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THE DRAGOMAN'S JEST

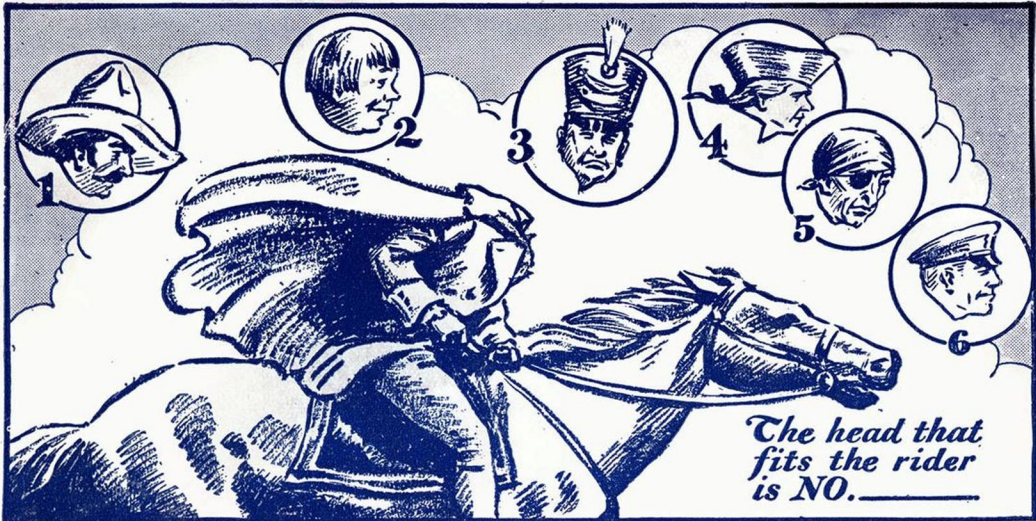
By
OTIS ADELBERT KLINE
and
E. HOFFMANN PRICE



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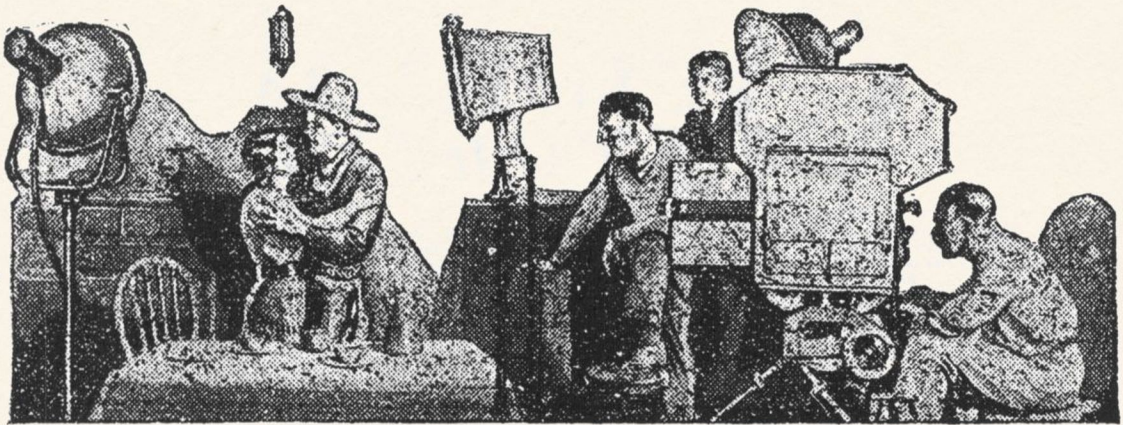
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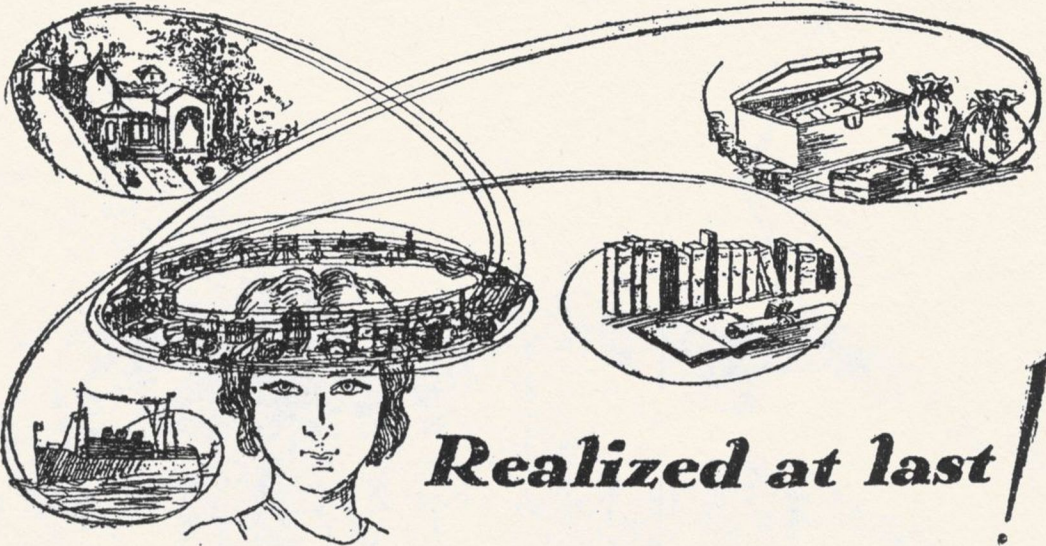
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"With a final effort he closed with the Hawk, half dragging him from his saddle in a desperate embrace. Then he drew and thrust with his jambiyah."



The Dragoman's Jest

By OTIS ADELBERT KLINE and
E. HOFFMANN PRICE

The exciting story of a jest that turned into deadly earnest—a tale of a beautiful woman, desert warfare, and the slave-train of the bandit ibn Sakr

"**A**YWAH! Aywah! Aywah!" de-claimed Silat sonorously, as he sorted the pebbles and bits of dirt from the beans of Abyssinian coffee that in Jerusalem was palmed off as the true berry from al Yemen. "There he goes, *ya sabibi!* Hamed Effendi. Strutting in his silks. Hamed Effendi. He's entirely forgotten that he ever was Hamed

the Dragoman, Hamed who led tourists into my *lokanda* and wheedled them into buying him coffee and stuffing a pipe for him while he regaled them with outrageous tales. May Allah bear witness, the truth is not in him! And when he had drunk and gorged himself, he led them into the *souk* to be plundered by the dealers in spurious *antikas*."



Silat's mutterings mingled with the crackling of the beans as they smoked and reddened in the iron ladle in which he roasted them over the glowing charcoal.

"And the first thing we know, he'll be Hamed Bey—while I still grind coffee, and bring the sweet, and take the full."

Silat tossed the roasted beans into the brazen mortar, and with ringing strokes beat them to powder.

"*Wallabi!* In this very *qahawat*, and before my eyes, Hamed looted the infidel. And still I pound these accursed beans while Hamed strolls by with silver-mounted sword, and graciously emerges

from his pious meditations long enough to offer the peace, and pass on."

And thus and thus, day after day, the tale of grief: until in the end, after uncounted cups of coffee, and pipes loaded with the best *Djabali* (liberally adulterated, of course, with *Suryani*) I picked up the ultimate fragment of the tale of Hamed and the orphan, Sitti Nefeyda.

Hamed the Dragoman—not Hamed Effendi, with curled beard and embroidered *djellab*, but Hamed the predatory interpreter and tourist's guide—ushered his client into Silat's *qahawat*. The more coffee the infidel drank, the longer it would take to "do" Jerusalem, and the

larger would be the commissions Hamed would receive from the merchants who sold the tourist antique Damascene simitars forged in Birmingham, and Persian prayer rugs woven in Italy on power looms.

"Here, *ya sidi*, is coffee which is indeed coffee. *Wallabi!* Perfect coffee, perfectly prepared. The true coffee from al Yemen, the home of Balkhis Malikat. The Queen of the Morning. The beloved of Suleiman! *Aywab!* From the red walls of Marrakesh to the golden domes of Samarcand——"

And then, to Silat: "Ho, Silat! Coffee for my lord! And roast the beans freshly before our eyes, O father of calamities!"

"But," ventured the client, finally getting a word into Hamed's eventual and necessary pause for breath, "we'll have to hurry if we're going to see the Kubbat es Sakhras."

"My lord," assured Hamed, "we have ample time. And one can not leave El Khuds, the Holy, without having tasted the famous coffee of Silat."

The victim resigned himself to his doom, and invited Hamed to have one himself. They always did.

Hamed thanked the Presence with a thousand politenesses. Then again to Silat: "Did you hear, *ya bu?* Then bring Carter Effendi some assorted pastries also!"

For a beginner, Howard I. Carter, of Detroit, did passably well in the resplendent native costume he had assumed several days previously, in response to Hamed's suggestion that such would be the most effective way of gaining insight into the customs of the Moslems, and absorbing the charm of Palestine's loveliest city. But while under Hamed's coaching, Carter at first glance was an acceptable Kurd from Kurdistan, his conversation-manual Arabic did not prove equal to the dragoman's

vocabulary or velocity of speech. Still, he understood the gesture, and spared himself the vanity of protest.

"The pastries of Jerusalem are famed the world over, *ya sidi!* The sublime pastries of Silat—*Aywab!* They are rose leaves and moonbeams dipped in honey and kissed by angels."

AS SILAT roasted the coffee, Hamed pondered on the strange ways of the *Feringhi*, those idolaters, pork-eaters, and lavish squanderers of inexhaustible wealth. Hamed recollected with pleasure the quality of his client's European clothing; and with more satisfaction recalled to mind the incredible sums Carter had spent, under Hamed's guidance, for the gorgeous costume he now wore.

"*Subhanullah!*" he ejaculated. "This is indeed the very man. I praise the One True God who brought me this man of all men, wealthy as a sultan, and aflame with curiosity about the life of the oppressed *Muslimen.*"

Silat was beating a ringing, brazen rhythm with his massive pestle, pulverizing the roasted beans of coffee.

"*Billabi!* Have you ever seen any one who could beat time thus with a pestle? And whirl it to the ceiling and catch it again without missing a stroke? By Allah, and he makes music with it!"

Arabian customs were crowding Carter faster than he could assimilate them.

"These cakes are too damned sweet," he remarked as he thrust aside the pastry shells drenched with syrup and stuffed with dates cooked in clarified butter. And this pointed thought he expressed in English; for the manual had not a word to cover the situation.

"O pig and son of forty pigs!" raged Hamed. "Did you hear, *ya Silat?* Your cakes are too sweet for my lord."

He stuffed the offending pastries into

his own mouth, smacked his lips, wiped the crumbs from his beard, and essayed the inspiration that food always brought to Hamed; for food was the gift of Allah, and Hamed remembered the famine-haunted, thirsty marches of the old days before he returned from Hayl to Jerusalem to plunder tourists.

"*Ya sidi*," began Hamed, "there is one noteworthy sight you have not——"

"Yes," admitted Carter, "I always did want to see the Kubbat es Sakhrāh."

"*Billabi!* Of course," agreed Hamed. "The sacred Dome of the Rock, revered by the pious. But since you can now pass as a native—as long as you refrain from conversations too involved—I will show you a sight that would give eyes to the blind. Such as no *Inglesi* tourist ever saw."

Carter tried his coffee and found it scalding.

"Hell's bells!"

This in faultless English; and then to Hamed: "And what will this great sight be?"

"My lord," explained Hamed, "I know the chief eunuch of the city palace of the Shareef Abd ul Krim——"

"Not so good," objected Carter. "I saw a eunuch in Stamboul. Interesting, but not impressive by any means. Can't say I'd want to take enough time to inspect another one."

"But, my lord, *this* eunuch——"

"Doubtless," suggested Carter solemnly, "can wiggle his ears."

"All things are possible to Allah," admitted Hamed. "But particularly this eunuch is in charge of the *hareem* of the Shareef."

"Splendid job," assented Carter. "But somewhat annoying qualifying for it, I fancy."

Carter resumed his coffee, now passing well cooled.

Hamed stuffed another *sanboosik* into his mouth, licked the syrup from his fingers, and resumed the attack.

"*Ya sidi*, the Shareef has three of his wives in this palace. One is from Tcherkess, and one from Gurjestan, and one——"

"I rather envy the beggar," confessed Carter with just a trace of enthusiasm. "But what——"

"My lord, the other day I overheard—*Astagfir 'ullah!*—I crave pardon of God, but I could not help overhear you say that a glimpse of an unveiled beauty——"

"Instead of one of those hags who coyly drop their veils and show a face that would stop a baggage camel. Quite so, Hamed. I did say that, while waiting at the consulate."

"For a very small present," continued Hamed, "he would permit us to see the unveiled ladies of the Shareef's *hareem* as they disport themselves in the master's garden, by the great fountain . . . and perhaps even in the sparkling waters thereof. . . . There is a side door which Aieed will leave ajar. . . . Think, my lord! Three ladies of the *hareem* of a prince——"

"Doubtless named Salima, Zubeyda and Fatima," scoffed Carter. "Save that for some one else, Hamed. They have a game like that in Paris."

"By Allah and by my life, *ya sidi!*" protested Hamed.

"Come, come, now," chided Carter mockingly. "Just because Jerusalem is . . . Listen! What the devil's that?"

Above the buzz and chatter and bartering of the *souk* came a shouting and a confusion of voices, and the tinkle of camel bells.

"Make way, O uncle!"

"To the right, *ya bint!*"

"Take care, *ya aulad!*"

Grooms and footmen trotted down the

narrow street, thrusting and beating aside the crowd that milled up and down its length the entire day.

"Noted citizens putting on pomp," explained Hamed. "Dignitary going abroad in ancient fashion."

"Make way, *ya bini!*" clamored the voice of a footman. And: "Stand aside and praise God, *ya hu!*" shrieked another.

Here was a touch of color. Real color, in the Moslem quarter. Hamed had been right, after all, in recommending native costume. Old Islam was revived for a moment: for dignitaries these days wear frock coats and gardenias, and drive about in motor cars.

Two silkily groomed white camels all gorgeously caparisoned were bearing between them a resplendent litter, canopied and draped and glittering. The curtains were drawn aside. Sitting back among the cushions was a slim, veiled girl, attended by a female slave whose age was exceeded only by her ugliness.

The girl murmured a few words into the ear of the maid, who nodded in assent, and then screeched at the groom who led the foremost camel. The procession halted, and a footman dashed into the shop.

"*Ya Silat,*" he announced, "our lady wants a parcel of sweetmeats, particularly *lakoum* and *bakalawat.*"

"Alas," deplored Silat, "we have no *bakalawat.*"

In spite of Carter's indifference to veiled beauties just a moment ago, he stared brazenly at the girl in the litter. The gauzy *yashmak* barely dimmed, much less concealed her features.

"The devil take the Shareef's wives," he said to Hamed. "*There* is something more to my taste."

The footman returned to the litter with the evil tidings.

"*Mafeesh bakalawat, ya sitti!*"

Carter could not understand her reply; but her voice was a rippling silkiness that belied her swift gesture of impatience. Happy gesture! For one of her many flashing rings caught the filmy veil and half tore it aside, just for an instant Carter looked full into the smoldering eyes with their *kohl*-blackened lids and long lashes.

"Christ!" gasped Carter.

"Beware, *effendi!*" hissed Hamed, nudging him violently. "You'll stare yourself into trouble. Look aside."

But Carter's determination to stare an eyeful was thwarted by the swift readjustment of the veil.

The cackling voice of the *khadimat* jarred rudely on Carter's ears.

The footman returned to take what sweets Silat had in stock.

"Who is she?" queried Carter, as the procession resumed the march.

"God alone is wise, all-knowing," replied Hamed.

"Too bad you're not! Find out!" commanded Carter.

Hamed dashed down the street to overtake the procession.

Carter drank his stone-cold coffee, grounds and all, as he arranged pieces of *lakoum* first in columns, and then in lines across the copper tray before him. . . .

"Well, what luck?" queried Carter, as Hamed returned, all out of breath.

"*Sitti Nefeyda,*" replied Hamed. "A noble and wealthy lady just recently from India. Up in the north, near the Afghan country. Of Pathan descent. Though they say her mother was Gurjestani. Shall we now visit the *Kubbat es Sakhrat*?"

"Be damned to the *Kubbat!* Save that for tomorrow."

As Hamed paid the reckoning for his client's coffee and food, he stroked his beard, and smiled more with his eyes than with his lips.

"There is no God but the One True God," reflected Hamed. "And He has been very good to Hamed this day. . . ."

"HAMED," began Carter by way of greeting the next morning when the dragoman reported to outline the day's schedule of places to go and things to do, "how much of a present must I give some one's chief eunuch to get another peep at that gorgeous girl?"

"*Aslahak allah, ya sabibi!*" exclaimed Hamed. "May Allah set you right, O master! But is this your morning's jest?"

"No. I'm serious. Anything short of my head, I don't care what it costs. Get to work and arrange it!"

"*Subhan allah!*" ejaculated Hamed. "I exalt the One God! And when have I heard a more liberal speech?"

Then, to Carter: "Impossible! Remember you are not in *Feringhistan* where women go unveiled, and talk to whom-ever they fancy. But there is one thing in your favor."

"Well then, order a pipe and coffee, and I'll listen to the morsel of hope."

"*Ya-a-a Silat!*" yelled Hamed in a voice that would carry across a battlefield. "*Abhw!*"

With a gesture he indicated that two were to be served.

"She is an orphan. The daughter of a Pathan and a Gurjestani woman. Alone in the world, but closely guarded by her childhood nurse, that old woman as ugly as Shaitan the Damned. You saw her sitting with Sitti Nefeyda in the litter. She told the groom in Arabic what the lady desired. You see, the lovely Nefeyda speaks just a smattering of Arabic. Her native language is Pushtu, or Gujarati, or some such villainous jargon they speak in the north of India. She's shy about airing her ignorance in public, so she gives her orders to her guardian, who translates them."

"Thus far," Carter protested, "the advantages are positively overwhelming. I see no point in her ignorance of Arabic being almost equal to mine. By actual count, I know something like eighty-three words of your sonorous tongue. By the way, Hamed, this pipe is terrible. Did he stuff it with hair and leather scraps? But listen: are you sure she's alone in the world, and not encumbered with relatives?"

"Yes, by Allah, and sinfully wealthy," assured Hamed.

"That is no particular merit. But what would you call wealthy?" demanded Carter.

"Well, once in Anayzah," began Hamed after a moment of study, "I stole two hundred *tomans* of gold from an *'Ajami* pilgrim, may God not bless the heretic! And for many days thereafter I felt wealthy, even after I had to give the upright *Kazi* a hundred and forty *tomans* to have the *'Ajami* flogged for bringing false accusation against an orthodox *Muslim*."

"And how much is a *toman*?" wondered Carter. "With *piasters* and *paras* and *riyals*, and Lord knows what——"

Hamed began an intricate reckoning, accompanied with much muttering.

"A *toman*," he announced at last, "is a Persian coin worth about two American dollars, or maybe nine *Inglesi* shillings."

"Hamed, I will make you several times wealthy if you can arrange for me to meet this girl on some pretext or other."

Carter produced a pleasantly bulky sheaf of notes. Hamed barely suppressed a gasp when he saw their denomination.

"If she has no relatives, and is a stranger in town," continued Carter, "my reception will depend somewhat on her own personal reactions. And you, Hamed, are a clever fellow. You might devise . . ."

Carter peeled several notes from the sheaf.

"This is a present for you, Hamed. Later on——"

"*Billabi!* Yes, it might be done," admitted Hamed, after frowning reflection and beard-stroking, and a heroic effort to seem unmoved by the lordly slips of engraved paper he idly fingered, and finally stuffed into his wallet.

Carter, fired by the spirit of adventure and high romance, drew fiercely at his *narghileh*, until its bubbling achieved the tempo of an express train. At rare intervals he got a faint wisp of smoke for his effort.

"The devil with your *sharib dukhan*—did I say it right?—drinking smoke!" Carter located a cigarette, and lit it from the chunk of glowing charcoal which Hamed offered. And Hamed took the discarded pipe stem, drew gently once or twice, and slowly exhaled a spreading cloud of fragrant fumes.

"*Ya sidi,*" he observed, "it is all in applying one's energy properly."

"Well, it's a terrible way to get a smoke!" retorted Carter. "But I'll have to master it. Give me the pipe."

"My lord," grinned the dragoman, "I was not speaking of smoking. I had in mind the task which you set for me, and the lordly present which I am to receive, should Allah prosper our venture. You carry off your native costume nicely enough, when you have a guide to keep you out of trouble. And neither she nor her servants will have reason to suspect that you are not the Kurdish emir you claim to be."

"Emir? Let's see, that is a sort of prince, isn't it?" queried Carter.

"*Aywab!* You would not be a Kurdish camel-driver, would you? Her *Muslim* environment and rearing will not revolt quite so much at a *tête-à-tête* with an emir.

As I remember it, you met her father in 'Ajam several years ago. And now you will call to pay your respects. You will be grieved to learn of his untimely death. The rest I leave to you."

"Not bad, not half bad," reflected Carter. "Say, this is good for a line! Pardon me, miss, but I think it was your father who was such a great friend of mine in Kurdistan! Hamed, turn that into faultless Arabic for me."

"Not yet. First learn to explain to her that you speak only Kurdish. But now we must go to the goldsmith's *souk* and select a few presents——"

"But I am calling on her father, of whose untimely death I have not heard——"

"Even so. Then we will buy a sword, and a gold brocaded robe."

And Hamed, followed by the Emir Carter, sought the swordsmith's and the dealers in brocades.

"**L**AILAT," queried Sitti Nefeyda of her ancient attendant, as she surveyed her freshly hennaed finger tips, "is every *shaykb* of the 'Aarab the color of an old saddle, and lean as a snake, and wrinkled as a mummy?"

"You have seen them, *ya sitti*. Hounds of the desert they call themselves. Birds of prey. Lean vultures. Bandits and sons of pillage. The rumor of your wealth has reached them in the desert, and they are seeking your hand."

"But tell me," resumed Sitti Nefeyda, "isn't that handsome fellow—I mean the one we saw at Silat's coffee shop the other day—a *shaykb*?"

"*Shaykb?*" Lailat's toothless grin gaped like a saber slash. "*Shaykb?* Don't let that come to his ears. He is an emir from Kurdistan. Visiting Jerusalem to seek the hand of the daughter of the Shareef Abd us Samad. They say that he is directly descended—but God alone is wise, all-

knowing!—from Salah ud Din Yusuf bin Ayyub, called Saladin by the *Feringhi*."

"And what did you say he was doing in Jerusalem?" challenged Sitti Nefeyda.

She had understood perfectly the first time.

"*Ya sitti*, he seeks the hand of the daughter of the Shareef Abd us Samad."

"And that double-tongued Hamed is sending these white-bearded, unsavory bandits of the desert to court me, with an emir in town. A handsome prince——"

"You spoke to Hamed of *shaykhs*, not emirs. Anyway, Hamed is only serving his master faithfully. The emir speaks nothing but Kurdish, and needs a dragoman who speaks '*Aarabi*.'"

"Really, Lailat, is the Shareef's daughter beautiful?"

"Who can say? But her father is a descendant of the Prophet, on whom be peace!"

"And that hound of a Hamed is helping him! The emir has the keenest eyes. I swear he was staring right through my veil."

"Such a heavy veil!" mocked Lailat. "Which of course you had to fumble and drop for a moment. And then——"

"And then Hamed nudged him, and muttered something, and almost bodily turned him to face away."

"Hamed knows that this place is not as free as Kurdistan, and thought to save his patron possible embarrassment later on."

"And of course had to pick on me as an example."

"It is just possible, *ya sitti*," suggested the old negress, "that the emir had so far no occasion to stare at any one in Jerusalem."

"Well," reflected Nefeyda, as she critically inspected her image in the mirror held before her, and approved of the *kobl*-blackened eyelids, "there is of course

something in that. Still, I think Hamed is a cheat and a double-dealer."

"But, *sitti*," protested the maid, "you bargained only for a *shaykh*. And this fellow is an emir. A high-handed, haughty, stubborn fellow who isn't to be led about by the nose. If you only knew these Kurds. . . ." sighed Lailat reminiscently.

"I'm not so sure of that," countered Nefeyda. "That oily Hamed taking over that poor fellow's affairs. A mountaineer, not speaking a word of *Aarabi*——"

"These Kurds," resumed Lailat, as she selected from her mistress' jewel-box a massive necklace of barbaric silver and uncut emeralds, "are very well able to take care of themselves."

Nefeyda rejected the emerald necklace in favor of a collar of greenish gold and cool sapphires, tried it on, and found it not entirely to her taste.

"Lailat," she began, as she discarded the sapphires and retrieved the emeralds and massive silver necklace, "I wonder if this Kurdish prince could be induced to remember that his father and my lately deceased father were great friends . . . oh, almost anywhere . . . in Turkestan, or Tcherkess, or some place. Then he'd call here, and I'd have a chance to tell him that my revered parent recently died. And the emir will express his sympathy. And I'll burst into tears. And somehow, I think the emir will be less insistent on the daughter of a Shareef. Go at once to that thief of a Hamed and see what you can do. No, bring him here, and I'll tell him myself——"

"*Ya sitti*," suggested Lailat, "maybe I'd better see Hamed."

"Very well," agreed Sitti Nefeyda. "And don't let him refuse."

"All dragomans are thieves," explained the old woman, "and if he could rob you of enough *Inglesi* pounds, he'd

knock his patron unconscious and drag him into your presence."

And so saying, she left Sitti Nefeyda to complete her task of adornment.

"IT WILL all be very simple," assured Hamed for the hundredth time in the past two days of intensive coaching. "Remember, she doesn't speak as much Arabic as you do. And in physique and coloring, you'll pass very well as a Kurd. She's probably never seen a Kurd, and even if she has, she's not seen enough of them to know you're not the real article."

"But how in the world will I start?" demanded Carter, this also for the several hundredth time.

"*Ya sidi*, you will be facing a woman, not a tiger. And no amount of broken language and stumbling phrases will handicap you, if only enough admiration speaks from your eyes. What! Have the women of *Feringhistan* been so distant and unapproachable?"

"Well, not entirely," admitted Carter. "But—well, this is different. And every pace we take toward her house, I lose another phrase I thought I had letter perfect."

"Well . . . then I'll interpret. I know a smattering of Pushtu—that's the language she speaks to the old woman, and I found that I can still pick my way along with it, though it has been a long time . . . so just say anything, and I'll improvise for you.

"Here we are now, *ya sidi*."

Hamed reined in his splendidly caparisoned mare, took the reins of Carter's mount, and turned both beasts over to the groom.

"Strange," remarked Hamed, "this gateway is open. Where's the porter?"

Hamed assaulted the massive brazen knocker. There was no response.

"Ho, there! Wake up, O father of calamity! Announce us to the house, O

son of a disease! The Emir Ahmad Khan!"

No answer.

"Strange indeed. Let's go in as far as the *majlis*."

Carter, resplendent in his Kurdish trappings and glittering simitar, followed Hamed in silence.

"*Dest'oor!*" bellowed Hamed. "By your leave!"

And Hamed stalked down the narrow hallway, around a turn to the left, and into the spacious *majlis*.

"Allah and again, by Allah!" he shouted. "O porter, announce the Emir Ahmad Khan!"

A voice answered from behind the great silken tapestry at the extreme end of the *majlis*; a gagged, muffled voice.

"In the name of Allah, help, *effendi*, help!"

"Well now, and what's all this?" demanded Hamed, as he dragged the porter, bound and loosely gagged, from behind the tapestry, where he had lain, buried in a heap of cushions. "*Wallahi!* Is this any way to receive guests?"

"My lord," explained the porter, "our lady has been kidnapped."

"What?"

"Even so, by the One True God! Shaykh Ali and a handful of ruffians——"

And the negro stuttered out his tale of entry by strategy, and the swift overpowering of the entire household before any alarm could be raised.

"What's the trouble?" demanded Carter. "What——"

And then he stopped short, remembering his coaching.

"Go ahead and speak *Inglesi*," replied Hamed. "There is no one in the house but the porter."

"No one in the house?"

"Yes. She's been kidnapped. Shaykh Ali is carrying her off. Undoubtedly to his headquarters at the oasis of Djebel Akhdar."

"Then report it to the authorities at once!" commanded Carter.

"Save your breath," retorted Hamed. "Both civil and military authorities know better than to cross Shaykh Ali."

"Then we'll equip an expedition of our own."

"There is neither might nor majesty save in God, the Great, the Powerful!" ejaculated Hamed piously. "Where could I get men to follow us? Even if we were so foolhardy as to pursue Shaykh Ali to his own territory."

"Go out and try," demanded Carter. "I'll pay them richly. Round up a crew of cutthroats to follow us. And I'll give you a thousand pounds *Inglesi* if we rescue her from that bandit."

"Very well, my lord," assented Hamed. "I'll do my best. Will you ride with us?"

"I'll head the column. Only hurry up about it! Get men, horses, and arms. And equipment for me."

Carter produced a great roll of bills. "Get busy at once!"

"But *sidi*, desert warfare——"

"I can stand the desert if you can. As to warfare . . . I'm no stranger to that."

SITTI NEFEBYDA emerged from the heap of silken cushions piled up on a Persian carpet in a corner of the great black hair pavilion and yawned luxuriously.

"You needn't bother with that fan, Lailat."

The old negress set aside the fan of peacock plumes.

"I simply can't wait for the emir's rescue party. It's going to be just too thrilling," mused Nefeyda. "But I almost hate to leave this lovely oasis. It's so picturesque and peaceful. . . . Hamed does arrange things so competently. But are you sure he'll make the rescue convincing?"

The negress grinned.

"*Billabi!* Leave that to Hamed. Those

Kurds love a good fight. The Sultan's army couldn't keep him from raiding the camp and rescuing you."

"Oh, I know that. But he's so terribly keen, he may find out it's all stage setting. And that would just spoil everything——"

"Don't worry," reassured the negress. "Those Kurds are great fighters, but they're overgrown boys. Simple fellows."

"Oh, it's just going to be gorgeous," exulted Sitti Nefeyda. "And he's the handsomest creature I ever saw. And a *prince!* But that was a terrible ride out here. I hope I never see another camel as long as I live. . . . I'm aching all over. . . ."

Sitti Nefeyda sank back among her cushions.

"I do hope no one gets hurt in this sham battle," she murmured drowsily. "Every one has been so thoughtful and considerate. . . ."

Her last waking recollection was Lailat's amused cackle to the effect that those Kurds were wretched marksmen, and that none of her abductors would suffer from more than the stench of burnt powder.

SHAYKH ALI'S men lounged about their tiny guard fires, gaming, quarrelling, and chanting their interminable, preposterous tales. Shaykh Ali himself went from group to group, giving them their final instructions.

"Little brothers of Shaitan," he began, "Hamed and that infidel masquerader will ride up some time late in the third watch with much shooting and shouting. That will be your signal.

"You, Yusuf and Nuh, will seize the lady and her slave——"

"Ho there, Mahmud, Allah curse you, but is that litter all in readiness——"

"Well then, Yusuf, remember to grab the lady and start off, but don't ride too fast, or you'll get lost and the infidel

can't rescue her. And, Satan rip you open, don't resist too vigorously and hurt the infidel.

"You, Khalil, see that your men fire rapidly, but well in the air. Let five or six of them mount their horses and ride, circling about with much shouting. Plenty of confusion, or the infidel will feel cheated, Allah confound him!"

"*Aywah!*" assented Shaykh Ali's lieutenants. "We understand perfectly. You want a first-class *gbazzu*, as it was in the old days, with much burning of powder—Look over there, *ya sidi!*"

The speaker indicated a dark blot in the distance.

Shaykh Ali stared across the moonlit, rolling *kbala*. The dark blot was moving rapidly. He could distinguish camels.

"Hamed is early. Well, no matter. To your posts!" commanded Shaykh Ali. "And remember, wait for them to fire."

"*Billahi!*" he ejaculated, as the blot drew nearer, and spread fanwise. "Hamed has a whole army . . . and he was to ride in from the south, not the east . . . probably that pig of an infidel took charge of the show. . . ."

Shaykh Ali could now distinguish the individual camels, incredibly swift for such ungainly beasts. Emerging from the intervals between them, he saw horsemen, and the frosty glitter of lance-heads, and the gleam of arms.

"God, and again, by God!" marvelled Shaykh Ali. "Those fellows ride well for the dregs of the *souk*."

Then he plainly heard the drumming of hoofs, and clank and jingle of arms and accouterments, but neither firing nor shouting. Then a light dawned on Shaykh Ali.

"Mahmud! Yusuf! Nuhh!" he roared. "Mount up and ride! It's not Hamed. They're *barami!*"

But it was too late for flight. The tips of the rushing crescent had com-

pleted the enveloping movement. A wave of rifle and pistol fire crackled swiftly along the line of advancing horsemen, raking the encampment with a hail of slugs and bullets which, while too high for damage, whistled and screeched savagely. Then the shouting: each of the *barami* bellowing his name and titles as he charged into the clump of pavilions. Out of the center swooped the chief himself, crouched low in the saddle of his silver-white horse.

Shaykh Ali's men were knocking each other down in their mad scramble to take to horse, to mount their camels. No time for burning powder. To face a mock charge of bazar loafers was not quite the same as facing the flickering steel of the advancing bandits.

Well, they might escape with their lives after all, and march back to Jerusalem on foot. . . .

Shaykh Ali, hands high over his head, ran to meet the chief.

"*Ana dakhilak, ya sidi!*" he shouted. "Under your protection, my lord!"

The chief reined his mare back to her haunches, and roared a command that rang loud and clear above the clamor and confusion. The uproar subsided.

"You have our protection, *ya hu!*" he replied to Shaykh Ali's declaration of surrender. "We will take the girl, the animals, and your arms. Your lives you keep. I, ibn Sakr, have spoken!"

"To the Lord of the Daybreak I betake me for refuge from the evils of creation!" quoted Shaykh Ali piously, as he was relieved of his simitar and pistols and stripped of his *djellab*. "Of all evil nights, to meet the Hawk and his *barami!*"

And Sitti Nefeyda, aroused from her sleep, was all a-thrill at the rescue. . . .

FOR three days and nights, Carter's patience had been tried to the breaking-point. At the rate they were going, Sitti

Nefeyda's abductors would be half-way across Arabia.

"Patience, my lord, patience," Hamed would expostulate. "We are going by a circuitous route to intercept Shaykh Ali. We must time our arrival to catch him just as he is breaking camp, so that we can attack when they are least prepared to resist. They will outnumber us, and we must depend on surprize. Allah alone——"

"Be damned to Allah!" snorted Carter. "Unless they're mounted on wooden horses, we'll never overtake them."

And thus and thus, hour after hour, scorching, searing heat by day, and frosty chill by night.

They had marched from three hours before dawn. It was now close to midnight. The troop halted at Hamed's signal.

"Thank God for a rest!" sighed Carter wearily.

"No, *sidi*. We will now mount our led horses. We are near the oasis of Djebel Akhdar. We must now reconnoiter, and be ready to assault the camp as soon as the opportunity presents itself."

Hamed pointed toward a dark blotch in the distance.

"That is the oasis."

"Then bring on my horse, and let's have at them," commanded Carter. "Make this beast kneel, Hamed. He can't understand the way I pronounce '*Ik! Ik!*'"

In response to Hamed's command, the camel knelt. Carter painfully dismounted, stretched himself, and more painfully dragged himself to the back of his horse.

"There should be a special hell for all camels, and for the first man who saddled a camel," growled Carter. And then he shouted, "*Ya Asad! Ya Hassan!*"

Hamed and his troop stared amazedly at this calling into the darkness.

"On your heels, *ya sidi!*" replied a voice from the right.

"What's this?" demanded Hamed, as two racing-camels drew up and halted, facing Carter, who had wheeled his horse toward the newcomers.

"Two young fellows I engaged while you were equipping this party," explained Carter. "They followed in our trace, with orders to join us just before the skirmish started."

And then: "What the devil is that?"

Carter pointed at a semicircle of flashes that spurted out of the moonlit half-darkness to the right of the oasis. The crescent of intermittent flashes moved rapidly toward the camp of Shaykh Ali. And then, clearly across the desert silence came the rattle of musketry, one ragged volley after another.

Hamed wheeled his horse about.

"Where you going?" demanded Carter.

"Back to El Khuds. We are too late. A band of *harami* is raiding the camp."

"*Harami?*"

"Yes. Outlaws. Bandits."

Carter seized the bridle of Hamed's horse.

"Stand fast! Where do you get this going back to Jerusalem?"

His hand dropped to his embroidered belt, and came up, not with the silver mounted horse-pistol of Kurdish masquerade, but a .45 Colt automatic.

"Stop, damn your hide. You, there——"

The roar of the automatic was followed by a howl.

"Keep those fellows right here, or I'll let daylight through a couple more. And you first, Hamed. Asad! Hassan! Cover these birds!"

The *bejira* to Jerusalem stopped then and there.

"*Wallah, sidi*, we were going back for

reinforcements. Listen to the fighting."

From the oasis came the rattle of rifle and pistol, and the shouts of attacker and attacked.

"We've not a chance, my lord," protested Hamed. "There must be a hundred of them. Hawks of the desert. It may even be *the Hawk*. Saoud ibn Sakr, the most savage bandit in Arabia——"

And then Hamed realized that the muzzle of the .45 was more terrible than the prospect of facing ibn Sakr, and that there was truth in the sentence that Carter was pronouncing:

"If you ride with me, you may live through it. They took Shaykh Ali by surprise, and we'll do as much for them. But one more word of retreat, and down you go. With a few of your playmates."

Asad and Hassan grinned sourly. Seasoned, hard-bitten fighters that Carter had marshalled into service while Hamed was equipping the holiday rescue party, it mattered little to them whether they closed in with the Hawk or with Hamed's troop.

Carter released the cheek strap of Hamed's mount, and wheeled his own horse about.

"About face, and forward march!"

None save Hamed understood the words; but the gesture they comprehended.

"By Allah!" they murmured, "who ever heard of a *Feringhi* like this?"

"I for one will follow this mad infidel!"

"There may be rich looting!" suggested another.

Thus, for the moment, Carter had solved the problem of leadership. Neither gold nor force will command the steadfastness of the Arab; but a reckless madman of a leader they will follow to a finish.

Carter drew the cavalry saber he had substituted for the curved, gaudy simitar Hamed had selected for him in the *souk*,

and motioned to Hamed to ride at his side.

"In your younger days, you used to ride on raids. I will lead the charge. But I want your ideas on the lay of the land."

"Then let us ride down this *wadi* which leads out again unto the plain a few hundred paces from the camp. The *barami* are now busy looting the camp. The true 'Aarab would loot if the judgment day were but an eye-wink's distance."

"Very well," assented Carter. "Asad! Hassan!"

"Harkening and obedience, *ya sidi!*" answered Carter's personal guard as they drew up to his side.

"Are your guns in order?"

"Perfectly, my lord."

"How many shells have you?"

"Twenty."

"Then let them off as fast as you can. But drop them short of the camp. And you, Hassan, open fire with the automatic rifle. Well up, and not right into the camp. And don't throw a fit when your gun begins shooting stars. Those bullets in your clips are tracers that burst into flames as you fire them."

"We understand, *ya sidi!* We are to keep the *barami* amused while you close in with your swords."

"Very good," assented Carter. Bear in mind that your fire must not endanger Sitti Nefeyda. We'll ride in and make it hand to hand."

"By God, by God, by the Very God!" swore Hamed, as Hassan and Asad left the column. "What manner of doings is this?"

"Hamed, I had all confidence in your ability," explained Carter with a broad grin, "but I wanted nothing left to chance. These two fellows served with Lawrence against the Turks. They were part of his personal bodyguard of selected ruffians and daredevils."

"Where——"

"A certain consul told me. Never mind who," countered Carter.

HAMED led the way down the steep sides of the *wadi* to its stony bottom, dry save only during the very rare rains of the desert.

"Lord, what a mad formation!" reflected Carter, as he followed in Hamed's trace. "I start out to pick up a bit of Arabic and get acquainted with local customs, and now I'm leading a raid to rescue a girl I never spoke a word to . . . but by the Rod, if this doesn't cost me my head, I'll have a few words with her on the way back . . . let's see . . . *ana abeb-ik* . . . no, that's rushing things a bit . . . but damn it . . . I *am* in love with that lovely armful . . . but . . . what in blazes were those preliminary remarks Hamed taught me? . . ."

At the outlet, where the *wadi* opened into the rolling plain some quarter of a mile from the oasis, Hamed halted. Carter glanced at his wrist watch. Five minutes by its luminous dial elapsed.

"Better give Asad a little more time to get into position . . ."

Five more minutes. . . .

Carter drew from his saddle-bags a Véry pistol, extended it arm's length over his head, and fired. A few seconds after its dull report a green star flared high overhead.

The next second was age-long; and even longer the succeeding two.

Carter shivered. If Asad weren't in position—

Then far from the other side of the oasis came a hoarse cough. Another, and another; a pause, and three more, each crowding its predecessor.

Carter pictured Asad dropping Stokes bombs down the muzzle of a mortar that resembled nothing more than it did a short length of three-inch pipe thrust into the ground at an angle of sixty degrees;

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Asad dropping a fresh bomb almost the instant the one preceding had cleared the muzzle. Instinctively he glanced up, before he realized the vanity of seeking to see the bombs tumbling and keyholing crazily in their trajectories as they approached its apex, and then as crazily beginning their downward course with its ever increasing velocity—

A great flash, and a heavy report. Another, and another. In the desert silence, those three-inch Stokes bombs were magnified to the volume of siege artillery fire. It was incredible that one lone gunner could keep up such a terrific cannonade.

"As foragers, and give 'em hell!" shouted Carter, holding his saber at the port, and leaning forward in the saddle.

Hamed rode at his side, three paces removed.

The column took up the gallop, formed a ragged line, with Carter at its center, and charged toward the oasis.

As they rode, Hassan's automatic rifle opened fire. First short bursts of five or six, and then a steady chattering, interrupted only when an empty clip was replaced with a fresh clip of twenty. The tracer bullets burst into green and red flame as they left the muzzle of the automatic, marking their course in vivid streaks; and being consumed in flight, their balance was upset, so that they dipped and corkscrewed and twisted in their path, an insane hailstorm of fire.

The camp was a madhouse. By the light of a pavilion set on fire by the tracers, Carter saw a tall figure on a white horse dashing about, rallying his men to the defense.

And then a Stokes bomb burst fairly in the encampment. Asad was firing wildly.

"Christ!" groaned Carter. "Those fools will kill her!"

Another shell, and another burst, this

time midway between the camp and Carter's line. Shell fragments whizzed past Carter. A horse dropped, rolling and kicking in the sand, hurling its rider headlong. Something struck Carter a paralyzing blow in the shoulder, nearly driving him out of the saddle. A flow of blood drenched him from shoulder to hip. His men were frantically fighting their horses, seeking to turn them and retreat.

"Forward, you idiots!" shrieked Carter. "Get inside the shell-fire!"

He laid about him with the flat of his saber. But in vain. His crowd of riff-raff, utterly demoralized by the misdirected bombardment, were scattering out in every direction except forward.

A hundred yards to go. An erratic fire crackled from the camp, although in camp as well as among Carter's troop, it was *sauve qui peut*. But though the Hawk was having his difficulties, he mustered a handful of stout followers.

"Give 'em hell, Hamed!" roared Carter. "Asad's nearly out of shells!"

But the blue and red tracers zipped and zigzagged and corkscrewed through the encampment. Fortunately, Hassan maintained his elevation well, and the shots went high.

"With you, *sidi*!" cried Hamed.

Boom! Boom! Boom! Three shells a split second apart. Flame and blinding dust and screaming fragments. And in the smoke, and rain of dropping pieces of shells, they charged full into the Hawk's troopers. Carter struck with a sweeping *moulinet* at the first head in reach.

"One!" he exulted. "Next!"

He ducked just as the pistol of the next adversary, arm's length distant, coughed an ounce slug through the folds of his *kufiyah*. The black powder stung his cheeks, and stifled him. But he lunged, gave him the point, and felt his blade sink home. Turning in the saddle,

and rotating his wrist, he wrenched his blade free in passing, and wheeled about.

Hamed had his hands full, cutting and parrying with his simitar, holding his own against a trio.

"By God, the old thief can fight!" growled Carter.

He lashed out with his blade, and cleared a saddle. Then, hacking and slashing, parrying with his saber and traversing with his horse, Carter worked his way through the *mêlée* to Hamed's side. The enemy gave way.

"Charge again, Hamed. Hot at 'em, or we're done for!"

"In the pavilion in front of us, *sidi*! I saw her!"

He wiped the blood from his forehead.

Then they saw the Hawk on his white mare, behind his troop, and towering above them. He ceased stroking his beard, and barked a command.

At that instant, Carter and Hamed charged, demoralizing the rush of the Hawk's troopers. Boot to boot it was now. A milling, murderous whirlpool. Hamed went down beneath the butt of a *jezail*, recovered, and discarding his simitar, stabbed and cut with his curved, shorter *jambiyah*.

Hack—slash—stab. . . .

In a momentary pause—even in that fierce mill of slaughter there were pauses—Carter glanced toward the pavilion. Sitti Nefeyda!

And then he faced the fresh, cool, unwearyed Hawk. The bombardment had ceased. Saoud ibn Sakr was lord of the evening. Carter's strategy had defeated itself. Two against that network of blades. . . .

Carter's weary arm responded too slowly to the Hawk's flickering cut, and the blade broke through his parry. But the blow that should have shorn Carter from shoulder to hip struck flatwise, and numbed his arm to the finger tips. His

saber dropped from his deadened fingers.

"Be damned to it! Here's a finish——"

He spurred his horse forward, getting inside the Hawk's guard before he could strike again. With a final effort, he closed with the Hawk, half dragging him from the saddle in a desperate embrace. Then he drew and thrust with his *jam-biyan*.

The blade snapped. For the Hawk's plumage included a light, tough coat of mail beneath his *djellab*.

And the butt of a pistol smacked soundly against Carter's head. A blinding flash shot with streaks of intolerable brightness; and then abysmal blackness into which Carter felt himself plunging . . . everlasting, bottomless darkness. . . .

"I CAN'T be dead," was Carter's first thought. "Neither in heaven nor in hell do they have camels."

"Steady, master," cautioned a voice. "That was a pretty fight, but you're barely hanging together."

Hamed's voice. So Hamed had survived. . . .

"Where are we?"

"Lashed to a baggage camel, *sidi*. Bound for God knows where."

Their captors were busy with the all-important mission of getting back to ibn Sakr's territory far to the south: and thus Carter and Hamed were lashed to the back of a baggage camel, along with odd bales and bundles which the Hawk's *harami* had salvaged from the fire and confusion of the skirmish. Nor did it occur to any one that the transportation of their mauled and wounded prisoners could have been accomplished with much less discomfort to the captives and without hampering the march southward.

And therefore, shortly after the sun rose, Carter modified his first theorem to the effect that there were no camels either

in heaven or hell, and thus expressed himself to Hamed.

"Be calm, *sidi*," cautioned Hamed in reply. "When we halt tonight, they will unbind us and give us food and water. And when you must speak *Inglese*, be careful that no one overhears you. You have quite a few days to spend with these fellows, and while they'll find out sooner or later that you're an unbelieving infidel, you might as well profit as much as you can by the kindness they accord those they think are true Moslems."

"Kindness?" wondered Carter.

"Yes. Instead of having left you at the oasis to perish of exposure and wounds and starvation, or hitching you with a bit of rope to the tail of the last camel of the caravan, they are carrying you. Very few slaves ever go to the market on camel back."

"Very few *what*?"

"Very few slaves, *ya sidi*."

"Impossible!" scoffed Carter. "Slavery was prohibited by the Powers years ago. British gunboats all over the world have stamped out slavery. And they've not the guts to sell an American citizen into slavery."

"My lord," replied Hamed, "ibn Sakr has an oversupply of those guts, as you so quaintly put it. And a hundred years ago, the Basha of Tripoli sold numerous American citizens and British and other subjects into slavery without hesitation. As for gunboats, I have never in all my forty years of wandering seen one in this part of the desert. Gunboats don't sail in the Nefud, and the long arm of His Britannic Majesty is weak and palsied when it reaches out toward the fringe of the Abode of Emptiness.

"*Aywab!* We, all of us, are bound straight for the slave caravan routes. We may be taken to al Madinat, or we may meet some trader and be sold on the way.

Anyway, I counsel you to learn 'Aarabi as fast as you can, and become a True Believer before you reach the hands of a small dealer or your ultimate owner. In the meanwhile, I will try to continue palming you off as a Kurd."

Carter caught occasional glimpses of his captors, and of the Hawk himself, making a round of inspection, and each look drove home the truth of Hamed's incredible words. He had refrained from inquiry as to the ultimate fate of Sitti Nefeyda. A vain question, in a land where the sanctity of the *bareem* and inviolability of the veil would hide identity and prevent any attempt at rescue.

And who would rescue her? An orphan from the north of India. His own chances of escape were infinitely better, hopelessly slim as they were.

The desert-born found this part of Arabia a hardship at this season. What chance of escape for Carter, even if given food and water and a camel? With no experience in riding the perverse beasts, and no knowledge of the obscure trails and hidden waterholes of the desert, his doom would be sealed from the start.

Self-preservation demanded staying with the caravan. Death patrolled the line of march, a hundred paces from the flanks of the little train of baggage camels, fast *theluls*, and richly caparisoned, high-bred mares that minced along, with empty saddles that would wait for a tenant until contact with the enemy.

Yet Carter would die a thousand deaths if he did not escape: and for the sake of Sitti Nefeyda, as many more.

And thus and thus, so that the misery of his mind masked the misery of his body, whose wounds and thirst and bruises and hunger were no wise assuaged by the terrific flame of the day and rolling gait of the roughest paced camel in all of Asia.

As for Sitti Nefeyda: they had ac-

corded her better treatment than Carter, since she was a more fragile and more precious bit of merchandise. Nevertheless, the swift transition from the luxury of the city to the flaming ferocity of a forced march across desert Arabia was a scorching torment. She had disdained the coarse, dirty woolen *djellab* in whose folds her captors had muffled her; but old Lailat's counsel prevailed.

"Sitti, your light silks won't protect you from the sun. It's not pretty, and probably it has many tenants besides yourself, but you'd better make the most of it."

The glare of the sun, reflected from the hard-baked ground, smote her cheeks like the blast of a furnace, and seared her eyes. Evasion of the terrific glow was impossible. Even when in desperation she closed her eyes, the savage whiteness of the sun searched her brain to the innermost cell.

"You'll get used to it before the end of the march," consoled Lailat. "The emir and Hamed are——"

"Oh, I'm so glad he got out of that dreadful fight alive!"

"Alive, *sitti*, and not much more than alive. He and Hamed are tied to a baggage camel, along with other odds and ends ibn Sakr picked up."

Nefeyda shuddered, and for a moment forgot her own misery.

"What's going to happen to us?"

"God alone is wise, All-Knowing," evaded Lailat.

Lailat knew from experience the whole grim sequence of forced marches across the desert, followed by the slave market; but she let her mistress deal with the present day's evils without adding to them any knowledge of the slave pen, and the sellers and the sold.

"I'm dreadfully thirsty. Do you suppose one of the men would give me a drink?"

"No, *sitti*. There's not a drop of water

in the caravan. We left the oasis in too much of a hurry. They are pressing their camels to the limit to reach Bir el Ahmar some time tonight."

"Some time *tonight*?"

"Yes. Among the 'Aarab, it is considered needless to take water on such a short march. Anyway, it is only a day."

"But I'm perishing for a drink."

"No. No one ever perished in so short a time. Though you may wish you were dead before the day is over."

And then the caravan left the hard, flat ground and wound its way across wastes of shifting sands that murmured and rustled and whispered as it drifted in the fierce, deadly hot wind. The glare was trebled, so that the heat of the forenoon seemed but a coolness in comparison.

NEFEYDA knew that the sun would never set. But in the end, it did dip below the horizon; yet the camels continued their relentless gait. Nefeyda was beyond all misery. It made little difference now if the march continued unbroken to al Madinat.

Late that evening ibn Sakr signalled for a halt. In the darkness Nefeyda could distinguish a clump of tall palms. She saw the camel men letting waterskins down into the well, and drawing them up, filled and dripping.

"Water, thank God!"

Water it was. Warm, brackish, foul-smelling and contaminated by the animals of some previous caravan, and full of green scum. The camels had drunk their fill at the oasis the day before, and refused to touch the evil syrup.

Nefeyda gulped it eagerly, choked at its vileness, and drank again. When she relinquished the flagon, the old negress clutched it.

"*Bismillabi!*" she ejaculated with unflinching Moslem piety, and drank.

"I don't know how I ever drank that filthy stuff!" exclaimed Nefeyda.

"It isn't like the *sharbat* I used to make of shaved ice in the city," admitted Lailat with a sour cackle.

The camel-drivers had gathered bits of mimosa and dry camel dung, and were kindling a fire. Some were mixing meal and water to make the evening's bread. Others were milking their camels.

"I wonder if I could have some of that milk," wondered Nefeyda.

"Probably not," replied Lailat, "but I'll ask. '*Atini laban, ya sabibi!*'"

The camel-driver shook his head.

"*Mafeesh laban.*"

And then he offered it to ibn Sakr's richly caparisoned silver-white mare, who drank it from a tinned copper pot.

"Oh, the beast! Giving that animal the milk!" raged Nefeyda.

"*Sitti*, were you his only wife, he would still give his mare first choice of the milk. She is *asil*. Perhaps of the original Khamasa. It is the custom of the desert. Each mare has her foster mother, a female camel whose milk nourishes her in this barren waste. Anyway, camel's milk would upset your stomach if you've never drunk it before. Learning to like it is not pleasant."

And then on the other side of the encampment she saw a kneeling camel being unloaded. Carter and Hamed were unceremoniously to the ground. What she saw in Carter's face, drawn, and grimy, and blood-streaked and scarred, made her own day a pleasure jaunt in comparison.

"Oh, good lord, and they had him lashed to that beast like a tent-pole! When you said they were tied to camels, I thought they were sitting up like us."

"Those Kurds are stout fellows, *sitti*. And they might have made him walk.

Or left him there, wounded and alone."

One of the *barami* brought cakes of freshly baked bread, and a handful of dates soaked in clarified butter. Another offered them coffee, night-black and bitter, and reeking from the foul water of which it had been brewed.

"Eat, *sitti*. *Inshallah!* there will be another day."

HAMED easily persuaded ibn Sakr to unbind their hands and feet.

"*Wallah, ya shaykh*, we are wounded and weak and unarmed. How could we fight or escape? And give us some molasses so that we can dress our wounds."

"Granted," acquiesced ibn Sakr after a moment's reflection.

Whereupon Hamed applied first aid in the desert manner: cauterizing their wounds with the molasses which he had brought to a smoking heat over the coffee-fire. Carter was too near the edge of exhaustion even to wince at this rough surgery.

"None of those cuts are deep, *sidi*. In a week you'll be as good as new. And now repeat after me the *Fatiha*."

"What's that?"

"The first *sura* of the Koran. It is the prayer of *el Islam*."

"What's the idea?" queried Carter.

"The sooner you become a *Muslim*, the better. When we reach the slave market, we'll part company, and if you grasp quickly the points of *el Islam*, it will be all the better for you."

"Be damned to Islam and your prophet also!" exploded Carter. "With what I've seen of pious Mohammedans——"

"*Sidi*," reproved Hamed, "was it the fault of *el Islam*, or the Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, that you saw fit to stare at a strange woman, and seek her acquaintance? Who urged you to come to her rescue? Who insisted upon your attacking ibn Sakr and

his *barami*? It was you, and not *el Islam* that offered me a thousand *Inglese* pounds reward.

"And, knowing that all things are ordained by Allah, the Wise, the All-Knowing, I, also a prisoner in the hands of *barami*, make no complaint.

"*Wallah, sidi*, our faith is easy to take. Do you believe that there is but one God, who begets not and was not begotten?"

"We-l-l . . . but you pray to Allah, don't you?" suggested Carter, ignorant, as most *Feringhi* are, of the meaning of the Moslem appellation of the deity.

"Allah signifies '*The God, the Very God, the One True God!*' "

"Fair enough," granted Carter.

"And Mohammed is his apostle."

"Nothing doing!"

"You *Nasrani* are narrow-minded, *sidi*. We of *el Islam* believe not only that Mohammed, God bless him and give him peace, was the apostle of God, but also that 'Isa, the *Nasrani* prophet, and all the other Prophets of the Book were envoys of the One True God. We believe more than you do, not less. Say it, *sidi*: '*La Allah ila Allah wa Muhammad er rasool Al-labi.*' "

Carter repeated the formula.

"Now you have nothing to do but to express your intention of becoming a true believer, and to repeat those words before witnesses. These are the five pillars of *el Islam*: belief in the Unity and Oneness of God; prayer five times daily, except when exempted, as on the march; acceptance of Mohammed as *er rasool*, the Apostle of Allah; giving of alms to the extent of one part in forty of your wealth; and making the *hajj*, or pilgrimage to Mekka, once in a lifetime, if you can.

"Now listen to the *Fatiha*, and learn it.

"*El hamdu lilabi rabbi l'alameen.*

Rahmani raheem. Maliki yaum ideen. Yaka naboodu wa yaka nastaynu." . . .

And Hamed recited from beginning to end the sonorous first *sura* of the Koran, which in no language has its equal in richness.

When Carter had mastered his lesson, Hamed continued: "Repeat this often to yourself. It will serve you well, perhaps, when we part company and you are alone among the *Muslimeen*."

LONG before dawn the caravan resumed the march. And day after day it pressed onward toward the south. Carter caught but passing glimpses of Nefeyda and her black servant. Hamed laughed and jested with his captors, telling them monstrous tales of romance and adventure, and recited long selections from *Alf Layl wa Layl*, The Thousand Nights and a Night, to the infinite delight of the *barami*. He wheedled them out of coffee and tobacco at the evening halts, and helped them unsaddle the camels, and groomed ibn Sakr's aristocratic mare.

Carter's identity as a Kurd who spoke no Arabic, but who, while not quite orthodox, was nevertheless a *Muslim* after a fashion, was well established: for the pious Hamed vouched for his belief in the Unity. And being wounded, Carter was not expected to make the genuflections of prayer, and thus betray himself.

"*Ya shaykh*," he would say, "we two are fighting men, as you may bear witness. Neither of us will bring you much in the market, for who would buy me, an old man, and him, a fierce Kurd? *Wallah*, look at him, and tell me who would not prefer a docile negro to a wild man like this who rides into a hedge of swords without second thought. By your beard, *ya shaykh*, had there been another like us, we would have scattered your men all over the *kbala*!

"Rather let us ride with you. I am

Hamed, of whom you may in times past have heard, over along the border of the Djowf. And he is an impoverished emir, who left Kurdistan for the sake of his health and the Turks, may God not bless them!"

Ibn Sakr would smile the shadow of a smile, and stroke his beard.

"Put in a word for Nefeyda," Carter urged, one day.

"For a grown man, who ever saw such idiocy!" Hamed retorted. "On your life, let no one think that you ever saw her. For her sake as well as your own."

Carter saw the point and held his peace. From day to day he added to his smattering of Arabic, mastered with fair success the stumbling-blocks of the language, such as the pronunciation of *'ayn*, and *ghayn*, *qaf* and *hbé*, and finally ventured to bandy words with his captors.

"*Wallah*, but that is fine! When we part, you will do nicely."

And the next morning, several marches from Khaibar, Carter realized that Hamed's words had had such an immediate application as to savor not at all of prophecy.

Hamed and a fast *thelul*, next to ibn Sakr's choice beast the finest camel in the troop, were missing. The wind had wiped out every trace of any trail that he might have left.

"Well," reflected Carter, "I don't blame him. I wouldn't have left without her. And we couldn't have taken her with us."

The march bordered on the Nefudh, the great desert of central Arabia.

Sitti Nefeyda was becoming inured to the hardships of the march. But by an evil form of compensation, the truth of her ultimate fate had dawned on her. The very wildness and unreality of it made her consider it as the devious windings of a tale told in the *souk*. She

ceased even to regret the mad whim which had taken her from the shelter of the city to the oasis to bait a Kurdish emir.

ONE night they approached the encampment of one who turned out to be a *shaykh* friendly to ibn Sakr.

"Thank heaven we'll eat tonight, Lailat!" exulted Nefeyda as she saw the preparations for a lordly feast. Sheep were being slain, and great quantities of rice prepared. And later, the savor of roasting coffee enriched the air, and blended with the aroma of spices and the whole sheep that simmered in a large cauldron. Food, after weeks of starvation rations of the *Bedawi*.

Ibn Sakr was still undecided as to the final disposition of Carter. A heretic 'Ajami, of course, only half a true believer who bungled the ritual of prayer, and was guilty of countless gaucheries . . . but what would one expect of such a barbarian, from 'Ajam? Hamed, that oily scoundrel, was not only a true *Muslim*, but an exceptionally pious and learned one, and he had vouched for the faith of the emir. And *Billahi*, what a fighter that Kurd was! . . .

Thus, when the feast was called, and the guests politely pretended not to have heard the first summons, and their host had repeated the invitation to ibn Sakr, Carter was included among those who took seats on the ground about the great copper tray along whose edge was a parapet of rice, high and broad, yet not sufficient to imprison all the gravy, and the towering heap of mutton.

Sitti Nefeyda from the women's half of the black hair pavilion had watched the preliminaries with starved eagerness. Then she saw that there was no tray of food for the *hareem*.

"*Bismillahi!*" pronounced the *shaykh*. "In the name of Allah!"

Following his example, the twenty

crowded about the tray likewise pronounced the Name, and plunged wrist-deep into the feast, tearing, rending, and stuffing fragments of meat into their mouths as fast as dexterous hands could manage; deftly rolling the rice into little balls which were thrust home with a swift flick of the finger. Of conversation there was not a trace. Speech in the presence of the bounty of Allah would be blasphemous; though at times there was a blessing called down on the host when with his own hands he dug out and thrust into the mouth of a favored guest some choice morsel.

In a surprizingly short time, the twenty had gorged themselves.

The coffee slave made his round; and the next relay gathered about the tray.

"Oh . . . how disgusting!"

Nefeyda had never before seen the desert-born confronted with a full meal. It was not thus in Jerusalem.

Finally, the ragged remains were carried in for the *hareem* to eat.

But hunger overcame outraged pride, and Sitti Nefeyda ate the scraps of the banquet, and found them good.

"You are among the 'Aarab," said old Lailat. "And you fare no worse than the wives of this powerful *shaykh*. It will be better when some emir or shareef buys you, and then you will live in luxury as you did in the city."

EVEN in al Madinat the slave traffic is conducted very quietly; and thus ibn Sakr entered the city by night with his captives, and all the loot of a season's raiding.

Trading in slaves was not the Hawk's customary activity. The captives taken in successful raids against the desert tribes were returned and a ransom received, all in accordance with the code of the desert. But these prisoners, chance baggage acquired at the close of his tour, belonged

to no tribe: and the Hawk knew that the city dwellers were ignorant of the polite customs of *kbala* warfare, so that he could not send them home, and have sent in return a suitable ransom. Thus the slave market was the only outlet for Carter and Nefeyda.

He might have kept Nefeyda to add to his *bareem*; but the desert-born has a high contempt for the city dweller. And Sitti Nefeyda would be an inconvenient luxury in the *beyt us shaar*, the black tent of the Bedawi. Carter—the Emir Ahmad—was a stout fighter and a strong man, and well able to ride with him on raids; but ibn Sakr was conservative. And his little band of selected cutthroats was in a way a closed corporation. Thus for Carter, as well as for Nefeyda, the slave market in the court of a great, ruined house in al Madinat.

To Nefeyda, the slave market, a terrible fact, had become an incredible fantasy. It was but another shifting scene of an outrageous dream. To be put through her paces like a choice horse at an auction; to be stared at, and pawed, and examined like a bolt of brocade in the *souk*; and to be given to the highest bidder, after hours of haggling and bargaining, of flowery praises by the vender countered by broad deprecations by the purchaser. She would awaken and find herself in Jerusalem, and far away from this nightmare of Africans, male and female . . . no, they weren't all Africans. Here was an Armenian girl, a Christian . . . and here, a golden-haired woman from Tcherkess . . . costly merchandise, these women from Tcherkess . . . and she wondered who would take the amber-skinned beauty from Turkestan. . . .

Carter was haunted by the thought of escape; haunted day and night until in the end it had rocked his mind like the incessant beating of a tom-tom, or the endless drip-drip-drip of the Chinese

water torture. A thousand plans, and each in the end vain. . . .

The guard of the camels nodded at his post . . . how simple then to throttle the sentry watching Nefeyda . . . but what would happen while he saddled a camel . . . in what direction to ride . . . with what arms fight off pursuit? . . . Plans made and discarded at every waking moment; and here, in the slave market, he was no nearer the solution, and their doom stared them full in the face.

Yet Carter still planned.

Three long, swift leaps, strike down and disarm the sentry. Muffle Nefeyda in his *djellab*. Dash out into the streets of al Madinat. To what purpose? Infinite chances for himself. But handicapped with Nefeyda—

Charging into a hedge of swords at that far-off oasis was child's play. But this planning for an opportunity that always proved false when it arrived—

Here they would separate. She would go to the *bareem* of some emir or shar-eef, lost forever behind the anonymity of a veil. And he . . . well, it made no difference, since such a multitude of fates would await him, while but one was in store for Nefeyda. The wild fancy of adventurous spirit in Jerusalem had flamed into a consuming obsession. In all the long marches across the desert he had spoken not a word to Nefeyda; yet if in the end he lost her, his soul would die many years before his body. What had begun as a touch of color to garnish a Mediterranean tour had become a purpose in life.

Carter stared a farewell look at Nefeyda, on the other side of the court, among the female slaves. She stood there like a sleep-walker, gorgeous in her finery, lovely and expressionless, dazed by meeting these first evidences of her fate.

Whenever any one passed the sentries at the entrance of the court, Carter

saw Nefeyda's prospective purchaser.

The sentries were lounging about a tiny fire, brewing coffee, and smoking their long, straight-stemmed *chibouks*. Their belts bristled with pistols and keen, curved *jambiyahs* and *kanjiars*, useless arms, guarding cowed and spiritless slaves, worn out by long hard marches and starvation.

Lailat had left her mistress to circulate among the negro slaves grouped about the courtyard. The old negress paused to chat with a Nubian girl in the guttural, clucking language of her native Africa. As she turned, to pass on, Carter stared full at Lailat, caught her eye for an instant, lifted one eyebrow, and resumed tracing meaningless lines on the paving . . . and studying the coping of the dry fountain in the center of the court. The mortar had fallen loose from the stones. He listlessly strolled to its edge.

The old negress ambled past him; halted, retraced a step.

"A bit of *tunbak*, *ya sidi*," she whined.

"*Mafeesh tunbak*, *ya ajuz!*" he growled. And then, in a low voice, "Tell *el sitt* that she must watch me closely, and escape when I start a disturbance."

"Just a little pinch of tobacco, my lord?" she repeated, as she nodded her understanding of his whispered words in broken Arabic.

"Here, old woman, take all of my tobacco," replied Carter, and thrust at her a pouch, containing not tobacco, but coins which his captors had overlooked in the grand looting at the oasis. And then he whispered: "Borrow a pipe from the guard for *el sitt*, and I will do the rest. You can take care of her once you pass the guards. There's a little money in the pouch."

The negress waddled back to Sitti Nefeyda.

"Here is tobacco, *ya sitti*. Now I will borrow a pipe."

So saying, she approached the sentries.

"Lend me a pipe for my mistress, *ya shaykh!*"

"And who is your mistress, mother of blackness?" laughed a tall, bearded fellow in striped kaftan and large, pompous turban.

"The lady from Gurjestan, *ya sahib*. And here is *bakhsheesh* for you."

At that instant Carter, poised at the end of his third swift, silent striding leap, brought down the loose fountain coping stone on the turbanned head, and in the next instant hurled it straight to the chin of the sentry who, facing Carter, leaped to his feet with a yell.

Carter sank to his knee, unsheathed the simitar of the first fallen, rose to a crouched posture of guard, and met the rush. A pistol cracked. A *kanjiar* raked across his chest. Carter's simitar flickered, steel to steel, as with deadly swiftness he beat off the first wave.

"Two down, and six to go! Hell's fire, girl, run for it!" he roared.

He stretched out in a full lunge, passing under the shearing simitar sweep that would have decapitated him, and with an upward cut disembowelled the foremost of his opponents and recovered, coming on guard in *terce*. They paused, awed by the ferocity of his assault.

Carter poised himself on guard for an instant; and then, drunk with enemy blood, leaped full into the squad, flailing his blade in terrible arcs.

From without the courtyard came the clank of arms, and the tread of running feet. A detachment of the guard——

At close quarters Carter's simitar was useless. He dropped it, wrenched a *jambiyah* from a descending hand, and with his knee floored his opponent. The milling mass was too compact for effective action; but above the tumult, Carter could hear howls and gasps as he drove home a thrust, or slashed whatever body or

limb presented itself when his knife hand was free.

But by sheer weight they were overpowering him.

"Ho, there, dogs and sons of dogs!" roared a voice that rang clear above the shouts and curses of the *mêlée*. Strong hands dragged the sentries from their prisoner.

"Quiet, sons of a disease! Touch him, and your heads will answer for it!"

CARTER, emerging from the confusion, half blinded with blood, slashed and beaten, wove about unsteadily on his feet. A red-bearded, magnificently apparelled dignitary with sword in one hand and pistol in the other confronted Carter's guards. His followers, having dragged the guard aside long enough for the Redbeard's words to sink home, took their places behind their chief.

"O cut-off ones, what is this rioting?" demanded the Redbeard in lordly tones. He holstered his pistol, sheathed his sword, and folded his arms imperiously.

"*Ya sidi*, this slave attacked and killed two of us. And when we sought to subdue him, he disarmed one of us and was cutting us to pieces."

"*Wallah*, my lord, you saved our lives!"

"He is a very *shaitan*!"

"He is a Kurd, one of those accursed 'Ajami!"

"Well," demanded the Presence, "whose slave is he?"

"The slave of ibn Sakr. And this girl"—he indicated Nefeyda, struggling in vain with two guards—"this girl belongs to ibn Sakr, and the old black woman, the slave of a slave, also."

"So . . . to ibn Sakr," pondered the lordly Flamebeard. "Call ibn Sakr at once! I will answer for his slaves, and for all other slaves in the court."

"But, *sidi*——"

"Silence, dog! Must I speak twice?

Will I not answer for the slaves?"

And then, to Carter: "Strong man, who are you?"

"A Kurd from Kurdistan!" replied Carter.

Carter had for some time forgotten to boast of American citizenship.

"*Wallabi*! Judging from your speech you do come from some *kafir* land . . . h-m-m-m . . . you handle a sword well . . .

"Yes, I will buy you for my troop of *memelukes*. *Mashallah*! Did you assault these eight ruffians with nothing but a paving block?" queried the unknown lord, as he noted the gray of brain and the red of blood on the marble slab.

"*Nahm, ya sidi*," assented Carter. "And then I drew his sword as he fell——"

"As I well notice. And this girl was to escape while you created a disturbance. Allah, by Allah, and again by Allah! If I bought you for your valor and her for her beauty, I would be cut to pieces before sunrise. O Kurd, swear to serve me faithfully, and I will buy you, and though a slave, you will have under you many slaves. And swear by the triple oath not to dispute or plot against my possession of the girl——"

Ibn Sakr stalked into the Presence.

"Ho, there, Redbeard, and were you speaking of buying this lion of a Kurd? This valiant fighter——"

"*Aywab*! And the girl also, O Hawk!"

"And what if I do not choose to sell him? I may keep him to ride with my troop, after all. He is too fierce to grind meal, or water palm trees, or keep your accounts. But as a fighting man, he is worth his weight in gold. Look what he did to these old women!"

Ibn Sakr kicked a body, half shorn asunder, that lay in an ever-spreading pool of blood.

"You should let me have him cheaply,

O Hawk! For all this slaughter he must either die, or else his owner must pay blood indemnity, and dearly."

"O Redbeard, a thousand *riyals*, and not less for a peerless fighting man like this. *Wallabi!* What a *memeluke* he would make!"

"The red beard, *ya Sakr*, is that of Khalil ibn Suleiman el Idrisi, an Afghan of the Afghans! I will not give more than a hundred *riyals*, since the blood indemnity for these four slaughtered dogs will ruin me."

"Not less than nine hundred and fifty, and I will use my influence with the emir to pare down the indemnity to a minimum, O Khalil."

"Grasping Bedawi! Hounds of the *khala!* Extortioner, I will give you a thousand *dinars* of gold for him, and the girl, and her slave."

"The girl alone is worth more than two thousand. Allah hates penury, O Khalil!"

"Then he must hate thee, *ya Sakr!* Look at the wench, O Hawk! Not unpleasing, but lean and straight like your starved *bareem* of the desert . . . and devoid of hips. . . ."

"With your *bareem* of Somali baggage, you are blind to elegance and grace when you see it. She is like a gazelle, Khalil!"

"Fifteen hundred for the three, O Hawk!"

"Nineteen hundred and my blessing," insisted ibn Sakr.

Khalil of the red beard raised his arms high overhead, fists clenched.

"O robber, eighteen hundred is too much, and I am a poor man."

"O miser, may God be miserly with thee, eighteen hundred is not enough . . . and what will the emir say when he sees this slaughter?"

Khalil drew from his belt a pouch heavy as only gold can be.

"I will speak to the emir, O Hawk.

Here is a purse of five hundred *dinars*, all of true weight, and Shaitan rip thee open! The balance I will give you tomorrow."

"Ho, Qasim!" commanded the Hawk, "shackle them all three, and bring them with us."

The bargain having been concluded, the adversaries left the courtyard, exchanging a thousand politenesses, with Carter, Nefeyda, and Lailat following.

"We will call on the Kazi in the morning and have a bill of sale drawn up," said Khalil. "Pass by my house and I will give you the balance due."

"It is not necessary," protested ibn Sakr courteously. "Take the slaves to thy house, and meet me in the morning before the Kazi."

"But I insist on giving you the rest of the *dinars* this very evening."

"Then let us also seek the Kazi."

CARTER was shackled and chained to a ring in the wall of the court of Khalil's house, and left to nurse his rage and wounds while the Afghan and ibn Sakr sought the Kazi, and then some *qabawat* to sip coffee and exchange ponderous compliments while the learned notary drew up a bill of sale. And then of course the clipped and short weight, and worn, and defaced *dinars* had to be sorted from the purse.

Carter strained vainly at his shackles.

"Well, here I am looking like some one who's fought ten rounds with a buzzsaw," muttered Carter. "From bad to worse. Polished off more men single-handed since I left Jerusalem than I did with artillery fire during the whole war. And now she's in the hands of that red-bearded ruffian . . . damn him, why didn't he at least let me kill a few more of them while they were finishing me, and I'd be through following strange women into

stranger jams? . . . Good God, but I'm thirsty. . . ."

Nefeyda and her servant were imprisoned in the *majlis* of Khalil's house, empty, it seemed, save for the prisoners. In his princely way, he had doubtless engaged a whole house as temporary headquarters while in al Madinat.

The small, arched windows of the high-vaulted room were barred; and the bolt of the door had clanked grimly into its seat as the attendants of Khalil had left Nefeyda in her prison. The room was rich in the barren luxury of the Orient. An ancient rug from the dusty plains of Feraghan shimmered in the moonlight that streamed through the window openings, and marked an archway on its worn, silky nap. And on the low divan that flanked the wall were long, narrow runners of Kurdish weave, heaped with cushions. The walls were unbroken, save for arched recesses which served to contain the accessories of a reception hall. In one were manuscripts, and writing-instruments. In another, burnished brazen coffee-pots, ranging in size from a tiny vessel just large enough to prepare two eggshell-sized *fenajeen* to one that would serve a troop of horse. In yet another niche were several richly embellished water pipes, with coiled stems, and silver tongs. The coffee hearth was in the corner furthest from the entrance.

Sold. And to an Afghan with a beard dyed red as flame!

Nefeyda's tears carried her to the verge of hysteria. Lailat sought in vain to restrain the high-pitched laughter of her mistress.

"It could have been worse, *sitti*. The Afghans are brave fellows, and generous in their way. You may even become the first lady of the *hareem*."

But this, it seemed, was not the proper approach. Nefeyda emerged from the cushions in which she had buried her

face, and still alternating sobs with terrible merriment, paced up and down the narrow, long room. Then as she passed the coffee hearth, the long heavy pestle that reposed in its marble mortar caught her eye. She stooped and picked it up, and caressed its smooth, worn surface.

"He'll be back tonight . . . and I'll wait for him. . . ."

She crouched at the barred door, resisting Lailat's every effort to wheedle her into surrendering the pestle.

Some one even now was approaching the door, lifting the bar.

Nefeyda's smile of welcome was unpleasant.

"*Dest'oor!*" came a voice from without. "By your permission!"

The hinges creaked.

Lailat seized Nefeyda's wrist just in time.

"Don't! It's Hamed!" she screamed, wrenching the pestle from her mistress. "Listen, *sitti*! It's Hamed!"

And Hamed it was; grave, courtly Hamed the Dragoman.

"I have returned," he began, "to ransom you from Khalil of the Red Beard, who bought you not four hours ago."

Over and over he repeated his speech. And finally its meaning dawned on Nefeyda. Lailat caught her just as she sank to the Feraghan carpet.

"Then he won't come back?"

"No, and I will arrange for the release of the Emir Ahmad. Where is he, Lailat?"

"Chained in the courtyard, *ya sabibi*. Approach him carefully. He killed several of his guards early this evening, so be sure he recognizes you before you get within arm's reach."

Leaving Lailat to attend her mistress, Hamed sought the courtyard.

"*Es salaam aleikoum, sidi!*" he saluted.

"Peace be damned!" growled Carter.

And then he recognized Hamed.

"I have arranged to buy you from Khalil. You, and Sitti Nefeyda and her servant also. If you will be pleased to sign an order on the American Express Company for the exorbitant sum that avaricious dog of an Afghan extorted—

"And then there is the blood indemnity for those guards you slaughtered. *Wallabi!* and I don't blame you either, but of course it was needless, seeing that I arrived in time. But what is done, is done. There is neither might nor majesty save in Allah, the Great, the Powerful," concluded Hamed piously, as he paused for breath, and fumbled at his belt for a wallet.

"Here you are, *sidi*. I rode hard and fast across the desert to Medain Salihh, and then by rail to Amman, riding thence to Jerusalem, where I entered your quarters and got your letters of credit on the express company."

"But Khalil won't take express checks or a letter of credit," protested Carter.

"Of course not, *ya sidi*. I have paid him in *dinars* of gold which I borrowed from a Yahudi money-lender. That sink of iniquity, God curse him, demanded thirty percent interest for a thirty-day loan, saying that my venture was so hazardous that he could take no less.

"Ho, Saoud!"

A negro armed with a hammer and chisel appeared in the arched entrance.

"Strike off my lord's shackles," commanded Hamed. "And you, 'Ali, bring a reed and ink."

The negro deftly sheared the shackle bolt, and released Carter.

"And now that your hands are free, *ya sidi*, be pleased to countersign these checks, so that I may get a release from the money-lender who holds my interest in you and Sitti Nefeyda as security for the loan. And then you will be free indeed, my lord . . . she is waiting for you

in the *majlis*. *Wallabi! Yallabi! Billabi!* If old Hamed were only an Emir from Kurdistan!"

"AND *thus*," I commented, as Silat again brought the sweet and took the full, "Sitti Nefeyda married the pretended emir?"

"*Aywab!* Even so; for in the desert it seems they had mastered enough 'Aarabi so that he could propose and she accept."

"But just a moment, Silat," I objected. "Do you mean to tell me she didn't discover the imposture and learn that she had married a *kafir* instead of a true believer?"

"No, *sidi*, she didn't."

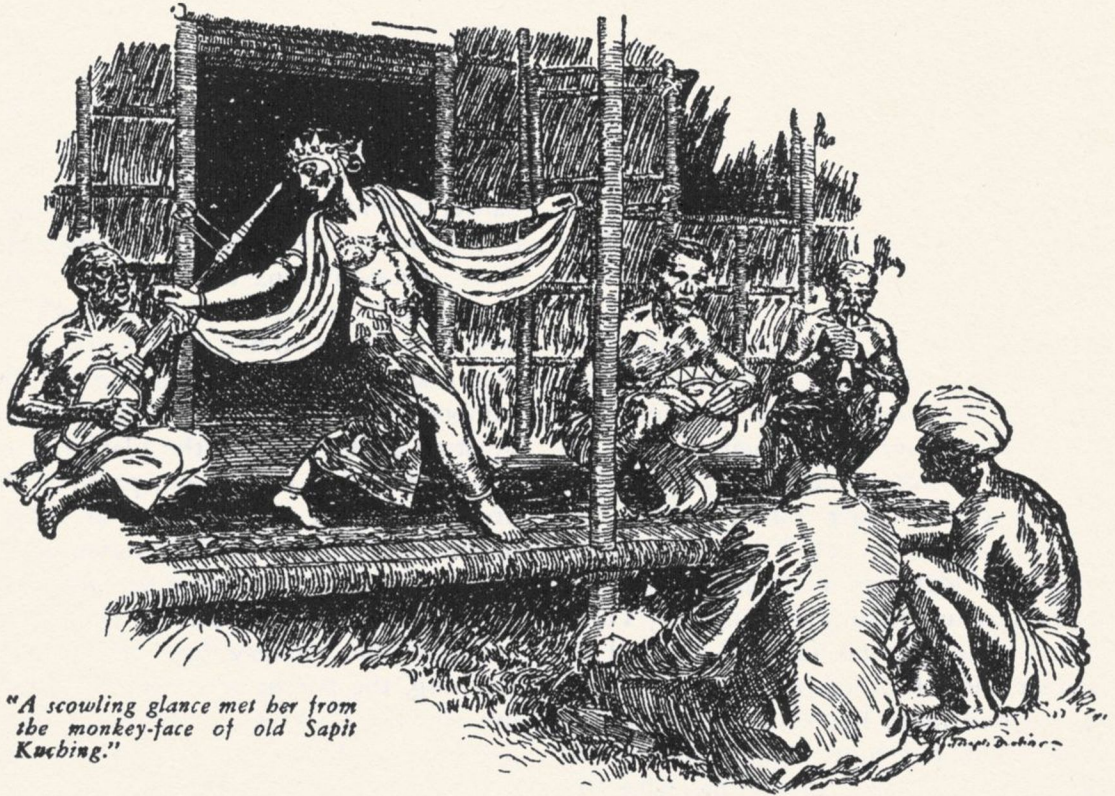
Silat's toothless grin spread from ear to ear.

"You see," he continued, "Sitti Nefeyda was actually Madeleine Perkins, of Keokuk, Iowa, a *pashalik* in your country, I think. She was wealthy and independent, after the fashion of heiresses in your land, and so she humored her fancy for meeting a wealthy *shaykh* of the 'Aarab, and sharing his life of romance, and luxury, and splendor!

"Hamed, seeing a chance for a jest—Hamed is a fun-loving fellow, my lord, as you know—groomed up several bazar loafers, as well as a few real *shaykhs* who came to town, picking always old, hard-bitten hounds of the desert that could not possibly please her, waiting all the while for one like the heaven-sent *Sidi* Carter.

"The kidnapping appealed to Sitti Nefeyda Perkins as colorful and a chance of arousing the emir's interest. It also gave Hamed a chance at double pay, acting as matrimonial agent for both masqueraders. It was I who suggested the idea of two impostors meeting each other. . . ."

(Please turn to page 144)



"A scowling glance met her from the monkey-face of old Sapit Kuching."

The Dancer of Djogyakarta

By WARREN HASTINGS MILLER

The story of a lovely Javanese maiden, who called the Elder Gods of the Hindus to aid her escape from the lust of white men who coveted her body

NONNA KUCHING'S attitude toward her own Javanese was that of the Eternal Mother deep-rooted in every woman. Men were foolish and perverse, but children, if skilfully managed. She was the Dancer of Djogya, dainty, childish in face and figure, but very much the Javanese woman; her men were to admire and obey, to be led about by the nose.

White men were different. She detested them all, as embodiments of the worst that is in us. It was small consolation to reflect that her lapses of virtue, albeit with them only, filled the need for

a wife and a sweetheart in these white men, who were lonely in this distant part of Java. Occasionally, not often, there had been words of appreciation of that, in incoherent murmurs, hints from very maudlin and sentimental white Tuans who had had dealings with her; generally it was all mere barter and sale, filling her soul with disgust. Occasionally, not often, there was an expression in their eyes like to this present young white Tuan, who sat on a pillow before her house veranda watching her dance. Nonna had seen before that expression, an incredulous amazement in his eyes that

this mere child, with the delicate oval face and drooping baby-mouth, with no visible eyebrows and finely modeled infantile Javanese nose—this picture of innocence dancing before him—should be in reality a grown woman complaisant to his hand.

The young white Tuan was tall and slender and handsome, with wavy brown hair brushed back over a sunburned forehead, his blue eyes with their puzzled expression of wonderment studying the art of her dance under raised brown eyebrows. His bow-curved mouth was compressed under the small and close moustache such as the Inggris [English] Tuans wore. He was no fat and beery Hollander, those bearded beasts whose reechy kisses had filled her soul with loathing. Yet she hated him vaguely; hated still more Tidak Prah, the guide, who had brought him here for the commission her father paid him. She was aware of that rabbit's presence, squatting behind his Tuan, but she bestowed on them all not a glance, concentrating her mind on the graceful steps of the Ronggeng, which is the court dance supposed to be performed exclusively before His Highness, the Sultan of Djogya.

Besides that expression of troubled incredulity that sat on her Tuan's face, there was recognition there, too. Nonna thought that out as she danced before him on the rude bamboo platform of the veranda of her kampong. She was now simply clad in a plain blue sarong and an embroidered white bodice which covered her bosom, with no ornament save a long and soft silken shawl or slendang, which left her arms and shoulders bare and served as a sort of wings to heighten the poses of her dance; but he was evidently recognizing her as that resplendent and supposedly impeccable court dancer, in the flowing, gold-embroidered sarong and tight bodice of gold-lace straps, who had

performed only the night before at the Sultan's court.

Yes, she was the same girl—a court dancer forbidden to all men—adds spice to your adventure, doesn't it, young white Tuan? teased Nonna with her eyes as she swung and pirouetted gayly through the measures, intent on her difficult dance. A discordant thump of the strings of the bamboo lyre played by her father, who squatted at the right of the platform, recalled her to her duty to her parent. The drummer at her left, dubbing at a long double-ended drum with the tattoo of his fingers, broke into a more vigorous and syncopated time. A scowling glance met her from the monkey face of old Sapit Kuching, the parent who owned her and lived by her sacrifices. It was necessary to pay less attention to the technique of her dance now, he was commanding; to put more seduction and direct invitation into it to this young white Tuan seated admiringly before her.

Nonna exercised her charms obediently. Her eyes concentrated on his; her arms swayed seductively, her body moved provocatively. How she hated this part! Really, Nonna thought, as she addressed herself to him, managing all these men—her father who lived on her and who had many beatings for her if she did not do her part—these white Tuans who bought her for an evening, this whole hateful league of men against her—they were almost too much for the Eternal Mother instinct in a girl of fifteen! It was all gross and unfair and cruel. There was the Sultan, too, who had more than once hinted that she might become one of his retinue; but above all there was the young prince Yusuf Sengang, who really loved her, who came courting after fowls-take-their-perches time but who could not get his uncle's permission to marry her. Really it required a deal of managing! Might Allah, the Merciful, the Compass-

sionate, show her the way out, thought Nonna as she went on with this hateful business of captivating the white Tuan.

There was irresolution in his eyes now; then the challenge of the primal male in him. Why, yes; if the lady made advances, it was for him to be gallant! It was at least better, this reluctance, than the usual lascivious hunger with which gross and bearded Hollanders or dark and oily Portuguese came here. But she hated him, nevertheless.

Others were watching him, too, and from the musicians shot out of nowhere in particular the usual wadded-up note, to fall in a curve into his lap. Nonna knew what it contained; a scrawl in Javanese-English appointing him to meet her that night at ten in the familiar old Hindoo shrine back in a secluded part of the Sultan's gardens. Nonna watched him surreptitiously open the note, while the natives grinned. A flush spread over his features; a glance of lowered respect, somewhat stern; then a nod of acquiescence. A spasm of loathing attacked her. How long, O Allah, Protector of the Innocent—how long?

NONNA retired to her room for a good fit of weeping after the musicians had gone to the men's rooms of her kampong and the white Tuan had departed in tow of that scoundrel, Tidak Prahū. She rose from her couch about five o'clock and put on the resplendent court dress. A final look in the mirror, before calling her *ebro* or tilt-carriage for the evening's drive. It was the face of a child that was reflected there; not a wrinkle or a line, the kind of innocent face she had seen on white mem-sahib children, girls of twelve. Delicate, almost invisible arched eyebrows on the smooth brown forehead; scanty black hair done smoothly back so as to bring out the childish contours of head and neck; no visible ears, soft and warm brown almond-

shaped eyes, eyes not narrow or oblique as with the Chinese but wide and disdainful. She was born men's hearts to snare; born, if the world had consulted her about it, to trample on all men with cool aloofness.

All save One. For him were the depths of those eyes. In the Name of Allah, *when?* All she wanted of Life was Yusuf, and a little brown baby that would be something of them both! And, because of her father and the Sultan—this!

She hated particularly white men, for they forced her to forego her reserve, that precious reluctance of womankind without which the world would be in chaos. If women were to take the initiative, eager, compelling, as men did! Nonna had very definite ideas as to just how far a girl should go. A dainty and delicate coquetry; a reserved display of her charms; half-daring, half-shy flirtations—beyond that the thing became distasteful, men's province. But to be forced out of the protection of these instincts, to become bold and seductive, of a wanton brazenness—*ugh!*

An old crone, a slave of her father's, set out tiffin for her on a flat bamboo table and laid a cushion before it on the floor. Nonna partook moodily. Tonight, again! She knew how Yusuf felt about it. To the Javanese youth it was all very simple. She was innocent, in his eyes, since these affairs with the white Tuans were none of her seeking. Once they were married, all that would be of the past and he would look only for faithfulness to him forever. The thing must be managed, somehow; this young white Tuan must be her last—and there must be no krissing him, as Yusuf would want, either!

SHE drove out through palm-shaded roads, past the *dessas* or native Javanese villages which bordered it on every side. In Djogya-town many were the

salaams and friendly greetings from the deposed Mataram nobility, proud and poor; dependent, as was prince Yusuf Sengang himself, solely on the Sultan's bounty—now that the Dutch government had shorn both him and them of their temporal power. Nonna was well known to them all; a great favorite at court. None of them knew of these private affairs of hers with the whites, arranged at her own home and consummated in the old Hindoo shrine in the Sultan's gardens.

The imposing ruins of the Prambanam Temples came in sight. Nonna had the true Mohammedan's contempt for Hindoo idols and human figures, carved against the express command of Allah, the One True God. She yawned and eyed disdainfully the bas-relief friezes on Prambanam picturing incidents from the Mahabarata; she gaped at the Shivas and Kalas and Ganeshas seated in their shrines. She had no conception of the vast antiquity of these gods, nor of their still potent influence on the human race. To her they were but foolish labors of foolish men, set up, stone upon stone, into vast temples; stone god after stone god hoisted into niches some thousand years ago—only to be swept into oblivion by the advancing armies of One True God. That Shiva was hoary with venerable antiquity when her Mahomet was born; that while Brahm dreams the Gods die not—these were verities that had never entered her mind. . . . Yet—and yet—

She began to grow reflective, as the carriage slowly paced around through the maze of temples, and she studied now the squatting stone figures, each and all marked with that impenetrable and enigmatic smile of Asia. What was the secret locked in those stone lips? What did these gods know that man did *not* know? She eyed them finally with yearn-

ing disquietude. Had they, after all, something for her; something that the later prophets had missed? Surely there was something wrong with the Koran's prophets of Allah that they had no solution for her and her problem! Her Mahomet had nothing but very strict and sharply defined instructions as to women of her profession. A dancing girl was a dancing girl—also a courtesan—and she was to bear no children or be stoned with stones. There was Another—Nonna had heard of Him once, from a very drunk and maudlin sub-lieutenant of police—who had simply said, "Woman, go and sin no more." All very easy to *say*—but what if one had a father who owned a palm mid-rib whip in which there were many beatings? And a lover willing to rescue her but whose whole life was bound about by the Sultan's bounty?

But the Elder Gods knew none of these things, nor cared. Serene and enigmatical, they sat in their shrines, stone, gray with the centuries, the ageless smile of Asia on their faces, the smile of that supreme wisdom born of indifference. "Worship us or do *not* worship us, it is all one. Ye are men, and ye make your own Gods, some to pull down and destroy, some to elevate for a little—but to Us ye come in the end!" their expression hinted.

A four-faced Brahm sat dreaming out of the topmost pinnacle of Prambanam, looking all ways, seeing all, indifferent, biding his time:

"I am Brahm, the Universe; the Known and the Unknown!" he seemed to whisper into Nonna's vague fancies. "All the creeds, the doubts, and the thoughts of man are Me. The Earth, the Stars, and all Life that on them is, are one with Me. The Gods are Me. Follow whom ye will—to Me ye return, for I am Him whom ye follow."

Yearning, eager questionings filled

Nonna's whole being as she halted her *ebro* and sat studying the impassive face of the Brahm so far above her. "O Brahm! What hast thou for me?" she implored with her baby lips. Surely there was a hidden Truth in these Elder Gods, these beings forgotten and neglected of the present generation! They would not fail her, as Mahomet had done. One and all, for they were but different manifestations of the Brahm, surely these Elder Ones had a message for her—or none had! There was something here, if she could only think down into it! Those wise, all-knowing, all-concealing faces!

And their Message came at length into her soul: "Man, woman—your world is *within you alone*. We gave you Life. It is yours. What you do with it, what you think, is yours to say, no one else. Ye are foolish who lean on this and that God, for they were born but yesterday and tomorrow will be gone and their mouths stopped with dust. But We, who are Life, We remain! Woman, arise and take! Thou alone hast dominion over thy soul!"

NONNA KUCHING drove back to Djogya a changed girl. She was done with Mahomet, for a mightier than he had spoken to her, the Brahma of Prambanam. She was only a dancing girl, as her Javanese world viewed her, but she was more than that, now, a dominant and determined woman's soul, freed from false convention, determined to mold her life and those around her henceforward by her will. It could and would be done, if she had the courage to do it. The Elder Gods knew Life; all that had come after them was futile piffle, lies, and would soon vanish and men return to Them. While Brahm dreams——

Prince Yusuf could take her or leave her, that night, she had decided. As for the white Tuan, a scornful smile tinged

her lips. All the insults to her helpless person were to be revenged upon him that night. No *krissing* or anything violent like that, which her woman's soul abhorred, but a thing humiliating, arousing the laughter of the very Gods, a soul-satisfying and complete woman's revenge on them all. The broad and obscene Malay sense of humor quivered on her lip as she thought over possible retributions and finally came to a climax in a shrill trill of childish laughter. This white Tuan—would that there were more of them, the more detestable ones, of odious memories, to witness and learn!

The iron scenery of this part of Java strengthened her resolution as she drove back. Great bare and rock-ribbed cones of volcanoes, some extinct, some inactive, a few—Bromo, Tosari and his fellows on the far horizon—arose clouded with fumes of smoke and shreds of vapor in the clear blue of twilight. She would do it! She was Woman, the Manager; these men, all of them, brown *and* white, were but naughty children, to be spanked or to be led where she would!

THERE was no sign of this inward revolt as she entered the thatch-roof kampong and flung herself idly on the mat to await Yusuf Sengang. A little garden of papayas and bougainvillea gave on her window; flanking it, two huge and slatting bananas. Fireflies were illuminating the night outside, winking in myriad twinkles of light in the great waringen trees which overshadowed the Sultan's gardens. Presently there was a soft calling of her name, and a slender brown hand pushed over the window. It bore a rope of pearls, which Nonna took with little soft cries of delight over the beauty of the lovely things.

"Ai, Nonna! My all—to purchase these!" whispered Prince Yusuf's voice. His turbaned head appeared over the

bamboo railing. There were soft love words, spoken in whispers, the sedate and discreet Malay courtship. He was a slender youth, seemingly as much a boy as she was a girl. There was no maturity visible in his face; yet it was there, the placid and unruffled maturity that looks on life with a right sense of its proportions and meets its onslaughts with the keen temper of a welded Malay blade. He was a good deal more of a man than he looked, this Prince Yusuf, in his resplendent and somewhat effeminate court dress.

Nonna listened awhile to the familiar endearments, enjoying them while she might, for no one could foresee the outcome of the step she was about to take.

"Enough, Yusuf, my prince and my lord!" she interrupted him. "When do we go before the Sultan's *badji* to be married?"

Yusuf waved his hands despondently. "Thou knowest, Light of Java, I am utterly dependent upon my uncle. When the Sultan says——"

"And I am *not* dependent, Yusuf! Dear as thou art to me, this night we go—or never."

The youth's almond eyes suddenly darkened. Nonna knew that expression well, the sudden Malay rage, ferocity. He had put his all into this gift for her—and to be treated thus! Then it softened to love and admiration again. "*Hai!*—My queen of dancers! A brave flash of spirit—but of no avail. What would you?"

"Take me, or leave me, dream of my eyes," purred Nonna softly. "Out into the wide world I go tonight. Here are back thy pearls—yet do I love thee!"

"But I have nothing—where can we go?—where?" wailed Yusuf, all his comfortable world of the Sultan's court suddenly stricken from under his feet. Life without the prospect of Nonna, however

dimly in the future but nonetheless a certainty to the timeless East—blankness—misery!

"I would die without thee, pearl of Java!" he murmured. "Speak not of going. We must wait. All will come in time."

"Are not two who love enough for life?" asked Nonna. "Two to raise the rice, to wield the parang that a home may be built? Is not the whole wide Preanger open to us? There we can find peace. These gewgaws"—holding up the pearls—"and others that thou and I possess, will buy land enough. For seed rice there is the *desa* bank, and coolies to plant it. Let us live, and *not* wait, my prince!"

Yusuf was immeasurably shocked—what had come over Nonna, the meek and submissive Mohammedan girl? But he hid it under the usual impassive Malay mask. He was also much perturbed for himself; to forego his position and his cherished nobility at the Sultan's court, to incur the old despot's sure displeasure—and all for this beautiful dancing girl, who had affairs with white Tuans! He took refuge in his religion, as most men do when they wish to coerce women.

"And what does the Koran say about young couples who flaunt their Sultan and disobey their fathers to run off into unknown principalities?" he asked. (The Preanger was just over the border.)

"The Koran be damned!" exclaimed Nonna, in as near an approach to that vigorous Anglo-Saxon expression as the soft and courteous Malay speech permits.

Yusuf stood aghast. Blasphemy! The woman was mad! He gaped at her, open-mouthed.

"Oh, Yusuf, our gods are but of yesterday, and those who made them scarce cold in their graves!" Nonna drove on at him relentlessly. "What do *they* know of Life? Have we not asked Mahomet in

our prayers, and has he anything to say?" she inquired scornfully. "Nought, but to endure and obey! *Pish!* I have talked with the Elder Gods, Yusuf, my prince. *They* know! When two meet at twilight in the young rice, there give they Life. All else is rubbish, the dreams of men."

"You have talked with Them, the sacrilegious idols on Prambanam, carved in defiance of the Prophet?" quavered Yusuf, his religion also knocked from under him by this new and *not* submissive Nonna.

"Yea, they talked to *me!* To Them we return in the end. The rest is lies! Tonight I go, dearest prince—and *thou goest with me!*" she insisted. "What stops us? The commands of the Koran, say you? They are lies, misery, striking down hope and love. Such things be lies! . . . Money? Position? They are naught. We have enough! Sell these baubles and come, my prince!"

Yusuf hesitated, eyeing with dawning approval and admiration this confident and courageous Nonna, who had dared to put her finger upon the bonds which held them both, and who dared, further, to brush them magnificently aside. He was half won to do and dare himself. There would be complications; the Sultan's displeasure; beginning life anew as a simple land-owner in a new province. But the Dutch government would see that he had no actual interference from Djogyakarta, no halting them back, no imprisonment. They were free to go where they liked under the white man's law. They had money enough to start, too; the jeweller who lived near the Residency would see to that, show him pearls enough. She was right; this way led Life! One thing alone troubled him:

"You have come by no affliction by these white Tuans?" he asked her, simply and directly.

"Allah be praised, no!" exclaimed Nonna, most inconsistently in view of what she had just said about the Elder Gods. It was not lost on Yusuf. She was still a devout Mohammedan—with reservations, which need not be known except to them two. It mattered a good deal, over in the Preanger, which was quite as devout Muslim as Djogya. It would not do for her to proclaim the Elder Gods there openly!

"And that reminds me," went on Nonna, "there is a Tuan coming to the shrine in the Sultan's gardens this night. A young and handsome Tuan, new to Java I think. His eyes were troubled over me when I was dancing before him this afternoon; yet will he come—like them all. But I would be revenged on them all through him, my prince."

Yusuf laid hand on kris and scowled, "Say but the word, Flower of Djogya!" he gritted through clenched teeth.

"Hoo! Always something violent, you men!" caroled Nonna softly. "Think how that would ruin everything, and bring down the wrath of the Kumpanie [the Dutch government] upon us all, in that you had slain a white Tuan! But there is a pond in the Sultan's gardens, a fish pond, full of ugly, squat frogs and great water lilies"—Nonna meant these huge Victoria Regias, the Sultan's pride, with round flat leaves a yard across—"and a vile slime and a stench arises from it when the coolies do wade in there to pluck the lotus flowers. This Tuan will come to me at the shrine at ten knocks, as white men count time. He will speak soft and false words of love, and then—will seize me," she shuddered, while again Yusuf laid hand on kris. "Then, my prince, I would that, when I cry out '*Djaga!*' [Beware!], four strong coolies seize that white man, in all his spotless linens, with the pearl buttons upon the

white jacket of him"— Nonna's shapely hands made vigorous pantomimes—"Then thou and I will go quickly."

Yusuf began to grin. His broad Malay humor was tickled at the vision of that sacred white Tuan being thus dealt with. He burst into an uproarious laugh, then stifled it with a sigh.

"*Hoi!* These be evil times!" he said, fondling regretfully the handle of his keen kris. "A woman's revenge, that! Better the old days, when the kris nudged the white man sharply if he dared tamper with our women! However, it shall be as thou would have it, Ornament of all Java! Then do we go and begin life together. Farewell, Prince Yusuf of Djogyala!—Salaam, dessaman rice-grower of the Preanger! But for thee, my beauty! . . . I will attend now to the matter of the pearls." He took them back, kissed her hand fervently, and was gone in the darkness.

THE Resident's clock was striking ten when Nonna stood before the dark stone shrine, one of those relics of ancient Hindoo days in Java with which the Sultan's gardens are filled. Shrubbery hid it in a maze of foliage; a great clump of blue bamboo hung over it and half hid the stone godling peering out at her from a niche above. Nonna shuddered as she glanced within its dark depths. There were the mats and pillows, spread out as usual by her father's retainers. Here had been made many sacrifices for golden florins, but this was the last, and it was to end in a manner particularly satisfying to her. To humiliate the white beast;—a feeble return, but a return, just the same, for the humiliations she had endured! Why could they not let a dancer *be* a dancer and enjoy her art alone?

Nonna lay down inside the shrine (which once had held one of the Elder Gods) and lounged carelessly, a pillow

under her bare brown arm, a cigarette at her lips. Her bare rounded knee jutted out provocatively from a fold of her sarong. She wished this thing over with quickly, for Prince Yusuf was hidden somewhere near, with four strong coolies. . . .

A faint crunch on the gravel path. A tall form approached, clad in tropical whites, with the upstanding military collar of a white blouse. Faint glint of pearl buttons in the firefly gleams and the starlight; the red glow of a cigarette tip.

But this white man did not at once seat himself on the edge of the mat and begin making love. Instead he sat himself down cross-legged on the gravel outside, his topee taken off, his head, with the sheen of well-groomed hair on it, just visible under the stars to Nonna as he smoked in reflective puffs of his cigarette.

"I know you, dancer-girl," he began at last in fluent Malay. "You are Nonna Kuching, of the court. I saw you dance there, at the last big entertainment the Sultan gave. Why, then, do you do this?"

His tone seemed gently reproving, reproachful. It was the first word spoken to her by a white Tuan with the least hint of human kindness in it. Nonna listened with awakened interest. Strange talk, this!

"Didst thou note the musician to my left this afternoon, O Tuan? The little monkey-man, with eyes like an ape, who played the bamboo lyre?" she inquired.

"I saw, dancer-girl. He managed—this. But why? Thou art but a child, Nonna, a little graceful child. This that thou doest is for women."

"He is my father, Tuan. There are many beatings if I only dance, as my soul would."

"For pity! I thought as much. Therefore did I come here, Nonna. Why dost thou not abandon this, and marry a youth of thine own people? Is it money? Is it

adat [law]?" So Nonna heard his kindly tones, yet he had got up and now sat on the edge of her mat, his eyes glinting with a growing admiration for the physical perfections of her. His cigarette tip was glowing frequently; inhalations under the spell of awakening passion.

Nonna recognized the symptoms and her heart hardened. Still, if it pleased the white Tuan to talk kindly she would listen on. Perhaps he would not lose control, in spite of himself, and go away blameless—to be spared.

"Nay, it is not money, nor law, white Tuan," she answered. "I love One. Knowest thou him? The prince Yusuf Sengang?"

"I've seen him!" sniffed the young white Tuan. "Another child!"

"Nay, it is but our faces that are young, we Javanese. I am a woman—see!" exclaimed Nonna artlessly exposing her tiny breasts.

The white Tuan eyed her avidly. He leaned over, beginning to caress her tentatively. "Why, then, do ye not marry?" he asked, his voice quivering with the sensations that were rising within him.

Nonna stifled a sigh. Why was it that her little slender body seemed to excite a flame of desire in all men! This Tuan meant well, perhaps, but his feelings were becoming too strong for him.

"Because the Sultan will not permit him," she answered, drawing away from him gently. "Perhaps he wishes me for a concubine himself. Perhaps he knows secretly of this that my father makes me do. Yusuf is dependent on him alone. Thou knowest, Tuan; we Javanese are poor but proud. It is long to wait."

"Thou shalt have him, Nonna! I, too, have influence with the Sultan. A word in his ear might avail much," he declared confidently. Yet his caresses had become still more fervent.

"Couldst thou!" Nonna had thrown herself back on the pillows, her bare arms crossed behind the sleek little knot of black hair ornamented with the spreading filaments of an aigrette. She did not seem to realize how unconsciously alluring she was, in her graceful and girlish bare shoulders, in the clinging silks which followed closely the delicate lines of her figure, in her gorgeous brown eyes that were looking tenderly upon this strangely compassionate white Tuan. But she felt that he was fast losing that stern and somewhat aloof resolution with which he had come here. The tension had become electric between them; the infinitely enticing, in such a virginal figure of woman as this, would soon beget an outburst of human passion, sweeping all his fine words, all his noble intentions, away.

But it was characteristic of the hypocritical white men to talk the nobler the more guilty their thoughts, Nonna knew.

"Child! Child!—To think that thou art old enough to be married!" he gloated, caressing her yet more. "But I shall help. And if it is money——" He dug into his pocket, while Nonna heard the crisp rustle of a ten-florin note. "Bah, it is nothing!" he ejaculated vexedly. "All I have with me, but there is more—much more, if it will help."

But the rustle of that note had awakened the savage in Nonna. *This* was what he had brought—for another purpose! The white Tuan was simply lying! They all lied, only this was a new set of lies! She made no move to take the florins, for she was Nonna of the Elder Gods, now, and this was a bad man-child, who needed whipping. Should she listen him out? Let him play out his futile, if well-intentioned, farce? His real desires would soon enough break out!

He was trying to fondle and pet her now, all the same time talking nobly, un-

mindful of her disdainful reluctance: "Yes, I shall help. I'll speak to the Sultan and you shall have your prince—but—oh, what's the use?—Nonna! Nonna, little girl!—Just once—for me——" He broke down, thrusting the note into her hand, pleading, begging, conscienceless, utterly unmindful of anything now but her, her, *her!* His arm had swept around her slender waist, his lips sought her shrinking face——

It had come, the lamentable truth! "Pheu!—Hypocrite! That talks kindly but art no better than the rest of them!—*Djaga!*" Nonna repulsed him disgustedly.

There was a swift rush in the bushes; then that white man seemed to melt away backward. The white body of him was swept kicking around the shrine, horizontally between four dark and struggling coolies. He cursed once or twice, but brown hands stopped his outcry. Nonna sprang out of the shrine, for the gleam of a kris had caught her eye.

"No! Yusuf! No!" she hissed, grab-

bing his arm. "The Tuan meant well, doubtless, but he was too much for himself. He has done no evil—come!"

Taking his hand Nonna ran swiftly out of the garden. Behind them they heard a resounding splash but no outcry. The four coolies had hurled that white man unceremoniously into the Sultan's lily pond. It was a squidgy place, of vile and bottomless mud under the Victoria Regia lilies. Men sent in there to gather lotus blossoms floundered for hours in the slimy ooze of the bottom before reaching shore! The white man would not dare cry out for help. His dignity forbade that. He would get out of that pond alone and in silence, and sneak to his hotel, a loathsome thing of slime and mud.

Nonna chuckled softly. "A woman's revenge, my lord!" she murmured to Yusuf as they fled. The latter shook his head; the kris, if you asked him! But the whole grove seemed to whisper with the laughter of the Elder Gods, as Nonna and Yusuf left the garden and set their faces toward Life.

The Mystic Rose

By HUNG LONG TOM

Oh, lovely flower,
From thy sweet perfume
The nightingale draws song.
The stars themselves
Reflect your sadness.
When your head is bowed
In grief over some tragedy
In the garden
They hide behind curtains

Of gray fog.
Oh, Rose,
Perhaps in your fragile
Loveliness
You are but a ghost,
The ghost of a slim young girl
Whose passing
Multiplied the sorrows
Of the world.



"Tsang bent down and caught one of the men in a wrestler's grip, gave a grunt and a heave and lifted him over his head."

Tsang, Accessory

By JAMES W. BENNETT

A tale of a Chinese motion-picture company—kidnapping and murder in Shanghai—and a Chinese detective

THE peculiar genius of Tsang Ah-bou, a detective of the Shanghai Municipal Police, lay in his uncanny ability in playing the rôles which his calling demanded. It is a truism that all Chinese are born actors, but Tsang was the actor as the Occidental thinks of him. Once he had put on the habiliments of a character he *was* that character.

He was of the average height of the Shanghai Chinese—who are not tall—and in appearance, fat. The latter description, if unqualified, would do Tsang a grave injustice. His loosely fitting gray serge gown concealed muscles trained in jiu-jitsu and of an iron-like hardness. He wore thick, myopic-lensed spectacles and suffered a considerable disability when

some disguise forced him to lay these aside.

Although unknown to the public, Tsang had won the confidence of many foreigners in Shanghai, men in high station. As for his Chief, Lluellan, a tall grim Welshman, that individual would occasionally wax lyrical in praise of Tsang.

Terence O'Conner had never had the privilege of meeting the Chinese detective. In fact he had had no dealings whatsoever with the Municipal Police of Shanghai's International City. However, he was now engaged in making this connection.

He was sitting with a hand on the desk telephone of the office of that new organization, "Oriental Motion Pictures, Limited, Shanghai." More than that, he was staring with somber intensity, not unmingled with horror, at a crumpled figure on the floor of the office. The figure was clad in a heliotrope satin gown. From the chin carefully depended seven long black hairs, mute evidence of an Oriental vanity and a desire to grow a beard. It was a vanity that was now forever thwarted, for the upper portion of the figure's head had been crushed in. The body gave evidence by its rigidity of having been a corpse for some time.

O'Conner turned away, lifted the telephone from the hook and asked the masculine Chinese Central to connect him with Police Headquarters. A Scotch desk sergeant answered the call.

"I want to report a murder," said O'Conner steadily. "I am the producer and director of the Oriental Motion Picture Company. I came into my office just five minutes ago, and I found Li Tsing—Mr. Li, we always called him—stretched on the floor, dead. Two chairs were overturned and the desk pulled out. He had been attacked with a blunt instrument, although there is no sign of the weapon——"

"An' have ye touched the body?" interrupted the sergeant.

"Of course! I tried to make an examination."

The police officer clucked disparagingly. "Well, what did ye find in yer examination?"

"Just what I was trying to tell you: apparently the only wound he received was on the head. Mr. Li was my male star actor. 'We were right in the middle of a film, too!'" O'Conner's voice rose querulously. "Of all times for him to get mixed up in a feud! For I suppose that is what it was. Some *tong* war——"

"Nonsense!" the sergeant again interrupted. "There's no such a thing as a *tong* in Shanghai. That's for them rascally Cantonese who emigrated over to America and learned American ways. Had the said Li any pairrsonal enemies?"

"Not that I know of—yes, wait a moment. There's another Oriental picture company here, an older organization that has no foreigners connected with it. Called Ta Ching Cinema, Limited. The rivalry between Mr. Li and the leading man of the Ta Ching has been high. I've been warned to look after my man, or the older company would try to 'noble' him."

O'Conner fell silent, and a stillness from the other end of the line indicated that the sergeant was putting down this information on the police blotter. At length the Scotchman queried:

"Any other places wherre ye might be suspectin' foul play?"

The director paused appreciably before answering. "It's not much of a suspicion. And, if I tell it to you, will you promise not to have the person arrested?"

"That depends," answered the desk sergeant cannily.

"But I can't have any arrests! I'm going to be crippled now finishing this

picture. I'll have to find a substitute for Mr. Li——"

"Well, come, come, who was it ye do be suspectin' also?"

O'Conner sighed. "Now that I've started, I suppose I must finish. It's the woman who plays opposite Mr. Li. Miss Laura Sun, a Chinese girl, our other star. They hated each other like blazes."

"'Hated — like — blazes,'" mechanically repeated the voice of the sergeant, evidently adding this to the blotter. "Why?"

"Why!" The director snorted. "Each thought he should be the only star. The usual thing. Li was the main offender. Rutherford, my camera man, used to get so angry that he swore he'd bash Li's head in, if the man didn't stop hogging the footage——"

"What's that?" The sergeant's voice was crisp. "Did ye say that one of yer employees, name of Rutherford, threatened to bash the said Li's head in?"

O'Conner gave an embarrassed laugh. "Oh, that was just a manner of speaking. It's proverbial that a camera man should dislike a star actor. One wants the composition of the picture to be right; the other simply aches to get his face in the middle of things."

"Did either Miss Sun or Mr. Rutherford openly threaten the life of said Li——other than Rutherford's statement about bashin' in heads?"

"Now, see here, Sergeant, I've told you all that I know!"

"Very well. I'll send one of our operatives down at once. He's a Chinese, name of Tsang Ah-bou. He'll straighten things out in amazin' quick time."

The director frowned into the mouth-piece of the telephone. "Good Lord, do we have to have a *Chinese* detective? Right at this moment, I'm a little fed up with Orientals. This is my first experi-

ence producing in the Orient and, so help me, it's going to be my last!"

The desk sergeant gave a discreet chuckle. "I know how you feel, sir. The Chinese do bedevil me, sometimes, until I fairr' want to break a few heads—but I beg yer parrdon! I forgot for a moment that the case before us was of a brroken head. I need yer co-operation in this, so I'll humor you by comin' down, myself. I think fer once the Scotch and the Irish can get together, Muster O'Conner."

"I'm not Irish," the director answered swiftly. "I'm an American. Born and raised in Hollywood. Terence O'Conner is the stage name I took when I went into directing. My name is, actually, Smith, as I can show you on my passport."

Again a pause. Then the sergeant's voice, ponderous, inexorable: "Terence O'Conner—*alias*—Smith."

"*What!*—oh, see here, Sergeant! You don't suspect *me*, do you? I just came down to the office five minutes ago and found Mr. Li's body. Why, I'm the last person in the world who—oh, it's ridiculous! Do you think I'd throw a monkey wrench into the machinery, right in the middle of a film? I was so anxious that nothing should go wrong that I had Li's life insured, only last week——"

"In yer own favor, Muster O'Conner?"

The director's voice grated. "No, not in my own favor! In the company's. The amount was only for ten thousand; and since the film will cost more than a hundred thousand, I'd hardly be murdering——"

"Now, now, sir, don't you be gettin' heated up! I must get all the facts. I do not suspect you. I suspect no one until the investigatin' is done. But, just for the sake of gettin' things all strraight, would ye mind tellin' me if *you* ever quarreled with said Li?"

O'Conner at once calmed down. "I'm

sorry I broke out as I did, Sergeant. Naturally I'm upset—sitting here, facing this ghastly tragedy as I talk with you. No, I've never quarreled with Mr. Li. Once I fined him pretty heavily for not appearing on the lot, two days running, when he was due in a series of sequences. Apparently he had been having a bout with the pipe, for he staggered in the third day, with his eyes the size of pin-points and looking like a wreck. That means opium, doesn't it?"

"It do," replied the sergeant dryly. "Which brings up another point: where did he get his opium?"

"How on earth should I know that?"

"No, I don't suppose you do. We'll try to run that down. Actorr smokin' opium. There may be our solution: he might have been smuggling it, on the side, and have been hi-jacked. There do be the most unlikely folk engagin' themselves in that. The last ye'd ever suspect."

O'Conner laughed. "As long as you don't suspect me! I don't even know what opium looks like. It's a brown powder, isn't it?"

"It is not!" said the sergeant ponderously. "It's brown, all right, but it's a fearful, sticky gum. But do you think said Li might have been engaged in smugglin' it with a member of yer company?"

"It's possible, Sergeant. We've engaged scores of extra people."

"But not, say, Miss Laura Sun?"

"It would seem to me that they hated each other too much to be partners in anything."

"Then, how about Rutherford, yer camera man?"

"That seems extremely unlikely, Sergeant, although I know very little about Rutherford. He's a queer young fellow. Moody, not talkative. I don't know what he does with himself, when he's off the lot. We don't live at the same hotel."

"How long have you known him?"

"About four months. I met him in Hollywood, just before we sailed. I advertised for a camera man and he answered the ad. The samples he showed me were excellent, so I hired him."

Once again that ponderous voice, just catching up with O'Conner's quick, nervous speech:

"Known Rutherford—four months—his past shrouded—his nights spent suspiciously——" A pause. "All right, Muster O'Conner. I'll be right over. You'd be surprized how few murderers get out of our net! You'd be surprized!"

"I'm sure I would, Sergeant. And believe me, I won't feel safe, myself, until he is netted. I may even be next!"

"Yes," agreed the sergeant earnestly. "Yes, ye may be, at that!"

2

NOEL RUTHERFORD sat with his back pressed hard against the rungs of a wooden chair. On the floor of Terence O'Conner's office the body of Mr. Li still sprawled. Rutherford kept his eyes carefully away from the spectacle of death. He was scowling.

Seated opposite him, face impassive, was Fergus Andrews, the sergeant of the Shanghai Municipal Police who had taken down O'Conner's story over the telephone. Andrews was saying stolidly:

"Why can't ye remember when ye had a quarrel wi' Muster Li?"

"Because I can't, that's all! I've been too busy. I'm doing all the photography for the entire job here."

"Even so——"

"Yes, even so! Why should I have stopped my work and said: 'Now, I must remember this; I must fix it in my mind! Because later a fat-headed policeman is going to come and ask me all about it!'"

The words were flung out by Ruther-

ford with a reckless disregard for their probable repercussions. Then his mouth lost its scowl; it softened to a smile of recognition. A girl had appeared at the door, a small, piquant figure garbed in old-rose silks banded with silver, her ebony hair smoothed back like a cap of lacquer. The camera man's eyes suddenly glinted with fear. He spoke urgently:

"Run away, Laura! *Please!*"

The Chinese girl obeyed, but not before she had glimpsed the sprawled, grotesque shape on the floor. For an instant her body had gone rigid. Her face, however, had remained expressionless.

"And who might that geyrrl be?" demanded Andrews curtly.

"Laura Sun, our leading woman," answered Rutherford with equal curtness. He paused an instant and then burst out: "And, see here, don't you bring her into this! She has nothing to do with the killing of that swine there!"

"See here, young fellow, you'll get along much better for yourself if you try answerin' me wi' a bit of civility——"

"Oh, it's civility you want?" interposed the young camera man in the same reckless tone. "Why should I be civil? You've made up your mind that I committed the murder! Just because I've had words with Li." His voice lifted a notch and the lips twitched nervously. "Well, I'll add to that. Not only have I threatened to bash in Li's head, but I've promised him a raw-hiding; I've threatened to drown him, to tie him to a railroad track. And why? Because he was the nastiest, slimiest worm that ever tried to disguise himself as a human being. A rotter if there ever was——"

"Wait a moment," cut in the sergeant. "Is it because he is Chinese that ye felt so provoked wi' him?"

"No, of course not. The other Chinese on the lot are as decent a crew as you

could ask for. You'd have to go a long way in Hollywood to get a cast of white men that are as honest and hardworking. But Li—he was all bad. And he made life a purple hell on earth for poor little Miss Sun."

"And I suppose you defended her?" Andrews asked.

"I did my best. The trouble was, he usually waited to begin his indecent proposals until they were playing a scene together. When she was supposed to be registering love for him, he'd spring something hot. I don't know the Chinese language, but I know that what he said was steamy. The extras would cackle and Miss Sun would cringe back and spoil the scene. There's no question in my mind that Li wanted her out of the way; wanted to wear her down and force her to resign——"

"Now, wait a moment," checked Andrews. "Where was O'Conner when this was goin' on?"

"O'Conner was there. He didn't like it, and he told Li so. But Li had been buttering O'Conner up and the Chief was always making excuses for him. To give the devil his due, Li could be a superb actor when he wanted to be. And Laura Sun—although she's lovely, as you saw—isn't in the same acting class with Li."

Andrews was silent a moment; then he asked: "Does O'Conner speak Chinese?"

"No. We've had to depend upon interpreters. Mr. Li did most of that. Miss Sun does a little. She was born in San Francisco and she speaks better English than she does her native tongue. As a matter of fact, if she hadn't been bilingual I doubt if she could have held her job. Her brain is keen, but there are moments when it doesn't seem to function before the camera."

"You say that the said Li acted as in-

terpreter. Where did he learn English? Here?"

"No, in America. O'Conner can tell you about him. I understand that he picked Li up in Hollywood. Li was acting as some sort of expert on Oriental *décor* there. The Chief brought Li over with him. Miss Sun we found here—or rather I found her. She came to me when we were first casting and begged so hard for a position that I more or less took her under my wing."

Andrews drummed for an uncertain moment with his heavy spatulate fingers upon the arm of O'Conner's desk chair. Then, with the air of a man who has made up his mind, he demanded:

"Could Muster O'Conner get a camera man to take yer place?"

Rutherford's eyes widened. "Yes. So, you're—arresting me?"

Andrews looked at him stolidly. "You're a wee bit in lo' wi' the little Chinese lass, I'm thinking. Perhaps Miss Sun has done it. And if she did, ye know all the sairrcumstances——"

"Oh, by all means, accuse Miss Sun!" Rutherford flung out, his voice rising to a sharp, hysterical pitch. "Arrest her, too, you fat-witted harness bull! She *would* be likely to kill Li! She's so big and strong! Take a good look at her wrists and hands, and try to imagine them lifting a club and doing *that!*" pointing with a shaking finger at the crumpled figure on the office floor.

"It ud be possible for her," commented Andrews imperturbably.

The camera man appeared dashed by the calm words. His tone changed. "But Sergeant, she's not a day over seventeen, only a child!"

"Aye, but old enou' to be turnnin' men's heads and causin' all sorts of blether and commotion and sudden death." Andrews hesitated an instant and then went on, his voice almost gentle,

"I do be beggin' yer pardon for this."

His large hands went out with a motion incredibly quick . . . and Rutherford found himself looking stupidly down at a pair of shining manacles that braceleted his wrists.

3

THE tall, elderly Chinese clad in the garish satins of the Chapei tea houses—which in China corresponds to the garb of a Rialto racketeer—smiled ingratiatingly at O'Conner. He had been buttonholing the director for nearly an hour. At last he reached the meat of his discourse:

"I have velly fine leading man fo' you, sir. A great actor tempolalily out of job. True, he talk' no English, but *I* shall be at hand to make translating. So you will get *me*, as well as——"

"Yes," interrupted O'Conner impatiently, "I know; we'll be getting your services as interpreter; you've been telling me that for half an hour; but how about the actor?"

"I am coming to that," went on the elderly Chinese calmly. "But as you foreigners say, hastings make wastings. In addition to my unusual and fine serv-icings, you get the incomp'able actor, Mr. Ch'ung. He has acted on stages of Peiping, Tientsin, Cheefoo, Tsingtao, Tsinan, Ichang, Hankow, Kiukiang, Chinking——"

O'Conner made an ineffectual grab at his fast-disappearing patience and missed. He interrupted to say: "All right! All *right!* I'll take your word for it that this Ch'ung has performed all over the map. But stage and screen acting are two different affairs. He may not screen well. And the main point is: does he look like Mr. Li? I can train a ham actor, but even I can't doctor up a picture to make a six-footer look like one that's only five-

feet-seven. Mr. Li was not tall, and his face was round."

The elderly Chinese waved his hands in the air soothingly. "But Mr. Ch'ung look' exactly like Mr. Li. All same his twin blother. Mr. Ch'ung is outside now."

This was too much for O'Conner. "Good Lord! Here I've wasted a third of a morning and all the time the man was here! Bring him in! We'll find out whether or not he's Li's twin brother!"

The elderly Chinese moved leisurely to the door and gave a shrill call. In response, there sidled sheepishly into the room an embarrassed-looking Oriental of thirty, gorgeously caparisoned. He was of Mr. Li's height and the face was authentically the full moon with slant eyes that the late lamented actor had possessed. But there the resemblance ended. Where Li had been thin to the point of cadaverousness, this actor verged on corpulence.

O'Conner suddenly moaned. "Take this man out!" he said feebly. "Take him away! He's forty pounds overweight! He's beefy!"

The elderly interpreter looked worried. He conferred for a moment with his charge. The latter began peeling off an outer jacket, a crape under jacket and then the loose silken shirt next to the skin.

"Here! What's the matter?" muttered O'Conner, startled. "Why the disrobing act? I'm not making any pictures of Aphrodite!"

"But, sir, I show you that Mr. Ch'ung is not beefsy, as you complain. No fat on him. All muscles."

In spite of himself, O'Conner was caught by the sinewy, beautifully developed brown torso that was revealed.

"He's an athlete, isn't he? Looks like a wrestler. . . . Hum . . . I wonder if I couldn't use him. Make him do a few

stunts. He ought to be able to. . . . Yes . . . I could——" O'Conner broke off. He had been talking to himself. Now he turned to the interpreter. "First I must give him a screen test; also, find out if he can act for nuts. You——" jerking a hand toward the newest Thespian—"you——come on."

The small but husky Chinese trotted obediently toward the door. As the pair, followed by the elderly interpreter, were walking across the lot, Sergeant Andrews appeared. O'Conner hailed him.

"Well, Sergeant, I think I've found a substitute for Li. I was growing pretty discouraged. I've had to give up the idea of getting an absolute double for Li. Funny thing, you think that all Chinese look alike—until you try to duplicate 'em! This man doesn't look like Li in the least, but I'm playing a hunch. I'm going to turn my picture upside down, begin all over again, change it to a stunt production. I'll make this new man engage upon a few high, wide and handsome fights. He looks like a fighter—stripped to the buff. Which is more than you can say about most Chinese. I don't think it's ever been done in an Oriental film. If he lives through the mill, perhaps I'll have a picture that will make me not regret Mr. Li's passing to the Great Beyond."

Sergeant Andrews had listened with a mouth that drooped wider and wider. With an effort he closed it and then said:

"Muster O'Conner, did you say that you were goin' to make a dare-de'il of this new man? A stunter?"

"That's it! A parachute drop or so from an airplane. A jump from a moving train to a motor car, and back again."

"My God!" muttered the Scotchman. "See here, O'Conner, you can't do——"

He stopped, for the actor who had paused near by was suddenly taken with a cough, a loud nasty cough that blanked

Andrews' words. As the Scotchman left the lot a moment later, he shook his head.

"Ah, puir 'Tsang Ah-bou,'" he said mournfully to himself. "Dropped from an airplane in a parrachute! I'm thinkin' this will be his last assignment—an' he the finest detective that ever wore his shirt outside his breeks! But that was a rousing cough he gave. I'm not the man to stop him if he's decided upon a courrrse of action. Aye, I'll not soon forget the tongue-lashin' he handed me for two weary hours, the time I gave away one of his disguises. Fairr blistered me, he did. . . . But jumpin' from a automobile to a movin' ttrain! Ah, puir 'Tsang Ah-bou!'"

4

SERGEANT ANDREWS had been able to recognize in the newly acquired actor his associate on the force only by reason of the set of those brown, muscular shoulders. What Tsang had done to his face, what subtle yet profound changes he had made in its lines and planes, the Scotchman did not know; nor, for that matter, did any one else on the staff. Tsang kept his methods secret.

He entered upon his new rôle of cinema stunt actor with the calm fatality of the Oriental who has an unhappy task to perform which can not be shirked.

O'Conner, on the other hand, was delighted. What his newest find lacked in acting technique—and his deficiencies were tremendous—he made up in courage, even in daring.

The danger and arduousness of the work did not, however, prevent Tsang from carrying on the real work underlying his strenuous play-acting. He moved about among the lowly extra people in a way that would have shocked the defunct Mr. Li, who had held himself

grandly aloof from the mixed sweepings of the street that made up the mob scenes.

Clues, Tsang found. He discovered such a maze of them that he was bewildered. They led in too many directions, implicating too many persons. One conclusion he did reach which he embodied in a letter to Lluellan, his Chief. The letter read:

"Respectfully request that you release Rutherford. If he is unable to furnish bail, I shall guarantee it. Release him on condition he remains in Shanghai and again takes up his duties as camera man. The camera man who is substituting for him is very poor; he does not do justice to me as an actor, thus arousing in my breast large professional pride, for I think I am going to make fine cinema actor. Who knows, I may resign my position as weary human bloodhound and become grimacing doll who smiles when the honorable O'Conner says, 'Smile,' and who knocks down inoffensive actors when he says, 'Knock.'"

The letter was unsigned, but Tsang had added a postscript:

"If this case ever ends, I shall put in a bill for damages as follows:

"One large bump over right eye.

"One rib which I believe cracked, or if not cracked at least greatly contused.

"One long finger nail, grown with great care over period of years, vanished.

"One sprain on right largest toe, obtained by kicking most pleasant man who has the misfortune to play part of villain.

"That is bill to the present. The future may see list long as my arm. The money value of such damages I leave to your judgment. But if the eminent Auditor of the Municipal Council endeavors to say that such damagings were sustained in the 'normal' course of my duties as detective, you will kindly advise him that I shall resign promptly and in great anger. For I feel that the treatment I am now receiving is most 'un-normal.' At moments I am even envious of the defunct Mr. Li."

Lluellan read this communication, laughed, frowned, swore and laughed again. His impulse was to recall Tsang. The most valuable man on the force shouldn't be permitted to run such risks! Yet, the Police Chief knew that Tsang would sulk for weeks if interfered with. And the Chinese detective had elected to take this risk.

He rang a bell, summoned a warder and ordered that Rutherford be brought to his office. The young camera man appeared, his clothes grimy. He was badly shaven and his eyes were bloodshot. Without preliminary, he began to speak:

"I've been thinking. Haven't slept. No use you chaps investigating any farther. I'll come clean. I—well, I bilked that filthy Li. I came across him, early that morning, in the office—before the others came. He was chivvying poor Miss Sun. I saw red, I guess. I hardly know what did happen, except that I swung on him. The next thing I knew, he was lying at my feet—smashed up, dead."

Lluellan eyed the boy pleasantly. "I see. Was Miss Sun with you, when this happened?"

"No!" Rutherford burst out. "I should say not! She knew nothing about it. I—told Li into the office."

Lluellan's smile broadened slightly. "I thought you just said that Li was—'chivvying' was the word you used—chivvying Miss Sun, when you set upon him?"

"That's right, sir. I sent her out of the office, first."

"What sort of instrument did you use?"

"What——?" Rutherford's eyes were startled.

"I said, what sort of instrument did you use?"

"Oh!" The young camera man paused. "A cane—a walking-stick. I threw it away."

"Could you find it again?"

"I? No. No, of course not. I haven't the faintest idea where I threw the board——"

"Walking-stick, don't you mean, Rutherford?"

"Yes, stick. What did I say, a board? Perhaps it was a piece of board." The young man's voice rose. "Li didn't de-

serve to live! He was a rotter, I tell you! He——"

"Hold up, Rutherford. I'd advise you not to try confessing any more. And don't tell any one else what you've just told me." Lluellan's face lost its genial smile, becoming remote and grave. "Do you know, Shanghai is the most unconventional city on the face of the globe, and I think our Police Force tops the list of its unconventionalities. In spite of this confession of yours, I am releasing you. Right now. You will give me your word that you won't leave Shanghai. That you will go back to your work as if nothing had happened. In return for this, if you are asked to give us any aid, I shall expect you to do so."

Rutherford's hand went to his forehead. It was evident to Lluellan that the camera man was battling with some temptation. But he downed it apparently, for he spoke coldly:

"I'm sorry, sir, but I don't think I want my freedom under such terms. I can't make that promise."

"You mean, if we cast the net too tightly about Miss Sun?"

"I mean, if you try to spin a net for her!"

"That's splitting hairs, Rutherford. However, we're not inhuman. If it turns out to be Miss Sun, we won't demand your aid. Besides, one of my operatives is conducting this case. I can depend upon him eventually to produce irrefutable proof."

"One of your operatives?" demanded the camera man with sudden interest.

Lluellan caught the strained quality of the question. If before he had doubted the wisdom of Rutherford's release, he did not do so now. The camera man would be directly under Tsang's observation. He nodded and spoke with easy mendacity:

"Yes, we have an American on the

job. You'll probably see him snooping about the lot—although he's pretty clever and you may not notice him. Now, have I your promise to go back to your job and to stay there?"

"Yes." Rutherford's answer was lifeless, uncaring.

5

NOEL RUTHERFORD returned to find work on the lot limping, for lack of an adequate camera man. O'Conner had been making shift with a Chinese whose experience was of the news-reel variety. The man had a certain knack for taking mob scenes and for grouping, but beyond that his ignorance of camera technique was sublime. . . . The director gave a shout, pounded Rutherford delightedly on the back and sent the news-camera man hurriedly into limbo.

After hearing Rutherford's story—minus the confession, which the camera man deleted—O'Conner said excitedly:

"Noel, I've got a new leading man in Li's place that's a world-beater. Talk about falling into a muddy ditch and coming up, smelling of attar of roses! A Chinese he-man! And willing? Not once has he had hysterics and screamed for smelling-salts, as Li used to do. And he can stage a fight like nobody's business!"

"Can he act?"

O'Conner shrugged. "Well, to tell you the truth, as a trouper, he's about on a par with Miss Sun. None of Li's fine points. There were moments when Li had sparks of real genius."

"Yes," agreed Rutherford sourly. "Yes, when he wasn't busy pinching Miss Sun's arm—to make her screw up her face and spoil footage."

The director laughed. "Oh, see here, Noel, let's not go into that old argument. Li's dead. Give the devil his due——"

O'Conner broke off and beckoned to a

Chinese, bare to the waist, carrying a two-edged warrior's sword.

"Ch'ung! Come here a moment!"

The Chinese did not move.

"Oh, hell, I keep forgetting that he can't understand English!" The director's voice rose to a bellow: "Cha! Hey, Cha! Where in blue bloody blazes are you? I wish you wouldn't be forever doing a fadeout when I want you! Cha!—Oh, there you are, are you?"

The tall, meager figure of the interpreter came with hurt dignity and very slowly from behind the canvas scenery. He spoke with shrill peevishness:

"Aw light, Mista O'Connah, aw light, aw light. What you want?"

"Bring our two-fisted leading man over here. I want him to meet Rutherford, my old camera man."

The introductions were made. The new masculine star bowed with a certain dignity which he did not lose, even though bare from the waist up.

But the gaze of the young camera man swept past the actor to a small figure in gay satins that stood lonely yet expectant, a short distance from the group. Laura Sun was smiling straight into Rutherford's eyes. He took an eager step forward, but she gave the barest negative shake of the head. He checked himself and turned elaborately back to the new leading man, who was engaged at that instant in telling him—via interpreter—that he, Ch'ung, was shocked with delight to meet the exalted and prior-born Rutherford.

Yet, in spite of his preoccupation with the amenities of introduction, the new actor's eyes were sharp. They had darted from one to the other of this pair: to Rutherford, handsome and reckless in Western fashion; to Laura Sun, beautiful as Chinese women many times are beautiful, with the fragility of Chien Lung porcelain, with the smooth, gold-tinted

skin of imperial lacquer. Like a powerful spark, leaping a wide arc, a message had passed between them, too fast for Tsang Ah-bou to read.

6

LATE that afternoon, when the work for the day was ended, the extras continued to linger. The studio exerted a moth-and-the-flame fascination. It was a place of topsy-turvy morals, even of downright wickedness; for, to them, many of the acts which O'Conner in all innocence demanded of Miss Sun and of his extra women were highly obscene. . . . In real life, no Chinese woman, even under stress of the deepest emotion, would permit herself to cradle the battered head of the hero on her shoulder—not even though he had fainted from loss of blood after rescuing her from the villain. By dangerously stretching a point, she might fan him, or recite a poem which she had composed on the spot to his valor. But all the while she should be staring fixedly in the direction of her father's home and showing a marked anxiety for her parent to appear and thus regularize her being alone—if only for a moment—with the hero.

Tsang Ah-bou could have told O'Conner that he was storing up trouble, applying the rules and canons of the Occident to a film that would be exhibited to a purely Oriental audience. But, being an Oriental himself, trained in one cardinal rule of the East: never to meddle in matters not directly concerning him and his real profession as detective, Tsang said nothing. As "Ch'ung," dare-devil of the film, he silently and doggedly obeyed orders.

Tsang had not been engaged long in his new work before he heard that the rival motion picture concern, the Ta Ching Cinema Company, was laughing

up its long sleeves at O'Conner's insanities. Their leading man, particularly, was reported to be loudest in his titterings. He was said not only to be laughing but to be making strange statements that would bear examination. Added to that, there was the former rivalry between him and Mr. Li of which O'Conner had told the police. Therefore, the evening of Rutherford's return, Tsang decided to investigate the Ta Ching matter, and promptly left the lot.

Going by devious paths to his home, where as a Chinese gentleman Tsang dwelt in peace and amity with his three wives, he patiently removed the bits of plastic clay that had transformed him from Tsang Ah-bou, a detective, to Ch'ung, an actor.

When again he left his home, Tsang was once more in disguise, but this time an entirely new one. He was now clad in the flashy silks of a sporting man. After a moment of thought, he directed his rickshaw to the House of the Ten Thousand Gilded Songbirds, a flamboyant, baroque edifice near the Willow Pattern Bridge. The choice was made because the tea house was the popular rendezvous of the moment for those who indulged in Chinese "hi-life."

His guess proved sound. In the center of the room, busily cracking and eating sunflower seeds, drinking too heartily of triple-distilled rice brandy, sat a tall, youthful Chinese clad in purple silk. When not eating and drinking, the purple one was talking—loudly. About him hung a group of sycophants. He was not unaware of the sensation he was creating, for a pleased smile played continually upon his lips. Confidently Tsang joined the group of admirers. The man's small, cold eyes darted to Tsang and he paused in his monologue. To fill the gap, the detective spoke:

"May this humble worm be permitted

to join your circle, ineffable Waung? Your blinding effulgence has so penetrated the land, that this person has traveled from the benighted hamlet of his birth—too small to permit a cinema—all the way to Shanghai, solely to view your superb face on the screen. But, to see you now in person! That is a pleasure so great that this slug-like one is overcome!"

The young actor bowed. Deliberately he unfurled a fan. The motion was as graceful as the dip of a swallow. Then he answered Tsang with a stereotyped humility that failed to hide an underlying arrogance.

The actor then continued what evidently was a narration of the extraordinary blunders committed by the Ta Ching's rival company, O'Conner's outfit. The purple one even confessed that he had put in a day as an extra, garbed in coolie cloth, and that his priceless face would be found in one of O'Conner's mob scenes. By this, Tsang shrewdly aduced that the Ta Ching Company—for all its bravado—had been more than a little worried by the appearance of a rival company in a field that had previously been theirs alone. Then, from a criticism of O'Conner, Waung turned to the work of the director's new leading man. Holding his mouth to the contours of a smile, Tsang listened.

"Their leading man, Ch'ung," said the young actor, "is a strange sea-cucumber! His shoulders are broad like a water buffalo's and just as poetic. His face is as expressionless as a sun-clock on a rainy day. When asked to portray hate, he shows joy. When asked to show fear, he shows nothing. For he has the courage of a clod and does not know what fear means. In that he is like the silly Western Ocean barbarians."

Here, Tsang knew, the actor offered the most scathing criticism of all, since the normal Chinese links hardihood with

imbecility, and sees no saving grace in recklessness.

The purple one drank deeply. One of his satellites queried:

"But what think you of their first leading man, Li?"

"Li was very good," answered the actor magnanimously. "True, he was broken down from too much opium. But why should he put much stomach into his work? With the leading woman that he had!"

Tsang asked, "What is your opinion of Miss Sun?"

Waung gave a shout of derisive laughter. "She? She plays in the style of the ugly barbarian women from the country of Huh-luh-wuh [Hollywood]. As for Li——" And Waung rambled on. He did not make the mistake of crassly running down the murdered man, but by dealing in innuendoes he succeeded thoroughly in blasting Li's reputation. He was drinking more and more rice brandy as he talked—thanks to Tsang's quiet word to the waiter that Waung's cup be kept continually filled. At last he gave a maudlin leer and announced with great gravity: "Li failed because he tempted the gods. He died because he tempted them. I am the one that the gods have chosen to become the supreme cinema actor of China. If I wanted, I could tell you a thing or two about Li's death!"

He paused and stared blearily at the faces which had hitherto been turned to him with admiration. Now they were flawed with fear. One man spoke:

"Heaven-smiting Waung, be careful! Remember that the murderer of the unessential Li has yet to be apprehended."

The actor laughed recklessly. "You mean that *this* person killed Li? Well, perhaps I did. But not in the way you think!" His lips pursed with maudlin secretiveness. "You'd like to know what

I mean by that, wouldn't you? Well, I'll tell you one thing: I was the last one with Li, alive. He dined with me here, at this very table, the night that he died. And he told me of a quarrel he had been having with his leading woman and with the Mei-guo [American] camera man. But neither of these was the cause of Li's death. . . . There was another . . . cause. . . ."

Waung's voice had grown abruptly drowsy and it tailed off into silence. He sat nodding his head, then jerking it up again. Tsang Ah-bou rose. With a shrug and a polite bow of farewell to the group, he left the table and the building.

7.

RUTHERFORD and Tsang Ah-bou each alighted from the same tram car near the studio, the following morning. Tsang had been economically traveling third class on the trailer, while the camera man, being a foreigner, had been forced to ride in the first class.

The American nodded coldly. Tsang, however, smiled as wide and friendly a smile as he could—in view of the materials placed on his middle-aged countenance to give it a more youthful appearance. He fell into step beside the camera man. Rutherford gave him a glance of annoyance but said nothing. They traversed a block in silence; then the American was astonished to hear the actor say in heavily accented Pidgin-English:

"Please do not tell any one dat I speak your language. I speak it so velly little that it seem bettah to say I do not speak it at all. Then no one can get angry with me when I not savvy evvathing, see?"

The suspicion that had first dawned in Rutherford's eyes now faded. The Chinese actor's explanation was rational. However, the camera man's frown did not relax. The day before he had caught the

man doing one of Li's old tricks, deliberately stealing footage from Laura Sun. . . . But what Rutherford did not know was that Tsang had waited until the camera man's eyes were on him, to try this experiment. The detective had seen the red fury mount in the young American's face.

As the pair walked along, Tsang continued to talk: "I work pretty hard now. Surely the honorable Li did not have to fight evvabody, as I do. Today I mus' jump from Lung Hwa Pagoda into net at bottom. I hear that picture will show me making jump but will not show net; so it look as though I fall great distance." Tsang's voice grew plaintive: "What man will think that I am such a big foolo as to jump from tower, just to save the life of girl? Chinese man will all say: 'Why so much troub' about one girl? If no can get this one, get another. Girl is cheap.'"

Rutherford turned, scowling. "You would think that way! You Orientals are so damned selfish."

Tsang continued, his serenity unruffled: "But Mr. Li did not have to do the things I do. Maybe that was why he was kill'. Maybe he said to somebody: 'No, I will not jump from the tower into a net!' Then, bang, bang, somebody got mad and hit him over the head."

An unwilling smile came to Rutherford's lips. "That's a new theory of the murder: that Li was killed for insubordination. No, the Chief didn't bilk Li, for not obeying orders. He's a white man, O'Conner is. I suppose you Chinese on the lot *are* speculating over who killed Li. Well, my advice to you is to stop it! Then you'll get into no trouble!" A sharp edge had come into his voice.

"Oha, yes!" Tsang promptly agreed.

Then he threw up his head in a listening attitude. They were just then entering the studio. In the distance, within,

some one was cursing in English. The sound drew nearer; then suddenly O'Conner shot around a corner, his hair tousled. Catching sight of Tsang Ah-bou, the director pounded toward him.

"You, Ch'ung, damn you to hell! What have you done with Laura Sun?"

Tsang's face became blank. "Uh?"

"Laura Sun! Laura Sun!—you infernal, kidnapping bandit! You had your nerve, coming back here to the studio today! I suppose you thought we shouldn't learn of it, though——"

Rutherford blanked any further utterance by shouting: "Terence, what are you saying? Is Laura gone?"

"I'll tell the cockeyed world she's gone! And there's the man who's responsible for it!"

O'Conner and Rutherford each caught Tsang by an arm, their grasp cruel. Then the director went on passionately:

"I don't know whether to take the law into my own hands and horsewhip him before the entire cast, or turn him over to the police. I'm afraid if I start whipping, I'll kill him." O'Conner turned and set up the familiar shout: "Cha? Cha? You malingerer, where in blazes are you? Come here!"

With great dignity, a tall gaunt figure rose from the canvas chair marked, "O'Conner—reserved for Use of Director only."

"Aw light," answered the interpreter in his high, disapproving voice. "What you want me to translate to the honorable Ch'ung?"

"Tell him—tell him—wait a moment! I believe I'll give him one chance to redeem himself. Tell him he's got to bring Miss Sun back to the lot, here, by this time tomorrow. If he fails, I'll send him to the hoosegow——"

"Huh?" interrupted Cha.

"Hoosgow—to jail, prison!" O'Conner fumbled in the pocket of his coat and

pulled forth a bit of crumpled, soiled paper upon which words had been scrawled by a dull-led pencil. "Now, translate this, Cha. And don't make any mistakes. I want him to realize that he's been found out."

Tonelessly Cha read:

"Dear Mr. O'Conner,—

"I am taking this one stolen opportunity to write, although my note may never reach you. I have been captured. Where I am I do not know—nor why. There is no talk of ransom, only of killing me. I am promising a small fortune to a boy of the gang if he will drop this in a post box. I dare not write more—except to say that Ch'ung, your new leading man, is spoken of repeatedly as the head of the group.

"LAURA SUN."

"There, you see?" began O'Conner, only to be interrupted by Rutherford. The camera man gave an insane bellow and struck viciously at Tsang. Instinctively the little Chinese dodged, but not enough; Rutherford's fist connected with his jaw. Tsang toppled backward, gave a whistling sigh and lost consciousness.

Rutherford would have leaped upon Tsang then, had not O'Conner, burly, and of the two the less excited, intervened.

"Hold up, Noel! You don't realize! This fine specimen of a gangster"—pointing to Tsang's limp body—"is worth more to us alive than dead. He's got to go out and bring Laura Sun back. She's given us our only clue."

The camera man stared at O'Conner for a dazed moment; then he nodded wearily. "Yes. Yes, of course. But it seems criminal to release him—to let him disappear among those millions in the Native City!"

"Not if I put the fear of God in him—before he starts!"

Tsang gave a grunt. The mists slowly cleared. "Ey-yah!" he muttered and sat up, feeling his jaw with an exploring hand. No. Fortunately those deceptive bits of clay which changed the contours of his face were undamaged; they had

been placed higher up, in the cheek hollows. Shakily reaching his feet, he spoke in Chinese to Cha:

"Let this person be permitted to look at that letter."

The elderly interpreter translated the request into English.

O'Conner gave a short, barking laugh and shook his head. "And have Ch'ung tear up this evidence against him? Not much!"

Again Tsang spoke to O'Conner, through Cha: "Take the letter into the office and compare it with specimens of Miss Sun's handwriting."

The director nodded and stalked to the office. Cha and Tsang Ah-bou followed. O'Conner opened a file and pulled forth Laura Sun's contract. He spoke:

"This is the only specimen of her writing that I have. I've already compared the signatures. They're the same. Look at them."

The little detective muttered under his breath. He was near-sighted, and his present disguise was one which did not permit him to wear glasses. A forgery? Who could have done it? Some one on the lot, with access to the office? O'Conner's sanctum was not difficult of entry; it was never locked. Tsang, in fact, had entered it and made a search, a few days previous, during an hour when he knew that O'Conner would be busy with a mob scene.

Could it have been Waung, the purple one? The leading man of the rival company had confessed to hiring himself as an extra, in order to spy upon O'Conner. It was a peculiarly Chinese type of plot, to steal the Oriental Motion Picture Company's leading woman and then try to fix the blame upon O'Conner's new leading man. Yet, would Waung have been so outspoken in his talk, the evening before, if he had committed such an act? . . .

Tsang came out of his brown study at the sight of O'Conner's eyes, cold with suspicion, bent upon him. He turned to Cha:

"Tell the heaven-born director that this person will make a search for Laura Sun. That I shall bring her back, if she is alive."

And Tsang walked out of the office, into the crowded, teeming Chinese street.

8

TSANG AH-BOU knew that a stiff job was before him, to find a Chinese girl, concealed somewhere in Shanghai's rabbit warren of two million inhabitants. Yet he knew his Shanghai, knew it intuitively. In addition, there were the usual ways of charting off a city, such as a Western detective would employ in New York or London. The scanning of police reports. A patrolman's notation that an unconscious woman had been carried into a building—for Laura Sun would hardly have gone peaceably unless rendered unconscious.

Then, there was still another city to be searched: Shanghai's Junktown. There lay a little world in microcosm, with its countless sampans and junks, its barges and lighters. There Chinese were born, lived, gave birth and died, rarely setting foot on land. Sampans loaded with fish and eels, fruit and vegetables, took care of their daily needs. A midwife's junk hovered in the offing when a baby was due to be born. A coffin boat hung unashamedly near at hand when some inhabitant of a junk lay fighting death. A secretive, closely knit little world that turned a suspicious face to all that dwelt on land.

Yet, even there, Tsang knew that the task was not insurmountable. The junk colonies each had its Headman, an elderly junkman who acted as arbiter of disputes and who exercised patriarchal rights over the fleet anchoring in his par-

ticular cove. Very little of an unusual nature on the water escaped his attention.

A step sounded behind Tsang. It was taking the same tempo as his own. Abruptly he wheeled. Rutherford was several paces behind him. The young camera man growled:

"Go on, Ch'ung! Don't stop! You're going to hunt Laura Sun today! And you're not going to quit, until you find her!"

"I know," agreed Tsang mildly. "That is what I try to do."

"And you're going to have company today—mine. If you make a single move to get away from me, you'll get a taste of *this!*"

Somewhat clumsily Rutherford drew from his pocket a small, shiny, not particularly lethal-appearing revolver.

"How long you had that?" asked Tsang.

"Since yesterday afternoon. When I saw you hogging all that footage from Laura, I doped you out to be another Li. Perhaps even a relation of his. I know how you Orientals stick together! And I figured if you started any revenge stuff for Li's death—well, my guess wasn't so far off; you started it, all right, by kidnapping her!" Rutherford looked somberly down at the revolver. "And a devil of a lot of good it did me to buy this! You stole her away right from under my nose."

"When you last see her?" Tsang asked with apparent casualness.

"None of your damned business."

Tsang spoke in a patient voice, as though to a child: "S'pose I am guilty; what harm to tell me that?"

"No harm, I guess. I walked to her hotel with her after work yesterday. I warned her against you, but she only laughed and said that she was in no danger. No danger! And you lurking just around the corner! . . . Well, let's get going. I don't care how you save your

face, how much pretended searching you do, just so long as you wind up at the spot where Laura is being kept. If you don't——"

"If I don't, you'll murder me?" asked Tsang softly.

"Yes! Yes, I'll—oh, I don't know what I'll do! I would hate you enough to kill you——" Rutherford's uncertain, unhappy tone changed; it became charged with its original bravado: "So don't tempt me too far! The sooner you find her, the better for you!"

With some difficulty, Tsang kept a frown from clouding his brow. The presence of Rutherford complicated things for him. How could he explain his action in entering the building plainly marked "Municipal Police" and a delay of an hour there, poring over Chinese patrolmen's reports for the past fifteen hours? In the Native City, the task would be less embarrassing; the Police *yamen* there did not advertise itself except by Chinese ideographs which Rutherford would not be able to decipher.

"Snap into it!" commanded Rutherford curtly. "And don't let any grass grow under your heels!"

Tsang thought of the old Chinese proverb: "Where the patient water buffalo with his slow but inexorable pace travels a thousand miles, the agile but changeably minded gazelle moves but a hundred."

9

TSANG'S first stop was neither at police station nor junk colony. He went to the Ta Ching Studios, the building which housed the purple one, Waung, the actor who had hinted of knowledge of the foul play which had caused Mr. Li's death. At the entrance, Tsang curtly demanded that Waung be summoned. The porter informed him dourly that the Heaven-smiting Waung was then engaged in a scene

and that not even Shang Ti, the Great Over-God, dared disturb him.

"Tell the miserable Waung," said Tsang in crisp Chinese, "that he may be willing to beard the wrath of Shang Ti, but he can not snap his fingers at the Shanghai Municipal Police. If he does not appear in five minutes, I shall telephone headquarters. A patrol wagon will come and your studios will be raided."

The porter gave Tsang an awed look, scurried away and, in a remarkably quick time, returned with Waung—today clad in a delicate shade of heliotrope satin. The young actor started. It was apparent that he did not recognize in Tsang the affable, middle-aged stranger of the tea-house, but he did recognize the leading man of the opposing motion picture camp. Waung said nastily:

"So, it's you, is it? You make me stop an important scene, because of a silly threat about a police raid. And, speaking of the police, if I ever find you here again, I'll have you arrested for trespass!"

"I think you are forgetting, miserable Waung, about the statement you made last night—before witnesses. You said that you knew all about the death of Li. I heard you. I could cause your arrest for murder. And, if you don't answer a question that I've come to ask you, I'll swear out that warrant."

The purple one's mouth flew open. "Who are you? A changeling? A Fox Spirit that can inhabit different bodies at will?"

"Never mind who I am," Tsang answered grimly. "I am here to learn whether you caused the disappearance of Laura Sun, either last night or this morning. And I want the truth!"

Waung's face portrayed surprise. "Laura Sun? Your leading woman? I know nothing about her."

"But you know about Li's death. Isn't

it reasonable to assume that you also know of Laura Sun's disappearance?"

Waung gave the detective a shamefaced look. "But I don't really know of his death. My theory is that he died at his own instigation—hired some one to kill him. That last night he was alive, he confessed to me that he was full of bitterness over the way O'Conner was running the film. Li said that when the film was released, his reputation would be ruined forever. He confessed that he was filled with great envy of me. Men have died for less."

Tsang gave an exasperated groan. "So that's what you were mouthing about, was it? I should have known that you were too much in love with your vain, peacock self to be either a murderer or abductor." He pointed toward the studio door. "Go back to your preening. And sponge from your mind this interview with me. If your tongue grows loose in the middle, even with wine, I shall hear of it."

The purple one, now thoroughly cowed, fairly bolted away.

Tsang turned to Rutherford, who had been standing impatiently waiting while this colloquy in an unknown tongue had continued. The detective said gloomily:

"Nothing there. I think perhaps this other company steal Miss Sun to spoil our picture. But, no."

"Did you take the word of that lanky specimen you just talked to? Of course, he'd say no."

"But there are ways and ways of saying no. That man is not guilty."

"Well," Rutherford's voice was gruff, "come on, then. Let's play out the farce. Only, when you get tired of walking me around, you see to it that we find Miss Sun!"

An expression not unlike pity flitted across Tsang's carefully made-up features. Offering no reply to the young camera

man, the detective set out at a pace remarkable for a man of such short stature.

10

TSANG'S morning was a series of blanks. Rutherford stalked at his side, glowering and sarcastic, hiding—as Tsang knew—a very sharp fear for the life of Laura Sun under the mask of bad temper. The pistol, however, was put away. Tsang's air of earnestness, the thorough way in which he combed the Native City, had its effect upon the camera man. In spite of himself, Tsang was forcing Rutherford to believe that the search was a genuine one.

At noon, Tsang turned to investigate the various boat colonies. It was not, however, until midafternoon that he came upon his first clue. . . . He had been conversing with the Headman of the junks at Zaucadoo. Here, the banks of Soochow Creek were lined with junks waiting to lighter into the harbor the bales of thread from near-by silk filature mills. The grizzled-haired Headman displayed the usual Oriental disinclination to run his nose into trouble, but Tsang soon discovered, from his evasions, that the man was in possession of an uncomfortable secret.

"What have you to fear, Elder Brother?" Tsang urged. "The police will protect you. And, too, although you are presumably a man of great wealth, even you will not be averse to gaining the reward that is being offered." Here Tsang decided to pledge Lluellan to the payment of a reward.

The man of "great wealth" stared intently at his shabby, coolie-cloth gown. He swallowed. "What—what is the sum offered?"

Seeing the Headman rise to the bait, Tsang said promptly: "Five hundred Yuan dollars."

A glint came into the man's eyes, but he said in an indifferent voice. "It is very little. If the police would consider the risk I run and raise the sum to a thousand——"

"Ey-yah!" answered Tsang testily. "You are like the man who was, by mistake, given a bag of rice yet who complained because he was not also offered a charcoal brazier to cook it. I shall recommend that the reward be reduced to three hundred——"

"Rest your tongue, Heaven-born!" interposed the Headman in alarm. "Five hundred was the sum clicked upon the abacus of my memory. . . . And now, will you follow me? I shall take you to the junk into which I saw a Chinese woman carried last night."

The junkman beckoned to Tsang and Rutherford to follow. Almost out to midstream the boats stretched, gunwale to gunwale. Using them as a bridge, at moments callously stepping on a hand or an arm of a figure napping on their decks, the Headman moved toward the open channel.

"Are we at last on the trail of something?" Rutherford asked wearily. Tsang's pace had been killing that day, and he had not stopped for noontide rice.

The detective nodded, then lifted an admonitory finger to his mouth.

Silently the three approached a large junk on the outermost fringe. It appeared deserted. No crew members took a siesta on the after deck. The forward deck was roofed over with gayly colored matting and hid from view any possible occupants there or down in the cockpit. The lines of the boat indicated speed rather than carrying capacity.

Tsang paused a moment, frowning, a hand on the arm of the Headman. There was something ominous in the silence of that junk. Were men waiting behind that wall of gay matting, ready to spring

out upon him? Or to fire a volley from a battery of small arms? Then he shrugged away the thought. When came his time to taste the waters of the Yellow Springs, no volition of his could change the hour.

The Headman apparently had no such fears. Nimble for one of his age he leaped aboard the strange junk. Thrusting a leathery brown neck under the hood, he muttered a surprised: "Ey-yah!"

"What's up?" demanded Tsang, who was prevented from staring within by the junkman's back.

"The woman is gone! No one is here!"

Rutherford caught the astonishment on the junkman's face, and Tsang's look of perturbation. "Another mare's-nest, Ch'ung? I'm getting pretty tired of this! Either you take me to Laura Sun in the next hour, or I give you a fine fat beating! Just because you're allowed to win a few set-up fights before the camera, you needn't think that you're a champion. I've knocked you down once today, and I'm in the mood to do it again."

Tsang stared preoccupiedly at Rutherford, not even hearing the camera man's threats. "She is gone. But that's not all. Look in this cabin." The detective pointed to a row of neatly piled tins.

Rutherford reached down and opened one. A faint but sickly-sweet odor arose. He gave an amazed whistle. "I know that smell! I used to get it from Li's clothes—mornings after he had been hitting the pipe. But these tins are all empty!"

"Yes. This was the boat that brought the opium down-river from the Honan poppy fields, I think," Tsang answered. "It's been transferred——"

He broke off, for Rutherford was staring at him fixedly.

"Ch'ung, your English is improving, I see!"

Tsang muttered under his breath at his

own stupidity, then he answered bluffly: "That, I think, is my business. Let me also say that I grow little weary of repeated threatenings. I have the realizations that you are worried man. But even patient snail becomes filled with anger when kicked."

"Oh, is that so! And don't stand there and tell me what is your business and what isn't!" Rutherford's snapping nerves caused him to forget all caution. His hand went out in an impulsive, stinging cuff that landed across Tsang's mouth, cutting the upper lip.

The Chinese detective did not move. His eyes bored levelly into Rutherford's—like the thrusts of a steel auger, biting deep. The camera man's eyes dropped. He whispered:

"I—I'm sorry I did that. I apologize."

Abruptly Tsang turned away. Facing the Headman, he said: "It is true that this boat is now empty, but it does not show signs of being abandoned. See, there is rice in the iron pot. And tobacco. Whoever was here will come back. The impetuous and bad-mannered foreign barbarian with me and I will wait here, aboard this junk. We shall hide in the cockpit. You will return to your own boat. As you go, command the men on the junks surrounding us not to give any warning. If they do, I shall cause some wholesale arrests and imprisonment. And you, Elder Brother, will not only lose your reward but will join your people in prison."

The Headman clicked soothingly with his tongue. "Have no fear, Eminent Police Watchdog; no one will warn the owners of this junk. They have no confederates among my people. Each boat here is as familiar to me as the face of my eldest grandson."

"Good-bye," answered Tsang. "If I do not come ashore—if you see this junk bearing off with me aboard—go at once

to the nearest police station. Report there that Tsang Ah-bou, an unworthy and stupid detective, was murdered in the performance of his duty."

11

AN HOUR elapsed. Once Rutherford spoke, but Tsang frowned him to silence. At last the Chinese raised a hand. Both men leaned forward. Clearly there came the bark of a motor launch moving up the stream. Made reckless by impatience, Rutherford asked:

"Have you any hope that Laura may be aboard that boat?"

Tsang answered patiently: "Possibly, my friend. Forgive my saying it, but she is only one—what is word?—segment of pattern that I begin to see."

"You mean, you've a hunch about it all?"

"Precisely," answered Tsang. "A hunch."

As the motor launch drew nearer and gave evidence that it was heading for the junk in which the two men were hiding, they presented a study in contrasting races. Tsang sat on his haunches, rocking gently back and forth. His eyes were alert, but he did not so much as move his head when the launch bumped alongside the junk. Rutherford, on the other hand, peered eagerly through a small hole in the straw matting. He moistened his lips repeatedly with his tongue and his hands clenched and unclenched. His eyes, however, were as unflawed by fear as Tsang's.

Suddenly Rutherford gave a sharp exclamation and, before Tsang could stop him, had bounded from under the matting and out on deck.

"What the devil," he shouted, "is the meaning of this?"

Standing on the bow of the launch was O'Conner. The director stared at Rutherford

in amazement. Then, as though with an effort, he spoke:

"Why, hel-lo, Noel! Didn't expect to see *you* here! What luck have you had? Any trace of her yet?"

"But, Terence, what are you doing here?"

"What do you suppose! I'm on the same trail as you. One of the extras at the studio gave me a tip to try this junk colony. Where's Ch'ung? Have you kept in touch with him?"

"He's here," the camera man answered dully. It was plain that Rutherford had lost interest, now that Tsang's hunch was apparently proving valueless.

Tsang ambled up from the cockpit, a grin stretched across his face. His eye roved casually to the motor launch alongside. There were two Chinese sailors aboard it. The launch, long and powerful-looking, had a cabin, the wooden shutters of which were drawn shut.

Rutherford began to give O'Conner an account of his search. The director listened sympathetically. Tsang waited a space, then leaped lightly aboard the deck of the launch. O'Conner wheeled about, face suddenly grown black with anger.

"Hi! You, Ch'ung! Come away from there! *Buabo*—no good!"

Tsang smiled in reply and shook his head as though not comprehending. Registering idle curiosity more perfectly than he had ever been able to do before the camera, he walked toward the cabin. O'Conner shot out a command in English to the pair of Chinese sailors on the launch, both powerfully built men. Swiftly they sprang for Tsang.

But the detective was prepared for this. There took place a fight that made Rutherford's mouth water to film. Here was no faking, no elaborate toppling over of a combatant in defeat at the precise moment that a scene had run its required

length. The odds against Tsang were two to one, the combined weight of the two sailors was more than double his; yet he appeared capable of meeting the handicap. As he adroitly shifted and dodged, the sailors got into each other's way.

After a space of this *mêlée*, Tsang bent down and caught one of the men in a wrestler's grip, gave a grunt and heave and lifted the sailor over his head. The man fell with a crash, his skull striking against the low brass rail of the launch. The force of the impact bent the rail and apparently cracked the sailor's head, for he lay still. His fellow promptly drew up and then cringed away from Tsang. O'Conner, from the junk, shouted at the frightened Chinese:

"Go on, you! Get into it! You've only begun to fight!"

But the man continued to cringe away from Tsang. O'Conner took a quick step to the edge of the junk, preparing to leap aboard the launch. Tsang said sharply:

"Mr. Rutherford, stop him! Keep him there!"

Automatically the camera man held out a detaining arm. But the director shook off his grasp, muttering:

"Don't be a fool, Noel! Can't you see what Ch'ung's trying to do? Make away with my launch!"

"Sorry, Terence," Rutherford muttered, drawing away his arm. "I didn't think of that."

Unimpeded, O'Conner jumped aboard the launch and swung a doubled fist viciously. Tsang ducked. The director was twenty pounds heavier than the Chinese detective and, as was soon evident, a superb boxer. The detective fought hard, if awkwardly, taking buffets on face and shoulders that caused Rutherford to wonder why he did not go crashing down.

Then the sailor who had funk'd a

single-handed encounter with Tsang crept around behind the cabin, and set himself to dive at the detective's legs.

This was too much for Rutherford. O'Conner might be right; Ch'ung might be planning to steal the launch; but he, Rutherford, couldn't stand to see a man—making as gallant a fight as the stocky Chinese was doing—beset by treachery. Leaning forward from the deck of the junk, steadying himself with one hand against the cabin roof-pole, he just managed to grasp the crouching sailor by the collar of a coolie-cloth jacket. Giving a hearty yank, Rutherford pulled the man backward and aboard the junk. The sailor gave a strangled, rattling sound and sat down abruptly on the deck of the junk, feeling gingerly at his neck. He remained seated, prudently refraining from further combat.

O'Conner was slowly driving Tsang to the rail, his heavy fists, filled with dangerous power, moving like pistons. Tsang's lips were ribbons. One eye was fast closing. A cut on his cheek had caused a bit of the clay pigmentation to hang loosely—as though a great patch of skin had peeled.

Yet, in spite of the beating he was receiving, Tsang kept his wits. Here, he realized, was a man who must have been, sometime in his career, a professional prize-fighter. O'Conner handled himself too perfectly even for the finest of amateurs. By trying to box O'Conner, Tsang knew that he was playing into the director's hands; but at wrestling the detective feared no man. . . . Suddenly cowering back as though beaten, he tolled O'Conner on. With a snarl, the director leaped in, to give the knockout. Tsang dropped to his knees, turned his shoulder, ducked in his head, and O'Conner dove helplessly over him, to the deck.

The fall did not even stun the director, but it gave Tsang the opportunity that

O'Conner's dangerous, flying fists had previously denied. The detective's legs shot out in a scissors hold; the ankles locked together squarely about O'Conner's waist.

The director thrashed fruitlessly about for a moment, then lay breathing in great gulps, too winded for words. Tsang, who was breathing as easily as though this were part of his daily regime—as in part it was, since he had taken over the rôle of stunt actor—now called to Rutherford:

"Come aboard this launch, my friend. Make looking in its cabin."

O'Conner also spoke to the camera man: "Yes, for God's sake, Noel, come aboard and make this devil loosen this lock he has on me—I can't move! Every time I try, he tightens it!"

Rutherford sprang across the narrow space of water to the deck of the launch. He moved determinedly, mouth grim, toward Tsang. The Chinese detective looked up appealingly:

"Break my hold on this man if you will, my friend—but first make looking down in this cabin!"

After an uncertain moment, Rutherford obeyed Tsang's behest. His scrutiny was short. He straightened up and muttered:

"Only tins of film. Queer that they should be here. Why did you want me to look?"

Tsang frowned. "Go down into the cabin. You've not looked closely enough!"

O'Conner spoke: "So you've begun talking English have you?"

Tsang paid no heed; his eyes were on the camera man. He could see Rutherford's shoulders stoop lower and lower. Suddenly the American gave a sharp, wordless exclamation and disappeared in the cabin. There came the sound of voices: Rutherford's, furiously angry, yet

tender, too; and in reply, a woman's accents.

O'Conner's face dropped into curiously rigid lines, like nothing so much as a cold, gray mask of ungarnished papier-maché. He ceased to struggle against the grip about his ribs.

Laura Sun and Rutherford emerged from the cabin. He was still engaged in untying strands of rope that had been fastened about her hands. Her mouth was sharply abraded and flecked with blood where a gag had evidently been thrust with considerable brutality.

"Now, Terence, what is the meaning of this?" began Rutherford in the still tones of a man who has been barely able to master a very vital anger. "No lies! I'd advise you to tell me, before I lay my hands on you and choke the life out of you——"

"Wait a moment, my young friend," interrupted Tsang. "Please! Such threatenings are most highly illegal. And I must now disclose myself: I am humble watchdog of the law. You will allow me to take caring of justice!"

"What do you mean?" muttered Rutherford.

"I mean that I am lowly detective."

O'Conner groaned. "Oh, Lord, a Chinese dick! And to think that I was taken in by him!"

Tsang answered: "But think how I was almost taken in by you. I thought you were motion picture director."

"Well, I am, and a damned good one! I turned down twenty thousand a year in Hollywood, to come out here. I can prove that!"

"I do not have least doubt of it," agreed Tsang. "I should have said: I thought you were only motion picture man. But you are more, much more——"

"What on earth do you mean, Ch'ung?" Rutherford demanded.

"I know what he means," spoke up

Laura Sun. "I followed O'Conner all the way across the Pacific to verify a suspicion. And I proved I was right."

12

NO MORE was said for the moment. Rutherford, aided by Tsang, bound O'Conner with the same ropes that had been used on the wrists and ankles of Laura Sun. The brace of Chinese sailors—taking advantage of the preoccupation of the foreigners—silently made their way ashore. One of them was holding a head upon which a large bump had risen; the other was still feeling gingerly at the vertebræ of his neck.

About the launch a veritable sea of excited faces had risen. Every junk at Zaucadoo was filled with peering Orientals. Loudly rose their speculations. Why had the small but apparently powerful Chinese bound with ropes one of the foreign devils? And why had another foreign devil stood complacently by and permitted it? Strange were the ways of the Occidental barbarians—but pleasing to note that not always were the Western Ocean men invincible.

Laura Sun rubbed at her wrist and said almost sharply to Tsang:

"Of course, if I had known you were working on this same job, think of the time we could have saved and the risk! I've had a pretty bad morning of it! O'Conner found out that I knew something and he tried to gouge it out of me, today!"

Tsang gave her a puzzled look. "You are very youthful to be a man-hunter!"

She smiled faintly. "I know. It's one of my assets. It stood me in good stead, getting this motion picture job. But to be made leading woman was a little more than I bargained for. Poor O'Conner, struggling with a couple of amateur ac-

tors, both of us! But what I haven't learned yet is the way he smuggles the stuff."

"What stuff?" asked Rutherford, conscious that he was several steps behind the others here. Laura, a detective; Ch'ung, also one.

"Opium," she answered. "We were sure that he was the head of the ring, but we were never able to learn his method of handling the Black Seed."

A chuckle came from the bound man at their feet. "You'll never know."

"Deeply regret taking away your last ray of hope, honorable director," Tsang said, "but I do know."

He walked to the cabin of the launch, bent over and came upright again, with a flat-sided, circular tin in his hands.

Rutherford laughed. "Don't be silly, Ch'ung! That's a film container!"

"It *was* film container. Now"—Tsang wrenched it open—"now you see, it holds several hundred dollars' worth of *ab-pien*."

On the clear warm air rose almost overpoweringly the sickish-sweet odor of opium, neatly packed balls of Patna, Red and Black Skin, each ball wrapped in foil. Laura Sun spoke crisply:

"These were probably going to America. Shanghai is the assembling-place for Burmese and Indian opium, as well as the local Szechuan seed. These containers were to be sent over—along with bona fide film. The method is clear to me now."

"Precisely," said Tsang. "It was nice system. If the customs in America opened one of the film containers and found opium, O'Conner could claim not to know anything of it. With it would be several reels of film showing me agilely falling on my head from Lung Hwa Pagoda into net."

Rutherford now interposed: "But how

can O'Conner afford to smuggle opium? He has a reputation in Hollywood of being an A-Number-one director, commanding thousands of dollars——"

At their feet a chuckle arose, dry, sardonic.

Tsang promptly motioned Rutherford and Miss Sun to leave the launch and go aboard the junk, where they could be within view of O'Conner but out of his hearing.

"It is true that he can command thousand' of dollar', possibly, as director. But as head of opium ring, he can make many million. He gambled for very great riches, indeed."

Rutherford spoke, giving Tsang a quick glance: "You have another solution, too. Any man gambling for as many millions as that, wouldn't hesitate to commit murder."

Tsang's eyes fell levelly on the young camera man's. Rutherford's gaze dropped. He muttered:

"I—I guess I won't accuse him of murdering Li. I imagine he will have enough indictments against him to hold him in prison for the rest of his life. Why not let sleeping dogs lie?"

"No!" Tsang's monosyllable shot out with the sharpness of a whip-crack. "A watch-dog is not a sleeping dog, and I have said that I am watch-dog."

He turned to Laura Sun. "Why did you kill Mr. Li?"

13

LAURA SUN blanched perceptibly under the olive bloom of her skin. Rutherford ripped out a sharp oath and fumbled in his pocket. Tsang's hand went out swiftly and he caught the camera man's wrist. The pistol that Rutherford had bought the day before tinkled to the deck.

The Chinese girl thrust herself between

the two. "Noel! Please! We must have no more bloodshed. This man is only doing his duty. He has found me out; that's all. You did your best to shield me. You even tried to take the blame on your shoulders." She fell silent.

Tsang eyed her keenly and tried to erase from his face all signs of elation. He had made a shot in the dark, accusing her. Yet it had seemed logical enough. O'Conner, of course, might have done it, but he would have run a risk, with the fortunes of the whole opium ring resting on his shoulder. Rutherford was out of the picture, but it had been his attitude of trying to shield Laura Sun that had pointed Tsang's suspicions toward her. Tsang said quietly:

"Suppose you tell us your story, Miss Sun?"

She said promptly and earnestly: "Yes, I'll tell it, if you promise to believe me. For every word I say will be the truth."

Tsang nodded.

"First off, the only person to suspect me was Li. It was my fault that he did. I tried to pump him, to worm out of him his connection with O'Conner—outside, that is, of his motion picture affiliation. I was certain that O'Conner and Li were in league together in the opium smuggling. Li couldn't exactly place me—he never did realize that I was a detective—but he became frightened. He tried to drive me off the lot. He would just about have done it, if it hadn't been for you, Noel. You took my part and upset most of Li's little plans.

"Li must have taken his suspicions to O'Conner. If so, the director didn't believe him, for O'Conner never once showed that he suspected the double rôle I was trying to play. O'Conner was satisfied with my acting; it was more American style than Li's even if it was amateurish.

"Then came the morning of Li's—

death. I had gone to the studio early. The day before, a boat had come in with mail from America, and I wanted to see if any letters had come for O'Conner that might give me a clue. I was going over these when I became conscious of some one behind me. I turned around. Li was there. He made a jump for me, hands spread like a fan. I dared not call for help. He caught my arms and muttered that he was going to hold me there until O'Conner came.

"My eye roved along the desk and I spotted an onyx paperweight. A clumsy weapon, but the only thing I could see. Just then I heard O'Conner's voice—from quite a distance. Li's grasp on my arms relaxed. He turned toward the door, to hail O'Conner. I caught up the paperweight and brought it down—on his head. . . ."

Her voice faltered and her brown eyes became filled with horror at the remembered vision. Then her gaze sought Tsang's again.

"You see, I am telling you the truth. I could have said that I killed him in self-defense. But that would not be correct. He was not threatening my life, except indirectly. But this I will say: I struck only with the intention of freeing myself, not with any thought of murder. Please believe that, Mr. Ch'ung!"

"Tsang Ah-bou is my unworthy name," spoke up the detective absently. His brown hands drummed a quick tattoo on the matted roof of the junk. "Ey-yah!" he muttered. "Ey-yah!"

Laura Sun gave him a hopeless look. "Well, I suppose you will want to arrest me, Mr. Tsang? But can't you leave Mr. Rutherford out of it? It is true that he came in and saw me, staring at Li, with that ghastly onyx ball in my hands, but he was only trying to help me. He, at least, has done nothing."

Tsang knitted his eyebrows. "Done nothing? Miss Sun, he is an accessory after the fact. As a detective, even a lady detective, you know unpleasant meaning of that term: that he is guilty, as though he aided in crime." He was silent a moment. "And if I solemnly turn away my eyes, I, too, become an accessory."

Laura Sun gasped. "You mean——?"

"I mean," said Tsang smiling gently, "that I shall announce to my Chief, Lluellan, that the mystery of Mr. Li's death is un-soluble. True, it will be my first big failure and will cause Lluellan, *Lao-yeh*, to think very small-ly of me. But that is penalty I must pay for joining ranks of law-breakers." Tsang took a deep breath and then added irritably: "It all comes, I think, of the bad custom in United States of having lady detectives!"

Then to the Lip of this poor earthen Urn
I lean'd, the Secret of my Life to learn;
And Lip to Lip it murmur'd—"While you live,
Drink!—for, once dead, you never shall return."

I think the Vessel, that with fugitive
Articulation answer'd, once did live,
And drink; and Ah! the passive Lip I kiss'd,
How many Kisses might it take—and give!

—*Rubâiyât of Omar Khayyam.*

Honor of a Horse-Thief

By S. B. H. HURST

A vivid action-adventure story of the Amir of Afghanistan, and the spectacular feat of a Durani clansman

"IN ALL Afghanistan you are the only man I can trust, Shir Ali!" said the Amir.

Shir Ali was a horse-thief.

It was nearing midnight in the palace of the Amir of Afghanistan in Kabul. Shir Ali was alone with the Amir in a little room. Midnight of that terrible winter. Terrible in its cold and in the revolt of the Afghan army.

The Amir was no longer Amir. The glow from a ruby-colored lamp showed his tired, strained face. The city was but a shadow, with a tinkle of music from heavy-walled houses and the scent of musk on frosty air, but about the palace was the noise and high confusion of an army that had set up one of its officers as king. In the isolated little room there still was privacy.

The Amir shrugged his shoulders.

"The throne and the army are one," he said bitterly. "The people are not interested. One Amir taxes them as does another! In a little while my head will rot on the Lahori gate. . . . More than glad I am that you came, Shir Ali. Strange how our lives have crossed and re-crossed! Like paths twisting across the plain. I was sitting in judgment when I first saw you. You made me laugh, so I let you go free. Later, you did me a special service—caught a rebel and likely saved my throne for me. You can not save it now—not for me. But—if God wills. . . . See!"

The Amir lifted a silk covering from a tiny bed. Asleep on the bed was a little boy of about a year old.

"My only son. Some day, if God wills

and you, Shir Ali, are not killed on your journey—well, some day you may look back and say that you saved my throne again—not for me but for my son!"

Shir Ali stood erect, squared his shoulders and gravely saluted the sleeping child.

"Nadir Shah, the new Amir, will cut off my head and stick it on the Lahori gate, according to custom—maybe tomorrow, maybe in a month: when he grows tired of keeping me in suspense. Nadir Shah, the new Amir, whom I favored and raised to Sirdar of the army! A big ugly devil of a man, marvelously like thee, Shir Ali! So like thee, indeed, that if you were garbed in his uniform, with his jewelled turban on that great head of thine, and he was put into your sheepskin coat—I would think you were him and he was you. . . . No matter. A man can die but once. . . . And my son must live!"

The Amir, Abdur Rahman, spoke with fierce affection, striding to and fro across the heavy rug.

"You came through the secret door, up the steps to this room. You and I are the only two men now alive who know of that door. You will take my son and escape with him—through that door. After that, you will stay with him and watch him grow, and guide his small feet, and be like another father to him—always keeping in his mind that he is the son of a king, and that some day he will be king himself. By the strength of his arm and the fickle favor of the army of Afghanistan!"

Shir Ali spoke for the first time.



"To where shall I take thy son, lord Amir?"

"'Lord Amir?'" the Amir laughed bitterly. "Never mind. . . . Take him—but, oh, what a terrible ride for him and thee! Take him through the Lataband, the Khyber—to Peshawah. Take him to the English!"

"The English?"

"Yes! They have always kept faith with me. Had I allowed them to build a railway and put a telegraph in my country the English would have had an army here by now—or, at any rate, on the way. For I could have sent them the swift word. I have kept faith with the Queen-Empress, and not a foot has Russia dared to advance. The English will guard my son, and educate him and care for him as a prince should be cared for. So, Shir Ali, take my only son and ride for Peshawah. No other man in the world could make

that ride. And no other man would I trust! . . . I love thee, you damned old villain!"

And the Amir flung his arm across the horse-thief's shoulders.

Shir Ali raised his right arm gravely.

"I take oath," he said. "By Allah and His prophet Mohamet! I take the King's Oath! My blood for the King's blood—drop by drop as long as I have blood! My blood for the Son of the King—my Prince! To my King and his Son do I dedicate the last drop of my blood, and every drop! And this I swear by God and His prophet! May Allah blast me and Shaitan burn my soul if I fail in my trust! For this is the King's Oath, and I am a Durani!"

The Amir returned the salute. He took a letter from a pocket of his uniform.

"This—I will read it to thee, for I remember, many years ago, that you told

me you could not read—this letter to the general of the English, whom you will find at the post called Jamrud, just this side of Peshawah. This letter, so that the English will know the child is indeed my son. Listen!"

The Amir, Abdur Rahman, read:

"Excellency,

My army has rebelled and raised Nadir Shah to be Amir. I await his pleasure in the matter of when he will order my head to be taken from my body. I can not escape, even if life seemed worth the weariness of the effort. But the bearer of this, my dear and trusted friend Shir Ali, may be able to get away. He is a very clever, and very strong man. To him I am trusting my only son. Therefore, if Shir Ali is able safely to make the terrible ride through the passes choked with the snows of winter, and to present to thee this letter of mine, you will know that the babe he brings with him is my only son. To thee, Excellency, and to England do I send my son, knowing that England will treat him as my son and as a prince. For England never forgets! I can write no more. I can hear the rebels in my palace, and the time is short.

ABDUR RAHMAN."

Abdur Rahman gave the letter to Shir Ali.

"Go quickly!" he said.

"I have no money," said Shir Ali.

Abdur Rahman laughed.

"As of old! Always the same!" He pinched Shir Ali's ear. He became sad and grave again. "If I gave thee an order on the treasury the purse-keeper would laugh at thee. But—take this! If, when you sell it, the broker asks you where you got it, say you stole it. Don't risk a quarrel with him. Take this!"

Abdur Rahman gave Shir Ali a splendid diamond.

"I happened to have it with me. All I have to give thee—when but a little while ago I was a great king, and could have smothered thee in diamonds!"

Shir Ali blinked.

"The value of a horse I know, and can judge—it is my trade! But this—what is this worth, my lord?"

"It is worth what the buyer wills—if he desires it enough. But ten thousand

English sovereigns would not buy it in open market."

Shir Ali put the diamond in his belt.

"Go quickly," whispered Abdur Rahman. "They are coming—for me. Hurry! the secret door!" The Amir lifted the sleeping child from the bed, kissed him and placed him tenderly in Shir Ali's arms. "Go quickly, and God go with thee! I will open the door!"

Abdur Rahman fingered a sliding panel. It opened noiselessly. Shir Ali, the child in his arms, stepped through. A draft of cold air met him. He walked carefully down some steps. Abdur Rahman shut the door.

SHIR ALI walked over a tiny bridge. It was very dark, but waist-high walls prevented falling. Under the bridge ran a swift deep stream—a narrow tributary of the Logar river. What secrets that dark, underground river contained! . . . Across the bridge, still within the secret tunnel, Shir Ali reached another door. He laid down the child and opened the door cautiously. Then he picked up the child, stepped into the winter night and closed the door again.

Would the child remain quiet? It slept and snuggled contentedly against the old horse-thief's heart, warm under his sheepskin. Shir Ali had stolen horses and taken chances under all sorts of conditions, but this was a new experience. With a sleeping baby under his left arm he had to steal a horse from the palace of a de-throned Amir, with the palace filled by the rebellious army. And the night was too clear. Stars and not a cloud in the frosty sky.

He loafed slowly toward the stables. The noise about the palace had quieted somewhat. Shir Ali nodded. The soldiers were gambling. They had taken Abdur Rahman, and would now have no other

thought but their games. . . . Shir Ali reached the end of the long north wall of the palace. He began to whistle as he turned the corner toward the stables. At that moment he saw a fat Usbeg groom.

"Ho! Ho!" greeted the groom. "Who art thou? And the bundle under the arm, friend?"

"You must have lost all your money?" replied Shir Ali, continuing to walk toward the stable.

"I have, or I would not be here. But who are you, and what's that under your arm?"

"Can you keep your big mouth shut?" Shir Ali let his voice drop to a confidential whisper.

"Of course!" the groom whispered, avidly.

"Come quietly with me, then! I will show thee what I have. No doubt something for thee, also—if that mouth of thine does not make a noise!"

The groom nodded. He grinned as a confederate in crime should grin. The big man had evidently made a good haul, and was trying to avoid discovery by sharing it. That was good! The Usbeg would be able to gamble again.

"I don't want to divide with every groom in Afghanistan!" Shir Ali was whispering again. "Let us go where there isn't a crowd."

"You are going right—otherwise I would have told thee," chuckled the groom. "Would I want every groom to share with me? This is that part of the stables where Abdur Rahman kept his best horses!"

They were in the stable. Better than the groom did Shir Ali know where the best horses were kept.

"Now let me see what you have," whispered the Usbeg.

At that moment the whole world

seemed to fall on him. A minute later Shir Ali was leading out a splendid horse. Very lightly for so large a man, his arm balancing the prince as if in a cradle, Shir Ali mounted. He spoke quietly to the horse and it walked quietly. Then he swore rather loudly at the whims of the world and the hard lot of all grooms—to arouse the interest of the sentry as naturally as possible. The child whimpered softly. Shir Ali raised his voice to drown the little cry.

"Well?" asked the sentry, who also felt it hard that he had to stand in the cold while his comrades gambled in comfort. "Where are you going with that horse?"

"Hullo, *naik!*" laughed Shir Ali.

"Don't call me *naik*—if I was a corporal I would not be here. And answer my question."

The voice of Shir Ali became the voice of a man who tells a smutty story.

"I can not tell you, but you can guess. The officer merely ordered me to have a horse *there*—in case he needs it!"

"No doubt! But in that case you must have some sort of pass! And what is in that bundle under your arm? . . . You look like a thief to me. Show me the bundle!"

Shir Ali sighed. It was a deep, pitiful sigh, the sigh of a truthful and honest man who is hurt by unbelief.

"Very well! Look!"

The sentry stepped closer. Something flashed in the starlight. The soul of the sentry went out in the cold. Shir Ali urged the horse forward. He had stolen a horse from the stable of a deposed Amir, from among that Amir's enemies. No other horse-thief had ever done the like! He grinned with grim pride. And he had not violated the horse-thief's code of ethics. He had merely stunned the groom, not killed him. Sentries, of course, were different!

The little prince stirred and whimpered plaintively.

"Lie still, little sparrow," Shir Ali spoke tenderly. "I will guard thee. I have taken the king's oath to thy father, and I am, thank God, a Durani! Lie at ease, son of the king, for Shir Ali will protect thee—if he has to kill every man he meets to do it!"

THE horse was cantering. The palace is outside the city, but soon Shir Ali was riding through the narrow, crooked streets of Kabul.

In one very narrow street, merely an alley between the high, windowless walls of the houses of wealthy men, Shir Ali reined in the horse. It was very quiet. He looked up at a small, barred, square opening in the wall of the house. He whistled softly. There was no answer. He looked up again. Far above, as it were through a slit in the roof of the world, he saw the stars. Again he whistled. This time a voice answered quietly.

"Who?"

"Shir Ali! I pray you open the door of your yard so that I may bring in my horse!"

"I will open."

Shir Ali rode out of the narrow way and around to the front of the house. Here were high, wide walls, with a door through which a man and horse might just pass, if the man bent low over the horse's neck. Shir Ali heard the heavy bolts being drawn. The door opened.

"Come in, friend."

"The blessing of God upon thee, Ben Mohamet!" greeted Shir Ali, as he entered and Ben Mohamet closed the door. "Old friend, I have need of thee!" He dismounted carefully. The little prince did not cry. "Need of thee as in times past when in trouble. I need a saddle for this fine horse, for I have a long ride. But

first a good blanket to cover him from the frost of the night—for I must enter the house to show you something. To show you two wonderful things. And—which is unusual—I can pay for the saddle!"

"No pay," said Ben Mohamet, leading the way into the house. "I will never accept pay from thee, Shir Ali, as I have often told you. Do you always forget how you saved my life and all I have?" He stood aside politely. "Enter, I beg of you, my friend."

Shir Ali entered. The door was shut. They stood in a room of rugs and Oriental furnishings, under the glow from a silver lamp, in that sacred privacy of the East which is like the privacy of a tomb.

"May I ask you to call your wife?" said Shir Ali. "I need much advice from the lady."

"Maybe advice in the matter of gifts for some houri of earth?" smiled Ben Mohamet.

"Not so, friend. It happens that I am now the father of a little son of great value, and I need a woman to explain to me how to feed him and the like."

Shir Ali laid the baby gently on a table.

"See, friend! Behold the future Amir of Afghanistan!" he said quietly.

Ben Mohamet stared at him. Surprising it had been when Shir Ali needed the advice of a woman. The baby increased that surprize. But—the future Amir. . . . Ben Mohamet understood.

"So, he gave thee the child to raise and care for—hence your coming here so quietly in the night. Well, friend Shir Ali, there are still loyal hearts in Kabul. You did right to bring the baby here. We are, as you know, childless, and my wife and I will give the baby love and adoration."

Shir Ali bowed.

"I thank thee, loyal heart, but I may not leave the baby here. I have a long

way to ride with him. I will explain. And we must hasten. Here," he produced the diamond, "is money for the journey—give me a part of its value. Not all! Be my banker. Please call your wife!"

Ben Mohamet acted quickly. He called his wife. Then he went to get the saddle and the money.

"The precious princeling," cooed the woman. "See, Shir Ali, you must hold him this way. You do your best, but a child can not be carried like a goose! This way! . . . And now—oh, there is so much to tell thee! Did ever a woman before me have the task of instructing a big, rough man in the ways of mothers—and with only a few minutes for the teaching of all that women have learned since Eve suckled her first-born?"

THE morning was clear and cold, but the heavy clouds upon the crests of the Hindu Koosh presaged more snow. Through the passes of the worst country in the world—such was the ride Shir Ali faced with the baby. And in such weather!

"Oh, well," he muttered, "I won't have to swing my sword in one hand and cuddle the prince in the other—this weather will keep the brigands at home!"

He shivered, though, as he thought of something else. The ghosts and djinns of the mountain passes. Shir Ali was afraid of nothing—if it was flesh and blood. But a ghost! His racial superstitions crept along his spine. The tales he had heard since he was a child. The terrible dead men who haunted the Lataband. Worse than the Khyber. But all agreed that both were fearful! Ghosts. Armies of them! The tales of men, the eery stories of the women. Not all travelers killed in the passes were killed by robbers! . . . The very dust of the passes was the dust of the dead. Ghosts of the armies of Alexander the Great, Mahmud of Ghazni, Jenghis

Khan, Berber. . . . And Shir Ali had to ride through that country, in the dark of the dead of winter, with a babe to care for—to the British post of Jamrud. . . . He tried to fight down superstition with wit.

"Maybe the ghosts will ask me if I have ceased being a horse-thief and turned kidnapper!"

He camped at dusk—between four and five in the afternoon. The early stars watched him caring for the child in the snow.

"I am a clumsy thing," he growled when the baby cried. "I have let the cold wind bite the tenderling. Thank Allah he comes of stout stock! See, the little thoroughbred is blue with cold, but he grits his teeth and refuses to whimper."

But Shir Ali made very slow progress. The snow was deep and loose. Even if alone he could have only made short marches between camps. No horse could stand much of such traveling. And when he stopped to care for the child the eery, icy mountain winds seemed to howl uncanny suggestions. An occasional handful of *krut* was all the man ate. He kept grimly onward. Between Kismet and Allah he hoped to avoid the occult.

Came a time when his physical sufferings made him indifferent to superstition. These had grown worse hourly. And then disaster struck him. The horse stumbled and broke a leg.

Shir Ali looked up at the leaden sky and cursed.

"I have forgotten some few prayers, and at times shown slight respect for the *mullabs*, and I have never made the pilgrimage to Mecca. These be things in a man's life! If I have stolen horses—well, I had to live; and I am told that the Koran says nothing against the trade! Be that as it may, I am now on an errand of duty—and where is Thy protection? Has Satan risen from Hell to rule the world? Or is

this just Thy mock of me—all these miles from Jamrud with a child in my arms, and no horse? Surely Thou knowest that I never walk!"

The bitter wind answered him. His eyes watered at its sting. Then he laughed like the fighting man he was.

"No more camps, by God! The horse had to be rested now and then, but I am a man!"

He was! But, as of old, the Pass hated men. Down through the centuries men had disturbed its solitudes, and all that time the Pass had taken its toll of men. But this man! Never before had the Pass seen such a sight! A big, hairy Afghan, a man of a cruel race, struggling forward, slipping and falling—but always taking care that his precious burden was not harmed. A man with a baby.

"My blood for the king's blood, and for his son—as long as I have blood to give. By Allah and His Prophet! I am a Durani, and this is the King's Oath!"

In a delirium of fatigue which would have killed an ordinary man Shir Ali decided that Kismet had ordained him for this end—to give his life to bring the baby to the protection of the British. But what a strange end! Would the *houris* welcome him into Paradise if he died saving a baby? Did they not crave a man who died fighting? He fell again. Could he ever get up? He asked the cold stars. Well, if he could not walk he could crawl!

THE Khyber was in that weather no place through which to move an army, but a treaty is a treaty, and the British army had put Jamrud behind it. Abdur Rahman had done his part as regards Russia, and England must keep her promise and help him when he needed help. But the army could make only the slowest of progress.

Just how far the rebellion had gone the

English general did not know. Abdur Rahman had been unable to send word since the trouble began. A message had come through asking for help. That was all. Then the snow had blocked the passes.

The sentry wondered. What was that crawling toward him? Stopping, lying at full length, crawling again. Surely that could not be a man! What would a man be doing there—crawling that way? Was it a bear? The sentry was no naturalist, but he promptly reported that he saw something.

Thus it came about that Shir Ali woke to consciousness from a cruel dream that seemed to have lasted since Allah created the world. He heard voices. His eyes were a film, and his eyebrows were crusted with icicles. But, dimly, he saw men. . . . Maybe they were not real. The only real thing in all this misery was the baby. Even in the extremity of his suffering he had given the baby the tenderest care. . . . But, still, that was a voice—asking in *Pushtu*:

"Who are you?"

Shir Ali grunted and tried to get to his feet. Two soldiers helped him. They supported him, for he could not stand.

"I . . . seek the general . . . of the English . . . at Jamrud. . . . Take me to the . . . Sirdar . . . I . . . have a letter . . . a letter . . . from my Amir . . . for the Sirdar. . . . And here . . . be very careful of him . . . here is the Amir's only son!"

They were very careful, very kind. So kind that Shir Ali wondered how soldiers could be so kind. . . . Then he felt himself falling, falling into the bottomless Pit—concerning which, he remembered, the *mullah* who taught the boys of his district had given him a most accurate description. . . . But that did not matter, because he could sleep now.

He awoke after many hours, stared

about and was greatly puzzled. Some one had undressed him while he slept! Shir Ali could not remember having been undressed by any one before. When very young, his mother! . . . The word was a whip to memory. Who had cared for the baby while he was sleeping? Like a hog he had lain there, while the little prince . . . The English soldiers would know nothing about caring for babies! They lacked his experience! Perhaps they had tried and, in kindly ignorance, harmed the tenderling! . . . Shir Ali was rolling out of the blankets, shouting. He felt well but a trifle shaky. He shouted. Ah, here was a soldier! . . . Shir Ali gripped the field hospital orderly and shouted frantic questions in *Pushtu*. . . . Where was the prince? The baby? The little one! . . . Puggle, don't you understand? . . . The orderly did not understand a word. He decided that Shir Ali was suffering from the shock of his recent hardships, and was delirious.

"'Ere, 'erc, 'old hup, old feller! Don't go to gettin' hexited!"

Shir Ali almost screamed with rage. He wrestled with the orderly. The orderly, accustomed to holding writhing men, did very well against his heavier antagonist, but he shouted for help. Shir Ali heard other footsteps. He looked up and saw a woman. He stopped wrestling. As he stared at her he realized that the baby had been properly cared for. Here was a woman. But what was she doing here—in a camp of soldiers? . . . Women followed the armies of Afghanistan, but not such women as this! There was a quality about this one. And she was wearing a sort of uniform. . . .

She spoke with authority to the orderly. He obeyed her! Shir Ali relaxed with an astonishment that was akin to horror. A woman giving orders to a soldier, and, what was worse, the soldier obeyed her!

Ah, only a queen is obeyed. . . . But, he had heard, the queen of the English was old. This one was young and good to look at. What was that tiny glass tube she was shaking? She was coming toward him with it! Some sorcery here, surely! . . . He shrank away. The woman smiled and advanced. She was not a bit afraid of him when he scowled at her. So he shouted for help—in *Pushtu*! The woman was still bent upon doing something to him with that glass tube. This was terrible! Shir Ali roared again.

Into this excitement came the officer who had spoken to Shir Ali when they found him in the snow. He looked and laughed. The pretty nurse looked at him reproachfully. The officer laughed again. Then he spoke to Shir Ali.

"The general sends his compliments, sir, and hopes you are well!" The old horse-thief grinned.

"Well, yes, thank God! But, sahib, I am all mixed up. A woman here who orders men! Yet am I relieved in my mind at seeing her, for I know the small prince has been cared for. I was worried about him!"

The officer translated for the benefit of the nurse. She beamed upon Shir Ali and replaced the thermometer in its case.

"The poor man, and all that was the matter with him was that he was worried about the baby!"

She looked at the orderly, as if the orderly ought to have known. Shir Ali insisted upon seeing the prince before he either ate or saw the general. The joy of that grim old fighter was wonderful when the baby recognized him, crowed and held up a tiny hand in greeting.

"THE Amir had not been killed when you left Kabul, then?" said the general.

"No, Sirdar. Nadir Shah will amuse

himself by keeping Abdur Rahman in suspense—as is the custom. That is what I think. But, again, the head of Abdur Rahman may even now be staring sightless from the high top of the Lahori Gate.”

“I see! My instructions are to take Kabul and to place on the throne another Amir than Nadir Shah—a man we can trust. The little prince will of course be taken to England, and reared as Abdur Rahman wished. You will go with him, since that was also Abdur Rahman’s wish, and your own desire. It will be interesting to you. Hem!” the general grinned. “I understand you were horrified when the soldier obeyed the nurse. In England men often obey women. Don’t allow that to disturb you. . . . By the way, the matter of your rank may become important. In this letter the Amir does not mention your rank.”

Shir Ali grinned.

“I have served Abdur Rahman in confidential capacities. . . .”

“I see,” said the general. “Chief of Intelligence, corresponding to rank of colonel in our army. Were you a cavalry officer?”

“Everybody in Afghanistan knows of my connection with horses,” said Shir Ali gravely.

The general nodded.

“If Abdur Rahman is not yet dead—is there any way, think you, of delaying his execution until I can get to Kabul?”

For a moment Shir Ali stared tensely at the general. Then he jumped to his feet.

“By God, yes!” he exclaimed. “Why didn’t I think of that before? If he still lives . . . if I can get to Kabul in time. . . . A horse, Sirdar! Get me a good horse quickly. I may be able to stop his execution.”

“How?” asked the general.

“The horse, quickly. Never mind what I do. You English have queer ideas, and my plan might seem . . . never mind. The horse, quickly, your excellency. . . . If he is dead I can do nothing. But . . . take good care of the prince! And follow me with all speed, Burra Sahib. I will ride like hell, and I am a good rider!”

SHIR ALI had better luck going north, and, considering everything, made remarkable time. He had no baby to care for, and his mind was set and at rest upon the solution of a problem. If Abdur Rahman still lived. Quite simple. It was the law that only an Amir can set the date for the execution of an Amir. For centuries that had been the law. It was a sacred law and could not be broken. Only an Amir can say to another Amir, “Cut off his head today!” And the time of death was never set until an hour or so before execution. Very simple, then. All Shir Ali had to do was to kill Nadir Shah! With Nadir Shah dead Abdur Rahman would live until the army elected another Amir. The new Amir could, of course, order Abdur Rahman’s head to be cut off. But by that time the English army would be at Kabul! Very simple. If Abdur Rahman was alive.

“The oath of the king’s blood! Thank God I am a Durani! I may be able to do it quietly, without being seen, or I may have to do it with ten thousand men watching me—who will tear me to bits! It does not matter very much—that tearing! The prince is safe, and—my blood for the king!”

He reached Kabul in the darkening of late afternoon. The practise of a lifetime bade him get rid of the horse, and the only way to get rid of a horse was to sell it to somebody he could trust. Shir Ali rode to the *serai* of an old crook with whom he had had many dealings.

The approach to the stable was intricate. A groom held a lantern to Shir Ali's face.

"Put that damned thing away!" growled Shir Ali.

"I did not know it was you," the man apologized. "Let me lead in the horse. A fine horse!"

"Yes, I stole him from an English general down in Peshawah!" said Shir Ali.

The groom laughed delightedly. This was Shir Ali, indeed! The cleverest horse-thief and the cleverest liar in Afghanistan.

"A splendid lie," he chuckled flatteringly. "From Peshawah he brings a horse that he says he stole from an English general—with the passes full of snow!"

But Shir Ali was not flattered. Usually he enjoyed making up a story to explain his possession of a horse as much as he did stealing it. But this night he had no time for amusement.

"I will flatten your silly face if you doubt my word," he growled. "Tell me, fool, where is Coomer Ali?"

"Here!"

An old voice cracked gleefully.

"Don't hit me, Shir Ali! Tell any tale your heart desires, for, as you know, I believe them all! How much for the horse?"

Shir Ali dismounted. A boy brought coffee and tobacco. But Shir Ali did not sit down. He spoke hurriedly.

"The best horse I ever brought thee!" Habit framed the words. He went on with careless truth. "A little tired he is, maybe. I have come a long way with him, and the snow in the passes makes hard riding."

Coomer Ali laughed politely.

"As I said," Shir Ali spoke rapidly, "I have been away. What is the news here in Kabul? Does the head of Abdur Rahman look down from the Lahori Gate?"

Coomer Ali raised his shaggy eyebrows.

"You almost make me believe you—and your tale about where you got the horse. But why twit an old and discreet friend? You know very well that the head of Abdur Rahman is not yet an ornament, and that Nadir Shah torments him by sending him fine food every day—saying, 'Eat, friend Abdur Rahman, for I want thy head to look fat and sleek when I stick it on the Gate! All this you must know, for it is the talk of the town!'"

Shir Ali nodded.

"I will take your offer for the horse! I am reminded that I have an appointment."

Coomer Ali gasped with astonishment. What had happened to Shir Ali? Usually, always was he a good business man, who would bargain for hours. Now he was accepting an offer before it was made! Was he sick? God was good, and Coomer Ali would make a fine profit, but he couldn't understand it.

"Well?" growled Shir Ali. "Hurry! I do not want to be late!"

"Of course not! Of course not! One must not keep a lady waiting!" Coomer Ali was thrusting money into Shir Ali's hand. Shir Ali never even looked at it before putting it into his belt. Coomer Ali was glad he did not look, for Shir Ali had a terrible temper, and the amount of the money, for such a horse, was an insult. Coomer Ali had been ready with a joke had Shir Ali counted the money. He did not count. All was well, and God was good to old men! . . .

"Good-bye!" Shir Ali walked out of the stable quickly.

"By Allah," Coomer Ali laughed. "I believe the cleverest horse-thief in the world has fallen in love!"

SHIR ALI walked through the dark city. He possessed one big advantage—a way of attack unsuspected by the enemy.

Only Abdur Rahman and Shir Ali knew of the secret door. Torture could not have wrung that secret out of either of them. That secret door in the long north wall of the palace, which a man might stare at for a week and never see.

He avoided everybody, did not speak to a soul, walking cautiously. Several times he crept in the shadows when, outside the city, he reached the grounds of the palace. He bent his huge body through the secret entrance, closed the door and stood quietly in the dark. There was not a shiver in his marvelous nervous system.

The underground river that never froze. The little bridge that crossed it. The steps to the room in which Shir Ali had last seen Abdur Rahman. These were passed, and Shir Ali stood listening at the sliding panel. Voices in the room. Shir Ali did not recognize the voices, but the conversation made identification easy. Nadir Shah was talking with some other men. Shir Ali grinned nastily. And with satisfaction. He had deduced that Nadir Shah would take that room for his own, after the fashion of usurpers, aping the dignity of the fallen.

Shir Ali listened. He was willing to take any sort of chance to accomplish his end, but he did not intend to be foolish. Nadir Shah had taken over that room for his own and the time would come when Nadir Shah would be alone in it. All Shir Ali had to do was to wait. Then he would be able to kill Nadir Shah and escape; and no man would know who had done the deed. Why didn't they stop talking in there? Shir Ali was bored. Affairs of state—the buzzings of flies that come and go, pass foolish laws, do cruel and silly things. Shir Ali suppressed a yawn and thanked God he was a horse-thief! Would they never stop their chatter—Nadir Shah and the fawning sycop-

phants of ministers? . . . New laws. Talking about them. . . . Shir Ali grinned. Nadir Shah would soon be interested in one law only. An old law, made by Allah. Dead men are dead men! . . . Laws! Chatter! And for the living the old law was good enough and sufficient: *pubktunwali*, an eye for an eye, a head for a head. . . . Ah, thank God, the chatters were leaving. Nadir Shah was saying:

"Leave me. I will sleep for a while. We will continue this discussion on the morrow."

Shir Ali grinned.

"The talk is ended," he muttered. "Now for business!"

He listened again, carefully. He made certain that Nadir Shah was entirely alone.

"My blood for the king's blood!" he murmured, and softly slid the panel.

All followed very quickly. The same room, the same lamp, the same furniture. Nadir Shah on the divan. Shir Ali took all this in in one swift look. He made less noise than a cat, but a sense of danger roused Nadir Shah—too late. He saw the sudden apparition of Shir Ali. What else he saw in this world was a hideous jumble. The fingers of Shir Ali, in which was literally the strength of a vise, gripped the throat of Nadir Shah. Swiftly, silently.

As silently as possible. There would be guards near by.

"So," gasped Shir Ali when the thing was done. "My oath! And it will be some little time before another Amir struts in this room, and orders the head of my king to be stuck on the Lahori Gate!"

He turned away toward the secret panel. Then he looked back. The light was shining full on the dead face of Nadir Shah. Shir Ali stared at the face, and suddenly a wild and splendid idea pulsed through him.

"A big, ugly devil of a man, marvelously like thee, Shir Ali! So like thee that if you were garbed in his uniform——"

The words of Abdur Rahman. And the dead face proved those words true.

Shir Ali was on the floor, kneeling by the dead man, swiftly stripping him. He tore off his own clothes, and put on the uniform of Nadir Shah, the jewels, the royal aigrette on the turban. He picked up the dead body and his own discarded clothing, and carried all through the panel down the steps to the bridge. There was a splash in the underground river, and the body of Nadir Shah and the clothes of Shir Ali were borne from human sight forever. . . . Shir Ali calmly climbed the steps again, slid the panel shut and sat down contentedly on the divan.

"Now I am Amir of Afghanistan," he murmured. "All the Amirs have been robbers—of a sort—but I am certainly the first professional horse-thief to reach this eminence!"

THRE came a knock on the door. Shir Ali looked in the mirror. He could not expect to continue this impersonation very long. Who was this at the door? What would he do if it was one of those damned ministers? His was no brain to wrestle with such things! For a moment Shir Ali felt like a trapped tiger. He—no, he could not kill all those damned talkers! . . . Yes, he could. But to do that would not serve. Well, he would have to let the fellow come in, or else suspicion might start something. By his looks he was Nadir Shah, and who would think otherwise when Nadir Shah had been left alone in the room, and, apparently, Nadir Shah was found there, alone, again?

"Come in!" growled Shir Ali, in the gruff manner of Nadir Shah.

The palace Officer of the Day entered and saluted.

"The midnight report, your highness," he said.

"All right," yawned Shir Ali. "I have been sleeping, but now I will walk abroad. You may go. Leave the door open."

The officer saluted and obeyed.

Nadir Shah's habit of rough democracy with the soldiers had been the cause of his popularity. Shir Ali had no doubt of his ability to act the part of Nadir Shah in this regard. No man in Afghanistan could tell a story as well. Nadir Shah had been good, no doubt, but——

"I will beat him at his own game," thought Shir Ali gleefully, as he loafed carelessly from the little room into the splendid halls of the palace of the Amirs. "That will be amusing. . . . After that, may my right arm and Kismet help me—also my horse-thief wit!"

He mingled with the palace guard, and laughed with them. Then he went out into the winter night—alone, bidding no man follow him because he wanted to be alone so he could think! He thanked God the night was so cold. Few men would be about, perhaps none. A big question troubled him, a question which any man or officer about the palace could answer, but which Shir Ali dare not ask—because he was supposed to know the answer. To ask would seem queer.

"Where was Abdur Rahman confined?"

Somewhere in the palace, of course—handy for the tormenting Nadir Shah had enjoyed. But the palace was a vast place, with a hundred dungeons. And Shir Ali's knowledge was limited to a part of the stables and the secret door.

How quiet it was! Here was a passage. Dark in there. The habit of years bade Shir Ali walk cautiously. He

grinned, squared his shoulders and swaggered.

"I am still a horse-thief, but I must try to remember that I am now a king!"

The dark passage was undoubtedly filled with cells, but there was no light at all. Shir Ali understood. Nadir Shah, to enhance his popularity, had set all the prisoners free. Except Abdur Rahman. That explained the quiet. No guards, and the soldiers amusing themselves. But here was another passage. And this one was also empty.

"I may have to ask somebody. I could shut his mouth after he told me! Ah!"

Shir Ali had heard voices. Two men having an argument. One of the voices remonstrated.

"But the man can not escape! He is locked in, and we have the key!"

The other spoke more quietly.

"Yes, but you know the order. Nadir Shah is good-natured—because he knows that his throne rests on the shoulders of men like you and me—but he is quite capable of having our heads cut off if he comes here—as he is likely to do—and finds nobody on guard, and nobody to unlock the door for him. How do you know he is in bed? When he is forever prowling around! Stay here, then, in case he comes. It's my turn, but . . . I will be back in an hour."

Shir Ali crouched in the shadows against the wall, and waited until the last speaker had gone. Then he walked into the passage.

"You return quickly—why?" the voice of the guard greeted him.

"Your eyes are dull," growled Shir Ali in the manner of Nadir Shah. "I come for some little talk with that which thou hast in the cage! Unlock the door!"

"My lord Amir!" The guard squirmed in his eagerness to please. "Certainly, my lord. The thing in there sleeps. I will open the door of its cage."

Shir Ali stared into the dark little cell. He spoke loudly, sarcastically, insultingly.

"How fares my captive goat?"

Abdur Rahman did not answer, but the guard laughed flatteringly. Then he asked:

"Shall I make the surly swine answer my lord?"

Shir Ali clenched his fist.

"Speakest thou so of a king?" he asked quietly.

"Why, my lord! . . ."

But Shir Ali's fist met the wagging chin, and the guard pitched headlong and unconscious into the cell.

Shir Ali stepped quickly after him. He saw, dimly in a corner, the figure of the astonished Abdur Rahman.

"This is thy friend Shir Ali, now Amir of Afghanistan!" Shir Ali spoke rapidly, laughing with the thrill of it. "Quick, a piece of thy shirt, or something. I need a gag for this guard before he can shout."

"Shir Ali . . . Amir!" gasped Abdur Rahman.

"Thy shirt, quickly!"

Abdur Rahman acted rapidly. As they gagged and bound the guard he asked:

"How did you do it, worker of miracles? And—how is my son?"

"Well, and cared for by English women! I did but seek to prevent Nadir Shah from cutting off thy head. Then I saw his face, and did some thinking. For I had heard him talk with his ministers, and saw that they were likely to change all the old laws. Nadir Shah could no longer trouble thee, but those ministers might make a cook into an Amir. So I became determined to rescue thee. I saw the face of Nadir Shah. Like mine, as you said. The way then was easy. I saw that my job would not be complete until I saw your throne made safe for thee. So I decided to rule in thy stead until the English

army ends this petty revolution. I wanted to see what it felt like to be an Amir!"

"Where is Nadir Shah?"

Shir Ali chuckled.

"Let's hope he is in Paradise. But the last I saw of him he was going down a dark cold river into the bowels of the earth! Come now, and I will get horses!"

The guard struggled back to consciousness. He goggled. Shir Ali spoke with mock gentleness.

"Be not disturbed, little one. Thine Amir is merely amusing himself. But be not afraid, for Nadir Shah will never so much as harm a hair of thy head!"

Shir Ali took Abdur Rahman by the arm. They left the cell. Shir Ali locked the door. He put the key in his pocket. He laughed softly.

"One can never tell when the key of a jail may come in handy. I will keep this one!"

Abdur Rahman, physically and nervously worn by the cat-and-mouse torment he had endured, shivered as they came out of the passage into the bitter wind.

"What next?" his teeth chattered.

Shir Ali blew out his chest. His Afghan soul delighted in his answer.

"Now we will put you back on the throne again, and give those damned rebels such a lesson that you will never again be troubled by them. You shall ride into Kabul at the head of the English army, with all the people cheering your return! In the meanwhile—oh, but this is delicious!—I will get two horses merely by ordering a groom to saddle them

for me. I would dearly like to strut through the palace again, with men bowing to me, but why sacrifice victory to vanity? Wait here, my lord, in the shadow, lest some observant groom recognize thee. I go to order horses. What a holy situation for a horse-thief! Allah be praised, what a wonderful world this is!"

Shir Ali strode, as an Amir should stride, to the stable. He was living at the height of life, speaking not in *Pushtu* but in flowing Persian periods, acquired heaven knows where, drunk with the wine of delight but coldly cunning, as ever, in his actions.

The warm smell of the stables and a groom asleep. Shir Ali touched him with his foot, and the groom jumped blinking to his feet.

"Saddle two of the best horses," growled Shir Ali. "Not those, thickhead! Who ever made thee a groom? You should be tending camels! See, take that one, and that roan in the stall!"

The groom was amazed. For the Amir was working with him. And the groom had never seen a cleverer man with horses. And the Amir was saying:

"I will lead them out! It's cold out there, and I don't want my servants to be uncomfortable!"

"**N**ow, my lord, mount! The world turns and brings thy throne back to thee. The English outposts will not be far away by this time. Mount and ride, Abdur Rahman, my king—but be careful not to speak to the sentry. He will pass *me* as Amir of Afghanistan!"

Waste not your Hour, nor in the vain pursuit
Of This and That endeavour and dispute;
Better be jocund with the fruitful Grape
Than sadden after none, or bitter, Fruit.

—*Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyam.*

The Sowers of the Thunder

By ROBERT E. HOWARD

A mighty tale of Baibars the Panther, most spectacular of all the figures of the Crusades—and the shock of Kharesmian armies fleeing before the Mongol horde

Iron winds and ruin and flame,
And a Horseman shaking with giant mirth;
Over the corpse-strewn, blackened earth
Death, stalking naked, came
Like a storm-cloud shattering the ships;
Yet the Rider seated high,
Paled at the smile on a dead king's lips,
As the tall white horse went by.

—The Ballad of Baibars.

CHAPTER 1

THE idlers in the tavern glanced up at the figure framed in the doorway. It was a tall broad man who stood there, with the torch-lit shadows and the clamor of the bazars at his back. His garments were a simple tunic, and short breeches of leather; a camel's-hair mantle hung from his broad shoulders and sandals were on his feet. But belying the garb of the peaceful traveller, a short straight stabbing sword hung at his girdle. One massive arm, ridged with muscles, was outstretched, the brawny hand gripping a pilgrim's staff, as the man stood, powerful legs wide-braced, in the doorway. His bare legs were hairy, knotted like tree-trunks. His coarse red locks were confined by a single band of blue cloth, and from his square dark face, his strange blue eyes blazed with a kind of reckless and wayward mirth, reflected by the half-smile that curved his thin lips.

His glance passed over the hawk-faced seafarers and ragged loungers who brewed tea and squabbled endlessly, to rest on a man who sat apart at a rough-hewn table, with a wine pitcher. Such a man the watcher in the door had never seen—tall, deep-chested, broad-shouldered, built with the dangerous supple-

ness of a panther. His eyes were as cold as blue ice, set off by a mane of golden hair tinted with red; so to the man in the doorway that hair seemed like burning gold. The man at the table wore a light shirt of silvered mail, a long lean sword hung at his hip, and on the bench beside him lay a kite-shaped shield and a light helmet.

The man in the guise of a traveller strode purposefully forward and halted, hands resting on the table across which he smiled mockingly at the other, and spoke in a tongue strange to the seated man, newly come to the East.

This one turned to an idler and asked in Norman French: "What does the infidel say?"

"I said," replied the traveller in the same tongue, "that a man can not even enter an Egyptian inn these days without finding some dog of a Christian under his feet."

As the traveller had spoken the other had risen, and now the speaker dropped his hand to his sword. Scintillant lights flickered in the other's eyes and he moved like a flash of summer lightning. His left hand darted out to lock in the breast of the traveller's tunic, and in his right hand the long sword flashed out. The traveller was caught flat-footed, his sword half clear of its sheath. But the faint smile did not leave his lips and he stared almost childishly at the blade that flickered before his eyes, as if fascinated by its dazzling.

"Heathen dog," snarled the swordsman, and his voice was like the slash of a



"Cabal struck back so savagely and swiftly that Haroun could neither duck nor parry."

blade through fabric, "I'll send you to Hell unshrive!"

"What panther whelped you that you move as a cat strikes?" responded the other curiously, as calmly as if his life were not weighing in the balance. "But you took me by surprize. I did not know that a Frank dare draw sword in Damietta."

The Frank glared at him moodily; the wine he had drunk showed in the dangerous gleams that played in his eyes where lights and shadows continuously danced and shifted.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"Haroun the Traveller," the other grinned. "Put up your steel. I crave pardon for my gibing words. It seems there are Franks of the old breed yet."

O. S.—6

With a change of mood the Frank thrust his sword back into its sheath with an impatient clash. Turning back to his bench he indicated table and wine-pitcher with a sweeping gesture.

"Sit and refresh yourself; if you are a traveller, you have a tale to tell."

Haroun did not at once comply. His gaze swept the inn and he beckoned the innkeeper, who came grudgingly forward. As he approached the Traveller, the innkeeper suddenly shrank back with a low half-stifed cry. Haroun's eyes went suddenly merciless and he said, "What then, host, do you see in me a man you have known aforetime, perchance?"

His voice was like the purr of a hunting tiger and the wretched innkeeper shivered as with an ague, his dilated eyes

fixed on the broad corded hand that stroked the hilt of the stabbing-sword.

"No, no, master," he mouthed. "By Allah, I know you not—I never saw you before—and Allah grant I never see you again," he added mentally.

"Then tell me what does this Frank here, in mail and wearing a sword," ordered Haroun bruskiy, in Turki. "The dog-Venetians are allowed to trade in Damietta as in Alexandria, but they pay for the privilege in humility and insult, and none dares gird on a blade here—much less lift it against a Believer."

"He is no Venetian, good Haroun," answered the innkeeper. "Yesterday he came ashore from a Venetian trading-galley, but he consorts not with the traders or the crew of the infidels. He strides boldly through the streets, wearing steel openly and ruffling against all who would cross him. He says he is going to Jerusalem and could not find a ship bound for any port in Palestine, so came here, intending to travel the rest of the way by land. The Believers have said he is mad, and none molests him."

"Truly, the mad are touched by Allah and given His protection," mused Haroun. "Yet this man is not altogether mad, I think. Bring wine, dog!"

The innkeeper ducked in a deep salaam and hastened off to do the Traveller's bidding. The Prophet's command against strong drink was among other orthodox precepts disobeyed in Damietta where many nations foregathered and Turk rubbed shoulders with Copt, Arab with Sudani.

HAROUN seated himself opposite the Frank and took the wine goblet proffered by a servant.

"You sit in the midst of your enemies like a shah of the East, my lord," he grinned. "By Allah, you have the bearing of a king."

"I am a king, infidel," growled the other; the wine he had drunk had touched him with a reckless and mocking madness.

"And where lies your kingdom, *malik?*" The question was not asked in mockery. Haroun had seen many broken kings drifting among the debris that floated Eastward.

"On the dark side of the moon," answered the Frank with a wild and bitter laugh. "Among the ruins of all the unborn or forgotten empires which etch the twilight of the lost ages. Cahal Ruadh O'Donnel, king of Ireland—the name means naught to you, Haroun of the East, and naught to the land which was my birthright. They who were my foes sit in the high seats of power, they who were my vassals lie cold and still, the bats haunt my shattered castles, and already the name of Red Cahal is dim in the memories of men. So—fill up my goblet, slave!"

"You have the soul of a warrior, *malik*. Was it treachery overcame you?"

"Aye, treachery," swore Cahal, "and the wiles of a woman who coiled about my soul until I was as one blind—to be cast out at the end like a broken pawn. Aye, the Lady Elinor de Courcey, with her black hair like midnight shadows on Lough Derg, and the gray eyes of her, like——" he started suddenly, like a man waking from a trance, and his wayward eyes blazed.

"Saints and devils!" he roared. "Who are you that I should spill out my soul to? The wine has betrayed me and loosened my tongue, but I——" He reached for his sword but Haroun laughed.

"I've done you no harm, *malik*. Turn this murderous spirit of yours into another channel. By Erlik, I'll give you a test to cool your blood!"

Rising, he caught up a javelin lying beside a drunken soldier, and striding

around the table, his eyes recklessly alight, he extended his massive arm, gripping the shaft close to the middle, point upward.

"Grip the shaft, *malik*," he laughed. "In all my days I have met no one who was man enough to twist a stave out of my hand."

Cahal rose and gripped the shaft so that his clenched fingers almost touched those of Haroun. Then, legs braced wide, arms bent at the elbow, each man exerted his full strength against the other. They were well matched; Cahal was a trifle taller, Haroun thicker of body. It was bear opposed to tiger. Like two statues they stood straining, neither yielding an inch, the javelin almost motionless under the equal forces. Then with a sudden rending snap the tough wood gave way and each man staggered, holding half the shaft, which had parted under the terrific strain.

"*Hai!*" shouted Haroun, his eyes sparkling; then they dulled with sudden doubt.

"By Allah, *malik*," said he, "this is an ill thing! Of two men, one should be master of the other, lest both come to a bad end. Yet this signifies that neither of us will ever yield to the other, and in the end, each will work the other ill."

"Sit down and drink," answered the Gael, tossing aside the broken shaft and reaching for the wine goblet, his dreams of lost grandeur and his anger both apparently forgotten. "I have not been long in the East, but I knew not there were such as you among the paynim. Surely you are not one with the Egyptians, Arabs and Turks I have seen."

"I was born far to the east, among the tents of the Golden Horde, on the steppes of High Asia," said Haroun, his mood changing back to joviality as he flung himself down on his bench. "Ha! I was almost a man grown before I heard of

Muhammad—on whom peace! *Hai, bogatyr*, I have been many things! Once I was a princeling of the Tatars—son of the lord Subotai who was right hand to Genghis Khan. Once I was a slave—when the Turkomans drove a raid east and carried off youths and girls from the Horde. In the slave markets of El Kahira I was sold for three pieces of silver, by Allah, and my master gave me to the Bahairiz—the slave-soldiers—because he feared I'd strangle him. Ha! Now I am Haroun the Traveller, making pilgrimage to the holy place. But once, only a few days ago, I was man to Baibars—whom the devil fly away with!"

"Men say in the streets that this Baibars is the real ruler of Cairo," said Cahal curiously; new to the East though he was, he had heard that name oft-repeated.

"Men lie," responded Haroun. "The sultan rules Egypt and Shadjar ad Darr rules the sultan. Baibars is only the general of the Bahairiz—the great oaf!"

"I was his man!" he shouted suddenly, with a great laugh, "to come and go at his bidding—to put him to bed—to rise with him—to sit down at meat with him—aye, and to put food and drink into his fool's-mouth. But I have escaped him! By Allah, by Allah and by Allah, I have naught to do with this great fool Baibars tonight! I am a free man and the devil may fly away with him and with the sultan, and Shadjar ad Darr and all Saladin's empire! I am my own man tonight!"

He pulsed with an energy that would not let him be still or silent; he seemed vibrant and joyously mad with the sheer exuberance of life and the huge mirth of living. With gargantuan laughter he smote the table thunderously with his open hand and roared: "By Allah, *malik*, you shall help me celebrate my escape from that great oaf Baibars—whom the devil fly away with! Away with this slop, dogs! Bring kumiss! The Nazarene

lord and I intend to hold such a drinking bout as Damietta's inns have not seen in a hundred years!"

"But my master has already emptied a full wine pitcher and is more than half drunk!" clamored the nondescript servant Cahal had picked up on the wharves—not that he cared, but whomever he served, he wished to have the best of any contest, and besides it was his Oriental instinct to intrude his say.

"So!" roared Haroun, catching up a full wine pitcher. "I will not take advantage of any man! See—I quaff this thimbleful that we may start on even terms!" And drinking deeply, he flung down the pitcher empty.

The servants of the inn brought kumiss—fermented mare's milk, in leathern skins, bound and sealed—illegal drink, brought down by the caravans from the lands of the Turkomans, to tempt the sated palates of nobles, and to satisfy the craving of the steppemen among the mercenaries and the Bahairiz.

Then, goblet for goblet with Haroun, Cahal quaffed the unfamiliar, whitish, acid stuff, and never had the exiled Irish prince seen such a cup-companion as this wanderer. For between enormous drafts, Haroun shook the smoke-stained rafters with giant laughter, and shouted over spicy tales that breathed the very scents of Cairo's merry obscenity and high comedy. He sang Arab love songs that sighed with the whisper of palm-leaves and the swish of silken veils, and he roared riding-songs in a tongue none in the tavern understood, but which vibrated with the drum of Mongol hoofs and the clashing of swords.

THE moon had set and even the clamor of Damietta had ebbed in the darkness before dawn, when Haroun staggered up and clutched reeling at the table

for support. A single weary slave stood by, to pour wine. Keeper, servants and guests snored on the floor or had slipped away long before. Haroun shouted a thick-tongued war-cry and yelled aloud with the sheer riotousness of his mirth. Sweat stood in beads on his face and the veins of his temples swelled and throbbed from his excesses. His wild wayward eyes danced with a joyous deviltry.

"Would you were not a king, *malik!*" he roared, catching up a stout bludgeon. "I would show you cudgel-play! Aye, my blood is racing like a Turkoman stallion and in good sport I would fain deal strong blows on somebody's pate, by Allah!"

"Then grip your stick, man," answered Cahal reeling up. "Men call me fool, but no man has ever said I was backward where blows were going, be they of steel or wood!"

Upsetting the table, he gripped a leg and wrenched powerfully. There was a splintering of wood, and the rough leg came away in his iron hand.

"Here is my cudgel, wanderer!" roared the Gael. "Let the breaking of heads begin and if the Prophet loves you, he'd best fling his mantle over your skull!"

"Salaam to you, *malik!*" yelled Haroun. "No other king since Malik Ric would take up cudgels with a masterless wanderer!" And with giant laughter, he lunged.

The fight was necessarily short and fierce. The wine they had drunk had made eye and hand uncertain, and their feet unsteady, but it had not robbed them of their tigerish strength. Haroun struck first, as a bear strikes, and it was by luck rather than skill that Cahal partly parried the whistling blow. Even so it fell glancingly above his ear, filling his vision with a myriad sparks of light, and knocking him back against the upset table. Cahal

gripped the table edge with his left hand for support and struck back so savagely and swiftly that Haroun could neither duck nor parry. Blood spattered, the cudgel splintered in Cahal's hand and the Traveller dropped like a log, to lie motionless.

Cahal flung aside his cudgel with a motion of disgust and shook his head violently to clear it.

"Neither of us would yield to the other—well, in this I have prevailed—"

He stopped. Haroun lay sprawled serenely and a sound of placid snoring rose on the air. Cahal's blow had laid open his scalp and felled him, but it was the incredible amount of liquor the Tatar had drunk that had caused him to lie where he had fallen. And now Cahal knew that if he did not get out into the cool night air at once, he too would fall senseless beside Haroun.

Cursing himself disgustedly, he kicked his servant awake and gathering up shield, helmet and cloak, staggered out of the inn. Great white clusters of stars hung over the flat roofs of Damietta, reflected in the black lapping waves of the river. Dogs and beggars slept in the dust of the street, and in the black shadows of the crooked alleys not even a thief stole. Cahal swung into the saddle of the horse the sleepy servant brought, and reined his way through the winding silent streets. A cold wind, forerunner of dawn, cleared away the fumes of the wine as he rode out of the tangle of alleys and bazars. Dawn was not yet whitening the east, but the tang of dawn was in the air.

Past the flat-topped mud huts along the irrigation ditches he rode, past the wells with their long wooden sweeps and deep clumps of palms. Behind him the ancient city slumbered, shadowy, mysterious, alluring. Before him stretched the sands of the Jifar.

CHAPTER 2

THE Bedouins did not cut Red Cahal's throat on the road from Damietta to Ascalon. He was preserved for a different destiny and so he rode, careless, and alone except for his ragamuffin servant, across the wastelands, and no barbed arrow or curved blade touched him, though a band of hawk-like riders in floating white khalats harried him the last part of the way and followed him like a wolf-pack to the very gates of the Christian outposts.

It was a restless and unquiet land through which Red Cahal rode on his pilgrimage to Jerusalem in the warm spring days of that year 1243. The red-haired prince learned much that was new to him, of the land which had been but a vague haze of disconnected names and events in his mind when he started on his exiled pilgrimage. He had known that the Emperor Frederick II had regained Jerusalem from the infidels without fighting a battle. Now he learned that the Holy City was shared with the Moslems—to whom it likewise was holy; Al Kuds, the Holy, they called it, for from thence, they said, Muhammad ascended to paradise, and there on the last day would he sit in judgment on the souls of men.

And Cahal learned that the kingdom of Outremer was but a shadow of an heroic past. In the north Bohemund VI held Antioch and Tripoli. In the south Christendom held the coast as far as Ascalon, with some inland towns such as Hebron, Bethlehem, and Ramlah. The grim castles of the Templars and of the Knights of St. John loomed like watchdogs above the land and the fierce soldier-monks wore arms day and night, ready to ride to any part of the kingdom threatened by pagan invasion. But how long could that thin line of ramparts and men along the coast stand against the growing pressure of the heathen hinterlands?

In the talk of castle and tavern, as he rode toward Jerusalem, Cahal heard again the name of Baibars. Men said the sultan of Egypt, kin of the great Saladin, was in his dotage, ruled by the girl-slave, Shadjar ad Darr, and that sharing her rule were the war-chiefs, Ae Beg the Kurd, and Baibars the Panther. This Baibars was a devil in human form, men said—a guzzler of wine and a lover of women; yet his wits were as keen as a monk's and his prowess in battle was the subject of many songs among the Arab minstrels. A strong man, and ambitious.

He was generalissimo of the mercenaries, men said, who were the real strength of the Egyptian army—Bahairiz, some called them, others the White Slaves of the River, the memluks. This host was, in the main, composed of Turkish slaves, raised up in its ranks and trained only in the arts of war. Baibars himself had served as a common soldier in the ranks, rising to power by the sheer might of his arm. He could eat a roasted sheep at one meal, the Arab wanderers said, and though wine was forbidden the Faithful, it was well known that he had drunk all his officers under the table. He had been known to break a man's spine in his bare hands in a moment of rage, and when he rode into battle swinging his heavy simitar, none could stand before him.

And if this incarnate devil came up out of the South with his cutthroats, how could the lords of Outremer stand against him, without the aid that war-torn and intrigue-racked Europe had ceased to send? Spies slipped among the Franks, learning their weaknesses, and it was said that Baibars himself had gained entrance into Bohemund's palace in the guise of a wandering teller-of-tales. He must be in league with the Evil One himself, this Egyptian chief. He loved to go among his people in disguise, it was said, and he

ruthlessly slew any man who recognized him. A strange soul, full of wayward whims, yet ferocious as a tiger.

Yet it was not so much Baibars of whom the people talked, nor yet of Sultan Ismail, the Moslem lord of Damascus. There was a threat in the blue mysterious East which overshadowed both these nearer foes.

Cahal heard of a strange new terrible people, like a scourge out of the East—Mongols, or Tartars as the priests called them, swearing they were the veritable demons of Tartary, spoken of by the prophets of old. More than a score of years before they had burst like a sand-storm out of the East, trampling all in their path; Islam had crumpled before them and kings had been dashed into the dust. And as their chief, men named one Subotai, whom Haroun the traveller, Cahal remembered, had claimed as sire.

Then the horde had turned its course and the Holy Land had been spared. The Mongols had drifted back into the limbo of the unknown East with their ox-tail standards, their lacquered armor, their kettledrums and their terrible bows, and men had almost forgotten them. But now of late years the vultures had circled again in the East, and from time to time news had trickled down through the hills of the Kurds, of the Turkoman clans flying in shattered rout before the yak-tail banners. Suppose the unconquerable Horde should turn southward? Subotai had spared Palestine—but who knew the mind of Mangu Khan, whom the Arab wanderers named the present lord of the nomads?

So the people talked in the dreamy spring weather as Cahal rode to Jerusalem, seeking to forget the past, losing himself in the present; absorbing the spirit and traditions of the country and the people, picking up new languages with the characteristic facility of the Gael.

He journeyed to Hebron, and in the

great cathedral of the Virgin at Bethlehem, knelt beside the crypt where candles burned to mark the birthplace of our fair Seigneur Christ. And he rode up to Jerusalem, with its ruined walls and its mullahs calling the muezzin within ear-shot of the priests chanting beside the Sepulcher. Those walls had been destroyed by the Sultan of Damascus, years before.

Beyond the Via Dolorosa he saw the slender columns of the Al Aksa portals and was told Christian hands first shaped them. He was shown mosques that had once been Christian chapels, and was told that the gilded dome above the mosque of Omar covered a gray rock which was the Muhammadan holy of holies—the rock whence the Prophet ascended to paradise. Aye, and thereon, in the days of Israel, had Abraham stood, and the Ark of the Covenant had rested, and the Temple whence Christ drove the merchants; for the Rock was the pinnacle of Mount Moriah, one of the two mountains on which Jerusalem was built. But now the Moslem Dome of the Rock hid it from Christian view, and dervishes with naked swords stood night and day to bar the way of Unbelievers; though nominally the city was in Christian hands. And Cahal realized how weak the Franks of Outremer had grown.

He rode in the hills about the Holy City and stood on the Mount of Olives where Tancred had stood, nearly a hundred and fifty years before, for his first sight of Jerusalem. And he dreamed deep dim dreams of those old days when men first rode from the West strong with faith and eager with zeal, to found a kingdom of God.

Now men cut their neighbors' throats in the West and cried out beneath the heels of ambitious kings and greedy popes, and in their wars and cryings out, forgot that thin frontier where the rem-

nants of a fading glory clung to their slender boundaries.

Through budding spring, hot summer and dreamy autumn, Red Cahal rode—following a blind pilgrimage that led even beyond Jerusalem and whose goal he could not see or guess. Ascalon he tarried in, Tyre, Jaffa and Acre. He was visitor at the castles of the Military Orders. Walter de Brienne offered him a part in the rule of the fading kingdom, but Cahal shook his head and rode on. The throne he had never pressed had been snatched beyond his reach and no other earthly glory would suffice.

And so in the budding dream of a new spring he came to the castle of Renault d'Ibelin beyond the frontier.

CHAPTER 3

THE Sieur Renault was a cousin of the powerful crusading family of d'Ibelin which held its grim gray castles on the coast, but little of the fruits of conquest had fallen to him. A wanderer and adventurer, living by his wits and the edge of his sword, he had gotten more hard blows than gold. He was a tall lean man with hawk-eyes and a predatory nose. His mail was worn, his velvet cloak shabby and torn, the gems long gone from hilt of sword and dagger.

And the knight's hold was a haunt of poverty. The dry moat which encircled the castle was filled up in many places; the outer walls were mere heaps of crumbled stone. Weeds grew rank in the courtyard and over the filled-up well.

The chambers of the castle were dusty and bare, and the great desert spiders spun their webs on the cold stones. Lizards scampered across the broken flags and the tramp of mailed feet resounded eerily in the echoing emptiness. No merry villagers bearing grain and wine thronged the barren courts, and no gayly

clad pages sang among the dusty corridors. For over half a century the keep had stood deserted, until d'Ibelin had ridden across the Jordan to make it a reaver's hold. For the Sieur Renault, in the stress of poverty, had become no more than a bandit chief, raiding the caravans of the Moslems.

And now in the dim dusty tower of the crumbling hold, the knight in his shabby finery sat at wine with his guest.

"The tale of your betrayal is not entirely unknown to me, good sir," said Renault—unbidden, for since that night of drunkenness in Damietta, Cahal had not spoken of his past. "Some word of affairs in Ireland has drifted into this isolated land. As one ruined adventurer to another, I bid you welcome. But I would like to hear the tale from your own lips."

Cahal laughed mirthlessly and drank deeply.

"A tale soon told and best forgotten. I was a wanderer, living by my sword, robbed of my heritage before my birth. The English lords pretended to sympathize with my claim to the Irish throne. If I would aid them against the O'Neills, they would throw off their allegiance to Henry of England—would serve me as my barons. So swore Sir William Fitzgerald and his peers. I am not an utter fool. They had not persuaded me so easily but for the Lady Elinor de Courcey, with her black hair and proud Norman eyes—who feigned love for me. Hell!

"Why draw out the tale? I fought for them—won wars for them. They tricked me and cast me aside. I went into battle for the throne with less than a thousand men. Their bones rot in the hills of Donegal and better had I died there—but my kerns bore me senseless from the field. And then my own clan cast me forth.

"I took the cross—after I cut the throat of William Fitzgerald among his own henchmen. Speak of it no more; my

kingdom was clouds and moonmist. I seek forgetfulness—of lost ambition and the ghost of a dead love."

"Stay here and raid the caravans with me," suggested Renault.

Cahal shrugged his shoulders.

"It would not last, I fear. With but forty-five men-at-arms, you can not hold this pile of ruins long. I have seen that the old well is long choked and broken in, and the reservoirs shattered. In case of a siege you would have only the tanks you have built, filled with water you carry from the muddy spring outside the walls. They would last only a few days at most."

"Poverty drives men to desperate deeds," frankly admitted Renault. "Godfrey, first lord of Jerusalem, built this castle for an outpost in the days when his rule extended beyond Jordan. Saladin stormed and partly dismantled it, and since then it has housed only the bat and the jackal. I made it my lair, from whence I raid the caravans which go down to Mecca, but the plunder has been scanty enough.

"My neighbor the Shaykh Suleyman ibn Omad will inevitably wipe me out if I bide here long, though I have skirmished successfully with his riders and beat off a flying raid. He has sworn to hang my head on his tower, driven to madness by my raids on the Mecca pilgrims whom it is his obligation to protect.

"Well, I have another thing in mind. Look, I scratch a map on the table with my dagger-point. Here is this castle; here to the north is El Omad, the stronghold of the Shaykh Suleyman. Now look—far to the east I trace a wandering line—so. That is the great river Euphrates, which begins in the hills of Asia Minor and traverses the whole plain, joining at last with the Tigris and flowing into Bahr el Fars—the Persian Gulf—below Bassorah. Thus—I trace the Tigris.

"Now where I make this mark beside

the river Tigris stands Mosul of the Persians. Beyond Mosul lies an unknown land of deserts and mountains, but among those mountains there is a city called Shahazar, the treasure-trove of the sultans. There the lords of the East send their gold and jewels for safekeeping, and the city is ruled by a cult of warriors sworn to safeguard the treasures. The gates are kept bolted night and day, and no caravans pass out of the city. It is a secret place of wealth and pleasure and the Moslems seek to keep word of it from Christian ears. Now it is my mind to desert this ruin and ride east in quest of that city!"

Cahal smiled in admiration of the splendid madness, but shook his head.

"If it is as well guarded as you say, how could a handful of men hope to take it, even if they win through the hostile country which lies between?"

"Because a handful of Franks *has* taken it," retorted d'Ibelin. "Nearly half a century ago the adventurer Cormac Fitz-Geoffrey raided Shahazar among the mountains and bore away untold plunder. What he did, another can do. Of course, it is madness; the chances are all that the Kurds will cut our throats before we ever see the banks of the Euphrates. But we will ride swiftly—and then, the Moslems may be so engaged with the Mongols, a small hard-riding band might slip through. We will ride ahead of the news of our coming, and smite Shahazar as a whirlwind smites. Lord Cahal, shall we sit supine until Baibars comes up out of Egypt and cuts all our throats, or shall we cast the dice of chance to loot the eagle's eyrie under the nose of Moslem and Mongol alike?"

Cahal's cold eyes gleamed and he laughed aloud as the lurking madness in his soul responded to the madness of the proposal. His hard hand smote against the brown palm of Renault d'Ibelin,

"Doom hovers over all Outremer, and Death is no grimmer met on a mad quest than in the locked spears of battle! East we ride to the Devil knows what doom!"

The sun had scarce set when Cahal's ragged servant, who had followed him faithfully through all his previous wanderings, stole away from the ruined walls and rode toward Jordan, flogging his shaggy pony hard. The madness of his master was no affair of his and life was sweet, even to a Cairo gutter-waif.

The first stars were blinking when Renault d'Ibelin and Red Cabal rode down the slope at the head of the men-at-arms. A hard-bitten lot these were, lean taciturn fighters, born in Outremer for the most part—a few veterans of Normandy and the Rhineland who had followed wandering lords into the Holy Land and had remained. They were well armed—clad in chain-mail shirts and steel caps, bearing kite-shaped shields. They rode fleet Arab horses and tall Turkoman steeds, and led horses followed. It was the capture of a number of fine steeds which had crystallized the idea of the raid in Renault's mind.

D'Ibelin had long learned the lesson of the East—swift marches that went ahead of the news of the raid, and depended on the quality of the mounts. Yet he knew the whole plan was madness. Cahal and Renault rode into the unknown land and far in the east the vultures circled endlessly.

CHAPTER 4

THE bearded watcher on the tower above the gates of El Omad shaded his hawk-eyes. In the east a dust-cloud grew and out of the cloud a black dot came flying. And the lean Arab knew it was a lone horseman, riding hard. He shouted a warning and in an instant other lean, hawk-eyed figures were at his side, brown

fingers toying with bow-string and cane-shafted spear. They watched the approaching figure with the intentness of men born to feud and raid.

"A Frank," grunted one, "and on a dying horse."

They watched tensely as the lone rider dipped out of sight in a dry wadi, came into view again on the near side, clattered reelingly across the dusty level and drew rein beneath the gate. A lean hand drew shaft to ear, but a word from the first watcher halted the archer. The Frank below had half climbed, half fallen from his reeling horse, and now he staggered to the gate and smote against it resoundingly with his mailed fist.

"By Allah and by Allah!" swore the bearded watcher in wonder. "The Nazarene is mad!" He leaned over the battlement and shouted: "Oh, dead man, what wouldst thou at the gate of El Omad?"

The Frank looked up with eyes glazed from thirst and the burning winds of the desert. His mail was white with the drifting dust, with which likewise his lips were parched and caked. He spoke with difficulty.

"Open the gates, dog, lest ill befall you!"

"It is Kizil Malik—the Red King—whom men call The Mad," whispered an archer. "He rode with the lord Renault, the shepherds say. Hold him in play while I fetch the Shaykh."

"Art thou weary of life, Nazarene," called the first speaker, "that thou comest to the gate of thine enemy?"

"Fetch the lord of the castle, dog," roared the Gael. "I parley not with menials—and my horse is dying."

The tall lean form of Shaykh Suleyman ibn Omad loomed among the guardsmen and the old chief swore in his beard.

"By Allah, this is a trap of some sort. Nazarene, what do ye here?"

Cahal licked his blackened lips with a dry tongue.

"When the wild dogs run, panther and buffalo flee together," he said. "Doom rushes from the east on Moslem and Christian alike. I bring you warning—call in your vassals and make fast your gates, lest another rising sun find you sleeping among the charred embers of your hold. I claim the courtesy due a perishing traveller—and my horse is dying."

"It is no trap," growled the Shaykh in his beard. "The Frank has a tale—there has been a harrying in the east and perchance the Mongols are upon us—open the gates, dogs, and let him in."

Through the opened gates Cahal unsteadily led his drooping steed, and his first words gained him esteem among the Arabs.

"See to my horse," he mumbled, and willing hands complied.

Cahal stumbled to a horse block and sank down, his head in his hands. A slave gave him a flagon of water and he drank avidly. As he set down the flagon he was aware that the Shaykh had come from the tower and stood before him. Suleyman's keen eyes ran over the Gael from head to foot, noting the lines of weariness on his face, the dust that caked his mail, the fresh dints on helmet and shield—black dried blood was caked thick about the mouth of his scabbard, showing he had sheathed his sword without pausing to cleanse it.

"You have fought hard and fled swiftly," concluded Suleyman aloud.

"Aye, by the Saints!" laughed the prince, "I have fled for a night and a day and a night without rest. This horse is the third which has fallen under me——"

"Whom do you flee?"

"A horde that must have ridden up from the dim limbo of Hell! Wild riders

with tall fur caps and the heads of wolves on their standards."

"*Allab il Allab!*" swore Suleyman. "Kharesmians!—flying before the Mongols!"

"They were apparently fleeing some greater horde," answered Cahal. "Let me tell the tale swiftly—the Sieur Renault and I rode east with all his men, seeking the fabled city of Shahazar——"

"So that was the quest!" interrupted Suleyman. "Well, I was preparing to sweep down and stamp out that robbers' nest when divers herdsmen brought me word that the bandits had ridden away swiftly in the night like the thieves they were. I could have ridden after, but knew that Christians riding eastward but rode to their doom—and none can alter the will of Allah."

"Aye," grinned Cahal wolfishly, "east to our doom we rode, like men riding blind into the teeth of a storm. We slashed our way through the lands of the Kurds and crossed the Euphrates. Beyond, far to the east, we saw smoke and flame and the wheeling of many vultures, and Renault said the Turkomans fought the Horde. But we met no fugitives and I wondered then—I wonder not now. The slayers rode over them like a wave out of the night and none was left to flee.

"Like men riding to death in a dream, we rode into the onrushing storm and the suddenness of its coming was like a thunderbolt. A sudden drum of hoofs over a ridge and they were upon us—hundreds of them, a swarm of outriders scouting ahead of the horde. There was no chance to flee—our men died where they stood."

"And the Sieur Renault?" asked the Shaykh.

"Dead!" said Cahal. "I saw a curved blade cleave his helmet and his skull."

"Allah be merciful and save his soul from the hell-fire of the unbelievers!" piously exclaimed Suleyman, who had sworn to kill the luckless adventurer on sight.

"He took toll before he fell," grimly answered the Gael. "By God, the heathen lay like ripe grain beneath our horses' hoofs before the last man fell. I alone hacked my way through."

The Shaykh, grown old in warfare, visualized the scene that lay behind that simple sentence—the swarming, howling, fur-clad horsemen with their barbaric war cries, and Red Cahal riding like a wind of Death through that maelstrom of flashing blades, his sword singing in his hand as horse and rider went down before him.

"I outstripped the pursuers," said Cahal, "and as I rode over a hill I looked back and saw the great black mass of the horde swarming like locusts over the land, filling the sky with the clamor of their kettledrums. The Turkomans had risen behind us as we had raced through their lands, and now the desert was alive with horsemen—but the whole east was aflame and the tribesmen had no time to hunt down a single rider. They were faced with a stronger foe. So I won through.

"My horse fell under me, but I stole a steed from a herd watched by a Turkoman boy. When it could do no more, I took a mount from a wandering Kurd who rode up, thinking to loot a dying traveller. And now I say to you, whom men dub the Watcher of the Trail—beware, lest these demons from the east ride over your ruins as they have ridden over the corpses of the Turkomans. I do not think they'll lay siege—they are like wolves ranging the steppes; they strike and pass on. But they ride like the wind. They have crossed the Euphrates. Behind me last night the sky

was red as blood. Hard as I have ridden, they must be close on my heels."

"Let them come," grimly answered the Arab. "El Omad has held out against Nazarene, Kurd and Turk—for a hundred years no foe has set foot within these walls. *Malik*, this is a time when Christian and Moslem should join hands. I thank you for your warning, and beg you to aid me in holding the walls."

But Cahal shook his head.

"You will not need my help, and I have other work to do. It was not to save my worthless life that I have ridden three noble steeds to death—otherwise I had left my body beside Renault d'Ibelin. I must ride on; Jerusalem is in the path of these devils, with its ruined walls and scanty guard."

Suleyman paled and plucked his beard.

"Al Kuds! These pagan dogs will slay Christian and Muhammadan alike, and desecrate the holy places!"

"And so," Cahal rose stiffly, "I must on to warn them. So swiftly have these Kharesmians come that no word of their coming can have gone into Palestine. On me alone the burden of warning lies. Give me a fleet horse and let me go."

"You can do no more," objected Suleyman. "You are foredone—an hour more and you would drop senseless from the saddle. I will send one of my men instead—"

Cahal shook his head. "The duty is mine. Yet I will sleep an hour—one small hour can make no great difference. Then I will fare on."

"Come to my couch," urged Suleyman, but the hardy Gael shook his head.

"This has been my couch before," said he, and flinging himself down on the scanty grass of the courtyard, he drew his cloak about him and fell into the deep sleep of utter exhaustion. Yet he slept but an hour when he awoke of his own accord. Food and wine were placed be-

fore him and he drank and ate ravenously. His features were still drawn and haggard, but in his short rest he had drawn upon hidden springs of endurance. An iron man in an age of iron, he added to his physical ruggedness a dynamic nerve-energy that carried him beyond himself and upheld him after more stolid men had dropped by the wayside.

As he reined out of the gates on a swift Arab steed, the watchmen shouted and pointed to the east where a pillar of smoke billowed up against the hot blue sky. The Shaykh flung up his arm in salute as Cahal rode toward Jerusalem at a swinging gallop that ate up the miles.

Bedouins in their black felt tents gaped at him; herdsmen leaning on their staves stiffened at his shout. A rising drum of hoofs, the wave of a mailed arm, a shouted warning, then the dwindling hoof-beats—behind him the frenzied people snatched up their belongings and fled shrieking to places of shelter or hiding.

CHAPTER 5

THE moon was setting as Cahal splashed through the calm waters of the Jordan, flecked with the mirrored stars. The sun was rising when his horse fell at the gate of Jerusalem that opens on the Damascus road. Cahal staggered up, half dead himself, and gazing on the crumbling ruins of the shattered walls, he groaned aloud. On foot he hurried forward and a group of placid Syrians watched him curiously. A bearded Flemish man-at-arms came forward, trailing his pike. Cahal snatched a wine-flask that hung at the soldier's girdle and emptied it at one draft.

"Lead me to the patriarch," he gasped throatily. "Doom rides on swift hoofs to Jerusalem—ha!"

From the people a thin cry of wonder and fear had gone up—Cahal wheeled

and felt fear constrict his throat. Again in the east he saw flying flame and drifting smoke—the gigantic tracks of the destroying horde.

"They have crossed the Jordan!" he cried. "Saints of God, when did men born of women ride so madly? They spurn the very wind—curst be the weakness that made me waste even a single hour——"

The words died in his throat as he looked at the ruined walls. Truly, an hour more or less could have no significance in that doomed city.

Cahal hurried through the streets with the soldier and he saw that already the word had spread like wild-fire. Jews in their blue shubas ran about howling; in the streets and on the house-tops women wrung their white hands and wailed. Tall Syrians bound their belongings on donkeys and formed the nucleus of a disorderly horde that streamed out of the western gates staggering under bundles of household goods. The city crouched trembling and dazed with terror under the threat rising in the east. What horde was sweeping upon them they did not know, nor care; death is death, whoever the dealer.

Some cried out that the Tartars were upon them and both Moslem and Nazarene shook. Cahal found the patriarch bewildered and helpless. With a handful of soldiers, how could he defend the wallless city? He was ready to give up his life in the vain attempt; he could do no more. The mullahs rallied their people, and for the first time in all history Moslem and Christian joined forces to defend the city that was holy to both. The great mass of the people fled into the mosques or the cathedrals, or crouched resignedly in the streets, dumbly awaiting the stroke. Men cried on Jehovah and on Allah, and some prophesied a miracle that should deliver the Holy City. But in the merci-

less blue sky no flaming sword appeared, only the smoke of the pillaging, the flame of the slaughter and at last the dust clouds of the riders.

The patriarch had bunched his pitiful force of men-at-arms, knights, armed pilgrims and Moslems, at the Damascus Gate. Useless to man the ruined walls. There they would face the horde and give up their lives, without hope and without fear.

Cahal, his weariness half forgotten in the drunkenness of anticipated battle, reined beside the patriarch on the great red stallion that had been given him, and cried out suddenly at the sight of a tall, broad man on a rangy Turkish bay.

"Haroun, by all the Saints!"

The other turned toward him and Cahal wavered. Was this Haroun? The fellow was clad in the mail shirt and peaked helmet of a Turkish soldier. On his brawny right arm he bore a round spiked buckler and at his belt hung a long broad simitar, heavier by pounds than the average Moslem blade. Moreover, Haroun had been clean-shaven and this man wore the fierce curving mustachios of the Turk. Yet the build of him—that square dark face—those blazing blue eyes——

"By the Saints, Haroun," said Cahal heartily, "what do you here?"

"Allah blast me if I be any Haroun," answered the soldier in a deep growling voice. "I am Akbar the Soldier, come to Al Kuds on pilgrimage. You have mistaken me for another."

Cahal frowned. The voice was not even that of Haroun, yet surely in all the world there was not such another pair of eyes. He shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, it is of no moment—where are you going?"

For the man had reined about.

"To the hills!" answered the soldier. "We can do no good by dying here—best

come with me. From the dust, it is a whole horde that is riding upon us."

"Flee without striking a blow? Not I!" snapped Cahal. "Go, if you fear."

Akbar swore loudly. "By Allah and by Allah! A man had better place his head beneath an elephant's tread than call me coward! I'll stand my ground as long as any Nazarene!"

Cahal turned away shortly, irritated by the fellow's manner and by his boasting. Yet for all the soldier's wrath, it seemed to the Gael that a vagrant twinkle lighted his fierce eyes as though he shook with inward mirth. Then Cahal forgot him. A wail went up from the house-tops where the helpless people watched their oncoming doom. The horde had swept into sight, up from the hazes of the Jordan's gorge.

THE skies shook with the clamor of the kettledrums; the earth trembled with the thunder of the hoofs. The headlong speed of the yelling fiends numbed the minds of their victims. From the steppes of high Asia these barbarians had fled before the Mongols like thistle-down flying before the wind. Drunken with the blood of slaughtered tribes, ten thousand strong they surged on Jerusalem, where thousands of helpless folk knelt shuddering.

Cahal saw anew the hideous figures which had haunted his half-delirious dreams as he swayed in the saddle on that long flight: tall rangy steeds on which crouched the broad forms of the riders in wolfskins and mail—square dark faces, eyes glaring like mad dogs' from beneath high fur caps or peaked helmets; standards with the heads of wolves, panthers and bears.

Headlong they swept down the Damascus road—leaping their horses over the broken walls, crowding through the ruined gates at breakneck speed—and

headlong they smote the clump of defenders which spurred to meet them—smote them, broke them, shattered them, trampled them down and under, and over their mangled bodies, struck the heart of the doomed city.

Red hell reigned rampant in the streets of Jerusalem, where helpless men, women and children ran screaming before the slayers who rode them down, howling like wolves, spitting babes on their lances and holding them on high like gory standards. Under the frenzied hoofs pitiful forms fell writhing and blood flooded the gutters. Dark blood-stained hands tore the garments from shrieking girls and lance-butts shattered doors and windows behind which cowered terrified prey. All objects of worth were ripped from their places and screams of agony rose to the smoke-fouled heavens as the victims were tortured with steel and fire to make them give up their pitiful treasures. Death stalked howling through the streets of Jerusalem and men blasphemed their gods as they died.

In the first irresistible flood of that charge, such defenders as were not instantly ridden down had been torn apart and swept back in utter confusion. The weight of the impact had swept Red Cahal's steed away as on the crest of a flood, and he found himself reining about in a narrow alley, where he had been tossed as a bit of driftwood is flung into a back-eddy by a rushing tide. He had lost sight of the patriarch and had no doubt that he lay among the trampled dead before the Damascus Gate.

His sword was red to the hilt, his soul ablaze with the battle-lust, his brain sick with fury and horror as the cries of the butchered city smote on his ears.

"I'll leave my corpse before the Sepulcher," he growled, and wheeling, spurred up the alley. He raced down a narrow winding street and emerged upon the Via

Dolorosa just as the first Kharesmian came flying along it, simitar dripping crimson. The red stallion's shoulder brushed the barbarian's stirrup and Cahal's sword flashed like a sunburst. The Kharesmian's head leaped from his shoulders on an arch of crimson and the Gael yelped with murderous exultation.

And now came another riding like the wind, and Cahal saw it was Akbar. The soldier reined in and shouted, "Well, good sir, are you still determined to sacrifice both our lives?"

"Your life is your own—my life is mine!" roared Cahal, eyes blazing.

He saw that a group of horsemen had ridden up to the Sepulcher from another street and were dismounting, shouting in their barbaric tongue, spattering the holy stones with blood-drops from their blades. In a red mist of fury Cahal smote them as an avalanche smites the pines. His whistling sword cleft buckler and helmet, severing necks and splitting skulls; under the hammering hoofs of his screaming charger, men rolled with smashed heads. And even in his madness Cahal was aware that he was not alone. Akbar had charged after him; his great voice roared above the clamor and the heavy simitar in his left hand crashed through mail and flesh and bone.

The men before the Sepulcher lay in a silent gory heap when Cahal reined back and shook the bloody mist from his eyes. Akbar roared in a strange tongue and smote him thunderously on the shoulders.

"*Bogda, bogatyr!*" he roared, his eyes dancing, and no longer Cahal doubted that he was Haroun. "You fight like a hero, by Erlik! But come, *malik*—you have offered a noble sacrifice to your God and He'll hardly blame you for saving yourself now. Thunder of Allah, man, we can not fight ten thousand!"

"Ride on," answered Cahal, shaking

the red drops from his blade. "Here I die."

"Well," laughed Akbar, "if you wish to throw away your life here where it will do no good—that's your affair! The heathen may thank you, but your brothers scarcely will, when the raiders smite them suddenly! The horsemen are all dead or hemmed in the alleys. Only you and I escaped that charge. Who will carry the news of the raid to the Frankish barons?"

"You speak truth," said Cahal shortly. "Let us go."

THE pair wheeled away and galloped down the street just as a howling horde came flying up the other end. Beyond the shattered walls Cahal looked back to see a mounting flame. He hid his face in his hands.

"Wounds of God!" he groaned. "They are burning the Sepulcher!"

"And defiling the Al Aksa mosque too, I doubt not," said Akbar tranquilly. "Well, that which is written will come to pass, and no man may escape his fate. All things pass away, yea, even the Holy of Holies."

Cahal shook his head, soul-sick. They rode through toiling bands of fugitives who screamed and caught at his stirrups, but Cahal steeled his heart. If he was to bear warning to the barons, he could not be burdened by helpless ones.

The roar of pillage and slaughter faded into the distance; only the smoke stood up among the hills, mute witness of the horror. And Akbar laughed gustily.

"By Allah!" he swore, smiting his saddlebow, "these Kharesmians are woundy fighters! They ride like Tatars and slay like Turks! Right well would I lead them into battle! I had rather fight beside them than against them."

Cahal made no reply. His strange companion seemed to him like a faun, a soulless fantastic being full of titanic

laughter at all human things—a creature outside the boundaries of men's dreams and reverences.

Akbar spoke abruptly. "Here our roads part for a space, *malik*; your road lies to Ascalon—mine to El Kahira."

"Why to Cairo, Akbar, or Haroun, or whatever your name is?" asked Cahal.

"Because I have business with that great oaf, Baibars, whom the devil fly away with!" yelled Akbar and his shout of laughter floated back above the hoof-beats.

It was hours later when Cahal, pushing his horse as hard as he dared, met the travellers—a slender knight in full mail and vizored helmet, with a single attendant, a big carle with a rough red beard, who wore a horned helmet and a shirt of scale-mail and bore a heavy ax. Something slumbering stirred in Cahal as he looked on that fierce bluff face, and he reined in.

"Man, where have I seen you before?"

The fierce frosty eyes met his levelly.

"By Odin, that I can't say. I'm Wulfgar the Dane and this is my master."

Cahal glanced at the silent knight with his plain shield. Through the bars of the vizor, shadowed eyes looked at him—great God! A shock went through Cahal, leaving him bewildered and shaken with a thousand racing chaotic thoughts. He leaned forward, striving to peer through the lowered vizor, and the knight drew back with an almost womanish gesture of rebuke. Cahal reddened.

"I crave your pardon, sir," he said. "I did not intend this seeming rudeness."

"My master has taken a vow not to speak or reveal his features until he has accomplished his penance," broke in the rough Dane. "He is known as the Masked Knight. We journey to Jerusalem."

Sorrowfully Cahal shook his head.

"No Christian may ride thither. The

paynim from the outer steppes have swept over the walls and the Holy of Holies lies in smoking ruins."

The Dane's bearded mouth gaped.

"Jerusalem—taken?" he mouthed stupidly. "Why, good sir, that can not be! How would God allow his Holy City to fall into the hands of the infidels?"

"I know not," said Cahal bitterly. "The ways of God and His infinite mercy are past my knowledge—but the streets of Jerusalem run with the blood of His people and the Sepulcher is black with the flames of the heathen."

Perplexed, the Dane tugged at his red beard and glanced at his master, sitting image-like in the saddle.

"By Odin," he growled, "what are we to do now?"

"There is but one thing to be done," answered Cahal. "Ride back to Ascalon and give warning. I was going thither, but if you will do this thing, I will seek Walter de Brienne. Tell the Seneschal of Ascalon that Jerusalem has fallen to heathen Turks of the outer steppes, known as Kharesmians, who number some ten thousand men. Bid him arm for war—and let no grass grow under your horses' hoofs in going."

And Cahal reined aside and took the road for Jaffa.

CHAPTER 6

CAHAL found Walter de Brienne in Ramlah, brooding in the White Mosque over the sepulcher of Saint George. Fainting with weariness the Gael told his tale in a few stark bare words, and even they seemed to drag leaden and lifeless from his blackened lips. He was but dimly aware that men led him into a house and laid him on a couch. And there he slept the sun around.

He woke to a deserted city. Horror—
O. S.—6

stricken, the people of Ramlah had gathered up their belongings and fled along the road to Jaffa, crying that the end of the world was come. But Walter de Brienne had ridden north, leaving a single man-at-arms to bid Cahal follow him to Acre. The Gael rode through the hollow-echoing streets, feeling like a ghost in a dead city. The western gates swung idly open and a spear lay on the worn flags, as if the watch had dropped their weapons and fled in sudden panic.

Cahal rode through the fields of date-palms and groves of fig-trees hugging the shadow of the wall, and out on the plain he overtook staggering crowds of frantic folk burdened with their goods and crying with weariness and thirst. When the fugitives saw Cahal they screamed with fear to know if the slayers were upon them. He shook his head, pushing through. It seemed logical to him that the Kharesmians would sweep on to the sea, and their path might well take them by Ramlah. But as he rode he scanned the horizon behind him and saw neither smoke-rack nor dust-cloud.

He left the Jaffa road with its hurrying throngs, and swung north. Already the tale had passed like wildfire from mouth to mouth. The villages were deserted as the folk thronged to the coast towns or retired into towers on the heights. Christian Outremer stood with its back to the sea, facing the onrushing menace out of the East.

Cahal rode into Acre, where the waning powers of Outremer were already gathering—hawk-eyed knights in worn mail—the barons with their wolfish men-at-arms. Sultan Ismail of Damascus had sent swift emissaries urging an alliance—which had been quickly accepted. Knights of St. John from their great grim Krak des Chevaliers, Templars with their red skull-caps and untrimmed beards rode in

from all parts of the kingdom—the grim silent watchdogs of Outremer.

Survivors had drifted into Ascalon and Jaffa—lame, weary folk, a bare handful who had escaped the torch and sword and survived the hardships of the flight. They told tales of horror. Seven thousand Christians, mostly women and children, had perished in the sack of Jerusalem. The Holy Sepulcher had been blackened by flame, the altars of the city shattered, the shrines burned with fire. Moslem had suffered with Christian. The patriarch was among the fugitives—saved from death by the valor and faithfulness of a nameless Rhinelander man-at-arms, who hid a cruel wound until he said, "Yonder be the towers of Ascalon, master, and since you have no more need o' me, I'll lie me down and sleep, for I be sore weary." And he died in the dust of the road.

And word came of the Kharesmian horde; they had not tarried long in the broken city, but swept on, down through the deserts of the south, to Gaza, where they lay encamped at last after their long drift. And pregnant, mysterious hints floated up from the blue web of the South, and de Brienne sent for Cahal O'Donnel.

"Good sir," said the baron, "my spies tell me that a host of memluks is advancing from Egypt. Their object is obvious—to take possession of the city the Kharesmians left desolate. But what else? There are hints of an alliance between the memluks and the nomads. If this be the case, we may as well be shriven before we go into battle, for we can not stand against both hosts.

"The men of Damascus cry out against the Kharesmians for befouling holy places—Moslem as well as Christian—but these memluks are of Turkish blood, and who knows the mind of Baibars, their master?

"Sir Cahal, will you ride to Baibars

and parley with him? You saw with your own eyes the sack of Jerusalem and can tell him the truth of how the pagans befouled Al Aksa as well as the Sepulcher. After all, he is a Moslem. At least learn if he means to join hands with these devils.

"Tomorrow, when the cohorts of Damascus come up, we advance southward to go against the foe ere he can come against us. Ride you ahead of the host as an emissary under a flag of truce, with as many men as you wish."

"Give me the flag," said Cahal. "I'll ride alone."

HE RODE out of the camp before sunset on a palfrey, bearing the flag of peace and without his sword. Only a battle-ax hung at his saddlebow as a precaution against bandits who respected no flag, as he rode south through a half-deserted land. He guided his course by the words of the wandering Arab herdsmen who knew all things that went on in the land. And beyond Aſcalon he learned that the host had crossed the Jifar and was encamped to the southeast of Gaza. The close proximity to the Kharesmians made him wary and he swung far to the east to avoid any scouts of the pagans who might be combing the countryside. He had no trust in the peace-token as a safeguard against the barbarians.

He rode, in a dreamy twilight, into the Egyptian camp which lay about a cluster of wells a bare league from Gaza. Misgivings smote him as he noted their arms, their numbers, their evident discipline. He dismounted, displaying the peace-gonfalon and his empty sword-belt. The wild memlukes in their silvered mail and heron feathers swarmed about him in sinister silence, as if minded to try their curved blades on his flesh, but they escorted him to a spacious silk pavilion in the midst of the camp.

Black slaves with wide-tipped simitars stood ranged about the entrance and from within a great voice—strangely familiar—boomed a song.

"This is the pavilion of the amir, even Baibars the Panther, *Capbar*," growled a bearded Turk, and Cahal said as haughtily as if he sat on his lost throne amid his gallagachs, "Lead me to your lord, dog, and announce me with due respect."

The eyes of the gaudily clad ruffian fell sullenly, and with a reluctant salaam he obeyed. Cahal strode into the silken tent and heard the memluk boom: "The lord Kizil Malik, emissary from the barons of Palestine!"

In the great pavilion a single huge candle on a lacquered table shed a golden light; the chiefs of Egypt sprawled about on silken cushions, quaffing the forbidden wine. And dominating the scene, a tall broad figure in voluminous silken trousers, satin vest, a broad cloth-of-gold girdle—without a doubt Baibars, the ogre of the South. And Cahal caught his breath—that coarse red hair—that square dark face—those blazing blue eyes—

"I bid you welcome, lord *Capbar*," boomed Baibars. "What news do you bring?"

"You were Haroun the Traveller," said Cahal slowly, "and at Jerusalem you were Akbar the Soldier."

Baibars rocked with laughter.

"By Allah!" he roared, "I bear a scar on my head to this day as a relic of that night's bout in Damietta! By Allah, you gave me a woundy clout!"

"You play your parts like a mummer," said Cahal. "But what reason for these deceptions?"

"Well," said Baibars, "I trust no spy but myself, for one thing. For another it makes life worth living. I did not lie when I told you that night in Damietta that I was celebrating my escape from

Baibars. By Allah, the affairs of the world weigh heavily on Baibars' shoulders, but Haroun the Traveller, he is a mad and merry rogue with a free mind and a roving foot. I play the mummer and escape from myself, and try to be true to each part—so long as I play it. Sit ye and drink!"

Cahal shook his head. All his carefully thought out plans of diplomacy fell away, futile as dust. He struck straight and spoke bluntly and to the point.

"A word and my task is done, Baibars," he said. "I come to find whether you mean to join hands with the pagans who desecrated the Sepulcher—and Al Aksa."

Baibars drank and considered, though Cahal knew well that the Tatar had already made up his mind, long before.

"Al Kuds is mine for the taking," he said lazily. "I will cleanse the mosques—aye, by Allah, the Kharesmians shall do the work, most piously. They'll make good Moslems. And winged war-men. With them I sow the thunder—who reaps the tempest?"

"Yet you fought against them at Jerusalem," Cahal reminded bitterly.

"Aye," frankly admitted the amir, "but there they would have cut my throat as quick as any Frank's. I could not say to them: 'Hold, dogs, I am Baibars!'"

Cahal bowed his lion-like head, knowing the futility of arguing.

"Then my work is done; I demand safe-conduct from your camp."

Baibars shook his head, grinning. "Nay, *malik*, you are thirsty and weary. Bide here as my guest."

Cahal's hand moved involuntarily toward his empty girdle. Baibars was smiling but his eyes glittered between narrowed lids and the slaves about him half drew their simitars.

"You'd keep me prisoner despite the fact I am an ambassador?"

"You came without invitation," grinned Baibars. "I ask no parley. Di Zaro!"

A tall lank Venetian in black velvet stepped forward."

"Di Zaro," said Baibars in a jesting voice, "the *malik* Cahal is our guest. Mount ye and ride like the devil to the host of the Franks. There say that Cahal sent you secretly. Say that the lord Cahal is twisting that great fool Baibars about his finger, and pledges to keep him aloof from the battle."

The Venetian grinned bleakly and left the tent, avoiding Cahal's smoldering eyes. The Gael knew that the trade-lusting Italians were often in secret league with the Moslems, but few stooped so low as this renegade.

"Well, Baibars," said Cahal with a shrug of his shoulders, "since you must play the dog, there is naught I can do. I have no sword."

"I'm glad of that," responded Baibars candidly. "Come, fret not. It is but your misfortune to oppose Baibars and his destiny. Men are my tools—at the Damascus Gate I knew that those red-handed riders were steel to forge into a Moslem sword. By Allah, *malik*, if you could have seen me riding like the wind into Egypt—marching back across the Jifar without pausing to rest! Riding into the camp of the pagans with mullahs shouting the advantages of Islam! Convincing their wild Kuran Shah that his only safety lay in conversion and alliance!

"I do not fully trust the wolves, and have pitched my camp apart from them—but when the Franks come up, they will find our hordes joined for battle—and should be horribly surprized, if that dog di Zaro does his work well!"

"Your treachery makes me a dog in the eyes of my people," said Cahal bitterly.

"None will call you traitor," said Baibars serenely, "because soon all will cease

to be. Relics of an outworn age, I will rid the land of them. Be at ease!"

He extended a brimming goblet and Cahal took it, sipped at it absently, and began to pace up and down the pavilion, as a man paces in worry and despair. The memluks watched him, grinning surreptitiously.

"Well," said Baibars, "I was a Tatar prince, I was a slave, and I will be a prince again. Kuran Shah's shaman read the stars for me—and he says that if I win the battle against the Franks, I will be sultan of Egypt!"

The amir was sure of his chiefs, thought Cahal, to thus flaunt his ambition openly. The Gael said, "The Franks care not who is sultan of Egypt."

"Aye, but battles and the corpses of men are stairs whereby I climb to fame. Each war I win clinches my hold on power. Now the Franks stand in my path; I will brush them aside. But the shaman prophesied a strange thing—that a dead man's sword will deal me a grievous hurt when the Franks come up against us——"

From the corner of his eye Cahal saw that his apparently aimless strides had taken him close to the table on which stood the great candle. He lifted the goblet toward his lips, then with a lightning flick of his wrist, dashed the wine onto the flame. It sputtered and went out, plunging the tent into total darkness. And simultaneously Cahal ripped a hidden dirk from under his arm and like a steel spring released, bounded toward the place where he knew Baibars sat. He catapulted into somebody in the dark and his dirk hummed and sank home. A death scream ripped the clamor and the Gael wrenched the blade free and sprang away. No time for another stroke. Men yelled and fell over each other and steel clanged wildly. Cahal's crimsoned blade ripped a long slit in the silk of the tent-wall and

he sprang into the outer starlight where men were shouting and running toward the pavilion.

Behind him a bull-like bellowing told the Gael that his blindly stabbing dirk had found some other flesh than Baibars'. He ran swiftly toward the horse-lines, leaping over taut tent-ropes, a shadow among a thousand racing figures. A mounted sentry came galloping through the confusion, firelight gleaming on his drawn simitar. As a panther leaps Cahal sprang, landing behind the saddle. The memluk's startled yell broke in a gurgle as the keen dirk crossed his throat.

Flinging the corpse to the earth, the Gael quieted the snorting, plunging steed and reined it away. Like the wind he rode through the swarming camp and the free air of the desert struck his face. He gave the Arab horse the rein and heard the clamor of pursuit die away behind him. Somewhere to the north lay the slowly advancing host of the Christians, and Cahal rode north. He hoped to overtake the Venetian on the road, but the other had too long a start. Men who rode for Baibars rode with a flowing rein.

The Franks were breaking camp at dawn when a Venetian rode headlong into their lines, gasping a tale of escape and flight, and demanding to see de Brienne.

Within the baron's half-dismantled tent, di Zaro gasped: "The lord Cahal sent me, *seigneur*—he holds Baibars in parley. He gives his word that the memluks will not join the Kharesmians, and urges you to press forward——"

Outside a clatter of hoofs split the din—a lone rider whose flying hair was like a veil of blood against the crimson of dawn. At de Brienne's tent the hard-checked steed slid to its haunches. Cahal leaped to the earth and rushed in like an avenging blast. Di Zaro cried out and paled, frozen by his doom—till Cahal's dirk

split his heart and the Venetian rolled, an earthen-faced corpse, to Walter de Brienne's feet. The baron sprang up, bewildered.

"Cahal! What news, in God's name?"

"Baibars joins arms with the pagans," answered Cahal.

De Brienne bowed his head.

"Well—no man can ask to live for ever."

CHAPTER 7

THROUGH the drear gray dusty desert the host of Outremer crawled southward. The black and white standard of the Templars floated beside the cross of the patriarch, and the black banners of Damascus billowed in the faintly stirring air. No king led them. The Emperor Frederick claimed the kingship of Jerusalem and he skulked in Sicily, plotting against the pope. De Brienne had been chosen to lead the barons and he shared his command with Al Mansur el Haman, war-lord of Damascus.

They went into camp within sight of the Moslem outposts, and all night the wind that blew up from the south throbbed with the beat of drums and the clash of cymbals. Scouts reported the movements of the Kharesmian horde, and that the memluks had joined them.

In the gray light of dawn Red Cahal came from his tent fully armed. On all sides the host was moving, striking tents and buckling armor. In the illusive light Cahal saw them moving like phantoms—the tall patriarch, shriving and blessing; the giant form of the Master of the Temple among his grim war-dogs; the heron-feathered gold helmet of Al Mansur. And he stiffened as he saw a slim mailed shape moving through the swarm, followed close by a rough figure with ax on shoulder. Bewildered, he shook his head—why did his heart pound so strangely

at sight of that mysterious Masked Knight? Of whom did the slim youth remind him, and of what dim bitter memories? He felt as one plunged into a web of illusion.

And now a familiar figure fell upon Cahal and embraced him.

"By Allah!" swore Shaykh Suleyman ibn Omad, "but for thee I had slept in the ruins of my keep! They came like the wind, those dogs, but they found the gates closed, the archers on the walls—and after one assault, they passed on to easier prey! Ride with me this day, my son!"

Cahal assented, liking the lean hearty old desert hawk. And so it was in the glittering, plume-helmeted ranks of Damascus the Gael rode to battle.

In the dawn they moved forward, no more than twelve thousand men to meet the memluks and nomads—fifteen thousand warriors, not counting light-armed irregulars. In the center of the right wing the Templars held their accustomed place, in advance of the rest; five hundred grim iron men, flanked on one side by the Knights of St. John and the Teutonic Knights, some three hundred in all; and on the other by the handful of barons with the patriarch and his iron mace. The combined forces of their men-at-arms did not exceed seven thousand. The rest of the host consisted of the cavalry of Damascus, in the center of the army, and the warriors of the amir of Kerak who held the left wing—lean hawk-faced Arabs better at raiding than at fighting pitched battles.

Now the desert blackened ahead of them with the swarms of their foes, and the drums throbbed and bellowed. The warriors of Damascus sang and chanted, but the men of the Cross were silent, like men riding to a known doom. Cahal, riding beside Al Mansur and Shaykh Suleyman, let his gaze sweep down those

grim gray-mailed ranks, and found that which he sought. Again his heart leaped curiously at the sight of the slim Masked Knight, riding close to the patriarch. Close at the knight's side bobbed the horned helmet of the Dane. Cahal cursed, bewilderedly.

And now both hosts advanced, the dark swarms of the desert riders moving ahead of the ordered ranks of the memluks. The Kharesmians trotted forward in some formation, and Cahal saw the Crusaders close their ranks to meet the charge, without slackening their even pace. The wild riders struck in the rowels and the dark swarm rolled swiftly across the sands; then suddenly they shifted as a crafty swordsman shifts. Wheeling in perfect order they swept past the front of the knights and bursting into a headlong run, thundered down on the banners of Damascus.

The trick, born in the brain of Bai-bars, took the whole allied host by surprise. The Arabs yelled and prepared to meet the onset, but they were bewildered by the mad fury and numbing speed of that charge.

Riding like mad men the Kharesmians bent their heavy bows and shot from the saddle, and clouds of feathered shafts hummed before them. The leather bucklers and light mail of the Arabs were useless against those whistling missiles, and along the Damascus front warriors fell like ripe grain. Al Mansur was screaming commands for a counter-charge, but in the teeth of that deadly blast the dazed Arabs milled helplessly, and in the midst of the confusion, the charge crashed into their lines. Cahal saw again the broad squat figures, the wild dark faces, the madly hacking simitars—broader and heavier than the light Damascus blades. He felt again the irresistible concussion of the Kharesmian charge.

His great red stallion staggered to the

impact and a whistling blade shivered on his shield. He stood up in his stirrups, slashing right and left, and felt mail-mesh part under his edge, saw headless corpses drop from their saddles. Up and down the line the blades were flashing like spray in the sun and the Damascus ranks were breaking and melting away. Man to man, the Arabs might have held fast; but dazed and outnumbered, that demoralizing rain of arrows had begun the rout that the curved swords completed.

Cahal, hurled back with the rest, vainly striving to hold his ground as he slashed and thrust, heard old Suleyman ibn Omad cursing like a fiend beside him as his simitar wove a shining wheel of death about his head.

"Dogs and sons of dogs!" yelled the old hawk. "Had ye stood but a moment, the day had been yours! By Allah, pagan, will ye press me close?—so! ha! Now carry your head to Hell in your hand! Ho, children, rally to me and the lord Cahal! My son, keep at my side. The fight is already lost and we must hack clear."

Suleyman's hawks reined in about him and Cahal, and the compact little knot of desperate men slashed through, riding down the snarling wolfish shapes that barred their path, and so rode out of the red frenzy of the *mêlée* into the open desert. The Damascus clans were in full flight, their black banners streaming ingloriously behind them. Yet there was no shame to be attached to them. That unexpected charge had simply swept them away, like a shattered dam before a torrent.

On the left wing the amir of Kerak was giving back, his ranks crumbling before the singing arrows and flying blades of the tribesmen. So far the memluks had taken no part in the battle, but now they rode forward and Cahal saw the huge form of Baibars galloping into the fray, beating the howling nomads from

their flying prey and reforming their straggling lines. The wolfskin-clad riders swung about and trotted across the sands, reinforced by the memluks in their silvered mail and heron-feathered helmets. So suddenly had the storm burst that before the Franks could wheel their ponderous lines to support the center, their Arab allies were broken and flying. But the men of the Cross came doggedly onward.

"Now the real death-grip," grunted Suleyman, "with but one possible end. By Allah, my head was not made to dangle at a pagan's saddlebow. The road to the desert is open to us—ha, my son, are you mad?"

For Cahal wheeled away, jerking his rein from the clutching hand of the protesting Shaykh. Across the corpse-littered plain he galloped toward the gray-steel ranks that swept inexorably onward. Riding hard he swept into line just as the oliphants trumpeted for the onset. With a deep-throated roar the knights of the Cross charged to meet the onrushing hordes through a barbed and feathered cloud. Heads down, grimly facing the singing shafts that could not check them, the knights swept on in their last charge. With an earthquake shock the two hosts crashed together, and this time it was the Kharesmian horde which staggered.

THE long lances of the Templars ripped their foremost line to shreds and the great chargers of the Crusaders overthrew horse and rider. Close on the heels of the warrior-monks thundered the rest of the Christian host, swords flashing. Dazed in their turn, the wild riders in their wolfskins reeled backward, howling and plying their deadly blades. But the long swords of the Europeans hacked through iron mesh and steel plate, to split skulls and bosoms. Squat corpses choked the ground under their horses' hoofs, as

deep into the heart of the disorganized horde the knights slashed, and the yells of the tribesmen changed to howls of dismay as the whole battle-mass surged backward.

And now Baibars, seeing the battle tremble in the balance, deployed swiftly, skirted the ragged edge of the mêlée and hurled his memluks like a thunderbolt at the backs of the Crusaders. The fresh, unwearied Bahairiz struck home, and the Franks found themselves hemmed in on all sides, as the wavering Kharesmians stiffened and with a fresh resurgence of confidence renewed the fight.

Leaguered all about, the Christians fell fast, but even in dying they took bitter toll. Back to back, in a slowly shrinking ring facing outward, about a rocky knoll on which was planted the patriarch's cross, the last host of Outremer made its last stand.

Until the red stallion fell dying, Red Cahal fought in the saddle, and then he joined the ring of men on foot. In the berserk fury that gripped him, he felt not the sting of wounds. Time faded in an eternity of plunging bodies and frantic steel; of chaotic, wild figures that smote and died. In a red maze he saw a gold-mailed figure roll under his sword, and knew, in a brief passing flash of triumph, that he had slain Kuran Shah, khan of the horde. And remembering Jerusalem, he ground the dying face under his mailed heel. And the grim fight raged on. Beside Cahal fell the grim Master of the Temple, the Seneschal of Ascalon, the lord of Acre. The thin ring of defenders staggered beneath the repeated charges; blood blinded them, the heat of the sun smote fierce upon them, they were choked with dust and maddened with wounds. Yet with broken swords and notched axes they smote, and against that iron ring Baibars hurled his slayers again and again,

and again and again he saw his hordes stagger back broken.

The sun was sinking toward the horizon when, foaming with rage that for once drowned his gargantuan laughter, he launched an irresistible charge upon the dying handful that tore them apart and scattered their corpses over the plain.

Here and there single knights or weary groups, like the drift of a storm, were ridden down by the chanting riders who swarmed the plain.

Cahal O'Donnel walked dazedly among the dead, the notched and crimsoned sword trailing in his weary hand. His helmet was gone, his arms and legs gashed, and from a deep wound beneath his hauberk, blood trickled sluggishly.

And suddenly his head jerked up.

"Cahal! Cahal!"

He drew an uncertain hand across his eyes. Surely the delirium of battle was upon him. But again the voice rose, in agony.

"Cahal!"

He was close to a boulder-strewn knoll where the dead lay thick. Among them lay Wulfgar the Dane, his unshaven lip a-snarl, his red beard tilted truculently, even in death. His mighty hand still gripped his ax, notched and clotted red, and a gory heap of corpses beneath him gave mute evidence of his berserk fury.

"Cahal!"

The Gael dropped to his knees beside the slender figure of the Masked Knight. He lifted off the helmet—to reveal a wealth of unruly black tresses—gray eyes luminous and deep. A choked cry escaped him.

"Saints of God! Elinor! I dream—this is madness——"

The slender mailed arms groped about his neck. The eyes misted with growing blindness. Through the pliant links of the hauberk blood seeped steadily.

"You are not mad, Red Cahal," she

whispered. "You do not dream. I am come to you at last—though I find you but in death. I did you a deathly wrong—and only when you were gone from me for ever did I know I loved you. Oh, Cahal, we were born under a blind unquiet star—both seeking goals of fire and mist. I loved you—and knew it not until I lost you. You were gone—I knew not where.

"The Lady Elinor de Courcey died then, and in her place was born the Masked Knight. I took the Cross in penance. Only one faithful servitor knew my secret—and rode with me—to the ends of the earth——"

"Aye," muttered Cahal, "I remember him now—even in death he was faithful."

"When I met you among the hills below Jerusalem," she whispered faintly, "my heart tore at its strings to burst from my bosom and fall in the dust at your feet. But I dared not reveal myself to you. Ah, Cahal, I have done bitter penance! I have died for the Cross this day, like a knight. But I ask not forgiveness of God. Let Him do with me as He will—but oh, it is forgiveness of you I crave, and dare not ask!"

"I freely forgive you," said Cahal heavily. "Fret no more about it, girl; it was but a little wrong, after all. Faith, all things and the deeds and dreams of men are fleeting and unstable as moonmist, even the world which has here ended."

"Then kiss me," she gasped, fighting hard against the onrushing darkness.

Cahal passed his arm under her shoulders, lifting her to his blackened lips. With a convulsive effort she stiffened half erect in his arms, her eyes blazing with a strange light.

"The sun sets and the world ends!" she cried. "But I see a crown of red gold on your head, Red Cahal, and I shall

sit beside you on a throne of glory! Hail, Cahal, chief of Uland; hail, Cahal Ruadh, *ard-ri na Eireann*——”

She sank back, blood starting from her lips. Cahal eased her to the earth and rose like a man in a dream. He turned toward the low slope and staggered with a passing wave of dizziness. The sun was sinking toward the desert's rim. To his eyes the whole plain seemed veiled in a mist of blood through which vague fantasmal figures moved in ghostly pageantry. A chaotic clamor rose like the acclaim to a king, and it seemed to him that all the shouts merged into one thunderous roar: "*Hail, Cahal Ruadh, ard-ri na Eireann!*"

He shook the mists from his brain and laughed. He strode down the slope, and a group of hawk-like riders swept down upon him with a swift rattle of hoofs. A bow twanged and an iron arrowhead smashed through his mail. With a laugh he tore it out and blood flooded his hauberk. A lance thrust at his throat and he caught the shaft in his left hand, lunging upward. The gray sword's point rent through the rider's mail, and his death-scream was still echoing when Cahal stepped aside from the slash of a simitar and hacked off the hand that wielded it. A spear-point bent on the links of his mail and the lean gray sword leaped like a serpent-stroke, splitting helmet and head, spilling the rider from the saddle.

Cahal dropped his point to the earth and stood with bare head thrown back, as a gleaming clump of horsemen swept by. The foremost reined his white horse back on its haunches with a shout of laughter. And so the victor faced the vanquished. Behind Cahal the sun was setting in a sea of blood, and his hair, floating in the rising breeze, caught the last glints of the sun, so that it seemed to Baibars the Gael wore a misty crown of red gold.

"Well, *malik*," laughed the Tatar,

"they who oppose the destiny of Baibars lie under my horses' hoofs, and over them I ride up the gleaming stair of empire!"

Cahal laughed and blood started from his lips. With a lion-like gesture he threw up his head, flinging high his sword in kingly salute.

"Lord of the East!" his voice rang like a trumpet-call, "welcome to the fellowship of kings! To the glory and the witch-fire, the gold and the moon-mist, the splendor and the death! Baibars, a king hails thee!"

And he leaped and struck as a tiger leaps. Not Baibars' stallion that screamed and reared, not his trained swordsmen, not his own quickness could have saved the memluk then. Death alone saved him—death that took the Gael in the midst of his leap. Red Cahal died in midair and it was a corpse that crashed against Baibars' saddle—a falling sword in a dead hand, that, the momentum of the blow completing its arc, scarred Baibars' forehead and split his eyeball.

His warriors shouted and reined forward. Baibars slumped in the saddle, sick with agony, blood gushing from between the fingers that gripped his wound. As his chiefs cried out and sought to aid him, he lifted his head and saw, with his single, pain-dimmed eye, Red Cahal lying dead at his horse's feet. A smile was on the Gael's lips, and the gray sword lay in shards beside him, shattered, by some freak of chance, on the stones as it fell beside the wielder.

"A hakim, in the name of Allah," groaned Baibars; "I am a dead man."

"Nay, you are not dead, my lord," said one of his memluk chiefs. "It is the wound from the dead man's sword and it is grievous enough, but bethink you: here has the host of the Franks ceased to be. The barons are all taken or slain and the Cross of the patriarch has fallen. Such of the Kharesmians as live are ready

to serve you as their new lord—since Kizil Malik slew their khan. The Arabs have fled and Damascus lies helpless before you—and Jerusalem is ours! You will yet be sultan of Egypt."

"I have conquered," answered Baibars, shaken for the first time in his wild life, "but I am half blind—and of what avail to slay men of that breed? They will come again and again and again, riding to

death like a feast because of the restlessness of their souls, through all the centuries. What though we prevail this little Now? They are a race unconquerable, and at last, in a year or a thousand years, they will trample Islam under their feet and ride again through the streets of Jerusalem."

And over the red field of battle night fell shuddering.

Broken Honor

By H. E. W. GAY

Outcast from his world, living among the Malays whose respect he had gained, Tuan Jim was put to a heartbreaking test

THE yacht loomed through the faint light of dawn over the shallows, a startling intruder on the exile of the man who was called Tuan Jim. In the morning mist her tall spars and housed sails were ghost-like. She might have been a vision come to mock at the bearded man who gazed at her in dismay upon the companion ladder of his brig *Wanderer*.

"She has come in the night, O *Tuan*, a ship of white men!"

The Malay who had awaked him spoke in an awed whisper, as though the yacht boded some strange and incalculable evil.

"Has any one else seen her?" asked the other, his own voice instinctively sunk to a whisper.

"None, *Tuan*," answered the Malay. "I hastened to awaken you as soon as I beheld a strange ship. But soon all men's eyes will be upon her."

Tuan Jim's hand tightened on the com-

panion rail. He gazed for some moments in silence, the expression of surprize in his face slowly hardening to resentment. It was as though the vision had materialized beyond doubt to a palpable menace.

"Aground!" he muttered at last, all his resentment articulate in the word. "Aground!"

The mist that wreathed the shallows was fleeing like an uneasy ghost before the first rays of the sun. A golden streak shot the horizon beyond the yacht, touching her spars and white hull with its glamor. She looked like a ship in a dream. But the picture did not kindle a spark of admiration in his eyes.

"Of all places on God's earth for a packet like her!" he muttered.

"Shall I go ashore and bear the news to Abadir?" asked the Malay.

"No. He will learn soon enough," answered the other; and as he turned again to the yacht he thought: "If they



"The remnant of the smile that lingered on Tuan Jim's face vanished abruptly."

have their way here you'll go up in smoke and every man aboard'll have his throat cut!"

His dominant feeling was one of anger against the intruder. She was a yacht, apparently on a pleasure cruise, which meant almost certainly there would be white people on board. And Telua, refuge of the last of those who had been pirates and trading adventurers of the Islands, was not a healthy place for such a packet. The remnant of Malays and Arabs who had refused to bow to the ever-widening dominion of white men over the seas of the Islands would see in the yacht a symbol of the authority they hated. Why was she there? Was she a spy, the forerunner of some accursed English or Dutch gunboat? But whatever she was, it was enough that she was

a ship of white men. A fierce exultation would possess them when they saw that the protective shallows which made Telua their refuge had delivered her into their hands. She had run aground on top of the spring tides, which meant she would not get away again at any rate within fourteen days, when the springs came round again. Ample time to leave nothing of her but a few charred ribs on a sandbank as a monument for every hated white man on board her!

"What blundering simpleton did her owner ship as master," wondered Tuan Jim, "to attempt a passage through these waters!"

He looked away from the stranded yacht to a cluster of houses ashore. Already there was a commotion in the courtyard of the biggest of them, the

dwelling of Abadir, a man who had been a leader of cutthroats, and whose sway over Telua had been supreme until the advent of Tuan Jim, outcast of white men.

"Men's eyes are *already* upon her!" he thought bitterly.

The yacht's appearance would provide just the opportunity that the Arab, Abadir, had been awaiting. Tuan Jim, who owed white men nothing, who had done with them for ever, would be put to the test. They would see, now, who were his people—the men of Telua to whom he had given his word, swearing that if he broke faith with them he would answer with his life, or those strangers in the yacht, whose skins were white like his own!

There was a drawn expression in his face, as though he were struggling not to cry out at some sharp spasm of pain. Certain officers at a naval court martial held about fifteen years ago had seen it, though they would not have recognized in the man with the iron-gray beard the young officer whose sword had been laid on the table, point toward him, as the presiding officer announced that he was dismissed the service. Two men only in that room had known that a scapegoat had been found for the theft of a secret code—the man who was responsible, and the scapegoat. Yet Tuan Jim had been that officer. About him had been drawn the deadly net of half-truths that are the outward appearance of things. There was no breaking free. Every violent denial was but a futile struggle that drew the meshes of the net more closely about him.

But the lawless sea-adventurers of Telua knew nothing of the naval officer. They knew a man who owned a brig called the *Wanderer*, who had forsworn the people of his country, who was just

and without fear, and whose word was his bond.

HE SAW the figure of Abadir emerge from the doorway of his house and focus a glass on the yacht. Then he gave an order to some men in the courtyard; for a moment later they made their way hurriedly to two large canoes that were hauled on the bank of the creek just astern of the brig.

"What's his idea?" Tuan Jim wondered suspiciously.

But it was plain that Abadir intended to come aboard the brig. Tuan Jim waited while a Malay ferried the Arab in a small dugout from the side of the creek.

"I have ordered a party of armed men to board her, *Tuan*," said the Arab with a glance toward the yacht.

The other looked at him and did not fail to notice the slightly malicious smile playing about his lips. In the arrogant tone of the voice and the hand resting on the pistol at his belt there was an unspoken: "That is good, is it not, hater of white men?"

"Does a man threaten a stranger with arms without first making sure he is an enemy?" asked Tuan Jim, ignoring the challenge of the swarthy leader of cutthroats. "Is it wise to approach a vessel—maybe an armed vessel, Abadir!—in open canoes packed with spearmen?"

"You fear, *Tuan*, this ship of white men—your enemies?" pursued the Arab.

"There is nothing to fear, Abadir, if I remain behind—with you," answered the other quietly. "But I shall not. It is better that I—who am wiser in the ways of white men than you—board the yacht alone and unarmed to learn her business here."

"What business brings her to Telua, O *Tuan*?" asked the Arab with subtle simplicity.

"I shall ask them," answered the bearded man, matching the other's manner of speaking.

Over Abadir's shoulder he could see the excited launching of the canoes. About a dozen men armed with spears were scrambling aboard each of them, talking loudly and gesticulating toward the stranded yacht.

"A nice freight of mischief to get alongside a ship's ladder!" he thought.

At heart these refugees of Telua were the lawless adventurers they had always been. The gunboats patrolling the more navigable waters of the Islands' seas may have driven them out of the business of piracy. But give them half a chance of looting a vessel, and they'd turn swiftly enough from their fishing and intermittent trading!

Ignoring Abadir, Tuan Jim went aft to the brig's rail.

"Haul those canoes ashore!" he shouted. "I am going alone to the ship of white men to learn their business."

"But the Rajah Abadir——" shouted the voice.

"Haul them ashore!" thundered the man at the brig's rail. "If the strange vessel be armed, will not your canoes be sunk before a single spear can be thrown? Your way is the way of fools. Haul them ashore!"

Reluctantly the canoes were grounded again. Abadir did not attempt to interfere. He was too shrewd to match his influence against that of the bearded man—yet. That time would come. Let the yacht remain for some days, at once an object of suspicion and a temptation. Let her become a thorn in the side of that man who had sworn he had done with white men for ever. They would see, the men of Telua, to whom the word of Tuan Jim was his bond. The black eyes of the Arab gleamed as they rested on the

broad shoulders of the man at the brig's after rail.

"Haul the dinghy alongside," he commanded, turning back from the rail. And as he approached the Arab he said:

"My word still stands, Abadir, even if the ships of white men were scattered thickly as the gulls over the shallows. If I break faith, the voice of the pistol at your belt shall be your last word to me."

"I hear—O enemy of white men," answered the other.

TUAN JIM handed his revolver to the Malay who stood by with the dinghy's painter, then descended the rope ladder from the brig's side. Slowly, as though he were paying a complimentary visit to a stranger in a safe harbor, he pulled toward the yacht. Astern of him the men who had left the canoes stood near the mouth of the creek, watching. Intermittent flashes revealed the broad heads of spears in the sunlight.

The quartermaster at the yacht's gangway was fingering an automatic pistol and looking down suspiciously at the man in the dinghy. Tuan Jim's courteous request that he be allowed to come aboard to speak to the owner seemed, however, to reassure him slightly. He stared in a puzzled manner at the big bearded man who looked like a pirate but spoke in a manner fitting to the yacht's own saloon.

As he followed the quartermaster aft he saw a girl of about fifteen standing by the rail. She was looking at him with the same puzzled air as the quartermaster, but there was a childish defiance in her attitude. *She* was not going to be scared by any whiskered pirate! Then just for an instant their eyes met, and the bearded man inclined his head with a smile. There was something about the way he did it that seemed to change the

child's attitude toward him. He caught a glimpse of it as his eyes left her.

"I am the owner. You wish to speak to me?"

He heard the voice at the same moment that he saw the man walking toward him. "And you are——?" the voice continued.

The remnant of the smile that lingered on Tuan Jim's face vanished abruptly. He managed to stifle the exclamation that came to his lips. Before him stood the man who had watched a young officer's sword laid on the table, point toward him—and knew that the theft of a naval code had been successfully fastened on a scapegoat.

For a moment the impulse came to him to answer the other's question: "I am the man in whose charge you left the keys of a certain safe in the office of the Governor of Port Koloa—for a purpose quite clear to you at the time, and subsequently as clear to me. I am the man who signed a chit, when I took the keys, that the contents of the safe were in order—after the customary superficial glance that is the rule between officers and gentlemen."

But Tuan Jim maintained silence. There was a certain irony in the present situation that caused an acid humor to stir deep down in him. He would let the other remain in ignorance of his identity, concealed by the graying beard, the sea-man-adventurer's clothes, and the vagaries of time and place. What would the unscrupulous careerist before him say if he knew that every life on the yacht hung on a word from the lips of the stranger on her decks?

"And you are——?" the yacht's owner repeated, a little impatient of the other's stare and his silence.

"I?" He smiled slightly. "I am called Tuan Jim."

He saw the other's eyes run him up

and down before glancing away at the shore. There was a moment of hesitation as he seemed to consider those two aspects of things in conjunction. Then the acid humor stirred again in Tuan Jim, as he saw how the other had made up his mind. Time had not altered him!

"I think it might be well for you to realize to whom you are speaking," he said. "I am the Governor of Port Koloa, and this is my private yacht."

There was a pause—an impressive pause. But Tuan Jim did not appear overwhelmed. His manner was politely attentive.

"Does that convey nothing to you?" There was a rasp of arrogance in the voice.

"It is a statement I can understand," answered Tuan Jim. Then with a sudden sharpness of tone: "Does the stranding of your yacht here convey nothing to you?"

"What do you mean? I am unaware of your relations with the riffraff I have noticed ashore, but if you appear before me——"

"That is not the happiest of phrases in your present position," interrupted Tuan Jim. "I am here to discuss ways and means of avoiding the very real danger into which you have run by stranding off this coast. It will be well if you forget your official position—which will avail you less than nothing here—and place yourself in my hands until you can get away again. Have your arms on board?"

For a moment or two the Governor glanced at the other arrogantly, then seemed to decide it would be well to listen to him. There might be some foundation for the alarm which the yacht's captain had betrayed when he had been ordered to take the vessel through these waters. According to him there

were yet men along this coast "who would as soon cut your throat as look at you."

"There are no arms on board," he answered. "This is—or was intended to be—a pleasure cruise. My daughter is accompanying me. Why do you ask?"

"Merely to know if you have means of defense. As you haven't, I advise you to be as unobtrusive as possible and certainly to make no attempt to come ashore."

"And what would be the consequences of failing to attend to your advice?" There was a thinly veiled sneer in the question.

"I might not be able to answer for it," replied the other. "Any move on your part the least suspicious or provocative would be seized on by the people ashore as ample justification for killing every one on board and setting fire to the yacht."

"And may I ask what you are doing in such estimable company?" asked the Governor with a sneer that was no longer veiled.

"It may be well for you that I am in their company," answered Tuan Jim. "The writ of Port Koloa does not run to these waters, and if it did they are too shoal for a gunboat to endorse it."

He left the Governor and had taken a few paces toward the gangway when he turned back suddenly.

"Keep a bright light burning at night," he said, "in case it is necessary for me to come aboard secretly. It may not be discreet to hail you in the dark."

The girl, who was still standing by the rails, smiled at him as he passed. There was something very likable about that child, he decided.

"I'm not the least bit afraid of you, you know!" her expression suggested.

"Is that little girl the owner's daugh-

ter?" he whispered to the quartermaster at the gangway.

"Yes. Though no one would think——" The man stopped short, with thoughts of kidnapping and ransoms flashing to his mind.

But Tuan Jim betrayed no further interest. He swung down the ladder into the dinghy and began to pull toward the brig. Above the yacht's rail a white handkerchief fluttered in the girl's hand. He shipped an oar for a second and waved back.

As the quartermaster had let slip: "No one would think——" And she was the daughter of the man who had made his name an offense in the ears of decent men. . . .

Tuan Jim smiled, but the source of his smile was not a bitter humor. He was wondering how life would have turned out for that child by the yacht's rail if he had not been made a scapegoat.

"What a devilish queer crisscross of a job life is!" he muttered.

Ashore the seamen adventurers of Telua watched the return of the man they called Tuan Jim, who had come in his brig *Wanderer*, an outcast of white men, finished with them for ever.

EVERY night a lantern slung from low on the yacht's forestay burned brightly. There had been no need for Tuan Jim to board her again. It became more and more plain from the way men looked at him that the less interest he displayed in her the safer it would be for the people on board. He was glad that they were following his advice to keep a light burning. It was evidence that the ship of white men remained a prisoner of the shallows, and within the power of those ashore. But how it would be possible to get her away when the spring tides came round again was a problem

that became more grave to Tuan Jim with each day that passed.

Abadir was playing his game with deadly skill. In spite of Tuan Jim's assurances that no danger threatened from the yacht, that she would depart again on the first tide that served, leaving Telua the refuge it had always been, men's suspicions were not lulled. They gazed at her with hostile eyes, and little groups of men gathered by the canoes on the bank of the creek, talking among themselves. But their talk was not for the ears of Tuan Jim. Whenever they saw him approaching, an ominous silence would fall, and their faces would grow sullen. The Malay who was the *serang* of his brig asked him one day if men spoke truly when they said much loot was to be had from the stranded ship.

"Whose speech is of loot?" asked Tuan Jim sharply.

"All men's, O Tuan," answered the Malay simply.

He left the *serang's* question unanswered. What would it avail to deny there was loot, even if the loot were no more than the yacht's stores and fittings? You could not convince men who had lived by piracy and adventuring that a trim three-hundred-ton yacht was not worth boarding! It would be a palpable lie. And men's faith in him was diminishing swiftly enough without his lying to no purpose!

"Abadir is leaving no stone unturned!" he reflected bitterly. "If she's not a spy, she's a prize!"

He made an attempt to explode the suspicion that was gathering against him. On hearing the Malay's words, he went ashore and summoned the silent groups of men to the courtyard of Abadir's house. The Arab himself stood behind him, a sneer of a smile on his lips as the

other spoke to the seamen adventurers of Telua.

"I have given my word that the ship of white men is no spy," he said. "She will depart as she came, and no man among you shall suffer by her coming. This I swear to you, I who have finished with white men and have made my dwelling among you. If any man believes that I am breaking faith with him let him stand forth and speak."

His gaze moved slowly over the faces of the crowd, but no one spoke. Lawless fighting men they were, who had shed blood and whose blood had mingled in the waters of the Islands' seas. They were adventurers, but there was something of nobility in their weather-hardened faces. They hated white men because they sought to set a rule and dominion over the shores that were their heritage from the beginning of time. Tuan Jim knew the secrets of their hearts, their indomitable pride and their fierce love of freedom. There was something about them—perhaps it was the bitter hopelessness that he knew lay at the heart of their rebellion—that had made an irresistible appeal to him. He, too, had become an Ishmael, with every man's hand against him.

"The strange yacht is nothing to me," he said. "No more than a gull that rests upon a sandbank and vanishes again with the flowing of the tide."

"I do not doubt your words, O hater of white men!" a voice rang out.

In the moments that followed a growing murmur moved through the crowd. It seemed to merge with the beat of the surf on the shore of Telua, acclaiming the man who was called Tuan Jim. He heard it with a fierce thrill of exultation. They had not lost their faith in him!

"Yet if you are a hater of white men, O Tuan"—it was Abadir's voice behind

him, incisive, mocking—"why do you wish the yacht to depart?"

Tuan Jim turned to his questioner and saw a sneer about his lips. The Arab did not mean to lose this opportunity of triumphing over him. If the yacht were allowed to go, there might never be another chance of breaking the power which the white man had over the men of Telua—a power which rested on their faith in him. Let his word—the much spoken-of word of Tuan Jim—be put to the test! Let him show who were his people!

He saw the challenge boldly written in the Arab's face. All the enmity which had been smoldering against him flamed in the black eyes.

A feeling that was akin to fear gripped Tuan Jim's heart. Not the fear of a pistol shot or the broad head of a spear—a man might meet those things with a smile—but fear of life itself if he should lose men's faith again. There had been those unforgettable years before he had cut himself off in desperation from the life of white men. . . . A man might be an outcast, but if he found some spot on God's earth where he could look men straight between the eyes and know that they believed in him, life was yet worth while. And he had found such a spot in Telua, the refuge of the last of the adventurers of the Islands. If *they* no longer trusted him—

"Why should not the yacht depart, Abadir, forgetting us and by us forgotten?" he asked, striving against that secret fear that laid cold fingers about his heart.

"White men who sail for no profit in strange seas do not forget, O *Tuan*, unless they are dead," answered the Arab.

"And if they were dead, would not the vengeance of white men follow as surely as the rising of the sun? He who kills

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white men and hopes to escape death is a fool."

"Yet white men's bones lie hidden in these seas, *Tuan*!" answered the Arab craftily. "And the yacht lies hidden from all eyes save our own. Why, then, should she depart, bearing tongues that may wag?"

The murmur that had run through the crowd died away. Tuan Jim was aware of the clustering men as a solid phalanx of silence, intent on the sword-play of words between Abadir and himself.

"The white men on the yacht deceive you, O *Tuan*. You have lived so long away from them that you have forgotten their cunning."

Abadir continued to press his advantage, forcing the issue artfully to a question of opposing loyalties. For whom was Tuan Jim concerned—them, or the white people whose blood ran in his veins? Cunningly he made it appear that it was not his word he doubted, but his faith that the yacht's departure would not result in evil for Telua.

The silence of the crowd made it clear that the Arab's words had their effect. He felt their eyes on him, as they waited to hear what he would say. The word of Tuan Jim was being put to the test!

Over the heads of the crowd he could see the white hull of the stranded yacht. She seemed to flaunt herself in the sunlight. What did men's doubt of him and the bitterness in his heart matter to her?

"You will see that no harm comes to me from these barbarians," her beautiful presence seemed to convey.

A flash of anger came into his eyes. What claim, after all, had she on him? There was not one man he could call friend in the world from which she came. Why should it matter whether that elegant hull of hers went up in flames?

But his anger died swiftly. Whatever

happened there was only one course open to him. She must be got away somehow, no matter how much he had to lie and deceive to achieve that end. Only one man aboard her had harmed him. Every one else had a claim on him. There were her crew—and that child who had smiled at him as though *she* knew quite well the sort of man he was.

His gaze left the white hull of the yacht. The Malays still waited for the words that would declare whom Tuan Jim had chosen. He would have to find some means of getting the yacht away, giving his word to them that she should remain. He must gain time to make his plans.

"I swear," said Tuan Jim solemnly, "that the white men's ship shall not depart. If she moves but a cable's length from the sandbank where she rests I will answer for it with my life!"

A sound ran through the crowd in the courtyard, swelling into a cheer that drowned the distant thunder of the surf.

Tuan Jim had chosen!

ONCE he had given his word that the yacht should remain a prisoner of the shallows, there had been no difficulty in restraining the men of Telua from boarding her. As long as she did not leave, she remained harmless. Her housed sails were evidence of her captivity by day, and by night, the bright, unmoving light that glowed at her forestay. Men no longer talked in groups that became silent at the approach of Tuan Jim. He had given his word and promised to answer for it with his life.

Even Abadir made no further trouble. He professed an outward satisfaction with things as they were. He knew that Tuan Jim's life was forfeit if the yacht did not remain, and he had taken the precaution of having a score of fighting men

and a large canoe ready at a moment's notice if any attempt should be made to move her. Half a dozen pairs of eyes gazed through the darkness watching for any telltale movement of the light. Abadir was content. He held the white man now in a cleft stick.

Tuan Jim had paid one more visit to the yacht, ostensibly to inform the people on board that their vessel was not to be moved, and that they must be confined to her until their fate had been decided by the people ashore. Actually nothing of the kind was mentioned in the five minutes he spent in her saloon with her captain and owner. . . .

On the day he had given his promise, he surrendered his weapons to Abadir, and had asked that he and two armed men should remain with him every night on board the *Wanderer*.

"My movements by day are plain to all men's eyes," he had explained with a smile. "But by night I might vanish, hoping to escape at the full of the tide in the ship of white men."

But the Arab had declined the mocking invitation. He had taken adequate precautions. At some time, he knew, the other's hand must be forced. The yacht could not remain isolated indefinitely from the shore or the people on board must starve. Sooner or later Tuan Jim must resort to fresh tactics. Meantime he could enjoy in secret the spectacle of the white man waiting for the trap that must inevitably close on him.

Tuan Jim did not turn in on the night when the tides had worked round again to the top of the springs. He had seen the light that marked the yacht's position on the sandbank blink out as dusk fell, and watched it, steady and unmoving, through the hours of darkness. An expression of anxiety came into his face as the swing of the brig athwart the creek

told him the tide had reached the full, but when she had swung to the ebb, and the light on the sandbank still remained perfectly motionless, he began to smile to himself quietly. It wanted three hours to dawn. By that time——

"Why do you not sleep, *Tuan?*" the whispered voice of his Malay *serang* interrupted his thoughts. "The tide ebbs fast and the light of the white men's ship has not moved. There is no need to watch, *Tuan*. She is safe."

The Malay could not see the expression on Tuan Jim's face. He heard his quiet: "Call me at dawn—as on that morning when the ship of white men first came."

Then he heard the diminishing sound of his footsteps moving aft.

TUAN JIM was awakened by the excited words of his *serang*.

"She has gone, O *Tuan!* The ship of white men has gone! Nothing remains but a spar thrust into the sand with a light hanging from the top of it! It is that we have watched, believing the ship to be there! Shall I——?"

"Yes," he interrupted with a smile, "bear the news to Abadir with all speed! Awaken every man in Telua. I will follow."

He saw the lantern hanging from the spar—the spar that he had told them on board the yacht to thrust over the side into the soft sand just as dusk fell. And the lantern had been hung from it so that the light appeared in its usual position at the yacht's forestay. It gleamed feebly now in the dawn, as though it were weary of a deception that was no longer necessary.

An excited crowd was gathering in the

courtyard of Abadir's house. Men pointed to the spar thrust in the sand, and pressed round Tuan Jim as though they waited to hear what he had to say now of the cunning of white men. There was a note of anger in some of the voices, which spread and became an inarticulate snarl of sound as those nearest him saw the smile on his face. Hands were raised as though to strike him, and he heard his name spat from lip to lip with contempt.

"He has helped them to escape!" shouted a voice. "Down with the traitor! Kill the dog of a white man!"

Abadir awaited him at the foot of the steps that led up to his house. The black eyes glinted triumphantly, and a hand caressed a pistol at his belt.

"I have come, O Abadir," said Tuan Jim, "to hear your last word. And I perceive," he added with a glance at the hand at his belt, "you have it ready."

He saw the hand lift the pistol so that the crowd could see it, and heard the Arab's voice raised above the tumult.

"What is the fate of a traitor in Telua?"

Out of the confused growl of sound came one word, harsh, insistent:

"Death!"

Tuan Jim's eyes did not waver from those of the Arab. He felt a strange contentment in that long moment of waiting. He seemed to see his honor in the eyes of men as something merely outward and unimportant, something to be smiled at—as that child on the yacht had smiled at his cutthroats' appearance. . . .

A flame flashed from the muzzle of Abadir's pistol.

Out on the sandbank the deceptive light of the lantern was no longer visible. The splendor of the sun had blotted it out.



The Dance of Yesha

By GRACE KEON

*A coward sat on the throne of kings, and prayed that he
might never yawn again*

YESHA, the maid, sang above her loom, and her voice was like the nightingale in the rose gardens of the Sultan. She was weaving her dower, her heart a flame of happiness. Beautiful and true were the thoughts of Yesha, beautiful and true the work of her fingers.

1

THE Sultan yawned. A look of consternation spread across the faces of his ministers. A look of fear shot into the eyes of his courtiers. A look of dread might be observed in the furtive glances of the bronze-hued eunuchs. It was so unexpected. He had been watching the dancers swaying to the clash of cymbals, the thrilling pipe of flutes. His gaze had followed them with absorbed attention, for the dance was new. And then——

The Sultan yawned.

Horrible catastrophe! Moved by one terror, dancers and slaves dropped to the ground. Trembling they fell, faces covered. Trembling, the ministers and courtiers stood.

Silence. Absolute. Terrifying.

It lasted just one minute—but that minute meant life or death. Then a shriek clove the air—a shriek from the mouth of the Sultan. His eyes glared, his hands quivered.

"Away! Away! All of you! Where is Osmanli? Osmanli, come!"

A shuddering breath of relief burst from the human creatures prostrated before him. They left his presence, swiftly, silently, salaaming, rejoicing that he had not annihilated them. All went—

the dancers, the courtiers, the ministers—and eunuchs pulled close and tight the cloth-of-gold draperies; for when Osmanli the prophet talked with the Sultan none might see or hear.

And then, silently, the draperies parted and fell again as silently and there stood a tall figure. The Sultan shot forward in his seat, elbows on knees.

"Approach! Approach!"

The man came to the foot of the ruby throne. A prophet, indeed! White-haired, dark-skinned, with piercing eyes that flamed and burned and saw . . . and saw. . . .

"Osmanli, I ask thee, has the doom come upon me?"

The prophet stooped, crossing his hands, saying no word.

"Thou knowest the prediction of Jazur, that evil swineherd: 'Ere thou yawnest thrice, monster, thou shalt die!' Ai-ai! Osmanli! I have yawned the second time. So my doom is upon me?"

A craven and a coward sat on the throne of kings. Oh for the days when men of sinew held the power of the land and feared no enemy! This shivering poltroon knew naught of valor and in his hands lay the destiny of his race.

He kept no pretenses with Osmanli. When Osmanli's eyes met his their souls merged. He could conceal naught. Those eyes . . . like steady lightning . . . that pierced. . . .

Gaze met gaze. Osmanli regarded him intently. The tapers burned low, the incense smoked. A cool breath filtered in from some unseen source like the scent of a wind-blown flower.

"My lord, I see!" said the prophet, in a low tone. "Drop not thy gaze until I finish all. Within thine eyes a woman stands. Quiver not a lash or I lose the tale. Ah-h! 'Tis she! Yesha, daughter of Mahmoud! Lovely! Fair——"

His voice ceased, he breathed heavily, while the Sultan's hands were clenched in agony.

"Send for her," said Osmanli, regaining his composure. "She hath surpassing gifts. I know of them. She hath in her hands . . . thy destiny."

The Sultan had rested the prophet Osmanli, who had carried him in his arms when he was a boy. He trusted him. Now he clapped his palms together sharply and one of the bronze-hued statues behind the cloth-of gold came to life.

"I would have here at once the daughter of Mahmoud, Yesha, her name. Call her, and see that she is brought to my presence. Osmanli——"

Osmanli nodded then, and added a few low-spoken words. The eunuch withdrew.

"He said it, the dog!" fumed the Sultan. "Jazur! I can not forget! The third time, he said. Allah, what is this? And how can a dancing-girl bear a charm for me? But thou hast said it, Osmanli! I trust thee! I shall reward thee and her. I shall cover her with jewels! I shall——"

He said no more.

2

THE moments went by . . . slowly . . . slowly . . . and the Sultan became more anxious, more nervous, closer to the breaking-point. But Osmanli made no sign, and moved not.

Presently a eunuch came. The Sultan sat up, staring eagerly. Behind the slave stood a slender figure. It moved slowly toward the ruby throne. And behind her

another eunuch bearing a burden across his two outstretched arms.

"Approach, maid!"

She came with arms extended, and bowed low, closer still, to the very lowest step.

"Thou art Yesha?"

"Yesha, daughter of Mahmoud, friend of Osmanli, the prophet."

"Come nearer. Kneel. Uncover thy face."

Osmanli, bending over, lifted away the silken tissue that enveloped head and face and form. For an instant the Sultan gazed.

"What jewel is this? Who is this maid?"

"Yesha, master and lord, daughter of Mahmoud."

"She is the fairest I have ever looked upon."

"Surely, my lord. She is thy thought, great one. Have I not beheld her in thine eyes? Thou hast given her life. She is thine!"

The flower-like face was bent. Fascinated, the Sultan leaned forward.

"Yesha——"

"My lord!" said a silvery voice. "Hast need of me? Shall I dance for thee?"

The Sultan shuddered.

"Nay, nay! 'Twas while those others danced that I——"

"Oh, master, but my dance is a prayer! And to him who looks upon it the great god Vishnu grants his heart's desire. Frame, therefore, the wish of thy soul, great king! I dance for the god!"

"Thou art—thou art——"

The Sultan was carried away by her beauty, her fire.

"Yesha, my lord, daughter of Mahmoud! Who will dance . . . for thee!"

"So, then!"

She swayed lightly. Her feet were like lilies and the golden circles and gleaming

jewels upon them like dewdrops set in flame. She lifted her arms and they were white jasmine drooping, and the strange perfume of her so filled the Sultan's senses that he wished to forget all else—all else but this daughter of Mahmoud. Yesha . . .

"Pray, my lord. . . ."

It was the warning voice of Osmanli, rousing him. The Sultan remembered—and in his heart he wished a mighty wish that he might never yawn again.

The eunuch spread the rug and went away, drawing the draperies close once more. Like a blossom in the gentle wind the fair daughter of Mahmoud began to dance. It was a dance the Sultan had never seen. It was the dance of a god.

And she sang:

"With mine own hands I spun the wool. With mine own hands I dyed the strands. The gift that brought him to me.

"Oh, heart of my soul . . . oh, my beloved. . . .

"With mine own hands I fashioned the steed, the proud steed that brought mine own to me.

"Oh, heart of my soul . . . oh, my beloved. . . .

"Behold the lions! They were of his house the symbols. He was strong, he was brave, he was mighty.

"Oh, heart of my soul . . . oh, my beloved. . . .

"And round and round about I set the angels that would keep guard between.

"Oh, heart of my soul. . . ."

Thus she chanted, stepping ever more and more lightly, her face aglow. Nearer and nearer she came, and the Sultan smiled. Smiled at her beauty, her tender-

ness. Now she knelt before him, at his feet, her slender arms touching him; her little hands were at his bosom, and he smiled, anticipating the sweetness of Yesha. . . .

Her voice did not lose its beauty.

"But thou didst take him, the heart of my soul! Thou didst have him scourged and flogged and tortured . . . and thus . . . and thus . . . do I requite thee for the death of Jazur, my beloved!"

Straight and true the little dagger went home. Straight and true through silken robe and fine steel mesh went its slender needle-point. Straight to the heart. The Sultan's smile froze upon his lips. He made no sound. He uttered no cry. He went out of life to the judgment of God.

"Osmanli!" breathed the maid.

Quietly the prophet curved the Sultan's right hand until it was clenched about the dagger, holding it there until the grasp was sure. Then he rolled up the rug and Yesha drew her veil closely.

"The Sultan rests," said Osmanli sternly to the eunuch. "Guard him well. Let no one enter."

The bronze statue salaamed before the prophet, whom he dreaded more than the Sultan himself.

IN THE archives of the land the tale was written of the king who had killed himself because of a sickness of the soul. No one said different. His brother succeeded him. Being just, but having a care for his own safety as well, he gave the prophet Osmanli a palace and slaves very far away.

The Sultan, however, had his wish. He never yawned again.

He who takes no thought for the future will find trouble near at hand.

—Confucius.



"Effendi! Allah is merciful! He has sent thee!"

El Hamel, the Lost One

By G. G. PENDARVES

The tale of a Touaregg woman's loyalty to her fallen shekh—a story of the North African desert

"The fate of every man is about his neck."
—Arab proverb.

LIEUTENANT DESTINS was young, unreconciled to loneliness, passionately unwilling to support the burden of his consciousness without the distractions of friends, music, theaters, and the general effervescence of a gay city life—the life of Paris, in fact, now removed from him by the Mediterranean and many weary leagues of the vast Sa-

hara desert. He was undergoing the severest trial a man of his temperament could experience, and his vivacious Gallic soul rebelled and sickened under the ordeal.

It was two years now since he had first arrived at Fort Djebel Sfah, one of the most isolated outposts of the French occupation, northwest of the great range of the Hoggar mountains. It was a region sufficiently desolate and heart-breaking

without the added terror of being the stronghold and headquarters of the dreaded Touaregg tribe.

The "Forgotten of God" these people are justly named, robbers, murderers, raiders of the most savage character. In spite of French vigilance, they made themselves feared throughout the desert—a fighting untamable remnant of a white Berber race, over whose origin the learned still dispute. "Wearers of the Veil" is another popular name for this unique people, whose men from time immemorial have worn the *littram* jealously fastened across their aristocratic features both at home and abroad—sleeping, eating, fighting, dying in this mysterious veil that is so useful in their frequent raids, making identification and retribution equally impossible.

Lieutenant Destins stood on the western ramparts of Fort Djebel Sfah and gloomily watched the far-distant Hoggar peaks—fantastic brilliant pinnacles of rock—against the changing sky. The great vault overhead merged imperceptibly from azure to ultramarine; the far-flung carpet of pale yellow sand deepened to saffron from horizon to horizon. Gradually the whole firmament took fire, blazed in unbelievable reds, yellows, purples, greens, softened to a dusky amethyst, finally darkened in chromatic beauty until the brief desert darkness cloaked the wilderness.

Still Lieutenant Destins stood like a statue, immobile in his frozen bitter nostalgia, while the moon and brilliant stars revealed the desert once more in the magic of a Saharan night. The soldier's well-knit youthful figure, his military carriage, the poise of his dark head, the beautifully drawn lines of nose and jaw in the shadow of his sun-helmet, all gave a first impression of strength and elasticity, of the "dauntless stuff" which fiction loves to

associate with men who hold the frontiers of empire.

In Lieutenant Destins' case this first impression was misleading. The little muscle twitching at the angle of his smoothly-shaved jaw, the restless snapping of thumb and finger, the bitter despondency of the too flexible mouth, the clouded dull despair in the brown eyes did not reveal heroic endurance.

Le cafard was about to claim another victim! That was clear to all within the sun-baked walls of Djebel Sfah who remarked Destins' symptoms. *Le cafard*—the madness that overtakes so many in the awful loneliness of Saharan outposts, a mortal sickness which too often drives its victims to end the unbearable monotony of their days in suicide.

A running, stumbling figure in a red fez, and long white shirt that flapped about a pair of lean dark legs, was approaching the fort across the moonlit sands. There was a shout from a sentry, repeated and echoed from within the walls of the fort, where native servants squatted round their cooking-fires, eating, smoking, and sleeping in the welcome coolness of the freshening wind.

The hubbub of excited voices pierced Destins' apathy; the distant hurrying figure, like an ant in that immensity of sand, attracted his attention at last. With the rest of the garrison, who tumbled like eager schoolboys from their quarters, he joined the group at the gates as the heavy doors were unbolted and opened to receive the traveler.

The whole garrison was stung to instant life and normality at mere sight of the approaching man. The sluggish tide of existence at the fort became in a twinkling a purposeful swift-flowing river. Here was a link with the great outside world from which they were cut off. Here came tidings of good or evil, no

matter which: tidings—news—the breath of life once more!

"Bachir!" exclaimed one of the natives. "Ya salam! He comes with all the *sbaitans* of the wilderness at his heels!"

And "Bachir! Ha! Bachir! Melek Taos! Melek Taos!" echoed on every side, with bursts of ribald laughter.

To see the vain, stately Bachir in this disarray indicated quite unprecedented tidings. Three days ago he had left the fort in company with six others—two servants like himself, and three officers of the garrison. They had gone ostensibly gazelle-hunting, but rumors of a threatened raid on a *garsta* crossing from Timbuktu to Lake Chad had given purpose and direction to the hunters, apart from the chance of varying their restricted diet with gazelle steaks.

Three short days ago Bachir had departed puffed up with pride and importance. Long service, and conspicuous bravery in several hot sieges and sudden raids, had placed him considerably above the rank and file of other natives at the fort, and an overweening vanity in the matter of dress decked him out in such abandon of glorious hues that he was nicknamed "*Melek Taos*," or "*Lord Peacock*," by one officer, who had been reading up the strange history and beliefs of the Yezidees, or devil-worshippers.

Near the gates, the disheveled dusty figure collapsed suddenly. A dozen eager helpers ran out into the moonlight, carried him into the fort, and put him gently on the ground with his back to a wall. Water was brought. He took a mouthful, spat it out, his throat muscles working convulsively; then he drank deeply and raised a limp hand in salute as the commandant bent over him.

"A *rhazzia*!" he whispered, his stiff, blackened lips shaping the words with difficulty. "Near the Pass of Set-Set! Touareggs . . . big *rhazzia* . . . hun-

dreds! All killed except me . . . wounded here!" he raised a shaking hand to his head. "I escaped . . . they pursued to the Well of Daz . . . but I had time . . . to drink . . . and spoil the water . . . poison plant near. My pursuers died. Lost my camel . . . yesterday. Touareggs come . . . swiftly, swiftly, *Arfi!*"

He stretched, sighed deeply once, and fell back. The *Lord Peacock* would strut no more. His body was hastily carried to a convenient corner to await burial at a less distracting moment—a bundle of dirty rags and indifferent clay.

THE ancient fort hummed and buzzed. The pent-up energy of weeks of inaction turned officers and men alike into demons of effectiveness. Gunners stood at attention on the walls, ammunition was brought up by chattering, excited men, cartridge belts donned. In addition to the regulation government rifles, old flintlocks, wicked-looking knives, and swords in strangely-chased scabbards appeared amongst the Arabs, who moved like cats in spite of the weight of the miniature arsenals they disposed about their persons.

With the rest, Lieutenant Destins became a dynamo of energy. Taut, erect, with throbbing pulses he stood again on the western ramparts, his narrowed eyes glued to the binoculars he held up, his whole soul concentrated on a barricade of hills running north and south almost in a straight line across the western horizon. Sand dunes rose to heights of several hundred feet on the distant sky-line. In the foreground, stretching to the base of the fort itself, the dunes flattened out to mere sandy swellings on the plain, covered with bush and dried yellow grasses, and affording excellent cover to such enemies as the Touareggs. With a perfection learnt through centuries of guerilla warfare in the wilderness, these Touareggs had a magic faculty of identifying themselves

with bush and grass and shadow that no white man could hope to emulate.

"Something moves to the left of that tallest hill, *Arfi!*" one of the Arabs volunteered. "Under the big star."

Destins frowned, strained his sight in vain.

"Keep down, keep down!" he ordered. "If you can see them, they can see us. They mustn't guess we've been warned, and are ready for them. Next man who puts an inch of himself above the parapet will be taken down to the guardhouse."

This horrible threat of missing all the fun kept the excited natives huddled within the deep shadow of a heavy buttress, but they chattered like monkeys.

"Thousands—thousands were Bachir's very words!" they assured one another. "They come as the sands of the desert for multitude! The great Shekh Ben Zaban leads them—who but he? *Billah*, the dogs! Scum of the Hoggar! Our guns will scatter them as eagles put wild birds to flight!"

Hours slipped by. The moon rose to her zenith and sank once more. The dark cold hour before dawn was upon them, and the excitement in the fort was intense despite the long hours of waiting. This was ever the Touareggs' chosen hour for attack—that chill discouraging hour when friend and foe are almost indistinguishable in the murk—the hour when blood runs slow and sleep lies heavy on the eyelids.

Lieutenant Destins drank scalding coffee from his pannikin, swore absent-mindedly as the hot metal burned his lips, and stamped his cold feet on the stones, his face turned constantly to the dunes.

Veil after veil of night imperceptibly lifted, and on the eastern horizon a cold white-gray patch increased. The wind that had nipped the garrison so cruelly through the night watches dropped suddenly. Even the Arab tongues were

stilled. A moment of silence as intense as the peculiar quiet of a forsaken churchyard held the fort and its watchers in a spell.

Then, like a burst bubble, the quiet and hush broke into a thousand flying shreds.

A soft thunder of hooves on sand increasing to a roar. Shrill yells of fury. *Ullab—Ullab—Ullab—lab—lab lab!* rose in a crescendo as, from the indistinct barrier of dunes, a cloud of horsemen surged forward like a great wave breaking.

An answering roar from the fort scattered them. Taken completely by surprise, they wheeled and circled in momentary confusion. But one figure, darting like a hornet amongst his men, rallied them. On they came once more, the hornet-like leader in the van brandishing his long gun over his head, while his gayly striped burnous stretched like a taut sail behind him.

Another flash of red leaped from the western walls of Fort Djebel Sfah, followed by a roar, and through the acrid smoke the garrison saw the Touareggs mowed down, whirl, and mill about in confusion. The hornet-one did not halt—standing in his stirrups of wide native design he harangued his men, and the Touareggs once more rallied.

On came Striped Burnous, lead peppering about him briskly as he got within rifle range, but although men fell on all sides, he seemed bullet-proof and rode straight for the gates of the fort. Some fifty of the Veiled Ones reached the safety of the buttressed walls with him, and reined in so close that it was impossible for the defenders to shoot them down without exposing their own bodies as easy targets.

A clattering of horses' hooves on the stones of the great courtyard arose. The commandant's orders rapped out like a machine-gun in action. From under the

gates wisps and curls of smoke rose ominously. The Touareggs were attempting to fire the massive wooden entrance.

"—but not until we have engaged them thoroughly," the commandant went on addressing Destins. "They've surrounded the fort, but as soon as we open the gates every last Touaregg will rush in on us. Then leave by the postern gate and circle round to cut them off from retreat to the hills. I can only spare you fifteen men. If he escapes us, concentrate on the leader—Ben Zaban! Get him . . . bring him back alive or dead! We must make an example of him."

THE gates were opened so abruptly that the raiders were again taken by surprize and the French thrust out in a grim determined wedge, meeting the yelling Berbers with the irresistible force of perfectly co-ordinated machinery. Pushing out through the swarming enemy, the defenders stood solid, taking aim deliberately, bringing down man after man until the riderless horses making toward the hills looked as if they were engaged in some sort of steeple-chase.

The Touareggs wavered, their morale breaking down rapidly under the steady strain. Their leader urged them in vain. Long distance sniping, guerilla warfare, the quick shock of hand-to-hand tussles in the hills with men as excitable and impassioned as themselves—that sort of fighting they understood. But this steady resolute opposition was not according to their code.

They broke and scattered, riding off in all directions. Those that made for the hills were cut off by Destins and his men strung out in a long line across the sand. Caught between these on one hand and the garrison on the other, few Touareggs escaped. But Ben Zaban's luck held, and he spurred determinedly for the hills, a flying streak of red and yellow.

Destins was after him, as closely attached as a tail to a flying comet. If Ben Zaban once reached his objective, the Frenchman realized that all the advantage would be with the desert fighter. It was now or never. He reined in his horse, took steady aim, and fired.

For a moment nothing happened, and he thought he had missed completely. Then the Touaregg reeled in his saddle, toppled, and slipped sideways to the ground. He was dragged in the dust until his body was caught and wedged by a mass of protruding rock. The horse broke free and dashed on, snorting with fear, and in a moment more had vanished among the winding defiles of the hills beyond.

Destins slowed his own horse to a footpace, for stone and stubble made the going precarious, and approached the bright huddle of Ben Zaban's body. He dismounted and looked down at the face which the torn veil revealed.

"A real warrior!" Destins looked regretfully down at the Touaregg shekh. "Modern civilization can never breed men like this again. A marvelous savage!"

He hoisted the limp body on the back of his horse, and began to make his way back to the fort.

From the bush-covered spur of a hill about twenty yards away there was a faint tinkle of armllets; slender henna-tipped fingers held aside a twig; two dark brilliant eyes peered through the opening thus made.

Zamathar the Beautiful! Zamathar, whose songs of love and battle were sung at myriad campfires, echoing all the fiery passion and romance of her most ancient race. Zamathar, whose wit and beauty made her a queen amongst the fierce Touaregg warriors. Zamathar, the star of Ben Zaban's tumultuous life—whose firstborn kicked and crowed in Ben Za-

ban's tent in the far-off Hoggar mountains, not knowing that his father lay still and silent in the dust before Fort Djebel Sfah.

Her eyes watched the limp body of her lover unblinking, her mouth steady, her whole body still as a marvelous statue, her breath deep and quiet, scarcely stirring the silken folds across her breast.

Despair . . . death . . . that might come later. The present was no time for private grief. The last act was yet to be played, and the deep tragic gaze that followed Destins, as he led his horse with its burden across the stones and sand, missed no detail that might help her to play her part later.

A long time she lay hidden among the bushes, until the lizards, emboldened by her perfect stillness, began to whisk about her. The sun climbed steadily, the sky changed from blue to grayish white, intolerably hot and glaring. From the scant shelter of a rock Zamathar watched and waited with the endless deadly patience of the East.

At last the gates of the fort were opened. A group of men emerged carrying something amongst them; they moved in her direction until they were quite near to her hiding-place, then threw down their burden on the sand, returned to the fort and vanished within. In a few minutes they reappeared with a ladder, which one of them mounted, and fastened something dark and round to a spike set in the archway over the gates. He got down and surveyed his handiwork from below, and the others joined him, gesticulating furiously. They were town Arabs from Algeria, Zamathar knew, and she despised them as only the true Berber can despise the town-dwelling Arabs. They went back through the gates at last, and the latter closed behind them.

Zamathar's eyes, keen as a young hawk's, knew instantly what that small

round object was over the gates. It was the head of Shekh Ben Zaban.

Her heart stood still with fear and horror and a bitter anger. No more awful punishment could have been devised for a true believer. Not only death of the body, but death of the soul! A dishonor which would blacken the name of Ben Zaban and his heirs forever.

Such punishment as this would deprive her beloved of all chance of peace and happiness in Paradise. He was lost—body and soul he was lost, unless that dear and sacred head could be recovered and buried with his body in one grave.

Long and agonized were Zamathar's thoughts as she lay there. She crept at last across the burning sand to the burden which the men had flung down so carelessly, and beside Ben Zaban's headless trunk she made her vow. Stooping her proud little head to the breast that had pillowed it so often, her lips moved soundlessly. Then she vanished into the hills beyond, while the circling vultures dropped one by one from the brassy skies.

TWENTY-FOUR hours later, Lieutenant Destins rode out through the gates of the fort. The old deadly nostalgia was stealing back—the old irritation and despair beginning to tug at him, distorting every one and everything in sight.

A stiff gallop would shake him out of his mood for an hour at least, brace him up before the horrible tedium of mess-dinner with the same old faces, the same old jokes, the inevitable menu, and the choice between a game of cards, a quarrel, or the farce of studying a few dull books to fit himself for promotion.

"Promotion! *Mon Dieu*—promotion!" Destins said between his teeth as he passed under the archway. "And what does that mean in this cursed desert? Moving on to some other corner of hell! More flies . . . more sun . . . more

fools to hate . . . more beastliness . . . and no recognition until one is skewered on some filthy Bedouin's lance! Then—a nice little hole in the sand and a label—'Died for his country.' Bah!"

He looked up at the grim object suspended from an iron spike above the gates. The bitter lines about his mouth deepened.

"And that's the end of you, *mon brave!*" he apostrophized it. "That's the finish of your glory and renown! Your handsome head hangs out for the sun to dry—and your body flung to the vultures! Well, I envy you. At least you died with the blood singing in your veins; you never knew the paralysis of inaction . . . of years of stupid monotony. You lived a man's life and died fighting. You were never cooped up like a wasp in a bottle until you were a soggy dreary beast . . . until you didn't care . . . didn't——"

With a curse he spurred his mount to a wild gallop, on to the far horizon, where the flaming disk that had made the fort an inferno from dawn to sunset now withdrew in a last defiant flare of crimson and gold.

In his hysterical uncontrolled condition, the unhappy Destins rode farther and faster than he had intended. Outraged by the constant application of her master's spurred heels, his spirited mare flew on with a recklessness that matched her rider's mood. Darkness fell round him like a black curtain before Destins woke to a realization of his folly, but it was too late to prevent catastrophe.

The mare stumbled over a patch of rough ground, fell to her knees, and when Destins dismounted and got her up again, the beautiful creature stood shivering and trembling with pain. She rubbed her velvet muzzle against his arm as, full of contrition for his carelessness, he soothed her with hand and voice.

She was very lame, and it was doubt-

ful if she could hobble home even without Destins on her back. The fort was entirely out of sight, but when the moon rose and showed the straight black interminable ridge of hills on the western horizon, it was not difficult to steer in the right direction, and man and beast began their tedious journey.

Destins was in no mood to appreciate the austere desolate beauty of his surroundings. The vast solemn grandeur of the wilderness appalled him. Space . . . solitude . . . silence . . . and overhead the fathomless depths of night-blue sky.

His eager blood was chilled in his veins. He felt like a pale ghost divorced from his body. The desert was to him a bitter hell of sand and heat where a man lost all he had . . . all he was . . . all he ever hoped to be.

THE moon rose higher; the desert, sketched in sharpest black and silver, became more remote, more mysterious. A man of far coarser imagination than Destins might well have been awed to the point of fear.

The mare hobbled along more easily; fifteen miles away the dark squat outline of the fort loomed up, while on the left the hills ran down in long ridges and valleys not more than a hundred yards distant. Suddenly the animal halted, one forefoot suspended, intelligent dark eyes turned inquiringly to those same hills, her delicate ears pricked.

A long soft call came clearly, low and sweet as a bird note.

As Destins hesitated, his fingers around the butt of his revolver, a figure emerged from the shadows in the hills, and moved swiftly toward him—a woman's figure, unveiled, desperate in its movements, bare arms outflung in appeal, the eager slender body wrapped in crimson silk that reflected the light as some crystal goblet of rare wine.

The young soldier stood still in the greatest surprize. Half aware of the morbid hysterical state to which he was succumbing by degrees, he felt a pang of horror.

"Am I mad, then?" he asked himself. "Is this a delusion—a trick of the senses?"

He shut his eyes to gain control of himself. Perhaps when he opened them there would be no woman . . . he would know then that his mind was really going! He squeezed his lids tightly together—heard a faint high note singing in his ears—a quick snuffling breath from the mare—then a faint musical tinkle of metal against metal.

His eyes flashed open in time to see a woman collapse at his feet, a sobbing, murmuring heap of brilliant silk; two clinging hands took one of his between their soft palms and held it to a tear-wet cheek.

"But . . . but——" stammered Destins, scarcely knowing even yet if he were a victim to a delusion or not, charming though it might be. He was silenced by a sight of the face raised imploringly to his.

"*Effendi!* Allah is merciful! He has sent thee . . . thou wilt not refuse thine aid!"

Destins looked long at her. Her face, like a dark glorious flower, was lovely beyond any he had ever seen. Amazed, speechless, he stared with the conviction that he had not known what beauty was until this moment.

And Zamathar did not spare him. She recognized him at once, and her whole soul put forth its strength to lure and bind him to her; every nerve of her exquisite body responded to her demand.

She did not see a young French officer . . . she saw only Ben Zaban standing proud and splendid before her. She was not speaking to Destins, but to

him whose ears would never delight in her low voice again. With all the strength and passion in her she clothed Destins in the body and blood of her beloved dead.

The man before her heard little and understood less of the tragic story she poured out kneeling there at his feet, her eyes outshining the stars in splendor, her perfumed hair a dark mist about her face and slender body. Some dim idea did penetrate his consciousness that her caravan had been attacked by men of the Tublu tribe, blood enemies of her people, that she had escaped and needed sanctuary. Some one she loved was killed; she was defenseless and far from her home. If he would hide her for a few days . . . a very few days . . . until it was safe for her to return over the hills again.

"*Effendi*, thou wilt not refuse me this?" Her hands—the small-boned exquisite hands of the Touaregg aristocrat—held his gently as a child's soft fingers. Destins shivered under their touch.

He was so enchanted that for long moments he could only stand there stiff and stupid as a waxwork, watching the play of her features, her fathomless eyes under tear-wet lashes, her skin smooth and creamy as a deep tea-rose, and her mouth—crimson as her rich robe—pleading, lovely, irresistible.

He stooped to her, lifted her from her knees, holding her as if he feared his touch might break the spell, that she might melt and vanish in his clasp.

Her night-dark eyes were on a level with his own, and he saw that they were blue, not black as he first believed. He drew her closer to him . . . closer, his eyes on hers. A flame danced down deep in those blue depths of hers, a flame of triumph . . . and contempt. Her tragic mouth twisted to a smile as he caught her to him.

"No! No!" she whispered breathlessly. "Not now—not yet! We must go

swiftly—swiftly, *effendi!* Take me away from this place! Hide me!”

Destins woke from his trance, astonished at the sudden change in her. He felt like an awkward schoolboy beside this regal woman, who pointed an imperious hand toward the distant fort.

“Take me there!” she commanded. “Hide me for a week—one week!”

She spoke a local dialect familiar to Destins with a liquid slurring of the vowels which pleased the young Frenchman’s critical ear.

“It is as you please,” he responded slowly. “I was thinking it will be easy to hide you for as long as you wish. I know of a place—if you are not afraid of *shaitans* [devils]!”

“I am afraid of nothing . . . nothing save the Tublu shekh who is pursuing me,” she answered. “There are no devils more dreadful than those I find in human shape.”

DESTINS flushed, remembering uneasily his share, and his fierce joy in the fight of yesterday. This woman would hardly have appealed to him if she had seen him shooting and hacking at her own tribesmen! He must be careful not to let slip anything about that.

Then a faint premonition of peril and disaster urged him to say:

“There is always the fort. Perhaps it would be wise for you to let me present you to the commandant. He will have you safely guarded, and you can send a message to your tribe.”

“Never—never!” she cried. “A woman alone with all those rough soldiers and contemptible Arabs who are the servants of your army! My name would be blackened forever . . . my own father would shoot me like a dog if I dared return after such disgrace. It would be a shameful thing for a Touaregg woman such as I!

No, *effendi*, if you can not hide me, then I die here in the desert.”

She snatched at his revolver before he could move a finger, and turned the muzzle to her breast.

“Wait—wait!” Destins was seized with a quite incredible terror. “It shall be as you desire. I will find a secret place for you . . . no one, no one shall ever discover you there.”

She lowered the weapon, and Destins seized it roughly, his hands suddenly cold and wet with the sudden fear that he had lost her.

“It was only for your sake I suggested the fort. I thought you might feel safer. I am no better than my brother officers,” he added roughly, impelled to sheer honesty by the lovely look of confidence and hope that again dawned in her eyes. “Why do you single me out . . . why do you trust me? I am a man . . . and you . . . you are the loveliest thing I have seen in all my life!”

Once more that flame danced in her eyes—that little flame of triumph . . . and contempt.

“I know men,” she said briefly. “I know those whom I can trust. I have known them in peace and in war. Men have loved me, hated me, desired me since I first learned to smile or frown on them! Beauty such as mine brings great wisdom, *effendi!*”

She spoke with a calm detachment that no one could mistake for vanity. Destins realized afresh that here was no lovely plaything to amuse a man’s idle hours.

He knew the matriarchal system of the Touareggs, the unlimited power and freedom of the mothers and wives of this ancient white race, the independence of their women-folk from childhood up. This was one of the *grandes dames* of that mysterious tribe—a woman whose word was law among her people, whom warriors sought out for counsel and advice,

who had no doubt ridden out to battle as other celebrated women of her tribe had done.

A brief doubt as to the meaning of her tears, her rôle of clinging despondent womanhood, assailed him. Even in his infatuation he realized dimly that such a rôle was alien to the stately creature before him.

Then she smiled at him, put a gentle, imploring hand on his arm. He was lost. What matter if she had been pretending? What matter the secret she concealed behind those dark blue eyes? What did he care? She had come to him out of the solitary wilderness—the first good gift it had given him, this loveliest of women had come to him. Why ask more of the Fates?

"They'll have sentinels posted," he said suddenly. "We shall be within their range soon. Better to wait here until the moon sets. That will give us a chance to get to your hiding-place without being seen. It is an old ruin about ten miles from the fort—the remains of an ancient castle. It is dry and there are no snakes about, and its reputation for being haunted acts like a charm for keeping it deserted."

She smiled at him again.

"It will be perfect," she assured him. "It is well for me that I have met you. Allah is good!"

Destins privately thought that Allah had been good to him also, and blessed his lucky star that had led him to ride out so fast and far that night.

THEY turned aside to a ridge of dunes, and in a deep hollow Destins built a fire from dried sticks scattered about, and by its cheering warmth he watched the stars fade out, giving himself up completely to the magic of the hour. The play of light and shadow on the face and figure of the woman fascinated him. At

times her head, in its cloud of hair, looked fateful, almost threatening—the eyes under their long lashes somber and tragic—the curved mouth austere to cruelty.

Then the leaping flame would set alight the fire in the blue eyes, her flashing glance would make his heart beat hard and fast, the proudly set lips would lose their tautness and relax to smile at him . . . to murmur gratitude and hope.

"What do they call you?" he asked abruptly.

She leaned toward him, holding out her hands, the jewelled fingers outspread.

"My names are many as the jewels I wear," she answered lightly. "As many as those who hold me dear."

"I hold you dear," replied Destins, his voice hardly audible above the crackle of the blazing twigs.

She looked at him in silence, her eyes holding his deep gaze with composure, her brows puckered a little as if he were a page of some new book she sought to understand.

"You shall call me Nakhla!" she said at last. "Often that name is in my ears. Nakhla—which means a palm-tree!"

"Palm-tree! The crown and glory of the desert," was Destins' quick response. "It's a good name for you. And my name——"

"I will name you El Hamel," she interrupted, with a strange twisted little smile. "El Hamel—the Lost One! When I first saw you trudging with your head down, and your shoulders bowed, that is how you appeared—El Hamel!"

Destins cheerfully agreed, laughing now at the dismal picture she sketched with an indescribable gesture of her supple wrist.

"That's what they will be calling me at the fort by this time, too," he remarked.

"Ah, yes! We must go!" She sprang to her feet. She was suddenly remote and withdrawn again, and Destins followed

her, leading the mare. In the gray dawn they reached the ruined castle that was to be Zamathar's shelter.

What had been the ramp leading to the main entrance of the place was now a hardly visible path, and Destins led his companion carefully over the stones and rock half concealed by the straggling camel-thorn. He looked round at the gray ruinous pile in doubt.

"It will be light before I get back to the fort. What will you do all day without food or drink? What a fool I am! You can't stay here and die of thirst!"

She took his hand in hers.

"That is nothing for me, a Touaregg woman! I can endure as much as a man. Often I have not drunk for many days together. Do not fear for me. I shall wait for your return tonight."

Destins took her in his arms—her hands crushed against his breast. . . .

"At the earliest moment," he said, his cheek against hers, the perfume of her hair in his nostrils. "You will wait . . . you will think of me, Nakhla, my beloved!"

"I will think of you during all the hours of the day," she assured him gravely, and stood quietly in his arms as he kissed her. He grew desperate at the moment of parting, afraid that the cruel desert would steal this new great treasure from him with all the rest.

"I can't leave you . . . I can't!"

"You *must* go," she answered very gravely. "In the Name of Allah I swear that you will find me here when you return tonight. Go now, El Hamel, if there is truly any love for me in your heart."

The last long miles across the sand might have been a stroll through the streets of his beloved Paris, as far as Destins was concerned. He looked up at the solid walls of the fort, and at the sentry's grinning face with astonishment on his arrival. As the day wore on, his brother

officers watched him at first with amusement, and then with pity.

"Poor fellow! Done for, I'm afraid! This cursed desert gets most of us one way or another!"

Destins, utterly unconscious of their looks and their interpretation of his dazed condition, lived the hours of the past night over and over again, counting the minutes until sunset and the friendly dark.

"IT AMOUNTS to this, then," said the commandant next morning. "No one has seen Destins since dinner last night. You, Boursoie, lent him your horse, and the sentry on duty then noticed that he took a southerly direction toward the Dazar oases. Take two Arabs and ride out there. If he has not been seen in that locality, round up a band of tribesmen for a search party. They're Tublus and at war with the Touareggs as usual, so that if any stragglers from those that attacked us are about, the Tublus will make short work of them. Keep a sharp lookout for snipers as you go, and report immediately on your return."

Boursoie saluted and went off. He drew a blank at Dazar, and spent the rest of the grilling hours of that day rounding up Tublu helpers and scouring the surrounding country. It was hopeless. At sunset he returned to make his report.

"Instruct the gunners to send up rockets every five minutes," ordered the commandant. "Double the sentries and tell them to keep awake for once."

But in spite of vigilance, nothing unusual occurred to disturb the serenity of the African night. From the distant hills came the occasional shrill yelp of a jackal—from the walls of the fort the voices of the sentries echoed—and that was all!

The surrounding country was full of small hummocks and hollows, patches of bush and long grass, many places where

the shadows lay densely black on the silvered face of the desert. More than once the sentries called to one another, thinking they spied something that skulked behind a bush, or crawled in the hollows behind the dunes. The rest would rally round, and, after a few minutes of concentrated vigilance, would jeer at the scaremonger unmercifully, for the sandy dunes were as empty of life and movement as the Dead Sea.

If the commandant had posted his men on the summits of the hills opposite the fort—those hills which had spewed out a Touaregg horde a few days previously—possibly an extra sharp-eyed watcher might have seen Zamathar. Just as possibly not! For she moved supple and quick as a panther, and in the neutral-tinted cloth she wound about her so closely, she was utterly inconspicuous. The brilliant royally clad Nakhla who had beguiled Destins was wiped out completely—only a phantom-like woman remained.

Her scarlet silken robe, torn and stained and dusty, was slung across her shoulders, looped so as to contain some burden about the size of a water-skin, with the corners knotted firmly about her neck. The bundle appeared damp, dripping every now and then upon the hot sands.

Keeping to the hollows, taking the shortest cuts, going always with untiring strength and determination, Zamathar at last reached a position almost opposite the fort, where she lay and took stock of her surroundings.

In the brilliant moonlight she could see distinctly every detail of the massive building which faced her. The white walls glistened as if they were cut from hard-frozen snow. On the battlements the sentries drowsily propped themselves on their guns and chatted in groups. It was almost three a. m. and they were thinking happily of hot coffee and their pipes

For any one skilled in guerilla warfare as was this warrior-queen, it was not a task of superhuman difficulty to approach within a hundred yards of the fort in comparative safety. True, that damp sticky bundle on her back was not a convenient accessory to her strategies. However, she let it slip from her shoulders and dragged it along in the sand, making a long furrow behind her—the sand caked and stuck to it until it resembled a huge ball of sand.

Behind a large patch of bush, Zamathar waited for endless minutes. The voices of the sentries came clearly across the clear night air to the watcher, whose brilliant eyes glittered as she prayed that Allah would speedily bring these dogs to a very evil end.

Not a sound, not a movement on the walls of the fort escaped her. But chiefly her attention was riveted on that small dried object hanging from the spike over the gate. Zamathar's face altered incredibly as she gazed at this.

She glanced around. Ah! There it was, still lying in the dust. A mere skeleton now, picked clean by desert scavengers—that strong splendid body that had been Ben Zaban's only three short nights since. Dead and dishonored! Her lover . . . dishonored!

Her small white teeth ground savagely together.

From sea to sea, in all the wide Sahara, none had borne a name more famous than that of the great warrior, Shekh Ben Zaban. And now this shameful curse was put upon him by the vile unbelievers . . . a curse to keep his noble soul from the Paradise it had earned.

The sentries were dispersing. It was a change of guard. She knew the ways of the white man—his strange foolish ways. There were two or three minutes when the walls were absolutely deserted, the careless sentries going off duty exchanging

badinage with equally careless sentries coming on.

"Now . . . now Zamathar!" she adjured herself.

Catching up her bundle under her arm, she sped like a cloud shadow across the last intervening space to the fort—gained the shelter of the walls—dropped beneath them.

With her bundle again slung on her back she once more looked up at the grim trophy over the gate. Then, clinging to the rough uneven surface of the old walls like a bat, taking advantage of every crack and cranny, she fought and struggled upward inch by inch. Her delicate feet and hands were torn, her nails broken, her muscles strained agonizingly, but she managed at last to reach a wide shelf of stone which ran along on either side of the gates. It was easy, once she stood there, to undo her bundle and exchange its contents with that shrivelled head impaled on the spike.

With the precious head clasped to her, she dropped in a soft boneless heap to the ground, and crouched there waiting. Not a tear, not a sigh escaped her, as she huddled there with that dreadful thing upon her knee. Not even yet was she free to dwell on her private grief. Vengeance was accomplished, but her duty to the dead was still incomplete.

An hour dragged by—two—three hours. At last she ventured to creep forward a few yards and peer up at the

walls. Only one sentry in sight, and he nodded as he stood with folded arms, leaning against a gun.

"Allah guard me!" she breathed, as she darted back to the shelter of the rocks and bush that fringed the hills opposite the fort, back to the hollow where the bones of Ben Zaban lay. She held the withered head to her soft breast.

"Remember me, where thou art gone, Ben Zaban!"

Digging a shallow grave in the soft sand, she laid within it both head and bones, covering all at last with a cairn of stones.

In the gray mists of dawn she vanished—back to the shelter of the enveloping dunes—back to her own tribe—back, to drink the cup of grief to its dregs.

SHORTLY after dawn, the commandant stared in purple apoplectic silence at that which replaced the head of the infamous Touaregg shekh, Ben Zaban.

True, a head still hung there from the iron spike over the gate of the fort—the head of a man as young, as handsome, as aristocratic as that of Ben Zaban's had been.

But this head was that of a Frenchman, not an Arab. Nor was it withered and dried by the sun. The face was still beautiful—more beautiful in death than in life, for peace and deep content were written on it.

It was the head of Lieutenant Destins.

As then the Tulip for her morning sup
Of Heav'nly Vintage from the soil looks up,
Do you devoutly do the like, till Heav'n
To Earth invert you—like an empty Cup.

—*Rubāiyāt of Omar Khayyam.*

The Snake Strikes

By LIEUTENANT EDGAR GARDINER

A red-blooded tale of outlawry and border raids in India, and the spectacular exploit of Mahbub Ali

TROWBRIDGE *sahib* stamped up and down the sultry *Thana* room and cursed, while the panting village *chowkidar* leaned against the doorway watching listlessly. Truly, these *sahibs* of the *Thana* [police station] were not as other men: why should the news of a *dacoity* [robbery] so enrage this one? True, in the village he had left at dawn were five newly dead, and the *dacoits* had retreated beyond the river with much gold and silver and jewels. What of that?

Old Aghad Khan had more than enough and to spare—that is, he did have before the *dacoits* had extracted from him the secret of the hiding-place of his wealth by the simple expedient of roasting the soles of his feet over a small fire. Those *bobs* had plucked him as clean as a crow. But Aghad Khan needed that wealth no more, for when the *chowkidar* had last glimpsed old Aghad he had been quite thoroughly dead if the hillman were any judge—the strangling silken cord of *Thugee* drawn tight about his skinny neck or the dagger protruding from between his lean ribs had either of them been quite enough to assure such a state. And now Aghad Khan's soul roasted in the fires of Jehanum quite as his feet had roasted in the *dacoit's* tongue-loosening flames. Again the *chowkidar* spat languidly into the dust without.

"*Babadur!*" the reader of the vernacular, crouched upon his mat with the litter of papers disorderly over its entire surface, dared to interrupt the mighty *sahib's* explosive wrath: "*Babadur* [son of a

king], a letter to the Inspector-General will bring a troop of *sowars*——"

"Curse the Inspector-General!" And again Trowbridge *sahib* was off in a more fiery display of verbal pyrotechnics than ever. Fresh fuel was added to that tirade because Trowbridge knew that such a letter should have been written days ago when the outrages first began, instead of trying to cope with the situation single-handed, aided only by the scant dozen of native policemen under him.

Each sultry day brought the news of a fresh outrage against the majesty of the British *Raj*; of new robberies in some lonely village far away from the one where his men had expected it and where they had lain in wait. Each day brought fresh tidings of violent death while the villages of the district seethed with mutinous unrest.

Trowbridge *sahib* looked past the listless *chowkidar*, and through the open doorway at the thread of shining river shimmering in the heat waves, a mere thread of a stream now, in wider wastes of shifting sand. A mere thread, that grew daily more shallow until it might now be forded in a dozen spots, while all up and down its length boats could be requisitioned on either bank to convey a party across—and his policemen be none the wiser.

He looked across at that native state lying on the other shore, where hillmen swarmed under a petty native's rule, where trouble and thieves bred like rabbits, keeping the British *Raj* awake of

nights and making his own life an intolerable burden.

It was Trowbridge *sahib's* first setback in all his brilliant administrative career and he was properly explosive. Curses on the *dacoits*! Curses on a native buffer state whose every inhabitant was a potential trouble-maker, a thief if but given a chance, who had only to recross the river borderline and secure complete immunity! It looked almost as though the robbers were watching the *Thana* with eagle eyes. It seemed they were quite able to anticipate his moves—or there was a traitor among his own small force who was aiding them!

At that paralyzing thought Inspector Trowbridge stopped short. In his mind he ran over the few natives under his orders. Not one but whom he would trust with life itself. Not one but had been with him for years, following him from one district to another as he was shifted from post to post, each more difficult and trying than the last, until his superiors had sent him to this lonely hill district where so many had failed. And now, was he, too, doomed to failure here? Must he now call for the assistance of a troop of *sowars*; he who always before had been so self-sufficient? He stopped short and his face grew haggard.

As he pondered over that arresting thought there was a stir in the sultry heat without. Trowbridge heard the sharp orders of dismissal, heard the men scattering to their quarters behind the *Thana*. It was Mahbub Ali and his four men just returning from their fruitless night watch at the ford by the village of Bakhadur, where they had lain all the night in the darkness because Mahbub had been certain that the *dacoits* would pass that way. Instead, they had made the night hideous in another village a dozen miles away.

And Mahbub had been so certain of

his information, gathered in the devious ways that only he could have told had he been willing to do so. He had promised the *Sikar Bahadur* that this time they would not fail; promised it with a flash of white teeth through black beard! And Mahbub above all his men was fitted to know. In that damnable, trouble-breeding state beyond the river he had been born and reared. There he numbered friends and relatives by the score—Trowbridge's mouth dropped open. Was Mahbub Ali the traitor? Impossible! And yet——

THE doorway darkened suddenly. Mahbub Ali strode in, shouldering the village watchman carelessly out of his way, saluting his superior smartly. Between these two lay long years of close association, of innumerable problems solved by the native's sharp wits and his superior's unquestioning faith and prompt, efficient backing. Between them lay the ceremony of blood brotherhood. No! By all the gods of Hind! It was not Mahbub Ali who was a traitorous dog! Trowbridge *sahib* returned the salute and smiled grimly.

"Again the trap failed, *Sikar Bahadur*!" Mahbub's voice was weary and disappointed.

"And again the wolves struck, and far away!" Trowbridge retorted. In swift words he told of this latest indignity. He watched Mahbub's rage rise in gathering blackness.

"We be watched! Day and night some one spies upon us, oh my friend!" Mahbub growled the words. He grew tense and grim with sudden resolve. "Have I the permission of the Presence to depart?" he asked softly.

Trowbridge considered.

"Surely, you would not leave me now, Mahbub!" he said at last.

"The Presence knows what is in my

mind," Mahbub went on simply. "Mahbub Ali will go, nor will any of the servants of the British *Raj* see him soon again. He would go to visit in the hills where he was born."

"But, damme, man! You can't leave me like this! We've got to stamp out these *dacoities*, and at once! Already they have gone on too long. Already the might of the *Raj* is a jest among these hill people. Soon they will rise against it—refuse to pay their taxes—the red flame of open rebellion will flare along the border—troops will pour in, leaving waste and ruin wherever they go! My service, all my work, will be undone! And what of your own long years under the *Raj*? What of the inspectorship that is almost within your hands? Mahbub, by God! You can't do it!"

Mahbub cast a single significant look at the open-mouthed reader of the vernacular crouched upon his mat, a glance that took in the languidly insolent hillman *chowkidar*, the village watchman, and abruptly Trowbridge *sahib* calmed.

"Very well, then! Come into my office!" he growled.

Mahbub closed the door softly behind him and waited a moment with his ear pressed closely against its panels.

"Nay! Oh, Trowbridge *sahib*, it is no jest! Mahbub Ali the sub-Inspector goes on leave and none knows whither!" He held up a hand, arresting his superior's wrathful utterance.

"There be spies!" he whispered. "I know not if they be among these dogs of the villages, or among our own men," he hurried on. "Therefore Mahbub Ali goes. But in his stead——"

"You are right, Mahbub." Trowbridge raised his head, his eyes hopeful again. "But something must happen very soon. If another outrage occurs I must call in other help. Perhaps it's too late already—

God! Man, we can't fail now! At all costs we must stamp this out. Revolt! And that's just what that damned snake across the border wants! Open revolt! Unlimited raids! Right now he is accepting foreign gold to start trouble along this border!"

At the words Mahbub Ali seemed to change.

"I go—and at once, Trowbridge *sahib*!" he said insolently. "It is not for you to ask the reason. I am a free man! I do not choose to stay! Pay me now and have done!" He leaned across the flat-topped desk, a boastful insolent Afghan in every line of him.

Trowbridge gasped at his sudden change—gasped, and cursed viciously.

"All right!" he gritted. Hastily he signed an order, filled it out with brief references to the *Thana* records, and thrust it into the outstretched hand that waited to receive it. "And don't ever let me see your filthy carcass around here again," he finished.

Without a word Mahbub took the order, but every line of his departing figure was eloquent of wordless insult as he shouldered past the reader and the village headman of Bakhadar who were entering, who must have heard every word that had just passed between them!

OPEN revolt was very near. The Inspector knew it from the almost contemptuous and unreasonable demands of the headman, no less than from the changed bearing of his reader. One more raid from across the border—his brow grew moist as he thought of such an end to all his hopes and plans. Ruin, complete and devastating! He damned the *bohs* of that buffer state; he damned Mahbub Ali, root and branch—Mahbub Ali, his trusted friend and subordinate, who had failed him now in his hour of

need. What had gotten into the man, anyhow? His action was quite likely to be the last straw—the spark that would start all that hill country to blazing with the horrors of a border war!

Mahbub Ali packed his few belongings swiftly and with care, mounted his horse and departed toward that ford from which he had so lately come. Behind him he heard the stifled whispers of his astounded fellows, knew that already the entire village had been apprised of what had taken place. He smiled grimly into his black beard as, head high, he rode swaggeringly away. Sudden as had been his plans, all had gone without a hitch. Yet Mahbub Ali, sub-Inspector, trusted right hand to Trowbridge *sahib*, never reached the ford.

Instead, there came a very holy man indeed, one almost naked and exceedingly filthy, one quite as insolent as any hillman, who squatted close beside the crossing and mutely held out his begging-bowl to every traveler. Even to the police who came at dusk to guard the crossing, he held out the bowl and took with wordless disdain the *pice* they carelessly condescended to drop therein before he hobbled toward the village.

Though he was not there, yet he knew when those troopers were withdrawn upon swift, sudden orders from Trowbridge *sahib*, knew by morning light how the whole *Tbana* force had prevented by the barest of margins a recurrence of the events of the night before at another village only a few miles away.

With unheeding ears he heard the buzz of gossip in the village over the event, saw the watchful wariness when one of the hated policemen strode arrogantly through the shops with a wave of swift silence preceding and following his passage.

At midday he begged his way across

the river to the other bank when Mahmoud Khan crossed it hurriedly. Though Mahmoud was a land-owner and quite the richest man of those parts, the bowl remained empty as the beggar held it out to him, nor would Mahmoud pay for the holy one's passage among his own few servants before he hurried away on his own affairs. And that unregenerate one grew loud and wrathful when the holy man would follow in the dust of the road asking shrilly for largess, until the land-owner ordered one of his shrinking servants to beat the holy man.

None among them dared so affront the Gods, however, and Mahmoud and his party disappeared in a cloud of dust toward the nearest village, leaving the beggar to pursue his aimless way in peace.

DUSK was falling swiftly when the holy one came to the village. Another such would have made haste to fill his bowl at the tables of the villagers who wished to acquire merit, for the evening meal was being eaten. Yet this *yogi* preferred to mortify his flesh, or perhaps he was doing penance for some sin and durst not eat. He carelessly passed the hovels, he skirted the inn, making his way through the blackness now as though he knew just what he was about.

Like a monstrous snake he crawled upon his belly to the flimsy wall of a hut set some distance beyond the others, before whose door horses stamped and snapped under the care of a single *syce*. Mahmoud's horse was there, and others; yet the holy one had no eyes for them.

In the black shadow of the wall he lay with his ear pressed against the frail barrier. He stiffened as he heard Mahmoud's voice.

"Mahbub Ali is gone and in disgrace. This very day he went toward the hills

where he was born and the white *sabib* spoke many bitter curses against him!"

Another voice broke in but the listener could not distinguish the words.

"That could not have been the work of Mahbub, may the Djinns fly away with him! I tell you Mahbub is gone and none knows where. But the Inspector-*sabib* was most bitter!" It was Mahmoud again.

The listener smiled fleetingly.

"Tomorrow, then? It is agreed?" Mahmoud speaking once more. "But who shall tell the Inspector-*sabib* at the *Thana*?"

"Who but thyself, Mahmoud?" The owner of that coarse voice must have moved closer, for the words came clearly to the listening ears.

And now Mahmoud was protesting; he seemed fearful lest his traitorous hand show too clearly when all was over.

"Who but thyself, indeed?" Again that unknown voice. "As you are to profit, why should you not also share in the danger? You say your note is due at the money-lender's and you beg of me to destroy it!" The holy man stiffened expectantly. "And therefore, you yourself shall send the Inspector-*sabib* the message that will hurry his men far away. Or go with it yourself, for all I care!"

Again Mahmoud protested vehemently.

"Enough!" the other rasped. "That you must do; but, stay—— Many years have I known you! Once you were wealthy. You owned much land. Bit by bit it has gone, swallowed up by your careless squanderings. Now nothing is left. In all your house is now not enough to tempt a *chupperbund* across the river. You shall do as I say or we come to the village not at all. Then how will you satisfy the money-lender when he seeks an accounting? But before we go on to the money-lender's house we will even stop with

you. We will batter down your door, and what tale you shall tell the Inspector-*sabib* afterward is no concern of mine. But how shall he suspect Mahmoud then, who also suffered the loss of all his valuables because the men of the *Raj* were far away?" The voice ended in a sneering chuckle.

The holy man waited to hear no more. Like a shadow he was gone, past the snorting horses, past the village settling down to rest. Unseen, he crossed the ford with strange agility and strength for such a holy one. And in the early watches of the morning the Inspector-*sabib* was awakened by a stone tossed within his sleeping-room.

IT WAS a sultry noontide when Mahmoud dismounted before the *Thana* door and tossed his reins carelessly to a waiting servant. Trowbridge *sabib*, pale and frowning, pacing restlessly to and fro, greeted him shortly, and listened to his story.

"That bears out what I heard this morning, Mahmoud," he said. "I shall send one of my men to the ford and order those six men to where you have told me they will prove more useful. But wait! You are returning now to Bakhadar? By your hand I shall send that message—will you do this thing for me, Mahmoud?"

The land-owner nodded slowly, veiling his eyes lest the Inspector-*sabib* see the eagerness reflected there. What fools were these white *sabibs* after all! Not at all shrewd as was——

He stopped. What if that other failed to keep his promise? But almost at once he reassured himself. After all, what did it matter? Mahmoud would send away all his servants for the night. There was a marriage feast in that village across the

(Please turn to page 140)



ORIENTAL STORIES continues to make new friends with each issue. To those of you who are asking that the magazine be published each month, we can only reply that this will be done as soon as you make it possible. Each issue shows a gratifying gain in circulation, and we will publish the magazine every month as soon as the sale justifies us in doing so. Until that time we will use no serials, for three months is too long a time to ask the readers to wait between installments of a long story.

"Just finished the current copy of *ORIENTAL STORIES*," writes Bruce Bryan, of Los Angeles, "and while I always like Howard's adventure tales I feel that Hurst's *The Test of a Ghost* is the best-written and the most dramatic of the lot this time. Also like *Rats at the Silver Cheese* very much."

An enthusiastic letter to the Souk from Jack Scott, editor of *The Cross Plains Review*, Texas, says: "Wow! what a story that, *The Blood of Belshazzar* by Robert E. Howard, in the Autumn Issue of *ORIENTAL STORIES*. If I am any judge of good fiction, that is one of the best stories printed this year in any magazine. It is what we readers want. Let us have more of Howard's stuff."

Geoffrey Vace writes from Winchester, Massachusetts: "Again—congratulations. I have enjoyed every word of the new *ORIENTAL*. Or perhaps I should modify that and say that I enjoyed every word with the exception of my own stuff. Warren Miller's yarn was splendid. If the authors have a right to vote, put Miller down for first place for me. Robert Howard's story was neatly turned too."

"Why not use a few scraps of old Chinese or other verse as fillers?" writes a reader from Berkeley, California. "Bits of ballads such as are to be found in Achmed Abdullah's translation, *Lute and Simitar*, might well be used, and if I may dare to instruct you further in the art of editing, may I put my critical foot down most emphatically on all African stories having to do with anything not definitely Islamic? 'Islam and eastward' might well be your slogan. As for my personal preference among the stories you offer, I consider every one in your current issue at least equal to the average maintained in other pulp paper magazines, with the possible exception of *ADVENTURE*. The portrayal of life instead of the typical Pollyanna ending sort of thing is particularly commendable. Specifically, *O Pioneers* is the best of the summer stories and *Four Doomed Men* the weakest. Perhaps this is due to my own overwhelming preference for the short short-story."

"*ORIENTAL STORIES*," writes Jack Darrow, of Chicago, "is so greatly superior

to many of the monthly and semi-monthly magazines now appearing on the news stands, its stories and illustrations are of such high quality, that I do not understand why it can not be issued more often. I hope that the circulation of ORIENTAL STORIES increases so greatly that it will be published as a monthly beginning with the next issue. In the Autumn Issue *The Blood of Belshazzar* is the story to which I give first place. I am sure that a book-length novel by Robert E. Howard would be welcomed by all. Warren Hastings Miller is another good author of Oriental tales. *The White Sawbwa of Mōng Nam* was well written and I enjoyed it immensely."

Gordon Philip England writes from Waterville, Quebec: "I have just read my copy of the Summer Issue of ORIENTAL STORIES with much enjoyment. I vote for *O Pioneers*, by Warren Hastings Miller, as the best story in that issue, with *The Hopeless Quest at Aissouan* as second choice. *The Dragoman's Slave Girl* is very good too, as indeed are the remaining stories in the magazine. I am only sorry that you do not publish more often. It is a good idea not to run serials, as the readers would not care to wait three months between installments."

"*The Dragoman's Slave Girl*, by Kline, was by far the best story in the Summer Issue," writes J. Brown of Montgomery, Alabama. "I have only read two issues, but you can count on me as a constant fan from now on. I am convinced that Mr. Kline will be my favorite author. I would like to ask you one question: Is the Koran published in English, and if so, where can I obtain a copy?" [You can order a copy of the Koran in English at any book-store.—THE EDITORS.]

Readers, what is your favorite story in this issue? In the Autumn Issue the most popular story, as shown by your votes and letters, was *The Blood of Belshazzar*, by Robert E. Howard, with Warren Hastings Miller's story of Burma, *The White Sawbwa of Mōng Nam*, a close second. Howard's historical tales have caught the imagination of the readers.

MY FAVORITE TALES IN THE WINTER ISSUE OF
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Story	Remarks
(1) -----	-----
(2) -----	-----
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Coming Next Issue

TO THE fierce heart of the Sultan, death was easier than sitting a captive at the feast which always followed a Tatar victory. Bayazid sat like a grim image, neither speaking nor seeming to hear the crash of the kettle-drums, the roar of barbaric revelry. On his head was the jewelled turban of sovereignty, in his hand the gem-starred scepter of his vanished empire.

He did not touch the great golden goblet before him. Many and many a time he had exulted over the agony of the vanquished, with much less mercy than was now shown him; now the unfamiliar bite of defeat left him frozen.

He stared at the beauties of his seraglio, who, according to Tatar custom, tremblingly served their new masters: black-haired Jewesses with slumberous, heavy-lidded eyes; lithe tawny Circassians and golden-haired Russians; dark-eyed Greek girls and Turkish women with figures like Juno—all naked as the day they were born, under the burning eyes of the Tatar lords.

He had sworn to ravish Timour's wives—the Sultan writhed as he saw the Despina, sister of Peter Lazarus and his favorite, nude like the rest, kneel and in quivering fear offer Timour a goblet of wine. The Tatar absently wove his fingers in her golden locks and Bayazid shuddered as if those fingers were locked in his own heart. . . .

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By

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THE DJINNEE OF EL SHEYB

By G. G. Pendarves

A strange story of North Africa, and the terrible fate that awaited all who entered the accursed city of the marabouts.

SCENTED GARDENS

By Dorothy Quick

Strange passion came to the young queen in the gardens of the rajah's palace, and swift was the rajah's vengeance.

Spring Issue Oriental Stories Out April 15

The Snake Strikes

(Continued from page 136)

river, he recollected—it would afford a capital excuse.

If the *chupparbunds* passed him by, he could himself hack open his own door! Who would be there then to tell just what men had done the deed or what they had taken? And now this foolish white one was sending by Mahmoud's own hand the order that would profit Mahmoud so greatly! He *salaamed* low and hastened away on galloping hoofs, leaving Trowbridge to resume his restless pacing, and he quite failed to see that other messenger who followed Mahmoud's course shortly after him.

Dusk fell and deepened swiftly into night. The ford was deserted. The six policemen on guard there had left hurriedly shortly after Mahmoud had delivered Trowbridge's written message to them, making for the next ford six miles farther down the stream—six, no, seven mounted men. Another had joined them as they left the village of Bakhadar behind.

The last of Mahmoud's servants had gone away, rejoicing at such unexpected generosity; his big house was deserted and forlorn. Only Mahmoud sat alone in the great audience chamber amid the frayed and tarnished furniture. He smoked and brooded glumly as the hours dragged, from time to time glancing anxiously behind him as though he sensed another's presence.

But that could not be; the women's wing was deserted—none had lived there since his aged mother had sickened and died. Mahmoud had never taken to himself a wife, preferring to sip of the pleasures of many wells instead.

That stealthy rustle was only a mon-goose after a snake; those creaking noises

were only aged boards settling into new places as the old building shifted wearily into new disintegration.

What if, after all this careful planning, those *dacoits* did not come? Or, coming, what if they failed to gather up, among other things, his notes at the money-lender, now past due, and for which Mohammed Singh was even now pressing him? What if they took them and held them over his head to enforce ever-growing fresh demands?

Mahmoud tortured himself into a sweat of cold fear as he sat and waited. He lit the great round-wicked lamp, set so incongruously among all that Oriental setting under its ugly red shade.

He should have assured himself of the blessings of the Gods on these affairs! He should have given alms—a few—to that holy man the day before instead of ordering his servants to flog him!

A loud groan startled him—Mahmoud jumped. His eyes, wide with fear, looked everywhere about. He saw nothing unusual, nothing out of place. Again that groan, eerily dismal.

On the door without, a swift knocking, loud and imperious. It stilled suddenly as Mahmoud sat in frozen torpor. The sound of sharp blows—the flimsy boards were splintering under the onslaught of those keen blades—the bars gave way suddenly. Into the room poured a dozen fierce bearded forms—a hoarse voice shouted in Mahmoud's ear:

"Mahmoud! We have come even as I promised. The ford was unguarded. My men saw the *Tbana* servants leave before the dusk. We go now to the money-lender's——"

The speaker's eyes took one glance into Mahmoud's fear-convulsed features.

"Nay! We harm thee not! . . . What is it, then? Speak, dog!"

A single shot rang out and the great lamp shattered into nothingness, the flame flickered and expired in one last gasp.

"Police!" a strange voice cried. At once it was answered in chorus by the bearded ruffians crowding around Mahmoud. Like frightened rats they blundered about in the blackness of the room, their weapons drawn, stumbling against the crowded furniture. As flesh touched flesh they stabbed viciously, and now groans were added to their curses and the din they made amid the smashing furniture. They found the yawning blackness of the open door at last. Stabbing and slashing, they fought their way clear. In their fright they forgot their horses tethered a little space away in an alley. As fast as they could run they hurried for the ford.

"THE ford of Bakhadar at last," Trowbridge *sabib* muttered to his six followers . . . "And it lacks a few minutes of midnight," he added as he squinted at the illuminated dial of his watch. "We are just about on time as that note suggested. Now keep a close watch on both banks, my children. Fire at once on any men, mounted or on foot, who seek to cross—though I'm blessed if I know what it's all about," he muttered to himself. "Perhaps I'm a blasted fool to pay any attention at all to an unsigned note . . . But, damme! Mahmoud came to me as the note said he would—and he told me exactly what the note led me to expect. . . . I've a hunch that it is the read goods! But what the devil is in the wind, anyhow?"

From the silent village came a confused chorus of wild shouts, the sound of swiftly running feet, drawing momen-



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tarily nearer. Among the troopers at his side sounded the click of weapons being cocked, as forms loomed through the thick dusk, their faces turned fearsomely behind them.

The orange flames of the rifles' discharge stabbed through the darkness; followed shrieks, groans; a body plumped to the ground almost at Trowbridge *sahib's* feet. The white glow of his flashlight burst full upon a bearded figure.

"By the Lord Harry! A hillman! A raider from across the border! God! It's the Snake himself!"

In the village a glow rose swiftly above the huddled huts; leaping flames roared skyward, bathing all the country in their ruddy glow. Showers of sparks swirled upward into the billowing smoke clouds.

"Hell!" Trowbridge's voice was violent. "That's Mahmoud's house!"

By the sinister glow of the flames his troopers were bending over four huddled forms that would never move again—hillmen all—raiders from that buffer state beyond the thread-like river. Among themselves they were calling off names as they recognized one after another of those dead—not one but was a desperate character—not one but was wanted by the British *Raj* for dark lawless deeds.

A naked man came slowly toward Trowbridge *sahib* from the direction of the fire that was now sinking again almost as fast as it had arisen, having thoroughly gutted that old ruin. The roof crashed in with another shower of dancing sparks and another glowing burst of dazzling golden flames. In the light of that glowing burst the naked man bent briefly over the dead bodies, and now Trowbridge *sahib* saw that it was a *yogi*, incredibly filthy, and therefore doubly holy.

"The Snake!" that holy one shouted. "And three others! Allah be praised! We have them all!" The holy one turned to

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE ACT OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912,

Of Oriental Stories, published quarterly at Indianapolis, Indiana, for October 1, 1931.

State of Illinois }
County of Cook } ss.

Before me, a notary public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Wm. R. Sprenger, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of the Oriental Stories and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption required by the Act of August 24, 1912, embodied in section 411, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business manager are:

Publisher—Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 2457 E. Washington St., Indianapolis, Ind.

Editor—Farnsworth Wright, 840 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago, Ill.

Managing Editor—None.

Business Manager—William R. Sprenger, 840 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago, Ill.

2. That the owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding one per cent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a firm, company, or other unincorporated concern, its name and address, as well as those of each individual member must be given.)

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4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company, but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest, direct or indirect, in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him.

5. That the average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the six months preceding the date shown above is _____ (This information is required from daily publications only.)

WM. R. SPRENGER,
Business Manager.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 30th day of September, 1931. RICHARD S. GOULDEN,
[SEAL] Notary Public.

My commission expires May 3, 1934.

the astounded Inspector. Smartly he saluted.

"No more need Trowbridge *sahib* fear the coming of the night and the *dacoits* together! Here are the last of them—and their leader! A dozen there were. Now we have them all!"

"Mahbub!" Trowbridge shouted. "Mahbub Ali!... Twelve, you said? You killed eight of them? Alone and single-handed?" Awe was in his tones.

Mahbub Ali smiled, a curiously changed and altered Mahbub. Gone was the silky black beard of which he had always been so proud. Gone, too, was the spick and span uniform, the snowy turban. Here was only a filthy beggar whose wild locks straggled out from under a dirty rag.

"Aye, Trowbridge *sahib*, it is I. I, who left the Presence to seek my kindred of the hills!" He smiled briefly. "Nor were they so hard to find. But I slew none—not one of those eight who perished with Mahmoud in his blazing house! In Mahmoud's deserted, rat-infested *zenana* I lay hidden. And when the *chupperbunds* appeared before him as their leader had promised I shot out the light. I called 'Police!' in a loud voice."

He chuckled softly as he remembered that wild death scramble of the *dacoits*.

"Then Siva, the Destroyer, worked her bloody will! In the sudden blackness those *bobs* thought all the hosts of the *Raj* had appeared against them. They thought each whom they brushed against was an enemy and all their knives were turned against their fellows. But four reached the door alive, of whom their leader was one, while the lamp that I had broken was now roaring and crackling amid Mahmoud's things that they had broken in their wild scramble. A roaring, crackling hell yawned behind them as they ran into your ready rifles at the

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WARREN HASTINGS MILLER

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ford and so to their death. No more shall these *chupperbunds* steal across the border in the black night, mocking the might of the *Raj* and the Presence. Soon all the border will be peaceful again. When the headmen of the villages shall learn of this feat of thine they shall fear the *Raj* and the Presence as never before!"

"Forgive me, Mahbub!" Trowbridge *sahib's* voice was husky, his outstretched hand shook. "I shall not forget. Forgive my hasty words——"

"They are already forgotten, oh my friend," Mahbub said softly. "What, then, is there to forgive?"

"I shall not forget," Trowbridge repeated softly. "In the morning I will write to the Inspector-General. Perhaps when I hear from him again you will no longer be sub-Inspector——"

Mahbub swung about to the gaping policemen——

"By the beard of my father!" he roared loudly. "By all the Blessed Imams! Is this the way you cows keep watch?" He rushed at the six burly forms before them. "But no, my children! The need for that is past! Go you quickly and help the villagers! And drag those dead crows from where they roast in the flames, that the Presence may learn who they be and what manner of men are foolish enough to stand against him and the mighty *Raj!*"

The Dragoman's Jest

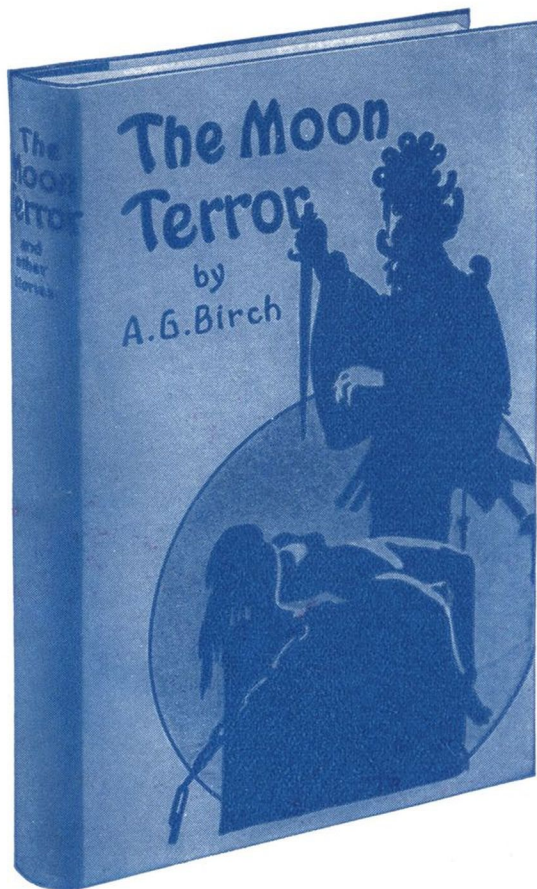
(Continued from page 30)

"Well," said I, "fortunately Carter was wealthy. Doubtless Hamed had to pay a high price to Khalil of the red beard for his newly purchased slaves——"

And Silat laughed aloud at this.

"*Sidi*," he finally managed to say, "the red-bearded Afghan was none other than Hamed himself; and the price he actually paid ibn Sakr was nothing compared with the ransom he extracted from Carter."

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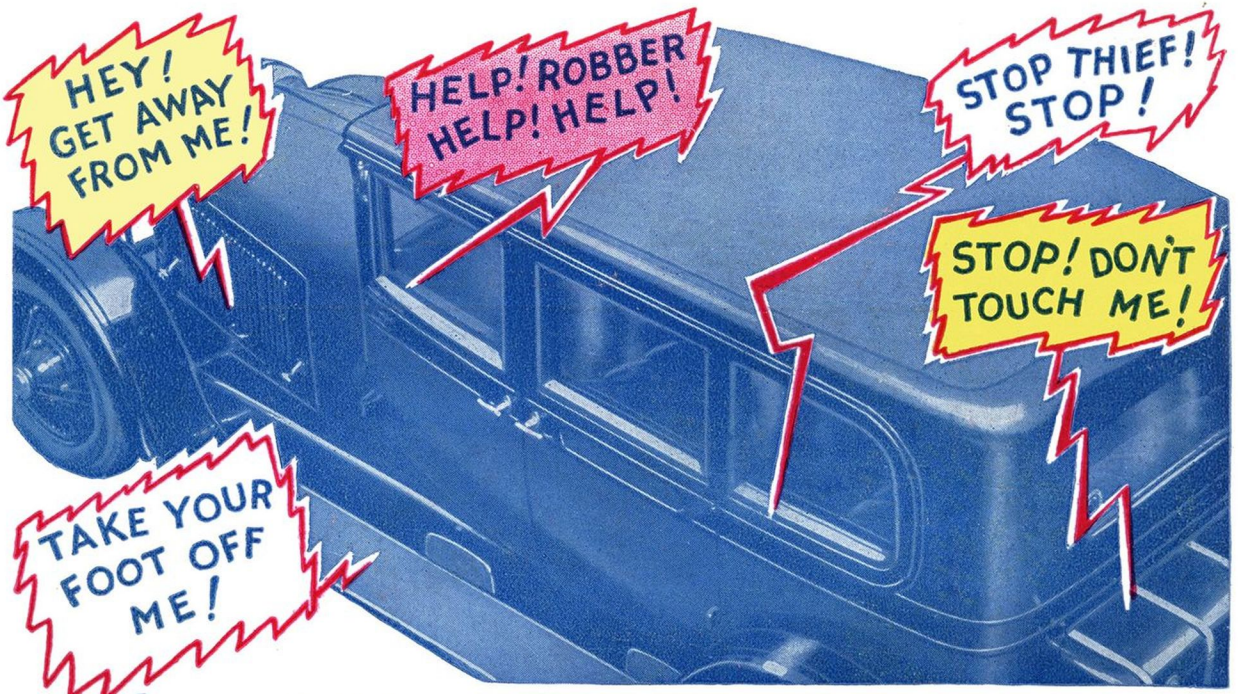
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