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JANUARY

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The Editors.

ORIENTAL STORIES COMBINED WITH

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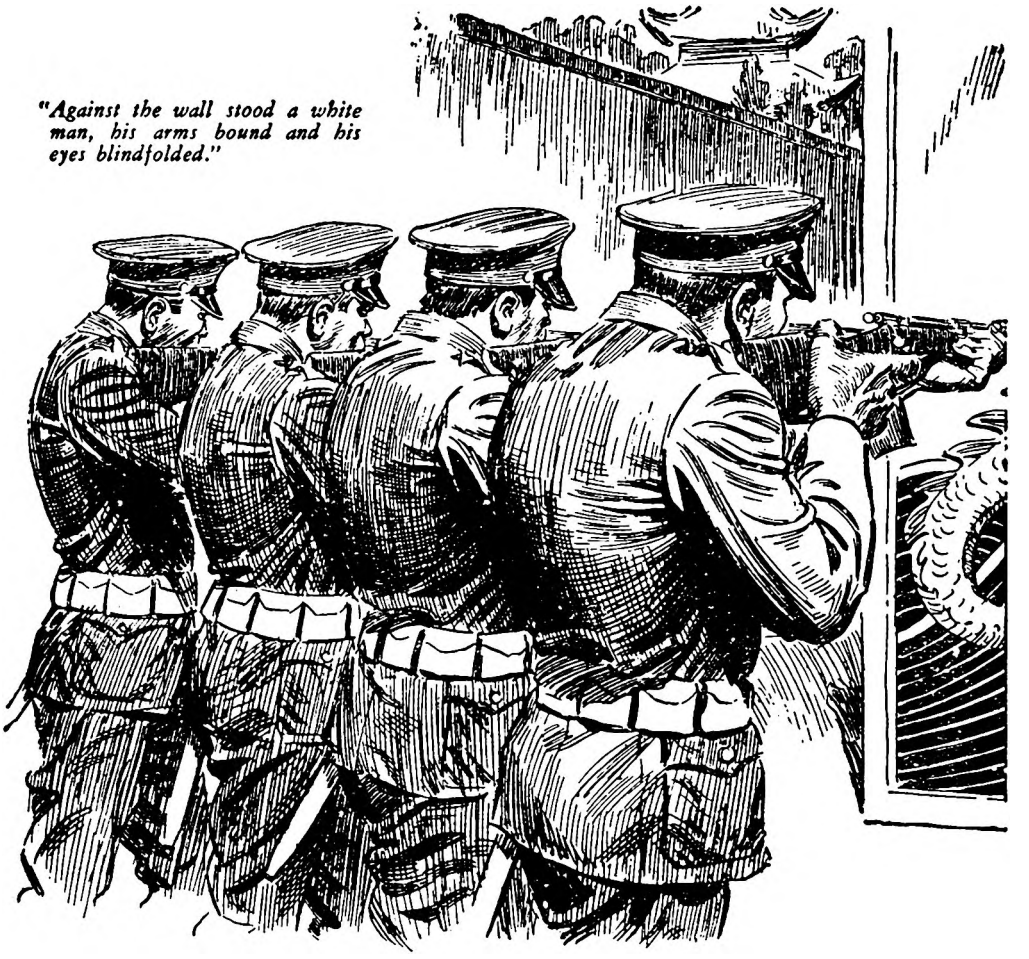


"Against the wall stood a white man, his arms bound and his eyes blindfolded."

The Master of Dragons

By H. BEDFORD-JONES

A smashing, fast-moving and powerful story of a bandit Chinese war-lord, and the thrilling adventures of two Americans and a girl in Soochang

THE Fokker two-seater was painted a brilliant jade green, its wings adorned in gold with the insignia of Governor Wang, war-lord and ruler of Szechuan province. There was no airport at Soochang, but the parade ground inside the north gate served the purpose admirably; and also served for executions.

Now this open space was empty, save for a squad of men at one side. Here, facing the road that went on to the high north gate, where squads of country folk were continually passing, was a low wall, eight feet high and ten long—a wall, nothing else. The side toward the road was a brilliant blaze of colored tiles, in

the design of a splendid blue and yellow dragon rising from the sea.

Against this wall stood a white man, his arms bound, his eyes blindfolded.

The Fokker circled. The squad of soldiers looked up at it. The words *"Lung yu!"* ran from man to man: "Jade dragon!" they muttered, half fearfully. Their officer gave a curt order. The rifles lifted. At the volley, the white man fell back against the wall, then slumped on his face, leaving a smear of scarlet across the blue and yellow dragon.

The machine came into the wind, made a perfect landing, ran to a halt. The squad of soldiers shouldered arms and marched away; the country folk stared at the Fokker but did not pause in their steady stream from the gate. From the barracks came an officer, all alone, striding across the open toward the airplane. He was unhurried, precise.

"Compliments of General Burket to General O'Neill," observed the passenger in the Fokker, a bronzed, wide-shouldered man in the uniform of a general, "and it doesn't look as if our arrival has stirred up a lot of interest! Execution squad didn't even notice us."

O'Neill threw off his helmet and goggles, picked up his sun-helmet, and swung out of the control seat to the ground.

"Officer coming," he announced. "A colonel. I suppose colonels and majors are thick as fleas in Soochang. This fellow isn't in any hurry, either."

"What's the idea of that dragon wall for executions?" asked Burket. "I'm positive it was a white man they just bumped off. Was it a gentle hint for our benefit?"

O'Neill shrugged as he lit a cigaret, his alert blue eyes on the approaching colonel. His keen hawk-face was thin, lean, dangerous, lacking its usual whimsical smile.

"I fancy it was, Bert," he rejoined. "These local bandit chiefs all have a spy system, and very likely we were expected. The lack of sensation we've caused would point to that, too. Well, you say it! Shall we push off while we have the chance, or see it through?"

Burket frowned. Soochang was not on any river, like most Chinese cities, but lay in the hill country at a confluence of trade routes. The black-tiled houses sprawled up the rising ground to the south, encompassed by high and thick walls where artillery glittered in the afternoon sunlight.

"Follow your hunch, you wild Irishman," he rejoined. "I vote to draw chips and play the cards darned close."

"O. K., then," assented O'Neill curtly.

THE colonel, a stocky, pock-marked fellow, approached and saluted stiffly. O'Neill returned the salute and spoke in the Szechuan dialect before he could be interrogated.

"General O'Neill and General Burket, foreign advisers to his excellency Governor Wang, on a special mission to General Jui-yin."

"I am Colonel Ssu Hieh," came the response, "in command of the city troops. If you will accompany me to my headquarters yonder, I will inform the general of your arrival."

"Very well," said O'Neill. "Send men here to guard our airplane and to bring our luggage. Who was just executed against that wall?"

"A foreign devil," returned Colonel Ssu, "who gained the displeasure of the general. He was a Russian, a barbarian."

O'Neill looked the man in the eyes, steadily.

"Be careful," he said. "Duty is one thing, impudence to a superior officer is another. You were not told to be impertinent to us."

The yellow man looked astonished for an instant, then laughed.

"Those who serve the Master of Dragons," he replied insolently, "do not watch their words in dealing with barbarians."

"In that case," said O'Neill, "they soon learn better."

Without warning, he gave the colonel an open-handed slap across the face that staggered him. Ssu's hand went to the automatic at his hip. Before he could draw it, O'Neill's fists drove in—left and right, savage, snapping blows. The Chinese abhor any striking with the fist, know nothing of such fighting.

Colonel Ssu backed away, still fumbling with his pistol. O'Neill knocked it out of his hand, landed a rain of short-arm jolts on the man's face, delivered his lesson without mercy. A howl broke from the colonel. He was knocked flat. Half rising, he remained on one knee, covering his face with his arms.

"Jerk out of it, Terence," warned Burket's voice, calmly. "Here's the boss."

O'Neill glanced around. A large automobile, probably the only one in this entire district, had left the barracks and was speeding toward them across the open. The flags above it, the five armed guards crowded on the running-boards, showed that this car must belong to the general himself.

"Looks like the finish," said Burket, who appeared quite cool. "When you

reach for your gun I'll plug the general——"

"Hold everything," cut in O'Neill.

Colonel Ssu rose and stood sputtering, wiping the blood from his face. The automobile drew up, halted, and the guards leaped to the ground, rifles unslung. At the open window of the car appeared a broad, heavy, masterful face. It was that of General Jui-yin.

"What does this mean?" inquired the general in Mandarin.

O'Neill saluted. "Merely the punishment of insolence, your excellency! Generals O'Neill and Burket, foreign advisers to Governor Wang, on a special mission here. This fellow needed a lesson."

"That is true," said Jui-yin, unexpectedly. "Gentlemen, you are welcome. My aide, Colonel Chen, is now at your disposal; he will install you in comfortable quarters and attend to your desires. Tonight after dinner I will receive you. Chen!"

An aide, seated beside the driver, alighted and saluted. O'Neill glanced at him, met a stolid look, checked his astonishment. Then Jui-yin snapped out an order.

"Take that fool. Let him ascend the dragon. Here and now."

Two of the guards swung about. Their rifles went up; the sharp explosions burst out. The hapless Colonel Ssu, with the life blown out of him, folded up into a heap of rags.

Then the five guards leaped back onto place, the car roared into motion, General Jui-yin saluted the two arrivals, and was whirled away.

A low oath of anger broke from Burket; everything had passed swiftly, in less than a moment since the car had halted. "The damned murderer!" he exclaimed. "Why, if I'd dreamed——"

"Chuck it," said O'Neill quietly, though he was white about the nostrils. "Well, Chen?"

The aide made a gesture of caution. His wide-jawed, powerful features expressed ability and independence.

"Be careful, heavenborn," he said in Mandarin. "Not a word until later!"

The astonished Burket looked from one to the other, then saw the approaching officer and soldiers, coming at the run from the barracks. Evidently the general had stirred things up; he had apparently arrived unexpectedly on the scene. O'Neill turned, and laughed at Burket's look of blank amazement.

"Chen's an old friend," he said under his breath, for the nearest officer was already close. "Used to be my striker up north, when I was training the Manchurian air force. Straight as a die. Watch your step, now."

THE running men came up, saluted respectfully, placed guards about the airplane. Chen beckoned to the two white men and strode off toward the barracks. They followed, and after them came one of the soldiers bearing the single grip that held their luggage. Being distinctly on campaign, the two friends traveled light.

It straightway became evident that this aide was a person of consequence. In front of the barracks he summoned a group of officers around him, addressed them with military brevity, and appointed one of them commander of the garrison in place of the defunct and evidently unlamented Ssu Hieh. Men went running, and presently two sedan-chairs appeared, high on their upcurved poles, with extra bearers running beside. Chen turned to the two visitors.

"Your arrival was expected," he said stolidly. "A residence has been prepared for you. I am instructed to place myself

at your orders during your visit. If you will enter the chairs, we will go."

The two exchanged a glance, then obeyed. So their arrival was expected! An ominous note, this, in view of their errand here.

They had no further chance to speak together, each entering one of the high carven chairs. An escort was waiting. Colonel Chen took charge of it, sent men ahead to clear the way, and in two minutes they were plunging through the narrow, crooked streets, which darted about at sharp angles to throw off devils, who can of course travel only a straight line.

O'Neill eyed his escort, watched the people, drew his own conclusions. It was plain that the townfolk were cowed by these soldiers, were terrorized.

That Jui-yin ruled by terror was an open secret. Even among the Chinese, who are the most callously cruel of all nations, due to inborn centuries of indifference to human life, he was renowned for his merciless character. Once a mere hill-bandit, he had suddenly seized upon Soochang three years ago, and at once became a man to be reckoned with. His army was small, but it was efficient.

He could well afford to laugh at any other authority. Wang, who had seized the entire province in exactly the same fashion, ruled at Chengtu and in the surrounding district, and extended his rule over the other cities in his province exactly as the rule of the nation's capital was extended over him—by acknowledging the positions of the various bandit chiefs who had seized these other cities, in return for which they nominally admitted that he was their master.

Wang knew better than to march against Soochang or other districts by force. He would gain little, and might suffer much, especially here in the hills, where Jui-yin controlled the roads and defiles. So Wang left Soochang alone, and Jui-yin did exactly as he pleased there, being too far from the coast for any foreign influence to reach him.

O'Neill was thinking of all this, when the escort and chairs halted abruptly, turned in at a gate in a wall where two sentries stood, and on passing the inner gate a very handsome old building was disclosed, surrounded by large gardens containing artificial lakes, fruit trees, and shady walks, all in the very heart of the city. The chairs halted, the two white men alighted, and Chen beckoned them toward the house, leaving the escort at the gate.

"What is this, a palace?" exclaimed Burket, gazing around in astonishment. Chen made a gesture toward the soldier who followed with their luggage, and offered no other reply. It was evident that he did not intend to do any talking until he considered it quite safe.

The building was not large, but was of obvious age, being of stone upon a framework of huge *nanmu* beams, still fragrant after centuries of standing here. The place had been wholly built over and restored, however. Two servants stood at the door, and upon entering O'Neill perceived that there were but two rooms in the place. These were sumptuously furnished, one of them containing two large brass beds and a number of French etchings.

The striking thing about the two rooms, however, was the number of dragons in evidence, plainly installed everywhere at no very distant day. The walls of one room were faced with tiles, as had been the execution wall near the north gate, each wall bearing a gorgeously colored dragon. The embroideries showed dragons. Bells, carvings, the very rugs on the floor, bore dragons of every shape and style.

"Here are servants to attend you," said Chen, indicating the two house-boys.

"Your things will be placed in your room. If you lack for anything, or desire anything, send for me. Now I will show you the gardens, unless you desire to rest."

O'Neill caught the man's look, and comprehended it perfectly.

"Let us see the gardens, by all means," he said, for the benefit of the servants. "We are not tired, and a walk under the trees will be most grateful."

CHEN assented in his stiff, stolid fashion, and they followed him out along one of the graveled paths. Then his manner changed, when the house was out of sight, and he turned to them with a grin, and extended his hand to O'Neill.

"So the heavenborn is a general now!" he exclaimed. Then he sobered quickly, and his eyes drove from one to the other. "There is danger here."

"That's no news," responded O'Neill lightly. "This is my friend, General Burket. Shake hands with my old faithful Chen. Now, we can talk safely here, so listen attentively, Chen, and get things straight."

O'Neill, who had been born in this country and spoke its languages fluently, fell into swift Mandarin. He was a little surprized that Jui-yin had also used this tongue, for here in western Szechuan the language of northern China was almost unknown.

He had no hesitation in confiding in this man, knowing well that Chen was devoted to him. A bandit in Jui-yin's force, Chen had risen with his bandit leader. When Jui-yin became master of Soochang, Chen became a colonel, an aide. This did not involve patriotism. In the chaos of present-day China, war-lords and lesser robber barons merely grab a city or district and settle down to systematic extortion.

"You know," said O'Neill, presently, "that Wang is governor of this province."

Chen grinned. "So I have heard, heavenborn. But my commander regards him not."

"He may change his mind, then. We were sent here to levy a fine on your commander for his disobedience and impudence, and to bring Soochang under the authority of the governor."

"It would take a large army to do that," observed Chen. "Wang himself could not do it. My commander probably guesses your errand. When he learns the truth, he will kill you, as he has killed other messengers from the governor."

"We have full authority to act in the governor's name," said O'Neill. "To tell the truth, Wang gave us this job to be rid of us. We keep half the fines we collect. If we're wiped out, Wang loses an airplane and two obnoxious foreigners whom he doesn't love. If we succeed, he gains face and his profits increase. So far, we've had good luck at various points."

"You will have none here, heavenborn," said Chen. "Jui-yin is a savage person. When he was a bandit, no man could meet him hand to hand. He is brave, but he is also crafty. He is swift to destroy any one whom he suspects. If he knew that I were thus talking with you, he would have me impaled or shot. He is amusing himself by treating you as honored guests, but he hates all foreigners. Last month he shot a German missionary and his wife, and today he executed a Russian who had been drilling his troops, and who displeased him."

"That affair of the missionary has plastered a fine of ten thousand gold on him," said O'Neill. "Governor Wang was furious about it."

"You will not collect it," said Chen. "He will kill you and send your heads to the governor in tubs of salt."

"Hm!" said Burket. "You don't seem to love him particularly."

"Who does? I fear him," answered Chen. "All his men fear him. When he leaves the yamen, he carries two executioners with him. This house in which you are staying belonged to a rich white man, a Frenchman. He killed the man and his family, took over the place, and uses it himself occasionally, or as a place to entertain honored guests."

"Pleasant chap!" said O'Neill. "Why do you obey him, if you fear him?"

"Because we dare do nothing else. He is perpetually guarded by the three dragons, also."

"What's that?" exclaimed Burket quickly. "The three deaf men?"

"Hold on," put in O'Neill. "Get the thing straight, Bert. Deaf people are called *lung,* or dragons, because dragons are supposed to be deaf. Look here, Chen! Are you talking about deaf men?"

The stalwart aide laughed. "Not at all, heavenborn! Dragons. Did you observe the five guards on his car? They were his executioners. The others are three brethren who are always close beside him or around him. They are his distant relatives and belonged to his original bandit force. They do whatever he says without question, and their hands are red with the blood of men.

"These are called the three dragons, because of their names; whether real or assumed, I know not. One is named Lung, the sky dragon. The second is Li, the ocean dragon. The third is Chiao, the mountain dragon. Jui-yin is called the master of the dragons, partly because of this, partly because he has always used the dragon as his symbol. You saw the dragons in the house and on the execution wall——"

O'Neill nodded. In a flash, he perceived a great deal. Jui-yin had acted shrewdly in thus adopting the dragon, the ancient symbol of royalty in China, and enlarging upon it. This must have aided him immeasurably in his rise to power.

"Never mind," he responded quickly, "Chen, can I rely upon you?"

"Yes," said the other, looking at him steadily. "But we must be careful. We must not be seen talking together. If I learn anything, I will let you know, heavenborn. It is certain that Jui-yin will kill you when he learns your errand tonight."

O'Neill laughed a little. "Perhaps I'll have a surprize for him. Good! Then come along back with us and go your ways. You'll come for us tonight?"

"Yes. It is not far to the yamen of the general. Beware of the servants; they are spies."

They returned to the house. Here Chen saluted and then strode away. O'Neill and Burket entered the building, told the two servants they needed nothing. Left alone, O'Neill sank into a chair and lit a cigaret.

"Looks as if we'd better make haste slowly," he observed thoughtfully. "Our friend the general is a rather deadly little reptile."

"Little? Where do you get that word?" exclaimed Burket. "He's the big boss boy, that chap is!"

O'Neill nodded.

"Right as usual, Bert. We've got a big job ahead, and no soft one either."

2

THE afternoon had drawn to its close, sunset merged into dusk, evening was at hand.

Colonel Chen arrived, stiffly formal, with two chairs and an escort. Although it was not far to the yamen, "face" demanded that generals should ride, not walk. O'Neill entered his chair and the curtains fell around him. He lit a final cigaret, and puffed at it furiously. He was, for once, distinctly worried. He usu-

ally counted on something turning up, depending upon his own fertile brain to take advantage of it—but nothing had turned up. And, if he laid his errand before the general, he and Burket were lost men.

"However, we seem to be lost anyhow," he reflected cheerfully. "We're not dealing with an opium-sodden wreck, but a despot. We can't catch him alone, and we've no hold on him. Those three dragons are certainly three good aces, not to mention the executioners!"

It was unusual and irritating to find himself blocked at the very outset. In enforcing the authority of Governor Wang, his plan of campaign was invariably simple; to hit his man first and hit him hard, get what he came for, and leave. In this case, however, it seemed as though he were to have no opportunity to catch Jui-yin off guard.

The chairs halted at their destination. This was the old yamen of the *tao-tai,* or pre-revolutionary governor, a pleasant palace amid gardens built on the formal Chinese plan, the various buildings orientated. Entering into the first or reception court, the chairs halted. O'Neill and Burket alighted, followed Chen into the long hall, and were presented to half a dozen officers there present; all of them were colonels or majors, although Jui-yin scarcely had two full regiments in his entire army.

A servant summoned Chen, who departed hastily. The hall was heavily ornamented in dragons; embroideries, lanterns, carved work, showed dragons everywhere, even the jackets of the servants having this symbol embroidered on their backs. O'Neill, talking with two of the officers, caught a glance from Burket, and after a few moments sauntered over to his companion.

"Something up!"

"Yes," said Burket, and extended his cigaret case. "Take it."

O'Neill obeyed, felt a slip of paper beneath the case, slipped both into his tunic pocket.

"Looks interesting," observed Burket. "Somebody slid it into my hand as the curtains of my chair were thrown back. Couldn't see who it was."

There was no opportunity at once for O'Neill to inspect the note, as an officer came up and made inquiries about affairs at Chengtu, the capital. Then, with some abruptness, Colonel Chen appeared and joining the group, lifted his hand.

"I am ordered to express the profound regrets of the general," he exclaimed. "He has become suddenly ill and will be unable to join us. We are to proceed with dinner as though he were present. He begs that the distinguished envoys from Governor Wang will accept his humble hospitality and consider that his poor and unworthy house belongs to them."

O'Neill responded fittingly. Presently, finding himself alone with Chen, he flung him a sharp question.

"What's all this? Is it safe to eat?"

"Perfectly," returned the other. "He will be watching from the balcony. I am ordered to make you drunk and learn what your mission here may be."

"Oh!" The blue eyes of O'Neill twinkled. "Go ahead, and more power to you!"

He understood perfectly what was in the crafty mind of Jui-yin. The general was anxious to learn the exact mission of these two foreign advisers; for, while he might suspect it, there was always the chance that his suspicions were amiss.

About the rear of the hall, behind the place of honor, ran a balcony fronted with carved lattice-work, and behind this the general would be posted—might be

there even now, listening to what went on, probably keeping his eye on his own officers as well as on the two visitors. Once these were comfortably drunk, Chen would worm out of them what he could get as to their mission. If it were hostile, as the general expected, if they had come here counting on their status as foreigners to deliver some sharp ultimatum from Wang, then they might be caused to disappear quietly before their message was delivered formally. Also, Jui-yin would gain some idea of the reaction among his own officers to such a message.

"Drink hearty," murmured O'Neill into the ear of Burket, as they followed Chen to take their places at the festive board. "Drink like a fish—but keep your mouth shut."

He knew that Burket would do both. The bronzed, vigorous friend who had been his partner in so many ventures could be thoroughly relied upon both to drink heavily and not to utter a word.

O'Neill was astonished by the esteem in which Colonel Chen was held. It was clear that Jui-yin trusted this aide of his to a surprizing degree; but then, Chen was worth it.

THE meal proceeded, an odd combination of Chinese and foreign, of interminable dishes and copious champagne and rice-wine. Musicians and singing-girls appeared and began their droning, whining recitative; tongues rose high in sprightly humor. O'Neill took note that servants with champagne buckets were alert to keep the two guests of honor ever supplied with full glasses, and he did not neglect their services.

Meantime, he took occasion to spread out the folded slip of paper in his lap, and perceived the reason for Burket's comment. Its contents, written in French, wakened surprize in him, not unmixed with alert suspicion. It read:

"Outside the yamen will be waiting man in black coat, fur cap. I have information for you, if you will help me. Life for life."

Life for life! That could mean only one thing, thought O'Neill, as he carefully crumpled the paper and slid it into his pocket. Some white man was in trouble, or needed help, and could give valuable information regarding Jui-yin's plans toward the envoys—unless, of course, the whole thing was a plant, a fake, a scheme to make O'Neill destroy himself. He had run up against similar things ere this.

"It's not a bit unlikely," he reflected, between courses. "It's been tried before, and will be tried again. It was tried on us, and all but worked, too. Once bitten, twice shy! Before I agree to help any more white folks in this country, I'll make sure they're not taking pay from the other side. Still, Jui-yin is hardly the type to try it. He's not afraid to walk up and start shooting, once he makes up his mind we need it."

The meal progressed and the champagne flowed. O'Neill did not spare it, while Burket positively revelled in it; the big fellow was not averse to taking a drop too much, and on this occasion made the most of his opportunity. Not a word escaped him regarding their mission, however, although Chen craftily tried him out—no doubt for the benefit of the watching and listening general behind the balcony screen.

Then Chen turned his attention to O'Neill, who pretended to be much more overcome by the champagne than he was in reality.

"Your errand here is no doubt something of a secret, general?" he inquired.

"A secret? Not a bit of it!" declaimed O'Neill loudly. "No secret at all. Gov-

ernor Wang sent us here. Open mission. Proud of it!"

In his supposedly vinous condition, he mixed the Szechuan and Mandarin dialects, so that the officers around, who were obviously not in the secret, burst into quick laughter. But Chen, who was by no means sure whether he had drunk too much to know what he was saying, gave him an almost desperate glance, then continued his probing.

"If it is no secret, venerable ancestor," he said in his polite Mandarin, "this unworthy slave would be delighted to be informed by your sage tongue."

O'Neill clapped him on the shoulder boisterously.

"Not so sage, old sour-face, not so sage at this moment! Drunk too much. However, why not tell you about it? Certainly! His excellency the governor sent us here to make flowery speeches to your general, and to present him with that airplane we came in, and to train one or two of his men to use it. We can fit it up with a machine-gun fore and aft, and there you are! Token of the governor's esteem for your general."

Only by a flicker of his eyelids did Colonel Chen betray his intense relief.

After an instant of astonishment, the other officers broke into vigorous applause. It was somewhat surprizing that the governor should be sending Jui-yin such a gift, but this might be accounted for in a hundred ways. Conciliation and bribes are an essential of Chinese bandit diplomacy.

Blurting out something about Chengtu, Burket switched the subject of conversation, and Chen made no effort to switch it back; obviously, he had obtained what Jui-yin wanted to know, and the dinner proceeded. It was a fairly elaborate dinner, the courses totalling in the thirties, and etiquette demanded that each course be at least tasted. When at length it was over, O'Neill spoke quietly to Chen.

"Take my friend back and forget me. I have an errand in town that I want to do."

"In uniform?" asked Chen. "It can not be kept secret, heavenborn."

"That will be taken care of, I think," said O'Neill. Chen gave him a steady look, then assented without further questions.

O'Neill, indeed, had quite forgotten that in his uniform he could not walk a block in the city without arousing comment. The arrival of two white men, generals, must have provoked huge comment. However, if the unknown had not thought of this item either, O'Neill determined to pass up the invitation.

So, as the guests poured out, O'Neill strode ahead of them, passed through to the yamen gate, and gained the street with no more than a startled salute from the sentries. Only now did it occur to him that the message might have been meant for Burket after all, and not for him, but it was too late to be helped. With a shrug, he turned down the street. The yamen was on a hill at one side of the city, so that he could make no mistake in his direction.

There were no lights, the starry but moonless sky gave scant illumination, and when he descried the figure of a man ahead, O'Neill had to approach him closely before he saw that the figure wore a Mongol fur cap and a black robe of quilted cotton; the nights here in the hills were likely to be sharp.

"Well?" demanded O'Neill without preliminaries. "Was it you who sent the note?"

"It was not I, *m'sieu,*" came a response in French. "But I delivered it. Here is a coat to cover your uniform, and a cap for your head."

O'Neill took the articles, then paused.

"Whither do we go?" he asked bluntly.

"To the house of one whom you knew in former days, when you were in Manchuria," came the surprizing answer. "Have you forgotten Doctor Sanson?"

O'Neill whistled. "Sanson! Is he here in Soochang?"

"He was," responded the other. "But General Jui-yin had him shot two days ago."

In silence, O'Neill donned the skullcap and the black robe.

3

O'NEILL followed his guide without any more questions. The man pattered silently along.

He remembered Doctor Sanson well; the abrupt news of his shooting was a brutal shock. Sanson had been a quiet, harmless man who devoted his life to science, and had all but succeeded in exterminating plague in Manchuria when O'Neill was there in the north. A gentle sort of a man, loved by all who knew him. And to think that Jui-yin had shot him!

"Unless," thought O'Neill, "this is all part of some trap. But they couldn't know that I had been rather thick with Sanson."

There had been a daughter, he remembered, but he had never seen her. She had been at school in Tientsin, in those days. Was she here now? He touched the elbow of his guide and put the question. The man assented.

"His daughter wrote the note, *m'sieu*. I am Emile, the servant of the good doctor. When I saw your face today as you passed through the streets, I knew you would help."

O'Neill felt suspicion waning within him. The doctor had had a servant, he remembered, a pottering little Frenchman, good for nothing in particular. So the daughter had written the note! Things began to shape up now. In the cold night air, his head cleared rapidly.

"We must not talk," warned the other softly. "It is dangerous."

They passed through the crooked streets, where Emile seemed to know his way perfectly, and excited no comment, for few were abroad at this hour. Once an officer and half a dozen soldiers with lanterns halted them, but Emile produced a pass which saw them dismissed on the instant. Presently, turning into a narrow, filthy little lane, Emile halted before a tiny gate in a wall.

"A back entrance," he murmured to O'Neill. "They know nothing of it, fortunately."

O'Neill was taking no chances. He reached in beneath his tunic and slipped the pistol from its holster under his left arm, kept it ready in his hand, as the little gate swung open. He followed Emile into a small garden, the low, bulky mass of a house rising darkly beyond. Not a light was visible. An excellent spot for assassination, he reflected grimly.

Nothing happened, however. There was no sound around. The usual breeze had fallen; O'Neill caught the odors of flowers, and above them came the multitudinous smells of the native city, nauseating, penetrating everything, filling the nostrils and clinging to one's garments. General Jui-yin knew or cared nothing about sanitation.

"Take me by the coat," breathed Emile, "and follow close."

O'Neill obeyed. Thus the man led him through a pitch-black building, apparently a house that was empty, down unseen steps, and then halted before a door. He knocked at this with what was obviously a signal-knock, and waited.

"Why all this secrecy?" muttered O'Neill. Emile laughed a little.

"Because, *m'sieu,* the guards of the general are before the doors. One of the dragons is there in person. Fortunately, I knew of this——"

The door swung open before them, in darkness. A voice spoke, Emile answered. O'Neill found himself led forward again. Then a curtain was thrust aside, and he entered a lighted room, where lanterns hung from the ceiling.

He stood silent in astonishment.

She stood before him slim and straight, her head held very high, the red-gold hair bound in a knotted mass, her eyes steady, level, unafraid. Her costume was of purest white Shantung, the skirt divided—white being the mourning color of China. In this first glance, O'Neill perceived that she was not very tall, coming nearly to his shoulder, but when he took her extended hand he encountered a quick, firm grip which showed her lithe strength.

"You are Mr. O'Neill?" she said in a low voice. "Thank you for coming. Sit down, please. I am frightfully worried about you. Was there much to drink at the dinner?"

O'Neill looked at her, and his gay, reckless smile broke out.

"Lashings of it!" he answered cheerfully. "How much do you know about it?"

"Everything," she responded, and motioned to one of the wicker chairs. Emile had vanished. The room was quietly, comfortably furnished. "I was afraid you might give yourself away——"

"Oh, we were warned," he said lightly. "I was extremely intoxicated, and let everybody know that I came bearing gifts from the governor, who held the general in high esteem, and so forth. Look here! How do you know so much?"

The quick relief in her eyes was shadowed again.

"Jui-yin told me," she answered. "He was here this morning. He knew you were coming soon and had everything ready, but he was not certain about your errand. He thought it was to levy a fine and exert the governor's authority."

"So it was," said O'Neill. From a stand beside him, he took a cigaret and lit it. "We'll come to that later, your pleasant dragon-master and I! For the moment, I'm feeling my way."

"I told Emile to warn you verbally about it when he delivered the note," she said. O'Neill opened his eyes a trifle. Burket had said nothing about any warning. Perhaps Emile had not been able to deliver it, perhaps he had not thought it of consequence. His gaze warmed upon her, and then he spoke very soberly.

"I knew your father; we were friends. You are Marie, of course. Emile told me about his passing. But we must go back a bit—how did you come to be here?"

"Father was working on the plague in this district. He has been here a year now," she said quietly. "Jui-yin took over the city about six months ago and professed to be friendly to father. Lately, however, father became frightfully worried, and was going to send me to Chengtu until he finished his work here. I was to have left two days ago."

O'Neill could guess what was coming now. He said nothing, watched the woman before him, marveled at her self-control, at the matter-of-fact way in which she approached the tragedy.

"Of late, Jui-yin has become slightly more offensive," she went on. "Three days ago he came here, left gifts as usual—his presents are all in the next room—and had a stormy interview with father. I don't know just what passed.

Father would not tell me. Then, the next day, the man they call Lung, the sky dragon, came with half a dozen soldiers and interviewed father. I was not here, having gone out with Emile to get a few things—I was leaving in an hour, you see. When I came back, father was dead. He had been shot. Lung had just shot two men who he said had attacked and killed father. He was lying, of course. Since then I have been here, the house guarded by Lung. General Jui-yin had poor father buried with great pomp, and was here this morning—oh! I can't trust myself to speak about it."

O'Neill saw that she was torn between grief and a helpless anger. He nodded quietly.

"Never mind, Marie. I have imagination. Lung has not been here all the time?"

"No." She was steady now, under firm control. "He comes and goes. He is usually here himself at night. He and his men never enter. They remain out in front, in the street. They bring us anything we need, Emile and me. Our house-boys have fled. When I found you were here, after Jui-yin told me this morning about how he meant to trap you, I had Emile risk everything to get hold of you. I don't know if you can help me——"

"Of course I can," said O'Neill cheerfully. He had not the ghost of an idea, but his quick smile showed supreme confidence. He knew that he must get her thoughts off what had happened, set them to work at other things. "Too bad Jui-yin takes a personal interest in you, but it might be turned to advantage. What sort of man is this Lung? Describe him. A big chap?"

"No, not burly like the general, but tall for a native—nearly as tall as you," she answered. "He has a heavy black mustache, which is unusual in a Chinese, and wears a large gold dragon at the front of his uniform cap——"

"I saw him this afternoon." O'Neill placed the man now, having noticed him among the guards of the general's car. That heavy, ragged black mustache made him conspicuous among the five, since Chinese are rarely hirsute. He remembered, now, that three of the five had worn conspicuous insignia on their caps, but at the moment he had not observed them closely.

"So he's the chief of the three dragons, eh?" he went on. She assented.

"The chief, yes, and the most terrible. They are all frightful creatures, cruel and inhuman. Even the natives fear them horribly, and believe them to be supernatural."

O'NEILL puffed at his cigaret, in silence, his thoughts racing fast. If he was going to do anything at all in regard to his real errand here, he must waste no time. His sole chance of success lay in striking hard, fast, and before Jui-yin could try any more tricks. And here, it might be, was a key to that success.

"Emile!" he called.

"Here, *m'sieu.*" Emile appeared, throwing back a curtain from a doorway.

"Do you know Colonel Chen, the general's aide?"

"By sight, *m'sieu.* I have never spoken with him."

"Very well. That's all."

Emile departed. O'Neill pinched out his cigaret, met the eyes of Marie Sanson, smiled.

"Now, young lady, I need some information," he said, reflectively. "First, am I to understand that you put yourself in my hands?"

"Yes," she returned calmly. "I have no other hope."

"Then if I give orders, I want 'em obeyed. Looks to me as if we're all in a ticklish position here, but I have a glimmering notion how we might work things out--only, it'll be no job for a squeamish stomach or a shrieking woman."

A slight smile touched her lips.

"Make believe I'm a man, then. It's agreed."

"What the devil! Could anybody who knows you forget what you are?" O'Neill's whimsical expression answered her smile. "All right. Does Jui-yin live in the yamen himself?"

"Officially, he does," she replied. "Every one thinks that he does. But"—and he saw her flinch a little—"in reality he is at another place, a temple that he seized. It is not far away. He has been decorating it specially, furnishing it, for the past week. He expects that I will go there to live in two or three days. He—we had a scene this morning. I struck him across the face. There is no weapon here in the house; he searched and took everything——"

She checked herself, and O'Neill comprehended how close she was to breaking down. He intervened cheerfully, gayly, before her threatening incoherence could grip her.

"Well, never mind all that! Pass it up, forget it like a bad dream. Let me see, now. As I recall, your father used to have a rather surprizing little stick--a rattan. In fact, I got it for him in Mukden, told him to carry it whenever he went riding about outside the city. Has he still got it?"

She nodded. "Yes, but he never carried it. I think it's on his wall now."

"Would you mind getting it for me?"

She nodded, rose, and left the room. O'Neill took a fresh cigaret, lit it, and inhaled the smoke thoughtfully, his blue eyes very keen and alert. Burket, he knew well, could not be relied upon for any sharp and quick work this night, after the quantity of champagne he had absorbed at the dinner.

"No matter," he thought. "All that served its purpose excellently. If good old Bert doesn't do another tap on this whole job, he's earned his salary by throwing the wool over Jui-yin's eyes. However, we may not need him. This girl has sense. She's one female who can play a man's part, sure enough, if need be!"

Aloud, he called Emile, and the man appeared, now without his fur cap and coat. O'Neill saw instantly that he was an opium user, from his shrunken cheeks and yellowish look. Impossible to rely on him in any emergency. And there would be emergency this night.

"Can you leave here at once and find Colonel Chen at our quarters?" he asked. "We're staying in a house formerly belonging to a Frenchman, which Jui-yin uses now for guests——"

"I know it, *m'sieu*," said the man, with a mournful intonation. "Many times I have been in that house with my master, before that devil who calls himself the master of dragons took this city for himself."

"Chen will be either there or at the yamen," said O'Neill. "Find him. You can trust him, for he is a friend. Tell him that in one hour from now—and watch the time carefully—I wish him to join me at the house where Jui-yin now lives." He broke off and glanced up as Marie appeared at another door. "Tell him where that house is, as Chen may not know it, please."

"He knows it," said the girl. "He was with the general this morning."

"That is all," said O'Neill. "Go, and do not fail."

EMILE withdrew. Marie turned swiftly to O'Neill, her eyes blazing.

"Be careful! You would not trust that aide, Colonel Chen?"

"With my life," said O'Neill calmly. His gesture silenced her, dismissed her protests. "Come. You're in my hands, trust me. We stand or fall together. The stick?"

"Here it is. But isn't it amazingly heavy!"

She handed him an innocent-looking little swagger stick of rattan, apparently. But it was not what it seemed, by any means. The upper portion was, indeed, rattan, but the lower portion was of lead, carved and lacquered to look like the rest. It was pliable as a whalebone "slugger" and twice as efficient. It was too efficient, in fact, for any casual use, being calculated to kill rather than to stun.

O'Neill hefted it approvingly.

"You didn't know about this when you smacked the general, eh?" and his eyes twinkled. "Good thing, too. You might have killed him. Then you'd have been shot by his dragons, and everything spoiled."

"I can't see that it would have mattered much," she observed.

"Nonsense! By the way, do you happen to know how many guards are at the door?"

"Two all day. One at night, whom Lung usually joins!"

"Lung and one man, eh? Not so bad," murmured O'Neill. Then he rose. "Let's take a look at the general's gifts, if you don't mind. And have you any mucilage, paste, or other sticky stuff in the house? The stickier the better. And a pair of scissors. And some charcoal."

"What on earth!" Her eyes widened. "Are you serious?"

"Perfectly."

She gestured, held back a curtain, and O'Neill passed into an adjoining room, obviously the dining-room of the place. On a side table were piled boxes and brocaded rolls. She motioned to it.

"There you are. Examine them if you like. I'll get what you desire."

O'Neill went to the side table and began to open the rolls and boxes. He produced vases of porcelain, bronzes, carved jades of mutton-fat white such as the northern Chinese esteem even above the green, embroideries—all sorts of objects, most of them precious and many of them having astounding value. He whistled softly.

"Evidently the general has lost his head completely over Marie, eh? Well, so much the worse for him! What Bert and I might have hesitated doing—no choice now. We're pitched into it, or rather, I am. And it looks as though we're getting a break, too, with conditions the way they are. Nothing but this lucky chance could have even suggested any course of action, much less favored it. Hm! Let's see, now."

From the heaps of objects he selected several of the smaller and finer things—jades, snuff-bottles, a little frog of massy gold adorned with diamonds. Whence this plunder had come, only Jui-yin knew. He laid these aside, as the girl returned, bringing glue and scissors and a stick of drawing-charcoal.

"Thanks, Marie. Put 'em over there on the chair. I suppose those are not your regular clothes?"

She regarded him in frowning astonishment.

"Yes, they are. I always dress in white. Father liked it——"

"Haven't you anything else?"

"Oh, of course——"

"All right. Now, you see these things I've picked out? I want you to go down and call in your friend Lung. Tell him

that you appreciate his faithful watching, and that you want to reward him with a present or two. Bring him in here and give him these things, and be sure the other guard doesn't come with him. Understand?"

"No, I don't." She looked at him, puzzled. "You're in earnest?"

"Quite." O'Neill glanced at his watch; then his eyes struck out and met hers, and he smiled a little. "Run along, Marie! And make the fellow say a few words, no matter what. I want to hear him talk."

With a grimace of bewildered resignation, she left the room.

4

THE front door of the house, which was set back a little from the street, opened into an entrance hall where a tiny lantern burned dimly. As the girl opened the door, the tall, uniformed figure of a man appeared outside, barring the way.

"It is not permitted to leave!" he exclaimed in the Szechuan dialect. His voice was nasal and sharp.

"I am not leaving, honorable Lung," answered the girl. "I wish to speak with you. Enter."

Lung came into the hall, staring at her suspiciously. Beneath the uniform cap, adorned with its large gold dragon, his features were harsh. Heavy black brows, a shaggy black mustache, showed in strange contrast with vicious and cruel features. High cheek-bones gave him the look of a Mongol.

"Well?" he demanded, as she swung the door shut.

"I am greatly honored by your eternal vigilance," she said quietly. "I desire to reward it. I have a few unworthy gifts to make you, honorable Lung. Come with me."

"I have no need of rewards," he replied, and grinned. "None the less, I will not refuse what the bounty of heaven sends me! Lead the way."

The girl obeyed, and he followed, hand on holstered pistol. They disappeared within the house.

After a little they reappeared, Lung talking volubly. The girl paused. He came on toward the entrance. Something moved in the shadows of a curtained doorway at his right. He swung around, hand going to pistol—but the hand of O'Neill was more swift and deadly. There was a heavy swish in the air, a dull and terrible sound, and Lung crumpled up in a heap.

"Go inside and change your clothes," said O'Neill crisply to the girl, as she stared wide-eyed. His voice held a new ring now—a steely, penetrating, commanding note which not only betrayed his nervous energy, his excitement, but told why men obeyed him without question. "Anything dark will do. From now on, you are unimportant—except that you must play the cards you've drawn without flinching, without turning back. Can you do it?"

"Yes," she said. Then, more softly: "Yes, comrade."

Then she was gone.

O'Neill opened the front door. He glanced out, then spoke, assuming the high-pitched, nasal voice of Lung.

"You, out there! Come here. Enter."

A shuffle, a heavy tread. Into the doorway came the guard, rifle in hand. In the dim light he discerned the figure of Lung lying on the floor at one side. He stared down, open-mouthed, and as he did so, O'Neill struck once more, and struck heavily.

Without a word, without a sound, the man fell forward on his face, the floor quivering to the heavy thud of his collapse.

After a little O'Neill came back into the dining-room. He no longer wore his own uniform. Instead, he was wearing the rather shapeless, shaggy khaki of Lung, and on his head was the cap with its gold dragon. Marie was not in the room. Another trip back to the entrance, and he returned with coarse black hair sheared from Lung's head.

A mirror was on the wall. O'Neill, chuckling, fell deftly to work before it, with the hair and glue and charcoal.

O'Neill caught a moving object in the mirror. He looked again, was suddenly startled, and whirled about, his pistol jerking out. A man's shape had showed there. Then he froze, as he perceived the truth, saw that it was Marie, doubtless wearing her father's clothes, a hat pulled down over her hair and eyes.

If he was startled, however, she was downright terrified for an instant; she uttered a low cry, caught at the door-post, her eyes distending. For the slim, erect, soldierly figure of O'Neill had become the slouched, slightly stooped shape of Lung, whose golden dragon glittered above his face. And that face, no longer keen, whimsical, alert, showed blackened, upturned brows, a smudged and dirty skin, deep-creased lines about the mouth and nose, and the shaggy black mustache which identified Lung among all his fellow soldiers.

Then, realizing the imposture, Marie laughed shakily and came forward.

"Well?" queried O'Neill. "I don't look like him, do I?"

"No, not a bit, in the light," she replied, surveying him again. "That is, your face doesn't. You walk like him and—well, it would deceive any casual eye. That awful mustache marks him out, you know. But what a terrible change it is!"

"Thanks for the compliment," and O'Neill chuckled. "I can't say that you're improved, but at all events you're much safer now. So many men here wear occidental costume that you'll not be noticed."

A KNOCK sounded sharply. It was the signal of Emile. The girl turned and disappeared to admit him. O'Neill glanced at his watch, nodded, picked up a cigaret and lit it.

The door opened and Emile came into the room. He stopped dead at sight of O'Neill, uttered a low, strangled cry, and his face went ashen. Then, swiftly, O'Neill spoke.

"It's all right, Emile. I'm merely representing the honorable Lung. Glad it fooled you. Did you find Chen?"

Emile drew a breath of relief and recognition.

"Yes, *m'sieu,*" he said. "I found him and delivered your message. He made no answer."

"Very well." O'Neill turned to Marie. "How long will it take us to reach Juiyin's house?"

"Perhaps five minutes, afoot."

"Time enough to finish my smoke, then. Emile, can you rustle me up a cup of coffee? Or tea? Thanks. I had too much champagne at that cursed dinner." From his pockets he took the gifts Marie had given Lung. "Here's the junk back. Only way I could think of to get him into the house, see him walk, hear him speak. Now, you'll have to go with me as a guide. Once there, you'd better return. Safer here than——"

"No, no! There's no safety here," she broke in quickly. "What do you mean to do?"

"Reach the general and argue with him."

Her eyes dilated.

"No! You can't! You must be mad!" she exclaimed anxiously. "Where is Lung?"

"Ask no questions and I'll tell no lies," rejoined O'Neill in jaunty accents. "Of course I'm mad. All Irishmen are mad, young lady! But seriously, this thing has gone too far. The game must be played out now, swiftly, without a bit of delay. My life, that of my companion, your own life and more, all hang upon it. I've got an ace in the hole, and that's Chen."

She made a helpless gesture of resignation. Then, as O'Neill extended an automatic pistol, she seized it quickly.

"There's a present from Lung," he said grimly. "Pocket it, but go slow on using it. Emile stays here, we go to call on the general. Ah! That's quick work, Emile."

The man entered, bearing a cup of steaming coffee, for even in the heart of China Doctor Sanson always had his coffee flavored with chicory, French fashion. O'Neill sipped at it, and felt a grateful glow run through his body. It wakened him instantly, put him on the alert. He finished it, and glanced again at his watch.

"Time's up! No delay. Emile, remain here," he said crisply.

She nodded and set forth, O'Neill following to the entrance. In the little hall, she glanced around in some astonishment, seeing nothing of Lung or his guard; O'Neill motioned toward the little side room in which he had been concealed, and she understood.

Emile closed the door after them. They passed through the starlit garden and came into the street. No one was in sight.

"There will be guards," she said softly.

"Of course," assented O'Neill. She went on in silence, as though finding argument futile.

O'Neill knew that his course was utterly mad, but for that very reason it had a slim chance of success. The three dragons could not be entirely sleepless, and the slim rattan in his hand was a silent weapon in case either of the others was on duty. The sky dragon, at least, was out of the way, permanently. There remained Li, the ocean dragon, and Chiao, the mountain dragon.

"There's more than one way to be a master of dragons," thought O'Neill grimly. "And if I don't put it over, then we're done for, sure."

"There it is—the light," murmured the girl suddenly, as they swung around a corner. "A tiny little temple, but very beautiful. Just the one building in a large garden. You can see the trees."

"And guarded by a dragon," said O'Neill dryly. "Like the old fairy-stories. Evidently these dragons never sleep. Do you know which one it is?"

"Chiao," she breathed.

"Let me go ahead."

O'Neill swung along, imitating the choppy steps and slouching appearance of Lung.

While the fact that General Jui-yin occupied this place might be secret, his ownership of it was blazoned abroad. Beside the gate, under the hanging lantern, had once been the image of a deity in a niche—probably, from the shape, that of Kwan Yin, goddess of mercy. This had been recently lined with tiles, showing a gorgeously colored dragon, and below these was a tablet bearing the two characters signifying "Master of Dragons" in bright vermilion and gold. The entrance was an arch of marble, inside this being a short wall to keep out the devils, who could not turn at an angle.

But, beside the dragon niche, lounged a figure whose cap, in the glow from the lantern, showed the gold insignia of a dragon. This was Chiao, second of the brethren, a short, stout, burly fellow, who stood smoking a cigaret, acting as

guard. He turned and regarded O'Neill as the latter approached, swinging his little rattan.

"Hai! And what now, fool?" growled the man. "Why abandon your post?"

"I must see the general," said O'Neill, imitating the shrill nasal voice of Lung. "Here is a person to see him."

Good as was the imposture, excellently as it might have fooled any one else, it was quite impossible to deceive one of the brethren themselves. Chiao leaned forward, scowling, peering at the approaching figure. Then, as the lantern-light struck on the face of O'Neill, he let fall a startled exclamation and his hand went to the pistol at his belt.

Too late! O'Neill stepped in, and the rattan in his hand lashed out.

CHIAO partly evaded the blow, but it staggered him. His hand jerked out the pistol. Then O'Neill had struck again, cursing his own clumsiness—this time a slashing, terrific blow that was merciless. The pistol fell, unfired. The man's knees crumpled, and he fell sideways, partly within the arched entrance, the top of his skull crushed in.

O'Neill darted forward, dragged the body inside out of sight, left it lying against the wall, and returned to Marie. She stood motionless, horrified comprehension in her half-seen features. O'Neill laughed grimly.

"In for a penny, in for a pound, Marie," he said. "Can you stick it?"

She took a deep breath, drew herself up.

"Of course," she rejoined. "But I thought he would shoot you——"

"So did I," and O'Neill chuckled. "Better go inside out of sight. Turn to the right and wait there in the shadow. If Chen arrives, we're all right."

She obeyed, passing in through the arch, and disappeared.

O'Neill looked at his watch. The time was up, and more. Was it possible that Chen had already come and was now inside, seeking him at the temple? The street remained empty. Forcing himself to patience, O'Neill lit a cigaret and stood there, slouched against the wall.

Footsteps shuffled through the darkness. He saw two men, soldiers, approach along the street. They saw his figure, shied off, and saluted as they hurried past. Evidently the dragons of Jui-yin were given a wide berth by the ordinary troops. At least, thought O'Neill, they had recognized Lung and had been completely deceived.

Two of the dragon-brethren were now out of the way.

The moments dragged. O'Neill threw away his cigaret, made sharp decision to go ahead, and turned in at the arch. He came to the waiting figure of Marie.

"If Chen arrives, tell him what's happened, and don't waste time," he ordered. "Send him along. If you hear any shooting, get back home in a hurry. Your job is to send Chen on to join me."

"Very well," she rejoined quietly. "Good luck, whatever you intend!"

He touched her hand for a moment, then passed on into the darkness.

5

THROUGHOUT the new China of chaos, the old temples and shrines have been seized right and left, grabbed by the republican state or by private bandits, their treasures robbed and their lands taken; this alleged reformation, however, has seldom been for the better. So in this case. Jui-yin had modernized and ruined a beautiful old temple which originally was a jewel.

The gardens were large. Immense trees towered overhead in the starlight, the fragrance of flowers was heavy on the

still air. O'Neill passed up the usual approach, guarded by stone dogs and lanterns; ahead, the building was dark except for a small lantern by the entrance, at the top of four wide stone steps. Modern doors had been installed here, and a soldier with a rifle stood under the lantern.

O'Neill addressed the man in his assumed voice of Lung.

"Has Colonel Chen arrived?"

The soldier stood at present arms. "No, heavenborn," he responded.

"When he comes, send him in. Take me to the presence of the general."

"But he sleeps——"

"Son of turtles, obey!"

The soldier saluted and turned to the door. O'Neill mounted the steps. So Jui-yin was asleep! Better and better. He hesitated whether to strike this man down, and decided against it. The sentry took him for Lung, and O'Neill shrank from using his weapon without need.

Taking the little lantern from its hook, the soldier opened the door and led the way.

Upon entering what had been the central hall of the temple, O'Neill was struck with astonishment as he glanced around. Here, plainly, showed the result of Jui-yin's systematic plundering of Soochang and its district. On every hand were the rarest treasures of art and many of them were intrinsic treasures as well; the very rugs underfoot were ancient, priceless weavings.

As the sentry paused before a door on the right, O'Neill checked him.

"Give me the lantern. Return to your post and watch."

The other obediently extended the small lantern, and O'Neill shielded his face from the light as he received it. The man turned, saluted punctiliously, and marched back toward the entrance, O'Neill giving him light by holding up the lantern. Then the front door closed.

Turning to the door, O'Neill opened it. He could not lose his way now; there could not be more than one or two rooms on this flank of the little temple. There was still the third dragon, Li, to be accounted for. The two executioners probably were not domiciled here.

O'Neill found himself in an unoccupied room, a daintily arrayed woman's boudoir furnished in the most modern French style, with a door on the far side. He surveyed the chamber grimly; this, no doubt, had been destined for the use of Marie Sanson. And behind that farther door must be Jui-yin.

He advanced toward it, swiftly.

No hesitation now; there could be only two men ahead, at most, if Li were guarding his master there. O'Neill pressed open the door, then drew back and placed the lantern on the floor behind him, as he perceived light in the room ahead. A painted glass lantern held in the claws of an enormous cloisonné dragon against one wall, dimly illumined the room.

On a sleeping-mat, native style, lay General Jui-yin, at the far side of the room.

O'Neill closed the door silently, and crossed the floor. Except for the cloisonné dragon, the room was quite bare, without luxury. He dropped the rattan on a table, and plucked out his pistol; glancing around, he found no sign of Li, the sea dragon.

At this instant, the sleeping man opened his eyes.

"Lung! How dare you——"

O'NEILL jerked with the pistol. An expression of the utmost astonishment leaped into the massive, powerful features of Jui-yin as he saw that this man was not Lung after all.

"Quiet," said O'Neill. "No, I am not Lung. Lung is dead, and you will follow him if you don't lie still. Put your hands outside the covers—quick! That's right. Now we'll have a nice little talk, you and I."

He sank down, sitting a foot away from the staring, glaring Jui-yin, the pistol covering him. O'Neill's purpose was to keep his victim in talk, kill time, awaiting the coming of Chen. Why the latter had delayed, he could not guess.

Reaching up with his free hand, he worked loose the false mustache, and threw off the cap with its dragon insignia. Recognition dawned in the eyes of Jui-yin; recognition, and a flame of gathering fury.

"You!"

"Exactly," said O'Neill. "And now I have you just where I want you, my dear general. I have no desire whatever to kill you, but if you give any alarm, I shall most certainly put a bullet into you. So stay quiet."

The brutal features before him became suffused with blood, then paled again.

"How did you get here?" snapped the general.

"By virtue of my dragon blood. You did not know that I was a descendant of dragons?" O'Neill lifted one eyebrow, regarded him whimsically. "But you saw me arrive in a green dragon. You should have taken warning. And that airplane is not a present for you at all. It is very far from being yours, just as you are very far from marrying the daughter of Doctor Sanson. And my real errand here is very different from the one you heard me announce tonight, when you thought me drunk. Your champagne, by the way, is really very good."

He beamed cheerfully on the yellow man, who was now thoroughly roused.

The face of Jui-yin was a study in fleeting expressions. Fury, chagrin, astonishment, succeeded one another; his lurid eyes narrowed, watching O'Neill like the eyes of an intent tiger. His lip curled in a sneer.

"You seem to know a good deal," he said, with a snarl.

"I know everything," corrected O'Neill complacently. "I know that you have never met a man who could best you in personal fight; you're an invincible sort of fellow, eh? Well, you've come a cropper this time, Jui-yin, and a very bad one."

The oriental got himself in hand, with an obvious effort. He relaxed on his pillows and regarded O'Neill steadily.

"You are a bold man to come here like this," he said slowly. "Do you think you can escape me? Or do you intend to murder me?"

"I certainly do if you give any alarm," answered O'Neill. "Otherwise not. As to escape, you'll learn about that in due time. I suppose you might as well hear my message from Governor Wang. You are fined ten thousand dollars gold for murdering a missionary recently. You are fined another equal sum for murdering Doctor Sanson. Further, all your property, including this house, is confiscated, and you are sentenced to six months in the common jail, to teach you the rudiments of mercy and justice."

The oblique, bestial eyes flashed with rage at hearing this. O'Neill found in the man's face the expression of a snarling wild beast caught in a trap, containing a welling flood of venomous fury which would overwhelm everything if unleashed. He tapped his pistol.

"Careful! I'd just as soon shoot you as not, and save trouble, so watch yourself."

"I am remaining quiet," said Jui-yin. "It is you who had better watch yourself,

foreign devil! I shall hang you by the heels from that bronze dragon yonder, and flay you alive; this I swear by the ten hells! Aye. And I know things about you that——"

He checked himself abruptly. O'Neill looked into his eyes and laughed softly.

"What, threats? Catch your foreign devil before you skin him, Jui-yin. Now, how shall we set about collecting those fines? Undoubtedly you keep a big reserve of cash on hand, since the banks here are scarcely to be called safe."

Jui-yin smiled grimly—a contortion of his features, rather than a smile.

"Since you desire the information, I shall tell you," he replied. "Beneath this house, which used to be a temple, is an excavation. It is like your foreign houses, which have caves beneath them. The monks used it, before I shot them, and now I use it. The only entrance is by swinging that bronze dragon, overlaid with cloisonné, to which you shall presently hang by the heels."

O'Neill did not take his gaze from the man. Perhaps Jui-yin was trying to make him look aside at that enormous dragon holding the lantern in its mouth; but he rather thought the bandit leader was telling the truth as well.

"But wait," went on Jui-yin calmly. "I shall certainly torture you to death, foreign devil; none the less, it is true that you have the advantage of me now. Does money tempt you? Very well. Give up your advantage, consent to go away in the morning, and I will give you fifty thousand dollars gold."

O'Neill laughed.

"You think I'd believe you? No, no! Even if you meant to keep your promise, my honest master of dragons, the sum does not tempt me in the least. Try something else."

Jui-yin looked up at the ceiling, as though seeking inspiration there; then his eyes came back to O'Neill. And the latter was suddenly startled. In those eyes, in the animal-like face, there was a swift glitter of cruel amusement.

"So you were aware that I was listening to your talk at dinner, eh?" said the yellow man. "Thank you for that information, foreign devil. It confirms my suspicions."

"Of what?" demanded O'Neill.

"Of my worthy but ambitious young aide, Colonel Chen." The other showed his teeth in a grin. "He warned you, eh? Well, I did not believe he would betray me, but all things are possible. Hm! I did well to put my dragon Li on his trail tonight."

O'Neill's eyes widened a trifle at this. The oriental saw the flicker of his lids, and grinned again.

"So that worries you, eh? Yes, I happened to know that Chen had been your servant up north in Mukden. I make it a point to learn everything about the men in my employ, you see. And your name is well known. So you killed my poor faithful Lung, did you ? And since you are here in his clothes, and Chiao was guarding the outer gate, I suppose you killed Chiao also."

"As I will kill you at the first move," said O'Neill slowly.

He felt a cold perspiration breaking out on his forehead, at this information. It was no bluff, certainly; Jui-yin knew the truth. And where was Li now? Where, rather, was Chen? If he did not come, then——

His thoughts broke off abruptly. The other was speaking again.

"Bah! I do not fear death, foreign devil! I am not a fool as you think me, however. You know about the daughter of Doctor Sanson—so! You have been at her house, or you could not have killed

Lung. And now you sit here with a pistol, and I have no weapon within reach. Still, do you think that I am the master of dragons for nothing? Do you not know that I can call down another sky dragon to seize you?"

The glittering eyes fascinated O'Neill, terrified him. Somehow, this man no longer feared him or his weapon. He stared at Jui-yin, trying to comprehend, trying to fathom what lay in the man's face and words.

"Very well," said Jui-yin abruptly. "It is time. First make certain of the weapon, and then seize him!"

For an instant O'Neill stared, thinking the man had gone mad. Then, in the dim light, something twined in the air before him—something moved, all but invisible. He caught a slight sound from above and took warning, too late.

A thin silken cord, strong as steel, dropped about his wrist. The noose was jerked taut. His hand was jerked up, the pistol flying from his fingers to fall with a clatter. Springing to his feet, O'Neill looked up, saw an opening with a face framed in it, knew that he had been trapped from the ceiling.

He leaped up, straight up in the air, and then, catching the silken cord with his left hand as he leaped, came down full weight. Jui-yin was scrambling clear of his covers. From above came a frightened cry. O'Neill's full weight was on that cord as it came taut again and the man above lost his balance, was jerked through the opening. He came down with a tremendous crash.

At the same moment, Jui-yin flung himself upon O'Neill, bare-handed, with a roar of wild fury.

Caught off balance, O'Neill went to the floor. The other was upon him, clawing, trying to get a strangle-hold, exerting a terrific strength. Somehow evading it, O'Neill smashed his fist squarely into that brutal face, again and again. He gained respite, broke clear, came to his feet. There was still a chance, if he could regain his pistol, if he could reach the rattan weapon there on the table!

Jui-yin hurled himself forward like a madman. O'Neill met him coolly with a straight right-and-left; two full-weight blows smashing home to the pit of the stomach. The burly ruffian doubled up with a gasp of agony. O'Neill struck again, a swift cross to the angle of the jaw, and Jui-yin was knocked sideways, sent sprawling on the floor. He lay there, motionless.

With a leap, O'Neill was after his pistol—only to be caught and tripped by the man who had fallen from the ceiling. At this instant there was a rush of feet, the door was flung open, and several men burst into the room.

Falling headlong, with the thought of the waiting girl in his mind and the necessity for warning her, O'Neill rolled over and grasped for the pistol. He missed it. A heavy body fell full upon him. Then another plunged down.

A moment later, pinned to the floor, unable to move, strangled by clawing fingers that found his throat, he felt himself throttled helplessly. His lungs were bursting. Everything went black suddenly, and he knew nothing more.

They had him.

6

FOR a long time, General Jui-yin was in the utmost agony.

Three men had burst into the room, one had fallen from the hole in the ceiling. This one had broken his leg in the fall, but had none the less tripped and caught O'Neill. He was lifted and carried out. O'Neill was bound and left ly-

ing at one side of the room. The three gave their attention to the general.

They placed him in a low chair, gaping at him, muttering in astonishment, flinging curious glances at O'Neill. A man with bare hands had beaten the Master of Dragons, had whipped him, knocked him senseless; it was the first time Jui-yin had ever met his match. Now he sat in the chair, eyes open and glaring savagely, but unable to speak or move. Both hands were clasped across his stomach, where the pain gradually lessened as air came into his lungs.

Blood and teeth had gushed from his mouth. Blood still dribbled out across his chin; that terrific smash must have nearly broken his jaw. The ferocity in his eyes as he sat there and looked at the bound O'Neill was terrible.

O'Neill stirred, wakened, came to himself, gasping. He met the gaze of Jui-yin, remembered what had happened, realized that he was lost beyond hope. He straightened up, moved himself to a sitting position against the base of the cloisonné dragon. There was still a faint chance, of course, that Colonel Chen would come, but after what he had heard, he believed that he knew only too well the reason for the delay.

Two of these three men around, O'Neill recognized. They were the executioners, the same who had shot down Colonel Ssu the previous afternoon before his eyes. Then, as he looked at the third man, he recognized the sentry from the entrance, who had passed him in.

There was a step at the door. The two executioners swung around; a startled word was exchanged; pistols leaped out. Then the figure of Colonel Chen advanced into the room. O'Neill felt a swift heart-leap; but only for an instant. Chen's arms were tied behind his back, and marching him along, grinning widely at those in the room, came the third of the dragons, Li.

O'Neill met the eyes of Chen. They were impassive, grim, hopeless.

"Hai, master!" cried out Li, who at first perceived nothing strange in the scene. "Here is this fellow. I caught him talking with one of those two foreign devils. The barbarian had pretended to be drunk. I heard what they were saying. This colonel of yours has betrayed you, even as you thought; so I marched him along——"

The man checked his flow of words, stood staring. He was a big, powerful fellow, with features that were brutalized, debased, but extremely cunning. When he caught sight of O'Neill, saw the blood on Jui-yin's features, glimpsed the cap with its dragon insignia on the floor, a sharp cry broke from him.

"This is the cap of Lung! Where is he, master?"

"Dead," said Jui-yin. He croaked out the word with an effort; then a fresh spasm contorted his face, and he groaned. "Silence!" he gasped, as Li was about to burst forth. His bloodshot eyes gripped those of Colonel Chen. A ghastly grin showed his heavy teeth.

"So," he exclaimed. "Son of turtles, you betrayed me! I expected it. Li! Remain here, with Hsien. You others, listen!"

He paused, wiping the dripping blood from his lips. One of the two executioners stepped to Li, said something under his breath, turned. The other two men saluted Jui-yin, who went on, after a moment.

"You two! Conduct this traitor to the barracks of my bodyguard, which he commanded. Turn out the guard. Have him drawn upon a stake at once, and let the stake be set up on the parade ground,

beside the execution wall, as a warning to other traitors."

Chen gave no sign of fear. Thus doomed to a lingering or horrible death, he might have been going to the execution of another, for all that showed in his stolid, impassive face. But O'Neill cried out sharply.

"Wait! General Jui-yin, this man is no traitor. He has obeyed me, because I bore the authority of Governor Wang, which is superior to yours——"

"I have seen no such authority," broke in Jui-yin, eyeing him sharply.

"The document is in my pocket," said O'Neill. "Blame me, and not this man——"

"You lie," said Jui-yin calmly. "You have no such authority. You are a foreign devil, you have killed my officers, you have broken into my private rooms, a thief. And you shall be punished as a thief. Well, take out this traitor!"

CHEN flung one look at O'Neill—a glance of gratitude, of thanks, of submission. Then the two forced him from the room. There remained only Li, the third dragon, and Hsien, the executioner. The latter turned to the general.

"Shall we summon a dozen of the bodyguard, heavenborn? We are alone here——"

"You are sufficient for my purpose," said Jui-yin grimly. "Where is the other foreign devil, who pretended to be so drunk?"

"He was somewhat drunk in truth, heavenborn," said Li, with a low laugh. "When I marched Colonel Chen away with my gun on his back, the foreign devil fell over on his bed and snored. I had a guard tie Chen's arms, then marched him here. Did I do well?"

"You did well, dragon of the sea!" exclaimed Jui-yin. He stretched himself, felt his lips and face tenderly, grimaced and put a hand to his stomach. Then he pointed to O'Neill. "You shall hang that man by his feet to the teeth of the dragon, yonder. First, strip him to the waist. When he is hung up, begin at the waist and flay him to the neck. When that is done, we shall see. Be careful how you flay him. I wish to preserve his skin."

The two men broke into a laugh.

"What about the lantern that the dragon holds, heavenborn?" asked Hsien.

"Put it here beside me," answered Jui-yin.

O'Neill felt the cold sweat of terror break out upon his forehead. In the calm, ruthless gaze of Jui-yin, in the cruel laughter and delighted eagerness of the two ruffians, he perceived that this was deadly earnest. He was to be tortured and killed with refinements of barbarism past belief. And it would be done as a regular part of their routine. The dragon Li jerked out a knife and thumbed the blade approvingly.

Hsien reached up for the lantern held in the mouth of the dragon. This bronze monster, gorgeously decorated in cloisonné, stood a good seven feet in height. The lantern that O'Neill had carried was outside the door of the adjacent room, giving no light in this chamber. Hsien reached up, took the lantern of painted glass from the dragon's mouth, and flung a word at his companion.

"Take off his tunic and shirt, Li——"

As he turned, Hsien caught his foot, striking it against one of the dragon's bronze feet, and staggered. A cry of warning broke from Jui-yin, changing swiftly to sharp anger. Hsien lost balance, and the lantern flew from his hand with a crash of splintering glass. The room was plunged into darkness, except for dim light from the adjoining chamber.

"Fool!" exclaimed Jui-yin angrily. "Get the lantern from the next room, Li!"

"At once, heavenborn," responded the voice of the dragon.

O'Neill started suddenly. He felt a presence near him, behind him, above him; something brushed his face, startling him. Then the cords about his arms gave way, he felt fingers touch his, heard a gasp of breath at his very ear.

Li, treading heavily, stumbled into the next room, came back bearing the lantern, holding it aloft. He set it on the floor, turned to close the door behind him.

From General Jui-yin, from Hsien the executioner, burst a quick cry.

7

THIS light, suddenly coming into the room, revealed a strange thing.

Where had been only the figure of O'Neill, sitting against the dragon's belly, were now two figures—beside O'Neill was standing another, knife in hand. And O'Neill's arms were free, in his hand was a pistol, in his eyes leaped a flame of eager exultation.

"You!" broke out Jui-yin. "You—the woman——"

Marie Sanson did not answer. She had slipped into the room, had performed her task of freeing this man. Now she was overwhelmed, terrified, helpless to move, fascinated by the sight of those two glaring, maddened men before her, realizing that Li was turning from the door, at the side, to stare at her. Everything had taken place in a flash, in the fraction of an instant.

O'Neill, still bound about the ankles, threw up the pistol.

"Hands up, all of you!" he cried sharply. "You have just one chance——"

Li, uttering a wild, shrill bellow of rage, hurled himself forward. The pistol exploded. He pitched down headlong. O'Neill had no choice now. He fired again, as Hsien whipped out a weapon, and shot the executioner through the head. Jui-yin, flinging himself sideways to the floor, caught the pistol that had been taken from O'Neill, caught it, threw it up, fired. The bullet splashed on the bronze behind O'Neill's head.

The answering shot from O'Neill's pistol did not miss.

Jui-yin, lifted on one arm, collapsed. His head fell to the floor, his eyes still open, glaring with bestial ferocity at O'Neill. He tried to lift his weapon again, and failed. It fell from his relaxing fingers. His whole body slumped suddenly, as the life fled out of him, and he lay motionless.

In the ensuing silence, O'Neill heard a moan, a subdued thud. Marie Sanson had fainted and lay half across the body of the third dragon, the knife still clasped in her hand.

O'Neill reached out, took the knife, and slashed at the cords binding his ankles.

The silence was terrible, portentous. He realized now that Marie had followed into the house after seeing Colonel Chen brought in by Li. She had seized the moment to act, had taken the chance given her when the lantern broke—but now what? It might still not be too late to save Colonel Chen. . . .

O'Neill glanced up wildly, desperately. He heard the sound of running feet, and could not get his legs free. The cords had been doubly knotted. He slashed again and again, then dropped the knife and caught up the pistol, twisting around to face them as they came. The door was burst open.

Into the room came Colonel Chen, with Burket at his heels.

"What the devil!" Burket came to a

dead halt, staring, his mouth open. O'Neill, drawing a deep breath, lowered his pistol, found his feet free at last, came erect.

"Well?" he snapped, overcome by this apparition. "Where'd you come from, Bert?"

"Me? I just follered along," and Burket grinned suddenly. "Heard Chen get word to meet you here. Then that dragon chap collared Chen. I played drunk, but trailed along. Met Chen with two guards, knocked 'em cold, heard the shots—say! What's it all about?"

O'Neill whirled suddenly, clapped Chen on the shoulder, pulled a paper from his pocket.

"Get out!" he exclaimed, his voice vibrant, eager. "Chen, here's my authority from the governor—full authority. I appoint you, in his name, general in command of Soochang. Can you swing it? Will the troops obey you?"

Chen took the document with its vermilion seal, and grinned.

"Heavenborn, after I have shot four certain officers, the rest will obey."

O'Neill threw out his hands.

"Go and shoot 'em, then. Quick!"

Chen departed at a run. O'Neill drew a deep breath, caught Burket by the arm, and laughed suddenly, gayly.

"We've swung it, Bert! Bully for you, old chap——"

"My Lord! what's this?" Burket, who had glanced down, froze. He sighted the face of Marie, her hat fallen away, her hair pouring out in the lantern-light. "A woman? Dead?"

"Nope, only fainted. Let her be. It's the best thing for a fainting person, only most fools jerk 'em up. Give me a cigaret."

Burket extended his case. O'Neill took a cigaret, lit it, jerked out the match.

"Remember Doctor Sanson, up at Mukden? His daughter. She's all right. Listen, now! We've got everything, Bert, everything! Chen will back us up, too. Confiscate Jui-yin's loot, all of it. Make Chen give real obedience to Governor Wang. Put him in full command here. Bert, we'll make enough out of this job to retire!"

"Oh, yeah?" Burket surveyed him suspiciously. "You wild Irishman, you're covering up! I know you. She's all right, is she? And you pretend to pay no attention. I suppose you'll leave her here, will you, and never see her again?"

O'Neill's eyes twinkled. He glanced down at the lovely features of Marie Sanson, then met the gaze of Burket, and his old gay smile leaped forth.

"No, Bert; nothing like that. In fact, I may see her often in the future. Every day or so—she's all wool and a yard wide! A fine woman——"

A sudden crepitation broke out across the night, the explosion of rifles in unison.

"Eh? What the devil was that?" he exclaimed. O'Neill chuckled.

"That," he said, "merely goes to show that our friend Chen is a fast worker. Better give me a hand with Miss Sanson—we'll let her wake up in another room, under more cheerful surroundings. Suit you, general?"

"Boy," said Burket solemnly, as he stooped to pick up the girl's figure, "I'm suited. Yes, sir, I'm here to say that I'm suited. Let's quit this business and take up something safer from now on."

"O. K.," rejoined O'Neill, and caught up the lantern. "Let's go."

"The lamp slipped through Aladdin's nerveless fingers."

What Became of Aladdin's Lamp

By ALLAN GOVAN

An entertaining story that begins where the "Arabian Nights" tale of Aladdin left off

THE writer is pleased to be able to give an authenticated account of what eventually became of the Wonderful Lamp through the means of which young Aladdin established his fortune.

It will be remembered that the scene of Aladdin's adventures was China, and that, when the last glimpse is got of the hero, he is firmly seated on the throne which came to him through his marriage to the Princess Badroulboudour.

The history of the subsequent period is somewhat obscure, but during the reign of Aladdin's great-grandson a revolution broke out (brought about, as far as the writer can gather, by the people's resentment at a tax on spirituous liquors). Alad-

din's great-grandson lost his throne, and the royal family fled to Baghdad; and in the time of the Great Calif (Haroun al Raschid) we find their direct descendant, a certain Aladdin Acmash, reduced to very poor circumstances.

Along with the few family heirlooms, the lamp had been passed on from father to son, but its secret had been lost. How the secret came to be rediscovered, and the events which followed from that discovery, are here told in simple language.

"IF I EVER CATCH you SPEAKing to that SCAMP aGAIN, I'll lamBAST the SAWdust out of you!" The stick rose high above the speaker's head and fell smartly at the syllables indicated.

"Aaaah! Ooooo! Ohhhh!" yelled Joharah as she wriggled and squirmed on the floor.

For a moment the smiter held his weapon suspended in midair. "Promise me that you'll never so much as look at him!"

"Aaaah! Ooooo! Ohhhh! I promise you, Uncle Yoosuf! I promise you I'll not even think about him," and Joharah, having given her promise, added a few supplementary yells.

"Don't you think that that's just about enough, Yoosuf?" The speaker was a fat elderly woman who had been a spectator of this demonstration of how to deal effectively with love's young dream.

Yoosuf glared at the woman. "Another word from you, Zat ed-Dawahee, and I'll start on to you next. It's my opinion you've been aiding and abetting her." In turning to the new offender, Yoosuf momentarily loosened his hold on Joharah, who seized the opportunity and wriggled clear.

"Start on *me!* Huh! I'd like to see you try it!" Zat ed-Dawahee contemptuously turned her expansive back on Yoosuf. She crossed over and flopped down beside Joharah. "There, there, my blossom of Allah's garden!" she cooed.

"See that you keep your promise," growled Uncle Yoosuf, and gave the stick a last threatening flourish in Joharah's face. He glared at both women, and whisked out, banging the door behind him.

"Son, grandson, and great-grandson of a knock-kneed pig!" hissed the old woman, and she went through the action of spitting in the direction of the door.

The girl had sprung to her feet. Her eyes had not actually been wet, so she didn't need to dry them; and, strange to say, when she spoke her voice sounded perfectly normal.

"Best bolt the door, Zat!" The old woman did as she was bid.

"Now, give me a hand with this blighted thing." The girl had begun to unbutton her green jacket which hung down over her natty red trousers. With the old woman's help she presently pulled forth a large oblong of solid leather (it was carefully wrapped in an old blanket so as to make the sound of the beating seem like the meeting of bamboo and fatty tissue).

The girl looked at the oblong of cow's hide approvingly. "There's at least one benefit in having a cobbler for an uncle! But if old Parrot-face thinks he——"

"Ssssh!" hissed Zat suddenly, and raised a warning finger. There was the sound of a pebble striking the wooden shutter. "It was the will of Allah that he should be late this night." Zat said it piously. Then she shuffled over to a cupboard, from which she fished out a good stout rope.

In the meantime Joharah had dashed into the small inner room, and was now frantically engaged in putting an extra spot of kohl on her eyebrows. She jock-

eyed her hair into position, composed her features, and was ready to receive Aladdin Acmash when he climbed over the window-sill.

"O delight of my eye, O joy of my heart, may Allah not make me desolate by thine absence. O moon of moons, love of thee hath taken up its abode in my soul, and fire of desire for thee hath burned my liver. O pearl of——"

"Cut that stuff!"—Zat's interjection came in a tense whisper. "Have you two gone batchie, or what?—old Leather-face hasn't gone yet!"

Thereafter for a time Aladdin Acmash and Joharah made love silently and, in a way, more satisfactorily.

At last there came the slam of the street door, and the sound of the key being turned in the lock—Uncle Yoosuf wasn't having young men visiting his niece during his absence.

When Aladdin had used up all the similes that he knew, he and Joharah sat back and began to look things in the face.

"If I had any money at all we'd get married in spite of your uncle. But I'm only his assistant. . . ."

"Aladdin," said Joharah, in the practical, sensible way that women have, "you'll never make any money at being a cobbler. Besides, cobbling is low. Couldn't you get into some other line—into a profession or something?"

Aladdin pushed his turban to one side to allow him to scratch his head just over his right ear. "The job I really have a fancy for is money-lending," he told Joharah. "All you've got to do is to lend fellows money, and then sit at your ease and do nothing until they bring you back three or four times what they borrowed. It's an ideal life! But you need capital for money-lending."

The description of the life appealed to Joharah. "But couldn't you get capital from somewhere, Aladdin?"

"If I stole it, perhaps," said young Acmash. "But if you steal you usually get found out," he added, and said it with deep regret in his voice. "And to think," he went on after a moment, "that my ancestors, when they were in China, had pots and pots and pots of money—or so I've always been led to believe."

Joharah had a flash of hope. Haven't you got any heirlooms that you could sell and get capital to start you off?"

"Heirlooms!" said Aladdin bitterly. "A few bits of broken chinaware! A fat lot I'd get for my heirlooms!"

The question of what ought to be done was discussed from several other perfectly useless angles, and right up to the end, the tone of the meeting was distinctly minor; and when Aladdin at last said good-night, he did it without giving vent to a single simile.

YOOSUF'S cobbler's shop was a shed in a corner of the tiny yard attached to his house. Aladdin slept in the little back-shop.

When he reached his apartment the first thing that caught the young man's eye was a small chest which contained the last relics of the greatness of the Aladdin family. Was it possible that some of these relics *might* have a cash value? He unlocked the box and began to take the things out one by one.

Right at the bottom he came upon the old lamp which he had seen often before.

There was a legend in the family that it was unlucky to rub this lamp. Well, the members of the family who had respected the legend hadn't benefited very noticeably! How about the present scion of the race defying the curse? Aladdin breathed on the lamp with a loud "Haw!" and began to polish it vigorously. . . .

The floor of the room clove asunder, and there before him stood a Jinnee.

The lamp slipped through Aladdin's nerveless fingers. He recoiled, and leaned against the wall to counteract the ague that had suddenly attacked his knee-joints. He had a feeling that his hair was standing straight up all over his head. His eyes were travelling from the hole in the floor—which wasn't there now—to the Jinnee, who certainly was. For some curious reason his Adam's apple had left its normal position and made its way to his windpipe, which it was obstructing badly.

"What wouldst thou have?" said the apparition. "I am ready to obey thee as thy slave; I and all the other slaves of the lamp."

Aladdin just managed to gasp out, "W-w-what's that?"

The creature repeated the formula, and young Acmash began to have a glimmering of the dreadful truth. "Y-y-you're a—a——"

"A Jinnee," said the Jinnee.

By swallowing hard Aladdin got his Adam's apple back into its proper place.

"B-b-but why did you c-c-come here?"

The Jinnee had one hand cupped behind his ear to help him to hear the question.

"What did you say?"

Aladdin repeated the question in a louder voice.

"Because you rubbed the lamp and summoned me," the Jinnee told him.

Aladdin bent down, lifted up the lamp, and gazed at it in amazement. "Because I rubbed this?" he said in a daze.

"I beg your pardon——!" said the Jinnee.

"Because I rubbed this?" yelled Aladdin, and held up the lamp in front of the Jinnee's nose.

"That's it."

Aladdin's hair had now subsided. He was still thoroughly scared, however, and completely bewildered; but he was beginning to see possibilities in the situation. He asked: "What can—what can you do?"

"Eh?" said the Jinnee; and he explained, apologetically, "My hearing is not what it used to be. I'm not so young as I was."

"What can you do?" roared Aladdin.

"Well, I built your ancestor a palace, and through my instrumentality he married a princess. . . . Would you like to marry a princess?"

"No, I wouldn't. I want to marry Joharah, the cobbler's daughter," said Aladdin, who was recovering his nerve.

"A cobbler's daughter!" There was contempt in the Jinnee's voice.

"Don't you dare to say a word against Joharah, or——"

"Oh, very well," said the Jinnee humbly—"you're the master."

"What else can you do?" Aladdin asked.

"What's that?"

"What—else—can—you—do?"

"I transported the princess to your ancestor's room. . . ."

"You transported——?"

"Bed and all."

"You what?" squealed Aladdin. "You brought a princess . . . in her bed . . . to my ancestor's room?"

"Oh! It was quite in order. Your ancestor put a sword between the princess and himself before he went to bed."

"He wasn't—wasn't married to the princess at this time?"

"No," said the Jinnee.

"Hot stuff, that ancestor of mine!"

"Would you like me to bring this Joharah's bed to your——"

"Hey!" yelled Aladdin. "Don't you so much as breathe such a thing. Jo-

harah isn't one of your princesses; she's a decent girl. . . . What else can you do?"

"I could clothe you in sumptuous apparel. . . ."

"M'm! I'd like that. I'd—a-a-ah!" shrieked Aladdin, and he danced about wildly, trying to shake himself out of himself.

"What's w-w-wrong?" asked the Jinnee, beginning to have a feeling that he hadn't done what was wanted of him.

"Wrong—*wrong!* Look at me!" Aladdin was clothed in silk—silk trousers and a long silk coat. He was wearing shoes with thick soles. His youthful beard was gone, and was replaced by a drooping mustache. A long pigtail hung down his back. "Oh, Allah, look at me!" Aladdin said it in a voice that would have melted a stone.

"Why! you're the very spit of your ancestor whom I——"

"Oho! so that's it, is it? You've made me a Chinaman! Me! a good Muslim! Here, take these accursed things away this moment—do you hear what I—ah! Allah be praised!" Aladdin looked down with relief at his shabby garments.

"I always gave satisfaction to your ancestor"—the Jinnee was now looking really troubled—"but I'm perhaps not so smart as I once was. In the days of Suleyman the son of Daood I could——"

But Aladdin wasn't interested in Suleyman the son of Daood. "Where have you been since you brought the princess —er—since you built palaces and things for my ancestor?" he asked.

"My home is on the shore of the Sea of El-Karkar—beyond the land of Borneo."

"Cripes!" exclaimed Aladdin. "And you came here in a matter of seconds! . . . What's your name, by the way?"

The Jinnee informed him: "I'm Dahish the son of El-Aamash of the diving Jinn."

"Well, Dahish old son, you'll need to bring your notions up to date a bit if you're going to be of any use to me."

"I'll—I'll try," the Jinnee promised humbly.

"Let me think!" As usual when he was thinking, Aladdin pushed his turban aside and scratched just above his right ear. "If Joharah were here she might be able to suggest something or——"

At this instant Joharah clutched at Aladdin's arm, and her scream nearly pierced the young man's ear-drums. Aladdin glanced at the floor. Zat ed-Dawahee was lying in a large heap in front of the Jinnee, her shrieks driven inward by sheer terror.

"In the name of Iblees, what have you done now?" roared Aladdin.

"I—I assumed it would be all right if I brought the old woman too . . . to preserve the proprieties."

Aladdin told the Jinnee sharply: "In future, don't anticipate me. Wait until I give you definite instruction."

"I hear and obey," answered the Jinnee, now looking thoroughly scared.

"Oh, what's all this?" moaned Joharah; "and who is that terrible person?"

THE explanation took quite a quarter of an hour, and even then Zat was still quivering spasmodically.

Joharah, having just heard the tale about the princess and Aladdin's ancestor, felt that she didn't want to take risks. "I think we should get married first thing in the morning," she said firmly.

"But what about your uncle? If we tell him about old Dahish, here, he's sure to make trouble."

Instantly through the minds of Alad-

din and Joharah there passed the same thought. They looked at each other.

"I wonder if the old boy could——"

The Jinnee bowed his head, and touched his brow in token that he was prepared to have a try at whatever it was.

"Could you—could you change Joharah's Uncle Yoosuf into something?" Aladdin asked—"just until after the wedding."

"Command me and I will obey," said the Jinnee.

Aladdin looked at the unearthly being doubtfully. "That 'command me and I will obey' stuff is all very well, Dahish my boy, but look at the mess you made of trying to supply me with a new rig. I'm not giving any commands until I have some assurance that you won't muck things up. What can you do in the way of changes?"

"I've done birds and gazelles and——"

"I don't fancy Uncle Yoosuf either as a bird *or* a gazelle," Joharah interrupted.

"I—I used to be very good at one-eyed mules. . . ."

"A one-eyed mule is more suggestive of your Uncle Yoosuf," Zat thought.

"He's bad-tempered enough without being turned into a mule," said Joharah acidly.

"If he's anything at all until after we're married, it doesn't so much matter what," Aladdin pointed out. "Could you make him, say, a he-ass, and do it from here?" he asked Dahish.

"Y-y-yes," said the Jinnee.

"Then do it," Aladdin commanded him.

"Be ye, Yoosuf, the uncle of this damsel, transformed into the semblance of a he-ass," said the Jinnee impressively.

His audience waited, half expecting that there would be some manifestation. But there was none.

"Well, that's that," said Aladdin, and he and Joharah proceeded to discuss the following day's ceremony.

The question of expenses cropped up.

"I'm not having any fancy clothes provided by a Jinnee," Joharah said decidedly. "Can you—can you make money?"—she addressed Dahish for the first time.

"Command me," that gentleman said to Aladdin.

"How about a—a hundred pieces of gold?"

Next instant Aladdin plunged his hand into his pocket, and glanced at the coin he brought out between his finger and thumb.

"Oh, I knew there would be a snag somewhere—I knew it in my bones," wailed Aladdin.

He held out the coin for Joharah to see. It had a hole through the middle of it.

The Jinnee retreated against the wall. "These are the same coins as I provided for your ancestor, and he——"

"I was sure of it. Chinese again!" Aladdin moaned. "What use are these, here? In the morning, have a look at the coins that the merchants of Baghdad use, and, if you can, send me a hundred."

"I hear and obey;" and as the Jinnee said it, the coins in Aladdin's pocket, and the one he held in his hand, vanished into thin air.

"Well! Zat and I will need to get back to the house," Joharah hinted, and she and Aladdin began to say good-night all over again.

"Will—will that be all for the present?" asked the Jinnee.

"Yes, you can go now if you——" But Dahish the son of El-Aamash had vanished.

"A SWIFT worker at times, old Dahish!" Aladdin commented, and proceeded to show his visitors out. . . .

When they were gone Aladdin sat down in his favorite corner and began to go over the events of this very eventful night.

He had given his first yawn, and was telling himself that it was time for bed, when he was startled by somebody thundering on the door.

Dreading he knew not what, Aladdin sprang to his feet, wrenched open the door . . . and almost fell into old Zat's arms.

"Oh, Aladdin, come at once," Zat wailed—"a—a terrible thing has happened."

Aladdin had heard enough. Leaving the old woman to follow as fast as she could, he dashed across the yard and in at the open door of the house.

Just inside the door Joharah threw her arms wildly about him, and clung to him like a limpet.

"In the name of all the Jinn and Marids and Efreets of Jahennem, what's the matter now?" cried Aladdin.

"It's Uncle Yoosuf! That Jinnee has made a ghastly mess again. Uncle Yoosuf isn't turned into a he-ass at all; he only thinks he is—and he's crawling about on all fours, nearly he-hawing the house down. Listen to him!"

Aladdin listened to him. Then, "The lamp!" he cried, and dashed away again.

He was back in the house in a moment, and assured Joharah: "It's all right! Old Dahish will be able to do the job right yet." He rubbed the lamp vigorously.

Nothing happened.

He rubbed it again, still more vigorously.

No Jinnee.

Aladdin and Joharah stared at each other, and wondered what exactly would happen to them if Uncle Yoosuf should continue indefinitely in his present state. Aladdin gave the lamp a last, hopeless, despairing rub——

The floor opened, and Dahish the son of El-Aamash stood before him.

"And where have *you* been, young Dahish?" Aladdin asked sharply. "I've been rubbing this confounded lamp until my arm is aching."

"I was in my home, on the shore of the Sea of El-Karkar—I must have been asleep when you——"

"Well, you shouldn't be asleep when you're wanted. And you shouldn't go so far away as that Sea of El-Karkar. How can you hope to hear anything away off there, particularly as you're deaf? Stay around somewhere—under the floor of the shop or some place where you can hear when you're called."

"I—h-hear and o-obey," said the Jinnee.

Aladdin pointed to Uncle Yoosuf. "Look at the botch you've made of Joharah's uncle. Now, do the job right, if you know how."

The Jinnee pulled himself together and concentrated all his faculties on the business in hand. He tried a different formula—"Quit this form, O Yoosuf, and assume the form of a he-ass of unprepossessing appearance."

It worked. In an instant, in the form of a he-ass that had run badly to fat, Uncle Yoosuf was flapping his ears and skilfully swishing flies off his back with the tip of his tail. They took him out to the yard and tied him up to a post.

The Jinnee was presently dismissed, and Aladdin and Joharah said goodnight for the third time.

THE Kadee and the witnesses had just departed after having performed the ceremony of the marriage contract between Aladdin and Joharah.

"There's no need any longer for your uncle to continue in his present form," Aladdin told his bride. "I'll call old Dahish, give him the necessary instructions, and we'll get the row over right away."

Just then there was a loud rap at the door.

"Go and see who that is," Joharah instructed her satellite.

In a minute Zat returned, followed by an old man with a long beard, weak knees, and sharp eyes. "Your Uncle Faraj from Damascus," Zat explained to Joharah.

"Ah! so you are little Joharah grown up! Come and give your old Uncle Faraj a kiss. Well, well! And who's the young man, eh?"

"This is Aladdin," Joharah told him proudly. "We've just been married—the Kadee and the witnesses left the house only a moment ago."

"Well, well, well!" said Uncle Faraj—"well, well, well, well! . . . And where's Yoosuf?"

Aladdin stared at Joharah, Joharah stared at Aladdin, and Zat stared at both Aladdin and Joharah.

"Eh?" said Uncle Faraj.

"He's—er—gone to the bazar to buy some leather," said Aladdin.

"Gone to the bazar to buy leather while his daughter is being married!" There was disbelief in the depths of Uncle Faraj's sharp eyes. "Funny thing!" he commented.

"If you take a walk along to the bazar you will find him in the street of the leather merchants," Aladdin suggested hopefully.

"What!" shrieked Uncle Faraj, "dash out again the moment I've arrived, after having come all the way from Damascus! Not I, by Allah (on whom be peace!). Aren't you going to offer me something to eat, and a pot of something to wash it down with?"

When he had eaten, Uncle Faraj expressed his surprize that his brother had not returned. But having been well fed, and exceptionally well wined, he was not so averse, now, to taking that stroll. In fact, he himself proposed it.

"I think I'll slip along to the bazar," he said. "I may see Yoosuf; but in any case I have business to attend to. . . . I see you've got an ass in the yard—I might as well ride as walk!" And before Aladdin and Joharah got their breaths, Uncle Faraj, astride Uncle Yoosuf, and urging him with his staff, was disappearing out at the yard gate.

FOR a solid minute Aladdin and Joharah looked at each other in blank dismay. Then, very slowly, a smile began to steal over their faces. The smile became a grin, the grin became a laugh, the laugh became a roar. "The funniest thing I ever heard of," cried Aladdin, the tears running down his cheeks—"it was such a heavy stick that Uncle Faraj had!" and they slapped each other on the back and roared afresh.

After a while the newly married couple began to think of how they should spend the day.

"I wonder if old Dahish could help!"

A minute later, answering Aladdin's summons, the Jinnee stood humbly before him.

Aladdin explained the situation, and asked for suggestions.

"In the days of Suleyman the son of Daood I——"

"Oh, cut him out," said Aladdin wearily. "What about the days of my illus-

trious ancestor—what did you do for him besides——" he glanced at Joharah, and didn't complete the sentence.

"I built him a palace," said the Jinnee, "and provided it with slaves and dancing-girls and players upon all manner of instruments, and filled it with fruits and wines and sweetmeats of all sorts and kinds that have ever been known in the world."

But the thought of a great palace scared Aladdin Acmash.

"Couldn't you do something smaller?"

"A pavilion——?" suggested the Jinnee. "A pavilion filled with all manner of birds, with fountains of scented water, and girls like moons singing to the music of lutes. . . ."

"A pavilion set in a beautiful garden!" said Joharah ecstatically.

"Have a try at that," said Aladdin.

This time the Jinnee was completely successful, for next moment the lovers found themselves in just such a pavilion. The birds were singing, the fountains were plashing, and the sound of lutes came faintly to their enchanted ears. Slaves stood by awaiting their master's commands.

Aladdin called for fruit and wine, and the minutes slipped by on fairy wings.

Something like twenty minutes had slipped by on fairy wings when, suddenly, Aladdin and Joharah saw a man coming through the open door.

For an instant the man looked about him in amazement. Then his brows came together, and he fixed his eyes on Aladdin in a glare that made that young man shiver in his turned-up-toe slippers.

"What's all this?" said the newcomer sternly.

Aladdin had tried his best to put on a bold front. "This is my pavilion—what are you doing here? You have no right——"

While he was speaking there had been growing in Aladdin's mind a feeling that he had seen this man before—somewhere. Now he *knew* he had seen him before. In an awe-struck voice he gasped out—"The Calif!"

Joharah sprang to her feet, and prepared to bolt. But Aladdin cried, "Wait!" He snatched the lamp from the breast of his robe, and began to rub it furiously.

Nothing happened.

"That benighted manifestation is asleep again!" wailed Aladdin, and he rubbed for dear life. Nothing at all happened—except that the Calif had taken three strides in Aladdin's direction, and that he had drawn a light, curved, and very sharp-looking sword from the sheath hanging at his girdle.

Aladdin waited for no more. He seized Joharah's hand, and ran as he had never run before, with the Prince of the Faithful at his heels, telling him how he would carve him when he caught him.

Aladdin and Joharah dodged amongst the trees, and for a moment gave their pursuer the slip. There was a wall near by. It was a fairly high wall, and how he and Joharah climbed it, Aladdin never afterward knew. His only recollection was of falling in a bruised heap on the other side. But his legs, and Joharah's, could still function, and they didn't stop functioning until they brought their owners to the house of Yoosuf the cobbler.

ALADDIN tried the lamp again. Dahish the son of El-Aamash appeared at once.

"So there you are at last," Aladdin shouted at him. "A fine old hole you've got us into now. You father of asses . . . you built that pavilion in the Calif's private garden!"

"I d-d-don't seem to be able to do any-

thing right, now." A large tear appeared at the corner of the Jinnee's eye. "In the days of Suleyman the son of Daood, I used to be able——" Dahish broke down completely. "Boo-hoo!" he wept—"Boo-hoo! boo-hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo!"

"There, there, Dahish old boy," said Aladdin soothingly, "you did your best. . . . For the love of Allah stop it!" he yelled suddenly, exasperated at the sight of the pitiable object in front of him.

Zat caused a diversion. She bounced in to say that Uncle Faraj had just returned—singing softly to himself about the color of wine. Locked in gentle slumber, he was at the moment lying at the spot in the yard where he fell off the ass.

That reminded Aladdin. "You'd better come and restore Uncle Yoosuf to his own miserable self," he told Dahish.

They all went out to the yard.

Only an occasional convulsive sob was escaping the Jinnee now. He wiped his eyes with the sleeve of his robe. "Be ye restored again to the form of Uncle Yoosuf," he said solemnly.

But there was no miracle. The ass merely yawned—he had evidently had a trying day.

Suddenly blind rage blazed up in the breast of Aladdin Acmash. "Your old lamp's a fraud," he yelled. "There! take it—I don't want the confounded thing;" and he threw it straight at the Jinnee's head.

Dahish ducked just in time, and three pairs of eyes watched the course of the lamp. It travelled straight on . . . *into space!*

"Oh, Aladdin, what have you done? You've——"

"Look at Dahish!" yelled Zat.

They looked. Dahish was slowly fading away before their eyes!

"Quick, Dahish old boy," Aladdin gasped out, "have another try at Uncle Yoosuf before you go. Quick!"

"In the days of Suleyman the son of——"

"For the love of Allah never mind him!"

Dahish bent his slowly fading eyes on the ass. He stretched forward his fading arms. "Be ye restored to your own proper form," he said, and next moment he had disappeared completely.

The spectators waited, and hoped.

Then Joharah dashed toward the animal. "It's not the same ass!" she shrieked.

One glance, and Aladdin agreed with her. Where Uncle Yoosuf had got to, only Allah and Uncle Faraj knew—perhaps only Allah knew.

"Gather together everything in the house that is of any value, tie the lot in a bundle, and fix it on this beast. We've got to be out of Baghdad before sundown."

"But where are we going, Aladdin?"

"El-Mosil, El-Basrah—anywhere."

"But—but what can we do when we get there?"

Aladdin hesitated for a moment. Then he put his hand in his pocket. "Old Dahish did one thing right. He sent me a hundred pieces of gold this morning." The young man drew himself up proudly. "I'll be a money-lender yet!"

"Oh! that will be lovely, Aladdin," said young Mrs. Acmash.

In our next issue Mr. *Govan will tell "The Truth About Sinbad."*

"The heavy rifle thundered at range close enough to scorch that coarse, shaggy hair."

KONG BENG

By WARREN HASTINGS MILLER

A tale of East Borneo and the dark superstitions of the Dyaks—a white man uses the Hindoo gods to fight fetish-worship

A LONG shaft of sunlight fell down in hundreds of feet from a ragged hole in the roof of the cave and bathed in splendor one of that solemn semicircle of Hindoo gods. Bulieng, Jim Anderson's Dyak foreman of the platinum mines, trembled violently as the pair stood knee-deep in bat dung, watching. The shaft moved like a finger of light as the sun outside passed the zenith. It had been resting on Brahma; it now brought out Shiva in a blaze of carved stone twelve feet high. Beyond him was his bloodthirsty wife, Kali. On the other

side of Brahma rose the ghostly quarter-circle of Vishnu, Hanuman, and Ganesha, dim in the gloom of Kong Beng. They had been erected here by a forgotten Hindoo dynasty somewhere in the Sixth Century, not to be discovered again till a Dutch archeologist came to this part of Borneo in 1902.

"No Neduma, *Tuan?*" Bulieng had been on the point of bolting a dozen times since entering Kong Beng. All the Dyaks shunned it like a plague. They believed it the home of Neduma, a fabulous monster who was appeased by human sacrifice once a year at Bulieng's *kampong* of Long Nya.

"Of course not, Bulieng!" insisted the manager. "There ain't no such animile! Now you listen to me——"

"Which one is thy god, *Tuan?*" asked Bulieng artlessly. He was by no means unconvinced of the existence of Neduma, for that monster had a very personal bearing on him. His own young wife, Melah, was selected for the sacrifice this year, it was whispered about the *kampong*. Anderson had seen her often, that sleek little Dyak beauty in her corselet of red rattan hoops and necklace of white cotton tatting. She always showed up on pay-day to collar Bulieng's stipend of silver *rykstdaalers* before he could dissipate it in cock-fighting. Anderson had a strong, manly affection for his capable foreman. He and Melah were in deep trouble now, with this doom hanging over them. He had persuaded Bulieng into Kong Beng mainly to encourage him to help himself by breaking his own superstitions over Neduma. Once convince Bulieng that that chimera was an invention of the witch-doctors, the rest would be easy.

"That one, I guess," Anderson laughed as he pointed out Hanuman, the monkey god. "The god of work, Bulieng. Thou knowest! All our days are given to the breaking of platinum rock. But it doesn't matter. . . . Now look here: you have seen with your own eyes that no Neduma lives in Kong Beng, haven't you? It's just a tale of the priests, Bulieng. It is they who come by night to take away the victim. Ye grovel with fear, and then the loved one is gone. But men do it, and a man can stop it—even *thou!*"

He jabbed a heartening forefinger at Bulieng's brawny brown chest. The Dyak looked bewildered and was still terribly frightened. But there was a dawning courage in his almond-shaped brown eyes. "The Master says?" he inquired, bucked up enormously by Anderson's hint that there was something that a bold young man with a keen parang could do.

"I say that Neduma is nothing more than a priest in a mummery of straw and hocus-pocus!" said Anderson forcefully. "You can beat him at his own game, Bulieng. Tell me more about this ceremony and I'll tell you what to do."

Bulieng looked doubtful about giving away any of the mysteries of Neduma night at the *kampong* to his white *tuan*. But he was desperate. She was the light of his eyes, that girl wife. Anderson remembered well their wedding of only a few months ago, up in the great communal house on piles near his platinum works, the fair young couple, the priests waving the sacrificial hens over them, the stern old chief, Tembak Merah, who ruled the *kampong* with an iron rod, aided by the priests. Neduma always took a virgin or a young wife, never a man. She vanished and was never seen again.

"Lo, *Tuan,* thus it is," said Bulieng in hoarse and husky tones. "The great gong beats and we gather family by family in all the twenty doors" [the communal rooms that give on the common gallery or board sidewalk under the great

thatched roof]. "Flat on the floor we lie; none daring to look, all praying that no one be taken from our room. Comes a stealthy rustling. He is here! Neduma, the Evil One, who will blast our *kampong* with plague and head-hunters if we do not give him of our fairest and best! The priests attend him. They go from room to room, in and out. A clicking and a rustling and he is *here*—in our room! Wo! Wo!—That he takes not wife or child or sister of ours! Wo to him who so much as cries out! The swift parang, and his head is cured for our headhouse! . . . Then the gong sounds joyfully and Neduma is gone—but one is missing from among us. . . . O my Melah!"

He was weeping from the emotion and the intensity of his scene. Anderson shuddered over this portrayal of the hour of dread that they all must go through. Ghastly! To him it was a diabolical rule of fear backed by force; but the Dyaks had no gods, not even these Elder Ones of the Hindoos. The sea Dyaks had Allah, due to their contact with the Malays; but up here in the jungle of East Borneo it was still all animism, witchcraft, *hantus* of the woods and rivers. The taboo reigned full force. To groom Bulieng to face this cloud of superstition, all alone, and break it, was letting him in for untold dangers, fiendish hates, audacious conspiracies. But he could not be in worse trouble than he was in now, with the life of his Melah threatened. Anderson put a reassuring hand on his shoulder.

"So? He comes attended by the priests, does he?" he grinned. "How would you like to be Neduma yourself, Bulieng?"

"Master! How can that be?" The Dyak drew back, puzzled and somewhat scandalized at his *tuan's* flippancy in so mentioning the dreaded monster.

"I mean," said Anderson, "this Neduma mummery is nothing more than old Ka-Sabang himself, the head priest. Don't I know that old devil! He hates me. He's barely civil when I have to call on the chief on business connected with our mining concession. Suppose you get into this gent's clothes and try stealing Melah yourself, since they're bent on taking her?"

IT TOOK some time for that astounding idea to penetrate Bulieng's intelligence. Then he frowned and tapped the war parang in its wooden scabbard at his belt. "The *tuan* says? Yea, I will take his head! But what man dares raise parang against Neduma, *Tuan?*"

"No, no, no! Don't you see? Neduma is only a hunk of straw and skins with old Ka-Sabang inside it, Bulieng. You tie him up, or something, and get into the mummery yourself. *You* come to the *kampong*, attended by the priests. *You* visit all the rooms as Neduma. When you come to your own room you pick up Melah and carry her off yourself, and there you are. Simple enough!"

"Tuan!" Bulieng's eyes were shining. The merry Dyak grin broke out on his features. The plan had an audacity about it that just suited him, once convinced that he was dealing only with men. He was nearly convinced of that now, under the adored master's guidance. Also bossing a hundred Chinese coolies panning platinum matrix — *mas kodok* [frogs' gold], the Dyaks called it contemptuously, knowing nothing of its value nor why the white man wanted it—had given Bulieng something of the white man's attitude on superstitions in general. He had seen too many equally absurd superstitions among the coolies and had laughed at them as the *tuan* did.

"Tuan, it can be done!" he said. "There is a fetish house in the jungle

that no man visits on pain of death. It is from there that the priests come, attending Neduma. If he is but a thing of straw and furs as thou sayest, I and my brothers will take care of the priests!" He smiled grimly. "But, *Tuan,* when I bring away Melah in my arms, where shall we fly? The priests will be found. Tembak Merah will pursue us with all his warriors, knowing then that I dared to be Neduma."

Anderson had been thinking ahead of him on that. Too true it was that the man who dared defy the prevailing fetishism of any jungle community incurred vengeance and death. Also the repercussions on his own work here would be most awkward. That his own foreman had perpetrated this outrage on their priests would bring down the wrath of Tembak Merah and all Long Nya upon the platinum mines. Anything but a row of that sort! The Dutch government would frown. The great oil company which used his platinum in its sulfuric acid stills and backed the mine financially as a subsidiary company would not be pleased. Also he would lose his valuable foreman with Bulieng fled into the jungle. Anderson could think of nothing but hiding him somewhere until this blew over.

"Why not bring her here to Kong Beng, Bulieng?" he suggested. "None of them would dare enter this cave."

Bulieng shook his head violently. "It is the lair of Neduma, *Tuan!* I *banyak takut* [much afraid]. When thou standest by . . . and the sun shines outside. But not at night, in the dark. Nay, *Tuan!*"

It was hard to keep patience with him. The existence of Neduma still troubled him, in spite of all that Anderson had said. The manager stood looking at the moving sun shaft, now swiftly lighting up the stone image of Krishna. It came to him that it was not enough to cast out one belief and leave no other in its place. Man was so constructed that he had to have something more powerful than himself to cling to. These ancient gods were primitive, but they met that need. There was a patron god for every human ambition, fear, hope. These Dyak savages had no such reliances, only fearsome *hantus* who must be propitiated. Bulieng would be touched by no such abstract conception as Allah or Christianity; what he wanted was something immediate and tangible, something to make offerings to and draw mental strength from, something to cast out fears. Otherwise he would relapse into the terrors of Neduma the moment Anderson left him, and be hunted down in the jungle and his head taken. Melah's too. . . .

"These be the ancient gods of the Dyaks, Bulieng," said Anderson solemnly. "Long ago. Before the memory of the grandfathers. The priests have made ye forget that these ever were. They tell ye lying tales of Neduma, so that your livers are filled with fear and ye are easy to rule. Would that all Long Nya would return to these and ye become men once more! Thou knowest, Bulieng! The Dyak fears no man; but before the evil spirits of the jungle he is a coward. It is because they have forgotten These."

THEY certainly were impressive. A temple floor of mosaic was under all this bat guano. The archeologist had cut a trench to it, already half filled in with the droppings from the cave roof. The forgotten gods stood in a solemn semicircle, and the shaft of the sun lit up each in turn throughout the day. There was one for every human need. They were a primitive system of theology, but they were at least the first step upward

out of darkness and fetishism. They led to the conceptions of Allah, and, finally, Christ. Anderson turned over the idea of getting all Long Nya to take this first step. It was the only way to settle Bulieng's problem definitely and permanently. You had to have the war chief, Tembak Merah, on your side or the martyrdom of Bulieng and Melah for their revolt against the Neduma superstition was a certainty. The *kampong* would never forget or forgive.

"Which is my god, *Tuan?*" Bulieng asked after some contemplation.

Good! He had parted with Neduma, and was now looking for strength without himself, under that suggestion of the manager's that these were the ancient gods so long forgotten. It had been a wonderment to Bulieng to discover them here at all, in this cave supposed to be the home of the Neduma monster.

"The sun falls on him now, Bulieng. The protector of lovers and married couples; Krishna is his name," said Anderson impressively.

"In truth, *Tuan?* Yea, I do need him!" Bulieng lost no time in doing *pooja* before the forgotten god. Anderson waited.

"They have power greater than Neduma's, *Tuan?*" asked Bulieng when his supplications were done.

"Sure! They represent ideas. . . ." Anderson stopped, for that word was too deep for his Dyak foreman.

"I mean, Neduma is nothing, nothing at all. You'll find that out, when you put on the mummery that old Ka-Sabang uses for the ceremony! The rest is your own fears, folly. Now, you'll bring Melah here that night, won't you? Krishna will protect you, no fear! I'll leave a flashlight near the entrance so you can find your way. Will you do it, Bulieng?"

"Can do! I no fear now!" Bulieng flashed the merry Dyak smile under his bang of blue-black hair and laid hand on his parang hilt.

"Mind you don't murder those priests, though!" Anderson laughed. "The Dutch will hang you, just the same. You tie 'em up. Lock 'em up in that fetish house. Any old thing. The rest of it I'll have to manage somehow. . . . Come on, let's get back to the mines, Bulieng," Anderson added in haste, having won his point.

"Those coolies haven't done a stroke of work since we left, I'll bet!"

THEY went down the three-mile trail to the platinum workings, with Bulieng a good deal of a changed man since the manager had dragged him to Kong Beng in spite of his fears. The Dyak could plan that coup against the priests cannily enough if he only had men like himself to deal with. The handling of Tembak Merah, the war chief, was a different matter. That would require Anderson himself. He was the Majoor, here, a minor native government official charged with the maintenance of the peace in this district. The Dutch allowed him a force of young warriors, armed with guns and their own sumpitans and parangs, for that purpose. He drew a percent on the mine profits in return for keeping off wandering bands of headhunters. He was friendly with Anderson, but would be adamant in backing up the priests with all their rites and customs and taboos. He probably was as much afraid of Neduma as any of them, and how to switch him over to the gods in Kong Beng was something of a poser. You couldn't persuade *him* into the cave, as Anderson had done with Bulieng.

The manager puzzled over it all afternoon while overseeing the coolies at the sluiceways and washing troughs and stamp mills of the platinum works. A creek

flowed down here through a formation of green syenite platinum matrix into the Bungalan River. The immense *kampong* of Long Nya rose on its banks; some two miles inland was the hill of Kong Beng, hollow inside with that enormous limestone cave. Anderson finally decided on the white man's way in dealing with native superstitions—to blast them with a commercial enterprise carried on right in the home of the myth, Neduma's cave.

He called on Tembak Merah that evening. Up a great notched tree-trunk ladder till thirty feet above the ground he climbed. The *kampong* hummed with laughter and domestic activity. Dammar torches lit up its communal board walk under the thatch roof. Pretty Dyak girls were winnowing *padi* rice by the toss of flat baskets in the night breeze. Older women husked it with wooden mortars and pestles and stored the grain in bins outside each of the twenty doors. The men were all in the head-house, talking, smoking, mending weapons and tools, waiting for the evening meal to be set off the fire within their teak board rooms.

TEMBAK MERAH came out to greet the manager courteously. *"Tabek, Tuan!* All is well with thy mining?"

He laid hand on heart and motioned Anderson to a bench. A hard-bitten old savage was Tembak, bullet-headed, grim of visage, his stern dark eyes expressive of force and character. Three gold crescents chained one above the other on his brown chest were the emblem of his rank as chief and Majoor under the Dutch government.

"Tabek, ya Tunku," returned Anderson. "I have come to ask permission to run a spur of ore track up to Kong Beng," he opened up briskly, white-man fashion.

The chief looked horrified. "To Kong Beng, *Tuan Besar?"* he growled, aghast. "There is no *mas kodok* [platinum] there, the *tuan* knows."

"In truth. But there is much good bat guano," returned Anderson hardily. "We ship it out in bags. There will be many *ryksdaalers* percent in it for you, *ya Tunku."*

The chief grew vehement immediately. That expression of cupidity that had first crossed his face was wiped out in a gibbering terror. "Nay, *Tuan!* It can not be! Knowest thou not what lives in Kong Beng? Yea, a pestilence will come upon thy coolies—upon all of us! Nay, *Tuan!"*

"Why not?" asked Anderson composedly. "There's nothing to it. Lay in a line of track and send in coolies with shovels. There must be thousands of tons of guano in that cave. Good thing for you, *Tunku!* I can give you ten percent on all we take out."

"Tuan!" Tembak Merah burst out, shocked. "Speak not so of Kong Beng! Know you not that it is the home of"—he looked over shoulder fearfully; then whispered hoarsely—"Neduma!"

"Who's he?" Anderson asked innocently. "He'll have to get out of there, that's all. That guano's simply going to waste."

"Tuan," said Tembak solemnly, "thou speakest as a foolish child! Know, then, that he is the most terrible of all the *hantus* of the jungle. No man can see him and live. Yea, he visits us with plague and war unless we appease him with sacrifice once a year! Go not near Kong Beng, I implore you, *Tuan!* A thousand evils will fall on him who dares."

The benighted heathen! He honestly believed all this, Anderson perceived. The priests had him fooled. He was going to be a deal of a problem, at that. Anderson shrugged his shoulders.

"He won't touch a white man, no fear, chief!" he said bluffly. "I was in there today."

"Thou?" Tembak looked at him, awed. He moved away abruptly, as if afraid of catching a pestilence. "What did the *tuan* see?" he asked from a safe distance.

"Nothing. Millions of bats. Two feet of solid guano. . . . Come, chief, this Neduma person didn't bother *me!* We'll put in the coolies and begin shipping the stuff. He won't bother them either, or I'll put a charm on him that he won't forget! Let's see; you get a dollar on every ten bags. . . ."

Even that did not move him. The chief glowered and was growing resentful that this presumptuous white man had visited Kong Beng at all and been permitted to live. He needed a dose of curiosity. Anderson said:

"Come to think of it, I did see something, chief. Big magic! . . ."

He paused, waiting for the chief to come on.

Tembak Merah frowned. *"Pah!* Magic leaves no track. What did the *tuan* see? Was it huge and black and covered with ivory knives?"

"So Neduma leaves a track, does he?" asked Anderson with interest.

"Sahyah! Cloven like a pig's, *Tuan.* When a Dyak sees that track he runs! They lead to his home in Kong Beng. Where is now thy magic?"

Anderson pricked up his ears. He knew of the skull in the museum in Charlottenburg, Berlin, the sole specimen of an animal inhabiting Borneo that the Malays called *babi itam besar,* the giant black boar. It was big as a Jersey cow, judging from that skull, and most formidable. Fletcher, the big-game hunter of Calcutta, was reputed to have shot one. He could not persuade any Dyak to follow those tracks, but had brought his own shikaris from India. Was Neduma none other than Babi Itam Besar, then? If so, Bulieng and he had noticed no tracks around Kong Beng. It would be rather interesting, however, if the animal *did* visit the cave! Especially on the night of the ceremony. . . . Or, had he another entrance that no man had discovered? Anyway, the mummery used by the priests seemed clear. It was a skin of the giant black boar, taken in some deadfall long ago and handed down by the priests from generation to generation. It would be something of a prize, for the scientific world was waiting for more details to add to that skull. Fletcher had cheerfully taken the head without bothering much about measurements. His big hall in Calcutta had about every game head in the world.

"Nevertheless there is big magic in Kong Beng, *Tunku,"* said Anderson. "Thou wilt see, some day. . . . Unless the sultan at Samarinda forbids us, I am going ahead with that guano."

Tembak Merah shrugged his brawny brown shoulders. He was bitten with curiosity over the "magic," but he knew right well that Neduma lived in the cave too. Pestilence would surely visit this impious white man! "Thy coolies will die before ever track is laid, *Tuan,"* he warned. "It is an evil thing. We offer up sacrifice as usual, on the night when the moon is full. Wo to the *kampong* that appeases not Neduma's wrath!"

He and all of them were certainly under the spell of the priests, Anderson thought. They had worked this rare animal into a legend of hideous fear and superstition. That it left visible tracks was all in their favor. That people disappeared and were never seen again, when those tracks appeared in any part of the jungle, was quite accountable by the ferocity of the beast. Anderson knew

wild pig, a formidable and pugnacious brute anywhere. A native would have no chance at all against this giant of the species. Also, if one did inhabit Kong Beng, it would not be a safe place for Bulieng to hide in with Melah. . . .

Anderson left the chief after some more talk. He had a lot to do, the first act of which was to consult his calendar. It showed the moon full on February fourteenth. It was now nearing the end of January, so he had not much time to clear out Kong Beng. His idea was the characteristic white man's penchant for combining practical utility with something more—restoring Kong Beng to its former temple glory. These people were like Bulieng, in that, having cast out Neduma, they would want something else to lean upon. Primitive as they were, these old Hindoo gods would be about the next step up from pure devil-propitiation. At that, a very large body of intelligent humanity worshipped them still. . . .

ANDERSON next sent off a messenger to the Sultan of Samarinda offering him a handsome percent on the guano, and then he sought out Bulieng.

"Catchem fifty coolie, Bulieng. I want track laid up to Kong Beng," he ordered.

"*Tuan!* . . . But wherefore?" asked his foreman wonderingly. "No can do, *Tuan!* The coolies much fright. Make bad hell, *Tuan.*" Bulieng shook his head vigorously.

"Not if I stand by with a rifle," the manager grinned. "They're not afraid of bats. We're going to ship out that guano, Bulieng. It's worth three *ryksdaalers* a bag."

Bulieng grinned. How like his white *tuan* to turn the sacred cave into another kind of mine for the ships that always seemed hungry—though Bulieng had never seen one!

"What if Neduma comes upon them, *Tuan?*" he asked.

Anderson eyed him keenly. "Yes, I've heard from Tembak Merah that he leaves a track. We didn't see any around Kong Beng, though."

"But I have seen it, *Tuan.* You say him no be; but once I was hunting with my dogs and they whined and would not go on. Lo, a track big as these two hands, *Tuan,* and deep in the soil! I show him to priests and we all run, *Tuan.* They say it is Neduma—and now he come take my wife."

"*Pouah!* If he leaves a track, that double rifle of mine will fix him," said Anderson confidently. "How are you getting on about those priests, Bulieng?"

Bulieng looked troubled. "Master, my brothers say you lie," he told the manager simply. " 'Have we not all seen Neduma's tracks in the jungle?' they say. 'What good for catchem priests? Neduma no hurt them; he kill *us!*' "

Anderson bit his lip over that primitive but practical reasoning. He had begun by assuming that Neduma was but a bogy and had dragged Bulieng into Kong Beng to convince him. But the legend had its existence in a real animal that left a track, and that made a lot of difference. There was no convincing Bulieng and his brothers that Neduma was just a mummery worn by Ka-Sabang, the head priest. They devoutly believed that Neduma came to the *kampong* attended by the priests, and had no desire to be around the fetish house when that happened! But he had to maneuver Bulieng, at least, out of that belief.

"*Bosh!* Deep track wasn't it, you said?" he countered. "Then the brute must weigh something. Do you hear the planks give and creak when he comes along the

twenty doors? You do not! Only a swishing, you said. I tell you they've got a skin or something. Anything as heavy as that track shows would make a big noise moving about on wood planks."

"*Tuan!*" Bulieng was all grins again. Then his face fell. "But how makes he a deep track in the jungle if dead and worn as a skin, then, *Tuan?*" he objected, all upset again.

"There's more than one of them, that's all," said Anderson. "Can there not be *two* giant pigs in the jungle? I'll shoot this one, and that's that. Come, get the coolies going, Bulieng."

CIVILIZATION proceeded to march on Kong Beng. The Chinese shouted and were happy to be let off the monotony of the sluiceways and ore-picking. They felled trees and filled in for a track-bed that grew length by length up the ravine that led to Kong Beng. Anderson went ahead, alone this time, the big double rifle in the crook of his arm. Since he had to deal with an actual giant black boar supposed to live in Kong Beng, it would be well to see if there were any tracks leading to the hill. He circled the silent jungle around it. The forest of tapangs that covered the lowlands back of Kong Beng was so dense-crowned as to kill all undergrowth save the lianas. It was columnar with their enormous trunks, buttressed with writhing roots that joined the boles in flat folds twelve feet above the soil. Anderson moved as through cathedral aisles. The birds were so far above that only the faintest sounds of them came down to him. His footfalls were muffled in the dank duff.

And he came upon a line of tracks. They were pig, all right, but what a pig! The telltale dew-claw points were at least four inches behind the cloven hoofs, and they drove into the duff as if rammed. They led toward Kong Beng.

Anderson followed warily. Caution, born of considerable experience with big game, bade him beware. Not before a tiger's pugs had he felt the respect that these tracks engendered! The well-known tenacity of the boar in charging home. . . . A tiger could be scuppered by two heavy shots at close range and died in an aimless flurry; the boar came right on. Fletcher's boar-head had tushes eleven inches long and twelve inches spread, he had heard.

Other lines of tracks joined this one as he neared Kong Beng. It became a regular runway leading to the hill. Anderson paused as the entrance to a small cave came in sight. That was his lair. It would be foolishness to venture further all alone. He shook his head, having located the place. Whether it joined the great temple cave of Kong Beng by some tunnelway passable to the giant boar could not be said. Probably not, as he and Bulieng had come upon no tracks around the temple entrance or inside. Anyway he would have to organize a drive and have a couple of Chinese gun-bearers at his back who would not run. One thing was certain: Neduma was very real. He lived here in Kong Beng—on the opposite side from the temple. He would have to be met and shot. Also, if he could confront the Dyaks with the freshly killed animal against that dried pelt used by the priests, the battle against superstition would be won.

Anderson returned to his platinum works thinking over how all this could be done. No drive of the Dyaks could be organized in the face of those tracks. But he had his Chinese. Some of them might be experienced in cave-hunting the snow tiger in China. They attacked him with long trident spears that were proof against the tiger's charge. Anderson unearthed four of those old-timers

in his coolie gangs. Big, powerful, hard-faced yellow giants were they, and they took over the blacksmith for a day to forge those tridents under direction of Yi-Song, their leader. Ghastly weapons! thought Anderson when they were finished. Two feet across the horns; the central tine long and bladed like a dagger and mounted at the end of a bamboo pole twelve feet long. He felt better now! With four of those planted at his back, he had some chance against the charge of Babi Itam Besar.

MEANWHILE the day of the full moon was nearing fast. The guano was coming out of Kong Beng in trundling ore cars. It was a place now of work and shovels, lit up by dammar torches. The *kampong* had entered a period of mourning and propitiation against the yearly coming of Neduma. It kept very much to itself. The jungle was filled with streamers tied to bamboo poles to ward off evil *hantus*. The taboos were increased, so that not a soul could leave the *kampong* save Bulieng and his two brothers employed at the platinum mines.

Anderson had a last conference with him on the evening before the ceremony.

"Look here, Bulieng," he said. "I don't want you to throw away that mummery, whatever it is, when you get away from the *kampong* with Melah. I'm convinced it is a skin, the skin of one of these big black boars. Be sure to bring it to Kong Beng and hide it somewhere. We may need it later. . . . And I want to be at the *kampong* tonight. Can you manage it? Tembak Merah will start something, sure, when he finds that you and your brothers are missing after it is all over! I'd better be around."

"Can do, *Tuan*. We have made a door in the planks of the floor in our room. There will be a bamboo pole, so that we can climb down after all the families are gathered in their twenty doors. The *Tuan* can climb up and take our place."

"Box seat for the ceremony, eh?" Anderson laughed. "All right; I'll do it. When had I better be there?"

"After fowls-take-their-perches time, *Tuan*. Thou wilt hear a great gong ringing. Then climb we down unseen by any one and go to the fetish house."

"Stout fellah! Go to it, Bulieng!" said Anderson gayly.

"*Tuan*, I do anything to save my Melah! Even go to Kong Beng at night. . . . I have faith in the god who is there. He will protect us, Melah and me."

"Even so," said Anderson soberly. "And there are gods for others too. One for the chief. The biggest one. We'll see. . . ."

As the sun set, Anderson sent his four Chinese up the track to Kong Beng with orders to wait there in the jungle for him. He might need them, this night. Then, as the swift tropic night fell, he strolled over toward the *kampong* with his big-game rifle in the crook of his arm. He waited near by, under the trees that bordered their *padi* fields. The great thatch structure was dark and silent. No happy laughter this night, only dread and foreboding. No family knew which of them would be visited with bereavement. It was a thing of the caprice of the priests—or their obscure politics. But Bulieng knew. His connection with the white man's work was the motive to pull him down; his discovery of that track the excuse. The vengeance of Neduma upon him who so much as dared to look at it! The priests would proclaim that, with shakings of the head, after the tragedy. Bulieng was a disturbing element to them, with his contact with outside civilization. He alone did not tremble enough before the bogy of Neduma.

The troubled snarl of a great brass gong broke the silence. It kept up for some minutes while Anderson moved hastily through the trees. He was in a grove of areca-nut palms, presently, the village supply of betel-nuts in tall slender trees like broom-handles fifty feet high. Through them he gained the damp area of refuse under the *kampong*. A dim slanting line under the big upright piles guided him to the bamboo. Three active young Dyaks were already sliding down it. There was the grip of hands and Anderson's whispered: "Good luck to you, Bulieng!" as the three set off for the fetish house in the jungle. Then he shinned up the pole.

He was in a room of grovelling terror. It was pitch-dark, save for the oblong of shaded moonlight of the narrow door. Bulieng's family, the old grandfather, the grandmother, Melah, a sister, three children, all lay face to the planks, shuddering and weeping. The deep, muffled *Boom!* of a great log drum in the head-house, where Tembak Merah and his unmarried warriors waited fully armed, pulsated at regular intervals. It was like the march of death, that drum. It boomed menacingly to the sound of stifled groans and women's outcries throughout all the twenty doors. It was an impressive ceremony, this yearly visit of Neduma—the abject rule of superstitious fear foisted on these people by their priests.

Anderson crept to the doorway where he could see. Already they were coming up the great notched log to the platform. As he had conjectured, Neduma was a great black boar skin, fearsome, bristled, gleaming with ivory tushes. The priests had improved on it by adding more along his great arched back, taken probably from skulls found at rare intervals in the jungle. His sides had another row of them, great white sweeping simitars of ivory.

Attended by two priests the monster entered the first door. There were moans, the stifled cries of children. A low wail of utter misery rose all over the *kampong*. They all knew what was coming!

Anderson moved over to one side as Neduma entered Bulieng's room. The shrieks of terror from the three nude brown infants were stopped by hasty palms from their elders. The brute stood over them all, his satellite priests waiting outside. There was an utter stillness, while the whole floor trembled with quivering bodies and the rapid beats of their frightened hearts could be heard through their open mouths. Even Anderson shared something of that terror. This hovering doom might take one of them, or it might not. It was Death; as present as with a mortal sickness, and they could but pray to be spared. Anderson lay on guard, with one hand gripping his pistol; for if that really was Ka-Sabang inside that skin and he saw a white man here—nothing could stop the swift stroke of his knife!

Then Neduma stooped and picked up the prostrate Melah. She disappeared into the cavernous depths of that skin without a sound or an outcry. Anderson was so upset with the diabolical reality of it all that he moved to stop it, but a reassuring kick in his ribs bade him lie low. Ka-Sabang would not have done that!

He saw them moving down the wide platform under the roof and vanish over the ladder head. The drum, that had not ceased its funereal booming, quickened its beat; then the gong broke out in joyous peals. Neduma was gone, for the year!

THE *kampong* came rapidly to life. Sounds of hysterical rejoicing within the twenty doors as each family looked

and saw that no member was missing. They poured out on their communal platform, shouting and singing and embracing each other, while the chief and his warriors advanced in a procession from the head-house to learn the news. Only one room was taking no part in the jubilee. From Bulieng's came wailings and lamentation, the shrill cry of children whose mother was gone. . . . Anderson had hastened to jump out and mix with the crowd. He broke through it, presently, to greet the chief, who glowered at him with resentment.

"What dost thou here, *Tuan Besar?*" he growled, a glare in his eyes and his hand on his parang hilt.

"I'm looking for Bulieng, chief," said Anderson cheerfully. "There's trouble at the works, so I came right over."

Tembak Merah pointed silently at Bulieng's door. "This is the night when Neduma comes, *Tuan.* He *has* come! And he has taken. . . . Thou that laughed at Neduma, see now! . . .*Ya* Bulieng! Come out! The *tuan* wants you," he called into the stricken household.

There was no answer.

"*Ya* Bulieng!" called the chief impatiently. "A torch, there!" He took one from his warriors and thrust it into the room. There was no one there but the old grandparents, wailing and rocking to and fro, and the three children being comforted by the sister.

Tembak Merah's face darkened. "*Ha!* He has dared break the taboo! No man may be away from the *kampong* this night! And where are the two brothers? Send for Ka-Sabang, my young men!"

Two of them were gone in a flash on the order. "And he is not at thy workings, *Tuan?*" asked Tembak Merah suspiciously.

"In truth no, chief! I want him right off," said Anderson. "The coolie tongs are rioting."

"I told thee that no good would come of the guano, *Tuan!*" said Tembak. "It is the work of Neduma that your coolies fight."

"Bosh! There's nothing in the cave, chief. Except that magic that I told thee about . . . and that is not for the coolies but the Dyaks. It gives all the power to thee, chief; not to these priests."

Tembak Merah regarded him with curiosity. The priests had too much power here, if you asked him! He had to back them up or a thousand plagues would fall upon him. But he didn't like it. They always fell back on *him* when hostile Punan head-hunters tried to raid the *kampong.* It was the parang and the sumpitan, then, for protection, though they always took the credit afterward. Anderson felt that he had driven in a wedge here and looked more hopefully toward the working out of his plot.

"Ka-Sabang and his priests not coming, chief! We dared not go near the fetish house." Those two young fellows had returned with that announcement.

Tembak Merah frowned, puzzling. "Always they come back to be with us, *Tuan,*" he said. "The happy families, who have been protected against Neduma by their incantations, make great offerings."

Anderson nodded sardonically. "Sure thing! Catchem coming, catchem going, chief! Now I'll tell you where you'll find Bulieng: You'll find him in Kong Beng. He prays to the big magic there——"

"But Neduma came to his room and he took, *Tuan!*" Tembak interrupted with triumph. "Greater than thy magic is he!"

"Yes? You'll find Melah there too," Anderson insisted. "Looks like it, doesn't

it? Bulieng and his two brothers gone; the priests gone. . . . Let's all go to the fetish house and see what's happened to them."

Tembak Merah hesitated. There were frightful taboos against going anywhere near that fetish house. "If the *Tuan Besar* leads us." . . . He gave reluctant consent.

A TORCHLIGHT procession of all Tembak's bodyguard went down the ladder to solve this mystery. Anderson retrieved his double rifle where he had left it against a tree trunk and led the way along that fearsome trail. They followed at a respectful distance. They saw him reach the fetish house and fling open its doors with the obtuse practicality of the white man. Then his laugh came back:

"Here they are, all three of them, chief! Come, take a look."

Tembak Merah crept up. Ka-Sabang and his two satellites lay bound and gagged, most unceremoniously, in the moonlight streaming down through those open doors!

A curious grin cracked the chief's hard features. He was not sorry! The Dyak sense of humor chuckled out from his young warriors. Here lay their dreaded priests; and they looked rather harmless just now! Also bold and determined men had done these things to them.

"Lo, a fresh trail leads off here into the jungle, chief," said one of the young men. He was pointing out an obvious trail through the lalang grass that grew around the fetish house. It went toward Kong Beng.

"Come on!" Anderson urged. "Now I'll show you the big magic in Kong Beng, chief! Bulieng is there. The magic gave him power to tie up these priests and come take Melah himself. You want some of that magic, chief?"

Tembak Merah grunted. He was already jealous of Bulieng. And he saw a chance here to rule the *kampong* himself, once rid of the power of his priests. Anderson kept close by his side during that march to Kong Beng. The old fellow and his followers were growing more fearful with every step toward the dreaded place. It wouldn't do to have him bolt and spoil everything!

They slowed up, hesitated, hung back, as through the tapang groves the hill of Kong Beng could be seen, its brushy slopes bathed in moonlight. Anderson gripped Tembak's arm and urged him ahead. The chief was trembling like a leaf. He would have prudently got out of this long ago were it not for the white man by his side.

The fearsome entrance now yawned before them. They all stopped. "Not a step further, O *Tuan!*" Tembak quavered. "Nay, we be torn in pieces!"

Anderson silently pointed at a mute evidence of civilization coming out of the cave mouth. It was but a curved piece of track, with an empty ore car on it, but it was eloquent of the *Tuan's* heedless commercialism to that Dyak chief.

"Stuff!" said Anderson. "The coolies be not afraid! The magic in Kong Beng protects them. Lo, I will call a few and let them go in first."

He gave a low whistle, and his four Chinese hunters stepped out of concealments among the mossy boulders scattered around the cave mouth. The Dyaks looked at their strange weapons with encouragement. Let Neduma come upon them! He would have to be more formidable than the mind of man could conceive to pass those tridents!

Anderson waved them ahead and again took the chief's arm. Their footsteps rang now on ancient mosaic floor-

ing. The guano had been cleared away so that a broad aisle now led into the temple, centered by that track. A few turns in the rock walls; then Anderson stood and pointed.

The moon had not failed him. A broad shaft of its silvery light fell in a slant from the ragged hole far above, just as with the sun. It was even more impressive. The twelve gods stood in their solemn semicircle and the moon-ray now fell full upon Brahma.

"These be the magic, the ancient gods of the Dyaks, chief," said Anderson gravely. "There *is* no Neduma! That god is Brahm, who gives power to chiefs —*thy* god, Tembak! Beside him Shiva, who is for the warriors. On the other side Vishnu, whom the women of the *kampong* may pray to. And lo, Bulieng with Melah beside him!"

He pointed to the left, where the dim form of Krishna rose. Two worshippers knelt on the mosaic before him; behind them two others, the two brothers.

The Dyaks looked in awe. They had never seen anything like this before. There was an air of serene power in this temple lit by its single shaft of moonlight and solemnized by the presence of the gods.

"I have heard an old tale that there were strange beings in Kong Beng, *Tuan,*" said Tembak. "Are these in truth the ancient gods of the Dyaks?"

"Yea, verily! Neduma is but an animal, a kind of pig. The priests have made him into a monster. Come, I'll show you!" Anderson added with energy. "Oh Bulieng!" he called. "Got that skin?"

Bulieng rose. He glanced defiantly at the chief; then with his usual merry confidence smiled at the manager. He could be seen dragging at something behind Krishna; then across the mosaic he was hauling without ceremony a huge black hide covered with curved ivory simitars. It looked pathetically harmless and empty in the beam of moonlight! Bulieng gave it a contemptuous kick and then stood beside it.

"Neduma, chief!" he said challengingly. "Priest wear him. Me too, this night! *I* took my Melah instead of Ka-Sabang. . . . *Ptu!*" He spat on the skin.

The Dyaks guffawed as that bold trickery upon their dreaded priests penetrated. There were growls of ferocity as they thought upon how many of their fairest and best had been taken under this dastardly fabrication of terror that was but some animal's skin. They were looking with a new appreciation at their ancient gods, and Anderson's triumph might have been complete—only at that moment a deep, thudding sound reverberated hollowly through the temple. They all jumped, startled, listening. It came from the extreme back of the cave, where piles and shelves of deep guano still lay untouched. It was succeeded by rapid thumps, rammings, an indescribable mutter of squeals and grunts muffled in the bowels of the earth. Menacing and ominous were those sounds of ghostly fury!

The appalled yell: *"Neduma!"* broke from all of them and they bolted in terror.

ANDERSON set the safety catch off his rifle and stepped forward, taut and tense. "Stand fast there, Yi Song!" he barked at his four Chinese—"Hold them, Bulieng! Call them back and they'll see something!"

The guano was cascading in waves of loosened dirt as the animal behind it dug and bored. Anderson knew that his conjecture was correct; there was a connection between the lair of that giant black boar and the temple, only it had been blocked up with guano. He was coming

through, enraged at the sounds of all these voices in here. The guano was tumbling down in heaps now. Then a slope of it burst like an exploding bomb and a great swinish head armed with long and fearsome tushes protruded. It rooted the guano fiercely. Red and fiery eyes under a mane of coarse bristles gleamed balefully in the moonlight. Anderson stood his ground, rifle aimed, waiting for the boar's chest to break through. His four Chinese flanked him with their spears set at a low slant. A drumming of hoofs in the soft manure showered the guano aside and then Babi Itam Besar stood revealed, immense, hairy, formidable—a monster of a brute!

Bang! went Anderson's first shot. The cartridge would fit a naval gun, but it did not stop him. A roaring squeal of rage and pain, and the giant black boar broke through and charged. *Bang!* at ten paces. Anderson jumped back to reload. His shot was mortal, full in the chest, but the boar charged home, his long tushes slashing wickedly, his pointed hoofs stabbing. The tridents met him in a ring of long steel blades as the Chinese braced their spears stoutly. They sank in deep to the bone, but he worried through them in a fury that would not be denied. Anderson had never shoved in two cartridges quicker in his life! His men had bolted, the spear shafts ripped from their hands by the giant's furious slashes. He came on impaled by them as Anderson jumped back to get a little space. *Bang!* The heavy rifle thundered at range close enough to scorch that coarse shaggy hair. The boar leaped up convulsively in a last purposeful slash. It missed Anderson by inches; then he had put his muzzle close to the glaring red eye and pulled the trigger.

That last shot knocked him down as if hit by a pile-driver. The boar spun about his shattered head in a fury of expiring vitality. His prolonged bawl died out in gasping grunts, sighs, comfortable little bleats as if he were falling asleep—which he was. Anderson stood by watching, a fresh pair of cartridges slid in and the breech closed. The temple was full of smoke, the moon-ray a long white shaft of it. And, with a last flurry and a grunt, the life went out of Babi Itam Besar at the foot of the statue of Brahm in Kong Beng.

The Dyaks had come slowly back, awed, breathless. It was manifest now that Neduma was only an animal and that the *Tuan Besar* had killed it with his rifle. Their superstitious terrors had vanished before those facts, for all of them were used to animals of various degrees of ferocity. Anderson swept them all with his glance; then pointed at the ceremonial skin that was so obviously identical with that on the brute now lying dead before Brahm.

"I guess that is the end of Neduma around here, eh, chief?" he asked. "Skin him out, you fellows," he said to Yi Song and his men. "No, not here; outside. Bring it to my bungalow when you get through. . . ."

He turned again to Bulieng and Tembak Merah. "Ye Dyaks . . . I leave ye to your ancient gods now," he said, and bade them farewell.

He went out of Kong Beng with the carcass of the giant black boar being dragged after him by the four Chinese. Within came the sounds of something very like worship as he left the cave to the Dyaks. Anderson felt an elder brother's sympathy tugging at his heart as he listened. Man needs a God; *any* god, sooner than the dreadful terrors of fetishism. He had done right to lead them this one step up out of darkness.

"Two huge eunuchs at that instant leaped from behind the curtain and pinioned Hamed's arms."

The Dragoman's Pilgrimage

By OTIS ADELBERT KLINE

A story of the utterly strange and amazing adventure that befell Hamed the Dragoman in the holy city of Mecca

YOU have been pleased to admire this green turban of mine, *effendi.* Perhaps you would like to hear the story of how I acquired the right to wear it, and to be respectfully addressed as *"Hajji"* by my fellow *Muslimeen.* For it was in the ultimate place of pilgrimage, the holy city of Mecca, that a strange and wondrous adventure befell me.

You would hear the tale? How fortunate that we are but a step from the coffee shop of Silat, who brews the best coffee to be found in Jerusalem. Enter, *effendi,* in the name of Allah.

Ho, Silat! Prepare us two *narghiles,* packed with golden Persian leaf and scented with a dram each of the finest neroli enfleurage. Also brew for us coffee, bitter as faith betrayed, black as the heart of Shaitan the stoned, and hot as a blast from the keyhole of hell.

Let us take this cushioned *diwan, effendi,* where we can talk and smoke in comfort and privacy.

For the purpose of this narrative, I pray you think not of me as Hamed the gray-bearded dragoman, but as a tall, handsome youth with jet-black hair, flashing eyes, and the strength and bravery of the sons of the lion. *Awah! Awah!* That those days so soon have fled!

I have told you, *effendi,* of the fair Tiger Lily from far Cathay, how she helped me regain the fortune that was mine, so that I became a wealthy *aga* in Mosul, and how I loved and lost her. It was her loss which drove me to bibulous companionship, and to spend my gold as if I had been a sultan with rents and revenues, until one morning I woke to the realization that my wealth was wasted. My palace, slaves and household goods were sold to satisfy my creditors. Fortunately for me, however, my good

friend Hasan Aga, who at one time had subsisted on my bounty, had prospered. He took me into his home, and for many days I abode with him, in sorrow and regret.

Presently, when the season for the *Hajj*, the Pilgrimage to Al Madinah and Mecca approached, Hasan Aga suggested that the time was propitious for me to make the journey. I would, by leaving at once, be able to join the Damascus caravan and thus make the *Hajj al Akbar*, the Great Pilgrimage, because in that year the Day of Arafat fell on a Friday.

When I had made due preparation, my friend pressed a hundred gold pounds on me. When I objected to taking so much money from him, he said: "I am but a tree which your bounty has planted, and this is a tithe of the fruit." So I took it, concealed it about my person, and immediately set out for Damascus, where I arrived in time to leave with the pilgrim caravan.

IN DUE time we reached Al Madinah, where I complied with all pious customs, visited the Prophet's tomb, the Mosque of Kuba, and the tomb of Hamzah, friend of Mohammed, on whom be peace.

We journeyed thence to Mecca, where I again went through all forms and ceremonies prescribed by the Apostle of God, may Allah bless and keep him, and where I circumambulated the Ka'abah, kissed the Black Stone, climbed the mounts Safa and Marwah, and drank the bitter waters of the holy well Zemzem. I also stoned the devil at Muna. The last stone having been hurled, I returned to Mecca for the ceremony of farewell, purposing to go from there to Jedda to see that wonder of antiquity, the sixty-foot grave of the giantess Eve, our first ancestress, on whom be peace.

As all the ceremonies of my pilgrimage were finished, and my caravan would not start until the morrow, I was left with considerable time on my hands, so resolved to spend it strolling about viewing the sights and enjoying some of the pleasures which had been forbidden to me while I was yet a pilgrim.

I accordingly visited the great bazar called the Souk al Layl, but quickly tired of the importunities of its piratical tradesmen, who hawked tawdry trinkets and gewgaws, mementos of the holy city, at ruinous prices.

Passing thence, I entered Mecca's principal slave mart, a wide street roofed over with matting and liberally sprinkled with coffee shops. Here there were no *Feringeh* consuls to frown upon the traffic, hence there was no secret bargaining behind closed gates. The human merchandise was openly displayed on benches that paralleled the walls. On the highest benches were the prettiest girls. The plain and the ugly females were herded together on the middle benches. The boys occupied the lowest seats of all.

All were decked out in bright colors, to draw the eye, and the girls wore transparent veils over their heads. This served to soften and make more alluring the beauty of the attractive one, but only accentuated the ugliness of their less-favored sisters.

Most of the slaves had been brought in from Africa, and varied in color from the light Copts down through divers shades of tan and chocolate, to the most ebon black. Among others, I noticed Gallas who chatted saucily with prospective purchasers, half-Arabian Somalis, coffee-hued Abyssinians, and ape-faced Sawahilis.

Leisurely I passed them by, pausing now and again to listen to the haggling of owners and buyers. Presently, how-

ever, I came opposite a high bench on which sat in lonely state a damsel whose dazzling beauty made me certain that Rizwan had opened the gates of Paradise and left them unguarded, so she could come forth. By comparison with even the most comely of the slave-girls I had seen before, her loveliness was as that of a precious and perfect pearl beside stones. Bright as the crescent moon of the Feast of Ramazan was her forehead, above delicately arched brows that were twin bows of enchantment. Her eyes were large and brown, the languorous lids fringed with long, curling lashes. Her nose was short and straight, with delicately formed aristocratic nostrils. The bright coralline of her lips was daintily reflected in her glowing cheeks. Blacker than a lover's night of estrangement was her silken hair. And her figure was slender and graceful as a wand of *ban.*

So perfect of face and form was she that I knew the ransom of an emir would not purchase her. I did not wonder that, though many stopped to stare, few felt prosperous enough to inquire her price of her owner, a grizzled *shaykh* who sat at one corner of the lowest bench, smoking a *chibouk.*

The fact that I had but fifty pounds Turkish left out of the hundred given me by Hasan Aga for my journey, placed me in the category of those who could only gaze, for I knew that as much as sixty pounds was often paid for an ordinary slave-girl. The price, then, which would be expected for this incomparable beauty, would be perhaps twenty times that amount.

Despite the fact that at least a score of loiterers had stopped to stare, the eyes of the damsel sought mine alone and held them. It seemed to me that her swift look conveyed a message—a warning of some sort—and that in that brief instant two souls looked out through their windows and communicated each with the other.

Without knowing why, I was thrilled immeasurably. Then she looked away, to glance indifferently over the crowd of loiterers. Had there been a message? It seemed to me that I must be mistaken. The eyes were not turned my way again, and reluctantly tearing my gaze from their lovely owner, I moved on.

I viewed the rest of the slave mart in a daze, scarcely seeing what I looked at, and unable to think of anything or any one except the beautiful creature who had, for a fleeting instant, condescended to notice a travel-worn pilgrim. Resolved once more to feast my eyes on her loveliness, though for me she was as unattainable as a star, I turned and retraced my steps. But when I reached the place where she had been seated I cried out in disappointment.

The bench was empty. Even the grizzled *shaykh* had gone.

2

As I stood at that empty bench a feeling of desolation swept over me. I had planned a gay holiday, with perhaps a bit of *arak* after my long abstinence, but the mood had suddenly left me. Now I only wanted to go somewhere and sit quietly alone, to reflect on the glories of a certain pair of lustrous brown eyes.

Accordingly, I entered the nearest coffee shop and ordered pipe and cup. But the undisturbed meditation which I sought was not vouchsafed me. Even before I had my tobacco well alight, a hunchbacked, bottle-nosed camel-driver, who smelt most convincingly of his profession, seated himself beside me and saluted me with the *salam,* to which I could not do aught else than reply.

He was a garrulous fellow, and much of his idle talk fell on deaf ears, for though I politely pretended to listen, my thoughts were elsewhere. Presently, however, he began to speak of the paucity of beautiful slave-girls in the market at that time, whereupon my interest was aroused, and I told him I had seen one girl whose beauty was glorious enough to brighten the entire countryside, and that the only thing that deterred me from bidding for her was the fact that my purse was reduced to a mere fifty pounds Turkish.

At mention of the money, he pricked up his ears, and stated that, after all, fifty pounds was not such an inconsiderable sum, though hardly enough with which to approach the owner of so lovely a creature. He stated that he knew the *shaykh*, her owner, that she had not been sold, and that he was bidden to the house of the *shaykh* that evening, where she would dance for a few friends. If I would honor him by having dinner at his house, he would later take me to the house of the *shaykh* where I might see her dance. I eagerly accepted his invitation, whereupon he said he would send a slave to my *khan* to conduct me to his house.

Early that evening there came to my *khan* a Galla boy, asking for Hajj Hamed bin Ayyub. On being directed to me, he said he was from Hosayn, the camel-driver, and that he had been sent to conduct me to the house of his master.

After traversing several of the more frequented thoroughfares, my guide presently turned off into a narrow and tortuous street, unlighted, and lined by houses of the meaner sort. From this he turned into another still narrower and darker, and then into several more, until I became so confused I knew not one point of the compass from another.

I was about to ask my guide how much farther it was to the cameleer's house, when suddenly I heard a scream from a doorway at my left, and dimly made out the slender figure of a woman, struggling in the grasp of a huge, heavily-bearded ruffian.

For a moment I stood irresolute, hand on hilt, for this might be master and slave, husband and wife, or father and daughter, and in any such case it would be unlawful for me to interfere. Then the girl, espying me, cried: "Under your protection, *sidi!* Save me, my lord! This villain would steal me from my father's house."

At this, I drew my simitar and leaped forward, whereupon the ruffian, seeing the flash of naked steel, released the girl and took to his heels. When I would have followed, the girl caught my sleeve and said: "Pray do not leave me, *sidi*. My father is away and there is none to defend me."

I sheathed my blade and watched the shadowy form of the cowardly woman-snatcher disappear around a corner.

"If you can stay but a few moments, *sidi*, my father will be here to protect me," the girl said.

I TURNED and looked down at the slight figure standing there beside me in the semi-darkness. She was veiled to the eyes, but somehow these held me—reminded me of the pair I had seen that day in the slave mart. "I am yours to command, *ya bint*," I replied. "But first I must send word by the slave of my friend, who waits to entertain me, that I shall be delayed."

She looked around in evident bewilderment. "What slave, and what friend?" she asked. "I see no one."

Surprized, I looked behind me, and saw that she spoke truth. The Galla boy, evidently frightened at the prospect of a fight, had disappeared. But now an-

other figure was approaching—a tall, powerful-looking Arab in voluminous cloak and head-handkerchief. He carried a *kurbaj*, a heavy whip with three lashes of twisted rhinoceros hide. Striding up to the doorway, he said harshly: "What means this, daughter, that I find you in the company of a strange man before the house?"

"I pray you be not wroth with me, my father," entreated the girl in a frightened tone. "A kidnapper entered the *harim* and would have dragged me away with him, had it not been for this stranger, who has preserved the honor of your house."

"A kidnapper, eh? *Wallah!* Could I but bring him within reach of my *kurbaj!*" He cracked the whip significantly, with a sound like the report of a pistol. "So the stranger preserved our honor. That is a camel of a different breed than I thought. May Allah reward you, *sidi*. Will you do me the further honor to enter my poor house?"

"Entertainment has been prepared for me by Hosayn the camel-driver," I replied; "so if you will excuse me I will continue on my way, as I am late."

"By Allah!" he cried, heartily. "Not only will I accept your excuse, but I will myself accompany you part-way. Where is the house of this cameleer?"

At this I was nonplussed; for I suddenly remembered that the Galla boy had vanished, and that without guidance I could no more find the house of Hosayn than leap across Arafat. "By Allah, I do not know," I replied. "He sent a Galla slave to show me the way, and the fellow has fled."

"Why then, you are acquitted of responsibility to him. Come and dine with me, instead. The slave will, no doubt, inform his master that you two were beset by a score of armed men, and that you were cut to pieces. I know these Gallas. The truth is not in them." He flung the door wide.

"Enter, in the name of Allah."

I went in. The house was a mere hovel, containing but one room, which was divided into two compartments by a curtain. My host bade me be seated on a shabby mattress in one corner, sat down beside me, and ordered the girl to bring pipes and coffee, then prepare food for us.

By the light of the candles which the girl set before us, I was able to get a good look at the features of my host. The entire lower part of his face was covered with a bright red and extremely bushy beard, which did not look natural either in color or texture. His eyebrows were so heavily blackened with *kohl* that their true color could not be determined. His cheeks were ruddy and puffed out like those of a man accustomed to feed well and often, thus agreeing with his thickness of waist and pudginess of fingers. His nose was flat with flaring nostrils, indicating some negroid admixture in his blood; and his brown eyes, though friendly enough, sometimes flashed forth a staring, sinister look which made me suspect that he might be a little mad.

Our pipes and coffee were brought so swiftly that it seemed to me the girl must have been a witch to prepare them in so brief a time. As she walked back and forth between the curtain and our corner, veiled, and clad in her silken harem garments, I contrasted her slim elegance with the coarseness and ponderosity of my host, and wondered how it was possible for this elephantine father to beget a daughter of such slender grace.

With a promptness which savored of magic, the girl now brought us the first course of our meal—a roasted pullet

stuffed with pistachios, almonds and rice, and a dish of cucumbers.

"Bismillah!" said my host. "Eat, with health and appetite."

WHILE we were eating, the girl began bringing in other dishes from time to time, such as egg-plant grilled, pureed, and mixed with lemon juice and sesame oil, string beans stewed in clarified butter, an excellent *pilav* of rice, spiced and swimming in red gravy, lamb cut in squares and grilled on skewers with sliced tomatoes, and broiled squabs perched in nests of rice drenched with clarified butter.

My host kept pressing me to eat more and more, and putting bits of food in my mouth with his pudgy and greasy fingers, until I swore by the Prophet's beard that I could not eat another mouthful. Then he clapped his hands, and the girl took away the dishes, after which she brought in pastries, sweetmeats, conserves, fruits and nuts, until as many dishes were before us as had previously been cleared away.

I had begun with a tremendous appetite, but now I looked at this array of food and groaned helplessly. Nevertheless, my host continued to press on me bits of this and that, meanwhile eating ravenously himself until I marveled at his capacity. Out of politeness I permitted him to stuff me until I was like a fowl ready for the roasting.

When he had eaten as much as he wanted, he again clapped his hands, and the girl brought basin, ewer and napkins, wherewith we removed the traces of our feast. She then brought a sherbet of pomegranate juice sweetened with honey, freshly filled pipes, and coffee.

Once, as the girl was serving me, she paused to adjust her veil, and her sleeve slipped up her arm. I noticed thereon two bright red welts, such as might have been made by a whip-lash. Instinctively my glance strayed thence to the *kurbaj* which my huge friend kept constantly across his knees, and the thought flashed through my mind that this must be a most cruel and tyrannous father.

By the time we had smoked and talked a while, half of the night had flown, and I arose to take leave of my host. He pressed me to spend the night with him, but I told him I must get to my *khan*, as I was leaving for Jedda early in the morning. At this, he assented and arose to wish me Godspeed and a safe and pleasant journey, but I noticed in his eyes that strange and sinister expression which had at first led me to suspect him of being a little mad. Then I suddenly recalled that I had not tendered the customary guest-gift, and sensed that he was waiting for it.

I had nothing of value with me except my weapons, clothing, and gold pieces, which latter were distributed about my person in lots of five pounds each, knotted in silken handkerchiefs. Although I had been most sumptuously entertained, I considered that no more than the worth of a single gold piece had been eaten, and that therefore if I tendered five it would be a magnificent and princely gesture. Accordingly, I reached beneath my sash and drew forth one of the gold-laden handkerchiefs, which I handed to him, saying: "In memory of my generous and lordly entertainment, I pray you accept this trifling gift, and if it pleases you, let it be used to buy something in the bazar for your daughter who served us so well."

He hefted it in his palm so that the gold pieces clinked together, and asked: "What's this?"

"Gold," I replied.

"It seems a trifle light for gold," he

returned, still juggling it in his hand. "What is the value?"

"Five pounds," I answered.

At this, the mad look suddenly flashed from his eyes and he flung the gift so it struck me heavily in the chest. "O niggard!" he roared, clutching his whip until his knuckles stood out as white knobs on his fist. "What guest-gift is this? Did I not set before you a meal fit for a sultan? Did I stint in my entertainment of you, and cease to press food on you before you had cried: 'Enough'? Did not my own daughter serve you? Did I not place my house and all in it at your disposal?"

"I grant you all this," I replied, seeking to pacify him, "yet I am a poor man, and gave you what I could. Had I been an emir, or the Grand Sharif——"

"Enough, O miserable and misbegotten miser," he interrupted. "Your guest-gift shall be fifty pounds, no less, and you will pay it now."

"For fifty pounds I could buy a dozen hovels like this, and sell them to the infidels for pig-sties," I rashly retorted.

"Wo to you, O money-grubber! Do you not know who I am?" he demanded.

"I am rich in nothing except ignorance," I replied.

"I am he who is called Abu al Kurbaj," he said, watching me narrowly to note the effect of this disclosure. "No doubt you have heard of me."

INDEED I had heard of him: Abu al Kurbaj, or Father of the Whip, the scourge of the pilgrims who, during and after pilgrimage, were lured into his power, cruelly treated, and after being robbed of all they possessed, left to beg or starve. I had heard a thousand tales of his cunning and cruelty which had made him notorious throughout all Islam. Knowing myself to be in the clutches of this avaricious bird of prey, my heart sank. However, I succeeded in keeping my features unperturbed so his searching eyes might not read the fear I felt. Stooping, I retrieved my gold pieces and thrust them back under my sash. "Since you decline my guest-gift," I said, "I will take it with me." With this, I started toward the door.

Suddenly the huge bulk of Abu al Kurbaj barred my way. Then his whip lashed out and cut me across the face. With the pain and indignity of that blow fear left me, and was supplanted by rage. I whipped out my simitar and drew it back for a stroke that would have terminated the career of that vile malefactor then and there, had not two huge Abyssinian eunuchs at that instant leaped from behind the curtain and pinioned my arms. Abu al Kurbaj laughed and lashed me again and again, while I struggled desperately to throw off my assailants. But those two black *shaitans* clung to me like Eblis to the tail of Noah's ass when he entered the Ark.

Presently they succeeded in tripping me and throwing me to the floor. Then they removed my weapons, bound me hand and foot, and searched me until all my gold had been brought out and emptied on the floor. Abu al Kurbaj counted it gloatingly, then knotted it all into one handkerchief and thrust it into his sash. "And now, O close-fisted dog," he roared at me, "you will be paid for your miserly conduct. You had with you fifty gold pieces, yet, after being entertained like a grandee, you tendered but five. For each of the forty and five you withheld you will receive three lashes with the *kurbaj*."

With this, he ordered his servants to bare my torso, and rolling back his sleeve, disclosed a brawny arm on which the

muscles were huge knots and the cords were like cables.

At this instant the girl came out from behind the curtain, and interceded for me. "Torture him not, I pray you, my father," she pleaded. "Remember your promise. You have his gold. What then can it avail you to make him suffer?"

For answer, he struck viciously at her with the whip. The lashes wound around her slender waist. She uttered a single shriek and fainted away.

With an ugly laugh, the Father of the Whip now turned his attention once more to me. I gritted my teeth as the heavy lashes bit into my back, tearing away skin and making the blood spurt at every stroke. I had meant to utter no sound or make no sign, but despite my utmost exercise of will-power, I was unable to keep from moaning and writhing as the burning agony increased with each blow.

Presently, when my persecutor saw that I was about to swoon away from torture and loss of blood, he stopped lashing me and ordered one of the eunuchs to rub the wounds with salt. This intensified the burning at least tenfold, and revived me so that I cursed my tormenters even with the curse of Ad and Thamud. But Abu al Kurbaj only laughed, and once more applied the whip. At length, in spite of the salt, I felt the faintness returning, and made certain of death. Then I plunged into a merciful oblivion.

3

WHEN consciousness returned to me, the burning agony of my hurts had turned to a dull ache, and I was shivering with cold. I sat up at the cost of a terrific pain in my back, and discovered two things simultaneously—that I was stark naked, and in a cemetery. Stars twinkled overhead, and the gibbous moon, hanging just above the mountains that walled the horizon, cast weird shadows among the tombstones.

Though I was so weak I could scarcely sit up, I could not bear the thought of lying there undad among the graves any longer. Also I feared death from cold and exposure. So, despite the pain any movement cost me, I caught hold of a marble shaft for support and drew myself erect. Then, marshaling what little strength I could command, and calling upon Almighty Allah for aid, I set off, stumbling over graves and markers, and staggering from weakness, not knowing in what direction I was going but only concerned with getting out of that place as quickly as possible.

Time and again I fell from weakness, only to drag myself erect by clinging to the nearest monument to which I could crawl, and totter onward. Presently, after at least an hour of wandering, I emerged from among the graves onto a road. Here my strength gave out completely, and I fell prostrate. Soon thereafter, oblivion claimed me.

I WAS awakened by the clamor of many voices around me, and looking up saw that it was broad daylight and that I was surrounded by a group of ragged strangers who had the appearance of beggars, all chattering at once.

"*Wallah!*" cried one. "This is the second within a week!"

"The last one was dead, may Allah concede him mercy, and this one is nearly so," said another.

"It may be that he will live," said a third. "Let us carry him to the side of the road. A caravan approaches."

The last speaker, a stalwart, swarthy fellow who had the look of an Afghan, caught me beneath the arms, and another

took my feet. Together they moved me aside just as the lead camel of a long caravan from the Nejd came padding along in the dust. Though they were gentle with me, I could not suppress a groan of anguish as they lowered me to the ground, then supported me in a sitting posture.

I saw at once that my new-found friends really were beggars, for a number of them began running up to the members of the caravan and shouting: "Alms, in the name of God! Give us food, for we are hungry! Give us a bit of cloth to cover the naked one! Allah rewards the cheerful giver."

Presently one of the riders threw down a pair of old bag-trousers from his litter, which were immediately brought to me, and which my Afghan friend helped me to don. Another tossed down a frayed head-handkerchief and band, another a ragged shirt, and still another a pair of slippers. Soon I was completely though shabbily clothed, and had several articles of raiment left over. As the last plodding camel disappeared in the dust haze, one of the beggars who acted as water-boy came up with a water-skin and cup, and poured me a drink. Though it was stale, luke-warm, and flavored with leather, that drink tasted delicious.

"*Alhamdolillah!*" I exclaimed, when I had finished. "Allah be praised for pious friends, for clothing, and for water."

"How are you feeling by now, *Hajji?*" asked the Afghan. "If you can walk a little way with me, food will be added to these other gifts of Allah."

"I feel stronger," I replied, arising with his assistance. "Let us go."

"First I would make you known to the brethren."

"The brethren?"

"Aye. We are all *Ikhwan al Kurbaj*, Brethren of the Whip, for all have suffered, even as you have suffered, at the hands of Abu al Kurbaj. Those of us who survived his cruelty, but were unable to obtain funds for return to our native lands, have banded together for mutual aid. You are the newest member of the brotherhood. And now, your name."

"Hamed bin Ayyub," I replied.

"I am Ibn Daoud, from Kabul," he said. Then he introduced the others to me, in turn. There were eleven in all, so I made the twelfth.

As soon as I had been made acquainted with the brethren, Ibn Daoud led me away in the direction of Mecca. "This place is called the Hajun," he said, "and the cemetery is known as Al Ma'la, as you probably learned when you made your pious visitations. Our house is near the Bab al Ma'la."

I WAS thankful when we reached the house occupied by the Brethren of the Whip, for despite the aid of Ibn Daoud, my strength had nearly given out. The place, though badly run down, was large, roomy and airy, and had formerly belonged to a well-to-do personage of the town. A once ornate fountain, though its jets were now broken off, still babbled musically in the center of the majlis. A few threadbare rugs were scattered about, and several tattered mattresses had been placed against the walls. Some battered taborets and an ottoman or two completed the furnishings.

Ibn Daoud bade me be seated on one of the mattresses, and went into the rear of the house. Presently he returned with some dates cooked in clarified butter, and a few crusts of bread. When I had eaten he brought coffee and pipes, saying he would give over begging for the day that he might bear me company.

He informed me that he had been a

wealthy horse-trader in Kabul until four years previously, when he had made the pilgrimage and had been ensnared by Abu al Kurbaj by means of a beautiful Awasil stallion which a dealer had offered to sell to him if he would bring a certain sum to his house. Like me, he had been led through the poorer quarter by a Galla slave, rescued a woman from her supposed abductor, lost his guide, and after dining with Abu al Kurbaj, lost all his possessions and most of the skin off his back. Like me, too, he had awakened, cold and naked, in the Al Ma'la Cemetery, and had been rescued by the Brethren of the Whip. He said that during his stay in Mecca more than two hundred pilgrims had been victimized by Abu al Kurbaj. At least half of them had died as a result of beatings and exposure. Many others had found the means to leave the city, but now and then a recruit remained to join the brotherhood, who had banded together to beg in the Hajun district near the cemetery, which was an excellent place to obtain alms from people mourning at the graves of their departed loved ones, pilgrims visiting the tombs of friends of Mohammed who were buried there, and caravans from Muna, Arafat, Zeima and the Nejd.

Abu al Kurbaj, he said, used various means to entice his victims. Beautiful slave-girls, fine horses and camels, and precious jewels, however, were his principal lures. In my case, he told me, there was no doubt that the slave-girl I had seen belonged to the Father of the Whip. Hosayn the hunchbacked cameleer had been posted to watch for those who showed special interest in her, to ascertain if they had money, and then to set the trap.

"If this be true," I said, "why would it not be possible to trap Abu al Kurbaj? One could go into the market with the Chief of the Watch and a couple of his men, arrest the slave-girl and the old *shaykh* who is supposed to be her master, and if Hosayn is about, take him also. Hailed before the Grand Sharif of Mecca they would soon confess, and the Father of the Whip could be run down."

"Alas!" replied Ibn Daoud. "All this has been tried many times. All deny knowledge of the Father of the Whip. The Grand Sharif himself says there is no such person as Abu al Kurbaj residing in Mecca. I don't know whether he is sincere or not, but I think he knows the villain and receives a considerable share of the spoils. Most of the victims who have complained to him have been laughed out of court. None have been able to locate the house in which they alleged that they were robbed and tortured, because of the tortuous way in which they were guided to it. A few, who were more vehement than the others, were bastinadoed and banished from the city. Under the circumstances, we have ceased to advise the brethren to appeal to the Grand Sharif for justice."

"In that case," I replied, "I will not visit his excellency, but will for the present resign myself to the decree of Fate. However, as soon as I am able to earn something above my keep, I purpose to find and punish this son of a disease who despoils true believers, and if possible, deprive him of his ill-gotten gains."

"*Awah!*" sighed Ibn Daoud, dolefully, "I fear that will be beyond your power. But we shall see. Nothing is impossible with Allah."

I SPENT three days in the house of the Brethren of the Whip, recuperating. Then I went forth with the others, to join them in the calling of begging for our daily bread. I found the vocation distasteful, but it was beg or starve. Al-

though I was a skilled chemist and perfumer, as well as an experienced dragoman with many languages at the tip of my tongue, I could not open a shop for lack of money, and for the same reason I could not attire myself respectably enough to seek employment as a dragoman. So I haunted the vicinity of the Al Ma'la burying-ground, day after day, often receiving less than enough to pay for my keep. But we Brethren of the Whip always pooled our resources, so we managed to exist and to pay the small rent which the owner of the dilapidated house in which we lived, collected from us each week. And as the days passed, I thought of a thousand plans for entrapping Abu al Kurbaj, if I should ever be able to save enough money to pass as a respectable personage once more.

Most of the mourners who visited the cemetery were women, and many of them were wives and daughters of well-to-do Meccans, but it was seldom that one of them gave alms above the value of a *zibrawi*, which is equivalent to six *piasters*, while most gave little or nothing.

One day, however, as I stood in my place by the cemetery entrance, shouting my beggars' formulas, there came a damsel cloaked and veiled to the eyes and riding a milk-white ass with silver-mounted trappings, led by a tall Abyssinian eunuch whose rich apparel proclaimed him the slave of some powerful grandee. With a start, I recognized him as one of the castrados who had seized me the night I was entrapped by Abu al Kurbaj.

For a moment I was too astounded to say or do anything. Then hot anger possessed me, and though I was unarmed and the eunuch wore simitar, dagger and pistols, I sprang forward with the foolhardy intention of attacking him. At this instant, however, the lady diverted my attention from her black guardian, who had evidently not divined my purpose, and probably saved my life. In a soft, musical voice which I instantly recognized as that of the girl who had enticed me into the clutches of Abu al Kurbaj, she said: "Come hither, *ya hu*, and Allah will make this day blessed to you."

I checked my mad rush just in time, whereupon she held out a slim white hand in which the delicate tracery of blue veins showed, and dropped a gold *lira* into my palm.

"Be here tomorrow, at this same hour," she whispered. Then she had passed on, while I stood there, staring first at her, then at the gold piece, too dumfounded to utter a sound.

That night the ragged brethren dined more richly and bountifully than for many a day, while the discussions as to what it all meant, and the prognostications as to what would take place on the morrow, were many and varied.

So when the morning dawned, and I had taken my place before the cemetery, I was so wrought up with anticipation that I lost the power of patience, and each minute of waiting assumed the length of an hour. Presently, however, I espied a small dust cloud on the road, and soon there emerged from it the eunuch, leading the milk-white ass on which rode my lady of mystery. When she drew near, she cried to me: "Hither, *ya haza*, and Allah will make this day propitious for you."

I ran up beside her as before, and extending a dimpled white hand, she presented me with a knotted silk handkerchief in which was something heavy that clinked as it touched my palms. This time, she rode on into the cemetery without a word.

As soon as she was well away among

the tombstones, my companions, who had been awaiting her coming with impatience that matched my own, crowded around me demanding to know what I had received. In the meantime I had recognized one of my own silk handkerchiefs in which I had knotted five pounds Turkish, and untying it, found the five gold pieces and a folded note. With trembling fingers, I opened it, and read:

In the Name of Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate! Es Sitt Layla to Hajj Hamed bin Ayyub. Greetings and Salutations:

But after, distribute these five gold pieces as largess to your companions in misfortune, and tell them to be of good cheer, for it may be that through your efforts and mine (Allah willing) their lot will soon be changed for the better.

Then, when the day is done, and night spreads its mantle over rich and poor, pious and profane, just and unjust, be waiting before the chapel, Maulid al Nabi, where there will come to you one who will be of assistance in mending your fortune.

Prayer and the Peace,

LAYLA.

When my companions saw the gold and heard the contents of the letter, they cried out with exceeding joy and gladness, and then and there declared a holiday. So we all repaired to the house in the Upper Quarter where a feast was soon spread, after which songs and merriment were in order.

But as for me, I left my friends to their revelry when the sun was low on the horizon, and hied me to the Maulid al Nabi, the chapel which surrounds the birthplace of the Prophet.

4

WHEN I reached the chapel I prayed the sunset prayer, then took up my post outside. Soon thereafter, darkness came down over the city, and here and there lamps began to diffuse their yellow radiance through latticed windows.

I waited long, while all those who had come to pray left the chapel. Yet I saw no one whom I might suspect of being the messenger of the lady Layla.

Presently, however, an old woman whom I had barely noticed, came up to me and asked: "Are you Hajj Hamed bin Ayyub?"

"And what if I am, *ya ummi?*" I countered.

"Answer my question," she insisted, "and be quick about it."

"I am he," I replied.

"Then take this clothing," she directed, handing me a bundle, "go into that deserted doorway and put on the garments. Then return to this spot, where I will await you."

I did as she directed, and opening the bundle, found that it contained a woman's head-scarf, face-veil and cloak like those worn by the old trot. Quickly donning them, I bent my back, shortened my steps and swayed my hips, so that my stature was concealed and my gait was as that of a woman.

When the old crone saw me coming toward her in this manner, she could not repress a chuckle. "Well done, young man," she quavered. "Did I not recognize the garments, I should take you for my elder sister, whom you are to represent this evening. She is skilled in geomancy and the casting of horoscopes, and *Es Sitt* Layla for the past two days has expressed a desire to consult her, so the master has consented."

"Who is the master?" I croaked, imitating the cracked and squeaky voice of an ancient beldame.

"That," she replied, "will be for my lady to tell you or not, as she chooses. Only see to it that you do not betray your identity, or death will night with us this night."

We walked on for some distance, while I questioned the old trot to no purpose. Then she suddenly warned me to be silent, and we stepped up before the large and ornate door of a palatial residence,

on which was piously inscribed: "God is the excellent Creator, the Everlasting." The lazy *bowab* reluctantly arose from his seat on the stone bench beside the door, put down his pipe, and grumblingly admitted us after the old woman had told him I was her sister, Sa'ada, who had come to cast the lady Layla's horoscope.

Imposing as was the outside of the house, it scarcely prepared me for the magnificence of the interior. Marble, tile, carnelian and alabaster were among the expensive materials employed with lavish abandon in its construction and decoration. Passing through the court, we went directly to the *bab al harim,* where we left our outer slippers. Before it stood with drawn simitar one of the Abyssinian eunuchs who had assisted in my robbery and torture some time before. To him the old woman repeated the tale she had told the *bowab,* and we were admitted to a small hallway at the end of which was a stairway which led to the upper apartments. Ascending this, we reached the women's sitting-room, where a number of slave-girls lounged about, smoking *narghiles,* nibbling at sweetmeats, and chatting. They spoke cordially to the old woman, and looked curiously at me, but made no comment. We passed thence into a hallway which led to the various apartments of the females. Eunuchs stood before the doorways of several of these, and before one I recognized the second castrado who had assisted in my spoliation and beating. Straight to that door the old dame led me, and again repeating her fabrication gained entrance for us.

The old woman now conducted me through the private entrance-hall of this apartment, and into a room where two slave-girls, who had evidently been expecting us, came forward. Much to my consternation, they began stripping off my garments. Then, cackling her amusement at my surprize and embarrassment, the old trot backed out of the room.

Some thirty minutes later, I stood before a mirror in that same room and surveyed the figure reflected therein. I saw a young man, tall, straight, and not unhandsome, wearing silver-mounted sword and dagger, a green silk turban, and rich garments that would have done credit to a *sharif.* The young man had been scrubbed, rubbed and anointed until his skin tingled delightfully, and exhaled a fragrance like that of a Damascus flower garden. It was obvious that he was altogether pleased with his transformation.

One of the slave-girls had left the room, and the other stood beside the door, holding the woman's garments I had worn as a disguise. Presently the absent girl returned, and called: "This way, *sidi.*"

THE girl at the door slipped my disguise over my new and magnificent habiliments, and I again assumed the posture and walk of an old woman as I followed the first girl out into the private entrance-hall of the apartment; for I fully realized that if I should betray myself to a chance-met person by omitting the slightest detail, my life would be forfeit. Crossing the hall, we entered a large and luxuriously furnished sitting-room. But magnificent as were the room and its furnishings, they were eclipsed by the exquisite loveliness of the radiant creature who occupied the center of the silk-upholstered *diwan* in the niche just opposite me. With a thrill of surprize and pleasure, I recognized the little beauty who had played such havoc with my heart in the slave market.

The two slave-girls quickly removed my disguise and stepped back, leaving me to stand there, awkward and self-

conscious before this slip of a girl, in spite of my recently acquired sartorial elegance. Her beauty, I observed, lost nothing by being removed to these surroundings, but was rather enhanced, as is a precious jewel by a correct setting.

"Will you not sit here beside me, *Hajji?*" she asked.

Scarcely crediting the testimony of my ears, I replied: "Yes, Allah willing," and crossed the room as if in a dream.

The girl took my hand and drew me down to the *diwan* at her side. "It seems you have grown less bold since that day in the slave market," she said, looking up archly.

"Then you did notice me that day?"

"Assuredly."

"I caught your glance, but I dared not hope."

"I wanted to warn you," she said, "but I could not, for fear of the *shaykh,* my uncle."

"Ah! So he is not your father or your master!"

"He and my father were half-brothers. My father's mother was a free woman, daughter of the Shaykh of the Banu Asadin. His mother was a half-caste Somali slave-girl. When my uncle was a youth, he joined the *harami,* the bandits who infest the roads that lead into Mecca, robbing pilgrims and other travelers.

"My father, on whom be peace, was an honest trader, who grew wealthy and built and furnished this house. When I was born, my mother was received into the mercy of Allah. Ten years later, my father followed her to the Gardens of the Blessed, and he was buried by her side in the Cemetery Al Ma'la. Then my uncle, now known as Shaykh Sa'ud, became my guardian."

"Can it be possible that Abu al Kurbaj is the pious and respected Shaykh Sa'ud?" I asked, in surprize. I had heard of this notable who was high in the councils of the Grand Sharif of Mecca, and who was always mentioned with admiration and respect.

"They are one and the same," she assured me. "Although he assumes a physical disguise when he becomes Abu al Kurbaj, it is then that he reveals his true nature. The gentle and pious Shaykh Sa'ud is the real disguise. The Sharif suspects, of course, if he does not actually know. But numerous costly presents keep him from voicing his suspicions. There are only four of us who could bear witness against my uncle should opportunity arise, and we would of course, incriminate ourselves as well. They are Hosayn, the camel-driver; the two eunuchs, Mormous and Mahmet; and I. The Galla boy gets his orders from Hosayn, and knows nothing beyond the task he performs. In view of the presents to the Sharif, I know my unsupported testimony would not be accepted, while the eunuchs and the camel-eer would fear the wrath of my uncle even more than the convictions which might follow such confession."

"Then you would win freedom from this life of pillage if you could?"

"Since the death of my father, it has been my dearest wish; for almost immediately after he assumed my guardianship, my uncle began forcing me to sit in the slave market from time to time, to entrap pilgrims. The people of Mecca believe that Shaykh Sa'ud has a slave-girl whom he often offers for sale, but never sells. As no one ever sees my face except my two slave-girls, my great-aunt who brought you here tonight, the eunuchs, and my uncle, nobody knows that the slave-girl and I are the same."

"When your uncle was about to flog me," I said, "you mentioned a promise he had made not to use the whip on me."

"It was a promise which he broke," she said, "as he has many others, for he is totally without honor. When I saw you in the slave mart that day, and knew you had been singled out for a victim, I refused to go on with my part. Then, for the first time in my life, though I had been threatened with it many times before, I felt the sting of the *kurbaj*. Even then, I refused to go on until he had promised not to whip you."

I looked at her searchingly. "You took a whipping to save me?" I asked, incredulously. "Why?"

"Because—from the moment I saw you—oh, can't you see, can't you understand that I——"

With a swift movement I swept her into my arms. "I can both see and understand, glorious one," I told her, "though the realization confounds my reason."

"Take me away with you, Hamed," she murmured, presently, her warm lips close to mine. "I have gold and jewels in plenty, wealth which rightfully belongs to me and is not the loot of pilgrims. We must make a plan—enlist the aid of your comrades. I will provide amply for all of them."

"I will go to them at once, tonight," I said. "To win you I would tear down this house bare-handed, stone by stone."

Her arms tightened around my neck. "You must be careful, my dear one. I love you so that I could not bear to lose you. I will pray Allah to——"

She was suddenly interrupted by a muffled scream from one of the slave-girls, who came hurrying across the room with my woman's clothing. "The master is coming!" she cried. "You must slip these on at once."

WITH the aid of the slave-girl and Layla I quickly donned the garments. Then, seating myself once more on the *diwan*, I bent over a horoscope and astrological table which the lady had provided for just such an emergency, and began muttering in the cracked voice of an old hag as if making calculations. When the door opened, I glanced covertly over my nose-veil, and saw a white-bearded *shaykh*, thick of waist and pudgy of fingers, with a face like a dolphin's belly and a neck like an elephant's throat, advancing ponderously across the floor. Despite the change in his appearance and his gentle, even kindly demeanor, there was no mistaking the flat nose and huge figure of the terrible Abu al Kurbaj.

"The peace of Allah be upon you, my uncle," greeted Layla.

"And upon you be peace and Allah's blessing," he replied. "I observe that you would look into the future."

"That," she replied, "is the province of the pious Sa'ada, who has much skill in the casting of horoscopes."

"So I have heard," he answered. "Perhaps she will deign to read the future for me, also, when you have finished with her. What say you, mother?"

"With joy and gladness, my lord," I croaked, then continued my interrupted muttering.

The *shaykh* drew up an ottoman and sat down quite close to us, observing me minutely.

"What large hands you have, mother," he said, presently, "and what enormous feet."

"I am as Allah made me," I replied, beginning to sense that something had gone badly amiss. Suddenly I recalled my outer slippers which had, according to custom, been left at the doorway with those of the old trot who had brought me in. She had no doubt gone away with hers, but mine remained, damning evidence that a strange man had been

admitted to the house. My greatest wonder was that the eunuch had not observed them, thus betraying me sooner. If I had only had the foresight to leave a pair of woman's slippers! But what had been done could not be undone. I waited tensely.

"The ways of Allah are past all understanding," observed the *shaykh*. "Yet never before have I known Him to provide a woman with hands and feet like those of a man; wherefore I marvel with exceeding marvel, and praise Allah for having permitted me to see this miracle of creation."

I knew that the time for shamming had passed, and so suddenly sprang at him, clutching him by the bull throat, and saying: "Perhaps you would test the strength of these hands, Father of the Whip." But despite my strength and swiftness, I was unable to shut off his voice. One might, with equal success, attempt to choke a hippopotamus.

He seized my wrists, and flung me from him as if I were a child. Then rising and overturning the ottoman, he bellowed: "*Ya,* Mormous! *Ya,* Mahmet! To me!"

I flung off my encumbering woman's disguise and whipped out my simitar just as the two stalwart eunuchs burst into the room, bared blades in hand. With a swiftness that was surprizing in one of his obesity, Shaykh Sa'ud also drew his simitar.

"So, it's you!" he roared, making a vicious slash at me as he saw my face unveiled. "For this, O blasphemer, and desecrator of the *harims* of the pious, you die!"

I parried his slash, and countered with a head cut that must have laid him low, had not one of the eunuchs at that instant caught my blade on his. Then, before I could recover, the other castrado had leaped in and caught my sword-arm. In a trice the three of them were upon me, and they soon had me trussed up like a fowl on a spit.

Shaykh Sa'ud took his knee off my chest and stood up, puffing from his exertions. His face a thundercloud of wrath, he glared at the lady Layla. "For this base deception, O foul slut," he roared, "I will marry you to Hosayn the camel-driver this very night. And as for your lover," spurning me with his foot, "he shall witness the ceremony, after which he shall again meet Abu al Kurbaj, so that the whip may speed him on his way to the hell reserved for blasphemers and profaners."

Layla faced him defiantly. "You shall not slay him," she cried, "nor will I marry your foul and ugly hunchback. Before this comes to pass I will take my life."

The *shaykh* laughed evilly—the laugh of Abu al Kurbaj. "So? We will see. Mormous, throw this dog into the dungeon until I call for him. Mahmet, see that the house is prepared at once for the marriage, and send for Hosayn and the *kazi.*"

"Harkening and obedience, *sidi,*" muttered the two eunuchs together. Then one took my feet and the other my shoulders, and they carried me out and down a secret stairway, which seemed to lead into the very bowels of the earth. At the base of the stairs they paused, and one lighted a lantern. Then they dragged me across a damp cellar filled with bales and boxes and cast me into an oubliette, the walls of which were provided with rusty fetters and neck-rings, and the floor of which was littered with filth and moldering human bones.

As I was so securely bound, the two did not bother to put fetters on me, but went

out, barring the door after them, and left me alone in the stinking darkness.

5

NO SOONER was I cast to the floor in the dungeon than I began straining and working at my bonds. At the cost of much skin and a goodly quantity of blood, I was at length able to stretch and loosen the cords which held my wrists so I could slip them over my hands. I then quickly unbound my ankles, and after stamping my feet to restore the circulation, made for the door.

The door and bolt were both of wood which had once been strong, but which was now warped and rotted by the dampness of the cellar. However, bare-handed, I was unable to make any impression on it, though I could thrust my fingers through one of the cracks and touch the bolt. Then I remembered the litter on the floor, and felt about until I found a human rib-bone. With this I enlarged the crack in the rotting wood, and prying at the bolt discovered, as I suspected, that the iron pins which were supposed to lock it had completely rusted away. Little by little I was able to slide the bolt along until the door swung open. Carefully closing and bolting it after me, I began groping about the dark cellar, feeling my way among the bales and boxes until I came to a wall. This I followed for some time before finding a door. I cautiously slid the bolt, and stepped into a dark passageway.

Silently I closed the door and felt my way along the passageway, expecting to encounter a stairway. Instead, I wandered on and on until I came to another door, and opening this, found myself in a low, rough-hewn cave, the moonlit mouth of which I could see a short distance away. The opening to the cave was so small that I was obliged to creep out on all fours. It was concealed by shrubbery, and was on a hillside just beyond the garden wall of the *shaykh's* house. Evidently it had been constructed by Layla's father, as a mode of escape in case of sudden necessity for flight.

As soon as I saw where I was, I started for the house of the Brethren of the Whip, running as fast as my legs would carry me. The sounds of singing and revelry, and the mingled odors of *arak* and stale pipe smoke greeted me as I flung wide the door and dashed in among them.

"Ho, comrade!" greeted Ibn Daoud. "What new good fortune have you found? By Allah! You are habited like the son of a sultan!"

The others swiftly closed around me, asking about my experience. In as few words as possible, I swiftly told them what had befallen me. Shortly thereafter, we twelve left the house together, all armed to the teeth, and some of our number bearing chisels, crowbars, hammers and lanterns, I in my resplendent raiment, they in their beggars' rags.

Swiftly I led the brethren to the cave mouth, which we entered, and lighting lanterns, proceeded into the passageway. When we reached the cellar, the brethren, after binding me hand and foot, but taking the precaution to cut nearly through my cords so I could free myself in an instant, left me in the oubliette with the door barred as before, hid behind the bales and boxes, and extinguished all the lights.

Presently I heard a door open, the sound of voices, and footsteps on the cellar floor. Then the dancing light of a moving lantern shone through the cracks in my door. A moment later it was flung open, and the two eunuchs, Mormous and Mahmet, entered. The former drew his simitar and slashed the bonds that pris-

oned my ankles, while the latter held the lantern.

"Get up, son of a pig," said Mormous, prodding me with his simitar, "and march before me."

I scrambled to my feet and walked out, with Mormous' point pricking my back. They hustled me across the cellar and up the stairway, then through a hallway, and into a room where Shaykh Sa'ud sat, smoking a *narghile,* a *kurbaj* across his knees. Seated at his left was the bottle-nosed, hunchbacked camel-driver, Hosayn, similarly occupied.

"Know, O mangy wolf," said the *shaykh,* "that since the *kazi* has not yet been found, I purpose to give you a foretaste of the means by which you shall depart this world when the wedding of my fathful friend, Hosayn, and my niece has been consummated."

He made a sign to the two eunuchs, who began stripping off my upper garments. In so doing they drew my wrists apart so that my bonds fell off.

The keen-eyed cameleer instantly noticed this, and picking up the severed ends, showed them to the *shaykh.* "You will observe that they have been cut, *sidi,*" he said.

"What's this, dog?" bellowed the *shaykh.* "Who cut your bonds?"

Before I found it necessary to reply, the door burst open, and in rushed my comrades, brandishing their weapons.

Seeing they were hopelessly outnumbered, our enemies quickly threw down their arms and surrendered. The Brethren of the Whip swiftly bound the four of them, and were then for pillaging the house and making off with the loot and slaves. But I had thought of a better plan, to which, after I had propounded it, they were quite ready to accede. At the suggestion of Ibn Daoud they voted me their leader, putting themselves completely under my authority.

"And now your orders, *Hajji,*" said the Afghan.

"Throw the two eunuchs and the cameleer into the oubliette and set a guard over them," I said. "In the meantime I will have a talk with the Father of the Whip."

While they were carrying out my instructions, I told Shaykh Sa'ud just what it would be necessary for him to do if he would see the light of the morrow's sun. At first he raged and fumed and blustered, but at length, seeing that I meant precisely what I said, and that there was no alternative, he agreed.

Presently Ibn Daoud returned with five of the brethren, the rest having been posted at various strategic points. Then I went out to seek Layla. I found her in her bridal clothes, weeping bitterly. When she saw me alive and well she could not, at first, believe her eyes. But once in my arms she was soon comforted, and I told her all that had occurred and what further plans I had made, whereupon she made haste to complete her toilette.

SOME time later, Layla wearing her veil, Shaykh Sa'ud and I were seated on a *diwan* before a curtain. Five of the brethren, attired in new and costly raiment, sat near us. One of Layla's slave-girls came in to announce that the *kazi* was below with witnesses.

"Give presents to the witnesses and send them away," I told her, "for we will not need them. But bring the *kazi* here."

Shortly thereafter, the learned judge, a white-bearded patriarch with an immense turban, followed the girl into the room.

After greeting the *kazi,* bidding him be

seated, and tendering him pipe and coffee, the *shaykh* handed him a paper and said: "Having reached the conclusion that it is better to lay up merit for the next world than wealth in this, I desire that you will write for me a deed, conveying all of my property to my twelve adopted sons, whose names are written on this paper."

"Have you taken leave of your senses, *sidi?*" asked the amazed kazi. "I was not aware that you had adopted any sons. As for giving away your property, you must be mad."

At this, there was a marked bulge of the curtain behind Sa'ud, and he winced before replying: "My mind is made up, and nothing will change it. I pray you make out the papers at once, without question or protest."

For some time there was deep silence, in which the scratching of the judge's reed pen was plainly audible. Presently he finished, and handed the paper to the *shaykh,* who hesitated a moment, but hastily signed it when the curtain bulged once more behind him.

"And now," said Sa'ud, after another bulge of the curtain brought a pained expression to his countenance, "write a marriage contract between my son Hajj Hamed bin Ayyub and my niece, *Es Sitt* Layla, stating that the marriage money, ten thousand pounds, has been paid, and receipt by me acknowledged."

Once more we all fell silent, while the *kazi's* pen scratched busily. When the contract was finished, we three signed it, and the five brethren signed as witnesses. Then, after the learned judge had affixed his signature to the document, he was handed a purse of gold for his trouble, and pleading the lateness of the hour, took his departure.

As soon as he had left the room, the curtain behind the *shaykh* was flung back, and out stepped Ibn Daoud, his terrible Afghan knife in his hand.

"Mashallah!" he cried. "Well done, brethren! And now to gather our horses and camels, goods and chattels, gold and jewels, slaves and slave-girls, and take our departure with our adopted father, so our brother, Hajj Hamed, may go in to his bride."

A FEW hours later I stood in an upper window of the *harim,* my arm about the slender waist of my bride, watching the departure of a considerable caravan. At its head rode Shaykh Sa'ud, with a Brother of the Whip on each side of him. And behind him rode in order, Hosayn the cameleer, and the eunuchs, Mormous and Mahmet, each similarly guarded. Then came the stalwart Ibn Daoud, flourishing a *kurbaj* with which I was all too familiar, in a manner that made me shudder at thought of the retribution which would soon overtake the four rascally prisoners.

We stood there, Layla and I, looking through the lattice long after the last camel had departed. Presently one of the slave-girls announced: "The bridal couch is ready, my lady," whereupon my wife hid her face against my shoulder.

Thus it was, *effendi,* that I took to wife Layla, most beautiful of the daughters of the City of the Prophet, and found her a pearl of great price.

As for Abu al Kurbaj, I was riding one day to the Cemetery Al Ma'la with my wife, when we saw, seated by the side of the road with a frayed napkin spread before him, a ragged and filthy beggar.

Save for his flat nose and tremendous bulk, I should never have recognized him as the Father of the Whip.

Ho, Silat! Bring the sweet and take the full.

"The Resident stared as though prodded with red-hot irons."

Ismeddin and the Holy Carpet

By E. HOFFMANN PRICE

A white-bearded darwish outwits the British Resident—a vivid tale of action and adventure in Kurdistan

"ISMEDDIN," said the Sultan of Bir el Asad to the white-bearded darwish who scorned the cushions of the diwan and sat on the sand-strewn floor of the private reception hall, "there is a mad *inglesi,* Captain Rankin, who is bent on stealing the Holy Carpet from the shrine of that Persian heretic, Imam Ismail, may Allah not bless him!"

"The fool will probably be torn to pieces by the brethren of the monastery, or if he escapes their hands, the Amir will have him flayed alive," observed Ismeddin the Darwish. "But what's that to us?"

"In the old days," replied the Sultan, "it would have been nothing but good riddance. But now—well, times have

changed. His Excellency the British Resident——"

The Sultan spat ostentatiously to cleanse his mouth of the contamination of the last phrase.

"The Resident will have a great deal of explaining ahead of him when his superiors hear of the captain's adventure. You see, Sir John issued a permit for Captain Rankin to excavate in the ruins just outside our walls, and carry on with the various idiocies so dear to these infidel pork-eaters, may Allah blacken them! And if Captain Rankin's hide is nailed to the door of Imam Ismail's shrine, the noble British government will demand Sir John's hide for not having kept him from stirring up trouble and losing his very valuable head."

"But supposing that Captain Rankin does steal the Holy Carpet?" asked the darwish. "He's a clever fellow, and he might succeed. What then?"

"Worse and worse!" replied the Sultan. "Those wild men of Kuh-i-Atesh will pour down out of the hills and loot the British mining concessions by way of reprisal. And there will be demonstrations in any number of places where the infidel hoof is planted on Moslem necks. Then after enough towns here and there have been shelled by British artillery, Sir John's successor would quarter a couple of regiments here, and all but depose me. Shaytan rip him open, he's bad enough, but there could be worse Residents! And so I've got to help the infidel out of this mess."

"Well," submitted Ismeddin, "why doesn't Sir John send him to the coast under guard? That would dispose of him in a hurry."

"Allah and again, by Allah! So he would, *ya* Ismeddin! So he would, if he could. But he can't. Captain Rankin disappeared last night on his way from the Residency, and Sir John's guard has been combing the town for him ever since.

"The scientist and archeologist vanished. I told Sir John to watch that fellow. I knew that his diggings and prowlings were a mask for something. I've heard of Rankin's doings in the secret service, and his roaming about, disguised as a true believer. And once they get into that habit, there's only one way of curing them."

The Sultan's swift gesture indicated that the executioner's two-handed sword was the infallible cure.

"But Sir John laughed. And now he's driving me mad, asking me to devise some way of stopping the theft, and saving Sir John's residential hide.

"That's why I called you. Keep Captain Rankin from plundering the shrine of Imam Ismail, and see that he gets back with his head on his shoulders—though a head that full of idiocy would serve as well in almost any position. Those *Feringhi* fools and their custom of collecting ancient carpets!"

"My lord," said the darwish as the Sultan paused for breath, "I once saw that carpet as I looked in through the door of the monastery of the Holy Brethren. It's about the length of two boys and the width of three men, and very worn. But it is a wonder, and a coolness to the eyes. Looking at it is like listening to exalting music. In the entire world there is not its like or equal. It is woven of moonbeams, and the smiles of Turki dancing girls. Still——"

Ismeddin felt his neck for a moment, just about where a simitar stroke would separate head and shoulders, and made a grimace.

"Still, this Rankin is doubtless a fool. And Sir John's another, asking you to cover all the ground between here and

Kuh-i-Atesh, and bag the captain before he gets into mischief.

"I saw him, some ten years ago, in uniform. But when he's in disguise, his own men don't recognize him. The chances are that he will steal the Holy Carpet——"

The darwish paused to stroke his beard, and smiled as at an ancient jest.

"In fact, *ya sidi,* there is no way to stop him: except shooting him in his tracks, which you forbid."

Then the darwish rose and took unceremonious leave of the Sultan.

THAT evening Ismeddin called on Sir John at the Residency.

The Resident listened attentively to Ismeddin's plan, and registered but one protest.

"But we simply can't have Captain Rankin lashed to a camel's back and carried back here by those——"

Sir John coughed, and continued, "By those Pious Companions of His Majesty the Sultan's late father. A certain propriety must be observed, if you get what I mean."

"Entirely so, Your Excellency," assured the darwish in English, which he could speak whenever he chose. "I understand perfectly that his Britannic Majesty's subjects must be treated with deference, even if they are engaged, so to speak, in——"

Ismeddin's command of English faltered for a moment, and Sir John hoped that for propriety's sake the darwish wouldn't select the word that he seemed on the point of pronouncing; although desperation had driven the Resident to the point of being able gracefully to ignore breaches of etiquette.

"——engaged in prying into the mysteries of the dancing darwishes," continued Ismeddin. "His Majesty the Sultan insisted that I use diplomacy, and as soon as I find Captain Rankin, convince him that his course is causing you great embarrassment.

"Just so, Sir John. Quite," concluded Ismeddin gravely.

Ismeddin's mimicry of Sir John's speech was obvious enough to goad the Resident to the verge of apoplexy; but he knew that the wily old scoundrel was the key to a ticklish situation, and controlled his flaming desire to have the darwish soundly flogged.

It was a relief when Ismeddin made inquiry as to whether Captain Rankin wrote the Arabic script as well as he spoke the language.

Ismeddin, upon learning that the talented captain could write half a dozen styles of script with uncommon elegance, announced his intention of then and there starting on the trail, and left the Residency.

"Well," reflected Sir John, "that old beggar may turn the trick for the Sultan's sake. And I'll probably pay for his services with several uncomfortable moments before I see the last of this Holy Carpet affair."

Then, as he watched Ismeddin striding on foot through the Isfayan Gate, past the sentries, "Some one would do very well to double the guards about his stables. That fellow won't be on foot very long."

Sir John was right: although, urged by some unusual whim, it was Ismeddin's own horse that he mounted.

THE cloak of the darwish covers diverse possibilities, ranging from the Rufai who mortify the body with hot irons and knives, to the well-fed Melewi in their substantial monasteries, seeking oneness with Allah by pious meditation and the contemplation of divine harmony. The darwish may wander through the

Moslem world alone, on foot, and in rags, with no possessions save his beggar's bowl, his knowledge of magic and medicine, and his reputation for loving nothing but books and study; or he may ride about on a blooded mare, followed by a handful of retainers, and bristling with weapons and arrogance.

A disgraced prime minister or ruined governor may seek the path to heaven, in the guise of the darwish; and the idler, vagabond or scoundrel may rely on that same cloak of eccentricity to carry him safe and harmless. He may pray, or not, just as he elects. And whenever he is in difficulties, his real or feigned madness will win him tolerance, fear, and respect. The darwish, in short, is the privileged adventurer of the Orient, and may be anything from a saint to a cutthroat.

And thus Ismeddin the Darwish rode into the mountains, this time not to loot a pack train, but to prevent the theft of the Holy Carpet that hung before the tomb of the Imam Ismail in the monastery of the Dancing Darwishes of fanatical Kuh-i-Atesh. Ismeddin's heart was not in his work, for he would have preferred being Captain Rankin's ally rather than adversary.

"Allah sift me!" exclaimed Ismeddin as he took the trail. "That *Feringhi* dog, Sir John, is becoming the pest of my life. Shaytan blacken him, but I'll make him sweat for a moment before he gets any good news I'll bring him!"

As he rode, Ismeddin plotted the details of the nebulous plan he had conceived. With one short cut and another, he reduced whatever lead Captain Rankin had gained by his earlier start; for with his acquaintance with obscure mountain trails, the darwish could afford to give heavy odds.

Whether Rankin would travel as a beggar, an itinerant physician, or as a darwish, Ismeddin would not hazard a guess. But he was certain that Rankin would look the part, act the part, and, in the more odoriferous rôles, smell the part he played; Rankin was one of those rare Europeans who had perfectly mastered not only the guttural sounds of Oriental languages, but also the thousand intricacies of ritual that guide the East through its daily life: so that Ismeddin's only hope would be to trip his adversary on an obscure point that even that master had overlooked. The darwish knew that he had to probe very deeply through Rankin's years of acquired Oriental thoughts and touch an instinct that would infallibly reveal the Englishman. And this done, he had to employ the betraying gesture in such a way as to dissuade Rankin from his quest, and at the same time, not actually expose the audacious captain to a certain and sanguinary doom in forbidden Kuh-i-Atesh, a city as holy now as it had been in the old, pre-Moslem days.

But before Rankin was tripped, he must first be recognized.

ISMEDDIN'S scouting through the hills was circuitous in the extreme; and thus toward the end of the second day, he was riding, for the time being, away from his ultimate goal. The rumors he had collected and sifted totalled exactly nothing at all, except the news that one Abdullah ibn Yusuf, a pious and learned scribe, had passed through Wadi el Ghorab, on his way north.

Even if this pious and learned person were indeed Captain Rankin, there would be no virtue in overtaking him on the road, for accosting him in the marketplace of Kuh-i-Atesh would be a much more effective way of bluffing the talented infidel. And as the darwish made his camp that night in a cave known by him

from old times, he was still at a loss as to the best approach.

To expose Rankin as an infidel would be futile. If he failed, he would only strengthen Rankin's position; if he succeeded, his victim would have no chance to retreat from his perilous venture. And a threat of exposure as an unbeliever would certainly be ignored by Rankin, who had in Mekka survived denunciation as an impostor. And thus and thus Ismeddin pondered until sleep found him in his cave.

Several hours later, Shaykh Hussayn, the chief of the Companions, woke the darwish from his light sleep. He fanned the embers of the dying fire, as Ismeddin wrote, and sealed the writing with a signet depending from a cord about his neck.

"Ride back to Bir el Asad," directed the darwish, "and give this to the Sultan. And remember, keep the Companions under cover while waiting for further word from me. Above all, don't let them amuse themselves by looting any villages."

"How about pack trains?" inquired Shaykh Hussayn gravely.

"Shaytan blacken thee, and no pack trains either! Now ride, and I will do likewise," replied Ismeddin as he mounted his horse.

The chief of the Companions took the trail toward Bir el Asad, and Ismeddin rode northward in the direction of Kuh-i-Atesh.

A PUBLIC scribe sat in the marketplace of Kuh-i-Atesh, acting as secretary to all who had petitions to present to the Amir, or letters to write to distant friends and relatives.

"Write to my brother in Herat," demanded a tall, fierce Afghan of the Durani clan. "He is ill, and not expected to live much longer. I am returning as soon as I have completed my business in this den of thieves."

"Very well," agreed the scribe. "What shall I say?"

"What shall you say?" growled the Afghan. "God, by God, by the Very God, you're a letter-writer, aren't you? Jackass, do you expect me to tell you what to write?"

A hunchbacked ancient beggar, wooden bowl clutched in his grimy talons, pushed his way into the front rank of the circle about the scribe.

"With your permission, O scribe! Say on behalf of this man, *'From the percussion of the grave and from the interrogation of the grave, may Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate, deliver thee! I, thy brother'*—what's your name, O Afghan?—Achmed?—*'send thee greeting, and after, say that I will shortly leave Kuh-i-Atesh to return to Herat, if it so please Allah.'* Write thus, O scribe!"

The Afghan's teeth flashed in a broad smile.

"Allah grant that thy kindness never grow less! *There* is a letter that sounds like a letter!"

The scribe began writing in fine *naskh* script.

"*Wallah!* There is a letter that will do you credit. Let me see it before you seal it," demanded the beggar.

He wiped his fingers on his greasy *djellab*, took the paper by its margin, and scrutinized it carefully. With his index finger he followed the script, spelling out each word as he read it. And then he nodded his approbation.

"Very good. May your brother prosper, and his health improve!"

Then, as the scribe attended to the correspondence of his next client, the beggar studied him as closely as he had the Afghan's letter. One eye, or rather, the

lack of one, was concealed by a patch; but the other was keen and piercing.

The beggar had roamed about the city since morning, crying for alms, and prying and poking about the taverns and the market-places and coffee-houses; but nothing had attracted his attention until he saw the scribe sitting on a rug nearly twice as long as it was wide. When he learned that the scribe was the pious and learned Abdullah ibn Yusuf, the beggar's interest quickened.

"A man concealing his true mission," reflected the beggar, "builds for himself a complete background and history. Now if this fellow were truly the scribe he claims to be, the gossips of Wadi el Ghorab and the other villages he passed through would not all be unanimous in remembering that Abdullah ibn Yusuf hails from al Yemen. Some few would have insisted that he was from Damascus, or Cairo. . . ."

Ismeddin the One-Eyed Beggar noted that the rug on which the scribe sat was old and thin, and woven in the days of his father's grandfather: its deep reds and solemn greens, the intricate perfection of its pattern, its very dimensions and proportions had a vague significance to Ismeddin.

"This may not be Captain Rankin, but this is a part that he might play. . . ."

The scribe was doing a good business. In addition to his harvest of coppers and small silver coins, he reaped the day's crop of gossip, and the hope, and fear, and jest, and misery that stalked between the lines he wrote at the dictation of his clients.

The correspondents by proxy had for the moment given the scribe a breathing spell. He yawned, stretched himself, and set aside the tile with its ink-saturated mass of silken threads that served as an inkwell.

Ismeddin approached and squatted on the ground before the scribe.

"*Ya,* Abdullah," he began, "may Allah prosper you! Thy generosity is my evening meal!"

The scribe tossed a copper coin into the ever-yawning bowl.

"Allah requite thee, O scribe!" acknowledged Ismeddin.

Then, hearing the tramp of feet and the sound of arms carried by men marching in cadence, he turned, and saw a squad of soldiers escorting a prisoner to the public square. Following them came an executioner and his assistants.

"Some one is going to die an unpleasant death," observed Ismeddin. "Judging by the implements that black fellow is carrying, it will be uncommonly savage."

"God alone is wise, all-knowing!" ejaculated the scribe, with an indifferent shrug of the shoulders.

Ismeddin's keen eye caught not a trace of the compassion or horror that even the most calloused infidel would betray at the sight of a man marching to a lingering barbarous doom. Nevertheless, there was something strikingly familiar about those eyes, and that nose.

"He goes to a savage doom," repeated Ismeddin. "For a trifling offense."

Then, staring fixedly at the scribe with his hard, glittering eye, "Captain Rankin, *he* goes to a feast compared with what you are facing."

"You call me by a strange name, O Grandfather," replied the scribe. "Possibly you mistake Abdullah ibn Yusuf for some one else?"

But for all his calmness, Captain Rankin knew then and there that he was in exceeding peril; and he knew also that the hunchback had penetrated his disguise.

"There is no mistaking Captain Ran-

kin," answered Ismeddin. "And to steal the Holy Carpet is a hazardous enterprise . . . cease fingering the butt of that pistol . . . shooting an old beggar would by no means further your cause."

"I reached for a purse, not a pistol," lied Rankin. "And suppose that you go with me to the Amir, to tell him that I am planning to loot the shrine of Imam Ismail."

The darwish smiled in recognition of an equal well met.

"What would that get me? The Amir would doubt that you are an infidel, and wouldn't believe that you were foolhardy enough to attempt such a mad feat. He would have me beaten, and you would go on with your scheme. By no means, *sidi* Rankin! I prefer to wait until you have committed yourself far enough to make my knowledge acceptable as truth."

"This," thought Rankin, "is no fanatic, but a blackmailer."

And then, to Ismeddin, "And how would you gain by exposing me?"

"A better chance to steal the Holy Carpet myself!" replied the darwish.

"Here are a hundred *tomans*," countered Rankin, producing a heavy purse. "And at the completion of my mission, another hundred, for your good will."

"I take refuge in Allah!" ejaculated Ismeddin piously, declining the purse. "I am seeking the Holy Carpet, and not a bribe!"

"But," protested Rankin, "we can't both take it. And if we work against each other, we may both end by being sawed asunder between two planks."

"Let us cast lots then," proposed Ismeddin, "so that one of us will withdraw and leave the other a clear field."

"Better yet," replied Rankin, "let us make a wager: whoever shall hold the other's life in his hands and yet refrain from exposing his rival, that one shall take the carpet. And the loser, for his good will, shall have from the winner a purse of a hundred *tomans*."

"Make it a thousand," said the beggar, whom Rankin had by this time appraised as no more a beggar than he, Rankin, was a scribe.

"Five hundred, and my blessing, Old Man!" countered Rankin.

"Done, by Allah!" agreed Ismeddin. And then, as he picked up his wooden bowl, "I am starting on the quest this very hour. And since I knew you for Captain Rankin, it is but fair that you know that I am Ismeddin, and that I am neither hunchbacked nor one-eyed. *W'as salaam!*"

Whereupon Ismeddin the Darwish limped toward the Herati Gate, crying to all true believers for alms.

"Ismeddin no more wants the Holy Carpet than I want ball-bearing eyeteeth," reflected Rankin. "And five hundred *tomans* is much more than he can get for my tanned hide, so he'll not betray me, though he'll probably waylay me on the road from here and take both the carpet and the purse. And that's a chance I'll have to take. . . ."

Rankin picked up the implements of his adopted profession and sought the *caravanserai* where he kept his baggage and stabled his mule.

That afternoon, Rankin wandered about the bazar, making sundry purchases. The horse and arms he left in charge of a venerable retired soldier—or brigand, Rankin couldn't decide just which—whose hut was just outside the city wall, not far from the Herati Gate. Despite several flasks of potent *'araki* which the old fellow drank like water, Rankin's friendly inquisitiveness failed to uncover the grizzled raider's history and background, or to spur him to boastfulness. That, and the promise of a second

purse, payable when Rankin returned to claim his property, gave excellent assurance of fidelity and discretion.

Late that night, Abdullah the Scribe mingled with the crowd that followed an outbound caravan past the city gate to wish it a safe trip, and a prosperous return. But the scribe was not with those who returned when the caravan had passed beyond earshot of the well-wishers.

The next morning, when the gates opened, a brother of the order of dancing darwishes picked himself up from the dust where he had slept, performed the ritual of morning prayer, and entered the city. Rankin's following in the trace of the caravan for several hours, and then marching back to the city, after assuming the costume of a dancing darwish, had made him convincingly travel-stained and weary: and the sentries enjoyed their fill of gossip from Damascus, with which the wandering brother regaled them before he sought the monastery.

IT WAS midafternoon of the day when the wandering brother from Damascus entered the city that the Amir of Kuh-i-Atesh sat beneath a striped awning on the flat roof of his palace, sipping Shirazi wine to his heart's content and his soul's damnation.

He thrust aside the freshly replenished glass and pointed toward the city gate. *"Mashallah!"* he exclaimed. "What's that?"

Footmen armed with staves which they plied lustily were beating aside the crowd as they shouted, "Gang way, O uncle! Make way for the Holy Darwish, Ismeddin! Careful there, *ya bint!* The pious pilgrim, Ismeddin! Gang way! Watch yourself, grandfather!"

Following the footmen, and filing through the Herati Gate, just past the guard, came eight camels, richly caparisoned and splendid with silken halters and silver bells. They bore on their backs musicians who alternately played Chinese and Hindustani music.

"Wallahi! Yallahi! Billahi!" swore the Amir, as the wailing notes of pipes and the clang of gongs and the thump-thump-thump of kettle-drums mingled with the shouts of the footmen. "Look at that ragged loafer mounted like a prince on a blooded mare! Bring him in right away, Mansur."

Four horsemen arranged in a square were now clearing the Herati Gate, mounted on trim, spirited desert horses. Each carried in his hand a lance: and on the four lance-heads they supported a canopy of crimson brocade splashed with gold, and decked with clusters of plumes.

Beneath the canopy, astride a bay mare with gilded hoofs, rode Ismeddin, arrayed in a ragged *djellab* and a turban even more disreputable. With one grimy talon he reined in the mare; and with the other he stroked his long beard, and half smiled to himself.

"Make way!" shouted the footmen. "Gang way for Ismeddin!"

Ismeddin dipped into his embroidered saddle-bags and scattered handfuls of silver coins to the right and left, raining largess on the loafers and beggars that crowded the city entrance.

As the procession approached the palace, the footmen arranged themselves in two groups at the entrance. The musicians, still playing, countermarched; and Ismeddin's mare, stung by her rider's savage spurs, leaped with a great bound from beneath the canopy toward the entrance of the palace, where Ismeddin's strong hand on the curb reined her back on her haunches.

Ismeddin dismounted and tossed the reins to a groom.

His retinue and their beasts were taken in charge by the Amir's steward.

"My lord," announced Ismeddin as he was presented to the Amir in the reception hall, "I sought you empty-handed. But it pleased Allah that on the long march from Kabul I inherited various possessions."

"Allah alone is Wise, All-Knowing!" exclaimed the Amir piously. "I have heard of your heritages before."

"And therefore," continued Ismeddin, "I am presenting to you the various beasts and trappings I acquired on the road that led me to the shadow of your magnificence."

"There is lavishness for you!" acknowledged the Amir.

"Rather say that the splendor of my lord's presence is better than horses and goods," countered Ismeddin.

And thus they exchanged compliments and gifts.

Coffee was served, and bread, and lamb grilled on skewers, and stews and pilau.

"El hamdu lilahi!" exclaimed the darwish as he stuffed home the last morsel of food. And then, *"Ya* Amir, I am a man of honor, and in the old days I ate your bread and salt; therefore I give you fair warning."

"There is neither might nor majesty save in Allah, the Great, the Glorious," intoned the Amir gravely. "But what might this warning be, *ya* Ismeddin?"

"Your city is favored by the presence of the shrine of the Imam Ismail, may Allah be pleased with him, and with the dancing darwishes who guard it. I have come from afar to seek the Holy Carpet that hangs before the tomb of Imam Ismail."

"Allah, by Allah, and again, by Allah!" swore the Amir. "Is it possible that you demand the Holy Carpet as a present?"

"No, my lord," replied the darwish. "I have come to steal it. And having eaten your bread and salt, I am bound in honor to declare my intention, so that you may be warned."

The Amir smiled, and stroked his beard for a moment. Then he struck his hands thrice together. An officer of the household advanced to the foot of the Amir's dais.

"Harkening and obedience, my lord!"

"You, Mansur," directed the Amir, "will give to Ismeddin a horse from my stables, and a brocaded robe, and a purse of a thousand pieces. And let Qasim give him ten cakes of bread, a measure of wine, a quarter of dressed meat, each day that Ismeddin is with us. Also detail ten slaves to wait on him as long as he honors us with his presence."

The Amir paused a moment, and then continued, "And you, Zayd, post a company of the guard about the monastery of the holy brethren. Draw a line skirting its walls at a distance of twenty paces. As for this Ismeddin, the guard will shoot him in his tracks if so much as the nail of his great toe or the tip of his little finger crosses the line."

Then, to Ismeddin: "See how I esteem your company. I have made the stealing a long task, even for one of your skill. Therefore take it if you can, and it is yours."

"Do you give me your word that if I can escape beyond three days' ride, it will be mine, and that you will not hold it against me, or demand reprisal of whoever gives me protection?"

"Even so, and let these be witnesses!" agreed the Amir, indicating the officers of the guard and the lords of the court.

THAT night, the secret wine-bibbers and the public coffee-drinkers marvelled over their bubbling pipes at the mad darwish who had proclaimed his intention of looting the shrine.

The dancing darwishes were aghast at the blasphemy, and reassured by the presence of the guard, and the broad white streak of lime that marked the deadline that Ismeddin would have to cross in the face of rifle fire. They heard the mounted sentries riding their beats along the city wall, against which the monastery was built, and were further assured that the audacious looter could not climb from the wall into the monastery. And there was one among the brethren, a new arrival from the college of dancing darwishes in Damascus who was likewise assured by the guard the Amir had posted. This holy brother's assurance, however, was mixed with wonder at Ismeddin's brazen announcement.

"Ismeddin is certainly bent on winning the loser's purse," said Rankin to himself. "There's absolutely nothing to be done in the way of refraining from exposing him! Unless he does the impossible and passes the sentries, so that I can nab him in the act of taking the carpet. . . . I wonder if he's allowed for my getting into the monastery at all, much less entering before they posted a guard!"

On the whole, Rankin felt that even though Ismeddin's demonstration might mask a subtle plan for looting the shrine, he, Rankin, had the advantage, since it would manifestly be easier to leave the monastery than to enter under the eyes of the guard. The theft of the carpet was, after all, nothing compared to observing the daily routine of the order of dancing darwishes, and carrying his life exposed to keen eyes ready to note the slightest false gesture, or word spoken out of character.

ISMEDDIN spent the following day wandering about the city, loitering in the *souk*, smoking and drinking coffee, and basking in the wondering stares of the populace, every last man of whom had heard of his mad quest. And since madmen are favored of Allah, their infirmity being a sign of especial holiness, the darwish was received as a saint by the hangers-on of the coffee shops, and the upstairs rooms where true believers, following the Amir's example, drank themselves drunk with wine and *'araki*, in defiance of the Prophet's precepts.

That afternoon, not long before sunset, Ismeddin approached the monastery and took his place at the plainly marked deadline, twenty paces before the wall, and in front of the entrance. He could look in through the arched doorway, and see, at the farther end of the hall, the Holy Carpet hanging before the shrine of Imam Ismail, magnificent in the dim shadows, and shimmering silkily where bands of late sunlight crept through the barred windows and marched across its surface.

"Ya Allah!" gasped Ismeddin as he saw the splendor of that web of enchantment, rippling ever so slightly in the breeze that stirred the sun-baked plaza between the monastery and the Herati Gate.

Then Ismeddin set about with his preparation to beguile the guard.

The captain of the troops barked a command. The rifles of the guard came to the ready.

"Beware, *ya* Ismeddin!" warned the captain. "Cross that line, and we fire."

"Wait until I cross the line," replied Ismeddin. "It is not forbidden that I look at the Holy Carpet. And of an evening

it pleases me to play at a curious game I learned in al Yemen."

At the command of their captain, all save the two sentries on post along the whitewash line retired to the guard house that had been erected at the entrance of the monastery.

Ismeddin unslung from his back a knapsack, and seated himself on the ground within a hair's breadth of the deadline. Then he took from the knapsack a tiny drum, and with his finger tips and knuckles beat a curious rhythm.

"Aywah! Aywah! Aywah!" he chanted. "Verily, O soldiers, I have learned odd feats in Hindustan——"

"You said al Yemen a moment ago, grandfather!" shouted one of the soldiers.

"See and judge for yourselves, O soldiers! *Aywah! Aywah! Aywah!* Yes, by God, O soldiers, I will show you a strange feat from Hindustan! Give me a copper coin, O soldiers, and watch this most entertaining feat!"

As he spoke, he reached into the capacious pack and withdrew a slim wand no thicker than the reed of a scribe, and about as long as his forearm: a quaint little wand with a grotesque image of ivory mounted at one end, to give it the semblance of a tiny scepter or mace.

Long shadows were stretching out across the plaza, and the fierce glare of day was being cut off by the bulk of the city walls and the tall minarets of the adjoining mosque.

"Watch with all your eyes, O soldiers!"

He tossed the scepter well across the line.

"By Allah, O Captain!" continued Ismeddin, "your men may not fire, since our lord the Amir said nothing about my little staff. Now watch me remove it."

"Better not, uncle," muttered the sentry as he passed. "That father of many pigs would order us to fire if your little finger crossed the line. I'll kick your staff to you the next time I pass."

"Captain," shouted Ismeddin, "is it truly forbidden that I reach across for my staff? Even just one little reach? I am an old man——"

"We warned you, O Ismeddin!"

"Then I am warned! So look with all your eyes, O soldiers, and see a most curious feat. *Aywah! Aywah! Aywah!* A most curious feat!"

As Ismeddin chanted his litany, he began making passes and gestures.

"Mashallah!" exclaimed the sentry. "It's moving."

Even as he spoke, the head of the little scepter rose a hand's breadth, halted, remained for an instant, its butt resting on the earth, head wavering from side to side. Then it rose another span toward the vertical, and yet again, until finally it stood as erect as a soldier on parade.

"O little staff," chanted Ismeddin, "take a pace forward, little staff. Old Ismeddin can't reach across to get you. Take another pace, little staff——"

In cadence to his chant and weaving gestures, the rod pirouetted toward him, a span at a time; paused, nodded, dipped, steadied itself, bounded this time half its length; reached the line, then very slowly sank forward until its ivory head touched the ground.

"See, the little staff is a true believer!" pattered Ismeddin.

"Ya sidi!" shouted the guard. *"Kamaan! Kamaan!"*

"No more tonight, O soldiers," declared Ismeddin, as he gathered up the coins and twists of tobacco and pieces of bread the guard had tossed him. "I live by your generosity, O soldiers! For I have sworn not to eat the Amir's bread until I have stolen the Holy Carpet!"

"Does that old jackass think his jug-

glery will make our vigilance relax?" wondered the captain. "Is this that crafty Ismeddin who's going to steal the Holy Carpet? . . ."

Ismeddin in the meanwhile had thrust his miniature scepter into his pack and joined a group of the faithful who were going to the mosque to pray.

TO EACH of the slaves that the Amir had given him, Ismeddin that evening assigned a sufficiency of tedious, trivial tasks that would keep him out of earshot. As they burnished his simitar, the trappings of the bay mare, and the daggers that usually bristled from Ismeddin's belt, and went on all manner of errands, the darwish reclined on his cushions, drinking coffee and smoking the pipe the Amir had provided.

The two who trimmed the pipe and replenished the tiny coffee-cup were gray-bearded, leathery fellows more accustomed to sword hilts and rifle butts than coffee-pots and charcoal-tongs: in a word, they weren't slaves at all, but a pair of the Old Tiger's picked raiders, the advance guard of the Companions that Ismeddin had rescued from the limbo of peaceful, Resident-ridden Bir el Asad and posted in the hills to await developments.

At every turn they contrived to upset the coffee-pot and spill its steaming, aromatic liquid into the hearth, or fumble the tongs and scatter burning charcoal over the rug at Ismeddin's feet every time the pipe received the slightest attention.

"O sons of several dogs!" roared Ismeddin. "Allah curse each of your fathers!"

If the palace walls had ears, the assurances of the coffee-slave and his protestations of his penitence effectively drowned the words that Ismeddin spat out between the curses and revilings he heaped on his awkward attendants.

And as the coffee-brewer loudly begged pardon, and dodged the pot hurled by the irate darwish, the *chiboukjji,* trimming the pipe, for once failed to drop a live coal, and spoke in low, rapid syllables.

"We don't know where the infidel dog is hiding. We heard that one of the brethren from Aleppo, or Trebizond, or some such place, came to the monastery just the other day."

"Find out more. But do nothing to betray Sidi Rankin, if it's he who has palmed himself off as a dancing darwish. And tell the Companions to patrol the hills closely. Any day, now. . . ."

THEY sat late at chess that night, Ismeddin and the Amir.

Thrice in succession the Amir just succeeded in checkmating the darwish, and was consequently in an amiable mood, and admired Ismeddin more than ordinarily.

"Wallah!" exclaimed Ismeddin. "Played like the Amir Timur. Up to the last, I had that game in my hand."

"Why speak of chess?" said the Amir. "Stealing the Holy Carpet is much more important! After all, you didn't come all this distance to beat me at chess."

The Amir beamed graciously.

"Come now, as one coffee companion to another, forget this stupid idea of taking the carpet. *Billahi!* You're a smart fellow, and an uncommonly good chess-player. How about taking a post as prime minister? Abdurrahman Khan has overstepped himself recently, and he's all ready for the bowstring . . . only he doesn't know it. Suppose you take his position?"

"I take refuge with Allah!" protested the darwish. "I am an old man, too late in life for a high position. Still, since you

put it that way, you could do me a favor——"

The darwish paused a moment, abashed at his presumption in suggesting some favor other than the one offered.

"Out with it, Ismeddin. Anything except the Holy Carpet."

"Well, since you insist. . . . You know, the secretaries of your court, and some of the brethren of the monastery, are reputed to be the finest scribes in this part of the world. Will my lord arrange a competition in the more elegant scripts, and then let the decision go in my favor?"

Ismeddin grinned, and winked.

"*Wallahi!* Nothing simpler," agreed the Amir. "And if you can impose on some one by being proclaimed the first scribe of my court, I'll draw the proclamation now, and arrange the competition tomorrow. And in a way, a love of learning is better than high position. I envy the darwish, roaming about the world——"

"*Voyaging,*" quoted Ismeddin pompously, "*is victory.*"

"Even so," agreed the Amir. And then, quoting just as ponderously, "*But while in leaving home, one learns life, yet a journey is a bit of Jehannum!*"

And on the heels of that profound declaration, the Amir dictated an order for the competition in writing, followed by a proclamation announcing Ismeddin the Darwish as winner and chief scribe of the court.

For several days Ismeddin dallied about, riding through the city, scattering alms among the beggars, strutting through the *souk,* and capering about with his mountebank tricks for the benefit of the troops posted before the shrine of Imam Ismail.

"*Ya sidi,*" said Ismeddin's pipe attendant as he trimmed the pipe, "I hear that the newcomer from Damascus is distinguished for his piety and learning. I bribed a porter to let me take his place and help carry a load of meal and some dressed meat into the monastery. One of the bags of meal broke wide open—by accident, you understand—and I insisted on helping sweep it up. Luckily, I got a look at the brother from Damascus. He has deep-set eyes, and brows that rise to points in the middle, just as you described Abdullah the Scribe.

"And tonight they will hold a ceremony, dancing themselves into ecstasy and then into a stupor. Then, as they lie in a trance, communing with Allah, this newcomer will take the Holy Carpet——"

"Shaytan rip thee open, why didn't you take it?" demanded Ismeddin. "You were in the monastery."

"In the monastery, with the muzzles of two rifles prodding me as I swept up the spilled meal," explained the pipe slave.

"Fair enough. By the way, Selim, have you ever seen such elegant writing?" asked the darwish irrelevantly.

"Never," admitted Selim. "But what has that to do with the Holy Carpet?"

"That," explained the darwish, "remains to be seen. Suffice it to say that even I couldn't have written such elegant *diwani,* and *kufi,* and *naskh,* and *ta'alik,* and such intricate *jeresi.*"

Ismeddin folded the manuscript and stuffed it into his wallet.

"Listen carefully. Have a horse waiting for me at the Herati Gate. Let there be another one close to the monastery, ridden aimlessly about by one of the Companions, so that if need be, I can mount behind him instead of running to the gate."

AS ISMEDDIN approached the deadline, the guard hailed him joyously.

"Will the little staff march in and take the Holy Carpet?"

"Sing us the one about the forty daughters of the Sultan——"

"No, tell us about Sitti Zobeïde and the wood-cutter."

"How about Abou Nowas and his wife's five lovers, O grandfather?"

"Sons of pigs, and eaters of pork!" retorted Ismeddin. "Allah sift me if I ever tell you another story, or sing another song, or perform any more juggleries for you. Tonight I have come to steal the Holy Carpet."

From within the monastery came the sound of pipes, and the eight-stringed *'oudh,* and the mutter of drums. The dancing darwishes were beginning their ritual of whirling.

The guard howled with good-natured derision. Sentry duty to keep this ancient madman out of the monastery was almost as good as unlimited looting.

"But before I steal the Holy Carpet, I will perform one more curious feat."

Ismeddin took from his knapsack half a dozen rods as long as his forearm and somewhat thicker than his thumb. These he planted in the ground, several feet apart, along the deadline.

"Tell me, O soldiers, have you ever been in *Feringhistan?*" he demanded as he fixed the last rod in place.

"No, by Allah!"

"Is it true that they eat pork?" asked one.

"And drink blood?" wondered another.

"And worship the images of three gods?" asked yet another.

"All that and more," replied Ismeddin. "But they have most amusing spectacles. In Damascus I stole these unusual sticks from the infidel oppressors of true believers."

The darwish indicated the upright rods: railroad signal flares, borrowed from the mining concessions in Bir el Asad.

Then Ismeddin produced several small red boxes, likewise the property of the British engineers, and scattered the contents, a grayish, glistening powder, along the deadline. Box after box he emptied until he had a continuous train that extended several paces on each side of the center of the line he dared not cross. This done, Ismeddin struck light to the signal flares, which flamed up with a fierce, consuming redness.

Three musicians approached from out of the darkness behind Ismeddin.

"Where have you been?" he roared. "When we're through here, I'll have you flogged! Take your places and begin playing!"

The musicians seated themselves behind Ismeddin, and unslung small brazen trumpets they wore suspended from their belts. Ismeddin, back to his musicians, made a gesture with the tiny ivory-headed scepter, and extended it at arm's length to his right front.

Ismeddin's wand flashed down.

The three musicians as one set their small brazen horns to their lips. The clear notes drowned the music coming from the monastery, where the brethren were well into the second phase of the ritual, whirling themselves into a trance. The blare of those brazen trumpets rang like the voice of a drunken god and wrenched the hearts of the listeners like daggers thrust home and fiercely twisted. And Ismeddin sang in sonorous Arabic that rolled and thundered like the voice of doom.

The guard stared at that little group of musicians, half blinded by the flares, and enthralled by that song that would carry across a battlefield. But they did not know that only two of the three trumpeters were sounding off; and that the third, for all his cheeks being inflated to bursting, was making not a sound,

watching, instead, for Ismeddin's next move.

The red flares were dying. One was dead—no, not quite. For as the fire flickered up once more, it set light to a fuse that hissed and sputtered swiftly toward the train of ash-gray powder.

Ismeddin closed his eyes, and bowed his head.

And then came a terrible, dazzling flash like the full blaze of uncounted noonday suns.

As Ismeddin leaped to his feet and dashed through the heavy wall of smoke that rolled forward from the explosion of that heavy charge of photographer's flash-light powder, the hitherto silent trumpeter picked up the chant where Ismeddin had left off.

The guard was stone-blind from the terrific flame they had faced with unaverted eyes. But they heard a great voice singing to the nerve-searching blare of brass, and believed that Ismeddin was still with his musicians.

The whirling darwishes, a full dozen or more of them, lay scattered about the hall, drunk with the divine ecstasy of having attained Oneness with Allah. Ismeddin laughed triumphantly as he leaped forward and snatched from its silver pegs the rug that hung before the tomb of Imam Ismail.

From without still came the blare of the brazen horns.

But Ismeddin knew that at any instant the guard would emerge from its beguilement: so he swiftly folded the carpet into a compact bundle, drew his pistol, and dashed for the door.

The guard of a sudden thought of the Amir's sanguinary fancies, and of Ismeddin's sleight of hand. Panic-stricken, they milled about, groping in the impenetrable blackness that clouded their eyes.

From the monastery came the yells of the *shaykh,* and of the musicians who had played for the participants of the ceremony.

A bolt clicked home. A rifle barked. The captain roared orders which no one understood in the confusion. And the brethren who had not danced themselves into a stupor emerged from their cells behind the hall.

"The Holy Carpet is gone! Stop him!" shrieked the *shaykh.*

Ismeddin, followed by his musicians, ran across the plaza, crouched low and zigzagging to avoid the fusillade that poured after them. And with a hail of bullets whistling over their heads, they gained the Herati gate.

Ismeddin let drive with his pistol before the sentry at the gate could bring his rifle to the ready, and dropped him in his tracks. A dozen bounds brought him to the clump of trees where horses and a groom awaited.

ISMEDDIN and his musicians were getting a comfortable lead on the pursuit.

"*Ya sidi,*" said the groom as he reined his horse to a walk, "just for a minute I came near mounting up and taking to the hills. Lucky you got there when you did."

"How so, Aieed?" demanded Ismeddin. "You had that thick wall between you and the rifle fire from in front of the monastery."

"That's not it at all, *sidi,*" explained the groom. "I saw that flash. It looked like all Jehannum breaking out! *Wallah!* What a flame!"

"That's when I ran for the carpet," interposed Ismeddin.

"You made good time, then. For the next thing I knew, there was shooting and shouting, and a general riot. Then I looked about me, and up there on the wall I saw a horse without a rider, and a

man going over the wall. I couldn't see whether he dropped, or climbed down.

"I was about to ride over to him—I thought it was you—when I heard the clatter of hoofs, and saw him charge out of the clump of trees he'd landed in.

"Just then you tore through the gate, with bullets kicking up dust all around you, and you shot the sentry's head loose from his chin. *Ya* Allah! If I hadn't waited——"

"But you did wait, *el hamdu lilahi!*"

The darwish frowned a moment, and stroked his beard. "What manner of man was this, Aieed?"

"I don't know, *sidi.* I got a glimpse of him on the wall, and it seemed that he wore a tall hat like the Brethren. But before he mounted his horse, he stumbled through the underbrush. I couldn't understand what he said, except a word or two——"

"And what was that?" asked Ismeddin.

"He spoke like the *Feringhi* engineers when they play that game of an evening. You know, when they poke sticks at little balls on a table, one who misses the ball says *'Damn'* and the other says *'Tough luck, Old Man.'* "

The darwish laughed.

"Captain Rankin, by Allah! Scared out at the last minute, he went over the side. Thought they were firing at him. But what was he doing on the wall? He should have stayed in the monastery if—— But maybe he wasn't ready yet to take the Holy Carpet."

"God alone is wise and all-knowing!" interjected Aieed. "And those *Feringhi* are all madmen."

To which Ismeddin agreed, and the horses having somewhat regained their wind, the darwish resumed the gallop.

They rode steadily for an hour or more. And as they rode, Ismeddin chanted the song about the forty daughters of the Sultan. He patted the carpet slung across the pommel of the saddle, and laughed.

"The one certain way of keeping Sidi Rankin from stealing the Holy Carpet. Me, prime minister in Kuh-i-Atesh! With a world dripping with loot, and the son of the Old Tiger needing me to keep Sir John in his place!"

Ismeddin reined his horse to a walk. He whistled a low note in ascending scale. In answer came the same trilling, quavering whistle.

"Ho, there, Hussayn! Bring out some fresh horses!" he commanded.

"Ready and waiting!" replied a voice from the darkness. "Are you far enough ahead for a pot of coffee? I'll send 'Amru back a way to watch the road."

Ismeddin dismounted, tossing the reins to Shaykh Hussayn. Then he unslung the burden from the pommel of his saddle, and dropped it to the ground by the smoldering fire. As Aieed fanned the coals to life, Ismeddin unrolled the precious carpet.

"*Ya* Allah!" exclaimed the darwish.

By the light of the glowing coals, Ismeddin recognized the very carpet on which Abdullah the Scribe had sat in the market-place of Kuh-i-Atesh. He examined the rug, peering at it from end to end to assure himself that his eyes were not deceiving him. But there was no mistake; it was the very rug, and no other.

"That infidel hung the false carpet beneath the true one, so that the theft wouldn't be noticed for several hours, or a day, perhaps. The brethren are so accustomed to seeing it that as long as something—almost anything that looks like a rug—hung there before the shrine, they suspected nothing."

"I take refuge from Satan!" exclaimed Shaykh Hussayn. He looked Ismeddin over from head to foot, and from foot to head. "Allah give me another twenty

years to marvel at the first time Ismeddin was outwitted!"

"Allah grant you forty more!" retorted Ismeddin. "But not to marvel at Captain Rankin. As long as the Amir's troops think we have the carpet, the infidel can make good his escape."

Aieed the groom let out a fresh horse.

Ismeddin swallowed his coffee, and leaped to the saddle.

"Mount up and follow me!" he commanded. "I'm going to find Rankin!"

ISMEDDIN'S search for Rankin appeared to be a hopeless task; but the darwish knew the hills, and immediately made his disposition of the Companions. He ordered them to ride out in pairs and fours, cutting across country where none but seasoned mountaineers could pick their way, and patrolling the passes leading in every direction from Kuh-i-Atesh. Ismeddin himself took charge of the southwestern quarter of the field, Rankin's most logical route, with a detachment of the Companions covering the ground as only ex-brigands could.

Rankin *could* get through; but the odds were against him.

For three days they patrolled. At times Ismeddin heard the distant crackle of rifle and pistol fire, and the drumming of hoofs; and then, later, one of the Companions would report an engagement with a patrol of the Amir's troops on their way back to Kuh-i-Atesh. But still there was no sign of Rankin.

"Shaytan rip me open!" exclaimed the darwish, as he received negative reports from every quarter. "He couldn't have gotten beyond the limits of the ground we've covered. He must be between our patrols and the walls of Kuh-i-Atesh. So we'll close in."

The morning of the following day proved the worth of Ismeddin's decision. The old darwish was riding along the narrow trail leading toward the ruins of a village sacked and looted several years previously by a band of raiding Kurds. In the distance, approaching the ruins, Ismeddin saw a man on foot, carrying a bundle on his back.

The wanderer was reeling, and his course zigzagged drunkenly. He stumbled, pitched forward on his face, lay lay there sprawled in the sun-baked dust. Then he laboriously rose to his knees, and with the aid of his staff, he lifted himself to his feet and resumed his staggering march.

There was something about the shape of the wanderer's burden that spurred Ismeddin to action. He urged his horse off the trail, and down the steep slope toward the wanderer. As he descended, Ismeddin signalled his followers to halt and take cover.

"Ho, there, *Sidi* Rankin!" he hailed.

For Rankin indeed it was, or what remained of him. By some unbelievable volition, he marched on when by all reason he should long since have dropped by the trail, with the vultures to administer the last rites, and a Sixteenth Century Persian carpet to serve as a shroud. His face was gashed and caked with dirt, and his long darwish cloak was slashed and tattered and stained with dried blood.

"Ho, there, *Sidi* Rankin!" repeated Ismeddin.

Rankin halted. With painful deliberation he unslung his bundle, laid it carefully on a rock, and drew the blade whose hilt peeped over his shoulder. Then he advanced at a brisk double-time, simitar at the port.

Ismeddin marvelled at that slashed, gory wreck of a man that had reeled and tottered just a moment ago, and now advanced with the agility of a tiger.

The darwish drew his blade, and

crouched low in the saddle to meet the charge. The bay mare snorted and pawed and reared at the smell of slaughter that the wind blew from the enemy.

At the instant of closing, Rankin shifted his attack from Ismeddin's right, where his blade would have full reach, to the left, where the darwish would have to cut over his horse's neck. Ismeddin wheeled just in time to evade Rankin's sweeping cut; and as he wheeled, Ismeddin's simitar flamed in a dazzling arc.

Rankin's blade rang against the rocks a dozen feet away.

Ismeddin dived out of the saddle, bearing Rankin to the ground.

"Take it easy, idiot!" growled the darwish. "I'm Ismeddin."

Rankin struggled vainly for a moment in Ismeddin's strong grasp. His strength and courage had left him with his blade. He glared for a moment at his enemy, and then recognized the ancient beggar who had accosted him as he played the scribe in the market-place of Kuh-i-Atesh.

"It's your turn, Ismeddin. I got six of them on the way out here. You're the only one who had sense enough to disarm me."

The darwish helped Rankin to his feet, and supported him for a moment as he regained his balance. Then he took from his saddle-bags a cake of bread, and dates, and unslung a skin of water.

"Here, eat!"

But before Rankin could accept the food and drink, Ismeddin remembered that his mission was not complete, and withdrew the water and bread.

"*Ya* Allah!" he exclaimed. "This interfering with honest looting is dirty business! Before there is bread and salt between us, there is this matter of a wager you made with an old man in the *souk*."

Rankin caught a flicker of steel in the background, half-way up the wall of the ravine, and marvelled that Ismeddin would parley when he could take the carpet without further discussion. The remark about settling the wager before there was bread and salt between them had a sinister implication; yet the darwish thus far had shown no intention of resorting to force.

"Well then," said Rankin, as he took from the belt beneath his cloak two heavy purses, "here is the loser's portion, as we agreed. And as much more if you and your men will escort me to Mosul. Take it, and let me eat."

"*Wallahi!*" exclaimed the darwish. "To refuse you food is painful. But you forget the wager: *whoever shall hold the other's life in his hands and yet refrain from exposing his rival, that one shall take the carpet. And the loser, for his good will, shall have from the winner a purse of five hundred tomans.*

"Now at what time between this moment and the day that we made our wager did you hold the life of Ismeddin in your hands?"

"Not once," acknowledged Rankin. "But——"

"Then by that sign," interrupted Ismeddin, "the Holy Carpet is mine, for I knew that you were in the monastery, and I refrained from denouncing you. One word from me, and your hide would even now be nailed to the city gate, and in their eagerness they would have flayed you before they killed you, and this you know well."

As he spoke, Ismeddin unslung a bundle lashed to the pommel of his saddle, and unrolled a rug.

"This is the carpet which you left in place of the one I sought. There is proof that in sparing your life, I gave you the chance to take the real, and leave me the substitute!"

At these words Rankin's spirit revived, instead of dying before his battered, hacked body: for with followers at his back, Ismeddin offered proof and invited argument instead of seizing what he could take.

"Not so fast there, Ismeddin, not so fast!" exclaimed Rankin exultantly. "Prove first that you held my life in your hands, instead of showing that you arrived some moments after I had succeeded! How do you think that I came to be accepted as a brother of the order of dancing darwishes? On what point of ritual could you have exposed me when the brethren themselves did not suspect me? Had you known enough about the mysteries of the order to betray me, you yourself would have entered as I did."

The darwish smiled and stroked his beard.

"But a wager is a wager, you still admit?"

"Granted," assented Rankin. "Then prove that my life was in your hands."

Ismeddin drew from his belt a scrap of paper.

"Here it is. Look at it!"

Rankin examined the fine *naskh* script, and the elegant *ta'alik*.

"Nothing but my own handwriting."

"Nothing but your death warrant, had I used it!" retorted Ismeddin. "The script that an infidel impostor submitted in a competition at the Amir's command."

Rankin laughed good-humoredly.

"Absurd! The *shaykh* himself complimented me on it."

"But supposing, *Sidi* Rankin," resumed Ismeddin, "that I had called to the Amir's attention that the triple dots over *sheen* and the double dots over *qaf* and beneath *yé* were made from *left* to *right*, according to the *Feringhi* direction of writing, even though the characters themselves were faultlessly made as we make them, from right to left. Your instinct betrayed you, and you never thought to make the right-hand dot first when you wrote, and you can plainly see how your reed moved in making them.

"One word to the Amir—but to say more is insulting."

"You saw that in the *souk*, when you read the letter I wrote for the Afghan, before we made our wager," raged Rankin, contending for more than the life he had so boldly risked. "And then you went to the Amir and announced your mission, so that it was impossible from the outset for me to betray you."

The darwish smiled; but he retreated a pace.

"Only a fool or an *inglesi* would wager without being certain in advance of the outcome; particularly when he adds to his oath the word of an *inglesi*. *You* wagered recklessly, not I. And who but yourself proposed the wager?

"You could have told the captain of the guard that I would blind his men with an explosion of flashlight powder, and take the carpet while they were sightless?" mocked Ismeddin.

Rankin turned and seized the Holy Carpet. His laugh was high-pitched and cackling.

"My life hung on three dots? What if I had mispronounced the password? What if they had seen me taking the carpet? What of the sentries patrolling the wall while you made your juggleries down there in the courtyard?"

Rankin's laughter froze Ismeddin.

The darwish signalled with his arm, and whistled a shrill note. Here and there from behind rocks and clumps of shrubbery along the slope appeared the heads of the Companions. The click of cocking pieces and the ring of bolts snapped home mingled strangely with Rankin's terrible laughter.

"Let them fire!" cried Rankin as he shouldered the rug. "And be damned to your three dots!"

Rankin strode along the trail at a brisk march, carpet balanced on his shoulder.

Ismeddin stared for a moment, reached again for the skin of water and cake of bread. But again he remembered that he served the Sultan, and not himself: and the darwish shouted a command.

The Companions swooped down on Rankin like falcons striking their prey.

The darwish mounted his horse, and took the trail toward Bir el Asad.

"Serving kings is a dirty business," he growled.

But as he rode, his frown was replaced by a smile, for Ismeddin contemplated the payment he would exact of Sir John.

SHORTLY after the morning prayer, Shams ud Din the Sultan sat beneath the glittering canopy of his throne of state. The captains of the guard and the officers of the court filed into the throne room and took their posts about the dais. Sir John Lindsay occupied his customary post at the Sultan's left.

The great gong rolled and thundered, formally announcing that the Sultan's Presence was for his people.

A *wazir* approached the dais. But his petition was not presented.

There was a clatter of hoofs in the courtyard. A horseman charged into the hall of audience, followed by a second. At the very foot of the dais they reined in their foaming horses. Both dismounted. And Ismeddin, tossing the reins to the grimy, bandaged survivor of hard fighting in the hills who served as groom, leaped up the steps to the throne.

"*Ana dakhilak, ya sultan!*" he cried. "Under your protection, O King!"

"You have our protection, *ya* Ismeddin," responded the Sultan: and then, remembering the old days when hard-pressed riders sought him, "Turn out the guard!"

"Never mind the guard!" said the darwish. "They're a day's march behind me!"

The Sultan's brows rose in saracenic arches.

Sir John twice opened his mouth to speak, and twice decided it was too late. Sir John had a premonition of evil: for with the Sultan's being startled into granting protection, no matter what devil's mess was following in the trace of the wily darwish, the Sultan was bound by his word to protect Ismeddin to the uttermost.

Ismeddin grinned, and stroked his beard. As he eyed Sir John, his grin widened.

"*Ya sultan,*" he announced, "Captain Rankin will not steal the Holy Carpet."

Sir John sighed deeply, and ceased looking as though he could bite a rifle-barrel in half.

"Is this the truth?" demanded the Sultan.

"By your life and by your beard!" affirmed the darwish. "This is the very truth of the One True God. I have done that which you commanded, and Rankin is safe, though corroded by the treachery of man."

But the Sultan suspected something that should not be revealed in public: so he signalled his *wazir* to dismiss the court. And as the hall of audience was cleared of all save Ismeddin and his groom, and the Resident, the Sultan said, "O subtle serpent, for what villainy have you tricked me into giving you protection? For the sake of what thievery and what slaying have you made a fool of me?

"Let it pass this time, but by your life, I will have your head if ever another device serves you as this one did.

"But prove to me that Rankin did not steal the Holy Carpet."

The darwish turned to his foaming horse, and with his poniard swiftly cut the lashing of the pack behind the cantle of the saddle. He flung the bundle at the foot of the dais, and unwound the outer covering of rags. Then he unrolled a rug somewhat over four feet wide and slightly less than ten feet long, and flung its rich folds upon the steps.

"Behold the Holy Carpet which Rankin did not steal!"

The Resident started as though prodded with red-hot irons.

The Sultan roared his rage.

"God, by God, by the Very God! I sent you to keep Rankin from stealing the carpet, and Allah curse your father, you stole it yourself! I sent you as a preserver of the peace, and you ride back with war at your heels! O crack-brain! Son of a camel and father of a pig!"

"Ana dakhilak, ya sultan," murmured the darwish, and grinned.

Sir John was choking, but he finally managed to articulate.

"Your Majesty, protection or no protection, this fellow must be surrendered to the Amir, and the carpet returned."

"Your Excellency," interposed the darwish, "I am his protected, and his captains and lords bear witness. And he will protect me to the uttermost."

Sir John knew that Ismeddin spoke the truth.

And Sir John knew that no explanations would be acceptable to his superiors. He wondered just how soon his successor would report for duty. He saw the concessions sacked and burned by horsemen from the hills.

"My good man," resumed Sir John, "I understand His Majesty's obligation to his protected. But you who have served His Majesty so faithfully simply couldn't hold out for protection at the cost of war. And your life isn't in danger. Return this accursed carpet, and go your way. I will reward you richly."

"Hear His Excellency seek favors of old Ismeddin!" mocked the darwish.

And Sir John endured his misery in silence.

"My lord," continued the darwish, "I obeyed your command concerning *Sidi* Rankin. As to the Holy Carpet, it comes without reprisal in its wake.

"I warned the Amir before witnesses that I had come to steal the carpet from the shrine of Imam Ismail, Allah curse the heretic! And the Amir laughed, and invited me to spend as much of my life as I cared to devote to that enterprise. He posted a company of the guard before the shrine, with orders to shoot me down if I crossed their line with as little as my finger tip. And he swore that if I could take it, then it was mine.

"And here is the Holy Carpet. By your beard, *ya sultan,* this is the truth."

The Sultan and Sir John listened to Ismeddin's account of the taking of the carpet, and of the fighting in the hills, and of the feasting of the vultures. . . .

Then said Ismeddin, "Your servant offers you a throne carpet worthy of a prince. And the sight of it is like listening to exalting music."

The darwish attempted to fling the carpet across the throne from which the Sultan had risen; but the Sultan stopped him with a gesture.

"Ismeddin," he said, "that carpet is red with the blood of the Companions of the Old Tiger. In the old days when I tossed away the lives of my men, I rode leading them; but now I sit safely on my throne. So I will not sit on that blood-stained rug!"

"So be it, and the thought is worthy of you, my lord," said the darwish. Then, with a lordly gesture, "Permit me then to give it to my faithful servant with whose blood this carpet is reddest."

He beckoned to the groom.

"Take it, Saoud, and my blessing with it!"

The purple tinge left Sir John's face, and he sighed his satisfaction.

"My word, your Majesty," said Sir John as he turned from the throne to leave the audience hall, "an unusual fellow, this Ismeddin. A bit irregular, you know, this keeping the stolen carpet, but since Captain Rankin isn't involved, it will be quite satisfactory. Entirely so, your Majesty."

Then, as the Resident passed the sentries at the door of the audience hall, the Sultan said to Ismeddin, "Why did you demand protection you didn't need? And who is this groom of yours? He's so loaded with bandages I couldn't recognize him."

"I demanded protection," replied the darwish, "for the purpose of giving that ass of a Resident a few unhappy moments for making me thwart an honest looting.

"As to the groom: that is *Sidi* Rankin in one of his disguises."

And Ismeddin told the Sultan the unrelated portions of the quest of the Holy Carpet as a bandaged, sword-slashed groom with a bundle on his shoulder led a foaming horse toward the excavations not far from the city wall.

FACE PIDGIN

By JAMES W. BENNETT

The story of a Chinese lottery promoter who would rather face financial ruin than lose face

MY CLERK, a solemn-faced Eurasian, thrust his head into my office and announced mournfully:

"Li Yuan is here, sir. He will *not* go 'way."

I groaned, and the clerk groaned in sympathy. Li Yuan was by way of becoming a Number One pest. And why, out of the several American attorneys practising law in Shanghai, he should have chosen me as confidant and father confessor, I can only describe as the working of some obscure Nemesis. I said to my clerk:

"All right, send him in. We'll get it over with."

Li Yuan entered. He was garbed in a robe of tan serge surmounted by a jacket of exquisite, leaf-brown silk brocaded with chrysanthemums—the perfect autumnal costume of the young Chinese dandy. Beaming at me, he began:

"You are my friend. You are my father. You are my dear teacher. At las', I have found life-work that will please you!"

I was not impressed. The young man had come to me with not less than forty schemes, the past six months, upon each of which I had dourly poured much cold water. They had ranged from stock flotation of a perpetual-motion machine to a

plan to build a stadium for the matching of fighting quail. Li Yuan's late-lamented father having been a friend of mine, I had honestly tried to prevent the youth from dissipating, in one lusty sweep, the entire family fortune. He now drew from his pocket a printed balance sheet, the statement of a firm planning to sell that profitable paper, lottery-insurance.

He said proudly: "That is my company. *I* am the Ta Ch'ing Lottery-Insurance Corporation, Limited. Ta Ch'ing—I have named it after Manchu Dynasty: 'Great Brightness.' "

I went over the statement with growing puzzlement. It was so perfectly in order that I demanded, "Do you mean that this is really accurate? Did you work it out, alone?"

"I have two other stockholder', two foreign gentlemen who know all about it. One is Jo-hon MacSmith from City of Mass'chusetts in State of Boston. Other is Jean Clouard. He is French. But let me tell you of fine idea I have, the idea that will make our firm famous all over China. We will have a prize: a fine coffin of catalpa wood which we will give to policy-holder before death—so that he can show to admiring neighbors. Then, after death, we pay all funeral expense', including fifty-course banquet, many bags of paper money to be burn', many prayer' at Taoist temple. . . ."

Li Yuan paused. His eyes rolled blissfully upward, showing the whites in a trick that I found maddening. Then he demanded:

"Is it not mos' conservative?"

For once I had to agree. The Chinese lottery-insurance companies had been worked out mathematically along actuarian lines. The lottery features furnished the sales appeal. And their system of penalties for delinquency and cancellation gave the companies an extraordinary profit, a profit which they legitimately increased by sound investment of the funds in their control. I asked:

"How are the stock shares in your firm divided?"

"I have control, sir. I own sixty percent."

I glanced again at the balance sheet. "Your treasury seems to be well filled. How much of it is MacSmith's and Clouard's money?"

"None, sir. I do financing. But the two gentlemen are giving their exper'ence. They are men with high Western ideal. They call themselves 'Investment Committee.' They will invest our funds. But they can make no purchase unless I give—how you say?—my okayo."

"I wish you'd let me look over those investments before you do any okaying. I've one fault to find with your company: these two men have no real equity in it. Even so, that needn't be serious, if you'll watch your step!"

"I'll watch it, Mr. Parkes!" And beaming refulgently at me, Li Yuan departed.

A WEEK later, Li Yuan sent me a chit, asking me to lunch. The meal was such an elaborate affair—being enlivened by those expensive if dubious delicacies, sharks' fins, antediluvian eggs pickled in lime, and moribund sea slugs—that I realized my young host had some unusual favor to ask of me. He began promptly:

"Mr. Parkes, what if I say that we have chance to make forty thousand dollar' profit for our company? Quick profit? You know company named Asiatic Investment? And you know what their bonds are selling at?"

"Above par. The Asiatic Investment is the strongest house of its kind in the Far East."

Li Yuan chuckled delightedly. "Didn't

I tell you Clouard and MacSmith were good men? They have found man in Soochow who wants money very fast. If I buy, tonight, for cash, he will give me two hundred bonds at eighty. He needs money quick, and he must not let his creditors know that he has to sell."

I asked uncertainly: "Are you sure it's the Asiatic Investment?"

"Sure, same company! I must go to Soochow on seven o'clock express. I have taken out hundred and sixty thousand in stocks and bonds from treasury and cashed them. I have money with me now."

Li Yuan casually patted his midriff, around which, under his robe, was the girdle that is the Chinese pocketbook and carry-all."

"Your mind seems to be made up. Why do you ask me?"

"Are you not my adviser? Do you ever make mistakes?"

"Well, I hope one isn't being made now," I said unhappily. I had no valid reason to offer in opposition. Ethically the transaction was not to my liking, but this seemed to be a case of letting the seller beware. If the Soochow Chinese was willing to part with his bonds under the market price in order to keep the transaction secret, Li Yuan might as well be the gainer.

ON HIS return from Soochow, the next morning, Li Yuan brought me the bonds. They were engraved on banknote paper. On the top fold, I read: Asiatic Investment Company, Ltd., Shanghai, Hongkong, Singapore."

I opened one. Coupons had been clipped from it up to a year ago. There remained two half-yearly coupons that were overdue.

I pointed to these. "Did you have enough money with you to pay the accrued interest?"

Li Yuan bent down to stare at the small rectangle, then he looked up with dawning surprize and delight. "Ey-yah! He forgot to clip'm! . . . No, Mr. Parkes, I pay no back interest. Man was in such great anxiousness to sell that he forgot to clip coupons."

I snatched up one of the bonds. My eye was arrested by its title: "Asiatic Investment Company, Ltd., Shanghai, Hongkong, Singapore."

Singapore. The Asiatic Investment was a British firm, but I had never known that it had extended its field as far south as the Straits Settlements. Li Yuan interrupted my scrutiny to say airily:

"I must go. I have many business matter' in town. Also I must go to broker office and sell these bonds."

"I'll join you there. I want to see those securities disposed of."

After a discreet delay, I followed Li Yuan from my office. I was distinctly uneasy over the turn his affairs had taken. My first move, I decided, would be to look up his "Investment Committee."

I paused, a half-hour later, just outside the door marked in Chinese and English: "Ta Ch'ing Lottery-Insurance Corporation, Ltd." From inside came muted voices, then laughter. I knocked. The laughter ceased abruptly. Steps cautiously approached the door. A face peered suspiciously at me, long-jawed, pale, surmounted by lank blond hair that fell over one eye. I handed him my business card. He stared at it and then said:

"Oh. . . . It's Mr. Parkes. Li Yuan's friend. Come in."

I entered the room. The side walls were covered with placards which served the double purpose of advertising the Ta Ch'ing Company and partially hiding wall-paper that was hanging in dismal shreds. On a Ningpo-varnished table were strewn strips of flimsy green paper,

numbered lottery tickets. Seated at the table was a heavy-set man with small eyes and triple chin. He said, affably enough:

"Have a chair, Mr. Parkes. My name's MacSmith. This is Clouard."

Seating myself, I asked bluntly: "Gentlemen, did you investigate this last purchase Li Yuan has just made?"

MacSmith stared at me coldly. "The Asiatic Investment bonds? Wouldn't that be like investigating the Bank of England? Those bonds are selling at one hundred five." His voice grew abruptly harsh. "Since you've taken over the job of being Li Yuan's unofficial adviser, you might try reading the financial section of the morning paper!"

I accepted the reproof. "There is just one point that puzzles me. I thought the Asiatic people were operating only in China. Have they an office in Singapore?"

Clouard drew in his breath sharply. "*Oui*—yes!" he answered.

"No!" countered MacSmith, scowling at his partner. "What Clouard meant was that they *had* a Singapore branch, a few years ago."

"I'm glad to be reassured," I said, assuming a tone of heartiness.

As I left the room, I fancied that the two men exchanged worried glances. Certainly my own forebodings were actively astir.

In the broker's outer office, Li Yuan was waiting for me, the bonds lying carelessly on the table before him. He showed an inclination to engage in amiable, idle gossip but I hurried him at once to the broker's desk.

Jackson, the broker, reached for a pencil and sales-order pad; then his eyes focused sharply upon the pile of bonds. "What's this?" he muttered. "Here! Wait a second."

"What's the matter?" I interjected nervously.

"Forgery!" he said succinctly. "I have an Asiatic Investment bond in my safe. We'll compare it with these."

He left the room, to return a moment later.

"No, it's not a forgery. The bonds you have are from another company; they read: 'Asiatic Investment Company, Ltd., Shanghai, Hongkong, Singapore.' Now, this bond from my safe reads: 'Asiatic Investment and Holding Company, Ltd., Shanghai, Hongkong.' The wording is different and there's no mention of Singapore. You see?"

"Yes, I do see!" I reached for the telephone. "Police Headquarters—quick!"

As I waited for the connection, my mind was in a ferment. I would get in touch with Tsung, a young Chinese detective, with whom I had had dealings on behalf of one of my clients. Tsung had shown himself to be a level-headed, dependable person, with an almost Occidental crispness of speech, the direct antithesis of Li Yuan who now sat, staring blankly at those bonds.

At last, getting my connection through to Tsung, I told him hurriedly of Clouard and MacSmith and of Li Yuan's purchase.

"I know of them," Tsung answered calmly. "The Crown Colony police at Singapore sent us their *dossier*. We have been watching for activity from them."

"What did they do in Singapore?"

"Opened an office and sold the stock and bonds of their own investment company. People thought they were buying the original Asiatic Investment paper. Clouard and MacSmith did a—how you say?—land-offices business. And, to use American slangs, the two got away with it——"

"What!" I interrupted. "Weren't they arrested?"

"Yes. And they were tried, too. But they managed to prove that their company had a different name and that they had a legal right to sell their own stock. They left Singapore, however, soon after their trial. And here they are."

"Yes, Tsung! Here they are. And I intend to see if there isn't a little more justice to be found in Shanghai! Swear out a warrant for their arrest, charging fraud."

The voice at the other end of the wire was silent.

"Did you hear, Tsung?"

"Yes, I heard, Mr. Parkes. But does Li Yuan wish that?"

"Li Yuan? Why, I suppose—oh, of course, he does! He wants to get his money back."

"You had better talk with Li Yuan before you make any move, Mr. Parkes. You see—we were at Nantai University together, and I know Li Yuan, very well. I am not certain he will want to prosecute."

After a few more questions concerning Li Yuan's Franco-American "Investment Committee," I hung up and turned to the budding young financier who had just come such a fearful cropper.

"Li Yuan, if that pair of blackbirds think they can steal a cool hundred and sixty thousand dollars from the treasury of the very company in which they are stockholders——"

"But, Mr. Parkes," interrupted Li Yuan plaintively, "I do not believe that they stole it."

"The money's gone, isn't it? I certainly would like to test the point in court. Furthermore, you may have my services as your attorney, free of charge."

"But, sir," Li Yuan protested gently, "I do not like court. If I talk to my Investment Committee and tell them what has happen', they will surely make Soochow Chinese give me back my money."

"Bosh! In this matter, it isn't what you like, it's what is best for you. For months on end you've come to me; you've taken up hours of my time asking my advice. Now I'm going to see that you follow it. You've got to go into court with this—and you've got to fight!"

"But—but—but——" he began. He swallowed several times, and his Adam's apple rose and fell alarmingly. "You are my friend, you are my father, you are my teacher," he said in a dying voice.

"Well, do we go into action?"

In answer Li Yuan gave a pathetic sigh.

A WEEK later, as I seated myself within the plaintiff's section of the Mixed Court, I was satisfied that we would win our case. It would be more than a technical victory, for I was convinced that we could force the two defendants to disgorge.

During my preparation of the case, Li Yuan had driven me to the verge of a well-defined attack of the jitters. He had offered objections and interposed obstacles as fantastic as ever his former perpetual-motion schemes had been. And through it all, he had continued to say with plaintive stubbornness that he did not believe in the guilt of his precious "Investment Committee."

This point, exasperating as it was, I believed I understood. It was a "face-saving" device. Since he had been foolish enough to trust them, originally, now he must show them a semblance of loyalty. This phase of the problem troubled me at moments. I had a wholesome dread of face, that peculiarly Chinese combination of inflated pride and stubborn self-respect.

The afternoon before, Li Yuan had sent me word that he would not be able to attend the trial because of illness. I had gone to his house to investigate this sudden malady. Taking him by surprize, I found him strolling in the garden of his home. He was carrying a brown song-bird in a lacquered cage. Without the slightest embarrassment, he said:

"My grandmother is very sick."

"Your grandmother? But you wrote that *you* were ill?"

"My grandmother is sick," he repeated pensively. "Very, very sick."

A moving object caught my eye, at that moment. Tottering with steps incredibly swift for one whose feet were bound, an old woman flitted across an inner courtyard. She was garbed in gleaming black satin—not the costume of a servant. Chinese families, I knew, were not in the habit of hiring servants with bound feet or dressing them in rich satins. It was unquestionably the "very sick grandmother."

I had just enough self-control left to advise him coldly that he would be present at the trial—or I would come and bear him there by force—and make my departure.

Nor had I gained much consolation from the attitude of Li Yuan's college mate, the detective Tsung. True, he had investigated the Soochow Chinese and had found that the man was not an inhabitant of Soochow. Immediately after the sale of his bonds, that individual had betaken himself to parts unknown. Also, Tsung had accepted restraining orders to hold MacSmith and Clouard in Shanghai. Finally, he had obtained space on a crowded Mixed Court docket for our trial. But this had not been done without considerable pressure on my part. I had been conscious of inertia, of that passive Oriental resistance so galling to the Occidental.

Since I am not a trial lawyer, I had engaged Tetlow, a pompous man but the most able of his tribe, to conduct our prosecution. The courtroom was crowded. Reporters were there from the three foreign dailies as well as from several Chinese news services. The thought lodged that if nothing more happened, at least the thimble-rigging of Messrs. Clouard and MacSmith would be thoroughly aired.

All that week, I had hoped that—rather than let the trial begin—they would offer a compromise. But no such offer had come. Apparently they were going to take the line of injured innocence. They now sat across the room, conversing calmly with their attorney. If each defendant felt perturbed, he did not show it.

But Li Yuan—who had heeded my threat of the afternoon before—sat looking as gloomy as a prisoner awaiting sentence. Nor was the young detective, Tsung, seated at Li Yuan's side, in any happier mood.

THE Chinese policeman detailed to act as bailiff appeared at the door leading to the judge's chambers. In a singsong voice he intoned: "The magistrate and the assessor are about to enter the courtroom. All will arise."

The first to enter was the Chinese magistrate, striding heavily and flapping his long, gray-silk robe. He was a powerfully built man with an impassive face. He was followed by Riddick, the assessor, an American consul detailed to act as associate judge. Riddick was the antithesis of the magistrate, a thin, weary-eyed man, with an irascible mouth. He was known for his quick judgments and for his heavy hand with swindlers of the MacSmith-Clouard stripe.

After the usual preliminaries, Tetlow rose and stationed himself under the judges' dais, just in front of Li Yuan. In leisurely fashion he began his argument, beginning with the formation of Li Yuan's lottery-insurance company.

Tetlow had proceeded—with somewhat windy eloquence—to the point where his client was contemplating the purchase of the Asiatic Investment bonds, when Li Yuan reached forward and plucked at his elbow. Without looking back, Tetlow dislodged the hand and said:

"My client was told by the said Clouard and MacSmith that——"

Again Li Yuan tugged at his elbow.

Tetlow looked around. "What is it?"

I could not hear Li Yuan's words but I caught the attorney's angry whisper:

"Don't you dare interrupt me again!"

I muttered to Tsung: "For Heaven's sake, keep Li Yuan quiet!"

"He knows what he is doing, sir," Tsung replied solemnly.

"But he'll ruin Tetlow's argument!"

The attorney made a third attempt to go on, only to have his arm again caught by Li Yuan. This time, the tug was so vigorous that the attorney visibly tottered.

Riddick, the assessor, spoke acidulously: "Mr. Tetlow, if your client will permit you, the court awaits your argument."

The lawyer lifted a face, suddenly beet-red. "He will not let me continue, sir. Has the court the power to remove the plaintiff until I can finish? If so, I should like to urge——"

"The court has no such power!" snapped Riddick. "What's the trouble?"

"My client says that the case has gone far enough, sir. He wishes to withdraw his receivership petition."

"What!"

From the tone of that monosyllable, I could read the assessor's condemnation of this insane proceeding. I guessed that he had been prepared to make an example of the two confidence men.

I jumped to my feet and faced Li Yuan. He met my accusing look with a firmness unusual for him.

"Sorry, Mr. Parkes! I know you start all this to help me, but I do not want trial. I stop it now."

"But it's too late, Li Yuan! The case has already started!"

"No, this is the Mixed Court. The magistrate is Chinese." Abruptly, Li Yuan wheeled about and faced the Oriental judge. "I appeal to you, Most Eminent and Prior-born, to dismiss my case. I do not wish it to go on. My good name is involved. Is not my good name worth more than any money I might recover in court today?"

As each eager phrase fell from Li Yuan's lips, the magistrate nodded his head as though in approval. He picked up the gavel which he was in the habit of using just before announcing a verdict. Then, apparently recalling that his colleague must be consulted, he turned to Riddick.

The assessor was scowling. "This is ridiculous!" he snapped. "The time of the court has been needlessly wasted! I am of the opinion that the magistrate should charge contempt. Mr. Parkes, you are responsible for the docketing of this. What have you to say?"

"Will you please allow me a moment, Mr. Assessor? This is as surprizing to me as it is to the Court."

Receiving Riddick's grudging nod, I appealed to Tsung:

"Stop these antics of Li Yuan! Get him out of the courtroom!"

The young Chinese detective regarded me gravely. "I agree with Li Yuan, sir. The case must not go on."

"But how about his money? This loss

about wipes him out. How is he going to pay his death benefits, his lottery prizes?"

"You forget, Mr. Parkes, that if this insurance company of Li Yuan's is thrown into the hands of a receiver, every policyholder will have to be told why. Li Yuan's future will be ruined. His pride——"

"I see! His pride!" That subconscious fear which had been in the back of my mind ever since I had taken over the management of the case, now came squarely out in the open. I was facing a barrier, too thick and tall to surmount: Face Pidgin. I turned to Riddick:

"It appears that my client will not let the trial proceed. I am helpless in the matter. It is purely a misunderstanding and no contempt of court is intended."

Riddick looked at me stonily. "Very well, Mr. Parkes; we shall drop the contemplated charge of contempt."

He turned and began a whispered conference with the Chinese magistrate. The judge nodded, lifted his gavel and brought it down sharply. His voice boomed portentously:

"The petition of Li Yuan for the receivership of the Ta Ch'ing Lottery-Insurance Corporation, Limited, is hereby dismissed. Plaintiff will bear"—he paused for emphasis—"*treble* the costs of the action."

I gasped. It was a signal victory for the two defendants. More than that, it was a slap in our faces. "Treble the costs!" No wonder the assessor had dropped the charge of contempt. . . .

I looked at Li Yuan. He was smiling—a radiant smile of supreme relief. Deftly side-stepping a group of Chinese reporters, his head thrown back at that angle I had grown to recognize when he was particularly proud of himself, he whisked from the courtroom.

I AM a stubborn man. Li Yuan might yet be reasoned with. There were still criminal courts in China. This civil court victory did not free Clouard and MacSmith, if Li Yuan could be persuaded to bring charges against them of embezzlement. I determined to follow him.

As I entered the lane that led to his compound, I became aware of a press of people before his outer gate. I caught a series of thin but penetrating cries, and halted at the edge of the crowd.

A small but ancient figure in rich black satin jacket and trousers was perched astride the tiled roof ridge of the gate house, some fifteen feet from the ground. It was Li Yuan's grandmother. Having chosen this lofty but characteristic position, she was indulging in that form of racial Chinese insanity known as a fit of *ch'i,* or "wrath matter." In other words, a repressed people's method of blowing off steam.

To the accompaniment of sobs and shrieks, she advised the world how a foreign devil—one of that snail-eyed, leprously pale-skinned tribe of demons from across the sea—had attempted to bring shame upon the hitherto honorable house of Li. In order to recover some money, this ghoulish monster had tried to force her grandson into an act that would have roused the family ancestors in horror from their graves. In order to recover some money, the demon had tried to make her grandson lose face. Money—that could be replaced in part by selling Li Yuan's Small Wives who were shameless hussies at best and lacked in proper respect for the elder members of the family. But in spite of the wily foreign demon—who went about disguised as a lawyer—her grandson must keep his face!

I turned—to walk as fast as dignity would allow—away from the Li domicile and from this yelling valiant beldame.

"Astonished at such a vision on the outskirts of his domain, he stared and stared again."

The Maid of Mir Ammon

By GRACE KEON

An exquisite story of frustrated love, and the grim tragedy of Fate

MIR AMMON gloried in it—and so wouldst thou! To view the dawns with him! Faint azure, green, pale gold, and shimmering turquoise. To hear with him the last, sweet, tired chirp of the weary night-bird; to bathe thy senses in the fragrance of the roses; or know the security of his sturdy cottage, there on the outskirts of the province of Yusuf Raj, sheltered from heat and rain and strong against the prowling of any beast. Above all, beyond all, what joy to look upon the maid who stood now before his threshold, smiling, drowsy from her sleep, Zulaikha, his daughter.

Zulaikha, his daughter. . . .

He gazed at her, wondering at her beauty, at the ivory clearness of her, the softness of her, the glow of her, the ebon, silky loveliness that framed her delicate countenance and rippled over her bare arms and bosom. In all the realm, no woman had such hair as this!

Zulaikha, his daughter. . . .

He turned again to the closely written parchment that lay upon his knee, and she, coming forward, sank beside him, listening. His fingers touched her head, and there remained.

"What are Love's fees?" he murmured. "To drain the chalice of all honor, glory, wealth and fame! Oh, happy chance when there remain the lees. So leave me these: Sweet memories that live again. But Love sayeth no. The lees also."

"But Love sayeth no?" Mir Ammon stirred and smiled. "The poet errs. The lees remain."

"Wilt thou not begin to teach me how to read these words?" the girl asked, slowly, peering at the curved black characters that held no meaning for her.

"Soon," he answered. "Yet why? I like thee as thou art—a child. I can not bear to see thee learned, my Zulaikha."

It was thus he answered her always—this maid, who was now in the ripe beauty of her thirteenth year, and soon at the age of marriage. Closely indeed were these two bound in the chains of hallowed love, for she had no mother. And though Mir Ammon knew it was a shame upon his house, he could not bear to yield her to a husband's arms. Nor did she dream of going, though it is evil for a maid to be unmarried or unpromised when so old. Suitors there were, since all who saw her loved her in spite of the fact—unthinkable and abominable!—that Zulaikha, daughter of Mir Ammon, went about unveiled.

Those who blamed her with one breath pardoned her with the other. She was a child with their own children and so the guilt was Mir Ammon's. The women cautioned her most kindly and even dared to stop her father on his walks abroad, begging him to have heed of his sweet daughter and not cheapen her by permitting all men to gaze upon her face. Mir Ammon laughed. She was Zulaikha! Awed by his air of grandeur, his haughtiness, his pride, they fell silent, and Zulaikha went on her happy way.

Of her dead mother she knew naught. They were not of this province; yet for seven years had her parents dwelt together here—and the mother gave up life of a strange and wasting sickness when her child was born. Mir Ammon was of high caste, free as the air, seeking no friends, living in loneliness on which none dared intrude. To him Zulaikha was not that foolish thing, a woman, but a flaming jewel, the red rose in his garden, the nightingale, the dawn, the sunset, the stars! Joyous in this love, to her life was like a book, its covers tightly closed, and she was content to be first with him she worshipped. If, on rare occasions, he spoke of himself as one growing on in years she teased him wilfully. For it is the gift of youth to judge the future by the present, and the laughter of the young has never yet been stilled by admonition.

YUSUF RAJ was the ruler of the province—just and kindly. His father died in early manhood, it was said, years before, and an older brother reigned upon the throne. Yusuf Raj held his place and sought no other, for it was peaceful and prosperous, and he thought, not wrongly, that his wisdom kept it so.

Idle gossip came to him in jests upon the lips of his friends—stories of that

strange, proud, untamed being, Mir Ammon, who spoke like a lord and acted like a master; of rare beauty unveiled, and lovers flouted; of a father and his woman child, who was as untrammeled as a fluttering wisp of down in the morning air. But he was young, this prince, and busy, and such a story did not rouse him. Let Mir Ammon be. His tax was paid. He obeyed the law. For the rest . . .

Not knowing that Sirda, his trusted friend and counselor, was one of those who would have counted life well lost to win Zulaikha, Yusuf Raj smiled at love. Some day, perhaps . . . but now, not now! Ambition ruled him, and thoughts of that weakly, sickly, whining ruler at the court of his father intrigued him. Some day, when that one had been gathered to the bosom of those who had gone before, perhaps . . .

So he strove to fit himself for great tasks by being rigidly faithful to small ones. His mother lived still, and ruled still, with her older son. Hard, ambitious, ruthless, she won her way by every wile God gives into a woman's hands to make her man's equal—and Yusuf Raj was his mother's son.

Yet the fates had him in their keeping. One day, mounted on his restless horse, he gave the animal its head, and it bore him far from his accustomed haunts. He rode and mused, and mused and rode, and presently his glances sought the earth. In that moment it was done. A maiden, simply but richly clad, one arm upflung to steady the jar upon her shoulder, paused to watch the passing of her prince. She knew it was the prince—had she not seen him last festival day? Her young face lifted, unashamed, her lips were parted, her eyes were bright and sparkling. But he saw first the sweeping cloud of hair, and marveled at it—then gazed upon that second marvel, her face. Astonished at such a vision, here, on the outskirts of his domain, he stared and stared again, while she drew back and turned—not hurrying, but with grace and dignity, while from ivory brow to ivory bosom a great flood of crimson color showed that she felt the quickened ardor of his eyes; while he spoke angrily to his horse, chiding himself for his emotions.

Who was she? Soon he knew—and he was angry. Mir Ammon! And who cared a whit for Mir Ammon or his shameless daughter? Yet at night he saw that upturned face, and his eyes gloried in the sheen of that rippling, flowing, waving hair. He was cross and surly. He held his court and found his wits wandering, for life had suddenly become distasteful. The shy glance, the beauty of Mir Ammon's daughter had enthralled him. He could think of nothing else. He imagined that lovely head upon his breast, his fingers touched those gleaming tresses, and he knew that the common fate of man had overtaken him.

So he called Sirda at last and told him what had happened, not knowing Sirda's heart, nor its tumult, nor its pain. Yusuf Raj would succeed where he had failed—now, now all hope was gone for ever! Had this been the reason lovely Zulaikha desired naught of love or lovers? She aspired to be mistress of a palace, wife in his master's household, ruler of his master's heart?

But Sirda was a true friend and he held Yusuf Raj close to his soul, pouring out the wine of his pain on the altar of friendship. He offered to present his cause to Mir Ammon, father of Zulaikha—a maiden set for a snare to men, he told himself bitterly.

ZULAIKHA was singing, her eyes aglow with happiness, her cheeks softly tinted, when the ambassador of Yusuf

Raj sprang from his horse and entered the house. She greeted him gently, as her father had taught her to welcome all who came. She was guileless and innocent, and though the eyes of Yusuf Raj had stirred the blood in her veins she did not ask why, nor knew that she was happier because of that chance meeting.

Mir Ammon liked young Sirda. Young Sirda was a man.

"*Ab-salam!*" he saluted, bowing before the father of Zulaikha.

"And on thee also be peace," returned Mir Ammon.

The guest seated himself upon the stool provided. His face was clouded, his eyes bent upon the ground. By his air of gravity Mir Ammon knew that this errand was of import, and he sat waiting, pipe in hand, with Zulaikha beside him.

"I have come," said Sirda, after a long pause, and speaking roughly to hide the pain in his heart, "to ask thy daughter's hand in marriage."

Mir Ammon's face darkened. This was not their custom, this harsh boldness—and then he smiled. Had not Sirda and he often discussed the absurdity of hours spent in arriving at a point? Had he and Sirda not agreed upon this? Under his hand Zulaikha's fingers fluttered and lay still.

"Wilt thou consent?" asked Sirda, abruptly.

"Ay," said Mir Ammon; then: "It is time." He put his arm about the slender form. "It is time to think about giving her to another, for I am growing on in years. She is too fair to abide with me much longer, and to whom would I yield her more willingly than thee?"

Sirda's head sank lower on his breast, his fingers clenched upon his knees.

"For me Zulaikha has naught but the eyes of friendship. Long since would I have asked for her, but I knew 'twould be useless. Art thou not, Mir Ammon, wise in the ways of men? She knows well that I esteem her, but she mocks at me as at all the others. Mocks!" he repeated, bitterly, from depths of sorrow, heedless of that outstretched hand, those eyes brimming suddenly with tears. "Meaning or not, the word stands. But she will not mock at him whose offer I now lay before thee. The heart of Yusuf Raj is on fire with love. So would he make Zulaikha his wife and his queen."

The girl quivered and shrank close to her father.

"Yusuf Raj?" she murmured. "Yusuf Raj?" And the words caught in her throat.

Mir Ammon sat straight. His face had gone gray, like clay suddenly hardened; his eyes were cold, and the long pipe fell from his fingers to his feet. Fear, terror, tragedy, had smitten the life from him—and his voice, when he spoke, seemed to issue from the mouth of another.

"Tell Yusuf Raj—tell Yusuf Raj—that he honors my house and me—but he can not have my daughter."

Sirda sprang up, overturning the stool on which he sat.

"Can not? *Al hamdu lillahi*, what madness this! What folly! What—what insult! Thou wouldst consent to me—to *me*—but not to Yusuf Raj——"

"Nay," said Mir Ammon. He caught the young man's arm in a warm grip. "Nay, *baba-jan!*" and the soft word, lowly spoken, brought Sirda to his knees before him. "This is not madness—nor folly—nor yet insult to Yusuf Raj! Go back to thy good master. My daughter remains here. From this there is no withdrawal. It can never be."

Perplexed and grievously upset, Sirda withdrew. When he had left them Zulaikha hid her face on her father's breast,

speaking no word, and thus they sat for a long time. Then he pushed back that soft dark hair, and, his hand beneath her chin, his tender glance seeking hers, he questioned her.

"My child, thou hast not given thy young heart to Yusuf Raj?"

The tears came then—no words.

"It is my will that thou shouldst answer."

"I saw him but the once," she whispered. " 'Twill pass. I thought him noble beyond all other men, handsomer than any. Is he not our prince? He looked at me so strangely, with fire in his glance, and I turned away, for I could not bear it. But I am thy daughter, thy obedient daughter."

"Would to the Most High that I could comfort myself with those words," he replied. "I dare not tell thee why thou canst not wed with Yusuf Raj, but I have sworn an oath to speak of it to no man, and this oath I dare not break." He rose to his feet, towered above her, trembling like a branch of a great tree when the first whisper of a storm sets it quivering. "Bid me cut off this hand which hath guided thee in infancy, to prove my love. This would I do to help thee forget Yusuf Raj!"

She threw her arms about him.

"Father, I love thee; Father, I love thee," she cried. "I am thine own and I shall never cause thee to break that oath, and will stifle every impulse of my heart and live for thee. I want no man to take me for his wife."

Mir Ammon's face contracted. The depths of him were in pain and he could not speak. He sank upon the cushions, and there rested, for his limbs were weak. And she left him to his thoughts.

YET it was not ended. Night fell and Sirda stood once more upon the threshold.

"Yusuf Raj himself will come on the morrow, to plead his cause," he said.

"That can not hap," protested Mir Ammon. He was reclining, as one spent with fatigue, upon his bed. "Yusuf Raj shall never seek——"

"He comes," said Sirda, in even tones. It was Zulaikha who answered him then, her fair face raised protestingly.

"Tell thy master, Sirda, that Zulaikha weds no man—not even a prince—whom she does not love."

That night Mir Ammon lay in heavy stupor, or roused to mutter meaningless words. Toward morning he grew better—better still as the hours wore on and Yusuf Raj did not appear. He said no more about what had happened, nor did Zulaikha. Quite bravely the girl attended to her duties. She sang—not the sad love-plaints that youth sings, with a thrill of happiness mocking the sorrow of the words—and which had been her favorites. She chose gayer, happier themes, and her father was well pleased.

So the months went by. Mir Ammon watched his lovely girl with care, and grew satisfied. Woman holdeth a man in the hollow of her hand—he is content with the outward semblance if it but agree with the desire of his heart. He told himself that, after all, Zulaikha was a child, a little child, her feelings too light to be touched by sorrow. Another would come bearing her the gift of love, and she would accept it happily.

Encouraged by Mir Ammon's revelation, and hoping he knew not what, Sirda visited their home more frequently, and Zulaikha was most kind. Over-kind, the older man thought, forgetting . . . over-kind, the younger man knew, with a lover's instinct. For she did not love him and she never would; yet he tortured himself nonetheless, gazing upon her face, her lovely form; tortured himself still

more by dwelling upon his master's sorrow, his loneliness and his kindness to all men that he might see the flush on her cheeks—more eloquent than words.

THE two so fated met once more at dusk when weeks had passed. At sight of her he sprang from his horse and barred her path, breaking forth into words of pleading.

"Thou art great and mighty, Yusuf Raj," she said. "A noble prince, and all honor thee as I do. Thou art far above Zulaikha. In the future thou wilt have many wives. Zulaikha will be old then, without beauty, and so a thing despised. Thou wilt have them, for thou art wonderful. A man is not like a woman, my father tells me. She wears her life to dust, clinging to one bough, while he drifts on and on for ever."

" 'Tis unfair to accuse a man until he has a chance to prove his honor," said Yusuf Raj, hotly. "That is no reason."

"My father hath sworn an oath," said Zulaikha.

"But why? Why? What has his oath to do with thee and me? Am I not Yusuf Raj?"

"I trust my father. So thou must keep thy way. Many will love thee in Zulaikha's stead. Thou art just. It would be easy for one who was not so to contrive, by trick or artifice, to take a maid from her father's house. Without the consent of my father I will never wed thee."

She spoke gently, but no gentleness could take away the ominous meaning of her words, and there was a tumult in his breast as he watched her go from him, with swinging, graceful walk, little head held high, feet like white blossoms on the dusty path. He cried out to Sirda, and Sirda heard with sorrow.

"Bring me some message—a reason—anything," he said. "Set my heart at rest."

Again Mir Ammon would not yield.

"I have sworn an oath," he repeated. "That is all."

And Sirda brought back that answer, greatly troubled.

"O my prince, put the girl aside. That man is proud and obstinate and she is like to him. Go from this place. Travel. Visit another city. Set distance between thee and this province. Let time heal thee."

"Nay," said Yusuf Raj, looking at him oddly. "Why should I go? Let Mir Ammon and his daughter leave. I shall banish them."

"That were best of all," agreed Sirda.

Yusuf Raj sprang up, his face contorted with rage.

"Thou fool!" he said. "Thou utter fool! Let what happens now fall upon the head of Mir Ammon. To him be his own evil."

"My lord——" began Sirda.

"Cease," said his master. "I am Yusuf Raj. Thou art forgetting."

THAT evening as Zulaikha stood with her jar at the fountain, alone, and somewhat sad, a tall figure appeared suddenly beside her.

"Put by thy jar, Zulaikha," said Yusuf Raj. "Put by thy jar, for thou art coming with me."

The vessel fell and was shattered into pieces.

"As thy jar is shattered, so is my life without thee — broken into fragments. Thou canst mend my wounds—and thou shalt, Zulaikha. No harm shall befall thee, that I swear. I have never done a man a wilful wrong, and I shall do none to thee. But thy father is obstinate without cause. If he has aught against me let him prove it. If he is right thou shalt

be restored to him, a maid as pure as thou art now."

"Thou art crazed," said the girl, her breast heaving.

"Nay, my beloved—my beloved Zulaikha!" He put his arm about her, and with the other threw a veil of silk over her head and body. "Thus would I have thee, hold thee, keep thee, for myself alone. 'Tis dusk and none will know thee. I am taking thee through the forest to my palace, where thine own place is being made ready for thee."

"Yusuf Raj! My father will die. This thing thou canst not do."

"Yet it is done—so. Before me on my steed—thus. Thou art mine—my one desired above all others."

She sobbed, and struggled from him, but his arm was strong as steel.

"My father!" she whispered, weeping. "Oh, Yusuf Raj, I am his all—his life. If aught happens to him 'twill always stand like a sword between us. A sword in my heart, Yusuf Raj, for ever."

Her words stayed him. He brought the plunging horse to a sudden stop, and when he spoke again his voice was altered.

"Thus it might well be," he said. "Well . . . I shall settle this with thy father now."

So to Mir Ammon's door he made his way, lifted the girl to the ground, and with his arm encircling her, entered the very room where Mir Ammon stood. Mir Ammon had been alarmed at his daughter's absence and was on the point of seeking her. Now he looked upon her face, from which she threw back the silken net. Her cheeks were wet with tears. And his gaze sought Yusuf Raj, stormy, bleak, with frowning brows.

"*Ab-salam*, my prince!" he said, and made obeisance.

"I am taking thy Zulaikha, Mir Ammon," said he.

"Thou art a madman, Yusuf Raj."

"I am taking thy Zulaikha, to my palace. No harm shall come to her. Even as a sister shall she be to me until thou dost consent to our bridal. She shall be my wife, and sit beside me in the room of state and on my throne with me. I love her, thou most obstinate of men, and I have never been denied."

Mir Ammon folded his arms across his breast.

"Zulaikha shall never wed thee or sit upon thy throne. My child," he spoke tenderly to the girl, for the tears upon her face seemed to fall on his heart, "thou must go with Yusuf Raj, because he is our prince. That he is honorable and just, I know, and his word is passed. So go. Be content. Fear not—thou wilt soon return to me."

Yusuf Raj laughed, and swung her up in his arms.

"As my bride. Not else," he said, and they were gone.

Mir Ammon sank upon the couch and buried his head in his hands. His face was white and strained, his lips compressed. He went to the carved chest and drew out some parchment and wrote—and destroyed—and wrote again. Early next morning he called on a neighbor and a friend.

"Thou art beholden to me for many things, Ali," he said, abruptly.

"Thou sayest truth."

"Well, I have work for thee, which shall be well repaid. There is a journey to make. . . ."

SO ALI started out upon his journey and Mir Ammon went back to his lonely house. Presently Sirda sought him, troubled and downcast.

"I know not what to think," he said,

"Yusuf Raj is like a man demented, at one time happy, and at one time sad. What is there for thee to do, Mir Ammon? I love thy Zulaikha, but she hath no eyes for me—and though she is allured by the fire of Yusuf Raj, yet her heart is breaking for thee and her home. Is there no way in which it will be possible for thee to make them happy?"

"Thou hast seen Zulaikha? And thou sayest she loves Yusuf Raj?"

"How can she help loving Yusuf Raj, Mir Ammon? Is any more worthy of her?"

Mir Ammon's chin was sunken, his eyes were the anguished ones of a man whose heart was torn.

"We can not escape," he said. "Though the oceans bear us on their crest, and the one goeth to the depths of the sea, while the other is caught up to the palace of the sun, yet the day will dawn when we must stand, confessed, accused. . . ."

Sirda stared, uncomprehending.

"There is no sense in thy words, Mir Ammon."

The older man made a despairing gesture.

"Go, Sirda, go. I have no comfort to give either thee or Yusuf Raj."

The days passed. Under their strain the dark hair of Mir Ammon grew white, his face wrinkled, his brows lined with pain. The weeks followed—and Sirda, loving him, brought news of Zulaikha, a prisoner, adored, and honored, but still a prisoner, and grieving sorely for her father. A month—and then Ali, in the dusk of a fragrant day.

Mir Ammon tendered him a gold piece for his news, but he refused it, and bent to the ground before him, kissing his feet.

"The messengers are at the palace, my lord," said Ali. "I returned with them."

"So, then!" A bleak smile touched his lips. "I shall sleep this night, I hope——"

Sleep? Could he ever sleep again? He sat through the long black hours alone, thinking of the gay-hearted, blithe-voiced child who had left him. Unsmirched of body and mind she would return to him, he knew, since Yusuf Raj held his word in honor. But what of the years that stretched before them? How to uproot Yusuf Raj from this young heart? How to mend a life that had been severed?

The messengers at the palace brought documents of import, they said, and so Yusuf Raj received them, though the hour was late. The Sultan's royal seal confirmed their mission, and when Yusuf Raj had perused the letters he sat with darkened eyes, and silent mouth—rousing to bid that they be fittingly entertained and housed, strengthened for their return journey.

"I am to take that journey with them, Sirda," he said. "My brother, the Sultan, so requests it."

"But——" began Sirda, wonderingly.

"Mir Ammon!" said his master.

"Impossible! What knows Mir Ammon of our Sultan——"

"That I go to discover." He looked into his eyes. "Thou dost love me, Sirda?"

"Well indeed do I love thee."

"In the morning take Zulaikha to her father's house. Into thy keeping I entrust her—from thy keeping I shall demand her. Swear to me——"

Sirda sank to his knees.

"I swear," he said, in a voice that trembled, "to protect and cherish her who is to be thy bride, to guard her with my life."

"I thank thee and trust thee. Next to that sweet rose I love thee. Believest thou this?"

"With all my heart I believe," said Sirda.

"Then that is well. Tell her my soul is in her keeping until I return to claim her."

SO ZULAIKHA went back to her father's house, and put her trembling arms about her father's neck.

"Blame him not too greatly," she said. "His love is holy and true and kind. I love him. Blame him not, nor me."

Mir Ammon said no word, and Sirda, observing, could not read his face. A great sadness filled it. For he knew that this child could never be his own again. She took up the tasks of the household and went about them from day to day, though her footsteps lagged, her lips were silent, and her face down-bent. She sang no more, she teased no more, she asked no questions. Sirda was filled now with a new horror. For weeks passed and Yusuf Raj sent no message, did not return, while daily Zulaikha pined to shadowy frailness. Her little face, her great eyes, her small head that seemed so weary carrying that hair that covered her like a cloud of silken sheen!

"Mir Ammon!" cried Sirda, passionately, his fears breaking through his restraint. "Dost not see what is happening? She is dying before thine eyes."

"Yes," said Mir Ammon. "Thus it was with my beloved one, her mother."

"Where is thy heart? Wilt thou not send for Yusuf Raj?"

"He is coming when Zulaikha is no more."

Sirda shrank and trembled.

"Zulaikha knows?"

"I have told her. She put the question to me. There have never been lies between us."

"Oh, the cruelty of it!" thought Sirda, faithful servant. Wild schemes coursed through his brain. He would steal Zulaikha from her father's house, to seek her lover at the Sultan's court! He would leave the province, find Yusuf Raj and bring him hither. But there was no need. Two days later there arose the wailing of the women and the shrill funeral music. Zulaikha, very lovely and sweet and smiling, had been found at the river's edge, her wet black hair clinging to her slender body. . . . She had fallen in, they murmured, and found herself too weak to conquer the strength of the waves.

Sirda acted like one distraught. Was this the way in which he had fulfilled his promise to Yusuf Raj? What could he say to his master when he demanded his bride?

"Grieve not," said Mir Ammon. "Thinkest thou to grieve more than I? Yet I rejoice to see her thus, my beloved. Thou shalt walk beside me to the funeral pyre."

So Zulaikha's body, clad in a rich robe, her bier covered with white blossoms, was carried to the river bank. She was so young, and she had died for love. Her slender bare feet and little hands, her calm brow, those long and glorious tresses of dark beauty. . . . Mir Ammon gazed upon her with eyes that would never again see joy in life—and then he and Sirda took their places in the ranks that followed her. But they were hardly started upon their way when a horse drove up, and a traveler, gray with dust, his face as if carven in stone, threw himself from the saddle. The people stopped. The wailing ceased. And all stared in awe and terror. There was their prince . . . alone . . . without a retinue . . . their prince. . . .

"Put her down," said Yusuf Raj. They lowered the bier and he gazed upon the gentle cold image of the maiden of his heart.

"Zulaikha," he murmured. "Zulaikha. . . ."

Mir Ammon put out his hand and steadied him. The bier was lifted, the procession started, the wailing began once more. And when, because it was his duty as nearest of kin, Mir Ammon raised the lighted torch, Yusuf Raj took it from him.

"Let mine be that task," he said.

The flames soared high, the boughs crackled, the fire licked and bit and ate until it had consumed all—all but a handful of silvery gray ashes, floating downward on the bosom of the Great Mother, the royal river. . . .

* * * * *

"I CAN not understand," said Sirda, into the silence and misery that had overwhelmed them. "I can not understand."

The younger man seated with them paid no heed. But Mir Ammon raised his head.

"I am father to the Sultan now reigning; and to Yusuf Raj; and to his younger brother. By the first wife of my house —a cruel, hard, relentless woman—I was father to Zulaikha. I loved her mother best, and for that mother's sake I gave up all the world hath in esteem. My throne, my place—it was rumored the Sultan had died in strange wise—but I fled here, where I have been the gladdest, the most sorrowful of men. . . ."

His head was lowered, his voice broke.

"Oh, happy chance," he murmured, "that there remain the lees . . . sweet memories that live again. . . . But Love sayeth no. For I must lose the lees . . . also."

The Nanking Road

By HUNG LONG TOM

On the Nanking Road
The whole world walks,
A thoroughfare to which
All wanderers come
To stroll in dreams
Upon the ground
Made eloquent
By countless ancestors.
Arab or Turk,
Armenian or Kurd,
All become brothers
On the Nanking Road.
Wayfarers all
Caught in a golden spell.

Step Softly, Sahib!

By HUGH B. CAVE

A story of the dope traffic in Sarawak—Mata Kara attempts to lure a British officer to his death

THERE was a moon that night—a misshapen red ball, half blood and half mist, hanging low over the crest of Mount Pu on the west coast. Under it the motor road from Kuching to Lunda, along the cliff side, was a dormant snake—with the red silhouette of a lone motor car creeping along it, through the fog, at a worm's pace.

To the left, a great wall of rock rose in the dark. To the right, at the very rim of the road, the same wall of rock dropped straight down into the gray mist that concealed the South China Sea. Not at all comforting to the Sikh soldier who hung over the wheel, straining his bearded face against the drooling glass. Even less consoling to the British officer who sat bolt upright in the rear seat, absolutely helpless in case the Sikh lost control!

A hundred yards ahead an outjutting formation of black rock hid the road. The Sikh's right foot pressed slowly, timidly, on the brake pedal, fearful lest those uncertain rear wheels should skid in the wet road-bed.

"Go slowly, Gurman Singh. This is a bad curve!" The white man was leaning forward nervously, both hands on the partition that separated him from the front seat.

"Yes, *sahib*." The Sikh spoke through clenched teeth. One hand came loose from the wheel to wipe the fog from the inside of the glass. It was no time for conversation. "I will be——"

The words clipped off. The Sikh's foot jammed down hard. A livid curse came from the white man's lips as the big car swerved crazily toward the brink.

Then the front wheels struck—struck the treacherous, unseen log that had been planted in the middle of the road, cunningly hidden behind that outjutting of rock. The Sikh's fingers were flung from their grip. The British officer was hurled backward. For a maddening second the car balanced on the brink; and then, smothering the fearful yell that came from the lips of Gurman Singh, it hurtled down.

The crash was hardly more than a sickening whisper, so far below did it originate. As it filtered up, a third figure stepped cautiously from behind the crag and advanced to the brink. A small figure, with stumped, feline body. Matted black hair crawled into his almond eyes, and his thin mouth, as he peered down, was an insidious grin of triumph. The man was a Singhalese—a low-caste Singhalese from the slums of Kuching.

He crouched at the rim for a long time, staring into the fog below him. Then he crept back and dragged his murderous log of wood to the edge—and pushed it over. When he straightened up again, he carefully erased all telltale marks from the road-bed. And then, after a final malicious survey, he crept back along the winding road to Kuching, two and a half miles distant.

The mist had changed to a slow drizzle. In the morning, if a searching-party came out of Kuching to follow the big car, there would be no tire prints, no naked footprints to reveal the presence of

the murderer. There would be nothing. The rain and the mud would take care of that.

And so Huang Ke Sen, the Singhalese, returned to Kuching's evil quarter—to the hangout of Mata Kara—to report the death of Captain John Brent of the British Foreign Service. And, incidentally, the death of an unknown and unimportant Sikh soldier.

BUT, for once, Huang Ke Sen was only half right. When he slid open the door of Mata Kara's hangout that night, in one of the narrow, filthy streets that snake in and out of Kuching's waterfront, Captain John Brent was sitting within ten feet of him. Sitting at a very intimate, unlighted table, looking straight into the cunning Singhalese face of Mata Kara himself!

He wore no uniform, not now. He wore nothing, in fact, that might associate him with the Foreign Service. In place of his army clothes were the conventional white shirt and duck trousers of the white man in the tropics. His face, usually smooth and clean—and young—was dark with unshaved bristle, and scarred from temple to jaw with the mark of a knife. Not a pleasant face, and made even more ugly by the thick, unwashed hair that hung over his forehead.

Huang Ke Sen stood quietly in the doorway for an instant, peering into the surrounding gloom. Then he crept forward toward the table. He did not recognize John Brent. He had come to make a report to Mata Kara, and the report was eating his thin lips!

He bent over Mata Kara and whispered something, very softly, into the Singhalese's ear. Mata Kara got up quickly, nodded to Brent, and stepped back into the shadows of the wall. There he listened to what Huang Ke Sen had to say. A moment later, Huang Ke Sen went to a vacant table and ordered a drink; and Mata Kara, smiling significantly, returned to the table where John Brent was sitting.

"I have news, *sahib,*" he murmured. "Pleasant news. The Captain Brent, who knew too much about us, is—unfortunately dead."

Only with an effort did Brent conceal his sudden start. For a moment he could not look into Mata Kara's evil face. Instead, he studied his fingernails with seeming indifference, and then he looked up slowly.

"How was it done?" he said curtly.

"Tonight, *sahib,* our leader sent a message to Captain Brent. It was a summons, ordering Brent to go at once to Lunda, where he was needed. And Huang Ke Sen did the rest."

"Yes?" Brent's reply was merely a shrug.

"Captain Brent went, *sahib.* It was a bad night to go, with the road so wet and treacherous; but the captain went. Unfortunately, it will be learned later that his car skidded over the edge of the cliff, killing both him and his Sikh driver. It is very sad, is it not, *sahib?*"

Brent stared straight into the face of the Singhalese and smiled. It was a deliberate smile, forced out with a mighty effort. Under the table, Brent's fingers clenched and unclenched spasmodically, itching to take that throat in their grip.

"Very good," he nodded. "Get me a drink, Mata Kara. And leave me alone. There is much to be done, and it will require much thinking."

Mata Kara got up obediently. When he had gone, Brent slumped down in his chair and stared dumbly at the table-top. Under its covering of hair, his face had turned a shade grayer. He tried to think it out—to prove to himself that he was

not to blame—that any man would have made the same blunder.

Three hours ago he had been in his own quarters, alone with Captain Charlie Davoll. Davoll had helped him off with the uniform—assisted him in getting into these new clothes. And a rap had come at the door, just as Charlie was helping him rub some brown stain into his face, and applying a cunning scab to it, to change his appearance.

Charlie had gone to the door, and opened it. A Dyak soldier had stepped into the room.

"A message — for Captain Brent, *sahib*."

A quick, significant glance had passed between the two white men; and Charlie had said abruptly:

"Brent is out. I'll give it to him when he returns."

The Dyak had gone. Brent had ripped open the envelope and read the summons from Major Cornhay, in Lunda. He hadn't known, then, that the summons was a forgery.

"You'll have to answer it for me, old man," Brent had said. "I'll be too busy tonight to bother with Cornhay or any one else. Tonight is the climax of the whole racket. I can't leave Kuching!"

And Charlie—gold old obliging Charlie—had grinned his answer. A moment later Charlie had gone. Gone in the government car, with a Sikh soldier at the wheel—over the road to Lunda.

TEN minutes after his departure, Brent had slipped out of the room and gone down to the native quarter, dressed as an ordinary white man. A pretty good disguise, and there was a vital reason for it. For two months the government had been "wise" to Mata Kara. Some one on the outside—some one who called himself "Martin Carole" —had been smuggling dope to Mata Kara. Opium, hemp drugs, cocain, in large quantities, for distribution among the Dyak tribes of the interior.

The government had intercepted letters—many of them—from this "Martin Carole" to Mata Kara. Insignificant letters, all of them, utterly simple and meaningless. But John Brent had decoded them and transformed their innocence into cold facts. And yet, not one of the letters, and not one of Mata Kara's replies, had disclosed the place where the incoming dope was being stored.

That was the vital point. Without that knowledge, it was useless to arrest Mata Kara; for the white leader who was clever enough to instigate such a scheme would be clever enough to find another assistant. It was not important, either, to discover how the dope was being brought to Mata Kara. There were half a hundred different ways, none of which could be checked. But it *was* important to learn the true identity of "Martin Carole"—and to find the cache!

Tonight the scheme had reached its peak. It was not safe to wait longer. A cunningly conceived message had been sent to Mata Kara by the Foreign Service, supposedly written by Mata Kara's chief, informing the Singhalese that Martin Carole was tonight sending a white man to Kuching—a white man who, with Mata Kara's assistance, would organize the plan of distribution!

Tonight John Brent had walked casually into Mata Kara's hangout and leaned on the counter.

"I come from Martin Carole," was all he had said, as the Singhalese bent toward him. And that was enough!

It had worked out beautifully. But Charlie Davoll had already paid the price for it. Mata Kara had evidently suspected John Brent of knowing too much.

Had plotted to kill him. And Charlie Davoll had been the victim.

"Your drink, *sahib*——"

Brent stiffened suddenly. He had nearly forgotten his surroundings. Now Mata Kara was bending over him again, placing a long-necked bottle and empty glass on the table. Brent nodded, and reached out for them.

He drank only enough to wet his lips. He was still thinking of Charlie Davoll, who had been murdered by Mata Kara's tools.

God, what a blunder to let Charlie answer that summons! Surely, if he'd taken time enough to look at the message, he'd have recognized the forgery!

Reaching into his pocket, Brent brought out the paper and stared at it, trying to convince himself that Charlie's death was not due to his own carelessness. But no—the signature *looked* right enough. He'd seen it a dozen times before, and this one had the same flourish, the same twirl at the end. . . .

Had he glanced up, he would have seen a cat-faced figure watching him covertly from a near-by table. He would have realized that the Singhalese was near enough—almost near enough—to read the inscription on that bit of paper. And the cat-faced one was Huang Ke Sen, the right-hand man of Mata Kara!

BRENT returned the paper to his pocket and poured himself a stiff drink. When he raised his head again, the glare of dumb helplessness was no longer evident in his eyes. He motioned quietly to Mata Kara; and the Singhalese came back to sit on the other side of the table again.

"You have been storing the drugs as you were directed?" Brent said curtly.

"Surely, *sahib*. I have been waiting for you to——"

"Take me to the hiding-place and show me where the stuff is placed. Then I will give you definite orders for removing it."

Mata Kara smiled. Only a Singhalese could mingle so many conflicting emotions in a single movement of narrow lips.

"You have only to look—above you, *sahib*," he whispered, bending very close. "This house was made many years ago to be a gambling-place; and the walls that separate the many upper rooms are not walls at all, but secret closets. They are not large, *sahib*—not large enough for a man to stand upright in—but they are sufficient to hide other things. Come!"

The Singhalese rose quickly and backed away. Brent followed. At the same moment, from that significant near-by table, Huang Ke Sen got up with a drunken lurch and stumbled toward the counter.

It was not chance that caused Huang Ke Sen to sprawl headlong into John Brent, as Brent stepped past. Brent stiffened as the cat-faced Singhalese clawed over him, struggling to remain erect. It was Mata Kara who seized the rat's arm and hurled him aside.

"Clumsy pig! If you are not more careful I will slit your stinking throat! Get out!"

Then, turning humbly to Brent:

"I apologize for him, *sahib*. He is drunk. This thing would never have happened if——"

"All right. It doesn't matter."

Mata Kara smiled and moved on again. Behind him, Huang Ke Sen scuttled back to an empty table and squatted down. But the cat-faced one was satisfied. He had obtained the thing he wanted. He had secured the bit of paper out of Brent's pocket.

IN THE upper rooms of Mata Kara's hangout, John Brent followed his soft-footed leader without a word. Mata

Kara, his lips curled again in that unpleasant, mechanical smile, paced slowly along the corridor to the last closed door. Opening it, he let Brent enter the unlighted room before him; then, following like a shadow, the Singhalese bent over the table and made a light.

"This way, *sahib,*" he said quietly.

Brent watched him. Watched him step to the wall and feel along the boards with tapered, sensitive fingers. Then, straining against the panel, Mata Kara slid aside a long section of wall and revealed what lay in the uncovered compartment.

Brent's lips tightened. He had expected something like this, but he had hardly anticipated such an array. The secret chamber was not deep—not more than a foot from front to back—but it was ten shelves high and each shelf extended the entire length of the wall. Every shelf, moreover, was lined with neatly wrapped packages — packages which, by their tinfoil and colored paper covers, might have been taken for bundles of commercial tobacco!

"Each wall, *sahib,*" the Singhalese smiled, "is the same. It is a good hiding-place, is it not? The Foreign Service would never think to look here!"

Brent stepped abruptly to the table.

"There is a rear entrance to this place?" he demanded.

"Yes, *sahib.*"

"It leads to the alley, eh?"

The Singhalese nodded.

"Any lights in that alley?"

"No, *sahib.*"

"Good. You will wait another hour or so, until the streets are deserted, and then you will take this stuff down the rear way to the alley. From there it must be taken with great caution to the first pier on the waterfront, and loaded into the two sampans that are waiting there. Have you got that straight?"

"And the sampans, *sahib?* What will they do——"

"They will take the stuff up-river, to the interior villages."

Mata Kara inclined his head slowly. The set expression of his face did not reveal it, but he was more concerned at that moment with the cunning twist of his scheming, Oriental mind. For a long time he had been considering the distribution end of the smuggling racket in which he was involved. He, himself, would like to take care of that distribution; and yet he was a little afraid of Martin Carole. But now Martin Carole had seen fit to send a substitute. Mata Kara did not fear the substitute in the least. His scheme was developing magnificently!

"It is well, *sahib,*" he replied quietly. "I will wait an hour, maybe more; and then I will do as you say. Huang Ke Sen will help me."

"Can you trust him?"

"Perfectly, *sahib.* I know enough about him to hang him!"

Brent smiled, and turned away. Without wasting further time, he went straight to the door. Strangely enough, as he went out, his glance centered on the crude table that stood near the farther wall of the narrow room. A moment later he was groping down the dirty staircase.

FOR a long time after Brent had gone, Mata Kara stood quietly by the table, with one hand resting like a white claw under the lamp. His lips were curved in a significant, malicious smile.

Huang Ke Sen, creeping up the stairs, found him there five minutes afterward. The cat-faced one sidled into the room

and touched Mata Kara's arm, holding out a slip of paper.

"I found this in the white *sahib's* pocket!"

Mata Kara looked at him intently, and took the paper. He barely glanced at it—just enough to recognize it. His smile faded abruptly. A sudden tightening of the lips revealed that he understood.

"When did you get this?" he snapped.

"When I stumbled into him, as you were coming up here. I saw him reading it, Mata Kara, and I stumbled on purpose."

Mata Kara crumpled the paper and thrust it into his pocket. His features were convulsed—terribly convulsed. He cursed.

"There is no time to lose!" he rasped. "The white man is not Martin Carole's agent at all. He is a Foreign Service soldier—come here to spy on us! Now that he knows, he will bring the others and raid the house."

For an instant the Singhalese paced back and forth, followed by his grotesque shadow on the wall. Then he stood very still and looked straight into Huang Ke Sen's face.

"If the Foreign Service comes here and discovers all the gambling secrets of my place, it will be the end of all of us. Do you know that, Sen?"

The cat-faced one said nothing. He was insignificant beside the fury of his leader.

"I am tired of this house," Mata Kara said grimly. "It is a slow way to make money—too slow. You and I, Sen, will finish Martin Carole's scheme in our own way, and destroy this place at the same time. We will amuse our good friend of the Foreign Service, and as for Martin Carole, he will never hear of us again. Give me a hand!"

Huang Ke Sen was a willing worker. Under Mata Kara's direction he went quickly to work, removing the little packages of dope from the shelves of the secret compartments. And as he removed them and dropped them to the floor, Mata Kara gathered them together and bound them into large, compact bundles, wrapping them carefully in stiff paper. From shelf to shelf Huang Ke Sen crept, taking the dope out of its hiding-place. And on the floor, in the thin light of the lamp above him, Mata Kara labored until the perspiration trickled down his yellow face.

They were not aware, either of them, that John Brent was quite as fully occupied. Brent had left the hangout in no seeming hurry, but after leaving the place behind him he had quickened his pace through the narrow street.

Straight to the waterfront he went—through half a dozen incredibly filthy alley-like streets. The evil quarter was completely dark now; no lights blinked above the broken sidewalks or from the shaded windows overhead. Occasional shuffling figures moved across the street, appearing and vanishing like ghosts. Sometimes they glanced at the white man who hurried past. More often they ignored him.

But when he reached the docks, he found what he sought. He found a man in uniform—a huge fellow, black-bearded and dark-complexioned—the captain of the police squad that patrolled the treacherous waterfront sector. A magnificent Sikh, replete with Foreign Service uniform and white turban.

Brent talked to him for a long time. At intervals the Sikh nodded and murmured a soft "Yes, *sahib!*"—but for the most part he listened stolidly to Brent's instructions. Finally he saluted and turned away; and Captain Brent turned his face

once again in the direction of Mata Kara's saloon.

And now he was in no hurry. He would give Mata Kara and Huang Ke Sen the whole of the allotted hour.

BACK in the gambling hangout, in that sinister upper room, Mata Kara had finished binding those huge packages on the floor. Getting swiftly to his feet, he closed the secret panels one after the other. Then he swung abruptly on his assistant.

"We must carry this stuff down the rear stairs and get it to the waterfront," he ordered sharply. "But remember—it will be placed in *my own* sampans—not in the two sampans which the white man has prepared for us!"

"If we are discovered——" Huang Ke Sen protested.

"There is no danger, pig! The white man's sampans are lying at the nearest dock, waiting for us. My sampans are five streets distant, at the very end of the waterfront. We shall not even be noticed!"

The cat-faced one shrugged his shoulders and lifted two of the innocent packages to his shoulders. Stumbling a little under the weight of them, he stepped to the door and vanished. Lifting another two, Mata Kara followed him.

Like twin shadows they descended the dark stairs and emerged in the alleyway at the rear of the hangout. With Mata Kara leading the way, they groped hurriedly through the piles of refuse until they reached the open street. Then, keeping deep in the shelter of overhanging buildings, they proceeded to the waterfront.

Mata Kara was right. His sampans lay drawn up on the most remote of the creaking, worm-eaten wharves. Clumsy things they were, with flat bottoms and flat decks, and mounted with squat cabins of thatch. But they were serviceable, and they could be poled easily through the shallow water of jungle rivers. Many times in the past these particular sampans had been used to advantage on unsavory missions. Tonight they would do their highest-priced duty of all!

With the help of the cat-faced one, Mata Kara slid two of the clumsy craft into the shallow water at the edge of the crude dock. Then, clambering over the deck, he secreted the four heavy packages in the shelter of the cabin.

"One more trip," he said curtly, "and we are finished. Hurry. There is no time to waste!"

The return trip was quicker. No need, this time, to slink in the shadows. In five minutes the two slant-eyed Orientals were back in that significant upper room, and Mata Kara was gripping Huang Ke Sen's arm.

"You must take the rest of it alone!" he rasped. "I have other work to do, and the white man warned us that he would return in an hour. Be careful when you pass through the streets. The native police have eyes!"

Sen nodded. Then, lifting two more of the bulky packages to his shoulders, he went. Mata Kara was alone.

The Singhalese stepped forward abruptly and slid the heavy table from its place near the wall. Dropping to his knees, he slid the knife from his belt and pried loose one of the ancient boards in the floor. Then he rose swiftly to his feet and left the room.

When he returned, he carried tools in his hands, and a coil of wire. He worked feverishly, all the while Huang Ke Sen was gone. And when the cat-faced one came up the stairs, ten minutes later, Mata Kara was still on his knees beside the table, still busy.

He did not even turn his head to glance at Huang Ke Sen as the cat-faced one picked up the last two packages of dope. But through his tight lips, Mata Kara murmured triumphantly:

"It is a good thing I studied in the white man's school in Pekin, Sen. It is also a good thing I anticipated this day, and kept a store of dynamite here! Hurry, you pig!"

Once again Huang Ke Sen shuffled away. But when he returned the next time—the last time—Mata Kara had replaced the table in its former place and was standing quietly in the middle of the floor.

Huang Ke Sen scuffed forward, smiling. He would have stepped to the table, but Mata Kara's fingers clutched his shoulder and flung him back.

"The table is prepared for the white man—not for you!" the Singhalese smiled evilly. "I have arranged a board in the floor, Sen—a board directly in front of the table. If you so much as touch it, this whole house will become so many fragments of blown-up wood!"

The cat-faced one fell back uneasily. His wide eyes stared at the floor beneath the table, then shifted and focused on Mata Kara's face. Mata Kara laughed derisively.

"Go and get the white man," he shrugged. "Bring him here in exactly ten minutes. Have sense enough not to come in with him, Huang Ke Sen, or your life will not be worth the weight of his tread. Send him here alone, and when he reaches this room, he will find it empty. There will be a note on the table, and the lamp will be lit. And he will walk across to read the note! That—will be the end!"

Huang Ke Sen shrank away, moving backward to the door. Plainly, he was nervous. He would be glad to get away from this ghastly room which had so cunningly been arranged for the death of Captain John Brent.

"You will have no trouble finding the white man," Mata Kara smiled. "The hour is up, and he will be on his way here. But do not bring him here *until ten minutes have passed.* Remember that! I have the note to prepare, and a few last things to attend to—and I do not wish to be here when he comes!"

THE cat-faced one retreated. Cringing like a dejected rodent, Huang Ke Sen crept from the room and descended the stairs to the saloon on the lower floor. But as he went, his expression changed. He, too, was cunning. He, too, could plot and scheme!

He was not shuffling when he paced across the saloon floor and flung open the outer door. For the success of his plan, he must find the white soldier at once, before Mata Kara left the death house. And that might be a difficult task—to locate the white man in the maze of streets that made up the evil quarter of Kuching.

It was simpler than he anticipated. Mata Kara had been correct; and Captain Brent was even then returning to the saloon for the final reckoning. He came face to face with Huang Ke Sen a dozen paces from the door of the hangout.

Sen's fingers closed over his arm.

"You must hurry, *sahib!* Mata Kara has tricked you! If you do not go quickly, you will be too late!"

Brent gripped the Singhalese's shoulders and swung him around.

"Where is Mata Kara?"

"In the upper room, *sahib.* If you do not hurry——"

But Brent was gone, flinging the cat-faced one away from him as he went. And Huang Ke Sen, slinking away into

the darkness, grinned with complete satisfaction. He had arranged the affair *his* way now. Not Martin Carole's way, or the white *sahib's* way, or even Mata Kara's way. But the way of Huang Ke Sen, which was the most terrible way of all! Now he would go quickly to the docks and find one or two half-caste natives to take the whole of Mata Kara's cargo into the interior; and Huang Ke Sen—alone—would be repaid for the efforts of the past two months! Brent would take care of Mata Kara!

As he moved away, he cast a final glance at Captain John Brent, who was even then vanishing through the doorway of Mata Kara's hangout. And the cat-faced one laughed softly, in anticipation.

But John Brent was not laughing. His mouth was screwed into a thin, bitter line. From the very first he had feared treachery from the subtle Mata Kara. Now, if he did not reach the upper room in time to prevent it, all his work would be worthless—and Charlie Davoll's life would have been lost in vain.

He crossed the lower floor in a dozen strides. The place was abandoned now; the last of the slab-faced inhabitants had slunk into the streets. Only a single light burned above the counter as Brent pushed open the inner door and started up the black stairway.

His hand crept down to his pocket and came loose again, clutching an automatic. It might be well to be prepared for the limit. Mata Kara was a Singhalese—a low-caste Singhalese—and would probably offer cunning resistance. Moreover, if the fellow were suddenly disturbed in his operations—whatever those operations might be—he would probably fight like a cornered cat, and——

But there was no time for conjecture. Brent stepped softly along the upper landing and flung open the door of the inner room. And as he did so, Mata Kara whirled around to confront him.

The Singhalese was standing by the table, in the very act of bending over, placing a bit of white paper under the lamp. It was a deliberate ruse, that bit of paper. Mata Kara had intended to leave it there, where the white man, coming into the room alone, after the house had been abandoned, would be forced to step upon the deadly panel in order to pick it up. That piece of paper would have brought the house down in a blast of hell, and Brent would probably never have read what was written upon it.

But now, caught in the act of planting it in place, Mata Kara stood with his back to the lamp, staring into Brent's face. The hands of the Singhalese twitched nervously. He moved sidewise, away from that hellish board in the floor. His eyes were riveted on the revolver in Brent's menacing hand.

"You—you are too soon, *sahib,*" he faltered. "The stuff is not——"

"You tried to double-cross me, did you?" Brent's voice was cold as ice. "What's that note?"

"Nothing, *sahib.* It is—it is nothing."

Brent's lips curved into a bitter smile. He was in time. He could afford to smile now. And yet he did not underestimate Mata Kara's cunning. He did not step to the table and take the note. To do that might give the Singhalese an opening to escape!

"Bring it to me!" Brent rasped.

Mata Kara reached out, very slowly, and slid the paper across the table. He came forward with sluggish steps, holding the note in his hand. His eyes were still centered on Brent's gun. He was still afraid—and he wanted, very, very much, to get out of that room of death!

With his free hand, Brent took the

paper. For a fraction of a second he took his eyes off Mata Kara—just long enough to read what was written on that significant square of paper:

"I have done as you directed, *sahib*. In ten minutes I will return and we will leave together. Bring a chair to the table and sit down and wait for me.

"MATA KARA."

Another subtle trick! Mata Kara had taken no chances on the success of his final plan. If John Brent had, by a slip of fate, stepped to the table without touching off the charge that would blow the house to fragments, this note would certainly finish it. No man could walk from the table to the chair and drag the chair back to the table without at least *once* stepping on that fatal board!

And the note very nearly did settle the issue. Mata Kara was desperate. He would have taken the slightest chance to escape. And as Brent glanced quickly at the note, Mata Kara saw his chance.

Like a snake he whipped forward. His hand shot down and dashed Brent's revolver to the floor. And then, as Brent stumbled backward under the unexpected impact, Mata Kara scurried like a rat to the door.

HE MIGHT have succeeded in reaching the black corridor, except for the cumbersome, treacherous folds of the *sarong* which hung from his shoulders like a monk's robe. The *sarong* twisted between his legs and tripped him. Before he could regain his balance and dart into the protecting darkness of the outer passage, Brent caught him from behind and jerked him back into the room.

Mata Kara spun like a top. Even as he twisted, his hand brushed across his belt and whipped up, holding a long, straight-bladed native knife. He forgot his desire to escape. His only hope now was to kill—and kill quickly!

He *was* quick. So cunningly fast that the blade ripped Brent's shirt wide open across the chest, drawing a thin line of blood, before the white man could drag him down.

They struck the floor together, with Mata Kara uppermost. But that deadly knife arm was locked between Brent's legs and was held helpless. Brent's fingers found the Singhalese's throat and dug into the yellow flesh.

A groan came from Mata Kara's dry lips. His body went limp, and Brent's fingers relaxed a little. But Brent underestimated the subtlety of the man in his power. Mata Kara was not finished. His free hand, seemingly limp and futile, slipped unseen between Brent's legs and removed the knife from the fingers of the hand that was locked. The blade swirled up and came down straight into Brent's face.

With a single mighty twist Brent avoided it, hurling the Singhalese sidewise. Next instant Brent's hand gripped that mad wrist and wrenched it back and down, until it cracked.

And then Mata Kara was through—beaten. Stretched flat on the floor, with Brent a-straddle him, he could not move. Brent's fingers found his throat again, and this time they did not loosen.

"Who is the white man," Brent demanded harshly, "who smuggled the dope in to you? The man above you. Who is he?"

Mata Kara squirmed feebly. The knife lay just beyond reach of his useless hand. He could not turn to pick it up with the fingers of his good hand.

"Who—is he?"

"He is—let me up, *sahib!* You are killing me!"

"I will let up when you have told me. Then you will show me what you have

done with the dope! And if you tell me anything but the truth——"

Brent's grip loosened ever so little. Mata Kara sucked in a breath.

"He is — Major Cornhay, *sahib* — in Lunda——"

Brent's eyes widened. He knew that Mata Kara was not lying. There was no point in lying—now.

"Then the note that was sent to me, summoning me to Lunda——" he rasped. "Cornhay wrote it? It was not forged by you?"

"No, *sahib*. It was not forged by me. It was—genuine."

Brent got quickly to his feet, standing over the man on the floor. Major Cornhay, in Lunda—the man on the outside! It was incredible! And yet it fitted precisely with the things that had already happened. It was the only logical solution.

Once again Brent's thoughts were his undoing. He forgot, once more, that Mata Kara was a Singhalese!

Mata Kara, groping to his feet, reached out with his good hand, unseen by the white man, and retrieved the knife. Then he stood up, swaying dizzily on his thin legs. But the swaying was merely for effect. It was part of Mata Kara's clever deception.

Brent turned away to inspect the room, thinking that the danger was over. And Mata Kara leaped softly—to strike down into the white man's exposed, unprotected back!

Only the shadow on the wall—the shadow cast by that uncertain yellow lamp on the table—saved Brent from annihilation. As it was, the knife slashed deep into his outflung arm, in the yielding flesh just below the shoulder. But Brent's right fist, swinging like a sledge, buried itself in Mata Kara's triumphant mouth. The knife clattered to the floor. Mata Kara, moaning softly, staggered back to the wall, where he slid unconscious to the floor.

BRENT clasped the wound heavily, gritting his teeth to hold back the pain. For a moment he reeled sidewise. Then he walked slowly past the table, and attempted to open the secret panel in the wall. But there was no room. The table was in the way.

Still gritting his teeth with the pain of his wound, Brent slid the table sidewise, and opened the hidden panel, to make sure that the dope had been removed. Satisfied, he returned quietly to the door and left the room, leaving Mata Kara lying on the floor behind him.

A moment later Brent left the hangout and emerged in the street. As he walked quickly along the narrow sidewalk, he pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and made an attempt to bind up his bleeding shoulder. The other wound—the one across his chest—had already ceased flowing. It was merely a scratch.

He went straight to the waterfront, along the same route that he had followed before. And in ten minutes he was standing in the shadow of a black dock-house, talking to the same Sikh soldier who had previously received his instructions.

"Has anything — happened?" Brent asked quietly.

The Sikh nodded, and smiled thickly.

"A lot has happened, *sahib*. We did as you told us, placing a detail of native police on every dock, to keep watch. Two men, both of them Singhalese and one of them with a face like that of a cat, came to the farthest dock with many big bundles. These two men pushed a pair of sampans into the water and loaded the bundles aboard. It took them many trips."

"Is that all?" Brent was smiling now, himself. He knew what those "big bundles" were likely to contain; and he recognized the description of the cat-faced one. Mata Kara and Huang Ke Sen had certainly risen to the bait!

"No, *sahib;* that is not all. Later, the cat-faced Singhalese returned, and brought two dock rats with him. They tried to launch the two loaded sampans, *sahib*—but the native police prevented them. The dock rats escaped; but the cat-faced one was killed before he could get away. And the big bundles are awaiting your inspection, *sahib!*"

Brent nodded, wearily. Then, as the huge Sikh led him forward, he paced across the dock to an adjoining building, where three more Sikh soldiers stood guard over a pile of large, well-wrapped bundles. Near by, on the bare boards, lay a still figure—dead. It was Huang Ke Sen, the cat-faced one. But as he bent over to unwrap one of the bundles, Brent was thinking of the confession he had wormed out of Mata Kara, back in the hangout. Thinking of Major Cornhay, who was the man behind all this—and the man who had murdered Charlie Davoll. It would not be hard, with the evidence on hand, to bring Cornhay to justice. And Mata Kara—it would not be hard to send a Sikh soldier after him, and bring him to headquarters, as well.

Meanwhile, it might be well to have a quick inspection of these bundles, to make sure that the plans had not gone amiss.

Had he seen Mata Kara at that moment, he would have been less concerned with the fate of the Singhalese. Back in the hangout, in that dreaded upper room, Mata Kara was climbing slowly, wearily to his feet, holding the wall for support.

The Singhalese was dazed. His eyes were half closed and rimmed with blood. By squinting, he could barely make out his surroundings—the dimly lighted room, the chair in the corner, the table, and the sputtering lamp.

As he stood erect, the Singhalese saw something else. Saw something that lay on the floor, beside the table-leg, glittering in the light of the lamp above it. He recognized it slowly. His own knife. It would not do to leave that knife there. It might—might be used as evidence against him, in case the Foreign Service managed to lay hands on him.

With uncertain steps, Mata Kara approached the table. He remembered, vaguely, that a certain board in the floor was deadly—that he must not step on it. He knew precisely where that board was, in relation to the position of the table.

But the table had been moved. Captain John Brent had shifted it. And Mata Kara's stumbling foot came down. . . .

AT THE moment of the explosion, Brent was saying quietly to the Sikh soldier who stood beside him on the dock:

"It is all here. Have your men take the stuff straight to headquarters. And send a man to Mata Kara's hangout to bring Mata K——"

The words were hurled back at him. Four streets distant, a mighty sheet of flame shot into the black sky. The docks under his feet trembled violently to the terrific roar that split the darkness. For a single instant the whole of the native quarter was livid with light, vibrating with a fearful belch of thunder.

And the echo of it came, like a lost voice from the outer darkness, from the high cliffs that marked the treacherous motor road to Lunda—the road that had sealed Charlie Davoll's fate. Came in a whisper, like the sound of the water lashing the base of the rocks—and died out to nothing.

THE SOUK

WITH this issue, ORIENTAL STORIES appears under a new name, and the price is reduced to fifteen cents. The magazine will be broadened in its scope and will include glamorous stories of all parts of the globe. We hope to present an all-fiction magazine that will be different from any ever published before. This will be truly *your* magazine, for here you will find, as nowhere else, a wide variety of fascinating fiction which expresses to the full the lure and mystery of far places.

And what better title than the MAGIC CARPET for this golden argosy which can bear you hither and yon in the twinkling of an eye? When Scheherazade told her sultan those marvelous stories in *The Thousand and One Nights,* she described a magic carpet which could fly to the most distant countries with the speed of thought; and that is what our MAGIC CARPET will do for you. It will transport you quickly through the air to Timbuktu, to Egypt, to the Vale of Kashmere, to Bagdad to Suva, to Istanbul. It will even fly backward into the departed glories of past ages. And unlike the carpet of Scheherazade, our MAGIC CARPET will make an occasional trip to distant planets and far suns in the remote corners of the galaxy.

We shall continue to print the best orientales obtainable, but the magazine will no longer be devoted exclusively to Oriental tales. With our expanded scope we hope, with the help of the readers, to build up an outstanding success. The reduced price of fifteen cents will make the magazine available to everybody.

And what a panorama will be unrolled before your eyes in the next few issues! Hugh B. Cave has written a fascinating novelette about the wicked queen Semiramis of Babylon, and the MAGIC CARPET will carry you into the dungeons of the temple of Marduk and let you participate in thrilling adventures which decided the fate of an empire. Seabury Quinn has written a series of stories for you about a swashbuckling soldier of fortune who is best described as a vagabond-at-arms, and whose thrilling exploits will hold you breathless. Robert E. Howard, whose brilliant tales of Tamerlane and Genghis Khan have already caught your fancy, will let you fly on the MAGIC CARPET to see the walls of Vienna shake to the thunder of Turkish guns as the Turkish sultan, Suleiman the Magnificent, hammered at Europe while all Christendom trembled. Edmond Hamilton, master of interplanetary tales, will pilot the MAGIC CARPET to incredible adventures on a far world revolving around the star Antares. Adolphe de Castro, who was co-author with Ambrose Bierce of the famous story, *The Monk and the Hangman's Daughter,* will offer you an equal-

ly fascinating tale in *The Jewelled Dagger.* These are but a few of the many romantic adventures that you will see from our MAGIC CARPET. A wide variety of stories awaits you, all of them glamorous, all of them expressing the witchery of distant lands.

The changing of ORIENTAL STORIES to the MAGIC CARPET magazine necessitated a shift in stories for the current issue. *The Desert Host,* Hugh B. Cave's splendid novelette of ancient Babylon, which was promised for this issue, will be printed in our next issue instead; and *The Young Men Speak,* by K. B. Montague, an intensely interesting story of the Spaniards and the native mountaineers in the Philippines, which was also promised for this issue of ORIENTAL STORIES, will appear in an early issue of the MAGIC CARPET. In place of these two stories, this issue of the magazine gives you H. Bedford-Jones' swift-moving novelette about a Chinese bandit general and a beautiful white girl; also Hugh B. Cave's story of the British Foreign Service in Sarawak, *Step Softly, Sahib,* and Grace Keon's story, *The Maid of Mir Ammon.*

The controversy in the Souk over the bibulous habits of Moslem potentates in Robert E. Howard's historical tales is clarified by a letter from Mr. Howard himself. "Thanks very much for the remarks and quotations in the Souk by which you corroborate the matter of Timour's wine-bibbing," writes Mr. Howard. "I welcome and appreciate criticisms in the spirit of Mr. Bell's, though, as you point out, he chances to be mistaken in the matter of Timour and others. But criticisms of this nature promote discussions helpful and instructive to all. In regard to Moslem drinking, I understand that the Seventeenth Century Tatars of Crimea, before imbibing, spilled a drop of wine from the vessel and drank the remainder, declaring that since the Prophet forbade tasting a drop of wine, they thus obeyed the command. They spilled the drop and drank the rest. Many modern Moslems maintain that they disobey no holy law by drinking brandy and whisky, since the Prophet said nothing about these beverages—proving that Christians are not the only people on earth to wriggle out of laws by technicalities."

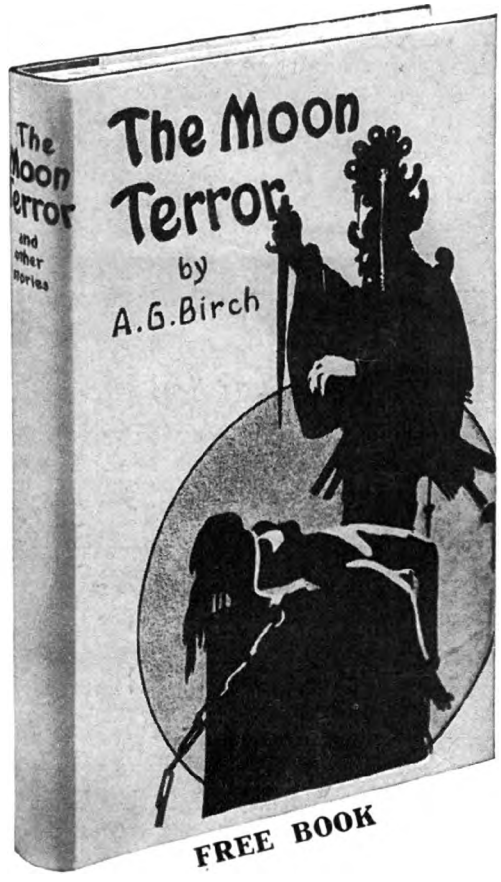
We have space left to quote from only a few of the letters recently received from you, the readers. Mrs. F. L. Steben, of Mount Vernon, New York, writes to the Souk: "It is decidedly difficult to choose which story in the Summer Issue is the best. To begin with I have one real complaint, and that is that ORIENTAL STORIES is not published often enough. Since I started to read the magazine, I haunt the store where I buy my papers like the ghost of some uneasy spirit, until it appears. Any story of S. B. H. Hurst is good, as he always has something unusual to give you, and Bugs Sinnat is a splendid character. Kline's dragoman stories are delightful, as his descriptions are truly vivid. I certainly hope that I shall see both Hurst's and Kline's stories at frequent intervals. It is hard to choose among *Pirate Whelp, The Black Adder,* and *A Battle Over the Tea-cups.* The last mentioned I find to be an excellent picture of Chinese guile. Give us more of August W. Derleth. Incidentally, I am glad to see that Warren Hastings Miller believes—or at least he writes so—that there are some women left who prefer the wilds to so-called civilization; I know I do."

A letter from Jack Darrow, of Chicago, says: "Thanks for the three novel-

(Please turn to page 128)

A Phantom from the Ether

Threatens the Lives of all Mankind



THE first warning of the stupendous cataclysm that befell the earth in the fourth decade of the Twentieth Century was recorded simultaneously in several parts of America. At twelve minutes past 3 o'clock a. m., during a lull in the night's aerial business, several of the larger stations of the Western hemisphere began picking up strange signals out of the ether. They were faint and ghostly, as if coming from a vast distance. As far as anyone could learn, the signals originated nowhere upon the earth. *It was as if some phantom were whispering through the ether in the language of another planet.*

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(Continued from page 126)

ettes in the Summer Issue of ORIENTAL STORIES. All were very good stories, and the shorts were fine too. *The Dragoman's Confession* was the best of the bunch. I am glad to know that there is to be another one in the next issue. I'll never forgive Mr. Kline for poisoning Selma Hanoum. I liked her as much as I do Hamed the Dragoman. By all means keep Warren Hastings Miller writing for you. Three authors I would like to see in ORIENTAL STORIES are Loring Brent, H. Bedford-Jones, and Harold Lamb. I enjoyed *The Further Adventures of Ali Baba,* by Allan Govan. I hope that there are many of these stories in future issues."

Writes Miss Frances Manno, of New Orleans, in a letter to the Souk: "I have several suggestions to make. All the covers of ORIENTAL STORIES have been attractive; in fact that is how I started to buy them. But I would like, if possible, one cover design to surpass all—a lovely Arabian girl in gorgeous clothes, perhaps in her wedding finery, adorned with jewels—against a background of a yellow cover. Probably this might attract more readers, especially the ladies; because every month in the Souk I notice there are more male readers. Also, concerning the Souk; there should be more pages devoted to the readers if you really receive so many letters. You ask us readers for advice and our favorite stories; so I know the magazine is published in my interest, which pleases me very much. My favorite stories in the Summer Issue are, in this order: *The Dragoman's Confession, The Black Adder, Pirate Whelp."*

Readers, please let us know which stories you prefer in this issue. And if there are any stories you dislike, let us know that, too. Your favorite story in the Summer Issue was Warren Hastings Miller's *Pirate Whelp,* that fascinating story of a wanton Malay queen. Your choice for second place was given to Otis Adelbert Kline's romantic story, *The Dragoman's Confession.*

My favorite stories in the January MAGIC CARPET are:

Story	Remarks
(1)----------	----------
(2)----------	----------
(3)----------	----------

I do not like the following stories:

(1)----------	Why?----------
(2)----------	----------

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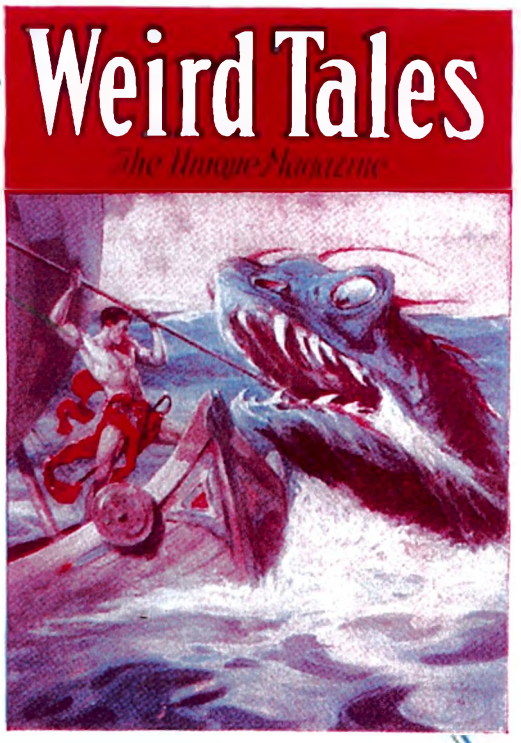

Buccaneers of Venus

by Otis Adelbert Kline

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OTIS ADELBERT KLINE

William Bolitho, prominent newspaperman and author, made this statement about Mr. Kline in the New York World:

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