

The **MAGIC** **CARPET** MAGAZINE



Seabury Quinn

H. Bedford-Jones

Edmond Hamilton

E. Hoffmann Price

Warren Hastings Miller

THE MAGIC MAGAZINE

Farnsworth Wright was a stubborn, though excellent, editor. Single handedly, he kept the low-budget WEIRD TALES alive for fifteen glorious years. He had less success, however, with the off-trail ORIENTAL STORIES, which he initiated in 1930, doubtless due to its limited theme. After but nine issues, Wright broadened its scope, retitling it MAGIC CARPET MAGAZINE. The result, as this collection attests, was a magazine that fell somewhere between WEIRD TALES and ORIENTAL STORIES in its philosophy. Beneath an unfixed pastel by Margaret Brundage, an H. Bedford-Jones historical romance, a Robert E. Howard (as Patrick Ervin) modern adventure, and an Edmond Hamilton fantasy-interplanetary story could nestle in relative comfort. Pretty clearly, Wright hoped to attract his WEIRD TALES audience to support the magazine.

But MAGIC CARPET, alas, ended after five issues, with the Jan./1934 number. Not that Wright was giving up, mind you. After the cancellation, he stated publically:

"We are putting the MAGIC CARPET in cold storage until magazine conditions improve. When we do resume publication, the MAGIC CARPET will be issued monthly, instead of quarterly."

Nor was that an idle boast. Until 1937, he continued to refer to MAGIC CARPET in his market letters as being only "dormant". But Wright was never to fulfill his pledge. For failing health and the sale of the Chicago-based WEIRD TALES to a New York publisher (who eventually fired him) dashed his hope to revive the companion to the "Unique Magazine".

Yet, that may not have been quite the end of the MAGIC CARPET MAGAZINE. In 1938, an obscure Chicago publisher, Sun Publications (who may or may not have been connected with the Ziff-Davis group) produced a magazine which was at least a spiritual descendant of MAGIC CARPET. GOLDEN FLEECE may have been more than that, though. For, strangely, at least two stories--Seabury Quinn's "The Fire Master" and Robert E. Howard's "Gates of Empire"--originally set for an unpublished issue of MAGIC CARPET, appeared in GOLDEN FLEECE five years later.

Coincidence? Perhaps. But if Farnsworth Wright had been so set upon reviving MAGIC CARPET, it stands to reason that he'd have kept the inventory stories in "cold storage", too. To carry this line of conjecture a bit further, when Wright saw his chance of resurrecting MAGIC CARPET disintegrate in 1938, he might just have sold the inventory stories and magazine concept to the nebulous Sun Publications. In fact, as the original market letter on GOLDEN FLEECE was mysteriously unsigned, Wright could even have been involved in this new incarnation in a direct way. As GOLDEN FLEECE faded in 1939, and Farnsworth Wright succumbed in 1940, we may never have much more than conjecture to venture here. But, all told, who can deny that ORIENTAL STORIES/MAGIC CARPET and GOLDEN FLEECE are not all cut of the same rich cloth--or PULP?

--Will Murray 13/October/1976

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THE MAGIC CARPET MAGAZINE

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The Vagabond- at-Arms

By SEABURY QUINN

"Immediately he was under my guard, stabbing at me with his poniard."



A swashbuckling mediaeval adventurer, Carlos de la Muerte, tells the story of his exciting and perilous career—a story of thrilling events and romantic dangers

1. How I Became a Vagabond

MY MOTHER was called Ayesbah; the beautiful, for her Christian parents baptized her Mary, star of the sea, and in the Arabic tongue that name is rendered Ayesbah. Sometimes she was called Mabrouka, the fortunate, although, God wot, there was little

enough of fortune in the poor lady's life, save, perhaps, that which was of an evil sort. How she was surnamed I do not know, for though she told me much of myself and of that far-off England where she was born and reared to womanhood, there was much she either dared not or could not tell, because of very grief and

shame that she, a Christian woman, should have taken the veil and religion of the Prophet of Islam.

My father I never knew, for he died with sword in hand and defiance on lips when the man whose bounty fed and clothed me during the days of my youth assaulted the ship on which he and my mother voyaged from England to Africa.

Of the circumstances of my birth and of my mother's coming to Algiers I learned at her knee as I played in the women's apartments of Sidi Ibrahim ben Ozman's palace near the Street of the Silversmiths, for it was in that house of green and red tiles that I first saw the light, and there I lived until evil fortune removed me to the house of Si Ibrahim's brother, an aged man who had lost an eye fighting against the Spaniards in the olden days and distilled so much of the vitriol of hatred of all things Christian in his nature that there was no room left for the milk of human kindness inside his withered bosom.

While my mother was yet but a bride, my father, who lived by the sword, was granted a commission to command the armed guard of a ship voyaging out of England to Africa, and with him he took his wife. She was of a delicate constitution, and as the humor of the Mediterranean was mild at that season of the year they thought the voyage would aid her health, for I had lain beneath her heart for some three months, and it was my father's hope that she be strong and hale when the fullness of her time was come.

While the tall ship stood powerless for lack of wind between the Iberian peninsula and the shore of Africa—for she carried no rowing slaves—a corsair galley beset her, and after a shrewd fight all who had not been slain in the encounter yielded themselves to Si Ibrahim's arms, though in doing so they bought safety

from the sword at the price of a lifetime's slavery at the oar. Howbeit, life is sweet, and even to labor on the galley bench is rather to be preferred to welcoming the kiss of Azrael, the Death Angel; besides, there was always hope of a rescue, or perchance, of ransom, though the rescue was likely to be at the hands of the Spaniards, which meant only trading Moorish chains for Christian fetters, and the chances of a poor seaman's ransom were but slight.

Several women fell into the corsairs' hands together with my mother, and the better favored of these were sent to Constantinople, where women of the West brought better price than in Algiers, while those not comely of face or figure were taken to the Algerian market to be sold as household drudges.

But when the Moorish captain looked upon my mother's face it was fair and pleasing in his sight, and he ransomed her forthwith with gold from his own purse and made her a fair offer of marriage if she would acknowledge the Prophet, promising, the while, that when her child was delivered, if it were a boy it should be treated as his own first-born, and if a girl, provided with suitable dowry when marriageable age should have been reached. And so, upon the deck still wet with her wedded husband's life-blood, my mother bowed her head and recited the *Allab Akbar*, acknowledging that there is no God but God, and Mohammed is His Prophet. Poor lady! Who shall blame her if for the freedom of her unborn child she turned from Lord Christ with her lips, so long as she kept Him in her heart? For well she knew that had she stubbornly refused homage to Islam, both she and the babe would have tasted the bitterness of slavery.

As for Ibrahim ben Ozman, he kept his promise to the letter, for he was a knight-

ly gentleman, and when they laid me on my mother's breast for the first time he recited the *Fatabah* as fervently as though in truth I had been the child of his own house, and gave great praise to Allah and much charity to the needy for that his wife had come safely through her travail.

Me they called Mohammed, to the greater glory of God's Prophet, and to this name my mother added al Kamel, signifying the perfect, for to a woman her first man-child is ever without spot or blemish, either of soul or body, though he be ill-favored as a monkey and vicious as a scorpion.

Thereafter my education was that of a Moorish lad of good family. In the school of the mosque I learned to read and write and to recite whole chapters of the Koran from memory. Slaves taught me to ride and swim and wrestle right cunningly, and my foster-father's men-at-arms instructed me in skill with the arbalest, the pistolet, the lance and the harquebus, for as yet the musket had not come into general use along the shores of Africa. Also there was a Greek from the Golden Horn, a captive of war who had bought freedom and preferment at the price of apostasy, who was more cunning with the sword than any man in all the city, and to him Si Ibrahim sent me for instruction: so that before I had reached my fourteenth year there were few of my age, or even my seniors, who could stand against my swordsmanship, and those who could better me with either saber or rapier were fewer still.

Meantime, in the sanctity of the harem my mother schooled me in the English tongue and taught me of Christ our Lord and of His Maid-Mother, so that I in the innocence of my childish heart was wont to recite *Our Father* in addition to the glorification of the Prophet at morning, noon and evening, believing

that by praising both I was securing favor from each.

When my sixteenth birthday arrived I was permitted to join Si Ibrahim's ship and sally forth to attack the infidels, for it had long been decided that I, as first-born male of the house, should carry on the honorable profession of harrying the Prophet's enemies when my second father should have become too old to lead in the fight.

Well do I remember when first I spilled Spanish blood—the first of much I was to let loose before the tale was ended. In the arrogance of my youth and ignorance I had thought the Nazarene dogs would quail and tremble at sound of the Prophet's battle-cry, and great was my astonishment when they met us breast to breast and blade to blade, right cut, left cut, thrust and parry, with such good will that I was like to have yielded up my spirit in the first of the fight had not a beetle-browed seaman missed the blow he aimed at my head and succeeded only in gashing open my cheek. The pain of the wound maddened me. Crying, "*Din, ed-din!*" with the loudest of them, I sallied into the fray, swinging my simitar with such fury and skill that even their mailed men-at-arms gave ground before me, and more than one of them tasted of my steel, and, tasting it, tasted nothing thereafter.

When all was done and the prisoners whose hurts would not incapacitate them from labor were stowed between decks (the badly wounded we threw into the sea, for there was small profit in feeding helpless Christians whose market price would not repay their keep), old Aben Alahmar, the ship's surgeon, bound up my wound with healing herbs and praised me to my face for the part I had borne in the action. "*Wallab,*" he told my father, "our little cockerel has sharp

spurs! A few more brushes with the infidel and he will be worthy to carry thy pennon into battle while thou remainest home to count the spoil!" And Ibrahim ben Ozman, who loved me with a father's love for all that I bore no blood of his within my veins, smiled on me and patted my wounded cheek, declaring that never had such skill or valor been shown by one so young. Truly, the praise of the elders is like the taste of honey on the tongue, even the Grecian honey which sells for half its weight in silver.

SO PASSED the days of my youth, and, though I knew myself to be happy, I understood not how happy I was, for he who has never suffered thirst knows not the sweetness of water. The house of Si Ibrahim was a home of joy, for the restrictions of the harem, never so harshly applied by the western Moors as by their brethren of the east, were scarcely enforced at all, and I was free to wander as I chose within the women's apartments, and, though my mother gave him no children, her husband loved her tenderly and refused either to put her away or take other wives from among his own people, though he had several offspring by the lesser women of the establishment.

My eighteenth year arrived and with it the plans for a suitable marriage, for Si Ibrahim would have me established in a house of mine own before he handed over the command of his sea-rovers to my grasp. Gifts had been exchanged and negotiations were speeding toward my nuptials when word came from our sea scouts that a great flotilla of Spanish merchantmen had been sighted and that much rich spoil might be obtained by a foray.

I pleaded to go upon the quest, but since the treaty of my marriage had begun my father would not hear of my exposing

myself to danger; so I remained behind to govern the house in his absence. Alas! The terror of the inland sea who had ever been a gentle and indulgent father to the fatherless Englishwoman's son returned no more to his pleasant house with its gardens of melon plants and almond trees. Instead, upon the fourth day following his departure a small boat from his ship limped into port bearing the sole survivors of the disastrous raid. Perfidiously, the Spaniards had mingled disguised ships of war with their trading-vessels, and when the corsairs swooped down upon them they were met with such a hail of lead and iron as sank most of their ships outright while the greater portion of their men perished in futile attempts to board the war-galleys. Of all the Moorish fleet only eight men survived, and I was doubly fatherless.

My father's elder brother, an ill-favored man whose lust for gold was equaled only by his hatred of all things foreign, assumed charge of our household, selling many of our most valued possessions and most beloved servants. My mother and me he gave shelter, as he was bound to do; but my days of happiness were over, for the one-eyed curmudgeon who filled my second sire's place imposed a rigid embargo upon the harem and I was no longer free to visit with my mother except in the presence of one of my stepfather's detestable eunuchs, and then only if she were veiled.

Nature had denied the aged rogue offspring, for evil living had blasted his vitality; but instead of treating me as his son-in-law he chose to regard me as an usurper in the household, and, as far as lay within his power, made life a misery to me. Si Ibrahim's fortune, which was no small one, was mine by right of inheritance; yet my uncle doled me out such pitiful dribbles of money that any one

would have thought me heir to a beggar's heritage.

Two months had passed since Ibrahim ben Ozman's death, and I was fretting mightily beneath the restraint of his successor when release came unexpectedly. Together with several companions I had been to a house of love; for, though I found small pleasure in the company of dancing-women, having seen performers better than any who danced for public hire in the house of Si Ibrahim, the time hung heavy on my hands, and the company of other youths was oftener to be found in the house of the dance than elsewhere. I was returning to my bed when, as I passed through the Street of the Silversmiths, I descried a figure huddled in a corner of the house wall.

"In the name of Allah, the merciful, the compassionate!" I challenged, laying my hand upon my dagger; for, though there was much money in the town, there was also much poverty, and those who took by force what they could not beg were frequently encountered after night-fall. And:

"In Allah's name, is it thou, my little cockerel?" cried the voice of Aben Alahmar, the surgeon who had bound up my wounds after my first taste of battle.

"Truly, my father, it is I," I returned, replacing my dagger in its sheath, "but why dost thou accost me in this manner?"

"Praise be to Allah that I am able to accost thee at all, my son," the old man replied, taking me by the arm and drawing me into the shadow of the wall. "There be evil things abroad this night, son of my friend. Thy mother, the lady Ayesbah, passed into paradise about the sixth hour this night—some say because of poison; and thy uncle, unworthy wretch that he is, has even now taken possession of thine inheritance. Wert thou to return

home thou wouldst be murdered before thine outcry could be heard; for verily, he purposes to destroy thee, that he may possess thy property."

"*Bismillah!*" I cried, seizing my dagger afresh. "This shall not be! Am I a Jewish dog to whine and cringe beneath the lash? By the beard of the Prophet, I shall apply to the Bey for justice!"

"Nay, my son," the old man counseled, "there is no justice for thee in this city. Already thine uncle—may the dogs bite him!—suborns false witnesses against thee, charging thee with treason and apostasy to the creed of the Nazarenes. By morning the Bey's janizaries will seek thee with lance and sword. Thine only safety is to put the sea between thee and them."

Now at these words I became sore afraid, so that my right knee was like to have exchanged greetings with its fellow; for though I feared no man in fair fight, the power of the Bey was a mighty thing, and my uncle's treachery had swept the world away from under my feet. "What, then, am I to do?" I demanded; for though I was a grown man in stature, I was but a lad in years.

"Behold, my son," the old physician answered, displaying a bundle on the pavement at his feet. "What I can do for thee I will. Allah knows 'tis little enough, yet it is better than letting the jackals eat thee."

From the bundle he produced a shirt of fine chain-mail, close-knit and well-nigh as light as cloth, capable of turning a crossbow bolt and fending off the stoutest thrust of sword or dagger. "Wear this, my little one," he bade. "More than once it has saved my life in battles with the Roumi, but what should I, who am too old to give and receive blows, do with the armor of a man? Here, too, is that which will make thy faring forth easier,"

and he handed me the simitar and dagger which he had worn on half a thousand sea-forays.

They were beautiful weapons, the product of the cleverest armorers in Damascus, so finely tempered that they could shear through plate mail well-nigh as easily as through a leather jerkin, and so cunningly balanced that whether the swordsman struck with point or edge their penetration was twice as great as any other weapons wielded with double the force. Each had a handle fashioned like a gerfalcon's head and a cross-guard formed by extended lion's paws, and on the blade of each was a legend in ancient Chaldean letters which I could not read, but which I had been told proclaimed: "*Who Feels My Kiss Feels Death No More.*" Often had I seen the old man striking about him with those twin dealers of mortality and often had I envied him their possession, but their like was not to be had in all of Barbary, and as for offering money for them—as soon would I have dared offer gold for Aben Alahmar's hope of paradise.

While I was yet at a loss to thank the kindly old doctor for his gift, he pressed a purse of woven silver on me, saying, "A hundred gold pieces, lad; 'twas all I could command at such short notice, but 'twill more than pay thy passage into Europe. After that, Allah be with thee."

"Nay, my father," I replied, very near to tears, "if I must go among the Roumi as a fugitive, 'twill be but for a short time; for surely I shall return when my uncle has gone to dwell with Shitan, and claim my bride and my inheritance."

"*Eiwa!*" he laughed in his beard. "Those be brave words, young cockerel, but the eagle's child is no less an eagle for having been fledged in the nest with the hawks, nor yet does the hawk become an eagle because he hatched among the

crags. When thou hast returned to thy father's folk we shall see thee no more, and, belike, thou wilt take up the religion of thy fathers as well. It matters not, my son, what god thou callest on in thy prayers, so long as thou followest a religion of justice and truth.

"And now be off," he ordered, almost gruffly. "The call to prayer will sound shortly, and thine enemies will seek thee as soon as there is light enough to guide their knife-thrusts." Once more he pressed me to his breast and kissed me on each cheek, then turned and lost himself in the shadows of the street.

Holy old man; may he remember me from his happy place! Though he was a sea-robber and an infidel to boot, surely he has not gone to that abode of burning of which the priests seem so certain; for, from a long lifetime spent among men of many religions—and none—I know his words to be true: it matters not overmuch what religion a man professes, so long as he practises one of justice.

A Levantin shipmaster who was beholden to me for some small favors in the past gave me shelter aboard his craft that night, and—for half my store of gold pieces—obtained me a disguise of European doublet and hosen and conveyed me safely to the Port of Malaga.

Thus ended my pleasant youth and began a manhood of toil, danger and strife such as few—thanks be to God!—have known.

2. *How "Carlos de la Muerte"* *Was Born*

NOW, of the things which befell me in the city of Malaga I do not purpose to tell at length; for though they were many, and of some small importance, the veteran of many battles keeps no tail of the shots he has heard fired, and were I to set down all that which I have done, the

supply of paper in all the world would scarce suffice for the chronicle.

One or two events fell out, however, which go to prove that ignorance, coupled with luck, may stand a man in greater stead than all the learning of the schoolmen.

My upbringing was like to have proved my undoing on the first day I wandered through the streets; for, though my mother had told me much of the underlying truths of the Christian religion, of its outward forms and ceremonies she had taught me nothing at all. Also, be it remembered, I had paid devotion to Mahound since the earliest days of my youth; therefore, upon the first noon of my stay in the city, when bells began ringing from all the spires at once, I turned me toward Mekka and had already bowed my forehead toward the earth, reciting, as a parrot does, without thought upon the words:

"*Allah akbar,
Ayah saiat . . .*"

when I bethought me that my Muslim days were done, and had the wit to make as though bending to recover my cap, which had fallen in the dust as I leant forward, and to stand with lowered head and moving lips until the city's business was resumed at the conclusion of the Angelus. Even so, I was glad to walk hastily from the spot when the prayer was finished, for more than one unwashed citizen of the town had cast glances of angry suspicion in my direction, and I had no mind to be arrested as a Morisco. Indeed, had I fallen into the clutches of the law at that time my shrift would have been short; for, though I was fairly proficient in the Latin tongue, having learned much of it from an unfrocked priest who had fled to Algiers for sanctuary, I knew no word of the prescribed prayers, and the briefest examination would have ex-

posed me to conviction as a Moorish spy, of which there were many in southern Spain at that time, as the sons of Islam had not yet abandoned hope of recapturing the lost provinces.

Howbeit, my luck held, and I escaped further suspicion for some days.

Everywhere I found reason for offense. The dwellers in the city were vilely dirty, for washing was no part of their religion, and the smell of their unbathed bodies was well-nigh as distasteful to me as the odor from the benches where the sweating, unwashed slaves toiled at the oars beneath the boatswain's lash. Too, the inn where I stayed was but a filthy hovel and the bed on which I slept was alive with vermin; so that I spent what time I could in the open air of the streets. On my second night at the *posada* some thieving rascal stole most of my remaining money, so that I was like to have starved had not my ignorance led me into the way of obtaining fresh supplies.

My money being nearly gone, I was wandering aimlessly through the streets when I chanced to pass a church. The heat of the afternoon was excessive and the building's interior looked cool and inviting; so, doffing my cap, I entered the sacred edifice and sank to rest in a corner of the wall hard by a tiny wooden booth which reminded me of the sentry boxes maintained on the battlements for shelter of the night watch during inclement weather.

IT MIGHT have been the sun tired me more than I realized, perhaps the wine I had drunk at breakfast made me drowsy, for wine-drinking was a new thing to me, who had been reared in the total abstinence enjoined on faithful followers of Mohammed; whatever the reason, I was soon asleep and dreaming of my mother, my happy African home and the brave

fighting I should do against the Spaniards, when the droning of two voices close beside me brought me up wide awake.

Some one was whispering to some one else inside the sentry box by which I slept, and though the conversation had begun while I was fast in sleep, I quickly caught the drift of it.

"—and who was it thou slewest, my son?" asked a voice as smooth and unctuous as oil of olives poured from an earthen jug.

"'Twas Lopez, the *escribano*, father," returned another whisper which reminded me of the vinegar men make from soured wine.

"Why didst thou do it?"

"Because he was a lawyer, therefore a robber of the poor, and because he had much wealth in his house."

"And who were thy companions in this evil deed?"

"Pedro the muleteer and Manuel the porter, and none others."

"None others?"

"Nay, father, we three and no more. We entered his house two hours before the Angelus and killed him in his bed. His body we hid in the well of his patio, while such of his wealth as we could lay hands on we bore away and buried in the old cemetery of the Jews. Some little of it we kept, but most of it we buried for fear our sudden possession of too much unexplained gold might bring suspicion."

What more was said within the little box I do not know, for I had already heard enough to know a foul killing had been done and one of the murderers was near. Rising very quietly to my feet I crept to the entrance of the church, where I remained kneeling, as though over-long at my devotions, and watched patiently for a movement of the curtain which

veiled the booth's entrance. Anon the curtains parted and a big-nosed, loutish fellow with a hangdog face crept forth and made for the open air with never a backward look.

I rose and followed him, and as he left the building I heard him murmur: "Give myself up to the Alcalde? Not I! Though twenty absolutions hung upon my surrender I would not do it. Am I to have the trouble of murder only to be cheated of its rewards by the hangman's noose? Give myself up, forsooth!"

Carefully, treading softly on the thin-worn soles of my ancient boots, I trailed the fellow at a distance, taking care not to excite his suspicion, but always keeping him in view. As we neared a principal thoroughfare I heard the ruffle of a drum and a loud and formal crying in the street. It was a herald from the Alcalde's palace declaring that Quesada de Lopez, the lawyer, had been murdered and robbed the night before and that five hundred maravedis would be paid as reward to any one giving information concerning the identity of the killers, a like amount to him who found the notary's body, and another similar amount to the person who disclosed the hiding-place of the loot.

Now I had thought to follow the self-confessed robber until he led me to the spot where his plunder was buried, but another plan formed in my mind as I heard the herald's proclamation. Taking counsel with myself, I turned aside and wandered through the byways until I had gone some considerable distance, then, accosting a passer-by, doffed my ragged cap politely and explained to him I was a traveler but newly come to Malaga and desired to learn the location of the old Jewish cemetery.

He looked at me shrewdly, desiring to know whether I were a new Christian—

as they called the baptized Hebrews—or no, but I informed him I was as good a Christian as I was on the day of my birth, which was true, and that I wished to go to the burying-place because there was buried there a certain Abarbanel who had bested my father's father in a business transaction, and I desired to spit upon his grave.

The apparent Christian-like reason for my desire to visit the cemetery commended me highly to my companion, and he obligingly gave me full directions how to find the place, even going out of his way to accompany me on my quest.

At length I found the ruinous remains of the place where the sons of Moses had aforetime been buried, and made short work of searching every foot of it for a spot where the earth had been newly turned. Beside the wreck of what had once been a headstone I found the place, and exhumed three leathern bags, the contents of which I spread out before me on the sun-dried grass. Two of the bags contained broad gold pieces, and these I returned to their place, since the gold was bulky and not easily to be carried, but in the third I found a number of precious stones of excellent water, and these I pried from their settings and hid in the hem of my doublet, then replaced the earth above the treasure's grave and hastened to the house of the Alcalde.

The officer of the guard was for denying me admission at first, but when he learned I bore news of the murderers for whom the whole town was searching he led me before the magistrate, to whom I told a cock-and-bull story of having seen three villainous-looking fellows skulking from the house of the dead notary early that morning. Pressed further for details, I said I could not name the men, for the light was poor, but that I would undertake to lay them by the heels if he would

give me three men-at-arms to go with me as escort.

Together with the trio of soldiers I made the rounds of the city's cheaper wine-shops, eventually finding the man I had seen in church that day drinking prodigious drafts of port with two companions as ill-favored as himself.

"There they be," I exclaimed, pointing to my quarry; "seize them before they can make off!"

To my surprize the three culprits made little resistance when the soldiers swooped down upon them, and though they at first stoutly denied all guilt, it took but half a dozen lusty blows with the flat of a sword to force them to confess.

WITH the prisoners firmly bound we made our way toward the Alcalde's house once more, and I was beginning to think that Malaga was no very evil place after all; since, though thieves stole my money while I slept, more was easily to be made in its stead, when a remark by one of the soldiers set my fears alive. "What think you his Excellency will do to the informer?" he asked in a low voice.

"Oh, belike he will torture him until he discloses the hiding-place of the loot," the other replied carelessly, "or perhaps he will only fling him into a dungeon as a suspect Moorish spy and leave him there to starve."

Now neither of these contingencies was greatly to my liking, and I commenced straightway to make plans whereby I might circumvent the Alcalde; for well I knew that if he ordered me into custody and his servants searched my clothes they would find the hidden jewels, and then I should most certainly taste the rack or the water-torture until I confessed to any crime with which my captors might wish to charge me. Therefore:

"Companions," said I as we passed a

dimly lighted wine-shop, "let us enter here and drink to our good fortune in finding the knaves who did the estimable lawyer to death."

Nothing loth, and grinning broadly at each other for that the gull whom they were taking into custody should offer to treat them, the soldiers dismounted and entered the vintner's with me, and I bade the wench who served us bring four bottles of her best claret for us and carry three more to the poor wretches who stayed bound without the door. "Belike it will be long enough before their gullets taste good wine again," I added in explanation of my charity, wherewith the soldiers laughed loud and long, and winked at each other with what they thought a hidden meaning.

"Friend," said one of them as he poured a second goblet of the wine from the sturdy bottle the serving slattern set before him, "thou drinkest not. Is not our company good enough for thee?"

Now this was the very thing for which I had wished, and, indeed, I had been seeking some means of forcing a quarrel on them when the half-tipsy fellow saved me the trouble.

Even better was my luck when one of his companions blurted out between hic-cups: "What may be thy name, Master Informer?"

"Carlos," I answered, giving the first Spanish name to flash into my mind.

"Carlos what?" he persisted.

"Carlos Francisco," I replied, thinking to satisfy him, but:

"Carlos Francisco, forsooth!" he laughed scornfully. "Hast thou no family name, or art thou one of those who may claim none? Faith, none but *bastardos* and heretics lack surnames!"

"Have it as thou wilt, then," I replied. "Let my name be de la Muerte, signifying Death!" and I snatched the dagger

from my belt and struck him in the throat midway 'twixt chin and gorget.

He sprawled forward across the table, his red blood mingling with the spilt red wine, and his two companions were on me in an instant, their long swords flashing in the dim torchlight.

But though they were both of greater stature than I, their knowledge of the fence was such as is learned in the *baracca*, not in the armory of a finished master such as had trained me.

Nicholaides, the Greek who taught me the science of the sword, used no fencing-masks, and to that fact I owed my life's salvation that night; for the first of my opponents lunged directly at my face, and had I fought as the Spaniards do, his point would surely have struck through my eye. But I fenced with my head well back, and as his steel slipped past my cheek I shortened my sword, then drove it gently forward as his body lurched against mine, and, scarcely thrusting at all, ran the keen blade through his breast so that he fell writhing at my feet with an inch-long wound in his bosom and a slit half that length in his back.

Loosening my blade from the dying man's chest I turned to engage his companion, but the fellow had no stomach for the fight.

"Help, help, a man lies murdered!" he bawled as he ran from out the shop, stopping not even long enough to let his metal cross mine.

There were few wayfarers abroad at that hour of night, and the tavern where we fought had been deserted (a fact which had led me to invite the soldiers to it); so, although the cowardly mongrel bellowed for help at the top of his lungs, none came to his assistance, and I left the place unmolested.

From one of the dead men-at-arms I took a steel cap, cloak and jerkin, and

from another: his boots, for I should need fresh clothing on my journey, and mine own was in a woful state of disrepair. Only a moment was required to hamstring two of the troopers' three horses and serve the poor brutes which bore the prisoners in the same way; for though I hated the cruelty, I well knew my own safety depended on distancing pursuit in the early hours of the chase.

So, astride the remaining cavalry steed and equipped like a member of the Alcalde's mounted guard, I dashed through the night, carrying on the fleeing soldier's cry: "Help, help, a man lies murdered!"

On my way from the city I bethought me of the Jewish cemetery and halted long enough to exhume the remaining bags of gold, then set forth for Granada, knowing full well that whatever fortune lay before me I was not like to acquire so much gold for so little work as I had in that night's business.

Thus ended my first visit to the Port of Malaga.

3. *How I Met the Beggar Princess*

NONE accosted me or offered me let or obstacle as I clattered along the highway toward the old Moorish capital, for I made a brave show in my burnished morion, my red cloak and my high boots of new cordovan leather as I bestrode the tall cavalry horse. Moreover, the first wound I ever received in battle had left a long crescent-shaped scar athwart my right cheek, and this gave to my countenance a singularly sinister expression at times, and the long sword clanking and clinking against my rowels warned the over-curious that I was an excellent man to leave alone as he rode about his business. And so I made my way by leisurely stages, stopping at such inns as proved inviting to my inspection, drinking spar-

ingly, gaming not at all with the idlers in the common rooms and swearing as little as I could without arousing suspicion, for the Spaniards were much given to strange oaths and the filthiness of their profanity disgusted me.

Now it was on a Sunday morning, very early in the day, when I neared the outskirts of the city which was my destination, and my surprize was great to see a mighty throng of people passing in the same direction, as though there were some fair or festival toward. Many of the peasants, too, were in their holiday attire; so that I was moved to ask a caballero who galloped past, as though he were afraid of missing some show, "What means the concourse of people, friend? Is it a pageant they go to?"

He looked at me narrowly from under his black brows and asked with what I thought a tone of suspicion, "Whence come you, that you ask such a question this day?"

"*José y Maria*, comrade," I replied, using the mildest oath I could think of, "I come from the African coast, where I have been fighting with the infidel!" which was true enough, though I neglected to say that all my blows had been struck on the infidels' side. Seeing that he still looked doubtful, I added meaningly, "There were men there who could give stout blows, as well as take them, and my arm grows numb for want of action these many days. Would you, perchance, care to——"

But it appeared he would not, for he crossed himself hastily and set spurs to his horse, riding rapidly away from me in the direction of the city gate.

Further questions were unnecessary, for the procession of boors and esquires, knights and ladies, serving-wenches and pot-washers set all in one way, and I had but to drift with the human tide to find

myself presently overlooking a plaza, or open square, in the center of which two tall stands of benches, like flights of monster stairs, had been built facing each other, with a little space of cleared ground between. I bestrode my charger wonderingly, for though all seemed ready for a play of some kind, I saw neither mimes nor actors, though a great press of audience was already assembled.

Presently, however, there came a blaring peal of trumpets, and immediately thereafter the melancholy chanting of a psalm-tune, and a procession the like of which I had never seen before filed solemnly into the square. A company of swart-faced fellows in black doublet and hose, white crosses blazoned on their tunics and cloaks, marched first, glittering halberds carried at the shoulder. Before them, like a standard-bearer, marched a friar in habit of black and white carrying a green cross swathed in veils of black, and behind the pikemen there marched, or rather shuffled, a company of what I first took to be mountebanks, so grotesque was their dress. Each wore a short, smock-like garment of brilliant yellow cloth on which was painted in blue the X-shaped cross of St. Andrew, while over all were daubed crude representations of flickering tongues of flame and figures of djinns, dragons and devils such as the story-tellers in Algiers were wont to tell of in the evenings when the seamen gathered in the houses of entertainment to while the hours of the night away. In addition, each of these people had a twin-peaked cap like a bishop's miter on his head, and about his neck was loosely drawn a noose, the ends of which hung down in front, pinioning his wrists together before him. In his hands each carried an unlighted candle of green wax, and all walked in their bare feet with legs uncovered to the knee.

Now, I was at first for laughing at the idiotic show these mummers made of themselves, but past experience had taught me caution, and before I burst into a guffaw I looked about me under lowered lids and beheld there was little enough of laughter on the faces of the crowd. Rather, it seemed to me, there was a look of fright on many a countenance, and many more showed sorrow, while those afoot bent the knee and beat their breasts as the procession passed them by and those who were mounted bared their heads and bowed them low upon their bosoms. Therefore, not being minded to cause remark, I did likewise, but watched shrewdly what was toward from beneath my brows. And behold, I saw a great company of shaven-headed friars in habits of black and white pass by, and after them, marching beneath a canopy of red and gold with such show of pomp and pride as the Bey would hardly have made as he passed through the streets of Algiers, there came a priest in full sacerdotal robes, and before him tripped a little boy with a staff of bells in his hand, and as he rang the chimes the multitude bent lower and lower, as though it were a signal for utter self-abasement.

Onward the strange parade wound its way to the wooden benches at the center of the square, and here the priestly marchers disposed themselves on one side, while the buffoons in yellow cap and gown were seated on the other.

Followed the celebration of the mass, and tears of admiration ran down my cheeks as I heard for the first time that wondrous mingling of beauteous words with stately music; but anon a man in a notary's robe arose and read from a parchment scroll a great list of trivial offenses which seemed to have been committed by the clowns in yellow.

"Truly," thought I as I watched this

strange proceeding, "the Spaniards are over-harsh in their judgments, for even the strictest *maula* in all Algiers would not humiliate a man guilty of such insignificant faults as these by obliging him to appear in public in such outlandish garb." But my wonder turned to loathing and my eyes went wide with horror as the notary gave place to another man who announced that the poor wretches were to be taken thence to an adjoining field and there burnt alive at the stake!

Scarce could I keep my stomach from retching as I turned my horse about and rode from that place of infamy, that spot accursed of God and man, where those who bore the sign and seal of the gentle Christ of whom my mother had told me doomed their fellows to death by hideous torture for no greater crime (in some instances) than that of giving a drink of water or a crust of bread to a starving Hebrew!

THE day was nearly spent and shadows had begun to take ever-changing shape in the streets before I could bring myself to think of food again, for ever and anon throughout the hours of daylight I fancied I could detect the scent of burning flesh which hung above the city like the odor of incense from some satanic festival.

But youth is ever quick to put behind it the thought and memory of things unpleasant, and by the hour of the evening Angelus my body, which was hale and stout as a young brute's, was crying out in anguish for nourishment; therefore I turned my footsteps toward mine inn, treading carefully, for as yet the town was strange to me and I scarce knew which way to turn to find the place I sought.

And as I walked along I brought up suddenly with a malediction, for the twistings and turnings of the lane I fol-

lowed had brought me back again to a place I had left some minutes before, and I stood at the junction of two tall walls, arguing with myself whether I would do better to turn me to my right or to my left, when the sound of flying footsteps and a woman's scream drove all thought of myself and my difficulties from me.

Very beautiful she was to behold as she ran toward me, her arms outstretched, her golden hair streaming in the breeze of her flight. Her face was long and oval-shaped and of a white-skinned pallor which minded me of the alabaster from which the lamps of Si Ibrahim's palace had been carved. Her eyes were large and blue, and of such depth and beauty that my heart melted to water at sight of them, and as for her form—women in plenty had I seen, but never one like her. Lightly clad in a sleeveless gown of some crude and dirty cotton stuff, her little feet, white as lilies o'erspecked with violet veins, bruised and bleeding from contact with the sharp-edged flints of the roadway, she seemed to me like a being from some other world—a *houri* from the Prophet's paradise, perhaps, or belike one of the holy angels who sang the good tidings of great joy above the fields of Judea on Christ our Lord his birth-night.

Howbeit, I was soon to know she was no angel, but a mortal woman fast held in mortal terror, for piteously she held forth her ivory hands to me and pitifully she cried, "Good friend, for Mary's sake, succor me; defend me; hide me—they come! They come!"

Now, till that moment women had meant little in my life, for I could have had my pick of any of a hundred fair-faced dancing-girls in my father's house, and many were the women of the *kashbah* who looked on me—or, perchance, upon my purse—with the soft eyes of love; but trading blows with sword and lance had

ever been more to my liking than bartering kiss for kiss, and so I stood tongued before the maiden what time she ran the length of the little alley and flung herself despairingly to her knees before me, holding me by the feet and imploring me to befriend her.

But finally the beating of my heart subsided enough to let me find my voice—though the breath still came hot and fluttering in my throat—and I raised the virgin in my arms and spoke her civilly, beseeching her but to tell me how I could serve her, and I would be her faithful slave till death, and much more such senseless things I said, the like of which young lads have ever declared when first love drives his dart into their vitals. What more I would have babbled I know not, for no man is master of his words when Eros holds the reins of his heart, but interruption came quickly to break my speech asunder.

Adown the narrow street, their eyes and teeth gleaming horribly, like those of wild and savage beasts when they quest their prey, there came two black-garbed men with crosses of white upon their ebon doublets, long halberts flashing in their hands and triumph on their faces.

"Heretic, devil's child, abandoned of God!" screamed one as he distanced his fellow and rushed toward the maid and me. "We have thee in a trap!" Whereat the damsel in my arms began to tremble violently and would have swooned had I not supported her against my bosom.

"How now, friend," I asked mildly, addressing the hangman-faced man who leveled his weapon at us, "what wouldst thou with the little maid?"

But the fellow seemed beside himself with a kind of frenzy, gnashing his teeth together as though he would tear his own lips to tatters and screaming at me: "Judaizer! Heretic dog, paramour of the

abandoned, obstructor of the hand of God! Turn loose the devil's brat and yield thyself to the authority of the Holy Office!"

"Nay, friend," I temporized, putting the maiden behind me and speaking softly still, for I had no wish to close in battle with two spearmen at once, "indeed, I am no heretic, but as good a churchman as any in the place from whence I came, and as for turning loose the damsel, as soon would I yield up my spirit."

"Have then thy wish, accursed of God!" the fellow shrieked, and made at me with his pike.

Then did I thank my guardian angel right heartily that I had learned to swing the sword in the armory of one whose masters in the fence were few; for as the villain attacked me I whipped my blade from out its scabbard and drew it quickly to the right in a single upward motion, and so keen and true was the good steel that it sheared the iron head from off the halbert staff, leaving mine enemy with naught in hand but a four-foot stave of wood.

Meantime, with my left hand I snatched the dagger from my girdle and struck right manfully at his breast, but the steel bent nearly double in my grasp; for under his doublet of black stuff he wore a shirt of mail, and had my hanger been less finely tempered, it would have surely broken in my hand.

Immediately the caitiff was under my guard, stabbing at me with his poniard, and had not the good steel shirt I wore beneath my tunic turned his point I had given up the ghost then and there.

But the tablets of my fate did not decree that I should die at the hands of such as he, and before he could recover his footing I had tripped him up with a wrestler's trick and driven my good

sword's point into his mouth as he lay back-down upon the pavement, so that my steel and his filthy blood mingled with the curses he spewed at me even as his soul sped forth to Satan, its lord.

His companion rogue, who had been vainly endeavoring to strike me with his pike, but feared to thrust too swiftly for fear of hitting his brother in crime, now closed with me, and would have made short work of it had not my secret mail stood me in good stead again. For, though his heavy iron lance-head bruised and pommelled my ribs like the kickings of a vicious mule, the point could not win through the forged links about my body, and I had recourse to a trick learned in the early days of my youth when rough and tumble fighting had been more to my taste than the cool science of the fencing floor. Pretending to be stricken unto death, I fell upon my back, spreading my arms out crosswise, and lay there, breathing heavily. Over me leaped my opponent, shortening his pike to strike me through the gullet; then from right and left I brought my two blades upward at once, like the arms of a pair of scissors, cutting through the tendons of both his legs and dropping him to the pavement beside me as though he had been shot with a cross-bow quarrel. Thereafter I slew him at my convenience.

I WAS for going through my fallen adversaries' pockets; for, though they looked a scrawny enough pair of catch-polls, there was some small chance I might find that upon them which would repay me for the trouble I had been at in killing them. Howbeit, I was deterred in my quest by an exclamation from the fainting virgin behind me. "*Santa Maria, Señor,*" she cried as she recovered her senses, "have you killed them both?"

"Aye," I replied with no little show of

vainglory, for the man who would not shine before the woman of his heart is but a sorry sort of fellow. "Aye, my beautiful one, they will hound thee through the streets no more. Already they drink the drafts prepared in hell for such as they."

I turned upon her, expecting full meed of laud and praise for my heroism, but to my amazement the little maid burst into a torrent of weeping. "*Ay di mi!*" she sobbed. "Alas, we are undone!"

"How so?" I demanded right testily; for it seemed to me our troubles had been greatly lessened by the dispatch of our assailants.

"Knowest thou not whom thou slewest?" she queried between deep-drawn sobs. "Alas, they were of the Militia Christi—familiars of the Holy Office—and who hurts or hinders them would better have had a millstone hung round his neck and been cast into the sea!"

"Say you so?" I answered, looking with no greatly increased respect upon the relics of my conquered adversaries. "Why should that be? Methinks they fought no better than other men, not so well as some I have met."

"Ah, *Señor*, you knew not what you did when you opposed them," she responded. "They carry with them the whole dreadful power of the Inquisition. Men have been tortured and burned for less than this night's business. I myself was taken in their custody for no greater fault than that I did refuse a piece of pork, which I hate, and thus became suspect of Judaizing. They were conveying me to their prison, which is hard by this spot, when I broke from them. Tomorrow I was to have been questioned, perhaps with torture, and anon they would have burned me. Oh, wo is me that in my weakness I called on you for succor, and wo are you that you accorded

it to me, for I have assuredly dragged you down to death and torture with me."

"By the bones of St. Jude," I answered, using one of my new-found Christian oaths, "do you tell me so? Fair maiden, have you no home to which I may convey you? Do but tell me where you would go, and Carlos de la Muerte will see you safely there in despite of all the shark-faced familiars of the Holy Office; ay, and of the Grand Inquisitor himself!"

"Hush, oh, hush!" she implored, signing herself with the cross fearfully and glancing about as though the very walls could hear my boasting. "I have a father who mourns me as lost, and, could I reach him, perhaps I might be safe from those birds of prey; but how can we make our way through the city beset with these dreadful servants of the Inquisition?"

"Sayest thou the populace fears these fellows?" I asked in my turn, stirring one of the bodies before me with the toe of my boot, for a thought had already taken form inside my mind, and needed but her assurance to be translated into action.

"Yes, *Señor*, there is none in all Granada, from the Governor General down, who would dare raise a finger to hinder one of them. Surely you are a stranger in our midst, or you would have run away and left me to my fate."

"A stranger I am, verily," I replied, "and as to what I might have done had I possessed more knowledge of your ways, we need say nothing at this time. The fact remains that the people fear these night-birds, and to that fact we shall owe our safe conduct through the streets."

So saying I stooped and possessed myself of one of the militiamen's black cloaks, spreading it over my own scarlet

cape and drawing it about me until I was muffled in its sable folds from throat to calf. "Do you likewise, *Señorita*," I commanded, handing her the other vulture's garment and loosening the shoes from off his feet. "Array yourself in his cloak, cap and shoon, and go boldly through the streets with me. Should any stop us, we will say we go upon an urgent quest for the Holy Office, and methinks few will ask us further questions. For those whose curiosity goes deeper"—I struck the hilt of my simitar—"I have this to argue our cause. Come, let us be off."

And so, disguised in the raiment of the little maid's late captors, we marched openly through the darkening streets, and I could have shouted aloud with laughter to see how the few passengers we encountered bared their heads and louted low at sight of the white crosses on our sable cloaks.

"How came it such a gentle dove as thou wert in the clutches of those hawks?" I asked as we pursued our way through the quiet streets.

"'Twas jealousy, Don Carlos," she answered, giving me the Spanish title of nobility, whereat my heart beat faster and puffed with pride inside my breast. "Yesterday morn I did repair with other maidens to wash my hair at the fountain, and a certain girl, a gipsy-blooded wench named Sanchica, reviled me for that my hair was yellow, instead of black, like hers. 'Thou'rt no true daughter of Spain,' she taunted me, 'for only the heretics of the north or the bastard brood of Andalusia have light hair and eyes.' Whereat I became enraged and replied, 'At least no light-complexioned maid need fear suspicion of having blackamoors for ancestors.'

"At this she screamed and bit her thumbs, for there was much talk of black

blood flowing in her family. Natchless, that evening she appeared to have forgiven me, and came to me and kissed me on the mouth and made me the offer of a great piece of roasted pork, a meat which sickens me whenever I attempt to eat it.

"I thanked her civilly for her present, but declined to eat of it, whereat she went straightway and informed against me to the Holy Office, and when the officers apprehended me this morning there was a great concourse of women who testified that I had publicly refused to eat the pig's flesh, which rendered me suspect of Judaizing. They took my silken robe from off me and clothed me in the shift of one foredoomed to torture. Tonight they conveyed me from one prison to another, and I broke from them and fled. The rest you know, Don Carlos."

ANON my fair companion led me through a succession of mean thoroughfares to an ancient Moorish house which had been all but demolished by the earthquakes with which the city had been plagued in former days. Brushes grew rank and wild before its gateway and spiders had spun their snares from post to post of its portal, so that it bore the signs of having been long deserted, but the little maid turned sharply to the right, stooped suddenly till she almost knelt upon the paving blocks, and slipped through a rift in the wall, signaling me to do likewise. I obeyed her wordless summons, crept through a jagged cleft in the house side, clambered over the broken shafts of fallen pillars and avoided breaking my bones against the fragments of ruined masonry by the narrowest of luck more than once before I found myself in the patio of the house, open to the sky and dimly lighted by a fire of dung burning on the marble pavement near the central well.

"Who comes there?" a hoarse voice challenged as we crept through the fissure in the wall and stepped into the patio. A villainous-looking cutthroat armed with a stout pole ax loomed suddenly from the darkness and barred our way. "*Santo Redentor!*" he cried sharply at glimpse of the cross on my companion's cloak, and would have struck her down without more ado had she not cried out:

"Sancho, it is I, Jacinta!"

"Praised be all the holy saints of heaven!" the fellow answered, lowering his weapon and doing a sort of grotesque dance for very happiness. "Our little one has come back to us. *Por Dios*, little princess, we had given thee up for lost!"

A great man in black with tattered cloak of purple, bearded like a Franciscan and swaggering like a man-at-arms, strode forward through the gloom and clipped the little maid to his broad bosom. "By'r Lady, *niñita mía*," he cried, while his great belly shook and bobbed with sobs like a wine-skin tossed and bounced upon the back of a capering mule, "I can scarce believe mine eyes! Hast thou really come back from that place where only the hope-abandoned go? How comes it? Tell me not they found no fault in thee; for, by San Luis, those dogs would prove heresy in the Archangel Michael himself were he haled before them!"

"Nay, father mine," the maid replied, turning from stroking the man's hairy cheeks to cast a glance of gratitude on me, "this good, brave gentleman saved me from their clutches. Aye, but he did slay the two who had me in charge, and it was in their clothes we made our way safely through the midst of their fellows to thee." Thereafter, when we had seated ourselves by the fire and been refreshed with great platters of savory stew and many a stoop of strong, sweet wine,

she told the tale of her escape and rescue, taking care that my reputation suffered none in the relation.

As for me, I hung my head and appeared as modest as circumstances would allow, albeit now and again I was forced to remind her of this incident or that which she had overlooked, for much of the time she had lain in a swoon, and could not properly recollect all details of the noble fight I had made in her defense.

"Well done, by my crown and throne!" the fat man cried when all had been said. Then, to me: "Young sir, your services this night are highly valued. How would you that I reward you?"

"Truly, *caballero*, I know not what to say," I replied, "for I am a wanderer upon the earth, having been cast off by mine own people and very like to find no hospitality other than that of the grave among these Spaniards." Therewith I told him of my life from the time of my birth in Si Ibrahim's palace to that night when I had wrested his daughter from the clutches of the Holy Office.

He pondered long upon my tale when I had done, nursing his hairy chin in the palm of his thick hand and staring pensively into the fire. At length:

"Spain is too hot to hold thee, for a time, at least," he said, "and such gold as thou left at thine inn is as good as gone, for to return to seek it would be to hand thyself over to the familiars of the Inquisition. Perchance, however, I can give thee that which is better than gold, for I think adventure will be the breath of thy nostrils for some few years to come, though thou wilt win wealth and no little fame before all is done, unless a rope stretch thy neck meantime.

Know then, young friend, that I am Ruiz, king of the beggars in Granada, and that I rule the clan with a power ab-

solute and unassailable here. In other cities and other lands there be other kings, or, rather, grand masters, of beggars, and to them the word of Ruiz of Granada is as a friendly greeting from another of their family. Take thou this, wear it ever on thy person. Shouldst thou ever be in need of friendship, succor or assistance of any kind, thou hast but to show it to any beggar, wherever he may be, and he is bound by an oath not to be broken to aid thee to the end so long as the probability of helping thee is greater than that of losing his own life."

Into my hand he pressed a heavy golden ring set with a stone of amethyst, and as I regarded it closely I saw the setting was carved with the effigy of Lazarus lying at Dives' door, and so cunningly had the lapidary wrought his work that the very tongues of the curs which licked the beggar's sores could be plainly distinguished, though the entire stone was no greater than the nail of my little finger.

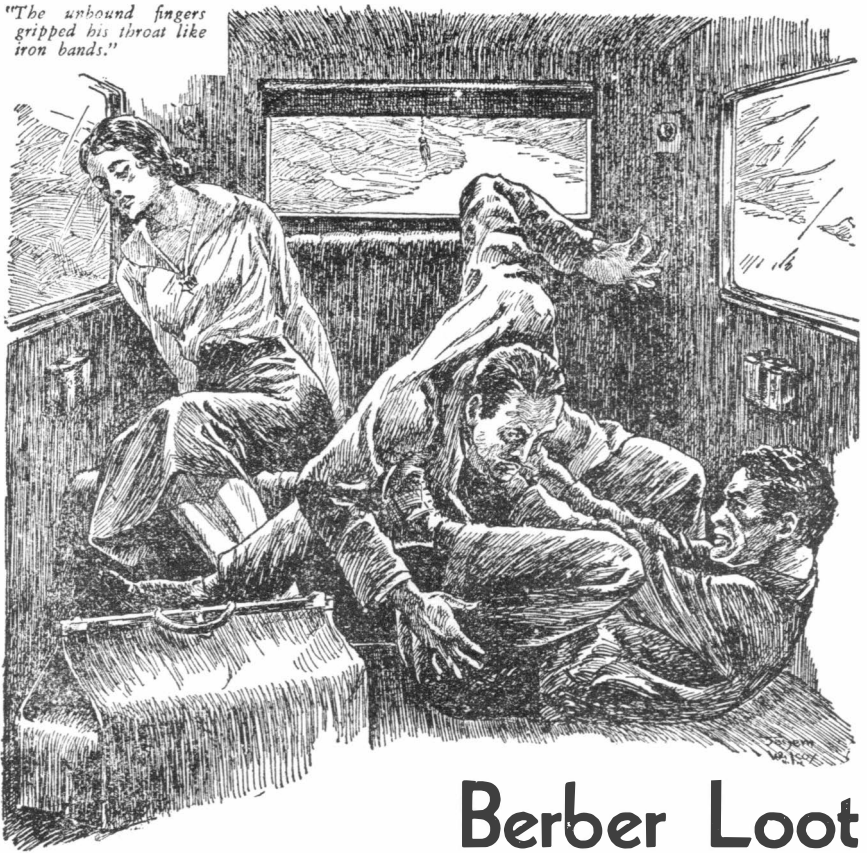
I put the bauble in a secret place within my doublet and thanked King Ruiz honorably for his goodness.

Next morning, attired in a beggar's filthy gown, my face besmeared with grime and a rattling clack-dish at my hempen girdle, I made my way from the ancient city of the Moors.

But underneath my beggar's gabardine I bore three talismans, aye, four: the ring of Lazarus, my good Damascus sword, and a rose plucked new and dewy from its bush that morning and flung to me by the little beggar princess, Jacinta. And in my heart there echoed and re-echoed as I trod the road toward Italy her parting words: "Go with God, Don Carlos, and take with thee my prayers. *Hasta luego*—until we meet again."

In the next adventure Carlos de la Muerte acquires a new name, a new coat, a new companion and several more exciting experiences. Don't fail to read it. It will be published in full in the next issue of the **MAGIC CARPET MAGAZINE.**

"The unbound fingers
gripped his throat like
iron bands."



Berber Loot

By H. BEDFORD-JONES

The story of a madcap adventure in Morocco, told as only Bedford-Jones can tell it—a story of thrills, romance, and sudden death, in a wild hunt for stolen treasure

HENNESSY was a tough egg, any way you looked at him, and at the present moment he was in a tough place.

His cap, his attire, his fingers, the silver Senegal coins he handed out, all showed that he was from the engine-room of the tramp. She had just arrived in Casablanca from Dakar. He was bronzed, efficient, scarred, with a warm but deceptive grin.

Croghan, lean and dark, sat beside him. They drank, and watched the Berber dancers whose thudding feet seemed about to tear the platform apart. Shipmates two years previously, they had met here in Morocco, by sheer accident, half an hour ago.

Croghan scemed at home here. This was the one place in Casablanca where they might have met. It was the new "ville Arabe," expressly designed for

pleasure. And it was the one place where Croghan could tell his amazing story in safety. The squealing fifes and fiddles, the monotonously beating drums, the iron heels of the Berber men thudding dust from the planks, all served to cover up his words.

The room was long and low. At one end, a platform held a score of Berber men and boys, the platformers. The trestles were crowded with girls of all shades from pitch-black to white, and with all sorts of men—Arabs, Berbers, French civilians and tourists. Occasionally one of the fuzzy-haired girls would approach the two men who sat talking together, only to be sent away by a negative gesture from Hennessy. Men and girls were coming in or leaving every moment, causing a continual flow of movement in the place.

As the police agents in the streets outside, and at the entrance gates, bore witness, this was a place created not alone for the native quarter, in this comparatively new city of Casablanca, but for every one—and for the amusement of every one. From down the street came other music, indicating Arab dancing, and the bustle and stir on every hand showed that the night had just begun for this Moroccan underworld.

Hennessy gave the dark Croghan a hard, level look.

"Are you talking stage money, Frog dough, or cold cash?" he demanded.

"All kinds, cash included," said Croghan. "The Berber who told me about it was one of this crowd right here. Met him here last night and he recognized me right off. He was going to meet me to-night. And half an hour after telling me, from what I can learn, somebody cut out his gizzard. I mean just that, too; you know, these natives think a knife is

meant to rip any one from the ribs down——"

"Keep to the point," said Hennessy. "How come this Berber recognized you?"

"I was running guns up into the hills last year. Rather, acting as agent for the main guy, and collecting," said Croghan. "That's all ended now, of course. Durell, the head of the outfit, is here in Casablanca now. I quit the game and have been running an auto stage to Rabat and Fez the last few months. Are you interested or not?"

"In fifty thousand dollars? Boy, you said it," Hennessy assured him.

"All right, then listen," said Croghan, dropping his voice. "During the troubles, this Berber and some of his pals raided the hill castle of a pacha; you know, the Berbers hate all the pachas, who are held in power by the French. They got the old boy's loot, got away, and then set in to kill each other off for the loot.

"This Berber of mine, and another named M'tel, double-crossed the rest of the outfit and cleared out with the loot. They ran afoul of a French column and were captured, but hid the stuff first. They were sent up for two years each, to different prisons, M'tel was sent to Marrakesh, but my chap went to the prison at Rabat. That's where I got next to him—he fixed it for me to get in touch with his people and so forth, about the munitions."

So Croghan had been in prison, then! Hennessy sipped his mint tea and said nothing.

"Day before yesterday, time was up for them both," said Croghan. "This bunch of Berbers met my friend in Rabat and came down here to keep their dancing engagement; I dropped in last night, and all was jake. The other one, M'tel, is in bad with his tribe. Most likely, he came

along and knifed my friend. I had a hint he had thrown in with Durell, the same chap——"

"Say, listen!" broke in Hennessy abruptly. "Is this some pipe-dream or what?"

Croghan leaned forward earnestly, sweat standing out on his forehead, a snarl on his thin lips, his dark eyes blazing at Hennessy.

"Cash: bank-notes and gold! Is that a pipe-dream, you fool? I know exactly where it's hidden. I can get it."

"What I want to know," said Hennessy, "is why somebody——"

"I don't give a hang what you want to know," snapped Croghan. "I can answer every argument you put up, explain everything you don't understand; but not here and now. I've no time. I've got to get somebody to lend a hand with this job, because M'tel and that chap Durell will be after the stuff in no time. If you want in on it, say so—yes or no. A fifty-fifty split."

Hennessy grinned.

"Agreed," he said. "When do we start?"

"In an hour, if you can be free of your ship in that time."

"I can so," said Hennessy promptly. "All I have to do is get my pay from the Old Man and leave her. He can ship a dozen engineers here, and he knows it. Will you come to the dock for me?"

"Not much," said Croghan. "I'm scared, I tell you; I'll not monkey around the port at night! Hennessy, I'm plenty tough, and so are you, but let me tell you that we're up against a bad gang if Durell is in on this. Let's separate here and now. Meet in an hour's time at my hotel, the Bonaparte. It's a little joint, clean and honest, in Rue Bonaparte. I'll have my car ready."

"Okeh, feller," said Hennessy. "Your car? Where do we go, then?"

"A hell of a long way," said Croghan, and drained his glass. Then he started and set down the glass abruptly, and slid from the bench. His hand gripped Hennessy's shoulder for an instant. "Look there—the chap with the chauffeur's coat! That's Durell himself. So long."

Croghan was gone, through one of the several exits—gone like an eel.

HENNESSY drew down his brows and looked at the man swaggering in, seeking an empty place at the long table. He wore the white dust-coat of a chauffeur, and a cap pulled over one ear, but he was clearly no chauffeur. His figure was lean, spare, powerful, his high-boned face was framed by black hair, sideburns, and centered by a short black mustache. It showed hard and ruthless lines, an expression of cool effrontery and the nerve to back it up. It was plain that Durell was well known here. Some called to him, others glanced at him and muttered hastily to their neighbors. Durell waved his hand, sauntered along, and slipped into the place just vacated by Croghan.

Hennessy sipped his mint tea, and stared at a soldier and a half-caste girl opposite.

"If you know what's good for you," said a voice in faintly accented English, somewhere close at hand, "you'll get back to your ship and leave that rascal Croghan alone."

Hennessy glanced around, but no one was paying any attention to him. Durell had just given an order to the waiter and was breaking open a packet of "jaunes." As he selected a cigarette, Hennessy shoved a package of matches along the board.

"Thanks," he said. "Have a light."

Durell glanced up swiftly and met his

gaze. The dark, vivid eyes struck against the calm, laughing gray ones, and a smile curved Durell's hard lips.

"Obliged to you," he said. "Stranger here?"

Hennessy nodded. "You seem to know," he said amiably. Durell surveyed his clear, laughing eyes, his heavily built, strong features, his wide shoulders, and shrugged.

"Better take my advice, my friend. Croghan ignored it; he'll be sorry, within the next half-hour. Better take it."

"Thanks, I will," said Hennessy, and rose. "I'm back to the ship right now."

He started for the door that gave on the street. Half-way to it, two Frenchmen wearing the blouses, red sashes and voluminous corduroys of workmen, suddenly seized on a girl who was passing them—a girl whose tattooed white forehead showed she was a Berber. One grasped her hair, the other caught her arms, and the first tried to empty a cognac bottle down her throat.

Amid the rough horse-play all around, the scene was unnoted, except to provoke laughter, but Hennessy caught a glimpse of the girl's face, and the stark fright in it jerked him into action. With a shove, he sent the first man reeling headlong into the wall, and his fist smashed into the face of the second man, who was knocked sprawling. The first man came to his feet like a cat, a knife glittered, shrill screams went up; but Hennessy crashed in a blow that doubled the man up in agony.

Then, elbowing a way out, Hennessy left the tumult behind him and slipped into the night, well aware of the police consequences for using fists—something abhorrent to the French taste. He strode down the street to the entrance, whose significant posters on either hand indicated the character of the place, and so

to the line of taxicabs waiting outside the wall. Two minutes later, he was on his way back to town and the waterfront.

HE SETTLED back comfortably in the car and thought of Croghan. He knew perfectly well that Croghan was unscrupulous, hard as nails, and a distinct social liability; on the other hand, he was dependable and resourceful. Hennessy was no shining society light himself. Having knocked around the French and Mediterranean ports considerably, he had a working knowledge of impolite French; while his ability to handle recalcitrant men and at the same time take care of himself, resembled that of an old-time bucko mate. The engine room is not a school of polite manners.

That Croghan had been pursuing fickle fortune in Morocco for the past couple of years, doing everything from filibustering to killing jail lice, did not convince Hennessy that his yarn of Berber loot held any truth. What did appeal to Hennessy was the intervention of this Durell, and the fact that Durell had been keeping a watch on Croghan, as his words proved.

"He'll be having me followed, too," reflected Hennessy cheerfully. "So I'll stop long enough aboard ship to convince him. Then I'll slip off up the docks. Hm! Not far uptown, and this Rue Bonaparte isn't a great way off. I'll walk. If Croghan is waiting, I'll take a chance with him. If not——"

Would Croghan be waiting? He strongly doubted it. Durell's words showed that something was in store for Mr. Croghan, and something distinctly unpleasant. On the contrary, Hennessy was well acquainted with Croghan's innate abilities. The odds were about even.

Having been in port for three days, Hennessy was by no means loth to throw up his job and go careering off on a wild

gold-hunt in Morocco. With Croghan as cicerone, there would be nothing tame about the trip—even leaving himself out. It might end in jail, or worse, but it would certainly not lack in excitement. Croghan certainly believed in the existence of this loot.

"It's plausible, anyhow," decided Hennessy, and dismissed further arguments.

Forty minutes later, without the least misadventure and without being followed so far as he could tell, Hennessy approached the Hotel Bonaparte on foot. It was a small hotel in a small street well down from the old Arab town. As he drew near, the lights of a car standing before the hotel entrance were flashed on, and he heard Croghan's voice.

"If that's you, Red, hop in and do it quick."

Hennessy, whose hair was not red but close enough to it to get him the name, quickened his pace. The car was a small but powerful Fiat sedan.

"Step lively," said Croghan. "Can you drive this outfit?"

"Me? I can drive anything," returned Hennessy.

"Then get under the wheel and let's go," ordered Croghan, his voice urgent. "Straight down past the docks to hit the Rabat road. Don't switch on any dash-lights, either."

Hennessy obeyed. As he settled under the wheel he was aware of Croghan's dim figure at his side, and sniffed.

"What you so blamed busy at? Smells like blood."

"It is," snapped Croghan. "Found two birds up in my room laying for me. They're still there and I've got repairs to make. Hurry and get out of here, blast you!"

The gears clashed. A moment later the fiat went roaring down the street,

and Red Hennessy was off on the trail of Berber loot.

2

A FEW miles outside Casablanca, on the straight paved highway following the coast, Hennessy pulled out of the road and halted. Under the headlights of the car, he assisted Croghan in his repair job.

This was no elaborate matter. Croghan had suffered a number of slight cuts about the arms and hands, which momentarily interfered with his driving, and a life-preserver had given him a nasty rap over the ear, but he was quite content.

"You should see those two birds who laid for me!" he observed darkly. "Luckily, I knew Durell's little ways, and kept my eye peeled."

"No police around?" queried Hennessy. The other sniffed.

"Police? You don't know this country; anything goes! Between the native police and the French police, the double court and jail system and so forth, you can get away with murder. This isn't part of France, but a separate country so far."

Hennessy started the car again and related his encounter with Durell, touching briefly on the incident of the Berber girl. At this, Croghan cursed.

"Durell will have the cops after you for that, sure! Why didn't you kick, instead of hitting—don't you know the French yet? So he had you spotted, eh? Sure, I knew I'd been trailed for the past day anyhow."

"Well, produce some information," said Hennessy. "How do you know this money has been lying untouched all this time, huh? Why didn't those two Berbers send somebody for it?"

"Nobody to trust," replied Croghan. "You don't know this country. Anybody would cut his own brother's throat for a

tenth part of that coin, Red! And the French would grab it in a minute if they caught on. No, that cash is lying under a boundary rock up in the hills, fifty feet off a road, an hour's drive outside Fez."

"Lying under a rock!" repeated Hennessy in scornful accents.

"Yeah. Boundary rocks don't get moved in those parts, without bullets flying. When these two chaps got caught by the French, they slipped the money under that rock, and it's still lying there, all right."

"Maybe. Once out of jail, why didn't either of 'em head straight for the spot? Especially if it was a question of which one got there first?"

"Why did my friend take me in on the deal? Why has the other chap, M'tel, taken Durell in with him?" responded Croghan. "Allee same need help to dispose of the loot; the country isn't what it was a couple of years ago. There's slathers of buried money, but not banknotes. An unknown Berber can't walk into a foreign bank with that amount of money and cash in on it, not without questions asked! But one of us can. Have you got a gun?"

"Two," said Hennessy. "Well, what's your program? How far is this place Fez from here?"

"Let's see. Ninety-two from here to Rabat; from there to Meknez, a hundred and forty; from there to Fez, sixty more. That's nearly three hundred."

"Miles?"

"No, you nut! Kilometers. About a hundred and seventy-five miles."

"That's easy," declared Hennessy, with a laugh. "No speed limit in this country, I hear. We'll tap your rock sometime tomorrow morning — it isn't eleven yet. Good roads, too."

"Sure. Only, Durell will know that we're on the way. He's got a Cadillac."

Hennessy stepped on the gas. The needle rose to a hundred, and passed it.

"We're doing sixty now, in miles. Suit you?"

"This is no race, Red," said Croghan bitterly. "Get that out of your head. Durell ain't in any great rush. He's got a pull, get me? All he has to do is telephone on to Rabat or Meknez, and have us pinched or else met by some of his gang."

"Well, what d'you expect to do? Fly?" asked Hennessy. "Can't we cut around those towns?"

"Not a chance. No network of roads in this country. Have you any papers?"

"Nary a one," said Hennessy cheerfully. "The skipper promised to leave the necessary documents at the consulate in the morning, with my pay."

"Then you're in dutch if the police hop on us. Maybe Durell will stick to his own gang, though." Croghan lit a cigarette, passed it to Hennessy, and lit another for himself.

"Well, what's your program?" asked Hennessy. "Crowd her through regardless?"

"You bet. Suit you?"

"Okeh by me, feller."

They swept on by hill and dale, once the coast was abandoned, then swooped down long valleys, leaving the occasional farms and old towers to right and left, the rolling boom of surf coming to them again to speak of the returning shores.

Twice they plunged across great chasms on suspension bridges, the road following the railroad rails with what seemed to be a dizzy lack of appreciation of any danger. They were ten miles out of Rabat when, topping a rise, the lights picked up a car stalled by the roadside below, two figures beside it. One of these stepped out and signalled frantically with a pocket torch.

"Go through," said Croghan. Hennessy slowed.

"Nope. Women. Have your gun ready, though."

"What the hell!" exploded Croghan. "Durell has women agents——"

THE brakes ground. Croghan, his gun ready, opened the window. Hennessy kept the headlights on the stalled car and its two passengers—a chauffeur in white dust-coat and cap, and a woman in a dark cloak. It was the latter who had signalled, and who now addressed them in French with a strong accent.

"*Messieurs*, can you have the goodness to help us in to the city? Our petrol has given out, and no other cars have passed to give us aid——"

Hennessy saw that her car bore a French license, indicating a tourist, as did the luggage piled on the top. It was a handsome car, a large Renault painted a bright blue, with brass trimmings; no hired hack.

"Certainly, *madame*," responded Hennessy. "One moment, if you please." He turned to Croghan and spoke in rapid English. "Get out and look at their tank. See if it's a stall. I'll keep 'em covered——"

"Oh! Are you Americans?" came the quick exclamation from the woman. "So am I! And I took you for French! This is certainly a relief. You can give us a ride to the city?"

"Yeah," returned Hennessy. "Go on, Croghan! Take no chances. I've got an idea.—Miss, let me talk with you a minute. Come over here by the car. My name's Hennessy, usually called Red for short, and this here is Croghan, and we're in a tough jam."

He paused in astonishment. The ray of the electric torch fell for an instant on his face, while Croghan was getting out.

Then the woman who held it, flashed it on herself briefly. Hennessy had a vision of a laughing face, framed in masses of dark hair, and gasped.

"Lord! I thought you were an old hen," he exclaimed, as she came close. "Who are you?"

"Good sir, I am a poor wandering damsel out of gas but with plenty of mad-money," she responded merrily. "By name, Mary Gray. My chauffeur speaks no English, luckily. You look too bronzed and happy to be a tourist."

"Correct," and Hennessy chuckled. "Where you headed for? And why all alone?"

"Because I *am* alone," she returned. "I'm not as young as I look, Red, being thirty-one last week; so I don't need to be chaperoned, if that's your notion. I'm an artist, a painter of this and that, and I'm supposed to put in a couple of weeks at Rabat and have an exhibition and so forth. The luggage you see is mostly works of art. Now do you know enough about me?"

"No," said Hennessy promptly, "not near enough.—Croghan! Never mind; gather round and listen. This party's on the level, and I've got an idea.—Miss Gray, we need your car."

She broke into a laugh. "How'll you make it run?"

"Listen, this is serious!" exclaimed Hennessy. "Half of Morocco is or may be looking for us right now, having a description of our car. Chances are, we'll never get to Fez without trouble, unless we get another car——"

"Check," she broke in quickly. "Who's after you? The police?"

"No." Hennessy caught a growl from Croghan, and grinned. "She's straight, partner, so shut up. No, not the police, but they may be later. Right now, a bad gang is looking for us. We're looking

for treasure, if you want it straight, and the gang wants it——"

The flashlight bit up at him again.

"No," she observed, "you certainly don't look drunk, Red!. Does this car belong to you?"

"Belongs to me, miss," said Croghan.

"What we want," went on Hennessy quickly, "is to swap cars. We'll put most of our gas in your tank. You put your luggage in this car and go on to Rabat. Then later on, we'll bring back your car. We're responsible folks——"

"Yes, you talk like it," she broke in, with a silvery laugh. "Is your treasure hunt on the level?"

"Croghan has a few knife-cuts to say it is," replied Hennessy. "And if this cussed Durell ever catches up with us, they'll get paid back——"

"Durell!" came her voice sharply. "Not Carlos Durell, of Casablanca?"

"My gosh! Do you know him?" snapped Croghan.

"I've met him, to my sorrow; only a couple of days ago. Here, wait! Climb out of your car, both of you, and shift over some gas. Can you do it?"

"Sure," said Croghan. "I've got a rubber tube. Siphon it easy."

"Pull up beside us, then, and get to work," she ordered with decision. "I'll have Jules change the luggage. Where's yours?"

"We travel light," said Hennessy. "If we have luggage later, we're satisfied."

He drew up alongside the other car. Croghan was mouthing admiring oaths as he glimpsed the strategy in view, and leaped to work on transferring some gasoline.

"How'd you come to run out?" demanded Hennessy, as Jules shifted over the luggage.

"Came up from Marrakesh today," replied Mary Gray. "Thought we had

enough to go right on to Rabat, but there's something wrong with the gauge. Where are you headed for?"

"Fez, or the other side of there," and Hennessy proffered a cigarette. She accepted. "Was Durell down at Marrakesh?"

"Yes."

To himself, Hennessy thought that this rather backed up Croghan's yarn, for the Berber M'tel had been in prison at Marrakesh. Durell had probably met him when he was turned loose and brought him on to Casablanca.

"There! Got enough to reach Rabat now." Croghan straightened up and turned to the woman. "Miss Gray, it's mighty white of you to let us use your car like this. Means a lot to us. If we win out, we'll sure let you know how much we appreciate it! Come on, Red."

"I'm going too," said Mary Gray abruptly. The two men stared at her in the starlight.

"You are not," spoke up Hennessy. She laughed lightly, and then he caught her arm and led her to one side. "Listen here," he said, "don't be silly, now. We don't want any woman along on this trip. It's not safe."

"So I judged," she returned coolly. "That's why I'm going. I'm interested."

"Well, get uninterested, then," snapped Hennessy. "Me, I'm a second engineer out of a tramp from Senegal. This guy Croghan is an ex-jailbird and gun-runner. Durell's gang——"

"Better and better!" she cut in. "But you listen to me a minute. I've met this Durell, as I said. And I'd give a good deal to meet him again, and help any one else give him a black eye. I'm going with you, and that's flat. Maybe I can help."

"You can't. You'd be in the way."

"Nothing of the sort. You can swear all you like; I can swear too, for that mat-

ter. I'm no tenderfoot, Red. I can drive as well as you, too. I use a chauffeur for looks and as a guide. Jules can take my things on to the Transat hotel at Rabat and wait for me. I'm going, so you may as well stop your protests."

The fire in her voice, the vibrant personality of her, conquered.

"All right, but when the shooting starts——"

"I have a pistol in the car, and a government permit to carry it."

Hennessy threw up his hands and strode to the Renault, where Croghan was still standing.

"Does she mean it, Red?"

"She does. And short of using force——"

"Let her come, then," said Croghan bitterly. "Damn it, we've got to be half-way decent, but for two cents I'd ditch her somewhere."

"Better not try it," said Mary Gray, who had caught the words, and laughed again. "Cheer up, Croghan! I'm not such a bad sort, really. Jules! Take the other car to the hotel in Rabat and say I've been delayed and will be along later. And keep your mouth shut."

"Yes, *mademoiselle*," responded Jules.

Croghan climbed sullenly into the Renault, and two minutes later, with Hennessy under the wheel, they moved off. As they got into speed, Hennessy chuckled. Mary Gray, who had the front seat beside him, gave him a sharp look.

"Well? What's the joke?"

"I was thinking that Jules might run into trouble with that car."

"Oh! Well, I was thinking so myself. That's one reason I'm in this car now."

Hennessy broke into a low laugh. She was all right!

AS CROGHAN admiringly stated, one had to admit that Mary Gray was a useful companion.

While the two of them huddled under a blanket on the floor of the tonneau, she got the Renault filled with oil and "essence", and drove off; then Hennessy resumed the wheel, and Croghan steered him out of town, knowing all the back streets of the French city that here, as in the other old Arab towns of Morocco, had been built adjoining the more ancient huddle of masonry and apart from it.

Then they went soaring on through the night to Meknez, the great garrison city, whose enormous ruined walls in which thousands of Christian slaves had been buried alive ran off across the hills for miles. It was two-thirty when Meknez fell behind them, and a quarter past three when the lights of Fez flashed into sight ahead.

Hennessy pulled out of the road and wakened his two companions, who were dozing.

"Conference, partners," he exclaimed gayly. "If you ask me, we've made time."

"I'll say you have!" said Croghan. "There's Fez. What you stopping for?"

"Orders. We need gas and oil, not to mention sleep. Do we go straight through, or break the trip here?"

"I need daylight to locate the right spot," said Croghan, doubtfully. "And you must be about done up. It'd be safer to go right through, but——"

"There's a new hotel in the French town, this side of Fez," spoke up Mary Gray. "Why not take rooms there, get an hour's sleep and an early breakfast, and go on about six?"

"The only reason why not," said Croghan, "is that we must give our names when we light, and fill out the usual

police card. If any one is looking for us, they'll know it in twenty minutes."

"Well, no car has passed us, so Durell's not ahead," said Hennessy. "We've broken the back of the trip, and I vote to start fresh at six."

"O. K., then," assented Croghan.

Another ten minutes, and they halted before the Hotel Splendide. Here Mary Gray took charge, issued the orders, obtained rooms, and Hennessy thankfully crawled between the sheets and was asleep on the instant. The nerve strain of that night drive at top speed had been terrific.

He had no luggage except the clothes he stood in and a toilet kit. Wakened at five-thirty, he was shaved, dressed and downstairs ahead of the others, and went outside to find that the hotel had refueled the car. Over the ancient twin cities of Fez was hanging the usual morning mist of smoke, so that, with the hill forts on either hand, it looked like a scene from fairyland.

Hennessy turned back into the entrance, then halted. A big car was just coming up, a Cadillac with a Moroccan license. With sharp premonition, Hennessy drew back into the doorway and watched. The new arrival halted behind the Renault. Sure enough, Durell got out, stretched himself; he was followed by two other Frenchmen, and then by a red-headed Berber in a new white jellab.

Waiting to see no more, Hennessy strode back into the lobby and encountered Croghan.

"Hey, Red! She's in the dining-room. Hustle in and eat—what's the matter?"

"Durell's here. Looks pretty done up. Come along, take a chance on the dining-room. Damned if I want to hide from that skunk! If he doesn't come in, so much the better."

THEY passed into the dining-room, a small alcoved room highly decorated with tiles and carved plaster in Moorish fashion. And here Hennessy had his first real look at Mary Gray, as they came toward her table.

Again he got that impression of vibrant personality, of laughing energy. Dark hair and dark eyes, firm feminine features—nothing spectacular about her, until she laughed and spoke. Then her face lit up with animation, with eager interest in everything around her. Thirty-one? He would have set her down as little over twenty.

And she, looking up at Hennessy, warmed to his quick laughing blue eyes, his alert, crisply carven features, the touch of whimsical recklessness that set him apart. She gave the two of them a bright greeting, and waved her spoon at the chairs adjacent.

"Settle down, comrades. I've ordered for you. A real breakfast, not a French snack. Well? What's gone wrong?"

"Durell's here," said Hennessy, as he seated himself.

She was facing the door, and looked past him, then frowned slightly.

"Let him be here, then!" she exclaimed. "When did he come?"

"Just now."

Their words died, as the waiter approached with a laden tray. During their night ride, Mary Gray had heard the entire treasure story, by snatches, but had related nothing about her knowledge of Durell. Now Hennessy recollected it, and spoke.

"You seem downright set against poor Durell. What'd he do to you?"

Anger lightened her dark eyes.

"He kissed me."

"Shucks!" Hennessy grinned cheerfully. "That's no crime. That's mercy following a perfectly natural inclination."

She gave him one furious glance, then broke into a laugh.

"You're—well, Red, you're a caution! Not only that, however; he was insulting about it, and I didn't like him anyhow. He came along when I was sketching the Koutoubia, down at Marrakesh; it was built by the architect of the Giralda at Seville, you know. He just naturally got his face slapped, and then he grew ugly, but Jules came along and he decamped."

Hennessy rose and laid down his napkin.

"I'll be back in a minute," he said. "Just thought of something——"

"Sit down!" she exclaimed sharply. "You hear me? Sit down! None of your nonsense, Red. I can read your mind. I won't have it, d'you hear? Leave Durell alone."

Before her determined words and look, Hennessy shrugged and seated himself. Croghan grinned.

"You'd better not be reading his mind, Miss Gray——"

"Hold everything," she said quietly. "Here he is. Please don't have any trouble in here."

The two men, seated with their backs to the entrance, exchanged a glance and fell silent.

Durell descended the two steps into the dining-room, glanced around casually, then came to a dead halt as his eyes fell on Mary Gray, facing him. Delight sprang in his eyes, and regardless of her cool stare, he approached and doffed his cap with a gay greeting.

"My lady of Marrakesh!" he exclaimed. "Come, this is nothing short of a miracle! What good fortune has brought you to me here?"

Mary Gray regarded him for a moment, then shrugged.

"A madman," she observed to Hennessy. "Pay no attention to him."

Durell broke into a laugh. "Ah, but——"

Hennessy came to his feet and swung around to face the other. Then Durell recognized him, glanced down at Croghan, and for an instant seemed frozen. His eyes hardened into cold pin-points. The recognition was an obvious shock.

"So, this is it!" he said slowly. "This is where you disappeared——"

"On your way," said Hennessy, curtly. "Did you ever hear of the bum's rush?"

Durell's gaze bored into him with a flame of hatred; then the man bowed, turned, and went striding out of the room.

With a grunt of disgust, Hennessy resumed his seat. "Eat fast," he said. "Pitch in, everybody!"

"And get away," said Mary Gray. "Right. Everything's paid, including breakfast, and a lunch is being put into the car now. Quickly!"

No time was lost. Swallowing a hasty meal, all three rose and departed. They saw nothing of Durell. His two companions stood in the lobby, and by the door was the red-headed Berber, who looked at Croghan with a curl of his bearded lips and a flash of hatred.

"That was our friend M'tel, right enough," said Croghan, opening the car door. "Hop in! Durell's probably telephoning and raising trouble. Straight back to the highway, Red, and then follow it out to the left, around the walls."

A tip to the attentive garçon, and they were off with a roar, Croghan now sitting beside Hennessy in front. A long block away from the hotel, Croghan uttered a startled oath.

"Stop," he exclaimed. "In to the curb, Red——"

A MOMENT later he jumped out, glanced at the tires, and suppressed certain violent words.

"Nail in the right rear," he said, climbing in. "Ain't flat yet—there's a garage dead ahead, though I can't say much for it. May be open now. You can reach it."

"Right," said Hennessy. "Now we know what M'tel was doing outside, eh?"

"Yeah. He got the nail part-way in, which is some job, and before we rolled a block, the car did the rest. There's the place, over to the left. She's open, too! No use sweating around and wasting time with tools, when we can get it done quicker. I'll give the mechanic a hand. Looks like a native."

A native it was, who had just opened up the garage. The *patron* was here, he told them, but was at the telephone. Hennessy thought nothing of this, at the moment.

They rolled in. The proprietor, a greasy-faced Provençal, appeared with great expressions of his desire to serve them; and Croghan got the native mechanic to work. Hennessy, having taken for granted that this was entirely a scheme to delay them, was watching the work and talking with Mary Gray, who refused to get out of the car, when the proprietor appeared at his side.

"A thousand pardons, *m'sieu*," he said with a smirk, "but am I speaking with M'sieu Hennessy?"

"You are. How the devil did you know my name?"

"A lady asks for you, *m'sieu*, on the telephone."

Amazed, Hennessy followed him into the office at one side, catching a laughing jest that Mary Gray flung after him. The Provençal threw open a door at the end, opening into another room.

"The telephone, *m'sieu*. it is there——"

Hennessy strode through. The door was slammed after him. A blackjack slammed into the door, as he sidestepped

like a shadow. A moving streak had given him warning.

Two of them, on him hammer and tongs as he slipped aside; knife and slungshot lunging and falling venomously. No time for questions. Two brown shapes, lithe and active as scorpions, displaying all the marvelous agility of Arabs, despite their apparently clumsy robes.

Somehow Hennessy evaded the rush, side-slipped like a phantom. The pair were silent, deadly, their eyes glimmering with intensity of emotion; they meant to kill, and they were not wasting time about it. Hennessy ducked, took the blackjack on his shoulder with numbing effect, swerved aside as the knife drove in for his belt; then his foot slipped and he shot sideway, falling headlong.

The place was littered with old tires, disused implements, empty tins. Hennessy rolled over and over, came to his feet like a cat, and brought with him a Ford tire-tool. The knife lunged in, but his weapon slanted down athwart the brown wrist. The Arab screamed shrilly as the knife fell.

The second man was rushing in. Hennessy unexpectedly met him half-way, caught his swinging weapon-arm, and slapped him over the skull with the iron. He crumpled, and Hennessy swung about. The first Arab was picking up the knife with his left hand. Hennessy booted him under the chin, then gave him a savage blow across the skull.

"You asked for it, and you got it——"

He started suddenly, now aware of a frantic honking of the car horn. It ceased as he stood panting, listening. Hennessy caught up the blackjack; then the room door was flung open, and into the place came the greasy Provençal, dragging Mary Gray by the wrist.

"Come, pretty one, and join your

American friend," he panted. "Ah! Thunders of heaven——"

He staggered back under a stinging blow in the face from her fist. Then Hennessy came down upon him, just as the man was gathering himself to rush upon her. He swung the greasy fellow about, pinned him against the wall with one long arm, and slapped him hard, twice, with jarring force. Then, deliberately, he swung the persuader and put the man out for good.

"All right, Mary," he said, and grinned at her. "Hurt?"

"No. But they killed Croghan——"
"Come on."

Hennessy leaped into action. He was gone through the office like a streak, running swiftly, silently, his face a blazing mask of fury. There was Croghan lying beside the car on his face, the Arab mechanic rifling his pockets.

The native had no warning whatever until Hennessy was upon him. Then he straightened up with a frightful cry of terror. Hennessy caught him by the throat and shook him for a moment, lifted him and shook him again, then flung him down to the cement floor.

"Fix that tire and do it sharp! Or else——"

For the first time, recollecting his pistols, Hennessy jerked one out. The Arab let out a howl and bent over the half-completed tire job. Hennessy glanced around, and found no one else in the place.

"Here." He shoved the pistol into the woman's hand, and spoke in French. "Kill this man if he stops working."

Stooping above Croghan, he found that the latter was not dead, and had suffered nothing worse than a crack over the head. Mary Gray's voice struck at him, and he was astonished to find it perfectly cool.

"They struck him down before I knew

it. I honked the horn; then they pulled me out of the car——"

"Thought you had a gun!" snapped Hennessy.

"It's in the car. By the driver's seat."

"Keep mine, then. Watch that bird, there!"

He lifted the inanimate Croghan and bundled him into the rear of the car. Two minutes later, as the last nut on the rim was tightened, the Arab mechanic came erect and bleated in stark fear as Hennessy strode at him. The slungshot darted out. The native slumped over and lay in a crumpled mass.

Abandoning the punctured extra tire, Hennessy stepped on the gas. Next moment they were out in the street, swinging on two wheels, heading out and away.

Behind them, the telephone in the office was ringing steadily, vainly.

4

"**W**ASN'T that brutal?"

"Eh?" Hennessy glanced at the woman beside him. "Wasn't what brutal?"

"Hitting that mechanic. He was in deadly fear of you——"

"Sure." A joyous, savage laugh broke from Hennessy. "I aimed to be brutal. When you're caught in a jam and want to get out alive, young lady, don't sit around manicuring your nails. That's a free trip. Say, just how did all that mess happen? By accident?"

"I doubt it." She regarded him for an instant, fascinated by the fighting glow in his eyes, the splendid laughing eagerness of his expression. "That Berber put the nail in the tire. There was only the one garage, straight on our road——"

"I see," and Hennessy nodded, realizing the truth. "Say! That chap Durell is no slouch! He must have telephoned over; probably knew the garage man.

Those two Arabs meant to kill me, and no mistake——"

"Two Arabs? Where?" she exclaimed. He flung her a laugh.

"Didn't you see 'em, in that inner room? Too busy to notice them, I suppose. That was a fine crack you hit the grease-spot! Yes, Durell phoned from the hotel, framed up everything in a flash. How much law is there in this country, anyhow?"

"Depends on what you can get away with, I fancy; about like Chicago. Oh!" She stirred swiftly. "I'll climb over in back—I forgot poor Croghan——"

"Right. Wake him up. We need directions. Crossroad ahead——"

"Turn right," she exclaimed. "We go past Fez, anyhow. When you come to the walls, turn left. The highway circles outside the city."

They swung into the highway and picked up a small column of marching soldiery, for the camp and aviation field were close by. Hennessy waved his hand gayly as he swept past, and a chorus of eager replies broke from the Frenchmen—something in this laughing, eager man compelled a comradely greeting from them in the sunrise.

Without regard for dignity, Mary Gray climbed into the back of the car and opening a bottle of wine from the lunch-basket, poured some down Croghan's throat. The latter coughed, opened his eyes, and struggled to sit up.

"Hello!" he exclaimed. "What hit me?"

"The sky dropped on you, partner," said Hennessy, without looking around. "Wake up and watch the road! Looks like we go slap into that gateway ahead——"

"Turn left!" cried Croghan sharply. Directly before them loomed the high crenelated walls of Fez, a wide gateway,

thronged with men, horses, mules, camels, soldiers. Hennessy saw the left-hand road, swerved into it abruptly, and sent the car roaring along.

"Sure we're right?" exclaimed Mary Gray. "If you're heading for Taza, Croghan, we should have gone to the south of the city——"

"We're right," said Croghan. "Straight on up the hill, past Fort Chardonnet, and then swing left on Highway 26. You can't miss the marker. Well, what happened?"

When he learned, his lean dark features contracted with anger; but he said no word, and after fingering his head and finding no great damage done, lit a cigarette and sat staring silently at the olive groves as they wound up the long hill slopes.

So they came to the shell-ruined tombs of the Merinide sultans. Now, below them, lay outspread the massive walls, the far-reaching twin cities of thousand-year-old Fez in the curving valley. Then all was gone, and they were sweeping past olives and cemeteries, circling with the twisting road, until they gained the fork and the six-foot section of wall that served as a marker.

So Fez fell away behind them.

THE empty road ahead drew in among the hills, apparently absolutely deserted and yet in reality filled with native life. Suddenly Croghan came to life.

"Hey, Red! Something wrong!" he exclaimed. "What's that knocking?"

"Search me." Hennessy slowed, then quickened the pace. They were passing a crossroad, where stood a neat little building corresponding to an American hot-dog stand. Presently, half a mile farther, the knocking became more distinct. Hennessy pulled out of the road, and Croghan uttered a groan of despair.

"Can't be the bearings, surely! Didn't they put in oil?"

Hennessy glanced at the gages. "Full when we left. Empty now——"

With a subdued oath, Croghan was out of the car. He dived underneath for a moment, then rose and kicked the front tire savagely.

"Broken oil line. Bearings burned out. This is a sweet mess!" he said. "Probably was broken last night and we got in without oil. Been losing ever since."

"Can't we go on regardless?" asked Mary Gray. Croghan gave her a bitter look.

"And have the rods bust through the pan? Not a chance. Ten miles to go yet—blast the luck! Just when we had him beaten——"

Hennessy lit a cigarette and regarded the others, whose dismay was complete.

"Facts are facts; no use blinking them," he observed coolly. "I suppose Durell must come this way? Or could he take another road?"

"No, he'll be along," said Croghan, frowning blackly.

"And he won't be wasting any time, either, once he finds what happened at that garage. Hm!" Hennessy puffed for a moment, his gaze darting around, scanning the road ahead. They had halted just around the bend of a curve. "Croghan, you hop out. Walk back to that crossroad; I saw a telephone line at the eating-stand. Get another car out here from the city. Can do?"

"Huh? Sure," responded Croghan, staring at him. "But by the time another car gets here, Durell will be digging up the stuff."

Hennessy grinned. "Not if he comes this way. You keep your eye on the road as you go, for if he comes along and sights you, you'll die of lead poisoning in a hurry."

"And what about you?"

"We'll be sitting here, partner. And if we have any luck, there'll be a Cadillac sitting here likewise, when you come along."

Croghan stared at him for a minute, the dark eyes a-glitter.

"You're a fool to chance it! What about her?" and he jerked his head toward the woman.

A laugh broke from her. "Never mind about us!" she said gayly. "You get going, will you? Trust Red."

"All right."

Croghan climbed out of the car, waved his hand, and started on the back trail without more questions. Hennessy met the merry, inquiring eyes of Mary Gray, and chuckled.

"You've got a lot of faith in me, young lady!"

"You deserve it. What's your program?"

"You'll see."

Hennessy started the clanking engine and ran the car a dozen feet ahead, then halted it half on the road, half off, as though it had run suddenly out of control. He pointed to the scattered boulders lining the sloping hillside to the right.

"You get up there and take cover—and keep it. Understand? No matter what happens, you remain out of sight. If anything goes wrong, stay hidden."

She nodded, her eyes searching his face. "And you?"

"I'm taking cover too, but closer to the road. This has come down to a real private war, and the less you have to do with it, the better. Promise to keep out of it?"

"Of course. But you've got to tell me what you mean to do——"

"You'll see that for yourself." Hennessy got out of the car and extended his

hand. "Come along; I want to see you tucked away securely."

She shrugged, and obeyed.

Fifty feet up the hillside, Hennessy left her ensconced in a snug nest of boulders and cactus, completely hidden from the road below. The sun by this time was mounting well into the blue sky and was blazing down fiercely. As usual in upland Morocco, the landscape was precisely that of the California hills, with the exception of the huge cactus cultivated for centuries by the Arabs in place of fences or hedges. This was scattered wild over the hillside among the boulders, and came down close to the road. On the other side of the road was a steep descent, running off out of sight into a ravine.

Some distance ahead of the car, Hennessy settled down behind two small boulders, completely screened by cactus that hid him without preventing his observation, and composed himself to wait, pistol in hand. He was convinced that Durell would halt at sight of the Renault; if not, he would be halted anyway. As he well knew, no half-way measures would now be used, for he was dealing with Durell in person, and that made all the difference.

THE moments dragged. Every minute of delay now meant that Croghan was farther on his way to the crossroads; in fact, Hennessy calculated that Croghan must have reached there long since.

"No doubt whatever now, about that loot!" he reflected. "Improbable as it seems, this is a country of improbabilities, sure enough. Durell wouldn't be so cursed hot after it, if he wasn't certain. He's a slick one, too! The way he walked out of that hotel dining-room and then got his gang to work was a caution. Well, if I have any luck now, I'll pay him back

for the tire he ruined, and with added interest——"

The hillside gathered and reflected the vibration of a car's engine. Hennessy gathered himself together, assured himself by a glance that Mary Gray was out of sight, and gave all his attention to the curve in the road.

An instant later, a car swept around this, going at high speed. It was Durell's Cadillac, and the Frenchman—though Mary Gray had intimated that he was half Spanish—himself was at the wheel.

As Durell sighted the stranded Renault, his brakes screamed. By his side was M'tel, the red-headed Berber; in the rear seat were the other two men Hennessy had seen at the hotel. All were craning out at the Renault. The Cadillac slowed down; then Hennessy saw Durell make a sudden gesture and pick up speed.

"Too smart to stop, eh?" thought Hennessy. "Doesn't like the deserted look of things. All right, mister——"

His pistol came up. He fired twice, rapidly. A third report made answer, as the right rear tire of the Cadillac was blown into ribbons. The big car lurched, swerved wildly, and just to make sure, Hennessy fired again and the other rear tire went out.

There was his mistake. He knew it instantly, too late to check his action. Instead of firing again, he should have held them under his gun. Even as he realized this, pistols roared from the halted car, almost directly opposite him. The cactus around him popped and split under a hail of lead.

Hennessy fired twice more, frantically, then fell forward and lay quiet.

Durell's imperious voice halted the fire of his companions. One of the two Frenchmen lay slumped in the rear of the car; Hennessy's last bullet had gone

through his brain. Durell's gaze searched the hillside rapidly.

"No sign of the other two," he observed. "See anything, M'tel?"

"*Mais oui!*" responded the Berber at his side, after an instant. "Something moved in that clump of rocks and cactus up above."

"So? Croghan's there, hurt, no doubt; their car ran off the road," said Durell, and then spoke rapidly. M'tel nodded and wriggled out of his jellab. Durell got out with his remaining companion, on the far side.

"With me, Pierre," he said, then lifted his voice. "He's shot dead? Good! Come along and take care of him. Why the fool shot at us, heavens knows! Luckily we have two spare tires——"

He beckoned Pierre. They darted forward to where Hennessy lay, a trickle of crimson running over his face. Durell spoke rapidly, softly.

"Lift him to the car. Hurry. She is up there, you comprehend?"

Meantime, the Berber had slipped from his car, free of the jellab, and darted forward down the road. After a moment he began to ascend the hillside among the rocks.

Lifting Hennessy's body, Durell and Pierre carried him to the far side of the car. Then Durell flung himself on the American, with a snarl, and searched him thoroughly. Finding nothing of importance, he straightened up.

"He's not hurt; a bullet merely clipped his thick skull. Tie him up and shove him in; we can make use of him later. Leave Moreau's body among the cactus yonder, across the road. He's dead enough. We'll carry him over in a minute. I'll fasten his murder on this blundering American, you comprehend?"

"And the tires, *m'sieu?*" questioned Pierre. Durell made a sharp gesture.

"Wait. Watch."

He peered up the hillside. There, nothing was to be seen. Hennessy, firmly tied hand and foot, was bundled into the rear of the Cadillac. Pierre lit a cigarette, waiting. The road remained empty in the morning sunlight.

Suddenly a sharp cry broke from the hillside. The figure of M'tel appeared, and waved a hand.

"I have her, *m'sieu!*" he called. "She's alone."

5

THE men of northern Africa waste no time on recalcitrant women, whose value is that of a few sheep, no more.

Her whole attention fastened on the road below, caught entirely by surprise when M'tel leaped upon her from the rear, Mary Gray had no chance to use the pistol in her hand. M'tel knocked it away, and as she fought him savagely, clipped her over the head with a stone and picked her slim body up in one brawny arm.

He grinned as he came down to the car. He was a big fellow, blue-eyed like many Berbers, brutal and uncouth of expression. Durell came to him savagely.

"Have you hurt her? If you have, then——"

"A tap, no more. She fights like a man," said M'tel. "Tie her hands if you mean to take her along."

"No sign of Croghan?"

"None," answered M'tel positively.

"Then he must have gone for help—ah!" Durell started slightly. "He could telephone from the crossroads, back there! That's it. Well, to work! We have two tires to change. Let her wait in the car. Don't tie her up. I'll take her."

He took the woman in his arms, looked into her unconscious face, and laughed softly.

"So, my precious one! Your lips are too good for Carlos Durell, eh? We'll see about that, and if you want to fight, just try!"

He placed her in the tonneau, and went to work with the other two. The body of Moreau was tumbled among some cactus on the downhill side of the road, the two spare tires were slipped in place, and in high good-humor, Durell gave his orders.

"Pierre, you drive. Sit with him, M'tel, and show the road. I'll ride with the lady and the American. Now to finish it up quickly!"

"And the man Croghan, *m' sieu?*" questioned M'tel. Durell laughed.

"We'll attend to him. Forward!"

When Mary Gray opened her eyes, the car was bouncing over a rough hill road, and Durell, his arm supporting her, was smiling down into her eyes. She recoiled from him, and his arm tightened about her.

"Fight, little bird, fight!" he exclaimed delightedly, in English. "You have spirit, and when you learn who's your master——"

Her clenched fist struck him in the mouth, twice, so that the blood spurted from his cut lips. Again Durell laughed, drew her more closely despite her struggles, and pressed his lips to hers until his blood was smeared on her face.

"There, little one, you'll soon learn to love me!" he exclaimed, the two in the front seat glancing back and laughing heartily. "Come, be a sweet child. You won't?"

He winced as her fingers sank into his neck, driving his head back. With this, he struck her twice, as he would strike a man, so that she sagged limply back in the seat, unconscious again. A torrent of oaths rushed from him, and M'tel uttered a roar of laughter.

"That's right, *m' sieu!*" he cried. "You know how to handle a filly, eh? Better leave her as she is. We're nearly there now."

Durell wiped the blood from his lips, produced and lit a cigarette with a grimace, and then watched eagerly as M'tel pointed to the road ahead. He did not observe that the eyes of Hennessy, doubled up at his feet, were open a trifle, watching what passed.

"We'll just take no chances on her making a dash for it," he said, as the car slowed. He leaned forward and knotted his handkerchief about Mary Gray's ankles, then prodded Hennessy with his toe. "Awake, swine?"

Hennessy gave no sign of life, and Durell, laughing, swung open the door; the car had come to a halt.

To their right was an open field, sown in wheat. To their left, the hillside rose quite sharply. Part-way down it came a ragged hedge of cactus, ending at an irregularly shaped boulder of some size. No house was in sight, nor any living thing.

"There it is," and M'tel jerked a thumb at the boulder. His bright blue eyes were glittering with an eager light. "There's a hollow under the stone, into which it fits like a socket. Two of us can lift the rock."

"How d'you know it hasn't been lifted?"

"It is death to touch a boundary stone, *m' sieu*—that is, to move it."

THE voices receded. The three men strode away toward the stone, two hundred yards up the long slope.

Hennessy stirred, moved, wrenched himself around. Frantic desperation spurred him to herculean effort, but he was powerless to break the cords about his wrists. He strained upward,

flung his voice at the woman on the seat.

"Mary! Mary Gray! For God's sake, wake up, Mary!"

That urgent, piercing voice broke through to her consciousness. Her eyes opened. She looked down at him blankly. Hennessy spoke again.

"Mary! Get the knife from my pocket—quick! Wake up! Get the knife, cut me free!"

The words registered. She leaned forward, fumbling at his pockets. He guided her with sharp words, twisted his head, looked out. Durell had left the car door ajar. Up the hillside, he could see the three men clustered about the stone there.

Then her hand had found the pocket-knife. She drew it out, opened the blade, and swayed over in the seat.

"I—I can't——" she murmured, and Hennessy feared that she was about to faint. Her face was bruised from Durell's blows, and blood-smears.

"Cut my wrists free!" snapped Hennessy angrily.

The bitter authority of his tone drove into her. She blinked at him, and leaned forward anew. The knife-blade bit at the cords, bit at his skin, sawed almost blindly.

Then a low cry of helpless effort escaped her lips, and she collapsed again.

Hennessy swore in heartfelt desperation, as the knife fell to the floor beside him. He looked down at his bleeding wrists—and to his amazement, perceived that the cords were severed. One burst of straining muscles, and his hands were free. Yet he could feel nothing in them. So tight had been those cords that his fingers were purpled, the circulation was cut off.

He glanced up the hillside. The three men were returning, Durell was holding in his arms a brief-case, of all things. Desperately, Hennessy moved his right

hand, caught the knife clumsily in his numbed fingers, slashed at the cords about his ankles. They were severed. He was free, but momentarily helpless. The knife fell by his feet and he could not recover it.

He hurriedly resumed his doubled-up posture, crossing his hands before him as before. He saw in a flash that he must gain time. If they knew now that he was free, they would shoot him without mercy. His hands and fingers were tingling with renewed circulation, strength was flowing into him. He felt no pain from his hurt head. His own fate and that of Mary Gray depended on him now, entirely.

The three were close upon the car. Their voices came loudly.

"She has not wakened, eh?" said Durell, with a laugh. "Excellent. Pierre, you shall have the honor of sitting with *madame*——"

"Stop! First, about the money," interposed M'tel, his voice ugly.

"You shall look into that while I drive," said Durell, "and count it. We know that money is here; nothing else matters. Take it."

"Good," replied the Berger. "There is that man Croghan——"

"I have thought about him," said Durell. "Get in, Pierre, get in! And don't forget poor Moreau. Here are three of us who can swear we saw this American try to hold up our car, shoot our tires, kill Moreau."

"If the woman tells a different story?" suggested Pierre, climbing in over Hennessy. Durell uttered a low laugh.

"She will not. She will tell no story whatever, because she is to be my guest for a long time; that is, until I grow tired of her. We'll not return as we came, but drive straight on to your village, M'tel. You keep her there. We'll arrange everything with the authorities and say that

you were a witness. We'll come back tonight and pick her up and take her to Casablanca. You understand?"

The Berber grunted assent, as he settled himself in the front seat. Durell got under the wheel and started the engine, ordering M'tel to open the brief-case and count the money.

A low exclamation of astonishment came from Pierre. Hennessy, peering up through half-closed lids, saw the man staring down, saw him lean over amazedly. He had discovered that the cords were gone from Hennessy's wrists. He stooped down to make certain of this incredible thing—

The unbound fingers gripped about his throat like iron bands.

In the front seat, Durell was driving slowly along the hill road, with half an eye on the Berber beside him. M'tel had opened the moldy leather case, raking out to view thick packets of banknotes—American notes, Bank of England, Bank of France, Bank of Algiers and so on. Both men were utterly absorbed in their occupation, the Berber aflame with cupidity, Durell half watching him, half intent on the road.

Neither of them paid any heed to the rear seat. There was nothing to draw their attention, except a slight thudding as the wildly flailing hands of Pierre hit the body of Hennessy and the car floor. Pierre had been drawn forward, off the seat and on top of the American, as those clamped fingers sank into the flesh of his throat.

Presently his struggles became fainter, then ceased entirely.

HENNESSY drew clear of the man's body, came to one knee. His intention was to get Pierre's pistol, when he would have the pair in the front seat at his mercy. At this instant, however, M'tel

glanced around, glimpsed the face of Hennessy behind him, and broke into a shrill cry of alarm.

The American's fist promptly smashed him under the ear.

Against two pistols, once they came into use, Hennessy well knew that he had not a chance. His whole idea now was to prevent a pistol being used. Durell instantly slammed on the brakes but could not abandon the controls. A flurry of banknotes spread over the whole front seat.

Driving another blow into the Berber's face, Hennessy flung himself on the man bodily, trying for a grip about his throat, twisting his own body over the back of the front seat. He kicked out viciously, and the car lurched wildly as his heel met Durell's cheek. A moment later, the car halted, still on the upper road above the stone marker.

In that moment, however, things happened rapidly.

Hennessy was sprawled above the two men, keeping Durell occupied with his feet, and giving his prime attention to M'tel. Hard as iron, apparently impervious to blows, the Berber put up a vicious fight, but Hennessy roughed him, and then, as the car halted, got a purchase and slammed his head and shoulders forward with terrific force.

M'tel's skull was smashed against the windshield frame, the impact cracking the thick glass. The Berber went limp. Hennessy had caught Durell's neck between his legs, and flung himself backward as the other frantically threw open the car door. Both men tumbled out in the dust together.

Durell came up with a pistol in his hand. It exploded, but the bullet went wild—Hennessy kicked at his wrist, knocked the weapon away, and flung himself on Durell.

He was met with a smashing crack that drove him sprawling.

Durell wasted no time trying to retrieve his pistol. He stepped into Hennessy's rush with a beautiful left from the shoulder that should have finished the matter straightway. Before the American could regain his feet, Durell was in upon him like a flash with a vicious kick to the face.

The engine room of a tramp, however, affords a wide range of education. Hennessy dodged that kick somehow, took another in the chest, then came to his feet, only to meet a storm of terrific smashes to the face and body. Durell could use his fists; he could use everything; and now he used all he had, to the very limit.

Hennessy had been up against many a battering in his day, but after the first ten seconds of this, he knew he had to fight with his head. He gave ground rapidly. Before him burned the snarling, bleeding, blazing-eyed face of Durell, alight with malignant hatred; the man was in the grip of an incredible ferocity. Hennessy evaded, ducked, parried, then got his balance, found his second wind, planted a straight left to Durell's belt and crossed over his right to the jaw.

Durell was halted. Like a flash, Hennessy bored in, beat the man back with a storm of blows, and landed one perfect crack flush to the chin that snapped back Durell's head and shook him badly. Panting, the Frenchman covered up, retreated, took another right and left that dazed him, and slipped in the dust. He was definitely mastered now, and realized it. Hennessy instinctively stood back to let him rise—then cursed himself for a fool.

Durell, lying on one elbow, kicked savagely. Hennessy's feet were knocked from under him. The Frenchman flung himself sideways and his arm shot out. The for-

gotten pistol in his hand, he came to his feet, cat-like, just as Hennessy rose.

The pistol cracked. Hennessy staggered to the impact of the bullet. Then, surprizingly, he hurled himself forward. Durell fired again, and missed clean. Hennessy was upon him, knocking up the pistol, planting a final blow in that high-boned face—and then slumping down in a heap. Durell looked down at him, laughed, lifted his weapon.

Another pistol-shot reverberated from the naked hillside.

6

THIS shot came from the pistol of Croghan.

Wholly absorbed in that frantically savage battle for life, neither of the two men had observed anything around them. They had not seen the approach of the Renault, had been blind to the figure of Croghan leaping from it and running toward them. Not until Durell lifted his weapon to blow out the brains of Hennessy, did his eye catch the moving object. Then it was too late.

Croghan's one shot whirled him around and dropped him, for good.

When Hennessy came to himself, he was in the rear seat of the Renault, and Mary Gray was pouring wine between his lips. He spluttered, met the grin of Croghan, and sat up.

"What's this? Thought I was dead! Felt Durell's bullet hit me——"

He looked around in utter stupefaction. No sign of the Cadillac, of the hillside, of anything. The Renault was pulled up beside the gray-green mass of an olive grove, hot in the noonday sun.

"Good lord! Was that all a dream?"

"You'll know if you move around," said Croghan. "That bullet slapped your ribs, partner, and we've been patching you up for some time. Gosh, man!

What you did to those three devils was a plenty! You hardly left enough of Durell for me to shoot."

"You!" Hennessy felt under his shirt, found himself bandaged heavily, and comprehended. "You—shot him?"

Croghan nodded.

"Yep. We've got the loot we came after, and now we're going to get something to eat and drink. We all need it."

Hennessy met the dancing eyes of Mary Gray; they were no longer laughing, and their gay merriment was sobered, but the smile that came to her lips, the pressure of her hand, brought swift answer from him.

"And now we've got to pay the piper," he said, and then bit into the sandwich Croghan passed him. The lean, dark man nodded gravely.

A bite to eat, a bottle of wine, and the three regarded one another. Croghan was the first to break the silence.

"No use blinking it," he said. "Durell was a bad egg and no one will mourn him, but all the same, if we go back to Fez there's going to be merry hell raised over all this."

"No place else to go," said Hennessy. "We've nothing to be afraid of. See the thing through, tell the truth and shame the devil——"

"Not for me," and Croghan shook his head. "I've been in jail, remember. I've got a record here. We may get off eventually, sure, but they'll jail us and grab the money, and we'll not see a red cent of it. We've worked for that loot, partner."

"I'll say we have," said Hennessy, frowning. "What else is there to do, though?"

"Well," said Croghan, "I made a mistake. Got a man out from town, soldered up the oil line of this car—and she'll go. The bearings aren't out after all. I came

on alone with her. We can make the north highway and hit for Spanish territory, or get the railroad up to Tangier. There's an afternoon train. In a couple of hours we can be clear outside any zone of danger—or I can."

"I've no papers," said Hennessy slowly.

"Won't need any, until you get into Tangier itself. The consul there can wire the consul at Casablanca and fix up your status all right. There won't be any hunt for us if we do the vanishing act—they won't pin this on us, or connect it with us. In fact, there may not be any trouble at all, but I simply couldn't take the chance."

"I don't like Morocco anyhow," said Hennessy whimsically, and met the eyes of Mary Gray. He started slightly. "Hey! But what about you, young lady? If——"

"Let's all go to Tangier and see what happens," she said quickly.

"Nonsense! You have pictures at Rabat——"

"Pictures be hanged!" she exclaimed, her dancing eyes suddenly aglow with eagerness. "What are pictures? All aboard for Tangier! We can make the train, at least, and settle everything else by wire. Ready? Then, let's go! You take the first spell at the wheel, Croghan!"

Croghan twisted about in his seat and shied the empty wine-bottle from the window.

"O. K., then," he rejoined. "Want to sit in front, Red? Won't joggle you so much there."

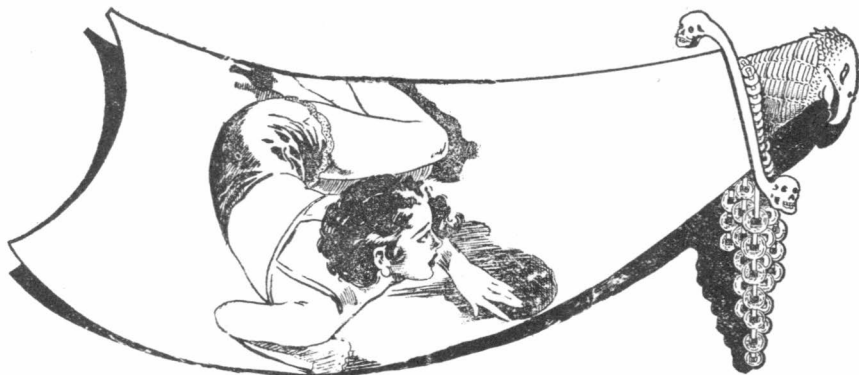
"No, thanks," and Hennessy met the eyes of Mary Gray, and caught her fingers in his own. "I stay here—all the way! There's better and bigger loot than money. Right?"

"Right," said Mary Gray, with her old silvery laugh.

The Kiss of Zoraida

By CLARK ASHTON SMITH

*The age-old cruelty of the East lives again in this story of
a harem in Damascus*



WITH one backward look at the bowery suburbs of Damascus, and the street that was peopled only by the long, faint shadows of a crescent moon, Selim dropped from the high wall among the leafing almonds and flowering lilacs of Abdur Ali's garden. The night was almost sultry, and the air was steeped with a distilled languor of voluptuous perfume. Even if he had been in some other garden, in another city, Selim could not have breathed that perfume without thinking of Zoraida, the young wife of Abdur Ali. Evening after evening, for the past fortnight, during her lord and master's absence, she had met him among the lilacs, till he had grown to associate the very odor of her hair and the savor of her lips with their fragrance.

The garden was silent, except for a

silver-lipsing fountain; and no leaf or petal stirred in the balmy stillness. Abdur Ali had gone to Aleppo on urgent business and was not expected back for several more days: so the slightly tepid thrill of anticipation which Selim felt was untinted by any thought of danger. The whole affair, even from the beginning, had been as safe as that sort of thing could possibly be: Zoraida was Abdur Ali's only wife, so there were no jealous women who might tattle to their common lord; and the servants and eunuchs of the household, like Zoraida herself, hated the severe and elderly jewel-merchant. It had been unnecessary even to bribe them into complaisance. Everything and everyone had helped to facilitate the amour. In fact, it was all too easy; and Selim was beginning to weary a little of this heavy-

scented happiness and the over-sweet affection of Zoraida. Perhaps he would not come again after tonight, or tomorrow night. . . . There were other women, no less fair than the jeweler's wife, whom he had not kissed so often . . . or had not kissed at all.

He stepped forward among the flower-burdened bushes. Was there a figure standing in the shadow, near the fountain? The figure was dim, and darkly muffled, but it must be Zoraida. She had never failed to meet him there, she was ever the first at their rendezvous. Sometimes she had taken him into the luxurious harem; and sometimes, on warm evenings like this, they had spent their long hours of passion beneath the stars, amid the lilacs and almonds.

As Selim approached, he wondered why she did not rush to meet him, as was her wont. Perhaps she had not yet seen him. He called softly: "Zoraida!"

The waiting figure emerged from the shadow. It was not Zoraida, but Abdur Ali. The faint moon-rays glinted on the dull iron barrel and bright silver frettings of a heavy pistol which the old merchant held in his hand.

"You wish to see Zoraida?" The tone was harsh, metallicly bitter.

Selim, to say the least, was taken aback. It was all too plain that his affair with Zoraida had been discovered, and that Abdur Ali had returned from Aleppo before the appointed time to catch him in a trap. The predicament was more than disagreeable, for a young man who had thought to spend the evening with a much-enamored mistress. And Abdur Ali's direct query was disconcerting. Selim was unable to think of an apt or judicious answer.

"Come, thou shalt see her." Selim felt the jealous fury, but not the savage irony, that underlay the words. He was full of unpleasant premonitions, most of which

concerned himself rather than Zoraida. He knew that he could not look for mercy from this austere and terrible old man; and the probabilities before him were such as to preclude more than a passing thought of what might have befallen, or would befall, Zoraida. Selim was something of an egotist; and he would hardly have claimed (except for the ear of Zoraida) that he was deeply in love. His self-solicitude, under the circumstances, was perhaps to be expected, even if not wholly to be admired.

Abdur Ali had covered Selim with the pistol. The young man realized uncomfortably that he himself was unarmed, except for his yataghan. Even as he was remembering this, two more figures came forward from amid the lilac-shadows. They were the eunuchs, Cassim and Mustafa, who guarded Abdur Ali's harem, and whom the lovers had believed friendly to their intrigue. Each of the giant blacks was armed with a drawn simitar. Mustafa stationed himself at Selim's right hand and Cassim at his left. He could see the whites of their eyes as they watched him with impassable vigilance.

"Now," said Abdur Ali, "you are about to enjoy the singular privilege of being admitted to my harem. This privilege, I believe, you have arrogated to yourself on certain former occasions, and without my knowledge. Tonight I shall grant it myself; though I doubt if there are many who would follow my example. Come: Zoraida is waiting for you, and you must not disappoint her, nor delay any longer. You are later than usual at the rendezvous, as I happen to know."

WITH the blacks beside him, with Abdur Ali and the levelled pistol in his rear, Selim traversed the dim garden and entered the courtyard of the jewel-merchant's house. It was like a journey in some evil dream; and nothing

appeared wholly real to the young man. Even when he stood in the harem interior, by the soft light of Saracenic lamps of wrought brass, and saw the familiar divans with their deep-hued cushions and coverings, the rare Turkoman and Persian rugs, the taborets of Indian ebony freaked with precious metals and mother-of-pearl, he could not dispel his feeling of strange dubiety.

In his terror and bewilderment, amid the rich furnishings and somber splendor, he did not see Zoraida for a moment. Abdur Ali perceived his confusion and pointed to one of the couches.

"Hast thou no greeting for Zoraida?" The low tone was indescribably sardonic and ferocious.

Zoraida, wearing the scanty harem costume of bright silks in which she was wont to receive her lover, was lying on the sullen crimson fabrics of the divan. She was very still, and seemed to be asleep. Her face was whiter than usual, though she had always been a little pale; and the soft, child-like features, with their hint of luxurious roundness, wore a vaguely troubled expression, with a touch of bitterness about the mouth. Selim approached her, but still she did not stir.

"Speak to her," snarled the old man. His eyes burned like two spots of slowly eating fire in the brown and crumpled parchment of his face.

Selim was unable to utter a word. He had begun to surmise the truth; and the situation overwhelmed him with a horrible despair.

"What? thou hast no greeting for one who loved thee so dearly?" The words were like the dripping of some corrosive acid.

"What hast thou done to her?" said Selim after a while. He could not look at Zoraida any longer; nor could he lift his eyes to meet those of Abdur Ali.

"I have dealt with her very gently. As

thou seest, I have not marred in any wise the perfection of her beauty—there is no wound, and not even the mark of a blow, on her white body. Was I not more than generous . . . to leave her thus . . . for thee?"

Selim was not a coward, as men go; yet he gave an involuntary shudder.

"But . . . thou has not told me."

"It was a rare and precious poison, which slays immediately and with little pain. A drop of it would have been enough—or even so much as still remains upon her lips. She drank it of her own choice. I was merciful to her—as I shall be to thee."

"I am at thy disposal," said Selim with all the hardihood he could muster.

The jewel-dealer's face became a mask of malignity, like that of some avenging fiend.

"My eunuchs know their master, and they will slice thee limb from limb and member from member if I give the word."

Selim looked at the two negroes. They returned his gaze with impassive eyes that were utterly devoid of all interest, either friendly or unfriendly. The light ran without a quiver along their gleaming muscles and upon their glittering swords.

"What is thy will? Dost thou mean to kill me?"

"I have no intention of slaying thee myself. Thy death will come from another source."

Selim looked again at the armed eunuchs.

"No, it will not be that—unless you prefer it."

"In Allah's name, what dost thou mean, then?" The tawny brown of Selim's face had turned ashen with the horror of suspense.

"Thy death will be one which any true lover would envy," said Abdur Ali.

Selim was powerless to ask another question. His nerves were beginning to crumble under the ordeal. The dead woman on the couch, the malevolent old man with his baleful half-hints and his obvious implacability, the muscular negroes who would hew a man into collops at their master's word—all were enough to break down the courage of hardier men than he.

He became aware that Abdur Ali was speaking once more.

"I have brought thee to thy mistress. But it would seem that thou art not a very ardent lover."

"In the name of the Prophet, cease thy mockery."

Abdur Ali did not seem to hear the tortured cry.

"It is true, of course, that she could not reply even if thou shouldst speak to her. But her lips are as fair as ever, even if they are growing a little cold with thy unlover-like delay. Hast thou no kiss to lay upon them, in memory of all the other kisses they have taken—and given?"

Selim was again speechless. Finally:

"But you said there was a poison which——"

"Yes, and I told thee the truth. Even the touch of thy lips to hers, where a trace of the poison lingers, will be enough to cause thy death." There was an awful gloating in Abdur Ali's voice.

Selim shivered, and looked again at Zoraida. Aside from her utter stillness and pallor, and the faintly bitter expression about the mouth, she differed in no apparent wise from the woman who had lain so often in his arms. Yet the very knowledge that she was dead was enough to make her seem unspeakably strange and even repulsive to Selim. It was hard to associate this still, marmoreal being with the affectionate mistress who had

always welcomed him with eager smiles and caresses.

"Is there no other way?" Selim's question was little louder than a whisper.

"There is none. And you delay too long." Abdur Ali made a sign to the negroes, who stepped closer to Selim, lifting their swords in the lamplight.

"Unless thou dost my bidding, thy hands will be sliced off at the wrists," the jeweler went on. "The next blows will sever a small portion of each forearm. Then a brief attention will be given to other parts, before returning to the arms. I am sure thou wilt prefer the other death."

Selim stooped above the couch where Zoraida lay. Terror—the abject terror of death—was his one emotion. He had wholly forgotten his love for Zoraida, had forgotten her kisses and endearments. He feared the strange, pale woman before him as much as he had once desired her.

"Make haste." The voice of Abdur Ali was steely as the lifted simitars.

Selim bent over and kissed Zoraida on the mouth. Her lips were not entirely cold, but there was a queer, bitter taste. Of course, it must be the poison. The thought was hardly formulated, when a searing agony seemed to run through all his veins. He could no longer see Zoraida, in the blinding flames that appeared before him and filled the room like ever-widening suns; and he did not know that he had fallen forward on the couch across her body. Then the flames began to shrink with awful swiftness and went out in a swirl of soft gloom. Selim felt that he was sinking into a great gulf, and that someone (whose name he could not remember) was sinking beside him. Then, all at once, he was alone, and was losing even the sense of solitude . . . till there was nothing but darkness and oblivion.



"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 hal-lowed 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 untrammelled 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 lillabi*, 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.

"Teil 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 carved 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,



"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-Ateş 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, ja 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 him.”

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 similar 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 *nashk* 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 eye-teeth," 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.

"*Masballah!*" 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.

"*Wallabi! Yallabi! Billabi!*" 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 lilabi!*" 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. "*Kamaaan! Kamaaan!*"

"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-

glory 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 *chiboukji*, 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.

"*Wallab!*" 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. *Billabi!* 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 Ailah!" 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 dis-

tinguished 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 Zobeide 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 *'oud*, 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 entranced 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 hail, 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! *Wallab!* 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 lilabi!*"

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 '*Dann*' 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 Sul-

tan. 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."

Aided 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."

"*Wallabi!*" 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 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 dakbilak, ya sultan!*" he cried. "Under your protection, O King!"

"You have our protection, *ya Ismeddin,*" responded the Sultan: and then, re-

membering 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 rugs. 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 dakbilak, 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 Massachusetts in State of Boston. Other is Jean Clourd. 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 actuarial lines. The lottery features furnished the sales appeal. And their system of penalties for delinquency and cancellation gave the companies an extraor-

dinary 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 Clourd's money?"

"None, sir. I do financing. But the two gentlemen are giving their experience. 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 bank-note 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 In-

vestment 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 leisured 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 *cb'i*, or "wrath matter." In other words, a repressed people's method of blowing off steam.

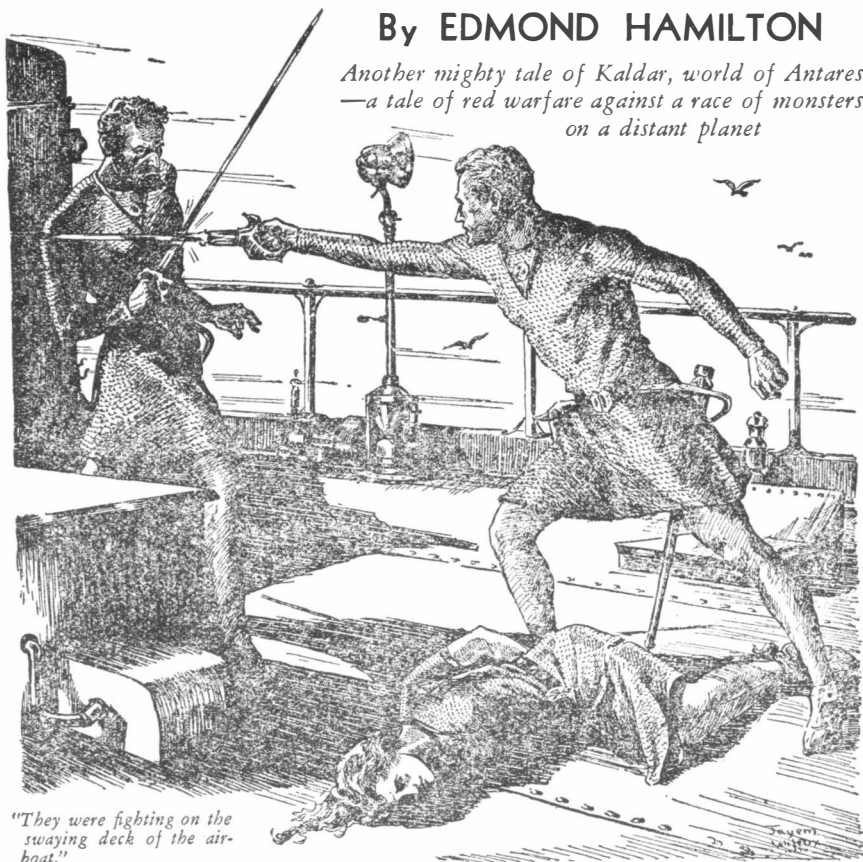
To the accompaniment of sobs and shrieks, she advised the world how a foreign devil—one of that snail-eyed, leprously pale-skinned tribe of demons from across the sea—had attempted to bring shame upon the hitherto honorable house of Li. In order to recover some money, this ghoulish monster had tried 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.

The Snake-Men of Kaldar

By EDMOND HAMILTON

*Another mighty tale of Kaldar, world of Antares
—a tale of red warfare against a race of monsters
on a distant planet*



*"They were fighting on the
swaying deck of the air-
boat."*

1. Back to Kaldar

ALMOST midnight, Merrick. In minutes you'll be on Kaldar again!"

Stuart Merrick nodded. Tall and lean and browned, he stood on a square metal platform-apparatus at the center of the long laboratory. A strange figure he made, garbed in a flexible black metal tunic that reached from shoulders to knees, a red disk blazoned on its breast. At his belt there hung on one side a long

sheathed sword and on the other a stubby, odd-looking gun.

In the soft-lit laboratory were more than a half-dozen men standing ready at the humming, crackling electrical apparatus that almost filled the room. All were elderly, with the faces of scholars and scientists, the oldest of them standing at a wall-switchboard beside which was a chronometer whose hands pointed almost to midnight. The laboratory's roof was open, and in the night sky overhead

sparkled a multitude of stars. Among them burned the fiery red light-point of Antares, toward which Merrick was gazing.

"Out there on Kaldar again in minutes," he repeated. "Kaldar, world of Antares—you're sure it will all work just as before?"

"Just as before," the man at the switchboard told him. "The projector's set has not been changed and it will hurl you out to the same spot on Kaldar where you found yourself the first time."

"And if I want to return?" Merrick asked.

"One week from now the projector will be turned on again at exactly midnight, with reversed power," the other answered, "and if you're on that same spot on Kaldar you'll be drawn back to earth in the same way as in your first venture."

Merrick's thoughts, as he stood waiting on the flat projector, were going back to that first venture. He had answered an advertisement of these nine scientists and had been amazed when they had told him that, working in secret, they had devised a method of projecting a living man out to any distant star and drawing him back again, by breaking down his body into its composite electrons and flashing them out across the void or drawing them back again almost instantaneously. To test the method, they had proposed to project Merrick out to a world of the distant star Antares, and to draw him back at an agreed time a few days later.

Merrick, accepting, had been hurled out across the void and had waked to find himself on Kaldar, world of the huge red sun Antares. He had found himself among a race of ruddy-skinned humans there, the Corlans, who were at that mo-

ment choosing a new Chan or ruler, and Merrick's sudden appearance among them on the dais of the Chan had made them choose him as their fate-sent ruler. Thus he had become Chan of Corla, making quick friends with Narna, daughter of the last ruler, and by that incurring the hate of Jhalan, a Corlan noble who had aspired to the rulership and to Narna's hand.

Jhalan had proved a traitor to Corla, plotting with its ancient enemies the Cosps, great intelligent spider-men who had long oppressed the humans. But Merrick, with the aid of Holk and Jural, two great Corlan fighters, and of Murnal, an old noble, had defeated Jhalan's plots, saving Narna from him and shattering the Cosp power for ever. Hardly had he done this when by his agreement, which he had forgotten, he was drawn back against his will to earth. In the weeks since, while the projector's condensers had been charging to send him forth again, Merrick had been chafing to return to the distant world of weird adventure where he was ruler of a race.

Merrick roused suddenly from his thoughts as he saw the chronometer's hands creeping over the last divisions toward the hour of midnight.

About him the nine scientists were waiting silently, some gazing toward the chronometer, some toward the projector on which Merrick stood, others up toward Antares' crimson spark among the stars. As Merrick turned his own gaze he saw the hands coming together at last to mark midnight, and turned to look toward the man at the switchboard. But as he did so the latter threw over four switches in quick succession. Merrick felt awful forces thundering through and about him, and then consciousness went from him in a flash as he was hurled out into bellowing blackness. . . .

OUT of that momentary black unconsciousness Merrick emerged with a clicking shock that jarred his frame through and through. He was aware that he was swaying on his knees, a fierce heat beating suddenly upon him, and then as he heard from about him a chorus of wild shouts, he staggered up to his feet and opened his eyes.

He was standing once more on Kaldar, world of Antares!

His first glance upward told him that, for in the heavens overhead there flamed not the familiar yellow sun of earth, but a huge crimson sun whose stupendous circle filled a third of the heavens and whose fiery brilliance was all but blinding to his eyes as he saw it thus again. Antares, sun of Kaldar! Merrick turned his dazzled eyes downward from it.

He stood on a round dais of black metal at the center of a great plaza. Around the plaza rose the numberless, sky-looming black pyramids of the city of Corla, their terraces and the streets between them swarming with black-tunicked Corlans. Over the city there drove thronging air-boats, long, slender craft humming to and fro. And on the plaza around the dais were other Corlans who were pointing up toward Merrick and madly shouting.

Merrick, still dazed by the tremendous transition from world to world across the deeps of space, saw that those in the plaza were running toward him as he reeled down from the dais. He was aware of them gripping his arms, of wild shouts of "Chan! Chan!" spreading out over the city, and dimly knew that they were half leading and half carrying him through the swift-gathering, excited crowds toward the great pyramid of the Chan at the plaza's edge.

Passing into the dim coolness of the pyramid's mighty halls, Merrick had

misty knowledge of black-garbed servants rushing forward, of the red sun-disk of the Chan blazing everywhere on the walls as it blazed on his own breast, of whirling upward in a great lift-chamber. Then, emerging into the great chambers at the pyramid's tip whose broad windows looked out over Corla's far-flung pyramids, Merrick was aware of other excited voices about him, and finally as something fiery-tasting was given him to drink, his brain cleared of the whirling mists and he looked about him.

Three men were with him, one a great weather-beaten warrior with huge shoulders, another a slender, quiet counterpart of the first, and the third a white-haired, fine-faced oldster. The biggest of them was gripping his shoulders.

"Chan Merrick! Chan Merrick! You've come back!" the three were crying.

"Holk! Jurul! And you too, Murnal!" Merrick exclaimed, recognizing them.

"Chan Merrick, where in the sun's name have you been?" cried the great Holk.

"Why did you go, O Chan?" asked the white-haired Murnal. "Why did you disappear from among us like that?"

"It was not of my own will that I went," Merrick answered. "You know that when first I came among you I told you that it was from a far-distant star and world I came. It is back to that star and world I have been, drawn back against my will and unable until now to return."

Uncomprehending awe was on their faces.

"Truly when you vanished there on the dais of the Chan it seemed that you had gone back into the unknown from which you came," said big Holk. "Never had we had a Chan like to you, who had shattered the Cosps, and some said that never would we see you again."

"Yes, many said that," Murnal added, "but Narna said always that some time you would return."

"Narna—where is she?" Merrick asked eagerly.

An embarrassment seemed to descend on the three at his question, a something in their faces that brought a quick throb of fear to Merrick. He gripped Holk's arm fiercely. "Narna!" he exclaimed. "What's happened to her?"

It was Murnal who answered him. "Chan Merrick, I will tell you all," said the old noble, "and wish well that it were not to tell.

"You know how you, Chan Merrick, with Holk and Jurul here, saved Narna from Jhalan and shattered the power of the Cosps for ever, and how you then disappeared from our sight so strangely on the dais of the Chan. Some said you would never return, but Narna was certain that some time you would come back. So we awaited your return, I still ruling Corla in your name.

"But a week ago came an unexpected event. Jhalan, whom we all thought dead, reappeared here in Corla by night with a half-dozen traitor Corlan followers. He seized Narna, and before any could reach them was gone with her in his air-boat. He sped north, and his last boasting word was that he was going where none dared follow, to the legendary city of the great Gurs or snake-men!

"This city of the Gurs is supposed to lie in the far north, and it was northward Jhalan's craft headed. Holk and Jurul and I learned of his carrying away of Narna only today when we returned to Corla after a week's absence. We were discussing what to do when you reappeared out there on the dais of the Chan. But you have reappeared too late, Chan Merrick, for Jhalan again has Narna in his grasp."

Merrick, when Murnal finished, was silent for moments, gazing out over Corla's black pyramids beneath the crimson sunlight.

"So Jhalan lives still and works evil still—but not for long!" His voice lashed out, his hand twitched on his light-sword's hilt.

He spun around. "Holk! Jurul! Assemble five air-boats in the plaza as swiftly as possible. Full light-gun armament and ten-man crews for each. We start north after Jhalan and Narna as soon as they are gathered!"

Holk and Jurul raced wordlessly from the room. Murnal's face was grave.

"Chan Merrick, you go on a more perilous quest this time than before," he said. "Our legends say that these Gurs or snake-men are mighty, and it is said even that there is a barrier of death around their city that no living thing can pass."

"The Cosps were mighty too, yet I reached Jhalan and Narna among them," Merrick answered grimly. "I have a reckoning with Jhalan that is long overdue."

Holk and Jurul reappeared, breathless. "The air-boats are ready, Chan Merrick," they reported.

Merrick turned. "Murnal, you rule still in my name until I return with Narna. We start at once."

Minutes later the five swift air-boats soared up from Corla's central plaza, Merrick and Holk and Jurul crouched on the low-railed deck of the foremost. At the sides and stern of each craft gleamed the grim muzzles of their light-guns.

The air-boats rose over the great city's black pyramids and crimson gardens and then with Merrick's craft at their head shot northward. They passed over the city and the ring of huge black mountains around it. Then before them to the horizon stretched a sea of thick crimson jun-

gle, and over this they flew on into the unexplored mysteries of the north.

2. *The Wall of Glowing Death*

CROUCHING in the air-boat's sheltered prow next to Jurul, Merrick peered ahead. For hours they had been flying northward and Antares' huge crimson circle had sunk half beneath the horizon to their left. Ahead and beneath stretched the same tangled crimson jungles that he knew covered vast stretches of Kaldar's surface.

The other four air-boats flew close behind, their crews of black-garbed Corlan warriors lying at length on their decks, one in each watching over the air-boat's compact propulsion-mechanism at the stern.

Merrick turned to Holk and Jurul. "How long do you think it will take us to reach this city of the Gurs?" he asked.

"According to all accounts, the legendary city of the Gurs is more than two days flight northward," Holk answered.

"The Gurs—snake-men," mused Merrick. "It seems almost impossible that there should be such a race. Is anything authentic known of them?"

Holk shook his head. "No, for no people on Kaldar ever ventures far from its own land. Even we Corlans know almost nothing of the country beyond our mountain-ring, save that the Cosps who raided us came from the south. But we have heard rumors many times of other strange races even more weird and un-human than the Cosps, and among these of a terrible race of snake-men called the Gurs, living in an inaccessible city far to the north."

"Jhalan must have heard the rumors," Jurul added, "and so has fled north to these Gurs to be safe from us."

Merrick nodded somberly. "Well, let

us hope that he has reached them; for though it may be almost impossible for us to find him among the Gurs, it would be utterly impossible to find him if we had no idea of where he has gone."

"We'll find him," Holk reassured. "Even if he's reached your cursed snake-men it ought to be easy—simply smash through them with all our light-guns going, kill Jhalan and get Narna before they understand what's happening, and smash our way out again."

Jurul nodded approvingly. "An ingenious plan, Holk, but don't you think it's a little too subtle, too intricate and tortuous?"

Holk scratched his head. "Why, it may be—" he began, and then as he saw Merrick and Jurul laughing aimed a bear-like blow at Jurul that the nimbler Corlan easily avoided.

Steadily they hummed northward, with Antares' blazing disk disappearing in the west and darkness rushing after it over the world of Kaldar. The five moons of Kaldar, four crimson and the fifth green, rose one by one to light their way. Merrick and Holk and Jurul relieved each other in turn at the air-boat's controls through the night, and when dawn came they were flying still over the same crimson jungles.

Through all that day the five Corlan craft flew north over unbroken red jungles, the only sign of life in them being some featherless flying-things that rose now and then to fly around their air-boats. As the next night passed a chill of apprehension grew in Merrick. Did the Gurs exist in legend only? Had Jhalan and Narna perished somewhere in these wild regions, and were they destined to search fruitlessly for them in these red jungles that might stretch to Kaldar's northern pole?

When the second dawn disclosed only

crimson vegetation ahead, their apprehension grew greater.

Holk was shaking his head doubtfully as he gazed ahead. "By the sun," he exclaimed, "I think the only intelligent life in these regions is ourselves. If your snake-men exist we must have passed them."

"But we can't have passed the city of the Gurs," Merrick said. "The great barrier that encircles it—we couldn't have missed that!"

"Two days and nights we've flown north," the big Corlan answered, "and that should have brought us to the city of the Gurs if the tales they tell are true. I'm beginning to think that they're legends only."

Jurul quietly shook his head. "Jhalan wouldn't have fled this way with Narna if he hadn't known something of where he was going."

"Well, it's more than we know," Holk growled. "If you ask me——"

"Look!" Merrick cried suddenly, pointing ahead. "That glowing across the horizon—what can it be?"

They stared, Holk exclaiming in surprise. For at the skyline far ahead it was as though a wall of glowing light stretched from east to west for miles across their path. They watched with intense interest as their five craft sped in the direction of the strange phenomenon, paying no heed for the moment to a group of the featherless flying-things that had risen from the jungle and were racing below and ahead of their air-boats.

And as they flew on Merrick and Holk and Jurul realized swiftly the stupendousness and strangeness of what lay ahead. It was a mighty wall of glowing light that sprang upward from the ground, which was not jungle at its base but bare rock. From this rock the stupendous glowing barrier rose almost as high as the eye

could reach, into the sun's glare. And the wall stretched from east to west for miles ahead of them, hiding from sight all that might lie beyond.

"A wall of glowing light!" Holk exclaimed, as they swept nearer it. "What causes it, in the sun's name?"

"I can't guess," Merrick answered, "but we'll soon be through it, and then——"

Jurul cried out suddenly. "Look at that!"

He was pointing to one of the featherless flying-things which they had not heeded until then, and which was winging on a little ahead of their five air-boats. It had flown into the great wall of light, a few hundred feet ahead, and the instant it entered the glowing light-wall it collapsed, crumpled, and fell down limp and lifeless. And the creature's body seemed to crumble and disintegrate as it fell in the glowing light, vanishing before it reached the ground!

Merrick's face went gray and his hands flashed to the controls. "Back!" he cried. "That wall of light isn't light but radio-active force that disintegrates anything in it! It's a wall of death!"

IT WAS Merrick's action and not his order that saved them. For before Jurul or Holk had realized the nature of the astounding menace ahead, Merrick had whirled the air-boat up and back in a wild curve, the four other air-boats instinctively following and almost grazing the glowing barrier. They shot back, came to a halt together in midair.

"Radio-active force!" Merrick exclaimed. "If that flying-thing hadn't been just ahead and warned us we'd have been gone in a moment!"

Holk, his jaw dropping, was staring at the glowing light-wall. "But where does the force come from?"

Merrick shook his head, still trembling from the narrowness of their escape. "That rock underneath must contain radio-active minerals in terrific quantities and strength. The greater part of its radiations would be upward through the free air, and so form this wall of disintegrating radio-active force through which nothing in existence could pass."

"Then this must be the rumored impassable wall around the city of the Gurs!" Jurul exclaimed. "It is said to surround their great city completely."

"How are we going to get inside, then?" Holk demanded.

"We'll see first whether or not there is any break in the wall," Merrick answered. "We'll follow around its circle and if there's even a small break in it we may be able to get through."

They turned the air-boats and headed westward, following the stupendous death-wall but keeping a few hundred feet outside it. They found that the wall formed a vast inclosing circle, but there was no break in it and they had no slightest glimpse of what might lie inside.

At last, in late afternoon, the five air-boats came again to the spot where they had started their circuit. They had gone completely around the death-wall's circle, which was scores of miles in diameter, without finding the slightest opening in the glowing, deadly force.

They halted again in midair. "Truly the wall of the Gurs is an impassable one," Holk said. "There's no way through it."

"There must be some way through," Merrick insisted. "Jhalan must have got through to reach the Gurs."

Jurul's eyes met his. "Perhaps he never reached them," the other said. "Perhaps he and all with him blundered into the wall as we almost did, and met death."

Merrick's heart sank, but he shook his

head. "I can't believe it," he said. "Jhalan must have known about this wall of glowing death and must have had some plan for getting through it, or——"

His eyes lit suddenly. "Or over it!" he finished. "That's it — Jhalan must have climbed as high as possible with his air-boat, to a height where the upward-radiated force would be far weaker, and then gone through!"

"Then that's our own way," Holk declared instantly. "Whatever Jhalan can do we certainly can."

"Wait!" Jurul said. "How do we know but that Jhalan and his boat weren't destroyed trying to get over the wall?"

"We don't know," Merrick said grimly, "but we will before long. We're going to try it now ourselves—order the other air-boats to climb with us, Holk."

WITH Merrick's air-boat leading, the five craft began to ascend in a close spiral, keeping well out from the glowing wall of death. Rapidly the crimson jungles outside the wall receded below them, and the air grew colder. But the glowing radiation of the wall was still too intense to dare.

Up and up in their endless spiral went the five air-boats, and when almost three miles above the surface the craft experienced difficulty in gaining greater height. Merrick and Holk and Jurul watched their progress with anxious eyes, for though by then the glowing radiation of the wall seemed somewhat weaker, it was not enough so for a dash through.

As they labored higher the air became freezing about them, and in their brief metal tunics they felt all its coldness. Holk's teeth chattered and Merrick saw that his own arms and legs were blue. At four miles it became evident that the air-boats could go no higher. At that height the glowing radiation of the wall

was much weaker than at the ground, but still menacing in appearance.

Could they risk a dash through it, Merrick asked himself? Had Jhalan—and Narna—got through it or had it crumbled their craft and themselves into fragments? Merrick knew he must decide quickly, for only by strong effort were the air-boats maintaining that height. He made sudden decision, shouted an order. The five air-boats drew back a little farther from the glowing wall, then turned and dashed at top speed toward it.

Instinctively Merrick and Holk and Jurul crouched together at their air-boat's stern as they rushed to the glowing barrier. They struck it, and as they shot into the glowing radiations, even at that height, Merrick and the others felt tremendous, tingling forces sweeping up through them like hurricanes of invisible force that shook the atoms of their bodies.

The air-boats reeled on through the radiations, and as such sickening forces shook the men on them, the metal of the air-boats themselves began swiftly to glow. Merrick saw, knew that a few moments more in the radiations would disintegrate the air-boats and then themselves. The thickness of the glowing wall meant life or death now—but suddenly they shot out of the radiations into clear air again. They were through, were inside the death-wall!

Merrick and the Corlans clung dizzily to the air-boats' decks. It was not until moments had passed that they felt enough themselves to look ahead and beneath.

Before them stretched the huge circle of country enclosed by the circular wall of shining death. It was swathed in thick crimson jungles like those outside the death-wall. That deadly barrier towered in glowing magnificence around this immense circle, shutting out from view all that lay outside.

Merrick stared across the vast circle of red jungle for some sign of the strange civilization of the Gurs or snake-men rumored to exist here. He could see nothing of the sort at first; then he thought he made out a black mass of some sort far in at the circle's center, half hidden by the surrounding vegetation. But his attention was turned from it by a sudden cry from Holk.

The big Corlan had been staring downward as the air-boats gradually descended to lower levels, and now was pointing excitedly.

"Humans!" he cried. "Look—down in that clearing—and they're fighting!"

"By the sun, Holk's right!" Jurul exclaimed. "See them, Chan Merrick?"

Merrick had seen. A long, irregular-shaped clear space broke the crimson jungles a little ahead of the descending air-boats. At its edge he could see a score of red-skinned men garbed in black tunics like the Corlans. They were battling a larger number of black serpent-shaped creatures, both sides using glowing rays of short range.

"Those are snake-men they're fighting—Gurs!" Holk cried.

"And the men can only be Jhalan and his followers!" Merrick exclaimed. "Head down toward them—we're going to get into this!"

3. *The Land of the Gurs*

AT MERRICK'S order the five air-boats dipped and rushed down as one toward the distant combat in the clearing, their crews springing to the light-guns mounted on swivels along the deck.

"Why not let Jhalan and his men fight their own battle with the snake-men, Chan Merrick?" shouted Jurul to Merrick over the roar of wind.

"Because if that's Jhalan and his men

Narna will be somewhere near!" Merrick yelled back.

"What's the matter with you, Jurul?" cried Holk. "Don't you know when you see a fight the thing to do is to jump in and find reasons afterward?"

The battle at the clearing's edge seemed rushing up clearer and closer to Merrick's eyes as the air-boats dived toward it. He saw now that there were fully a half-hundred of the hideous black snake-shapes, the Gurs, and that they had almost surrounded the score of red-skinned men.

The Gurs held Merrick's momentary attention. These snake-men of the north were, as the legends of Kaldar told, each like a giant black-scaled snake in body but with a human-shaped head that had two close-set black eyes and a white lipless mouth. The monstrous things moved by writhing in snake-like fashion, but below their heads two short tentacle-arms branched from their bodies.

In these arms the Gurs held dark stone instruments like a bull's-eye lantern in shape, from which they released narrow glowing rays upon the humans they were attacking. These rays seemed of the same glowing force as in the great death-wall, since Merrick saw that the humans struck by them crumbled and disintegrated. The effective range of these rays of the Gurs was apparently not more than six feet.

The attacked humans were replying to the snake-men with rays of the same sort. Also the humans were provided with circular shields of dark stone like that of the ray-instruments, which appeared invulnerable to the glowing force and with which they warded off the rays of the Gurs. It was patent, though, that the snake-men were overcoming them.

But now the appearance from above of the five Corlan air-boats changed affairs abruptly. As the five boats swooped, Merrick and Holk and Jurul crouching at

the prow of the foremost, their Corlan crews worked the light-guns and sent a hail of shining charges raining down upon the snake-men. These charges wrought terrible destruction.

Astounded as they were by this sudden new element in the combat, the snake-men quickly replied with a dozen glowing rays directed at the down-swooping air-boats. Most fell short, but two of the rays struck and disintegrated the third of the air-boats. But in the next moment the four remaining ones had landed, and the Corlans, with Merrick and Holk and Jurul at their head, were pouring out to attack the Gurs with their light-swords, except for a few remaining on each boat to work the light-guns.

Merrick found himself with hideous black snake-bodies all around him, stabbed swiftly with his shining light-sword and blasted Gur after Gur with its touch before they could bring their rays into action. Holk was fighting a little to his left, the big Corlan bellowing his fury as he laid about him with his weapon. Close on Merrick's other side Jurul, whose light-sword flashed and flickered among the crowding snake-men like a dancing lightning-brand, was laughing silently, as was his wont when the fighting became fierce. Flanking these three on either side the Corlans pressed forward.

The Gurs, though they had destroyed a half-dozen Corlans with their rays, gave back before the light-swords of their attackers and the charges still pouring into them from the light-guns of the four air-boats on the ground. They sought to flee, but the snake-men found retreat cut off by the humans whom they had been attacking moments before, who were coming fiercely at them with rays. Caught between these and the Corlans, the Gurs were speedily wiped out.

MERRICK and his Corlans looked across the heap of blasted snaky bodies at the men they had succored. Merrick's eyes searched among them for Jhalan or Narna, but neither was among the dozen men facing him. And now Merrick saw that though these men were red-skinned and dressed in black metal tunics like Corlans, they were not Corlans.

"Who are you?" he asked one who seemed their leader, in the tongue common to all races on Kaldar. "You're not of Corla?"

"Corla?" repeated the other. "We know it not. We are Dortas, as surely you too must be."

"Dortas?" said Holk to Merrick. "We Corlans have always thought we were the only humans on Kaldar, but it seems there must be others."

"I am Arlak," the Dorta leader was telling Merrick, "and I and my men thank you for saving us from the Gurs."

"Why were the snake-men attacking you?" Merrick asked.

Arlak looked blankly at him. "Why, a party of them stumbled on us out here and knew of course that we had escaped from the Gur city. Surely you must be Dortas escaped from there also, though your weapons and your flying-ships are strange."

Merrick shook his head. "We never saw Gurs or Dortas until now," he said. "We came in from outside the wall."

A buzz of astonishment ran through the Dortas, and they talked excitedly, eyeing the Corlans.

"You can not mean you came from outside," Arlak protested. "Why, nothing can pass through the glowing wall of death!"

"We did not pass through it but over it in our air-boats," Merrick told him. "But you said you Dortas had escaped

from the Gur city. You mean you were prisoners there?"

"We were slaves there, like all the Dortas," Arlak answered. "We Dortas have always lived inside this wall of death. There are legends which say that long ago we were a free race and had here our own villages and cities, and that then the Gurs or snake-men appeared, coming up through crevices from some great space in the interior of Kaldar, and that the Gurs then first enslaved the Dorta people.

"Be that as it may, for ages the Gurs have dwelt in their city at the center of this land and have held there as slaves the whole Dorta race. Now and then slaves escape from the city into these jungles around it. We are such escaped slaves, and there are others. The Gurs send out parties occasionally to look for escaped slaves, and it was such a party that stumbled on us and would have destroyed us had you not appeared."

"By the sun!" swore Holk. "A race of humans enslaved by these snaky monsters!"

"It seems we did not make a mistake in mixing in this fight," said Jurul with quiet emphasis.

"Tell me," said Merrick to Arlak, "have none of you seen or heard of an air-boat like these with men like us coming here from outside the death-wall?"

Arlak shook his head, spoke briefly to the other Dortas, who made signs of negation also. "None of us has heard of such," he told Merrick. "Was it in search of such a one that you came?"

"It was," Merrick answered. "The air-boat we are hunting held an enemy of mine and also a girl, my friend, whom he and his men carried off. This enemy, this Jhalan, boasted that he was going to ally himself to the Gurs, the snake-men of the north."

Again Arlak shook his head. "He must have known little of the Gurs to think that they would receive him as a friend. But none of us has heard of such arriving at the Gur city, and some of us escaped from there but three weeks ago.

"There are some at our camp, though," he added, "who escaped from the Gur city less than a week ago, and they may know something of it if your enemy actually reached the Gur city."

"Your camp?" said Merrick quickly. "There are more of you, then?"

The Dorta nodded. "About a hundred of us in all—we have a camp in the jungle close to the death-wall."

"We'll go there with you, then," Merrick decided quickly. "The air-boats will hold us all and you can guide us there."

QUICKLY he issued orders, and the Dortas, not without some evidences of distrust, distributed themselves among the four Corlan air-boats. Arlak took place with Merrick and Holk and Jurul in the first boat and marvelled as the four rose smoothly from the ground and hummed low over the red jungles toward the glowing barrier.

Arlak guided their flight, the other three air-boats following the first. As they proceeded, Jurul, who had been examining curiously the stone ray-weapons and shields of the Dortas, obtained from Arlak a description of their nature.

The ray-weapons, Arlak explained, were merely containers in which was held a quantity of the intensely radio-active rock that caused the death-wall around the Gur country. The lantern-like containers were worked from a rare stone invulnerable to the crumbling radio-active force, and the force was released in a narrow ray from inside them by opening

a small aperture much like the slide of a bull's-eye lantern.

Arlak added that the Gurs had originally devised these weapons for control of the Dortas, but that he and other escaped Dortas had been able to make them for themselves. Also they had made thin circular shields of the same invulnerable stone which protected them more or less from the rays of the Gurs. His band of escaped Dortas, he told them, had made some hundreds of the ray-weapons.

The talk broke off as Arlak indicated they were nearing the camp of the escaped Dortas. It was cunningly hidden in the thick crimson vegetation close inside the towering death-wall, but when the four air-boats slanted down to it, scores of Dortas swarmed forth to repel them.

At sight of Arlak on the foremost air-boat they held back their rays, and soon the four craft had landed and were surrounded by the hundred or more Dortas. Quickly Arlak explained to them the providential advent of the air-boats and the help Merrick and the Corlans had given them against the Gurs. Then Arlak singled out two of the Dortas.

"Hann, you and Shala escaped from the Gur city but days ago," he said. "Heard you of any strangers like these reaching it?"

Hann shook his head, but Shala nodded excitedly. "Such arrived there the day before I escaped—but six days ago!" he said. "A flying-like craft like these with a half-dozen men and one girl!"

Merrick's heart leapt. "What of that girl?" he said quickly. "What happened to her and to the men?"

"Why, the Gurs seized them, of course," said Shala. "We Dortas could not understand why they should come into the Gur city to be slaves. The leader of the men did not expect that, and they

fought, but the Gurs overpowered them."

"So much for Jhalan's boast," Holk commented grimly. "He thought the Gurs would accept them as allies, and not make slaves of them."

"But what did the snake-men do to them?" Merrick pressed. "To the girl?"

"They must have been put with the rest of the Dortas in the slave-circle," Shala said. "But I did not see that."

Merrick turned to Arlak. "The slave-circle? What does he mean?"

Arlak explained. "The Gur city is one of four concentric circular walls, dividing the city into a central circular space and two ring-shaped or circular spaces around it.

"In the central circle the Gurs have their living-quarters and only the Dortas who are personal servants of the snake-men are admitted into that circle. In the next circle are the places and mechanisms where the Dortas work under supervision of the Gurs. In the outer circle are the quarters of the Dortas, while on the wall around it, the outermost wall of the city, Gurs are posted to prevent possible escapes."

"And Jhalan—and Narna—are somewhere among the slaves there," Merrick said. He looked to meet the eyes of Holk and Jurul.

"Well, now that we know where they are, we can break in to get them!" the big Holk said cheerfully. "To get Narna, that is—Jhalan can remain a slave of the Gurs several lifetimes without hurting my feelings."

"I've remarked before that your strategy is somewhat elementary, Holk," said Jurul dryly. "We can't go into that Gur city and walk around as though in Corla."

"As I see it," Merrick said thoughtfully, "our best chance would be to wait until night and go through that outer

slave-circle. We could get over the guarded outer wall easily enough with our air-boats and might be able to find Narna and get out without the Gurs becoming aware."

Arlak interrupted, his expression excited. "You can do better than that," he told Merrick. "You can help us do what we have been planning long to do—to loose a revolt of the whole Dorta race against their Gur masters!"

"A revolt of the slaves? You've been planning for that?"

"Yes, for months!" Arlak exclaimed, eyes alight. "I told you we escaped Dortas had been making hundreds of ray-weapons—we have done so in hopes of arming the hosts of Dorta slaves inside the city and starting a revolt with them against the Gurs.

"Our difficulty has been that we could not get the ray-weapons inside to the Dortas. If we tried, the Gurs on the outer wall would give the alarm, and all chance of a surprise, which alone could give such a revolt success, would be gone. But with these flying-boats of yours you can take the ray-weapons in and distribute them to the Dortas tonight!"

"By the sun, it's a plan worth trying!" Holk declared. "Are you sure the Dortas would rise once they had weapons?" he asked Arlak.

"They would rise," Arlak said grimly. "And they would fight until either the Gurs or the Dortas were destroyed."

"We'll try it!" Merrick decided. "But we'll try first to find Narna.

"Here is the plan," he told the others. "We'll start tonight to the Gur city as soon as darkness comes, with the ray-weapons and as many of these Dortas as we can take in our four air-boats.

"We'll land in that outer circle of slaves as stealthily as possible and begin distributing the ray-weapons among the

Dortas. In doing so all of us will keep on the lookout for Narna among the slaves, and when we find her can get her out on an air-boat before we start the revolt."

AT ONCE, under Arlak's orders, the Dortas began preparing for action under Merrick's plan. There was little time left before night's coming, for already the huge red disk of Antares was sinking to the horizon. Excitedly the Dortas labored, bringing forth from hidden storehouses the hundreds of lantern-like ray-weapons they had fabricated and loading them on the air-boats.

When darkness came they still were working at the task, but soon after night's coming they finished. The air-boats were loaded from stem to stern with the ray-weapons. Without further delay the Corlans and as many Dortas as possible crowded onto the air-boats, Arlak and Shala taking places with Merrick and Holk and Juru' on the first one.

At Merrick's low order the four craft rose heavily into the darkness and headed over the lightless jungles toward the Gur city. Not far behind them towered the glowing death-wall toward the stars, casting a weird quivering light on the four air-boats. Merrick could see the terrific shining barrier curving away in the darkness, far away, enclosing completely this strange land by night as by day, the colossal wall's shining splendor enhanced by the darkness. Two red moons had risen.

Merrick looked ahead. They had not flown for long before they glimpsed a circular pattern of lights in the dark jungle. As they swept closer toward these, the lights of the city of the snake-men, Merrick saw that they and the city they outlined were several miles across. He gave order to rise a little higher.

Slowly the heavily laden air-boats

slanted to a higher level, then as they neared the Gur city's lights moved more slowly so that their humming progress was scarcely audible. Merrick and Holk and Jurul, gazing ahead, could make out in the glowing light from the distant surrounding death-wall that the Gur city was as Arlak had described, composed of four concentric black metal walls that enclosed three concentric circular spaces.

There were lights at regular intervals round the outermost wall and he could make out the dark snake-shapes of guarding Gurs there. If these guards looked up they would see the air-boats passing above, Merrick knew, but he was counting on the fact that the Gurs would not be on the watch for aircraft.

His confidence was justified, for the four air-boats slipped almost soundlessly above the outer wall without any alarm from the Gur guards. Silently they descended through the darkness and landed in the deeper shadows of the outer circle. It held many long structures that Merrick guessed were the barracks of the Dorta slaves.

They disembarked, and Arlak and Shala entered the nearest slave-barracks. They returned in moments with a crowd of excited Dortas to whom they had explained the situation, and who despite their excitement came silently lest they rouse the Gurs on the wall. Quickly they were provided with ray-weapons, and as they spread to other slave-barracks increasing numbers of Dortas arrived, for weapons, from all around the outer circle of the Gur city. Soon some hundreds of them, dark shadowy forms in the darkness, had been furnished with ray-weapons, women among them as well as men.

Suddenly Holk's great dark figure moved and as he grasped one of the arriving slaves Merrick heard his whispered exclamation.

"By the sun, Chan Merrick—see whom I have here! It's——"

"Narna?" whispered Merrick eagerly, pressing toward him. "You've found Narna?"

"No! It's Jhalan!" Holk answered.

4. *Through the Snake-Men's City*

MERRICK stopped, dazed for a moment by disappointment, then went on to the two. His eyes, now accustomed to the darkness, made out Holk's great figure, hand on his light-sword's hilt ready to rip the weapon forth and destroy the man beside him. Merrick's face hardened as he saw for himself that this was Jhalan.

Jhalan, arch-traitor of Corla, the man who had tried to betray Corla to the Cosps and who had carried Narna north into this hell-city of snake-men masters and human slaves! Jhalan's strong, bearded face, his merciless eyes and mocking smile, were as when he last had seen them. But Jhalan had no light-sword now at his belt, dressed simply in black metal tunic like the Dorta slaves about him.

His eyes flashed with mocking light at Merrick. "The Chan Merrick from the unknown!" he greeted in a whisper. "So you have returned to Kaldar?"

"I've returned and I've followed you and Narna," Merrick said, his voice deadly. "Where is she, Jhalan?"

"She is, like myself, a slave of these cursed snake-men or Gurs," said Jhalan coolly, "though from the looks of things it seems that the Gurs' slaves are about to revolt."

"Where is Narna in this city?" Merrick asked. "I am going to kill you sooner or later, Jhalan, and it will be at once unless you speak truth."

"She is in the inner circle of the city—

that in which the Gurs have their quarters," Jhalan told him unperturbedly. "When the Gurs seized us, they put Narna among those Dortas who are personal servants to the snake-men. I saw her assigned to one of the Gur dwellings there before I was sent out to this outer circle."

"You'd know the Gur dwelling in which Narna is?" Merrick asked. "You could guide me to it?"

Jhalan nodded. "I'm sure I could."

"I am going to give you a chance to do so," Merrick said grimly, "and it is your one chance for life. If you'll guide me in there to where Narna is I'll give you a light-sword so you'll have a chance for your life when this revolt breaks. Without it you'll have none."

"In that case I'll guide you to Narna," Jhalan said. "This does not cancel the differences between us, though?"

"It does not," Merrick told him. "Once Narna is safe, you and I are going to settle our account once and for all."

"The arrangement is good," said Jhalan. "Where's the light-sword?"

Holk caught Merrick's arm. "Chan Merrick, you're not going in through the snake-men's city? And with this traitor Jhalan?"

"I've got to," Merrick told him. "Narna has to be got out of there before the revolt breaks, for hell will burst loose in this city when the Dortas rise. And Jhalan's the only one who can guide me to her."

"At least take us with you," Jurul whispered.

"Two of us will have a far better chance of making it than more, and every one of you will be needed here when the Dorta revolt starts," Merrick told him.

He turned to Arlak. "As soon as you've distributed all these ray-weapons, start the Dorta attack from all sides of

the city, and press in on the Gurs before they can recover from their surprize. Holk, you lead the attack on the north side, Jurul on the south, Arlak and Shala on the west and east.

"If Jhalan and I are not back with Narna before the revolt starts you'll know that we've been caught. In that case, do everything you can to find Narna if you get to the inner circle, and get her safely back to Corla. Now give Jhalan a light-sword and we're off."

One of the Corlans unbuckled his light-sword and belt and Jhalan quickly put it on. He started then with Merrick through the silent but excitedly crowding Dortas.

Holk barred his way a moment. "Remember, Jhalan," he growled, "that if you survive this night and Chan Merrick does not, I'll be waiting for you."

"And I," added Jurul in a whisper, infinitely menacing.

Jhalan laughed soundlessly. "When tonight is over you'll have to wait your turn to be killed. The Chan from the unknown comes first."

With this mocking rejoinder he pushed past Holk and Jurul; and Merrick, after a brief hand-grip to the two Corlans, followed. In a moment they were out of the crowd of gathering Dortas, and looking back Merrick saw them only as a blur of dark shadows. There was no sound, for though the Dortas were gathering from round all the city to get the ray-weapons, they were moving with stealth and silence.

JHALAN led the way between the big long black structures that ordinarily held the hosts of Dorta slaves. He and Merrick made their way toward the inner side of the ring-shaped slave-circles, keeping in the deeper shadows always and out of the direct light of the three moons now

overhead, and the less direct illumination of the distant surrounding glowing wall. Merrick looked back anxiously toward the lights up on the outermost wall, but no sound had yet aroused the Gur guards there.

They reached the wall separating the outer slave-circle from the second or mid-most circular division of the city. Along it Jhalan led, and paused a moment later beside a narrow opening in the wall.

He and Merrick pæred into the second circle. Merrick saw that it held looming machines and metal work-buildings instead of slave-barracks, and that though there were lights here and there in it, few moving forms could be seen. He and Jhalan moved into this second circle, heading across its great expanse toward the city's innermost circle. Their hands were on the hilts of their light-swords as they crossed it, keeping when possible in the shadows of machines.

When two-thirds of the way across it, Jhalan and Merrick had abruptly to crouch low as a party of Gurs approached from the right. They were moving through the silent second circle as though on a definite errand, five in number and conversing in hissing voices as they writhed forward in their hideous snake-fashion. As they neared the machine behind which Merrick and Jhalan were crouched, they separated, two continuing on through the circle while the other three started toward the inner part of the city, directly past the machine behind which were the two men.

Merrick knew they would be seen as the three Gurs passed, and he and Jhalan gripped their light-swords, drew them from their sheaths.

There was no need of plan. When the three Gurs writhed within a few yards of their hiding-place, Merrick and Jhalan sprang at them like uncoiling springs.

Merrick's light-sword touched and blasted one of the Gurs before the snake-man could voice an alarm. He spun toward the other two, to find that with incredible swiftness Jhalan had slain both.

"Quick work!" Merrick approved in a whisper, despite his hate for his companion.

Jhalan laughed coolly. "I just imagined those two were Holk and Jurul," he said. "Lead on."

"Lead on," Merrick said grimly. "The Dortas will rise at any moment, and when they do it'll be the end of stealth for us."

They threaded the mechanisms and structures of the comparatively deserted second circle and in a few minutes crouched by the wall separating it from the innermost circle, that of the living-quarters of the Gurs.

It was a circular space less than a mile across into which Merrick and Jhalan gazed. There were in it a great number of round squat structures of black metal, and from window-openings of many of these gleamed lights. A number of Gurs could be seen writhing occasionally from one structure to another, and also men and women Dorta slaves appeared at times, often with burdens. These, Merrick knew, were the personal servants of the snake-men.

He saw in at the circle's center a larger structure which he guessed held perhaps some center of government of the Gurs. Beside it he could make out a long low shape resting on the metal pavement, which he recognized as a Corlan air-boat.

Jhalan's eyes had followed his gaze. "It is the air-boat in which we came here," he whispered to Merrick. "The cursed Gurs seized it and us when we landed here."

"In which one of those Gur dwellings did you see Narna put?" Merrick asked.

Jhalan pointed to one of the round structures not far inside the circle. "That one. Whether Narna is still there I do not know."

"We'll soon find out," said Merrick. "Come on."

They moved through the opening and crept silently along the inside of the wall, two deeper shadows in its shadows. Merrick's thoughts were racing. It seemed unthinkable strange that he and Jhalan, the arch-villain he had pursued so far over Kaldar's surface with deadly purpose, should thus be acting in unison. But it was necessary—they must find Narna before the Dorta revolt which Holk and Jurul and Arlak were preparing out in the slave-circle broke upon the Gurs.

THEY left the wall's protecting shadow and moved out into the circle toward the structure Jhalan had indicated. There were lights showing inside, but no sound came from it.

Reaching the door-opening of the Gur dwelling, they sprang inside. They were in a bright-lit hall in which was no one else. It led into the structure's interior, rooms opening from either side. Merrick and Jhalan peered into these, light-swords in their hands.

There was neither Gur nor Dorta in the first two rooms, but in the third were two sleeping snake-men, their hideous serpent-bodies coiled and resting on cushions. They might wake at any moment, and Merrick entered with light-sword extended to destroy them.

As the shining force-charged blade reached toward the two coiled Gurs the eyes of one of them opened and stared squarely at Merrick. But in the next instant the sword had touched both and they were but scorched, blasted bodies.

Merrick was starting back to the hall

where Jhalan waited when through a door-opening at the room's corner came a sound of some one approaching as though alarmed by the slight sounds he had made. Merrick bounded to the door's side, light-sword ready to stab at any snake-man that came through.

But as a figure emerged he let the light-sword fall almost from his hand. It was no snake-man but a human, a girl, a red-skinned girl whose black hair matched the black of her tunic, who stared at Merrick with wide eyes—

"Chan Merrick!" Her exclamation was incautiously loud in her amazement. "Chan Merrick, you've come back to Kaldar!"

"Narna!" For a moment Merrick held her close. "Yes, I came back to Kaldar, and came north after you. And I've found you!"

"Quiet!" grated Jhalan from the hall. "You've been heard outside—Gurs are approaching!"

Narna stared unbelievably from Merrick to Jhalan, as though unable to credit the spectacle of the two together, and not fighting.

"Holk and Jurul and I found Jhalan out with the Dorta slaves and he led me here to you," Merrick explained to her in a swift whisper. "The Dortas are going to revolt tonight and we've got to get back out to the slave-circle before—"

"Too late!" cried Jhalan. "The Gurs come!"

There was a sound of rushing snake-bodies in the hall and two Gurs appeared with short glowing rays stabbing toward Jhalan. Jhalan leapt to evade the rays and as Merrick jumped to his side their light-swords stabbed in and touched and destroyed the two snake-men.

Other Gurs pressed forward behind those, and Merrick and Jhalan fought them from the narrow doorway, their

light-swords stabbing past the short rays and blasting the snake-men. Now a babel of hissing cries could be heard from outside and it was evident that news of the fight was spreading through the whole inner circle.

"Chan Merrick!" cried Narna. "They come through the other door!"

Two Gurs were writhing through the door in the room's corner through which Narna had entered.

Jhalan leapt back across the room, thrust under their rays and blasted the two snake-men.

"Hold that back door against them, Jhalan!" yelled Merrick over his shoulder. "If we can hold them for a little while, Holk and Jurul and the rest may get to us!"

Now Gurs were crowding into the building in scores and their very numbers hampered them as they sought to enter the room through the narrow door-openings defended by Merrick and Jhalan.

Merrick's light-sword wove a flickering net of death across his door-opening. The effective range of the Gurs' glowing rays was hardly longer than his sword, and as the rays could not affect the force-charged sword itself, sword and ray met on even terms. Merrick stabbed and struck swiftly, each touch of the deadly blade blasting one of the Gurs writhing to the attack.

He knew that they could not hold the room for ever against the crowding snake-men. A swift glance over his shoulder showed him that Narna was close behind him and that at the room's back door Jhalan had made a heap of scorched Gurbodies behind which he fought. The arch-traitor was using all the supreme swordsmanship Merrick knew by experience to be his.

The hissing outcries of the writhing Gurs drowned all other sounds. Glowing ray and shining light-sword crossed

and clashed like flashing lightning. Merrick had now before him a heap of scorched snake bodies like that Jhalan had made, but up over these writhed other Gurs to attack with their rays.

Suddenly there was heard over the hissing din a dull, distant roar of sound, swelling up from round the whole Gur city.

"Chan Merrick! What is it?" cried Narna.

"The Dortas are rising!" Merrick cried. "Their revolt has started!"

5. *Battle's End*

THE dull roar from around the city was increasing in volume each moment, and from the hissing outcries outside Merrick knew that the Gurs now realized that their human slaves were revolting, and that they were rushing out to meet the attacking Dortas.

Merrick had hoped that the snake-men attacking them would join the others to combat the Dortas, but they pressed their onslaught with even more fury, as though determined to dispose of Merrick and Jhalan so that they could join the other Gurs in the fight with the Dortas.

Merrick felt himself tiring as fresh Gurs crowded over the dead to stab with their rays at him. A glance backward showed him that Jhalan too was fighting fiercely to hold the other door. Merrick could hear the roar of battle drawing nearer and knew the Dortas must be pressing the Gurs inward toward the city's center, knew with what ferocity the human slaves must be falling upon their snake-men masters.

But would the Dortas led by Holk and Jurul and Arlak and Shala reach the inner circle in time to save Narna? It seemed to Merrick's racing thoughts that they could not, for though the din of battle

outside was ever louder as the Dorta attack crashed inward, he and Jhalan now were being assailed with reckless fury by the Gurs they held back. Merrick now could hear the yells of the Dortas as they fought into the central circle of Gurs.

The Gurs attacking Merrick suddenly changed tactics, sought by turning their rays on the metal wall on either side of the door Merrick defended, to widen that door! Merrick saw the metal crumbling under the glowing rays, knew even as he thrust to right and left at the swarming Gurs that in a moment more they would have an opening too wide for him to defend.

But the snake-men suddenly turned from Merrick, to fight Dortas crowding into the hall from outside. The rays of the Dortas mowed them down as with unhuman ferocity the slave-men crowded forward, wreaking vengeance for ages of slavery.

They crowded to where Merrick stood bewildered in the open doorway, and three of them leapt toward him. He recognized Holk and Jurul and Arlak, their faces aflame with excitement as they shouted to him over the din of battle still going on in the central circle outside.

"In the sun's name, we've loosed something here, Chan Merrick!" yelled Holk. "The Dortas have swept all the Gurs in the city into this central circle and are killing them—they've gone crazy!"

"Crazy with vengeance, yes!" Arlak cried, his eyes half mad. "Let them kill—no Gur escapes this night while a Dorta is left to kill him!"

"Chan Merrick, where's Jhalan?" Jurul cried. "And Narna?"

"Narna and Jhalan are here with me," Merrick said, turning. "Jhalan helped me—but they're gone!"

Gone! Neither Jhalan nor Narna was in the room, and at the back door Jhalan

had defended there was only a pile of dead Gurs.

"It's Jhalan!" Merrick cried. "He killed the Gurs at that door and then took Narna while I was fighting here——"

With a bound Merrick leapt toward the back door of the room and through it before the others could follow. It led through another room and down a corridor out of the building. Merrick burst out, looking wildly about for Jhalan and Narna.

The central circle of the Gur city was a scene of madness around him. It was filled with combat, crowds of Dortas insane with blood-lust pursuing groups of the writhing Gurs and annihilating them with glowing beams. Merrick gazed despairingly for a moment around this hell of battle, light-sword in his hand.

Then he cried out. By the greater structure at the circle's center he saw the Corlan air-boat he had noticed when he and Jhalan had first crept into the inner circle, Jhalan's air-boat which the Gurs had seized. And Merrick saw now through the hordes of struggling Gurs and Dortas that Jhalan was running toward this air-boat, carrying Narna's hastily-bound figure in his arms.

Merrick yelled, sprang through the combat after him. He threw himself forward through a chaos of snake-men and humans and rays as he saw Jhalan drop Narna's helpless figure on the deck and spring to the air-boat's controls. Merrick heard the cries of Holk and Jurul behind him.

The air-boat was rising! Merrick, still a score of feet from it, flung forward in a desperate last spurt and then leapt forward and upward. His fingers caught the rail at the air-boat's stern and held, light-sword still in his right hand's grasp. He swung thus from the craft's stern as it shot up into the night.

As the air-boat shot out over the city of chaos where the Dortas pursued and slew the last of the Gurs, Merrick drew himself upward. He saw Jhalan turn, come leaping back along the air-boat's deck with light-sword drawn. Over Narna's bound figure Jhalan leapt and then his light-sword was clicking against Merrick's. They were fighting on the swaying deck of the air-boat as it rushed without pilot through the night.

A STRANGE calm held Merrick as his shining blade clashed with the other. He knew that the moment had come, that even as he had predicted to Murnal, light-swords were out for the third and last time between himself and Jhalan, and that one of them was going to die.

He thrust, side-stepped, parried, as though in the calmest of friendly fencing-bouts. Across from him Jhalan's dark, sardonic smile flashed at each thrust, but Merrick's face was set, his eyes brilliant. It was the strangest of duels, fought with deadly swords of shining light on the deck of the air-boat as it sped pilotless out through the darkness from the city of the Gurs.

Merrick took a step forward—another. The two shining blades flashed faster, needles of light weaving a web of death between the two men.

Again Merrick pressed forward. He was fighting as he had not known he could fight. Jhalan, his smile disappearing and his eyes becoming deadly, was wielding a blade that seemed everywhere about Merrick. Yet Merrick, as though filled with a force not of himself, was pressing him back toward the racing air-boat's prow. They passed Narna, bound and helpless on the deck, watching the fight silently and without fear in her eyes. They fought on as the craft rushed on

over the dark jungles, and now to Merrick Jhalan's figure stood out dark against a glowing wall of light.

The air-boat, with no hand at its controls, was racing toward the mighty wall of glowing death!

Merrick realized it, and his shining blade flashed faster. Backward still into the craft's prow he pressed Jhalan but could not penetrate the other's marvellous guard. Feint, thrust, parry—click, click—each moment brought them nearer to the death-wall. Jhalan was in the air-boat's prow, could back no farther. His sword moved almost faster than eye could follow, yet Merrick's matched it as they battled on in this duel where a touch of either shining blade meant blasting death.

Now the air-boat was rocking in air-currents as it rushed closer to the towering wall of glowing death. Merrick read in the eyes of Jhalan that the other, with all lost, meant to fight on until they three had rushed together into death rather than surrender. The whole world before Merrick seemed dissolved in brilliance as with a rapier of light he fought as he had never dreamed he could fight. Jhalan's laugh rang suddenly.

"Chan from the unknown—I think we go into the unknown now together!" he cried. The air-boat was rocking in toward the deadly light-wall and in a moment would be in it.

"Not both of us—no!" Merrick cried.

He leapt in a mad last rush with the words, but at that instant the air-boat rocked violently and he was hurled from his feet to the deck. As he was thrown prostrate thus with sword still in his hand, Jhalan was leaping toward him with light-sword upraised and face gleaming with triumph.

Merrick knew it for the end but took the last slender chance open to him and with a sweep of his arm, from where he

lay on the deck, hurled his own sword full toward Jhalan. His sword went dead and forceless as it left his grasp, but struck the upraised shining blade of Jhalan and knocked it back against the traitor's own shoulder. There was a flash as the sword's deadly force blasted its owner, and Jhalan fell in a scorched, lifeless heap.

Merrick leapt forward over him. Just ahead loomed the glowing death-wall, immense, walling the heavens with light. His hands slammed over the controls only just in time to send the air-boat curving away from the wall of death it had been about to enter.

MERRICK, half dazed by the events of that night, staggered back and undid the bonds which Jhalan had hastily used to secure Narna. As the air-boat slowed and came to a halt in midair, they clung to each other in silence.

There came a cry from the night above them, and as an air-boat like their own dropped beside them, Holk and Jurul and Arlak poured over the rail onto their craft.

"Chan Merrick! Narna!" Holk cried, and then his eyes widened as he saw Jhalan's blasted, lifeless form. "Chan Merrick, we saw you leap onto Jhalan's boat and we followed in one of our own air-boats. And Jhalan is dead!"

"Jhalan is dead," Merrick answered dully.

"By the sun! To have missed the best fight in Kaldar's history!" swore Holk.

"Fought on the deck of an air-boat racing toward death!" Jurul cried.

"And that after helping us Dortas to sweep away our age-old masters!" Arlak exclaimed.

Merrick waved aside their excited praise. "Holk, you and the rest return to the other air-boat," he said. "Keep it

alongside and I'll be with you in a moment."

Holk stared but obeyed, he and Jurul and Arlak helping Narna over the rail into the other boat. Merrick turned, stepped over the sprawled, prostrate form of Jhalan to the craft's controls, turned the air-boat and started it moving toward the glowing death-wall again. As it moved faster he stepped quickly into the other air-boat that had kept alongside, and as Holk brought that to a halt they all watched silently as the dark craft that bore Jhalan's dead form alone as crew winged on toward the glowing wall.

They saw it diminish to a dark spot as it neared the wall of light, and then Merrick, his arm across Narna's shoulders, glimpsed it rushing into the glowing radiations of the barrier, wavering for a moment to their vision, then disappearing as it and all on it were disintegrated by the deadly radio-active force. They stared in silence for a time at the glowing wall before Holk's great voice sounded.

"Battle's end for Jhalan, eh? Well, whatever else he was, he was a fighter."

Merrick nodded wordlessly, Narna close beside him. But Jurul had turned, was gazing back down at the Gur city where the wild uproar of the victorious Dortas was diminishing, the last of the snake-men slain.

"Back there, too," came Jurul's quiet voice. "Battle's end!"

6. Merrick, Chan of Corla

FOUR days later the four remaining air-boats of the Corlans, Merrick and Narna with Holk and Jurul on the foremost, rose from the Gur city. It was now the city of the Dortas, though, for the dead Gurs and the wreckage of the wild battle had been cleared away, and Arlak ruled now as Chan of the Dortas.

From Arlak and the Dortas they had parted, with promises of future visits and communications, and now Merrick's four air-boats flew out over the crimson jungles toward the eternal glowing barrier, climbed and climbed until the jungle was miles below, then shot as one through the weaker radiations at that height.

Steadily southward they flew, toward Corla, under the red blaze of huge Antares by day and under Kaldar's thronging moons by night. When they approached the great ring of black metal mountains encircling Corla, late on the third day, they were met by watchful Corlan air-scouts which shot at full speed to the city to take news of the return of Merrick and his friends.

So that when their four craft hummed down at last into the great central plaza of Corla it was to find plaza and streets and terraced pyramids massed with shouting men and women.

Up onto the dais of the Chan stepped Merrick, and there beat upon him stunning waves of sound as Corla's thousands hailed their Chan. When he stepped down from the dais to walk with Narna and Holk and Jurul toward the great pyramid of the Chan they moved through lanes of cheering, massed humanity.

In the chambers atop the pyramid of the Chan, Murnal greeted them, tears in his eyes.

"Chan Merrick! I knew that you would come back with Narna!" was all that he could say as he grasped their hands.

"So Jhalan is dead," he said when he had heard their tale. "And the great Gurs are no more. Truly, O Chan, you are of another world—none of this world could have done it."

"It was not I only, but Holk and Jurul and Arlak and the Dortas," Merrick replied. "Well, it was a bloody revenge

that the Dortas took on their snake-men masters."

"Yes," said Jurul. "For once, I think, even Holk had enough fighting to satisfy him."

"Not I!" Holk exclaimed. "I'll go sorry until the end of my days that I missed that last fight between you, Chan Merrick, and Jhalan!"

When Holk and Jurul had left, Murnal between them and listening to their recital, Merrick and Narna turned toward the broad window, looked forth.

Antares, huge and crimson, was dipping its blazing rim behind the horizon, its red rays streaming in splendor over Corla's mighty pyramids and the throngs that crowded its streets and the air-boats that rushed and dived above them. Merrick, looking forth with his arm across Narna's shoulders, remembered how first he, a dazed adventurer from earth, had looked out from this very window on the same scene.

The last crimson light in the west faded and darkness rolled quickly across the scene. Lights gleamed out on the

surrounding pyramids and on the humming air-boats, and laughter could be heard, and excited voices. Eastward Kaldar's green moon and two of its crimson ones were climbing already into the sky, but Merrick and Narna were gazing up toward the stars that gleamed in a canopy of jewelled light across the heavens.

Merrick pointed up to a faint yellow star. "The star and world from which I came, Narna," he said.

She gazed, silent. "You will be going back to it again, O Chan?"

He laughed, shook his head. "I couldn't now if I wanted to, for at the moment, a week after my return here, when I should have been down on the dais there to be drawn back, I was far north with you and the rest."

"Chan Merrick!" she cried. "To save me, then, you have lost your chance to return to your world!"

He shook his head, drew her closer. "No longer my world, Narna," he said. "I would never have gone back before of my own will, for I am Stuart Merrick of earth no longer. I am Merrick, Chan of Corla!"

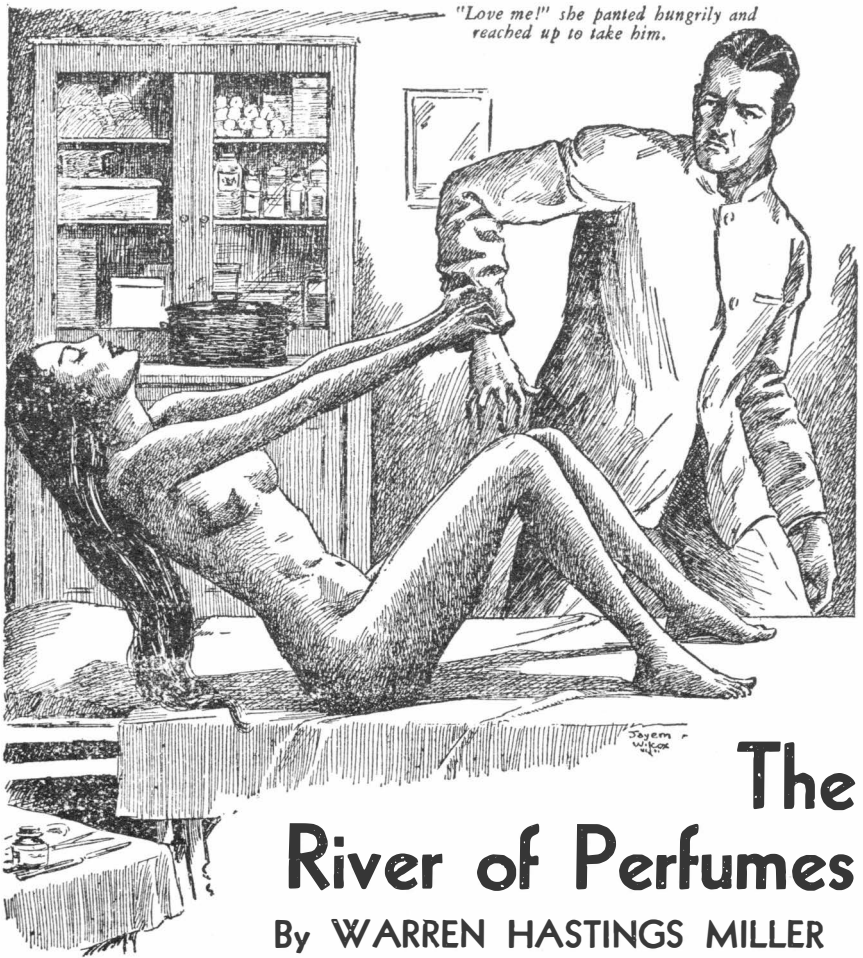
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"Love me!" she panted hungrily and reached up to take him.



The River of Perfumes

By WARREN HASTINGS MILLER

She drove men to madness by her sheer beauty, this little maid of Indo-China—an Oriental tale of love, lust, and sudden death, and a wild adventure

A FAIRY temple of pearl and rose seemed to be floating toward him on the dark waters of the River of Perfumes. Doctor Barrett rose in haste and clapped his hands for his house-boys. The temple undulated and swayed somewhat under the oar-strokes of the pirogue that floated it. It was fringed with translucent globes of color from its paper

lanterns; it was lit within, so that its silken walls radiated a luminous pearly-white glow. Coming through the scented night, over a black mirror of waters that was all reflected color from the lights of the Emperor's palace downstream, it thrilled Barrett.

"God! It takes Indo-China to stage a scene like this!" he exclaimed.

He spoke sharply to Number One: "My instruments, Song Ha. Serum. Alcohol. Bandages. You go chop-chop. Court lady coming."

He thought it another cobra case. The Emperor's gardens were extensive along the River of Perfumes. Cobras got in. There would be a tiny pin-prick on a soft ankle and then one of the beauties of his numerous harem would presently feel numb and faint. Her abundant vitality would sicken and pale; within half an hour she died.

It was that embarrassment that had caused the Emperor Bao Dai, on his return from his studies in France and investiture on the throne, to summon Doctor Barrett from Siam. Jim Barrett, of Georgia, U. S. A., was young, exceedingly handsome in the dark Southern type, and courageous. He had to be, for he was a graduate of that school of courage, the famous Snake Institute of Bangkok. The work there, carried on with death peering over one's shoulder at every step, had resulted in a serum effective against cobra bite. Its saving beneficence had spread all over the East as various progressive rulers heard of it. The men trained there were much in demand; hence Barrett's job as palace specialist here in Hué.

He stood on the wharf ready for immediate action as the float neared. His boys were lighting the lane of paper lanterns that led up to his Annamese house of stucco and brick. The victim would be carried in and the serum administered. It was astonishing to watch the arrest of that paralysis, the slow return of rose-ivory color to the girl's round cheeks, her rosebud lips. Many a raving beauty Barrett had so watched return to this world. They were pretty, these Indo-China girls. He would readily concede to Mrs. Sun Yat Sen, in her youth, the honor of being

the prettiest woman of any race, but these palace beauties ran her a close second. They were the pick of all the Five Provinces of Indo-China.

The results of that restoration to life had been embarrassing to him—at first. A rush back of amazing vitality, a surge of overwhelming passion—directed at the first male in sight, the handsome white doctor—the clasping him to her, as the starfish unfolds the mollusk. . . . He had resisted them—at first; then realized that it was part of his reward. It was all the girl had to give.

But no eunuchs bore any case for Doctor Barrett when the floating fairy temple arrived. Instead, Prince Tou Dac, one of the numerous brothers of the Emperor, stepped out on the wharf, alone. He kotowed with ceremony and shook hands with himself under the long blue silk sleeves of his mandarin robes. The red jade button on his black cap proclaimed his rank of Prince Imperial.

THE doctor saw that this visit had nothing to do with professional services and set himself to the honorifics due to Prince Tou Dac's rank. Tea was brought, as they seated themselves in the reception room. The Prince glanced around the room with loud smacks of appreciation of the doctor's honorable tea. He admired its carved teak, its cloisonné, its ceramics, its luxuriant embroideries in vast hangings of color. He beat about the subjects of the weather, Annamese politics, the state of the doctor's health, for some time, and then finally asked:

"The serum for cobra bite; does it cure as well with all snakes, Honorable Doctor?"

Barrett grunted non-committally. He was not giving that secret away! As a matter of fact, the serum had no effect against the Russell's viper, nor the cro-

talid asp venom, but there was no sense in publishing that fact. Such failures were excused on the score of being brought in too late.

Tou Dac took his grunt for an affirmative. "My people do not like all these changes, Honorable Foreign-devil," he said next.

That change of title from doctor to foreign-devil was subtle. So was "my people." Barrett eyed him fixedly. He did not like Tou Dac. The Emperor always dressed in the latest style from Saigon when he had any business in hand with Europeans; Tou Dac clung to his mandarin robes. He was a reactionary, and also older than Emperor Bao Dai. He had plenty of claims to the throne that were private grievances, ignored, however, by the French Protectorate.

"Look here, Your Highness," Barrett said, nettled, "there's no use in grouching over changes; they're bound to come. You remember the rebellion of 1916, when the French had their hands full at home? That failed utterly, didn't it? Not a chance in the world now!"

Tou Dac nodded. A gleam of desperation lurked in his eyes. He seemed like a leopard pacing the bars of its cage and no way out. Finally he broke out with: "She is the most beautiful girl in all the world, Doctor! Men are driven mad with the bare sight of her. I, even I, who have loved so many. . . . Perhaps, with your knowledge, you can help me. If so . . . any reward you care to name. . . . *Aiee*, little Nanya Chan! I am on fire! I have not slept for nights! But she is for the . . . the house-boy of M'sieur Saint."

His lips curled with bitter scorn over that description of the Emperor as the head-servant of the French Resident-General. He would lose his head for that remark if it were even repeated in a whis-

per about the palace. But an Anamese smitten by love parted with all his caution, his loyalty, his shrewdness, his honor. Barrett knew them. He knew the girls, too; their passion was wild, abandoned, insatiable. They were but traps of flesh, clamping tight with arms and heels the man caught in their toils. He said:

"Truly, love is a fever in the young, and even the aged are not exempt, Prince. But this girl; if she is for the Emperor, you had best go on an expedition somewhere and forget her. She'll fade. There are lovely ones also up in Tonkin."

"*La!* I want her *now!*" Tou Dac was beside himself. "I spoke to you about the snakes, hoping that there might be an—er—accident to the Emperor, and I would reign. But you say you can cure any snake-bite? *Howagh!* And little hope in a revolution, by which I might be put on the throne. . . . Remains—*you.*"

He was frankly revealing his mind. Extraordinary, in a subtle and reserved native prince! She must be a remarkable girl, this Nanya Chan, Barrett thought. And he had no intention of being used in her abduction. It was dangerous to offend Tou Dac, but—

"Suppose she happens to be bitten while walking in the gardens," Tou Dac mused, out loud. "She will be brought here in haste. And then, after her cure—" His eyes gleamed. He could see his kidnapping sampan swooping down on the floating temple with the girl convalescent in its fairy shrine; himself flying with her into wild Laos. He was desperate enough for that.

"Good Lord!" Barrett protested. "You aren't going to do anything so foolish as that, Prince! You are Minister of the Interior here, aren't you? You have vast provinces of Annam to look after. You have your share of this government, your

part to take off the Emperor's shoulders——"

"*Hoo!*" Tou Dac broke in. "We are all but puppets. We gabble and we kotow and we deliberate—and the French do what they please. Decrees are put before us to sign. We sign. . . . They are poison to me, those decrees! I know what is good for my people. I sign with tears, with rage. The French mean well, but they know not what they do. *Ho-agb!* Gladly I give up all that farce for nights of love with *her!* O Pearl!—O Beauty!—O thou ruby treasure, Nanya Chan!"

He was quite mad. "Nevertheless I wash my hands of it, I warn you," Barrett told him sternly. "Go away and forget her. You won't have a chance in Laos with the French hunting you down. . . . Sorry, Prince; I would be a bad friend to you if I assisted in this idiotic scheme in any way."

"You can't help yourself, Doctor!" Tou Dac exulted. "A Hindoo snake-charmer that I know will manage it. He will cause her to be bitten and you will cure her. She will be brought over here. The rest is for me. . . . No; I've thought the way out, at last, after groping for three nights!"

The doctor shrugged; then eyed him defiantly. "A little word from me to the Emperor. . . . Mind, I wouldn't give you away, except that I am convinced that you've lost your reason temporarily."

Tou Dac nodded courteously, conceding the point. "I am desolated, Honorable Physician," he said silkily. "But you shall *not leave this house tonight!* Nor any of your house-boys. It would be . . . unhealthy."

His eyes glittered through the spectacles. Barrett shrugged his shoulders. He would see about that! Tou Dac commenced the honorifics of bowing himself out. Barrett could see that he was set on

this kidnapping, having found a workable plan. He kotowed back, with more cordiality and real feeling than when Tou Dac had come here as a reactionary prince in the doctor's regard, disliked and feared by the white colony as hostile to all modern progress in Indo-China. After all, there was a deal to be said for his side of it. . . .

And this infatuation, for which he would gladly throw away a kingdom for love, commanded a man's sympathy. Barrett approved—except for Tou Dac's age. It was difficult to guess that age beyond the evidence of those hard and seamed features, but he could not be less than fifty. The girl would not be over sixteen; Barrett had the physician's natural repugnance for such a mismatching of ages as that. Give her a man near her own age to love. . . .

He sat smoking over it after Tou Dac had gone. What should he do? He had been forced into his part in this abduction; there was no escaping that. He could not let the girl die. As a trusted white retainer of the Emperor's, it was also his duty to let him know about an affair like this and let him take his own steps. His higher duty to Tou Dac was furthermore to save him from himself, from this folly. But—"Bah!" Barrett exclaimed impatiently over that smug Puritan meddling. "Who am I to say what's good for him? Let him have her. I'll get a knife in my ribs for my pains if I meddle in this. She must be some beauty!"

SHE was. Tou Dac moved fast. Within two hours Barrett saw a commotion down at the water-gate of the palace along the River of Perfumes. Paper lanterns bobbed agitatedly. An illuminated orchid, in rose-violet and pale yellow, came floating swiftly upstream. An enor-

mous orchid of silk on a sampan it was, with its purple tongue curving over from astern as a sunshade and canopy. The swift thumps of its oar betokened haste.

Barrett called his boys and hastened down to the wharf. The Annamese rower jumped out and cast a turn of rope around a cleat. Within the orchid, the heart of the lotus, was a couch in a riot of silken pillows, and on it lay a glittering little court beauty. She scarcely breathed. Her eyes were closed, and the pallor of death had driven all the rose from her cheeks. Barrett gasped at the sheer beauty of her; then signed to his men to carry her in haste. The sampan man squatted for a long wait.

On the operating-table the hospital boys were quickly divesting her of her blaze of embroidery encrusted with jewels, then her filmy under-silks. Their sponges began bathing her with the powerful alcohol. Barrett gasped again. Never had he seen a more perfect woman's form. She was made for love. Her intense glossy blue-black hair was brushed back tight from a round and smooth forehead, giving an aspect of innocence and girlishness. The nose was piquant, saucy. Her mouth was a red flower, in which one would bury one's lips as in a rose. And her eyes . . . they now drooped, closed, under downy lashes of black and were arched over with thin pencil-bows of black brows, but they would be opals of brown and red fire when they opened.

"Oh, you little beauty!" Barrett breathed hard in a tumult of emotions. He sought for and found, just under her knee above the shapely turn of her calf, the two red pin-pricks of the cobra. He made two sharp incisions that welled blood; then he sucked it and the venom out, spat it away. It was only preliminary, that draining of the reservoir; the venom was already all through her blood, para-

lyzing all nerves as it went. Barrett drove in the sharp hypodermic needle above the wound and pressed steadily on the serum plunger. A second hypodermic, applied under the curve of her left breast to protect the heart. A third, injected in the smooth curve of her right thigh where it swept into the slender sweep of her waist. Then he stood and waited.

Slowly, miraculously, her quick, tight respiration lengthened. The paralyzed muscles relaxed. A faint glow of rose color appeared in her palms, her breasts, her feet. The pale ivory skin took on richness, the soft glow of health.

"Enough with the alcohol," he said.

They wrung out the sponges, gathered up basins, and left. Barrett braced himself for the recovery. . . .

SHE was charming. They all were charming, in a physical way; but it took charm plus intelligence to enchant an educated white man. Her eyes alone could tell him if there was intelligence. They were mainly little pretty animals, without the ghost of a thought beyond finery, the seduction of men, the delights of food. Barrett could easily understand that this girl would set all men mad with her perfections, so far as they went. Good enough for Orientals; they did not demand anything more. . . . He wondered if this one would act differently. . . . No; she hadn't a chance with what he was about to give her.

Her eyelids fluttered. Barrett had ready a beaker of a strong vital solution that flooded all over the more important organs, whipping them into an intense activity and setting the heart to pounding furiously so as to restore circulation. Gently he parted her flower lips and made her swallow the dose.

She stirred, presently, moved her whole body slightly to a more comfortable position. Then her eyes opened. They stud-

ied him a moment. They were rich with intelligence, humor, keenness. A pretty wrinkle of puzzlement appeared on her brow. Then they changed swiftly to the glowing fires of passion. Her arms opened to receive him.

"Love me, O man!—Love me!—Love me!" she panted hungrily and reached up to take him.

Barrett eluded her. No. . . . He had made a bargain, in a way, with Tou Dac. She was for Tou Dac if he had courage and ingenuity enough to carry out her abduction. He must refrain. He was on fire himself, but he shook his head and tried to raise a warning hand.

Quick as a leopard she snatched at it, dragged him down upon her. She was not to be denied. Fierce, lithe, strong, she enveloped him, locked him fast.

SOME time later Barrett's detachment asserted itself. The girl was now content just to sit up and look at him; then would come a fresh wave of affection and she wanted his arms again. She was completely and utterly in love with him. Her eyes danced, sparkled, blazed, invited; repelled in sheer mischief, to relent and invite again. Her laugh was like music, her voice caressing, wise, merry, deep with feeling as she talked. Barrett wondered when, if ever, she would return to the normal and rather disdainful girl who wanted now to go back to the palace. That reaction always set in.

But it did not with her. An hour had gone and she was still absorbed in him. She was charming, vivacious, intelligent, abounding in humor. Her exotic beauty was intoxicating. Barrett considered the appalling fact that he, too, was fast falling in love with her. He had heard of love at first sight and had scoffed. Now he was experiencing it. . . . The rest had been mere physical dalliances that

satisfied, in a way; this was the real thing.

He fought against it. Sardonicly his inner mind was telling him that he was being moved to do precisely as Prince Tou Dac had done—throw away everything, position, professional standing, comforts of home and income, even his social status in the white colony of Hué, all for love of this Oriental beauty. He must not permit it. . . . He glanced in the general direction of the wharf.

"They will begin to be uneasy about you at the palace," he hinted.

"Aieeee!" Her brown eyes grew round. "The palace? You would not send me there, delight of my heart? It is to my death! The Emperor will find that I am not now virgin and"—her graceful hand with its tapering fingers clutched at her throat—"no more little Nanya Shan!"

Shan? Of course! He had been misled by Tou Dac's pronunciation, the harsh *ch* of Chan. She was a Shan girl. Barrett had heard of them. Ask the English! They had the bulk of that race over in Burma, across the river from Laos. "Why, how ridiculous! They make charming little wives!" Barrett heard in memory that sharp rejoinder by an English officer's wife to an ignorant American who was questioning a marriage with "a yellow woman," to use his own coarse phrase. Nanya was a Shan. She had those rare Burmese qualities of humor, comradeship, capability and intelligence that, better than the Japanese, set them apart from all other Oriental girls as worthy any man, even the haughty white man. She was no pretty doll!

But Barrett was now much disturbed. He had known immediately that he was risking her very life when first in her embrace. He should have denied himself, at once. The Emperor would simply have her strangled. Never before had a closely guarded virgin been sent to him as a

patient from snake-bite. It had taken Prince Tou Dac's Hindoo snake-juggler to accomplish that.

"Let me stay with you for ever, my heart's joy!" Nanya begged. "You that have brought me love! I worship you! *Aiee*—I die if you are not near—always!" She cast herself on him with passion. Barrett clasped her to him with renewed fervor, in a tumult of pity, perplexity, remorse. A rebellion against parting with her—ever—gripped him. Like Tou Dac, he felt, wildly, that nothing else in life was of any importance compared to the love of this starry and vivid beauty. And he had it, and Tou Dac hadn't. . . .

He was her first love. She had never been permitted to so much as look at any youth since the beauty-child of some obscure Laos village waxed into a womanhood fit for the Emperor. There is nothing more ardent or enduring with any woman than that love for the man first to open the gates of life to her. She would remember the white man all her days. . . .

But there weren't going to be any days, not for Nanya. Strangled, tomorrow, in some closet in the palace. Barrett did not know what to advise. He did not mention the sheer cruelty of returning her again, but she read the doubt in his eyes. She sighed, reached for the heap of jewel-encrusted finery, and her hand came away with a steel *da-sye* in it, a glittering needle of a blade five inches long.

"Love me, one last time—my all—my heart's treasure!" she murmured passionately on his breast. "Then this dagger! I swear it before the Buddha."

Tears made her eyes gorgeous as she looked out over the dank River of Perfumes in farewell. Its scented aromas of frangipani and moon-flower and lotus came in languorously through the marble lacery of Barrett's windows. Out there all

was beauty, peace, lights on the black flowing mirror of the river, glistening foliage winnowing in the breeze. It was her farewell to life; but to die was sweet in the first rapture of love, in the odors of blossoms, in the arms of her man. She could care for no other after him. . . .

Barrett rose with resolution. He had decided. Her life was precious to him now. He *was* her life; she preferred death without him. Her devotion was equal to that supreme sacrifice. And with her lay supreme happiness. Like most bachelors of long standing, he was hungry in heart for the mate of his dreams to come into his life. But he had found no one so far. She would be for ever a delight; vivacious, charming, intelligent—and a raving beauty in any style of womanly apparel she chose, European or Asiatic. His position here? *Bah!* His services as a specialist commanded employment anywhere in the East! He must get her out of this. . . .

"Wait," he said. "Put on those filmy underthings. Do up the rest. . . . Boy!" He clapped his hands. "Bring coolie suit, chop-chop!" To Nanya: "We go, Nanya, dearest! Out of this! Out of Indo-China. Away! Bangkok—Singapore—Rangoon—where you will! There is no need to die."

"Oh, my love!" In her eyes shone rapture. She reached at once for the filmy things. Rodin would have wept over the poem of her body as she stepped into them.

But his problem bristled with practical difficulties as Barrett explored into what he was letting himself in for. Escape out of the house was impossible; Tou Dac's daggers guarded every egress from its gardens, for white man or house-boy, and Nanya was now dressed as such. There was but one way left open; back to the sampan waiting at the wharf. And

that sampan would be swooped upon by another sampan, bearing Tou Dac, hot for his girl and aided by a dozen retainers. . . .

Where would Tou Dac attempt her abduction? Somewhere during that brief trip down the River of Perfumes to the palace water-gate. Tou Dac's eyes would be on her sampan every moment. No matter which way it left the wharf, he would pounce in pursuit. He would listen to no evasions either; the girl, or her dead body in proof that she had succumbed to the cobra bite, one or the other, would have to be on board.

BARRETT eyed Nanya critically. That long black gown of coarse silk worn by both sexes, with its straight lines, hid her graceful curves. She wore the flat turban of many turns of thick ribbon silk—but under it beamed her piquant ivory face, all a-sparkle with merriment. It would never do! Her beauty glorified any clothes; men would not look at them, but at her. And gasp—and remember. Tou Dac could trace her, anywhere they went.

"Can you row, dear one?" Barrett asked.

She nodded, smiled, gripped his forearm. Lord, she was strong! He resisted, but his arm was nearly bent back. That training of the dance since childhood had given her endurance and lithe strength. "Many times, on the Mekong, have I paddled the pirogue, beloved one," she told him, with her saucy eyes dancing.

"We're fixed, then," Barrett said with relief, and stepped into his laboratory. Presently he emerged with a brush and chemical pigments; also a good Colt revolver was now strapped on his belt. Caste marks with the brush disfigured Nanya's lovely face; frightful lines of worry, labor, and semi-starvation smeared her

eyebrows and grooved her piquant cheeks. She looked now like a sampan rowing-woman, gaunt with toil.

"You'll do," said Barrett. "Come."

Together they went down to the wharf, she following him as the white man's coolie. Barrett spoke sharply to the squatting sampan man:

"Go! Help them up at the house. She must be carried. Careful, now!—Coolie, make ready the bed," he ordered Nanya.

She stepped clumsily aboard and busied herself with the pillows under the great canopy tongue of the orchid. Barrett watched the sampan man till his shuffling figure darkened his doorway.

"Quick, Nanya! Take the oar," he called softly. "Straight down the river," he directed her. "Keep to the middle when passing the palace. Keep rowing, no matter what happens."

He was gone in a dive into the heart of the lotus. Swiftly he blew out the paper lanterns. Then he banked the pillows close around him, so as to hide as much as possible his lean masculine form. Over them he drew a large coverlet of eyelet-embroidered silk, then loosened the revolver in its holster. The strokes of her oar kept up steadily.

Barrett could only guess how Tou Dac would manage his abduction, but he could picture the raiding sampan dashing alongside and the Prince leaping aboard to snatch up his prey out of the heart of the lotus. He was ready for him! The oarsman? Ah, there was uncertainty enough in his plan to sicken the heart! He could not foretell what she would do when the crisis came! The Prince's retainers would deal summarily with any sampan rower who showed the least resistance. At least three of them would board with the Prince to help carry off the girl. And she would fly to his defense, reckless of risks to herself. She

had given him proofs enough of that devotion. . . . It was a fool plan, Barrett groaned miserably. He wished he hadn't tried it, but it was the best that he could think of. Once down to the river-mouth, there would be tramp steamers off the bar of Hué.

Where were they now? He could hear the distant cries of the sampan man discovering that his boat was gone. A powerful waft of frangipani perfume reminded him of a great tree of that species that grew by the garden wall some distance above the water-gate. Then came the pungent odor of teak in full blossom. To him who knew it, the River of Perfumes was a guide in landmarks by its smells alone. Those teak trees were near the water-gate; they were passing it, unchallenged.

Then her oar-strokes quickened. The craft leaped ahead. "My lord!" her voice called to him. "Boat following, fast!"

Barrett heard the faint rhythmic dip of many paddles in the silence of the river. "Jump overboard, Nanya!" he called tensely. "Meet me down the river—left bank. I'll take care of 'em! It is Prince Tou Dac, who comes to take thee."

"*Aarrh!*" That cry of rebellion against the lust of men raged from her lips. She had found love; its exaltation scorned the thought of the loveless palace girl, the plaything of princes. "That withered old ape?—Better the dagger, my heart! I have it with me."

Barrett almost broke up his ruse in his anxiety. "*Don't!*" he cried. "Jump and swim ashore. They will take you for the sampan rower. You can meet me below——"

THERE was no time for more. A ferocious gabble of yells barked out, close at hand, over the River of Perfumes. Paddles splashed furiously. A heavy

wooden bump careened the sampan as a great long war pirogue swept alongside.

"*Jump!*" Barrett yelped; then lay tense under the coverlet, one hand gripping his revolver butt. There was commotion on board, the sampan rocking wildly under the thrust of sandals, a violent leap of some powerful man down into the heart of the lotus. Gripping hands tore away the coverlet for a gloat over the languid beauty ensconced in the pillows, and then—Prince Tou Dac arrested his clutch in midair. His mouth gaped open. He was looking down into the bore of Barrett's revolver.

"Hands up! *Back!*—Back to your pirogue, all of you!" That order was imperative as Barrett leaped up with a thrust of his left hand. Tou Dac gave back before the revolver, his hands on high; then he found his voice.

"Doctor Barrett!" he grated, his eyes all ferocity, astonishment, bafflement. "What do you here? Where is she? What does this mean?"

"It means," said Barrett bitingly, "that you are not to have her, Prince. I sent her back to the Emperor some other way——"

"*You did!* You dared, dog of a white man?" A white-hot glare of rage made Tou Dac's eyes feral. The chains of his wrath were loosed. "Upon him! *Kill!*" He clutched for Barrett's pistol with that harsh shout.

Barrett eluded his groping talons with a swift circular twist of the gun that brought its barrel down viciously, with all his force, on Tou Dac's turban with the movement. The Prince crashed down across his legs. But close behind him followed a circle of long, curved *dab-syes* thrusting for Barrett's life under their guarding arms. He could back no further into the orchid shrine.

"*Mawng Shwé!*" That piercing silvery

voice was no sampan man's! It arrested them all, to glance back at her. Nanya stood dragging at the dagger within her coolie robe. She was tensed to leap to his help. She had not jumped overboard. Her accents were of extreme terror for the life of her love. The raiders grinned diabolically. They had them both now! The Prince would come to. . . . Two of them faced her way; the rest crouched to close in on Barrett and finish him.

"Don't! Keep away, Nanya!" He bared clenched teeth at her; then fired as rapidly as he could pull trigger. The rest was a confused hurly-burly of struggle in the darkness, the sulfurous flame and smoke of his revolver at close quarters, cuts, stabs, blows, men groaning and stumbling. He was conscious of her in the thick of it, active, swift-turning as any dancing-girl, meeting their slashes with thrusts of her dagger, warding off with quick blow of her arm some fatal stab at him. And then it was all over and the bower smoldered with red patches of fire on its pillows and reeked with powder-smoke fumes.

Barrett, bleeding from gashes and sobbing for breath, flung his assailants hastily over the gunwale, one by one, back into the pirogue they had come from. Then he sat down and let the sampan drift; on down the River of Perfumes. Nanya lay dead among the pillows. She had given her life to save his. . . .

LISTLESSLY he watched the Prince's pirogue drift away. There was commotion now along shore over the shooting, but what did it all matter? Her loss was too cruel to be borne. To have a great love awakened in his own heart, after all these empty and cynical and unsatisfied years in the East, only to— He had seen that fatal stab at the last moment. On guard for herself, it would

never have more than scratched. . . . But there was one greasy knife-hand in his grip at that moment. A successful wrench, and it would have killed him. . . .

Mechanically he slapped out with a wetted palm those patches of fire that threatened to become flame too near her body. And then he got up and bent over her. By heaven, there was just a chance! They knew that it was essential to take her alive. The Prince would execute, with exquisite tortures, that man who dared really harm her. A man can take the force out of his blow at the very last instant, if his mind so directs. Barrett felt her again, a faint thread of hope lighting his gloom. His first examination had been hasty. Dead; he had been only too sure of it! But she was still warm. And, after a long time, Barrett nodded and a throb of poignant joy flooded all over him. Yes, her heart was still going; in the faintest of beats and at long intervals. . . . That heart was his. . . .

Frantically he set to work to do what had long been left undone. It would be a fight to save her. And he had no stimulants, no laboratory, no aids of any kind save his own medical skill—and his own fierce will-power. He raged with the intensity of that and prayed fervidly! "God! Have mercy! Give her back to me! . . . They shan't have her! They *shan't!*" His thoughts raved against the powers of darkness as he worked over her, alternately begging God and defying Death. He knew, now, the agony of a lost loved one; and there is no greater. He sobbed ungovernably as he bandaged.

And then he had done all he could for her. He went back to take the oar. The sampan had long since drifted past the excited crowds in the palace gardens; it now leaped ahead down the River of Perfumes, impelled by Barrett's vigorous and stinging strokes. A quiet happiness

suffused him as the boat entered the city area of Hué and passed lines of thatched pirogues moored side by side along both banks. There was just a chance, yet! Reach a steamer and a medicine chest, and he could bring her around. . . .

IT WAS no longer the River of Perfumes, but a river of stinks and industrial smells. Tall black factory chimneys in the night; rice mills; moored steam launches, lighters. All were asleep in the dead of night. Then came a faint tang of salt air, and Barrett quickened his strokes. Lagoons; the lighterage port of Thuan-an; and then, at last, tramp steamers anchored out in the offing.

Barrett hailed one: "Ship ahoy! Can you take a couple of passengers?"

A gabble of Malay from some serang on watch. "Am waking capman, boss."

Presently a sleepy officer, in pajamas and naval cap, stood by the rail. Barrett repeated his query.

"Aye. We're leaving for Singapore on the turn of the tide. If that suits ye, come aboard."

Barrett surged with satisfaction. Good! Singapore! There would be French complications over this affair at either Saigon or Hanoi.

A rope ladder was lowered. Up it he bore his limp burden. He kicked the sampan adrift. A lantern shone on their faces as the grizzled Scotch captain sized up his passengers.

"Man, she's a beauty! Ye're in luck, I'd say," he commented with a knowing twinkle over the old, old story—in the East. White man taking a little trip with a native girl. . . .

"She's my wife." Barrett shut that off sternly. "Your medicine chest, Captain. She got hurt, badly, by a jealous native. I'd like a stateroom if you can manage it."

"Oh, aye." The captain shrugged and gave him up. He had seen that brief infatuation for a native girl too. It always ended badly—for the girl. Nevertheless he hurried off for the ship's medicine chest.

Barrett faced his attitude defiantly. He loved her, sincerely, and with his whole heart. Let them take it as they would! She was a treasure. In Singapore he would look around for a position at the court of some Oriental potentate whose gardens were pestered with snakes. . . .

And it was in the stateroom berth that Nanya finally came to. Her eyes opened, looked up at him with recognition. Then they glowed on him with a steadfast adoration. Barrett could do nothing but murmur tenderly her name.

She was too weak to touch. She held onto life but with the merest thread as yet. But she was gaining on it. An arch look came, presently, into her eyes; her lips quirked.

"Man," she said feebly, but there was the faint music of laughter in her voice. "My man! . . . What is your name?"

Barrett smiled down at her delightedly. They had omitted that trifle, up to the present. "Jim," he told her. "Jim Barrett, love."

She puzzled prettily. "Djeem? . . . What a funny noise! I have a better one, my all. Mawng Shwé, my Golden Prince! Kiss me. . . ."

Barrett ventured to do so. He held her, very gently, and drank in the poignant happiness of it. She was adorable, this gift of the River of Perfumes; she was worthy the best that was in him; and she was his. . . .

The love-theme from *Madam Butterfly* was singing in his soul; it would never end like that tragedy, he vowed before God.

Alleys of Darkness

By PATRICK ERVIN

A story of Singapore and Dennis Dorgan, hardest-fisted slugger in the merchant marine, and the maze of intrigue that enmeshed him



"I stepped in and hooked my right to his jaw."

WHEN the gong ended my fight with Kid Leary in the Sweet Dreams Fight Club, Singapore, I was tired but contented. The first seven rounds had been close, but the last three I'd plastered the Kid all over the ring, though I hadn't knocked him out like I'd did in Shanghai some months before, when I flattened him in the twelfth round. The scrap in Singapore was just for ten; another round and I'd had him.

But anyway, I'd shaded him so thor-

oughly I knew I'd justified the experts which had made me a three to one favorite. The crowd was applauding wildly, the referee was approaching, and I stepped forward and held out my glove hand—when to my utter dumfounding, he brushed past me and lifted the glove of the groggy and bloody Kid Leary!

A instant's silence reigned, shattered by a nerve-racking scream from the ringside. The referee, Jed Withers, released Leary, who collapsed into the rosin,

and Whithers ducked through the ropes like a rabbit. The crowd riz bellowing, and recovering my frozen wits, I gave vent to lurid langwidge and plunged outa the ring in pursuit of Whithers. The fans was screaming mad, smashing benches, tearing the ropes offa the ring and demanding the whereabouts of Whithers, so's they could hang him to the rafters. But he had disappeared, and the mad-dened crowd raged in vain.

I found my way dazedly to my dressing-room, where I set down on a table and tried to recover from the shock. Bill O'Brien and the rest of the crew was there, frothing at the mouth, each having sunk his entire wad on me. I considered going into Leary's dressing-room and beating him up again, but decided he'd had nothing to do with the crooked decision. He was just as surprized as me when Whithers declared him winner.

Whilst I was trying to pull on my clothes, hindered more'n helped by my raging shipmates, whose langwidge was getting more appalling every instant, a stocky bewhiskered figger come busting through the mob, and done a fantastic dance in front of me. It was the Old Man, with lick on his breath and tears in his eyes.

"I'm rooint!" he howled. "I'm a doomed man! Oh, to think as I've warmed a sarpint in my boozum! Dennis Dorgan, this here's the last straw!"

"Aw, pipe down!" snarled Bill O'Brien. "It wasn't Denny's fault. It was that dashety triple-blank thief of a referee——"

"To think of goin' on the beach at my age!" screamed the Old Man, wringing the salt water outa his whiskers. He fell down on a bench and wept at the top of his voice. "A thousand bucks I lost—every cen'. I could rake, scrape and border!" he bawled.

"Aw, well, you still got your ship," somebody said impatiently.

"That's just it!" the Old Man wailed. "That thousand bucks was dough I owed them old pirates, McGregor, McClune & McKile. Part of what I owe, I mean. They agreed to accept a thousand as part payment, and gimme more time to raise the rest. Now it's gone, and they'll take the ship! They'll take the *Sea Girl*! All I got in the world! Them old sharks ain't got no more heart than a Malay pirate. I'm rooint!"

The crew fell silent at that, and I said: "Why'd you bet all that dough?"

"I was lickered up," he wept. "I got no sense when I'm full. Old Cap'n Donnelly, and McVey and them got to raggin' me, and the first thing I knowed, I'd bet 'em the thousand, givin' heavy odds. Now I'm rooint!"

He throwed back his head and bellered like a walrus with the belly-ache.

I just give a dismal groan and sunk my head in my hands, too despondent to say nothing. The crew bust forth in curses against Whithers, and sallied forth to search further for him, hauling the Old Man along with them, still voicing his woes in a voice like a steamboat whistle.

PRESENTLY Iriz with a sigh and hauled on my duds. They was no sound outside. Apparently I was alone in the building except for Mike, my white bulldog. All at once I noticed him smelling of a closed locker. He whined, scratched at it, and growled. With a sudden suspicion I strode over and jerked open the door. Inside I seen a huddled figger. I jerked it rudely forth and set it upright. It was Jed Whithers. He was pale and shaking, and he had cobwebs in his hair. He kinda cringed, evidently expecting me to bust into loud cusses. For once I was too mad for that. I was probably as pale as he was,

and his eyes dilated like he seen murder in mine.

"Jed Whithers," I said, shoving him up against the wall with one hand whilst I knotted the other'n into a mallet, "this is one time in my life when I'm in the mood for killin'."

"For God's sake, Dorgan," he gurgled; "you can't murder me!"

"Can you think of any reason why I shouldn't put you in a wheel-chair for the rest of your life?" I demanded. "You've roint my friends and all the fans which bet on me, lost my skipper his ship——"

"Don't hit me, Dorgan!" he begged, grabbing my wrist with shaking fingers. "I had to do it; honest to God, Sailor, I *had* to do it! I know you won—won by a mile. But it was the only thing I *could* do!"

"What you mean?" I demanded suspiciously.

"Lemme sit down!" he gasped.

I reluctantly let go of him, and he slumped down onto a near-by bench. He sat there and shook, and mopped the sweat offa his face. He was trembling all over.

"Are the customers all gone?" he asked.

"Ain't nobody here but me and my man-eatin' bulldog," I answered grimly, standing over him. "Go on—spill what you got to say before I start varnishin' the floor with you."

"I was forced to it, Sailor," he said. "There's a man who has a hold on me."

"What you mean, a hold?" I asked suspiciously.

"I mean, he's got me in a spot," he said. "I have to do like he says. It ain't myself I have to think of—Dorgan, I'm goin' to trust you. You got the name of bein' a square shooter. I'm goin' to tell you the whole thing.

"Sailor, I got a sister named Con-

stance, a beautiful girl, innocent as a new-born lamb. She trusted a man, Sailor, a dirty, slimy snake in human form. He tricked her into signin' a document—Dorgan, that paper was a confession of a crime he'd committed himself!"

Whithers here broke down and sobbed with his face in his hands. I shuffled my feet uncertainly, beginning to realize they was always more'n one side to any question.

He raised up suddenly and said: "Since then, that man's been holdin' that faked confession over me and her like a club. He's forced me to do his filthy biddin' time and again. I'm a honest man by nature, Sailor, but to protect my little sister"—he kinda choked for a instant—"I've stooped to low deeds. Like this tonight. This man was bettin' heavy on Leary, gettin' big odds——"

"Somebody sure was," I muttered. "Lots of Leary money in sight."

"Sure!" exclaimed Whithers eagerly. "That was it; he made me throw the fight to Leary, the dirty rat, to protect his bets."

I begun to feel new wrath rise in my gigantic breast.

"You mean this low-down polecat has been blackmailin' you on account of the hold he's got over your sister?" I demanded.

"Exactly," he said, dropping his face in his hands. "With that paper he can send Constance to prison, if he takes the notion."

"I never heered of such infermy," I growled. "Whyn't you bust him on the jaw and take that confession away from him?"

"I ain't no fightin' man," said Whithers. "He's too big for me. I wouldn't have a chance."

"Well, I would," I said. "Listen,

Whithers, buck up and quit cryin'. I'm goin' to help you."

His head jerked up and he stared at me kinda wild-eyed.

"You mean you'll help me get that paper?"

"You bet!" I retorted. "I ain't the man to stand by and let no innercent girl be persecuted. Besides, this mess tonight is his fault."

Whithers just set there for a second, and I thought I seen a slow smile start to spread over his lips, but I mighta been mistook, because he wasn't grinning when he held out his hand and said tremulously: "Dorgan, you're all they say you are!"

A remark like that ain't necessarily a compliment; some of the things said about me ain't flattering; but I took it in the spirit in which it seemed to be give, and I said: "Now tell me, who is this rat?"

He glanced nervously around, then whispered: "Ace Bissett!"

I grunted in surprize. "The devil you say! I'd never of thought it."

"He's a fiend in human form," said Whithers bitterly. "What's your plan?"

"Why," I said, "I'll go to his Diamond Place and demand the confession. If he don't give it to me, I'll maul him and take it away from him."

"You'll get shot up," said Whithers. "Bissett is a bad man to fool with. Listen, I got a plan. If we can get him to a certain house I know about, we can search him for the paper. He carries it around with him, though I don't know just where. Here's my plan——"

I listened attentively, and as a result, perhaps a hour later I was heading through the narrer streets with Mike, driving a closed car which Whithers had produced kinda mysteriously. Whithers wasn't with me; he was gone to prepare the place where I was to bring Bissett to.

I DRIV up the alley behind Ace's big new saloon and gambling-hall, the Diamond Palace, and stopped the car near a back door. It was a very high-class joint. Bissett was friends with wealthy sportsmen, officials, and other swells. He was what they call a soldier of fortune, and he'd been everything, everywhere—aviator, explorer, big game hunter, officer in the armies of South America and China—and what have you.

A native employee stopped me at the door, and asked me what was my business, and I told him I wanted to see Ace. He showed me into the room which opened on the alley, and went after Bissett—which could not of suited my plan better.

Purty soon a door opened, and Bissett strode in—a tall, broad-shouldered young fellow, with steely eyes and wavy blond hair. He was in a dress suit, and altogether looked like he'd stepped right outa the social register. And as I looked at him, so calm and self-assured, and thought of poor Whithers being driv to crime by him, and the Old Man losing his ship on account of his crookedness, I seen red.

"Well, Dorgan, what can I do for you?" he asked.

I said nothing. I stepped in and hooked my right to his jaw. It caught him flat-footed, with his hands down. He hit the floor full length, and he didn't twitch.

I bent over him, run my hands through his clothes, found his six-shooter and throwed it aside. Music and the sounds of revelry reached me through the walls, but evidently nobody had seen or heard me slug Bissett. I lifted him and histed him onto my shoulders—no easy job, because he was as big as me, and limp as a rag.

But I done it, and started for the alley. I got through the door all right, which

I was forced to leave open, account of having both hands full, and just as I was dumping Ace into the back part of the car. I heered a scream. Wheeling, I seen a girl had just come into the room I'd left, and was standing frozen, staring wildly at me. The light from the open door shone full on me and my captive. The girl was Glory O'Dale, Ace Bissett's sweetheart. I hurriedly slammed the car door shut and jumped to the wheel, and as I roared off down the alley, I was vaguely aware that Glory had rushed out of the building after me, screaming blue murder.

IT WAS purty late, and the route I took they wasn't many people abroad. Behind me I begun to hear Bissett stir and groan, and I pushed Mike over in the back seat to watch him. But he hadn't fully come to when I drew up in the shadows beside the place Whithers had told me about—a ramshackle old building down by a old rotting, deserted wharf. Nobody seemed to live anywheres close around, or if they did, they was outa sight. As I clum outa the car, a door opened a crack, and I seen Whithers' white face staring at me.

"Did you get him, Sailor?" he whispered.

For answer I jerked open the back door, and Bissett tumbled out on his ear and laid there groaning dimly. Whithers started back with a cry.

"Is he dead?" he asked fearfully.

"Would he holler like that if he was?" I asked impatiently. "Help me carry him in, and we'll search him."

"Wait'll I tie him up," said Whithers, producing some cords, and to my disgust, he bound the unconscious critter hand and foot.

"It's safer this way," Whithers said. "He's a devil, and we can't afford to take chances."

We then picked him up and carried him through the door, into a very dimly lighted room, across that 'un, and into another'n which was better lit—the winders being covered so the light couldn't be seen from the outside. And I got the surprize of my life. They was five men in that room. I wheeled on Whithers. "What's the idee?" I demanded.

"Now, no v, Sailor," said Whithers, arranging Bissett on the bench where we'd laid him. "These are just friends of mine. They know about Bissett and my sister."

I heered what sounded like a snicker, and I turned to glare at the assembled "friends". My gaze centered on a fat, flashy-dressed bird smoking a big black cigar; diamonds shone all over his fingers, and in his stick-pin. The others was just muggs.

"A fine lot of friends you pick out!" I said irritably to Whithers. "Diamond Joe Galt is been mixed up in every shady deal that's been pulled in the past three years. And if you'd raked the Seven Seas you couldn't found four dirtier thugs than Limey Teak, Bill Reynolds, Dutch Steinmann, and Red Partland."

"Hey, you——" Red Partland riz, clenching his fists, but Galt grabbed his arm.

"Stop it, Red," he advised. "Easy does it. Sailor," he addressed me with a broad smile which I liked less'n I'd liked a scowl, "they's no use in abuse. We're here to help our pal Whithers get justice. That's all. You've done your part. You can go now, with our thanks."

"Not so fast," I growled, and just then Whithers hollered: "Bissett's come to!"

We all turned around and seen that Bissett's eyes was open, and blazing.

"Well, you dirty rats," he greeted us all and sundry, "you've got me at last, have you?" He fixed his gaze on me, and said: "Dorgan, I thought you were a

man. If I'd had any idea you were mixed up in this racket, you'd have never got a chance to slug me as you did."

"Aw, shut up," I snarled. "A fine nerve you've got, talkin' about men, after what you've did!"

Galt pushed past me and stood looking down at Bissett, and I seen his fat hands clenched, and the veins swell in his temples.

"Bissett," he said, "we've got you cold and you know it. Kick in—where's that paper?"

"You cursed fools!" Bissett raved, struggling at his cords till the veins stood out on his temples too. "I tell you, the paper's worthless."

"Then why do you object to givin' it to us?" demanded Whithers.

"Because I haven't got it!" raged Bissett. "I destroyed it, just as I've told you before."

"He's lyin'," snarled Red Partland. "He wouldn't never destroy such a thing as that. It means millions. Here, I'll make him talk——"

He shouldered forward and grabbed Bissett by the throat. I grabbed Red in turn, and tore him away.

"Belay!" I gritted. "He's a rat, but just the same I ain't goin' to stand by and watch no helpless man be tortured."

"Why, you——" Red bellered, and swung for my jaw.

I ducked and sunk my left to the wrist in his belly and he dropped like his legs had been cut out from under him. The others started forward, rumbling, and I wheeled towards 'em, seething with fight. But Galt got between us and shoved his gorillas back.

"Here," he snapped. "No fightin' amongst ourselves! Get up, Red.—Now, Sailor," he begun to pat my sleeves in his soothing way, which I always despises beyond words, "there ain't no need for

hard feelin's. I know just how you feel. But we got to have that paper. You know that, Sailor——"

Suddenly a faint sound made itself evident.

"What's that?" gasped Limey, going pale.

"It's Mike," I said. "I left him in the car, and he's got tired of settin' out there, and is scratchin' at the front door. I'm goin' to go get him, but I'll be right back, and if anybody lays a hand on Bissett whilst I'm gone, I'll bust him into pieces. We'll get that paper, but they ain't goin' to be no torturin'."

I strode out, scornful of the black looks cast my way. As I shut the door behind me, a clamor of conversation bust out, so many talking at wunst I couldn't understand much, but every now and then Ace Bissett's voice riz above the din in accents of anger and not pain, so I knowed they wasn't doing nothing to him. I crossed the dim outer room, opened the door and let Mike in, and then, forgetting to bolt it—I ain't used to secrecy and such—I started back for the inner room.

BEFORE I reached the other door, I heered a quick patter of feet outside. I wheeled—the outer door bust violently open, and into the room rushed Glory O'Dale. She was panting hard, her dress was tore, her black locks damp, and her dark eyes was wet and bright as black jewels after a rain. And she had Ace's six-shooter in her hand.

"You filthy dog!" she cried, throwing down on me.

I looked right into the muzzle of that .45 as she jerked the trigger. The hammer snapped on a faulty cartridge, and before she could try again, Mike launched hisself from the floor at her. I'd taught him never to bite a woman. He didn't

bite Glory. He threwed hisself bodily against her so hard he knocked her down and the gun flew outa her hand.

I picked it up and stuck it into my hip pocket. Then I started to help her up, but she hit my hand aside and jumped up, tears of fury running down her cheeks. Golly, she was a beauty!

"You beast!" she raged. "What have you done with Ace? I'll kill you if you've harmed him! Is he in that room?"

"Yeah, and he ain't harmed," I said, "but he oughta be hung——"

She screamed like a siren. "Don't you dare! Don't you touch a hair of his head! Oh, Ace!"

She then slapped my face, jerked out a handful of hair, and kicked both my shins.

"What I can't understand is," I said, escaping her clutches, "is why a fine girl like you ties up with a low-down rat like Bissett. With your looks, Glory——"

"To the devil with my looks!" she wept, stamping on the floor. "Let me past; I know Ace is in that room—I heard his voice as I came in."

They wasn't no noise in the inner room now. Evidently all of them was listening to what was going on out here, Ace included.

"You can't go in there," I said. "We got to search Ace for the incriminatin' evidence he's holdin' against Jed Whithers' sister——"

"You're mad as a March hare," she said. "Let me by!"

And without no warning she back-heeled me and pushed me with both hands. It was so unexpected I ignominiously crashed to the floor, and she darted past me and throwed open the inner door. Mike drove for her, and this time he was red-eyed, but I grabbed him as he went by.

Glory halted an instant on the thresh-

old with a cry of mingled triumph, fear and rage. I riz, cussing beneath my breath and dusting off my britches. Glory ran across the room, eluding the grasping paws of Joe Galt, and throwed herself with passionate abandon on the prostrate form of Ace Bissett. I noticed that Ace, which hadn't till then showed the slightest sign of fear, was suddenly pale and his jaw was grim set.

"It was madness for you to come, Glory," he muttered.

"I saw Dorgan throw you into the car," she whimpered, throwing her arms around him, and tugging vainly at his cords. "I jumped in another and followed—blew out a tire a short distance from here—lost sight of the car I was following and wandered around in the dark alleys on foot for awhile, till I saw the car standing outside. I came on in——"

"Alone? My God!" groaned Ace.

"Alone?" echoed Galt, with a sigh of relief. He flicked some dust from his lapel, stuck his cigar back in his mouth at a cocky angle, and said: "Well, now, we'll have a little talk. Come here, Glory."

She clung closer to Ace, and Ace said in a low voice, almost a whisper: "Let her alone, Galt." His eyes was like fires burning under the ice.

Galt's mugs was grinning evilly and muttering to theirselves. Whithers was nervous and kept mopping perspiration. The air was tense. I was nervous and impatient; something was wrong, and I didn't know what. So when Galt started to say something, I took matters into my own hands.

"Bissett," I said, striding across the room and glaring down at him, "if they's a ounce of manhood in you, this here girl's devotion oughta touch even your snakish soul. Why don't you try to redeem yourself a little, anyway? Kick in

with that paper! A man which is loved by a woman like Glory O'Dale loves you, oughta be above holdin' a forged confession over a innocent girl's head."

Bissett's mouth fell open. "What's he talking about?" he demanded from the world at large.

"I don't know," said Glory uneasily, snuggling closer to him. "He talked that way out in the other room. I think he's punch-drunk."

"Dorgan," said Bissett, "you don't belong in this crowd. Are you suffering from some sort of an hallucination?"

"Don't hand me no such guff, you snake!" I roared. "You know why I brung you here—to get the confession you gyped outa Whithers' sister, and blackmailed him with—just like you made him throw my fight tonight."

Bissett just looked dizzy, but Glory leaped up and faced me.

"You mean you think Ace made Whithers turn in that rotten decision?" she jerked out.

"I don't think," I answered sullenly. "I know. Whithers said so."

She jumped like she was galvanized.

"Why, you idiot!" she hollered, "they've made a fool of you! Jed Whithers hasn't any sister! He lied! Ace had nothing to do with it! Whithers was hired to throw the fight to Leary! Look at him!" Her voice rose to a shriek of triumph, as she pointed a accusing finger at Jed Whithers. "Look at him! Look how pale he is! He's scared witless!"

"It's a lie!" gulped Whithers, sweating and tearing at his crumpled collar like it was choking him.

"It's not a lie!" Glory was nearly hysterical by this time. "He was paid to throw the fight! And there's the man who paid him!" And she dramatically pointed her finger at Diamond Joe Galt!

GALT was on his feet, his small eyes glinting savagely, his jaws grinding his cigar to a pulp.

"What about it, Galt?" I demanded, all at sea and bewildered.

He dashed down his cigar with a oath. His face was dark and convulsed.

"What of it?" he snarled. "What you goin' to do about it? I've stood all the guff out of you I'm goin' to!"

His hand snaked inside his coat and out, and I was looking into the black muzzle of a wicked stumpy automatic.

"You can't slug this like you did Red, you dumb gorilla," he smirked viciously. "Sure, the dame's tellin' the truth. Whithers took you in like a sucklin' lamb."

"When you caught him in your dressin'-room, he told you the first lie that come to him, knowin' you for a soft sap where women's concerned. Then when you fell for it, and offered to help him, he thought fast and roped you into this deal. We been tryin' to get hold of Bissett for a long time. He's got somethin' we want. But he was too smart and too tough for us. Now, thanks to you, we got him, *and* the girl. Now we're goin' to sweat what we want out of him, and you're goin' to keep your trap shut, see?"

"You mean they ain't no Constance Whithers, and no confession?" I said slowly, trying to get things straight. A raucous roar of mirth greeted the remark.

"No, sucker," taunted Galt; "you just been took in, you sap."

A wave of red swept across my line of vision. With a maddened roar I plunged recklessly at Galt, gun and all. Everything happened at once. Galt closed his finger on the trigger just as Mike, standing beside him all this time, closed his jaws on Galt's leg. Galt screamed and leaped convulsively, the gun exploded in the air, missing me so close the powder singed my hair, and my

right mauler crunched into Galt's face, flattening his nose, knocking out all his front teeth, and fracturing his jaw-bone. As he hit the floor Mike was right on top of him.

The next instant Galt's thugs was on top of me. We rolled across the room in a wild tangle of arms and legs, casually shattering tables and chairs on the way. Mike, finding Galt was out cold, abandoned him and charged to my aid. I heered Red Partland howl as Mike's iron fangs locked in his britches. But I had my hands full. Fists and hobnails was glancing off my carcass, and a thumb was feeling for my eye. I set my teeth in this thumb and was rewarded by a squeal of anguish, but the action didn't slow up any.

It was while strangling Limey Teak beneath me, whilst the other three was trying to stomp my ribs in and kick my head off, that I realized that another element had entered into the fray. There was the impact of a chair-leg on a human skull, and Jed Whithers give up the ghost with a whistling sigh. Glory O'Dale was taking a hand.

Dutch Steinmann next gave a ear-piercing howl, and Bill Reynolds abandoned me to settle her. Feeling Limey go limp beneath me, I riz, shaking Steinmann offa my shoulders, just in time to see Reynolds duck Glory's chair-leg and smack her down. Bissett give a most awful yell of rage, but he wasn't no madder than me. I left the floor in a flying tackle that carried Reynolds off his feet with a violence which nearly busted his skull against the floor. Too crazy-mad for reason, I set to work to hammer him to death, and though he was already senseless, I would probably of continued indefinite, had not Dutch Steinmann distracted my attention by smashing a chair over my head.

I riz through the splinters and caught

him with a left hook that tore his ear nearly off and stood him on his neck in a corner. I then looked for Red Partland and seen him crawling out a winder which he'd tore the shutters off of. He was a rooin; his clothes was nearly all tore offa him, and he was bleeding like a stuck hawg and bawling like one, and Mike didn't show no intentions of abandoning the fray. His jaws was locked in what was left of Red's britches, and he had his feet braced against the wall below the sill. As I looked, Red gave a desperate wrench and tumbled through the winder, and I heered his lamentations fading into the night.

SHAKING the blood and sweat outa my eyes, I glared about at the battlefield, strewn with the dead and dying—at least with the unconscious, some of which was groaning loudly, whilst others slumbered in silence.

Glory was just getting up, dizzy and wobbly. Mike was smelling each of the victims in turn, and Ace was begging somebody to let him loose. Glory wobbled over to where he'd rolled offa the bench, and I followed her, kinda stiffly. At least one of my ribs had been broke by a boot-heel. My scalp was cut open, and blood was trickling down my side, where Limey Teak had made a ill-advised effort to knife me. I also thought one of them rats had hit me from behind with a club, till I discovered that sometime in the fray I'd fell on something hard in my hip pocket. This, I found, was Ace Bissett's pistol, which I'd clean forgot all about. I throwed it aside with disgust; them things is a trap and a snare.

I blinked at Ace with my one good eye, whilst Glory worked his cords offa him.

"I see I misjudged you," I said, lending her a hand. "I apolergize, and if you want satisfaction, right here and now is good enough for me."

"Good Lord, man," he said, with his arms full of Glory. "I don't want to fight you. I still don't know just what it was all about, but I'm beginning to understand."

I set down somewhat groggily on a bench which wasn't clean busted.

"What I want to know is," I said, "what that paper was they was talkin' about."

"Well," he said, "about a year ago I befriended a half-cracked Russian scientist, and he tried in his crazy way to repay me. He told me, in Galt's presence, that he was going to give me a formula that would make me the richest man on earth. He got blown up in an explosion in his laboratory shortly afterward, and an envelope was found in his room addressed to me, and containing a formula. Galt found out about it, and he's been hounding me ever since, trying to get it. He thought it was all the Russian claimed. In reality it was merely the disconnected scribblings of a disordered mind—good Lord, it claimed to be a process for the manufacture of diamonds! Utter insanity—but Galt never would believe it."

"And he thought I was dumb," I cogitated. "But hey, Glory, how'd you know it was Galt hired Whithers to throw my fight to Leary?"

"I didn't," she admitted. "I just ac-

cused Galt of it to start you fellows fighting among yourselves."

"Well, I'll be derved," I said, and just then one of the victims which had evidently come to while we was talking, riz stealthily to his all fours and started crawling towards the winder. It was Jed Whithers. I strode after him and hauled him to his feet.

"How much did Galt pay you for throwin' the bout to Leary?" I demanded.

"A thousand dollars," he stuttered.

"Gimme it," I ordered, and with shakin' hands he hauled out a fold of bills. I fluttered 'em and saw they was intact.

"Turn around and look out the winder at the stars," I commanded.

"I don't see no stars," he muttered.

"You will," I promised, as I swung my foot and histed him clean over the sill.

As his wails faded up the aliey, I turned to Ace and Glory, and said: "Galt must of cleaned up plenty on this deal, payin' so high for his dirty work. This here dough, though, is goin' to be put to a good cause. The Old Man lost all his money account of Whithers' crooked decision. This thousand bucks will save his ship. Now let's go. I wanta get hold of the promoter of the Sweet Dreams, and get another match tomorrer night with Kid Leary—this time with a honest referee."

*Another story of Sailor Dorgan will
appear in our next issue*





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