

Bim-bashi Baruk of Egypt

Bimbashi Baruk of Egypt

by Sax Rohmer

1944

Chapter 1

Mystery Strikes at Ragstaff Hill

THERE WERE two witnesses of the remarkable incident on Ragstaff Hill—or two witnesses who reported it. In normal times the mystery would have been a front-page sensation; but these were not normal times. What happened was this:

Early one morning as reluctant winter fell back before spring—spear heads of crocus and daffodil were piercing the fresh green so recently white-mantled—Major Stampling, of Old Place, set out as was his custom to take a brisk walk to the top of the hill and back. He wore a plus-four suit and a cap of the same outstanding check, with a red woolen pullover having a polo collar to merge with the burgundy hue of his face. He carried an ash stick, and field glasses were swung over his shoulder.

At a point about midway between the gates of Old Place and the crown of the hill, the major pulled up sharply. The day promised perfection, and the view was one of which he never tired: a tableau of close-hedged farmland sweeping upward like a gesture to the pale blue sky outlining the crest. Sea tang spiced the air. Several magpies were exploring furrows of a neighboring meadow and the chatter of a host of their less comely cousins, the rooks, sounded pleasantly in his ears.

Just by an open gate, where a track led down to Hooper's Farm couched in the valley, and squarely in his path, a man was seated before a small easel, painting.

"Well, I'll be dashed," muttered the major.

It was not that the prospect failed to merit the services of art; it was how, with a great part of the world locked in a death grapple, anyone could find either leisure or enthusiasm for painting. The fellow was quite young, too; not a day over thirty, he'd be bound, and a bronzed, athletic-looking figure of a man. Two minutes later the major stood behind the artist, monocle adjusted, considering the painting.

He didn't like it. On this point he was quite definite. He thought of the fine prints in Old Place and decided that this man couldn't draw.

Although the painter had offered no indication of the fact that he was aware of Major Stampling's criticism, he presently dropped his brush. He was a lean, wiry man, and he wore breeches and muddied riding boots. A sort of suede jacket and a spotted muffler completed his visible kit, for his head, covered with black, rather wavy hair, was bare. He turned, smiling up at the major.

"Rotten, isn't it?" he remarked.

The critic's stare met a glance from dark blue eyes which were humorously pathetic and were set in a brown, aquiline face which, he had to admit, was that of a man of action.

"I would not go so far as that, sir," he replied, "but I confess I have seen better."

"So have I," murmured the painter, relighting a briar pipe—"lots."

His accent and manner were those of a cultured Englishman, and his blue eyes were English, too, or perhaps Irish; but in repose there was something Oriental about the drooping lids, and his slow smile was not a Western product. Major Stampling scented a Wandering Jew and wondered where the refugee was billeted.

"You see," the painter explained, "these mother-o'-pearl effects of early morning fascinate me. Whistler knew how to trap them. John can do it, and Brangwyn. Damned if I can."

"It is possible, sir," the major began—when at that very moment it happened.

Heralded by a coughing and spitting of asthmatic cylinders, a car crested Ragstaff Hill. The painter watched it idly; Major Stampling swung his binoculars forward, raised and focused them. On the crown of the hill the car seemed almost to pause for a moment. Then, at ever-gathering speed, it raced down the slope past a coppice of firs—and was gone.

As if petrified, the major stood, glasses raised, still watching the stretch of now empty road. Some explanation of his attitude must have come to the artist, for he sprang up. He had realized the fact that Major Stampling was listening—listening so intently that he had forgotten to move.

And now, the other listened also. He heard the drone of the engine become a

distant roar—a shriek—and finally a sound so like that of a heavy bomb falling that, unconsciously, he grasped the major’s arm.

Following that shrill wail, complete momentary silence had fallen. Battalions of rooks, disturbed, rose from the woods; their discord filled the morning. Like a sooty cloud against blue sky they swept overhead. A robin seated on the farm gate chirped as if in warning. Major Stampling lowered the glasses and turned to the painter: his florid complexion was slightly modified.

“Good God!” he said. “That rat-trap has done for her at last. Always knew it would. Brakes failed or something—”

“You speak to a stranger, sir,” the painter interrupted, and his crisp, almost peremptory, change of manner did not escape the soldier. “You know the owner of that car?”

“Polly Anstruther. Everybody knows her. Old bus of hers was literally tied together with string. But that’s Ragstaff Hill, sir, steepest gradient in the county.”

“Well?”

“Well—there’s a right-angle bend halfway down, slap on the cliff’s edge, with nothing but some old hurdles marking the verge. Three hundred feet below is Cobham Cove. That’s where the car lies low—”

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“IT’S ALL VERY WELL, Stampling,” said the Chief Constable, “for you to philosophize, but to my way of thinking this business has a bad smell.”

Colonel Brown-Maple and Major Stampling were old friends, neighbors now in this forgotten corner of the West Country. They were alone in the colonel’s library: the hour was close on midnight. Three days had elapsed since that remarkable incident had occurred on Ragstaff Hill, and these had been three days of bother and mystification for the Chief Constable.

In the first place, at about the time that Major Stampling and the painter had witnessed the death ride of Miss Anstruther’s car, Miss Anstruther herself was telephoning the Moreton Harbor police to report that it had just been stolen from outside her garage. The major was already doubling back to Old Place to notify

the same authority of what he assumed to be a tragedy. He held Miss Anstruther in high esteem. As commander of the local Home Guard, he was pleased with his performance: he made the mile in something under eleven minutes. The painter, who had a bicycle lying in a ditch, had set out pedaling furiously down to Cobham Cove.

Major Stampling's prediction was proved correct. Fragments of flotsam, which included a broken hurdle, marked the spot where the car lay, four fathoms deep. Not until a diver and salvage plant had been sent round from Poole—an interval of an entire day—did it become possible to raise the wreck.

A man was pinned inside, crumpled up over the broken driving wheel.

Dr. Whittington, who acted for the police, certified that the victim had sustained a number of injuries, any one of which might have proved fatal, but that the actual cause of death was a bullet which had passed through his brain!

His age the doctor set at twenty-five to twenty-seven. He was slight but strongly built and had recently been in hard training: a fair man, well groomed and wearing a brief military mustache. He was fully dressed and his clothing was of excellent quality. The name of a George Street tailor was found in the pocket lining of his dark suit and that of a Piccadilly hosier on his underwear. Otherwise there was nothing in his possession: no wallet, no money, no watch, key or identification disk. But on the left side of his breast, the work of a master of tattoo, appeared two slender feminine hands clasping a heart. On the heart the initial C was imprinted.

At this phase of the inquiry it was that Colonel Brown-Maple had remarked to somebody: "It simply doesn't add up. A dead man can't pinch a car—and if he shot himself *in* the car, where's the gun?"

But the colonel's troubles were far from being ended. Inspector Horley of the Moreton Harbor police interrogated Miss Anstruther at some length, but gleaned nothing of value.

Miss Anstruther, a reduced lady of good family, occupied a cottage on the eastward approach to Ragstaff Hill. It stood in two acres which she had converted to land fit for chickens and bees to live in. Miss Anstruther had a small local connection, and sold eggs, honey and, occasionally, cut flowers. Her car, which belonged to the days of silent slapstick, was used for the delivery of

produce. It was a feature of the landscape.

She lived alone; a spinster sister had formerly shared the cottage. An elderly man acted as daily help in the chicken and bee business, but Miss Anstruther did her own housework and also drove and looked after the car. To casual observation Miss Anstruther offered the pungent sweetness of an acid drop; but there were some—Major Stampling was one—who had discovered that this lonely old maid possessed a high, fine courage and the heart of a rather obstinate child.

Her story of the event was a simple one. She rose early—an hour before Pomfret, the daily man, arrived. On Wednesday morning, having driven the car out of the garage—a wooden structure opening on the hill—she had gone down to the shed to pack a number of eggs for delivery. The sound of the car being started had brought her swiftly back. The car was gone.

In reply to Inspector Horley she stated that, although Ragstaff Hill was a short cut into Moreton Harbor (it was marked: “Very steep hill. Dangerous”), personally she never risked it. She was unacquainted with the dead man. Yes, her car was insured. She did not say for how much, but Sergeant Dimes, the comic of the local police force, later claimed to have discovered the amount to be one shilling and four pence-halfpenny.

“It’s a case for Scotland Yard,” Colonel Brown-Maple had barked at Inspector Horley. “We’re out of our depth, damn it. This tattooed fellow isn’t a tramp: he’s a gentleman. The thing simply doesn’t add up.”

Scotland Yard had responded electrically. Suppress the facts, the Chief Constable was told; postpone the inquest; await arrival of Sir Burton Ayres, the famous pathologist, and Chief Inspector McCall. This had the colonel on tiptoes; but more was to come. He was called up at an unearthly hour by the Air Ministry. A member of their Intelligence was already on his way. No further steps must be taken until this officer should arrive: he was to be expected between four and five a.m.

Colonel Brown-Maple thereupon summoned his old friend, and now here they were, pacing in opposite directions up and down before the big desk in the Chief Constable’s library.

“God knows what it’s all about, Stampling,” said the colonel. “But I simply had to unload on somebody. Good of you to come over. Propose to turn in now.

Stopes will wait up. See you in the morning.”

“This Ministry man may want to vet the painter fellow.”

“Probably will. Know where to find him?”

“Yes. His name is Barrack or Brook or something. Staying at the Bull in Opley.”

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“THE TRUTH OF THE MATTER is,” said Wing Commander Prescott, “that we got onto this only just in time to prevent exposure. Nothing would be gained by publicity, and until we know the real acts it is important that there shall be none.”

Colonel Brown-Maple nodded. “Whenever the Yard men travel,” Prescott went on, “Fleet Street more or less tails ‘em. But I think have gained a little time. I’m going to be quite frank with you, Colonel. The dead man was one of our fellows: Squadron Leader Hallory—better known as ‘Jimmy.’”

“Good God!”

“Yes. The tattoo mark described to the Yard gave the clue, of course. Because they have been keeping a sharp lookout. Hallory vanished some time on Tuesdays the fifteenth—”

“Day before the car mystery.”

“As you say. He had a baddish crash three months back, and after convalescence he was seconded for special duty—rest cure, really. He humped important stuff between the Ministry and various headquarters. On Tuesday he had a particularly valuable cargo—we’ll call it Plan B—which had been left with a coastal command for study and comments. It was in a brand new attache case of the kind commercial travelers use. Quite commonplace; meant to be. Hallory set out from London pretty early, driving his own car, arrived safely, collected case, started back after lunch—and vanished.”

“You mean—his car as well?”

“No, not his car. We traced that. It seems to have packed up on him outside Anchester, where he left it in a garage. There’s no record, though, that he hired

another. So, naturally, we have been combing the Anchester area. Then came this report of the body found down here.”

“But, Anchester,” muttered the colonel—“damn it, Anchester is forty miles from Moreton Harbor if it’s a league! How did he get_ here?”_

Prescott shook his head. He was a small, tanned, keen-faced man, gray at the temples: in appearance and dress he presented an admirable impersonation of a bank manager.

“We have discovered, of course, that there was no train stopping at Anchester which would have served: it’s a drowsy old place to be marooned in.”

Silence fell. Colonel Brown-Maple had turned out smartly to greet the emissary from the Air Ministry. His only perceptible fall from grace was betrayed in a white muffler which took the place of more correct neckwear. But he was conscious of the earliness of the hour.

“What is the history of the tattooed heart?” he asked, glancing at a box of cigars and then distastefully away again. “Some love affair, no doubt?”

“No doubt.” Prescott smiled dryly. “Poor Jimmy Hallory was highly impressionable. He was formerly stationed in Singapore. I imagine that the design dates from that time. I am getting in touch with his great friend, Walmer, who was with him there. One never knows.”

“I take it the loss of—er—Plan B would be by way of a nuisance?”

Wing Commander Prescott stared hard at the colonel.

“Granting certain eventualities, you understate the facts,” he replied.

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RATHER LATER THAT morning, having made essential arrangements, Prescott, alone, was driving slowly past the Bull at Opley, where he reduced speed to a crawl, then pulled up, and leaning back on his elbow stared toward the little courtyard of the inn. A tallish, lean man who wore a riding kit of sorts was strapping a painting outfit onto the rear of a bicycle. He had just completed this operation when Prescott joined him.

“Hullo, B.B.!”

The painter looked up. His dark eyes surveyed the speaker analytically; then, with a glad smile, he stretched out his hand.

“As God is good,” he exclaimed in Arabic, “I behold none other than Prescott Pasha!”

And Prescott, grasping the extended hand, smiled gladly too. He had last seen Bimb❖shi Baruk in Cairo; but just before Prescott left for England, the bimb❖shi had disappeared. Ten days or so later the Army of the Nile began its spectacular advance into Libya, and Prescott learned that Baruk had been attached to Intelligence, as was natural and proper. He knew every caravan road, every jackal run, between the Oasis of Siwa and Benghazi better than Prescott used to know the way from his club to his London flat before bombing Huns mixed up the landmarks.

“It’s infernally good to see you, B.B.—but a tremendous surprise. How come?”

“I was sufficiently stupid to allow myself to be hit by an Italian bullet. I deliberately got in its way: it was not coming in my direction at all.”

“Must have stopped it pretty firmly to be sent home. When does leave expire?”

“I cannot say, Prescott. I have a Medical Board next week. I chose this spot because, although my mother came from hereabouts, I had never had a chance to visit it before.”

Mohammed Ibrahim Brian Baruk, major (bimb❖shi) of the most renowned Camel Corps in Africa, was the son of a sheikh of pure lineage by his English wife. In many respects a typical public-school product, there ran in his veins the blood of Moslem captains who had slain the infidel and spared not.

“Keen to get back to the daily round?”

“That depends upon which daily round you mean.” The bimb❖shi leaned against his bicycle; his eyes were dreamy. “You may mechanize a Camel Corps, but you cannot mechanize a man’s soul. I shall miss my camels. But I was happy in my work while I stayed with your fellows.”

“What! Were you attached to the R.A.F.?”

“Yes—I thought you knew; a sort of lend-lease arrangement. For that matter, I suppose I still am; and although I endeavor daily to improve my rotten painting, I confess that this long spell of inactivity is very boring.”

Prescott glanced at the dark, aquiline face, now faintly touched with melancholy.

“Care for a job?” he asked abruptly.

Baruk’s eyes lighted up from within.

“Rather! Got one for me?”

“Let’s go into the Bull. Better if we’re not seen together.”

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MISS ANSTRUTHER, her simple lunch dispatched, sat in the cottage porch drinking a cup of coffee and enjoying one of the three cigarettes which she allowed herself per them. A spell of Riviera sunshine blessed the West Country, and daring buds peeped out among the thorns of a rambler rose which bowered her.

Suddenly she looked up.

A man had rested a bicycle against the gate and was coming along the paved path toward her. He was a dark man, undeniably good looking in a vaguely sinister way, and he wore breeches and riding boots and some unfamiliar sort of leather jerkin. He had a swinging stride which Miss Anstruther always associated with the cavalry. At the step of the porch he halted, smiled and bowed.

“Do I address Miss Anstruther?”

His accent was of a kind to which she was accustomed, but his voice possessed an exotic musical quality. Her fine gray eyes (they had been called hard) regarded him without fear or favor. Nevertheless, something which he saw there prompted his next words.

“I may add that I am not a German parachutist!”

Miss Anstruther studied him for a long moment, and then, smiling slightly in return, indicated a seat on the other side of the porch.

“But you are a soldier,” she said in her cool, clear voice.

He presented a card which he held ready in his hand. “How did you know?”

“I was born and bred among them.” She read the card, holding it a long way off. “But I don’t remember having met a Camel Corps officer before. What can I do for you, Major? Let me get you a cup of coffee.”

“Thank you all the same, Miss Anstruther, but I lunched only recently.”

As something of a connoisseur of coffee, he had abandoned its use since he had left Egypt. He sat for a while regarding her, and then he asked an odd question.

“If I had really proved to be a German, what would you have done?”

Miss Anstruther stared straight before her; she did not appear to be looking at anything.

“I don’t know. There are those who have heard me say that if ever one fell into my hands I would shoot him. I come of a long-memored race, and I have an old service revolver tucked away. You see, Major, my sister (we used to keep house together) went out to Poland, before the fall of Warsaw, with an ambulance unit. She was a qualified nurse. I have never heard of her since—and I am selfish enough to miss her dreadfully.”

Bimbi[❖]shi Baruk nodded, but his glance told her that he understood. She fell silent, flicking ash from her cigarette.

“Of course,” he said, “you would want to be quite sure of your man—sure, I mean, that he was actually an enemy.”

“Yes.” A smile flickered over her face, disturbing its firm lines. “That would be important, especially as we have been warned that they may be dressed as civilians.” She glanced swiftly at Baruk.

“But what is it you want to know?”

Now, Bimbo[❖]shi Baruk possessed a sort of extra sense; less an intuition than an occasional, and most untamable, gift of lucidity. He could read at times in a person’s eyes exactly, minutely, what that person was thinking. And as he had stepped up to the porch and bowed to Miss Anstruther, he had received such a mental message, which said: “I suspect you to be a German. If you are, I shall do my best to kill you.”

Upon this he had based a theory to explain those discrepancies in Miss Anstruther’s story of the loss of her car, which he had undertaken to clear up. His reply was dictated by this line of reasoning.

“I want to know how you would satisfy yourself of such a man’s identity before you—disposed of him.”

Miss Anstruther extinguished the cigarette stub in a broken flowerpot which served as ash tray. She set down her empty coffee cup. Then she nodded her head several times.

“Yes”—her eyes watched him frankly—“I have landed myself in a hell of a mess!”

He proffered his open cigarette case.

“Trust me to get you out of it. These are very ordinary gaspers.”

“Thanks, Major—no. I’m rationed. But don’t_ you_ want to smoke?”

“Mind an old pipe?”

“Not in the least. You smoke, and I’ll talk.”

And so, while Bimbo[❖]shi Baruk found his tobacco pouch, Miss Anstruther talked. Pomfret, the aged daily man (no doubt by permission of Walt Disney) made a brief but successful appearance with a wheelbarrow.

“You have worked out, of course, that my story doesn’t hang together too well. I suppose you are acting for Military Intelligence. The police told me the man was English and I knew he was a soldier. I was taken by the inspector to ‘view the

body,' and it is perfectly true that I haven't the slightest idea who the poor fellow is, or was. But I think you will agree, if you can recall his close-cut blond hair, that he might have been a German?"

The bimb❖shi, open tobacco pouch on knee, seemed to consider the point; his heavy eyelids drooped.

"Yes," he admitted, "as a physical type, possibly. But his voice, his manner?"

"His voice and his manner? You must remember, Major, that I had nothing but his appearance to go upon."

Bimb❖shi Baruk questioned her with swiftly raised eyes.

"You mean—you never heard him speak?"

"How could he speak? He was dead."

Bimb❖shi Baruk ceased to load his pipe. Discerning blue eyes challenged unwavering gray.

"I don't understand," he said quietly. "Perhaps I had better let you tell the story in your own way."

"Oh!"

Miss Anstruther's exclamation was little more than a whisper. Baruk's strange endowment was a double-edged weapon. She stared at him almost confusedly. She knew, in that instant, that he believed her to have fired the fatal shot.

"What is it? You are with a friend. You have nothing to be afraid of."

"But I have." She spoke quite coolly. "I have to be afraid of disappointing you. That you would doubt my word is something that does not arise. But, you see, the man was already dead and already seated in front of my car when I found him!"

"My dear Miss Anstruther! Whatever prompted you—"

"Let me explain. I dislike admitting it, but quite frankly, I lost my head. I

returned to the car, which, as I told the police, was standing outside the garage. I was carrying two baskets of eggs. A man was lying across the driver's seat, with his face turned upward. He was dead. He had been shot. In the first place, I dropped the eggs. This seemed to restore me. Then I took a good look at the man. I came to the conclusion that he was a German who had been wounded, that he had struggled as far as the car, hoping to drive away in it, but had died in the attempt."

Bimb❖shi Baruk went on filling his pipe. He was smiling again—smiling at his own dangerous facility in jumping to conclusions.

"What I thought at the time to be common sense prompted me. Everyone would say I had shot the man—for I have a revolver in the house, as I told you. I was not afraid of the legal consequences, but I was dreadfully afraid of the ghastly publicity. I knew from experience that my car, which had a fixed bias to the offside, if given its head from the hilltop, would unfailingly take the hurdles at the corner. I risked it. No one could possibly have seen me jump out. Upon my word of honor, Major, it was not until I had phoned to the police that I realized I should be called upon to repeat, on oath, what I had told them!"

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BIMBASHI BARUK pedaled slowly along through the fresh-scented afternoon. The inquiry promised to be more than slightly involved. He had learned from Miss Anstruther all that might be learned. Her veracity he never doubted. He understood the complex motives which had prompted her slip. They parted fast friends. He told Prescott later, "She is like a date palm. Her sweetness is difficult to reach." But the clue which he had obtained was indeed a slender one.

For some time she had persisted in her statement that not a soul had approached the cottage between the time that she took the car from the garage and the moment when she returned with the eggs. Pomfret had not then arrived. But the bimb❖shi had persevered patiently.

The postman?

There had been no letters.

The milkman?

Pomfret brought the milk from Hooper's Farm every morning—But ah, yes! Someone_ had_ approached the cottage, but had not actually passed by.

“Thank heavens!” Bimb❖shi Baruk had exclaimed. “Medical evidence inclines to the idea that the man was dead for some hours before he went under water, and the notion of a dead man strolling about is so unwholesome.”

It appeared that there was one Jonas Sowerby, a dairy farmer—Miss Anstruther had formerly been a customer—who delivered milk in the neighborhood. His farm was on the other side of Opley. Although he no longer called at the cottage, he passed close by on his way down to Moreton Harbor. He usually branched off at the fork just below the crown of the hill; and on Wednesday morning Miss Anstruther was_ almost_ sure she had heard the sound of his truck as he turned the corner. She herself was in the packing shed at the time.

In what way Mr. Sowerby could be concerned in such a crime did not seem too clear; but Bimb❖shi Baruk had no other clue._ Someone_ must have placed the body in the car, and Miss Anstruther lived half a mile from any neighbor. By elimination—a simple process in this case—the only suspect who remained was the milkman.

Although he passed the Bull on his journey, Bimb❖shi Baruk did not notice the inn; he was pedaling softly and thinking hard. He even forgot to feel thirsty, so that he found himself staring into Mr. Sowerby's premises before he realized that he was come to the outskirts of Opley.

In a hollow on the left of the road he saw a neatly ordered yard in which were a number of churns and frames of milk bottles. There was a small, old Ford truck, the same, no doubt, which was used for delivery purposes. It stood immediately beneath him as he leaned on a low wall looking down. Yes, according to directions given to him by Miss Anstruther, this was the place.

He could see no one about, and in view of the delicate nature of his business he was debating how best to proceed when a man came out of a dairy building and stared up at him. He was an unpleasant-looking man with a broken nose and the particular kind of red whiskers which Bimb❖shi Baruk found offensive.

“Good afternoon,” called Baruk. “Am I addressing Mr. Sowerby?”

“You are.”

“Do you mind if I come down for a moment?”

“What for?”

“I may have to arrest you.”

And as he made this alarming remark, his tactics were rewarded. Mr. Sowerby’s truculent expression changed—and he shot one furtive glance in the direction of the old Ford!

“You see,” the bimb❖shi continued, leaving his bicycle propped against the wall and walking down a steep path to join the dairyman, “I know all about it, and I’m afraid you are in a damned tight corner.”

Sowerby awaited him; his attitude was guarded.

“Say what you’ve got to say”—he spoke challengingly—“and have done with it.”

“That is quite easy. No doubt you argued that no one saw you put the body in Miss Anstruther’s car the other morning?”

There was no reply; only a slight change of color.

“You thought you were safe. But you were wrong. Now”—the dark eyes held a command—“I am giving you a chance—your last. What have you to say?”

“Just this.” Sowerby swallowed and clenched his fists. “It’s that old hen Polly Anstruther what’s at me again! Always at me, she is. Nearly lost me my license, she did, sayin’ I watered the milk. Then told them inspectors I mixed margarine with the butter. Don’t think I don’t know who done it!”

Words long stemmed flowed in a passionate torrent.

“Now she’s a-tryin’ to pin murder on me! So it’s my turn at last. I never wanted to be mixed up in it, but I always knowed that old hen would do for some German one o’ these days. What I didn’t know was as she’d try to pin it on_ me!”_

Bimb❖shi Baruk hesitated. He had learned much, having known nothing; but if

he would get to the root of this mystery he must avoid spoiling good work done already. His favorite proverb was:

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“Speech often stumbles where Silence walks serene,”

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“Go ahead,” he said sternly. “I am listening.”

“There’s no more to it. I just dumped him back where he come from. I don’t want no dead Germans found on_ my_ farm! Let them as done it take the blame,_ I_ say.”

“Why were you so sure?”

“How wouldn’t I be? Who else but Polly Anstruther would kill a German parachuter and then throw him down into my van? I’m askin’ you a simple question: Who else would? Not nobody about_ these_ parts. Not nobody as_ I_ could put a name to, anyways.”

“At what time do you say you found the body?”

“Close on dusk it were, Tuesday evenin’. There’s a bit of a mist, and it lies heavy in the valley here. Couldn’t see not no further than across the yard. I was up at the house havin’ my supper when I heard it—”

“Heard_ what?“_

“All them bottles smashin’!” He pointed to a small mound of broken glass under a lean-to. “Three dozen went, they did. I come runnin’ out with my torch, and there’s the frames a-layin’ in the yard and all the bottles busted, and there’s this dead parachuter a-layin’ in my van! Shot, he was. Dropped him over the wall, she had. I heard her drivin’ off.”

“Where was his handbag?”

“Handbag? He didn’t have no handbag. Not a thing on him, there weren’t.”

“What did you do?”

“Hid him till I thought it out, like. Nobody knowed, only me and that wicked old hen. Then I says to myself, ‘I’ll take him and dump him back where he come from—on my mornin’ round, I will-‘ So I done it. Covered him up in the van under a bit of tarpaulin, meanin’ to leave him in her garden when nobody was lookin’. But I see that rattle-jack of hers a-standin’ in the road, and I changed my mind and shoved him inside.”

“And you say you heard a car being driven away on Tuesday night?”

“Plain as plain I heard the old hen a-drivin’ away as I run down with my torch. But the mist hid her, it did. Cunnin’ she is—cunnin’ and wicked.”

That spell of still, sunny weather which had brought skies from the Cote d’Azur to the West Country served Bimb[❖]shi Baruk now. For fully an hour, patiently, methodically, he examined every foot of path, every inch of wall above the yard where the Ford truck stood. Sowerby, from below, watched him moodily. At one point, where a piece of rusty metal protruded from the ancient masonry, he found, and delicately detached, a fragment of something. Sowerby could not see what it was. He made careful measurements of imprints on a patch of soft soil.

So long and so quietly did he work that thrushes and blackbirds, encouraged by his harmless ways, went about their unending quest almost at his feet; and a red squirrel, survivor of a dying race, paused on a branch to consider him.

Finally he remounted his bicycle. “Not a word to anyone, Sowerby,” he said. “You understand? Not to anyone.”

To the landlady of the Bull he put an odd question. “Is there a good furrier in Moreton Harbor, Mrs. Eldon?”

“A furrier, sir? Bless me, I don’t think so. There’s Miss Lister. She sells furs. ‘Arlene,’ her shop is called, in the High Street. I don’t know anybody else.”

However, while he was having his tea she came back.

“I’ve been thinking, sir. You asked about a furrier. There’s a gentleman staying at the Royal, a Mr. Lewis, and the headwaiter, who comes in here, told me he was in the fur business.”

“I am much obliged, Mrs. Eldon.”

Twenty minutes later, he sought Mr. Lewis. He found him audibly asleep in a cane rocking-chair. Mr. Lewis’ attitude, which was not conciliatory, implied that he regarded the bimb❖shi as an irritating lunatic. But he consented to glance at a silky gray fragment which Barak took out of a wallet.

“Bit of chinchilla,” he pronounced, handing it back. “Want it made into a tie-pin?”

“Chinchilla? A very expensive fur?”

“Oh, no! Makes a nice cape for rough wear.”

“What would it cost?”

“More than_ you_ ever had, if I’m any judge. Nine hundred to a couple of thousand or so.”

“Is there such a cape anywhere in the hotel?”

“There is_ not._ Thinking of pinching one?”

But Bimb❖shi Baruk, pedaling back to the Bull, was saying to himself, “If I can find the wearer of the chinchilla cape I shall have found the woman with a heart in her hands.”

Wing Commander Prescott was waiting for him.

“There isn’t a thing among poor Jimmy Hallory’s papers to suggest a line of inquiry,” he said. “Just got a report in from London. But we have one grain of hope. There was a train from Anchester which he could have caught, and by changing at Kessborough—and a wait of two hours—he would have been able to get back to town by about eight in the evening. A man answering to his description, and carrying an attache case, was actually seen on the train.”

“Kessborough?” murmured the bimb❖shi.

“It’s on the main line between here and Anchester. Frightful detour, of course, if he went that way. But he may have done—and Kessborough is only fifteen miles

from Moreton Harbor.”

“I am going to Kessborough.”

“Biggish place. What are you going to look for?”

“A chinchilla cape.”

*

BIMBASHI BARUK haunted the highways and byways of Kessborough until dusk fell. Then, having glanced at the register, he engaged a room at the Grand, changed into a dark suit and went down to that awesome whispering gallery of an English hotel, the lounge. He had it to himself. Kessborough was less “biggish” than anticipated, and he had visited every important shop in the town, always asking the same question: “Has Mrs. Wybrow been in?”

When he was informed that they did not know Mrs. Wybrow, he invariably replied: “She often wears a chinchilla cape. You wouldn’t forget_ that.”_

In this way he had secured two names. “The only lady I know who has a chinchilla cape is Mrs. Burton from Sandby Hall.” This provided one of them; and “You don’t mean Mrs. de Marsan who lives out by the Warren?” gave him the second. Discreet inquiries from mine host of the Sandby Arms had enabled him to dismiss Mrs. Burton from the case. He learned little about Mrs. de Marsan.

The somnolence of the lounge, with its prewar copies of motoring journals, was disturbed. A petite and attractively modeled brunette came in, to awaken memories of Paris before the eclipse. Disposing herself on a settee, she revealed suave silken legs and patrician feet shod in high-heeled slippers. From a handbag she took a jeweled case, and from the case a cigarette. Bimb❖shi Baruk was up, lighter snapped into action, before she had reclosed the case.

“Please permit me.”

Eyes so dark as to be almost black, beautiful eyes except that they were set too closely together, appraised him as he bent and lighted the cigarette.

“Thank you.”

“It is a privilege. I believe I address Madame de Marsan?”

The pupils of madame’s eyes seemed to enlarge, so that their blackness became phenomenal. The bimb❖shi read a message there.

“That is so—but how do you know?”

“The hotel register. You will find my name not far below your own. Brian Baruk. You see, Madame de Marsan, I have been looking for you.”

“Why?”

Her natural pallor grew slowly more marked.

“There is someone I have to find. Can you help me?”

“I don’t know. Who is this you—have to find?”

“I have to find the woman with a heart in her hands.”

For perhaps ten seconds he feared that she was going to faint; after those ten seconds the danger was past. Madame de Marsan’s full lips trembled into a smile. It was a smile of resignation. Bimb❖shi Baruk caught himself admiring her.

“Please sit down, Mr. Baruk, and tell me how you—got onto my track.”

“Your chinchilla cape,” he said, dropping down beside her. “It is not necessary that I measure the heels of your shoes—but those you wore on Tuesday night were quite as high. There was another woman with you. She wore low heels.”

“My maid—Suzanne.”

“Is she here?”

“No. She remains—at the bungalow.”

“Sort of—clearing up the mess?”

Madame de Marsan’s lips trembled slightly.

“Yes... clearing up.” She raised her eyes. “I could no longer endure to sleep there. Am I to consider myself under arrest?”

“No—not at the moment. There is one rather urgent matter: Plan B. Have you sent it on to anybody?”

She shook her dark head, wearily.

“Everything Jimmy had with him is there, at the bungalow.”

“Really! What was the hitch?”

“There was no ‘hitch.’ I am very, very unhappy, but I know I must go through with it, now.”

“That would be the best way. May I suggest champagne cocktails? They are quite a good buck-me-up.”

In an atmosphere so artificial that the bimb^oshi found it unreal, Madame de Marsan told the story of the loss of Plan B.

“My husband, Commander de Marsan, is with his ship in North Africa. We are to be divorced. When it was done I should have married Jimmy. We met, Jimmy and I, in Singapore, two years ago. We became great friends. He was so gay, so generous, so kind—and he was very much in love with me—”

“So you are the woman with a heart in her hands?”

She smiled tremulously.

“He was a wildly impulsive boy. He went to Osuku, the famous tattooer—”

“C,” murmured the bimb^oshi.

“My name is Camille. After Singapore, we were parted for a long time. I returned to France. Then, the debacle. I escaped, with Suzanne, from Le Touquet, and came here. Jimmy found me the little bungalow at the Warren. His duties sometimes allowed him to visit me; sometimes we met in London. We never wrote to each other, because I was afraid I might fail to get my divorce.”

An elderly clergyman carrying an evening paper entered the lounge almost noiselessly, and adjusted his glasses. Noting madame's Gallic gestures, the man's tense calm, and deducing a lover's quarrel, he withdrew with a sigh.

"When he crashed and was so ill, I did not see him for ever so long. Then he was given duties that made it possible for us to be together again. Last Tuesday—" She hesitated, gulped, but went on. "Last Tuesday his car broke down near a place called Anchester. He found that by taking a train to Kessborough he could spend an hour with me and then catch another slow train to London. But when the time came for him to leave me, he was very late. He ran all the way down the garden carrying the brown attache case. Since his illness he had been—"

"Excitable?"

"Terribly, terribly temperamental."

Madame de Marsan paused; Baruk watched her covertly.

"I am speaking of my lover, the man I hoped to marry. Try to understand. Perhaps—I may be unable to go on. An hour later Jimmy came back. I was wild with joy to see him. He ran in. He looked, and behaved, like a madman. He threw the case open. It was empty. He hurled it on the floor at my feet—"

She spoke rapidly, tonelessly.

"He told me that I had won his love only to ruin him—that I was a spy—a courtesan—a cheat. He had left the train at the first stop and made his way back. Suzanne was out, and I was demented. When he learned that she was out, he uttered a cry like a scream. He shouted, 'She has gone with the plan! I am too late!' I tried to soothe him. I told him I did not know anything about a plan.... He threw me across the room. He said, 'But_ you_ shall not escape.'"

Madame de Marsan was so pale that the bimbo❖shi grew anxious again.

"He took a pistol from his pocket, and—shot himself."

A painful interval followed before she was able to proceed. Out in the lobby someone was beating a dinner gong.

"When Suzanne returned she found me lying beside Jimmy. She was my nurse;

she is Breton—she has great strength of mind, and of body. She found Jimmy's case, locked. In his hurry, he had taken the wrong one. Mine was empty. Suzanne persuaded me to do what we did. We emptied his pockets and carried his poor body through to the garage. Suzanne said, 'It is dreadful. But if he is found here you will hang.' We meant to go to the coast. But it was getting dark. Suzanne sat behind with—him. He was wrapped in a rug on the floor. We came to a hollow beside the road. I was terrified of being stopped by a Home Guard patrol. We carried him to the low wall.

"Something there was below, in the mist. There came a crash of glass ..."

*

AT ABOUT ELEVEN O'CLOCK that night, Wing Commander Prescott, who was staying with Colonel Brown-Maple, was called to the phone. He had had a tiring and sterile day. Nevertheless, from Walmer, who had been Hallory's great friend, he had learned something. Bimshi Baruk was on the line.

"Oh, hullo, B.B.!" Prescott called. "I have some news for you. There was a woman in Singapore called Camille de Marsan who got tied up with Hallory, and —"

"I know. I'm with her now."

"What!"

"Yes. The doctors were right, Prescott. They thought the wound was self-inflicted. Shot himself. By the way, I have Plan B."

"You have what?"

"Plan B. I forced poor Hallory's case to make sure. You see the job was finished when I found the woman with a heart in her hands."

"But you haven't found her!"

"What's that you say?"

"I say you haven't found her. Thank God you recovered the stuff, B.B.! Top marks! But Walmer tells me that Hallory had that tattooing done some time

before he met the de Marsan woman. The C stands for Cynthia—girl called Cynthia Stockwell, well known in Singapore circles. Old Hallory was crazy about her; they were engaged. She ran away with a Marine.”

Chapter 2

The Bimbashi Meets Up with A 14

BIMBASHI BARUK walked across to the Club. He was in no hurry and he loved the sights and the sounds and the smells of Cairo; for a man who has first known life as it is lived in the household of a wealthy Arab father and later, by desire of an English mother, life as it is lived in a public school, is an unusual man. Mohammed Ibrahim Brian Baruk looked uncommonly well on duty. His lean, narrow-hipped body and long, slim legs promised agility and strength. Brown of skin and heavy lidded, the contrast afforded by blue eyes was almost startling. He had notable poise and wore his uniform with an air.

He found Colonel Roden-Pyne staring out of a window and stamping his feet, rather like a stalled charger. Colonel Roden-Pyne, tall, thin and bristly, had always reminded the bimbashi of a white horse. But there was mutual esteem and they were old personal friends.

“Expecting you,” said the colonel. “Flop in that armchair. We have the place to ourselves.”

Characteristically, he plunged headlong into his subject, not even pausing to inquire about the bimbashi’s health. It was a queer, rather inconsequential story he unfolded; and Baruk, who had filled and lighted his pipe, presently found that it had gone out.

“You see, B.B., we’ve had some useful hidings since you went away, and my department hasn’t escaped all the kicks that have been flying around.”

“No, lucky we don’t lose wars, because we lose most of the battles.”

“In short, I can’t afford to come a purler over this business. That’s why I asked for you.”

“Charmed, although I might point out that if I had wanted to be a policeman I shouldn’t have joined the Camel Corps.”

“Penalty of being so damned clever. You set up a big reputation at home for

trailing the missing.”

“The Ragstaff Hill mystery? I am therefore condemned to remain a bloodhound?”

“At present. Let me run over the essential facts again. Ask any questions that occur to you. Right? Inside the triangle, Ankara, Damascus, Baghdad, something has gone wonky. First, our most reliable underground postman in the western part of the area disappears. The man, an Armenian tallyman-huckster—sells cheap trinkets, bits of stuff and so on to the women of the smaller towns. Sand as a bell and well paid for the District messenger job. He had established contact with A 14, the best agent we have between Palestine and the Turkish frontier, and was carrying valuable material. When he was posted overdue, I inquired through the usual channels. At some point, in or near Damascus, he had vanished like a mirage—”

“With the information?”

“With everything. Not a trace.”

“Brigands?”

“A possibility. But the French have reported no incidents, and we can’t be too curious. Damascus, of course, is an enemy hotbed. Rosener, of the German Staff, is there. Also, we know that his three-star agent—opposite number of our A 14—is operating in the area.”

“Who is this agent?” Colonel Roden-Pyne neighed realistically—he had suitable teeth.

“Find that out, B.B., and I’ll recommend you for the D.S.O.! I’ll wager there’s an Iron Cross waiting at the other end for the German who finds out who A 14 is, too.”

“You’re a nasty, secretive lot.”

“Try to be. A 14 is little short of wizard. His reports are models. He has tipped us practically every move made by Rosener. He warned us of the Baghdad_ coup d’etat_ a week before it came off. Any questions?”

“Not at the moment.”

“Very well. Episode Second: Through our contact in Damascus, a barber called, I think, Abu Hassan—

“All Arab Berbers are called Abu Hassan.”

“Well, through him we found out what little we know about the Armenian. Abu Hassan, of course, merely passes the wink that stuff is waiting, he knows nothing whatever about it and could give nobody away. It looked to me as though Z—we call the German agent Z—had got hold of the parcel. Not knowing contents of same, I sweated freely. It’s a rattling fine code, of Arab origin, introduced by A 14 and used by no one else. But I wouldn’t swear that it can’t be broken. I panicked badly. I sent for Madden. You know Pop Madden—used to be with you.”

“Rather. Little wiry fellow. Permanent expression—a baked apple.”

“Exactly. Been with me here for some time. Knows Syria well. First-class with dialects, customs and so forth, nearly as good as you, and as clever as a monkey at the game. Works out as a camel dealer. Knows all about camels.”

“He who knows the camel knows the worst.”

“Well, I brought him up to date, and off he went. That was”—he glanced at an almanac on the wall—“the ninth. Ten days ago. Last Monday I got this.”

Colonel Roden-Pyne took a slightly dirty postcard from a pocket case and handed it to Bimb[❖]shi Baruk. It bore the Damascus postmark and had been mailed on the day after Madden’s departure. It was addressed to Said Ali, the Muski, Cairo.

“Who is Said Ali?”

“Abu Hassan’s brother, a perfumer. They both run accommodation addresses. Suits our purpose.”

The note, written in that kind of colloquial Arabic used by professional letter-writers, simply said:

“If your nephew is the boy with a rose in his mouth I don’t like him. May God be with you and with Yosef-Abu Hassan.”

“Who is Yosef?”

“Myself. The card, of course, was written by Madden. I spotted at once that something had made him uneasy. This was a tip, in case he failed.”

“But what does it mean?”

“Not a notion. But as Madden also has disappeared, I want you to cut up to Damascus and find out. At all costs we_ must_ get in touch again with A 14.”

“This thing is not my idea of a jamboree. I would rather be shot on a camel than against a wall. Besides, I haven’t been in Syria since I went with the Transport Commission to Beirut, and my Syrian Arabic is not so hot.”

“Your Arabic is your own affair. I look for results.”

“Happy is he who leaves obstacles to the less fortunate.”

“Let’s stroll over the way. I will show you one of A 14’s reports and fix necessary contacts.”

*

DAMASCUS grew sleepy in the morning sun, which restored aged minarets to the dazzling whiteness of their youth so that they stood as translucent shafts amid those groves of poplar and orchards of fig, apricot and pomegranate which lovingly embrace this pearl of the East. Already mueddin might be seen, a moving black speck, on his high gallery. In the covered bazaars with their cavelike shops—khans which had housed merchants from Baghdad when the great Harun reigned—and cooling fountains, a drowsy hum prevailed. Rumor passed from lip to lip. In the Street of the Coppersmiths it might be heard amid the ceaseless tap of hammers; in the Street of the Perfumers one smelled it out above ambergris and musk. Laden camels, indifferent to the convenience of pedestrians, paced rubber-footed on their way; and their dopey eyes held some secret which might not be told.

At one of the crossroads in this maze of merchandise there was a gracefully lazy

fountain. It was old and venerable, having been erected by the Caliph Marwan in A.D. 750. Thousands of weary travelers had paused there gratefully in the centuries between, but only one was seated beside the fountain now—a fierce-eyed dervish. He was impressively dirty, unshaven and ragged, wearing a garment originally black but at present patched so as to resemble a dilapidated quilt. A thick staff lay beside him, and although he demanded no _bakshish_ he might demand almost anything at any moment, so that the prudent deemed it wise to avoid him. The green turban of the order to which he belonged lent this nomad some spiritual authority. Furthermore, members of such fraternities often possess a fertility of invective and a range of curses highly disturbing to the modest.

A buxom Negress carrying a basket of green vegetables on her head came out from one of the narrow streets and approached the fountain. Then, from the same direction came a slender youth, well dressed and wearing a sky-blue turban. His indolence of carriage was poetic, for he was a handsome, if an effeminate, stripling, and his large, dark eyes surveyed the scene with languorous indifference. In his mouth he held a red rose (as affected by some Sufi intellectuals) rolling the short stem between his lips as other men roll a cigar.

Into the mysterious murmur of the bazaars, above clatter of hoofs, beating of hammers and cries of vendors, sweetly stole the Call to Prayer, weaving its silver thread among the embroidery of Eastern sound. It was the hour of noon.

Alone of those present in the little square, the dervish, pulling a scrap of carpet from beneath his tattered robe, prostrated himself. The poet, leaning against a wooden archway near by, smiled cynically. The colored woman rested her heavy basket on the edge of the fountain. Prostrations completed, the dervish, vanishing his scrap of carpet, fixed light, fierce eyes upon her.

“O mother of blackness, sell me a lettuce for a prayer.”

She stooped to her basket in which there were a number of fine lettuces, but her glance darted here and there the while as though she sought someone.

“Who can live on prayer?” she muttered.

“Prayer is better than meat,” returned the dervish. His voice was unexpectedly melodious. “Therefore, sell me a lettuce which has no less than fourteen leaves.”

Bending over the basket, the Negress replaced that lettuce which she had first selected and seemed to hesitate.

“Who shaves the heads of the Faithful?” she whispered.

“Who but Abu Hassan in the Street called Straight. Give me the lettuce.”

She produced a large one from deep down in the basket and, as it changed hands, murmured:

“Be careful. One is watching.”

“May blessing and peace be with you,” intoned the dervish; “for he who gives in faith gives to God’s only prophet happy in his own Paradise.”

The Negress resumed her burden and walked away. Dipping the lettuce in the fountain, the dervish tore off a tender leaf and began to eat it. The poet watched him in high disdain; and now the holy man condescended to notice this supercilious onlooker.

“O poet,” he called, “what do you ask of life?”

“Love.”

“What have you to offer in return?”

“Beauty and song.”

“But to God?”

“Nothing.”

The dervish, thrusting the lettuce into his waistband, sprang up, seizing his staff. His melodious tones grew suddenly rugged.

“O conceited spawn!” he cried. “O gnat’s egg! O insect most unclean! For that black heresy I will, without remission or let or hindrance, beat thee insensible!”

Pouncing, he grasped the youth with fingers seemingly made of iron and began to thrash him savagely.

Merchants came running out of near-by shops; a ring formed around the one-sided contest. The poet struggled, struck blindly, kicked and screamed curses. But the beating went on. Certain more Westernized tradesmen whose only tribute to Islam took the form of a_ tarbush,_ or turban, joined the onlookers. A native policeman appeared last of all. One man, stout, florid, intervened.

“Back, dervish! Stop, I say! Are you mad? This is one of the household of Raschid Azem!”

The dervish paused.

“And I am a hadji of the Bektashiyeh. No infidel dog shall deny God and escape my anger.”

Now, the order in question, founded in Khorassan, derives from the dreadful Old Man of the Mountain, father of the Assassins. Few lightly flout a fakir of this brotherhood. But the portly tradesman stuck to his guns.

“Such is the word. I speak to a wise man. Be advised then, O hadji, and go in peace.”

The native policeman had disappeared. Reluctantly, the dervish lowered his staff, releasing the poet. Eyes aflame, the youth backed away, turned and ran. The dervish took the lettuce from his waistband and nibbled a leaf.

“There is no virtue in mercy,” he remarked. “Our Lord Mohammed (may God be good to him) enjoins us to smite the infidel and spare not.”

*

THE DERVISH MADE his next recorded appearance in the shop of Abu Hassan in the Street called Straight. A customer was being shaved and he started so nervously at the sight of the ragged figure that Abu Hassan narrowly avoided gashing him. Seating himself on a chair in the doorway, the dervish produced a string of beads, and bending, muttered prayers.

“God be with you, hadji,” said the barber.

“And with you,” muttered the dervish, in parenthesis, continuing his prayers.

Abu Hassan's client was easily satisfied. He departed at speed, muttering a formal salutation, which was acknowledged, to the dervish in passing. The barber prepared to attend to his second, and profitless, customer without delay, for certainly no one would come in while this fakir remained in the shop.

"What can I do for the servant of God?"

"Give me the letter which you have in the cupboard." Abu Hassan's jaw fell; his dark eyes opened widely. "Or shave me fourteen times for the greater glory of the Prophet, who watches us from Paradise."

A sudden flash of teeth which lighted up the dirty unshaven face convinced Abu Hassan that this indeed was the messenger he had been warned to expect. He smiled in return, but nervously.

"O effendim! The path you tread is set with pit-falls, but who is better equipped to avoid them?" He opened a small cupboard. "Here is the letter."

The dervish concealed it under his tattered robe.

"Tell me," he said, "all you know about a boy who carries a rose in his mouth and who belongs to the household of one called Raschid Azem."

"He is an_ aldtee" _ (musician and singer) "and a great favorite of his master's. He is worthless and dissolute."

"But Raschid Azem?"

"O effendim, Raschid Azem is wealthy beyond the dreams of men, but he burns with the fires of love and ambition. He has great possessions and much business. He is favored by those in power and beloved of women. He is to marry Yasmina, daughter of the Sheikh Ismail ed-Din, rose of the Lebanon, called Pool-o'-the-Moon."

"Why, O Abu Hassan, is she called Pool-o'-the-Moon?"

"It is said that as a child she would kneel by a lily pond in the dusk of the evening, looking down, and when her nurse asked her what she saw, she replied, 'There is another moon in the water. I like it better than the moon in the sky.' And so she came to be called Birket el-Kamar, or Pool-o'-the-Moon. Her beauty

and loveliness enchant all beholders; and it is told that Raschid Azem cannot sleep, nor has wine any savor for him because of his love and longing. All men may see this. For know, effendim, that love is difficult, and the concealment of it melteth iron, causing disease and infirmity.”

“Is there some obstacle to their marriage?”

Abu Hassan went to the door of his shop. He stared to right and left along the Street called Straight and furtively noted passers-by. He returned and bent to the dervish’s ear. “It is whispered, effendim—” And he spoke on, softly and fearfully.

*

POOL-O’-THE-MOON gazed out from an open lattice in the_ mushrabiyyeh_ window of her apartment. Below lay a terraced garden ablaze with flowers glittering in the sun. It cupped a rock pond where lilies floated and comet-tailed carp streaked the water with gold. Stone steps led up from the pond to a kiosk or small pavilion; and the whole was sheltered from biting winds of the Lebanon Mountains by a high, vine-cloaked wall. Doves were wooing in the walnut tree. This was my lady’s garden and sacred to Yasmina, called Pool-o’-the-Moon.

But Yasmina found this cloistered life hard to endure. Once it had seemed inevitable, until her father, Ismail ed-Din, much against his personal inclinations, had sent her to the French school in Beirut for two years, because her mother, who was dead, had always wished it to be so. Those two years had revealed new horizons; and for this reason Yasmina accepted but could not welcome the fate which God had ordained should be hers. Although nearly seventeen, which is full maturity in the East, she had evaded marriage; but she knew that it was not to be evaded forever. Raschid Azem, to whom she was promised, had found means to gaze often and ardently upon this guarded treasure, and he desired her as he desired no other woman. She did not return his passion.

Pool-o’-the-Moon had the complexion of a Damascus rose and her skin resembled the purity of white petals. In figure, she was slender as the painted Isis of Egypt; and her dark eyes, though gentle in expression, were observant and mysterious. The kiosk in the garden was her workroom. Here she made delicate plaques in rare woods, inlaid with ivory, jade, mother-of-pearl and lapis lazuli; designs of leaves and flowers and graceful Arabic letters. She drew them first,

exquisitely, in water colors, as Sister Felice had taught her. She was highly talented. From her mother she inherited her beauty and her sense of romance; her father had endowed her with a practical brain.

She had secret dreams. Once, in Beirut, while seated in the large, high old motor omnibus belonging to the school, she had seen a young man in a smart uniform who stood looking up at her. He wore his_ tarbush_ with an inimitable air. She had felt a flush steal all over her body as their glances met. He had blue eyes; they were approving eyes. Smiling gravely at the pretty, embarrassed girl, he had raised his hand in salute and turned away. Yasmina had supposed him to be French, but because she could not forget him she had made discreet inquiries, and had learned that he was a British officer attached to a military mission. That memory had woven itself into the fabric of her life. If only she had been born a European!

Yet at heart she remained Oriental. She loved to deck herself in rich robes, with sashes cunningly contrived and intertwined, and with jewels on her slim arms and fingers to posture before a mirror. Sometimes it came to her that she posed for a dream lover and not for the man destined to take her. Then, very sadly, she would cease her play, put on working overalls, and go down to the kiosk in the garden where she created her wonderful plaques.

Yasmina, staring from her window, was thinking of Raschid Azem. Always she had disliked him; certain recent events had changed dislike to hatred. The prospect of her marriage was one she feared to think about. True, in his way Raschid Azem was not ill-looking, and he kept some state at his large house near Damascus. He had extensive property, not only in Syria but in Irak, and in his business dealings was highly up-to-date; but at home, she had heard, he preserved the more dignified Oriental virtues. Yasmina suspected that she would not reign alone.

Sighing, she turned from the window and opened a large cedarwood cupboard recessed in a wall. It was filled with dresses. But all she wanted was the suit of overalls. So attired, she went onto a wooden balcony and down steps to the garden. Passing the pond, she crossed to the kiosk and entered her workshop. Sometimes she worked there right into the night, when Aida, her Syrian maid-companion, would bring her supper out.

*

BIMBASHI BARUK trudged along a path which divided a field of maize from a pistachio orchard. He was thinking with admiration about the ways of the British agent, A 14. Concealed in the lettuce given to him by the colored woman whom he had been instructed to meet by the Marwan fountain at noon, there had lain a tiny note in English capitals. It read, “The barber has a message in the cupboard,” and it was signed with what looked like a row of scratches but was actually the Arab letter_ alif_ (A) written fourteen times. This note he had eaten with the lettuce.

The second message, held by Abu Hassan, was similarly penned. It said: “Well of Seven Palms on the road to el-Kasr three hours after sunset.” This, also, he had destroyed. Visualizing Madden’s operations, he had accosted fodder merchants, portage contractors, market gardeners and others, always with the words: “Has Abdul the camel dealer passed this way?”

When asked what he wanted of Abdul, he replied: “I want to slay him.”

But he failed to pick up any clue until at last he detected a spark of interest in the eyes of a lean and furtive fruitseller.

“Is he,” the fruitseller asked, licking his lips, “is he a small but very vicious villain, this Abdul, whose face resembles a ripe pomegranate?”

“A baked apple,” the bimb❖shi corrected; “but a ripe pomegranate will serve.”

“Hard and heavy of hand and filthy of tongue?”

This presented a reasonably sound description of Captain the Honorable J. Popham Madden, and the bimb❖shi nodded, snarling savagely.

“Lead me to him!” He grasped the man by the shoulder. “Dare to refuse and I will slay thee also!” He relaxed his grip. “Abdul, the son of a mule, stole my camel,” he added in more gentle tones, “the only camel I ever had.”

The fruitseller grinned sadistically.

“Hearken, O hadji. He stole my donkey—the only donkey I ever had—on the road to el-Kasr.”

“The road to el-Kasr! How long since?”

“It was the night of the full moon, a mile beyond the house of Raschid Azem.”

About an hour later, outside Damascus, the dervish secured a lift in the cart of a homeward-bound vegetable gardener. His offer was a simple one: a prayer or a crack on the head.

At a suitable spot he alighted, and now, the path by the pistachio orchard reaching a high road, he saw the residence of Raschid Azem on a cypress-guarded slope beyond. Ten minutes later, the dervish took a seat on an old stone_ mastabah_ beside the jasmine-bowered gate of the courtyard and prepared to make himself a nuisance.

He had learned that Raschid Azem was a_ kadi,_ that is, something between a Chief Constable and a Justice of the Peace—evidently a considerable citizen. He therefore anticipated some state, and met it now in the shape of an obese and pasty-faced porter wearing a red uniform, who emerged from the courtyard. Having surveyed this splendid exhibit from his high_ tarbush_ down to his twinkling brown shoes, the dervish took out his string of beads and began to mutter prayers. The porter’s pale features quivered emotionally.

“Begone from here!” he cried in a reedy, angry voice. “We allow no beggars to loiter.”

The dervish raised his eyes.

“Have I begged?”

“Out, I say! Guests are expected. Be gone.”

“This seat was set beside the gate that the Faithful might rest.”

The porter took a step forward.

“It is not for such as you. Begone, or join the other miscreants who await sentence.”

The dervish concealed his beads, grasped his staff and stood up.

“O misbegotten! O dreadful error of an otherwise beneficent Creator! O pork-fed abomination! O unutterable—”

Swinging the staff above his head, the dervish leaped, and the porter, dignity deserting him, turned and darted across a courtyard with an agility surprising in one so fat. The dervish strode a few paces after him along a sanded path pleasantly shaded by cherry trees in full blossom. Here he paused—for he had heard a car approaching. When it drew up at the gate, he was standing inside, concealed by a vine-covered gatepost.

Two men alighted. One, wearing a well-cut white linen suit and a _tarbush,_ was a man of about thirty-five. He had a brief and very black mustache, a good figure and a manner of authority. The other, whose bulky body was a product of human appetite but whose short legs were an act of God, the bimb❖shi recognized as Dr. Rosener of the Nazi Intelligence Staff. They were speaking in German.

“I shall be interested, nevertheless, Raschid Azem, my friend, to see this camel dealer. In your absence your servants have perhaps been over-zealous of your honor. What they believe to be a love intrigue—”

The dervish strode into view and saluted Raschid Azem.

“I claim justice, O _Kadi!” *he said harshly. “Your porter has misused me, yet I came here only to slay Abdul the Thief, Abdul who robbed me of my camel! Justice, O Kadi!”*_

“Stand aside,” said Raschid Azem quietly. “I have been absent, but my Court opens on Monday. Attend there, and justice shall be done.” Dr. Rosener grasped his arm. “Not so hasty, my good friend,” he whispered. “If this fellow can indeed identify your prisoner, one doubt at least will be set at rest.”

Raschid Azem, a man of swift decisions, hesitated for no longer than a moment, then nodded shortly. Running footsteps announced the return of the porter, his flabby features moist with perspiration.

“O my master! this villainous dervish—”

“Silence! Get the keys of the Old Stables and join me there.” He beckoned to the bimb❖shi. “You—follow.”

“There is no god but God,” intoned the dervish. “May all blessing and peace be thine, O King of Kings.”

He followed the pair with an air of docility—but muttering smothered curses upon Abdul—through a delightful garden, until they came to a stone building on the eastern outskirts. From flotsam of conversation picked up, he gathered that the official jail had become unduly crowded during the _ kadi's_ absence, overflow being accommodated here. The fat porter, his wet features a mask of malignancy, now coming up with keys, a heavy lock was unfastened and the bimbo-shi saw a row of stalls which had been converted to cells by means of fitting iron bars to the half-doors. From one, a bearded face peered out.

“I demand to be released!” the prisoner spoke in French. “I am a Turkish subject and I warn you—

Divining the fact that this was the unfortunate Armenian, Bimbo-shi Baruk in passing murmured:

“It is written that there are fourteen consolations.”

At a cell beyond, Raschid Azem stopped and turned.

“Come here, hadji, and tell me if this is the man you seek.”

Bimbo-shi Baruk looked in through the bars. He saw a stone floor, a pallet bed, and a small, dirty man who lay glaring up at him. The light was poor, but even so he knew that chubby face, its redness discernible through the stain, those wicked little hazel eyes. By means of an acrobatic twist, the camel dealer curled up like a startled hedgehog, concealing his features, but Bimbo-shi Baruk had read a message in his eyes; it said: “Come inside.”

“Open the door, my lord!” he demanded. “See! The rat hides from me! Open the door!”

“Unlock the door,” Raschid Azem directed.

Fat fingers twitching, the porter obeyed. And no sooner was it done than the dervish hurled himself in, grasped the camel dealer and turned him over bodily.

“O Abdul—filthy insect”—rage seemed to be choking him—“prepare to die!”

Abdul at that moment whipped wiry arms around the dervish's neck, and hauled him down onto the pallet. The dervish grasped Abdul's throat. Both men

screamed the foulest of imprecations. The bimbo-shi's head was being dragged lower and lower in the struggle. The fat porter was shouting for assistance.

When Baruk's ear almost touched the unshaven face of the captive, Madden whispered: "Avoid Seven Palms! It's a trap! Now yell like hell!"

Whereupon he nearly made his teeth meet in the bimbo-shi's ear!

Uttering a howl of pain only partially simulated, Bimbo-shi Baruk sprang back. Blood already was dripping onto his shoulder. As he said later, "Pop Madden is an inspired actor, but my ears are real, they are not stage properties."

He submitted to forcible ejection from a side entrance into part of the extensive maize crop. What he feared most was the appearance of the youth with a rose in his mouth.

*

WHEN DUSK swept its violet brush across the Lebanon, Bimbo-shi Baruk was many miles north of the house of Raschid Azem. He had followed unfrequented ways, avoiding, as formerly he had courted, observation. At a village market he had paused to beg some fresh fruit, sticky honey cakes and a handful of dried dates. These, and a draft of water from a spring, served for dinner. He was beginning to enjoy himself. The incidents of his mission seemed to hang together, although the thread was frail. An amazing theory demanded admission: that Colonel Roden-Pyne's underground system had gone wrong because his messengers were suspected to be, not British agents, but accomplices in a love intrigue!

Bimbo-shi Baruk sat upon the crumbling wall of a bridge spanning an irrigation ditch and laughed silently. He would have given much for a cigarette, or even more for a full pipe; but he carried nothing which could betray him in the event of capture.

The youth with a rose in his mouth was Raschid Azem's jackal. In some way the Negress had aroused his suspicion. He had followed those to whom she had talked at the Marwan fountain. The Armenian had been seized with a message in his possession. Later, Madden had suffered a similar fate. And, visualizing one of these messages, the bimbo-shi experienced a new thrill of admiration for the genius of A 14. They were designed to convey just such an impression—that

they were love letters.

Written in Arabic—which is read from right to left—they invariably opened with the phrase, “O my beloved.” Poetic, rapturous, at times they became slightly incomprehensible, for the good reason that, read from_ left_ to_ right,_ discarding alternate words and selecting only certain letters of those which remained, they embodied reports of inestimable value to His Majesty’s Government! On what charges the Armenian and Madden had been detained did not matter. Evidently Raschid Azem did as he liked in his own neighborhood. What did matter was that they were not suspected of espionage, and so at the worst would suffer but light sentences.

Bimb❖shi Baruk fondled his ear speculatively. “Good old Pop,” he muttered.

*

THE WELL OF SEVEN PALMS was half a mile from the nearest road. It stood in the midst of acres of poppies and enshrined the tomb of a Moslem saint—a cracked and time-stained dome touched by moon magic to the semblance of a gigantic egg on a scarlet tablecloth. In a grove beside it there was a spring. Some distance away, on a mound, one saw an extensive walled property, in part of great age, overlooking the small town to el-Kasr. The town, and rich lands for miles around it, belonged to the Sheikh Ismail ed-Din.

Now, Bimb❖shi Baruk, who could stalk like a stoat and whose sense of hearing was keen as that of a desert fox, had been lying concealed at the well since shortly after dusk. His coat of many colors and dark green turban merged perfectly with the floral carpet. A punishing wind from the Lebanon Mountains had sprung up, and it pleased him to listen to the complaints of a party which had arrived more recently. Its members were hidden in the shadows of the palm grove.

“I am frozen to the liver.” The reedy voice was that of the porter. “I shall be very ill. I do not believe that the murderous fakir has any connection with this affair.”

“But I tell you, O bag of lard, that I saw him with the Negress.” The poet spoke. “He eluded me while my hurts were being dressed, but I am sure he will come tonight. Our Lord Raschid Azem must be convinced that the woman is a wanton.”

“Otherwise”—the third speaker, Bimb❖shi Baruk decided, was a secretary —“you will be compelled to work for your living, Ahmed. No wife of delicacy and refinement would tolerate you about the house.”

An angry snarl was the poet’s only reply. An interval of some minutes followed.

“I cannot understand,” said the fat porter, whose teeth were chattering, “why we have not seized this old witch who brings the love messages. From her we might learn who sends them, since the men refuse to speak.”

“Since she comes from the direction of Ismail ed-Din’s house,” the secretary replied, “we might also learn what the jail at el-Kasr is like. No, the woman must not be molested.”

“She might be followed, master.”

“Who, unseen, could follow her across a poppy field in bright moonlight?”

(“I could,” the bimb❖shi said to himself; “in fact, I am going to do so.”)

“And stop thy teeth chattering,” snarled Ahmed.

So A 14 employed a woman in this vitally important matter, the bimb❖shi reflected. He considered the point long and deeply. He was still considering it, noting that the wind had dropped, when a low hiss from the palm grove prompted him to raise his head slightly. No sound disturbed the silence, save that of the porter’s teeth. A figure approached through the poppies; the figure of a woman enveloped from head to foot in a black voluminous garment. Bimb❖shi Baruk, who had been watching the moon, knew that three hours had elapsed since sunset.

The woman drew nearer slowly, stooping, and sometimes turning to look behind her. Clearly, she feared no danger at the well, but only from el-Kasr. Skirting the group of trees, she walked to the ancient shrine and seated herself on a stone bench beside the door overgrown by wild flowering vines. Stillness reigned unbroken. The bimb❖shi wondered if the poet had removed the porter’s teeth. Some night-scented plant among the poppies perfumed the air.

For half an hour the shapeless figure remained, a bundle of blackness among the shadows; then, the woman stood up and walked away in the direction from

which she had come. Moving slowly as before, but now glancing back at the well from time to time, as if in doubt, she crossed the red carpet spread before el-Kasr, mounted a winding path, and paused before a door set in a high wall. She had just turned the key when a dimly visible figure confronted her.

“There are fourteen reasons,” said a voice which spoke in English, “why I should come in.”

By lamplight the studio in the kiosk was mysteriously charming. On an easel rested a delicate water-color composition—a flower subject. Fragments of intricate inlay, fretsaws, tiny chisels and little brass trays holding pieces of jade, lapis and other semiprecious stones, were strewn on a wide table. There was a bookcase filled with volumes, many in Arabic MS. and some that were very rare. The owner of this kiosk, the bimb❖shi decided, loved old Arabic script (perhaps the most beautiful in the world) and had some good examples on the shelves.

Having locked the door, the messenger discarded her vast black garment, disclosing the pale face and slender figure of a girl dressed in white overalls. Her beautiful eyes studied the ragged visitor unfalteringly.

“Please tell me who you are.” She spoke perfect English. “You frightened me dreadfully.”

Bimb❖shi Baruk was staring, amazed.

“Naturally,” he replied, “I cannot expect you to recognize me, nor indeed to remember me.” But Yasmina’s heart was beginning to act like a captive hare. “I have never forgotten_ you_ since the day I saw you in an old omnibus in Beirut.”

Smiling, he clicked his heels together and raised his hand to the green turban in salute.

Some little time elapsed before Pool-o’-the-Moon grew sufficiently composed to relate the strange story of the cedarwood cupboard; for it was this cupboard in her apartment overlooking the kiosk which had brought A 14 into existence. While selecting a dress one day, more than a year before, she had been surprised to hear the voice of Raschid Azem raised in anger in the adjoining room—her father’s office.

“I tell you, Ismail ed-Din, that you are mad! The British are defeated. Colonel Roden-Pyne, their Cairo Director of Intelligence, has been outwitted at every move by Dr. Rosener. They are finished. The French we control. In two months, in a month, I shall be Reich Governor of Lebanon! You must compel Yasmina to consent to an immediate marriage. Otherwise I shall begin to wonder. I have means of information, and there are rumors—”

At an angry word from Ismail ed-Din, Raschid Azem had abated his tones, and Yasmina had heard no more. Ismail ed-Din was away from home the next day. A delicate operation with the tools Yasmina handled so skillfully soon removed a square piece of cedarwood and revealed thin paneling—all that remained between the wardrobe and her father’s office.

On his return, Ismail ed-Din had to thank his daughter for a framed flower study painted on silk which she had screwed to the wall immediately above his chair. She omitted reference to the fact that she had removed the panel behind it. But Yasmina had to remember to hang a heavy garment at the back of her cupboard and to keep the door closed.

A week later, Aida, her confidential companion, obtained permission to visit a sister in Cairo, and Colonel Roden-Pyne received a letter which surprised him. It contained particulars of an ingenious Arabic code, together with an offer to supply accurate information from time to time relating to Nazi plans for the future of Turkey, Irak, Syria and Palestine. “Get in touch with Fatimah, a Negro woman who sells vegetables in the Damascus market and make arrangements for letters to be exchanged.” The writer’s signature consisted of an Arabic A written fourteen times.

Fatimah, formerly Yasmina’s nurse, had married a worthy man of her own complexion owning a small market garden in the fertile area of the Ghutah. The colonel’s arrangements involved Abu Hassan (already in British employ); and from the day that A 14 was incorporated in the underground system, Colonel Roden-Pyne had had good reason to congratulate himself upon taking the chance. In his anxiety to impress Ismail ed-Din, Raschid Azem frequently confided to the Sheikh details of brilliant intrigues which he assisted Dr. Rosener to carry out.

“But the cipher, Yasmina—did you invent it?”

“No, I am not clever enough.”

“That I dispute.”

Yasmina took a faded volume from her bookshelf. It dealt with alchemy, a subject of which she knew nothing; but in studying the text, which was in classical Cufic exquisitely penned, she had discovered the hidden cipher: a method by means of which some of the old alchemists had buried in their writings, for the benefit of brother adepts, the secret of transmuting metals.

“Pool-o’-the-Moon,” said Bimb[❖]shi Baruk, “you are strangely and beautifully wonderful.”

*

COLONEL RODEN-PYNE was called up on the private line from Haifa. “Is that Major Baruk?”

“Baruk here, sir. There’s a man named Raschid Azem—do you know him?”

“Of course I know him, B.B. But what’s happened?”

“Well—what do you know_ about_ him?”

“About him? Big businessman. Has interests all over the place. Nazi tendencies, but nothing against him. Why?”

“He’s visiting Alexandria next week.”

“What about it?”

“Well—make his stay as pleasant, and as long as you can.”

“Why?”

“He’s the lad you call Z.”

“What!”

“Positive fact. Rig up any charge you like, but hold him. I have this direct from A 14.”

Now, the annoying evasions to which Colonel Roden-Pyne had resorted with the bimbo[❖]shi touching the identity of that invaluable agent had merely masked ignorance; for this was something which Colonel Roden-Pyne had never succeeded in finding out.

“Did you see A 14?”

“Yes.”

“In person?” The colonel was hard hit, but he concealed the fact.

“Did he give you the missing report?” he asked.

“Yes. That was it: Hold Raschid Azem.”

“What’s become of Madden and the Armenian?”

“In jail.”

“What! Where?”

“At Raschid Azem’s house: They are not suspected. There is no serious charge against them.”

“But—I mean, good heavens! How is—er, A 14? Is he well?”

“*He* flourishes like the bay tree._ He_ grows wiser and more beautiful day by day._ He_ is one of the most wonderful creatures God ever created.”

Colonel Roden-Pyne cleared his throat hastily.

“I agree,” he said. “Report back to headquarters at once.”

Chapter 3

Murder Strikes in Lychgate

IT WAS DURING the first uneasy lull in Libya that Bimbo[❖]shi Baruk found himself back in England, not, this time, on sick leave, but charged with a somewhat unusual mission—of which more later. His uneasy spirit was forever leading him into dark places, and this fact is illustrated well by the strange affair at Lychgate. Indeed, those mysterious circumstances which attended the death of Major de Maura might never have been explained, nor the true story of why the White Hart on Lychgate Heath became so uncomfortably crowded one night in September never have been told, if two men who had nothing to do with the matter had not chanced to meet there.

On the night in question, a man who wore a rough tweed suit and carried an ash stick, made his way into the bar. He was deeply tanned and his rather sleepy eyes looked almost startlingly blue in their dark setting. Immediately inside the door he paused for a moment, surprised by a fog of tobacco smoke and boom of conversation created by an unusual number of customers who crowded the place. He derived an impression that his entrance had caused a sudden lull, that many glances were directed upon him, but that apparently he was not the person looked for.

Joe Porter, the landlord, beckoned to him and, “Would you care to step into the Sergeants’ Mess, sir?” he suggested. “It’s getting pretty fuggy in the bar.”

The Sergeants’ Mess was a tiny coffee room in which might be seen a print of “Ye White Harte, Lychgate Heath, 1743,” and another of the fight between Sayers and Heenan, while over the mantel was displayed a stuffed mongoose in a glass case.

This sanctum gained and two pints being served, the customer asked: “What exactly has happened? Have you got a Lodge of the Ancient Order of Foresters or what?”

“Not at all, sir. It’s clean beyond me. That crowd out there are shoemakers.”

“Shoemakers?”

“Yes. There’s over twenty of ‘em.”

“But why have they all decided to come here tonight?”

Joe Porter took up a copy of the_ County Mirror_ and indicated a paragraph. This was the paragraph:

*

To Cobblers and Working Shoemakers

A Cobbling match for the Champion’s Cup and a purse of One Hundred Pounds. Entries between 9 and 9.30 p.m. on Thursday September the eighteenth at the White Hart, Lychgate Heath.

*

“That’s the explanation,” said Joe Porter. “It’s filled my house with cobblers from miles around. Even old Jerry Stickle is here tonight. Won’t go out after dark for nobody as a rule. Not,” he added, “as anybody’s going to work overtime to persuade him.”

“H’m,” murmured the visitor. “Queer business. Practical joke?”

“I suppose so. Anyway, nobody’s come forward to explain it.”

Voices from the bar grew louder at this moment, and Joe Porter raised the hatch so that the man in tweeds, looking through, could both see and hear the disputants.

“What I says is,” remarked one who had a voice like a macaw, “and I says it firm, is this: Who done it?”

The speaker was a small man whose triumphantly bald crown had cast out the last invader, so that his retreating but unconquerable hair had dug itself in lower down. Here it had resumed the offensive in the form of a vigorous and violent red beard. He wore spectacles with uncommonly thick rims, was attired in riding breeches, green stockings and a sort of khaki tunic, while his shoes had been built for alpine occasions. On his back he carried a steel helmet and a gas mask.

“There’s twenty-four of us here,” he announced, “includin’ six from Uphill. I have been a-countin’ of ‘em.”

A heated dispute thereupon arising, Joe Porter excused himself and went to restore order. As he retired by way of one door, a customer entered by the other. He was a big blond man with that in his bearing which suggested the soldier.

“B.B., by all that’s wonderful!” he exclaimed. “I thought you were on Afric’s burning shore!”

“So I was ten days ago.” B.B. sprang up, a light of welcome in his eyes. “But I have established an unfortunate reputation as a Bow Street runner or something. So now I’m back in England. Delighted to see you, Colonel.”

Colonel Dawney, commandant of a military hospital in the neighborhood, smiled into the blue eyes of Bimb❖shi Baruk. Although still young, Mohammed Ibrahim Brian Baruk of the Camel Corps had—entirely contrary to his wishes—become an almost legendary figure among those who served in Africa.

“You haven’t looked me up,” said Dawney, as Joe Porter’s face appeared behind the hatch. “I sometimes drop in here, because it’s the only pub I know where one can get a decent glass of beer.”

“Thank you kindly, sir,” said Joe. “Two pints?”

“I didn’t know you were here,” the bimb❖shi replied. “I am billeted on some worthy people out Kinton way, where I share a small bedroom with a large bust of W. E. Gladstone which frightens me.”

“You look fit,” commented the medical officer, running an appraising glance over Baruk’s spare, athletic figure. “Quite recovered from that nasty one you stopped in Libya?”

“Quite. In fact, I think it did me good to let some daylight into my dark interior.”

“Well—what about dining with me tomorrow night?”

And so this was arranged, as Joe Porter’s parade-ground tones reached them: “Final orders, please!” But when at closing time, four and twenty cobblers reluctantly faced the blackness of Lychgate Heath, they did not disperse until

Sam Jollet, the constable, had pointed out that they were creating a public disturbance.

*

FOLLOWING quite a sound dinner, Colonel Dawney and Bimb❖shi Baruk were lingering over excellent port—the colonel was a connoisseur—when an urgent phone message called the colonel away to one of the wards. The bimb❖shi emptied his glass—he didn’t care for port, even when it was super—and filled his pipe. He was lounging in an armchair-island surrounded by a sea of tobacco smoke when Dawney returned.

“Sorry to leave you, B.B. It was that chap I mentioned—Major de Maura. Came in at eight, and now it’s”—he glanced at his watch—“nine forty-one.”

“Well?”

“Finished. He’s gone.”

“Sorry. Very sudden, surely?”

“Yes.” Colonel Dawney helped himself to a stiff brandy and soda; he was clearly upset, because he failed to note that his guest was not drinking. “Heart, I think; at the end. Phew! I’m bothered.”

“Let me see, Dawney. This was the man who was working as a linguist for the War Office people on the Hill. Born in the Argentine, you said, and had served in Morocco and elsewhere?”

“That’s the fellow. Unique at languages, they say. He was billeted at the house of a Mrs. Saunders near Hayland Common. She called the police when he was seized with this attack. The M.O. on duty diagnosed tetanus, but it was difficult to see how it had occurred. They found a small scar, certainly, on the side of his calf—probably caused by brambles; healed and unlikely to have led to such violent infection. There was also, I should add, a tiny pinprick, quite recent, on his right forefinger. A thorn, again, might have done it. From what little I have learned—believe I told you—I gather that de Maura was by way of being a Don Juan. Normally, I should say he was a good-looker of his type. Lorkin, the medical officer who went to collect him, didn’t like his heart. He picked up some story from Mrs. Saunders about a woman who used to visit him secretly.

However, that's neither here nor there. It appears that a phone message came through for him—female voice, foreign accent—just before they called me.”

He drew a slip of paper from his pocket.

“It was taken by the orderly on duty and sent up to the ward. You see, the patient's mind was clear, at intervals, although his tongue was paralyzed. They decided to read the message out to him. Here it is, as the orderly wrote it down”—and he passed the chit across.

Bimb❖shi Baruk read the following words aloud:

“Please tell Major Rafael de Maura that Gabriel Varez is with him in spirit.”

“Did he seem to understand?”

The colonel nodded: it was an eloquent nod.

“He forced himself upright in bed—and he spoke, for the first and the last time —”

“What did he say?”

“He said, ‘My shoes—’”

“My shoes?”

“Just that. Then came the final seizure—and his heart conked out.”

Dawney suddenly observed that Bimb❖shi Baruk was not drinking. He became conscience-stricken.

There was an interval of silence. Bimb❖shi Baruk watched a daddy longlegs bent upon committing hara-kiri in a port glass. He possessed a sort of extra sense which, but only at odd times, enabled him to read from a man's eyes what that man was thinking. Such a message had just reached him from Dawney. It was this: “I believe Major de Maura was murdered.”

“I take it”—the bimb❖shi seemed to be thinking aloud—“that the message, and its strange effect, gave you the idea that there had been foul play?”

Colonel Dawney stared.

“I don’t know how you knew, but you’re right. It startled the poor devil like an electric shock, with the queer result I have mentioned. I assume his reaction to have been one of urgency; a sudden, uncontrollable desire to get away—presumably from Gabriel Varez. Hence his words, ‘My shoes.’”

“Was he undressed?”

“Yes; they found him in bed. But my idea wasn’t based on the message entirely. Charlton—he’s one of the M.O.’s here—came on duty soon after de Maura died. It was he who phoned me just now. Charlton spent some years in South America; and although I’m inclined to think that the patient’s nationality and the mysterious message inspired his theory, Charlton insists that de Maura didn’t die of tetanus at all—”

“What’s that?” Bimbo Shi Baruk’s sleepy blue eyes woke up. “Then of what did he die?”

“According to Charlton, of curare poisoning.”

“Curare poisoning?”

“I have never come across a case myself, but I understand that the symptoms are similar, except that the onset is sudden and the end more swift. A mere touch, of course, is sufficient to do the trick with curare—and there was that tiny pinprick on his finger. Point is, B.B., that if it was, as Charlton believes, curare, the case goes very deep indeed.”

“What is curare? Is it something one can buy at a druggist’s?”

Colonel Dawney laughed. He had ingrowing laughter, silent, but evidently very painful.

“Don’t be a fool. It’s an alkaloid found in the extract of some South American tree and principally used as an arrow poison. Next to unobtainable.”

“That fact rather narrows down the inquiry, don’t you think? I mean, in order of importance, I should look for one, definite evidence that curare was used; two, somebody who had some or who could obtain it; three, de Maura’s secret visitor;

and four, Gabriel Varez. Either three or four, or possibly both, might prove to be two.”

“H’m—lucid reasoning, I admit.”

“If you really think that there’s anything underlying this business, I should be glad, if it would relieve your mind, I mean, to look into it.”

Colonel Dawney smiled his gratitude.

“Thanks, B.B. I should naturally have hesitated to suggest such a thing; but—I’ll have Mrs. Saunders called up.”

*

MAJOR DE MAURA’S apartments formed a suite, accessible from a side entrance. The sitting room offered no useful evidence. Mrs. Saunders, a hushed little woman who looked fragile, the bimb❖shi had dismissed from the inquiry, although, if one were to accept as authentic a spacious and gaily colored photograph of the late Mr. Saunders which hung above a bureau, her survival became a minor mystery. It exhibited a gentleman who wore a well-nourished but angry mustache and a Masonic apron, a gentleman whose hypnotic glare would have frightened anyone to death, the bimb❖shi thought, with the possible exception of W. E. Gladstone. A row of textbooks in English, French, German and Spanish lay on the bureau. The bimb❖shi glanced at them and went into the bedroom. This he found in wild disorder, with bedclothes strewn all about the floor.

There were few tasks he liked less than that of taking stock of another man’s private possessions, made pathetic, and in a sense sacred, by the seal of death. It approached sheer indecency. But he went on with it and presently found himself considering a parade of shoes, lined up two-deep in a cupboard. Clearly Major de Maura had been a shoe fancier: he counted ten pairs. Another pair lay under a chair beside the bed, and near by he saw some red Persian slippers.

For a long time Bimb❖shi Baruk considered the rows of shoes, wondering in what way they differed from other shoes. They were unusually small, certainly, but it was not until he picked one up and compared it with his own that he grasped the real difference. The heels were almost an inch higher than normal. De Maura, a man below average height, had been anxious to add to his stature.

Nearly an hour elapsed before Bimb❖shi Baruk came downstairs and bade Mrs. Saunders good night. He had discovered nothing of importance. True, the bimb❖shi knew now that Major de Maura had had no visitors on Saturday, but had gone out to mail letters shortly after seven o'clock, returning before eight; that he had been a married man with two daughters, and separated from his wife, who lived in Buenos Aires, for ten years; that he had proved himself a courageous and capable soldier; that he was effeminately proud of his small feet; that he was a chronic amorist; that he dyed his hair; that he had been involved in a local intrigue; that he had expensive taste in cigars and a streak of sadism in his character—together with one or two other trivial facts.

But as he walked on through the darkness, Bimb❖shi Baruk found himself saying aloud, "My shoe!" He said it in a variety of ways, pronouncing the two words with subtle intonations, so that a number of motives might have inspired them. But "My shoes" remorselessly haunted him, until at last he pulled up, turned and went back.

The immediate outcome of his second visit to Mrs. Saunders, from which he brought away a pair of shoes wrapped in newspaper, was a phone call to Colonel Dawney.

"Hullo, Colonel. Baruk here. I believe you are right about de Maura. Looks like an amazingly clever murder. I'm afraid I shall have to glance over the body. You seem to have missed something. Will it be troubling you?"

*

ON THE FOLLOWING MORNING, Bimb❖shi Baruk set out on a tour of cobblers' shops in and around Lychgate. His routine was as follows:

"Good morning. My friend Major de Maura left a pair of shoes to be repaired. Are they ready?"

On learning from one that Major de Maura was not a customer, he inquired the name of another. In this manner he had made six futile calls when somebody suggested that he might try Mr. Stickle. The name sounded faintly familiar, but although Mr. Stickle's establishment proved to be not more than three hundred yards from the White Hart, he had no small difficulty in finding it.

The cottage, a seventeenth-century survival like the inn, shrank back from

Lychgate Heath, as if to avoid observation. It had a rusty red roof and diamond-paned windows, and it was smothered in sweet briar, now jeweled richly with scarlet berries. A brick path, worn in the center so as to resemble a shallow ditch, led from gate to porch. Above this porch appeared a sign which stated:

*

Jeremiah Stickle

Shoemaker

Established 1739

*

And, cross-legged on a bench inside the front window, so that he commanded a view of the path, was seated at his last none other than the little red man who had a voice like a macaw. The bimb❖shi entered. The place smelled of leather, hot wax, brass and a number of other things. Mr. Stickle went on hammering nails into the sole of an elderly boot and paid not the smallest attention to his visitor.

“Good morning,” said the bimb❖shi. “My friend Major de Maura left a pair of shoes to be repaired. Are they ready?”

Jeremiah Stickle glanced sideways and mumbled: his mouth was full of nails. When a row had been completed and certain redundant nails returned to a tin box, Mr. Stickle made up for his enforced silence.

“Collected ‘em hisself on Friday mornin’,” he squeaked. “Friday mornin’ they was promised for, and Friday mornin’ he had ‘em.”

“H’m.” The bimb❖shi looked puzzled. “You mean, of course, a pair of brown shoes with perforated white uppers—sometimes known as ‘corespondent’s’ shoes?”

“I do—and he had ‘em Friday mornin’.

Punctual I am, and knows me trade. When that picture what Joe Porter has of the White Hart in 1743 were made, this business stood here, it did, and a Stickle were in it.”

He smiled proudly, displaying through a hole in his red beard those few teeth

which had survived a lifetime devoted to chewing brass nails.

“So I gather,” said the bimb^oshi, wondering if a prosperous-looking spider whose web embraced one corner of the room had been in it too. “While you were amusing yourself at the White Hart on Thursday night, who was in charge here?”

“Amusin’ meself!” Mr. Stickle’s beard almost audibly crackled. “Let me tell you something, mister. Nobody can’t get me out of a night—nobody. Don’t hold with it these times. But Thursday night were a challenge. I never refuses a challenge. If there’s a champion shoemaker around these parts, I reckon everybody knows where to find him. But”—his voice assumed its most pathetic squeak—“I wish I knowed who done it.”

“Who was here while you were out?”

“Nobody. I lives by meself. When I goes out for a pint I puts this here board up what says, ‘Back in 10 minutes.’ The other night there wasn’t no board—but I got a good Yale lock and all the windows was fastened.”

“Had anything been disturbed when you returned?”

“‘Course nothing had been disturbed. Who’d disturb it?”

“When did you finish work on the shoes?”

“Thursday afternoon. Half-heelin’ were the job. He has extra high heels and wears ‘em down accordin’.”

“Who, except you, could have known when the shoes were finished and when they were to be called for?”

“Anybody who knowed me methods. Lots of people drops in for a talk like. Any of ‘em could have knowed.”

“Name some of these people.”

Mr. Stickle scratched under his beard.

“Well—Tom Payne were in Wednesday, I think it were. Then Bill Hookey come

in Friday. Sam Jollet, the constable, he step in nearly every day some time.”

“Has any of these a key of the door?”

“Key o’ the door! I wouldn’t trust a key o’ me door to no livin’ man, no, nor woman neither, nobody livin’—except Dr. Allardyce.”

“Why ‘except Dr. Allardyce’?”

“Because Dr. Allardyce have one.” He laughed as though he had scored a point. “Maybe you think Dr. Allardyce stole them shoes? Likely, too, I’d say!” He chuckled until his spectacles threatened to fall off. “That’s a good ‘un, that is.”

“But why has Dr. Allardyce a key?”

“‘Cause I never ask for it to be give up. When I were layin’ in me bed here with me bronchitis last spring, Dr. Allardyce have a key made to come in an’ out. Stay best part o’ one night along o’ me, too. Aye, there ain’t another doctor in Lychgate would have did it. I challenge you to find one. That’s what I calls a real doctor. Always droppin’ in for a chat, too, friendly like—”

“I see,” said the bimb❖shi. “Does Dr. Allardyce live near here?”

“Heath House. That’s where Dr. Allardyce live.” He took up the notice, “Back in 10 minutes,”

“Would there be any objection to me goin’ along to the White Hart for me pint?” he inquired.

*

HEATH HOUSE, tendrils of creeper running like veins across its weather-beaten face, challenged the heath in rather forbidding silence. On a brass plate beside the gate appeared:

*

JULIAN ALLARDYCE, F.R.C.P. (Edin.)

DR. M. ALLARDYCE.

*

A trim, grim and elderly Scotswoman opened the door to Bimb❖shi Baruk. He was presently shown upstairs and left in a well-appointed study, both windows of which commanded extensive views of Lychgate Heath. He had waited no more than a minute when one of three doors opened and a man who wore a long white coat came in. The bimb❖shi felt the impact of a powerful personality.

“Good morning, Major Baruk. I understand that you wish to see me.”

“Dr. Allardyce?”

“Julian Allardyce, at your service.”

Julian Allardyce was tall, of a lean but athletic build of which his visitor approved; clean shaven, with abundant silvering hair brushed back from a fine brow. His gray eyes were steady in their regard and he would have been strikingly handsome if the bridge of a strong, straight nose had not been broken at some time.

“My call concerns one of your patients—”

“I do not practice, sir, although I hold a medical degree.” He had a light, vibrant voice and at times a somewhat arrogant academic manner. “I am employed in research work.” Another of the three doors opened and a woman came in. Julian Allardyce extended a large, capable hand. “This_ is Dr. Allardyce.”

Bimb❖shi Baruk turned, and was about to say something about “your daughter,” but his nimble wit stepped on his tongue in the nick of time. He contented himself with a formal bow.

“Major Baruk wishes to see you about one of your patients, Marian.” Julian Allardyce bowed slightly to the bimb❖shi. “This is my wife. And now, no doubt you will excuse me, sir, as I am engaged upon work of some urgency.”

He went out.

“Won’t you sit down, Major Baruk.” Mrs. Allardyce spoke in quiet, cultured and musical tones. “I hope I can help you. Which of my patients is it?”

Bimb❖shi Baruk took a seat in an armchair and Mrs. Allardyce on a deep settee placed between two windows. The bimb❖shi wondered how even Jeremiah Stickle had contrived to gabble for several minutes without betraying the fact that “Dr. Allardyce” was feminine. He noted that she was dressed now in a smart tweed suit, that she was slight and shapely and her husband’s junior by many years. Her dark hair, in which one might detect faint coppery streaks, had a most intriguing wave. She wore spectacles, and, smiling so as to display small, milky-white teeth, she removed the spectacles and laid them beside her.

“My professional disguise,” she explained. “I have learned that they give patients confidence.”

He found himself looking into amber eyes fringed by long, curling lashes, and he knew that Mrs. Allardyce was a remarkably beautiful woman; he knew, too, that she was not English. A swift picture of the story took form in his brain, clear and strong as a good photographic print.

“Actually, I am interested in two patients,” he replied slowly. “The first is Gabriel Varez.”

Mrs. Allardyce watched him steadily; her expression was unfathomable.

“I have no patient of that name.”

“Shall I say, then, _ was _ Gabriel Varez? The other is Jeremiah Stickle.”

“I have certainly attended Stickle, but not lately. Is he ill again?”

“Not at all, nor is he of more than secondary importance. I am chiefly anxious to know why you sent a phone message to Major de Maura on behalf of Gabriel Varez.”

“You say that _ I _ sent such a message?”

The bimb❖shi hated his task more and more every minute. His peculiar system of interrogation called for great moral courage in practice; but he had outlined the inquiry to Colonel Dawney in this way: (1) definite evidence that curare was used. This he believed he had secured. (2) Somebody who had some or who could obtain it. In this household he had found, at least, somebody who could obtain it and also somebody who could have had access to de Maura’s shoes

while they were in Stickle's workshop. Her appearance suggested that this beautiful woman who possessed leopard eyes and a preoccupied husband, might conceivably be (3) de Maura's secret visitor. There were weak features in the formula, but, in lieu of a better, he allowed it to dictate his next remark.

"My dear Mrs. Allardyce," he said, "it would be nearly impossible to mistake your voice."

"My voice?"

"Your words were, 'Please tell Major Rafael de Maura that Gabriel Varez is with him in spirit.' Your voice is undisguisable."

"But_ you_ did not—"

She checked herself, dropped protective lashes; but it was too late. At last, that extra sense of the bimb❖shi's had awakened. The completed sentence reached his brain; it was: "But_ you_ did not take the message." He sighed and stood up. He was acutely uncomfortable. He stared out of a window, learning that the cottage of Jeremiah Stickle was visible from that point. Then he turned.

"Let me make my position clear." His voice was gentle, almost apologetic. "I hold a sort of warrant, authorizing all Officers Commanding, Chief Constables and others, to afford me every facility. In point of fact, my present visit is not an official one." Mrs. Allardyce rose from the settee and confronted him. "Would you care to give me particulars and leave the result to my conscience; or do you prefer that I pass the inquiry over to the police, with such evidence as I have?" Her hands had been clenched, but she relaxed them.

"What evidence have you?" she asked coldly.

He took out a small leather box, velvet-lined; it had formerly held pearl studs. It now contained an odd-looking object which he handled gingerly.

"This thorn—a briar thorn, I think—neatly attached to a wooden peg. It was inserted in a hole bored between the sole and the upper leather of de Maura's right shoe, so that his toe would come in contact with the point. In fact, this occurred according to plan, and he removed the shoes to learn the cause of the trouble. His finger also was pricked by the thorn. Now, the case rests like this: There is a black substance on the thorn; and I suggest that no one in this

neighborhood—except your husband and yourself—knows, or knew, (a) Gabriel Varez; (b) Major de Maura; and (c) where to obtain this substance—which is curare. Furthermore, no one else, other than Stickle, has a key to Stickle’s cottage. No, Mrs. Allardyce, I did not receive your telephone message, but I believe that it was you who sent it, and I suggest that it was someone in this house who lured Stickle out on Thursday night. I have only one question to ask: Why was it done?”

There was an interval during which amber eyes searched his own, an interval which the bimb❖shi knew must decide the swing of the pendulum. Then Mrs. Allardyce pointed to the armchair and returned to her place on the settee.

“You are a clever man, Major Baruk,” she said, speaking with perfect composure. “I salute you. Since you have found the shoe it would be useless on my part to refuse your offer. Scotland Yard would meet with no difficulty in tracing my former relations with Rafael de Maura and the identity of Gabriel Varez. So I will tell you the story, and you may do as you please. Shall we smoke?”

She offered a cigarette from a box beside her and took one herself. Bimb❖shi Baruk took one also and lighted both. He sat down again.

“Am I to suppose from your words, Major Baruk, that you believe my husband to be concerned?”

“Not necessarily. I await your story with an open mind. You spoke of your former relations with Rafael de Maura. Suppose we begin there?”

Mrs. Allardyce nodded quietly; her expression grew introspective.

“Rafael de Maura was a member of a well-known family which owned large estates in Santa Fe. They adjoined our own. Rafael was handsome, fascinating, and an experienced woman-hunter, although I did not know it at the time. I was nineteen. But deceived by all sorts of solemn promises, or perhaps because I was blindly infatuated, I consented to his proposals—only to discover that he had a devoted wife living in Buenos Aires. Even this might have failed to cure me completely, if I had not met Gabriel Varez. Gabriel was the son of a neighboring doctor and we were both studying medicine. I learned then that what I had mistaken for love was no more than an outburst of adolescent passion. Gabriel taught me this.”

Her eyes glowed as if a somber fire burned in the brain behind them; and the bimb❖shi wondered by means of what arts the dour Scottish scientist had won the affection of this beautiful, turbulent woman.

“To come to the point of my story. Rafael found Gabriel and myself together. There was an unpleasant scene. Later, there was worse, when I told him quite plainly that Gabriel knew everything about us and that Gabriel and I were to be married. Now, you must understand that Rafael’s ardor had by no means cooled. He was not yet tired of me; nor would his vanity permit him to believe that I was tired of him. He made threats which would have shown me—supposing I had not known it already—that I had been infatuated by as callous a ruffian as ever breathed. All the same, the next two months were among the happiest of my life. Then came the end. If you will excuse me for a moment, I will show you in what form it came.”

Mrs. Allardyce stood up and went out. A swift doubt leaped to the bimb❖shi’s mind, to be dismissed as swiftly. Indeed, she was not absent more than two minutes, and when she returned and resumed her place on the settee, she handed him a faded note. He glanced at it and shook his head; it was in Spanish.

“I will translate for you, Major. It says, ‘Please tell Gabriel Varez that I am with him in spirit. Rafael.’ Gabriel was dying when it came—I nursed him throughout. And_ this_ was the cause of his death.”

From a wooden box she took a thorn fixed to a round wooden plug and held it up for the bimb❖shi’s inspection.

“An_ opuntia_ thorn—prickly pear—coated with curare. The de Mauras employed an old colored servant, Hannibal, who was widely credited with being an Obeah man—and such people understand the use of secret poisons. He was utterly devoted to Rafael. I knew from experience that Hannibal could smuggle messages with incredible cunning; he seemed almost to be able to make himself invisible. Gabriel one evening walked over to see me, and had scarcely set his foot on the veranda when he collapsed. I had him undressed and put to bed. I was terrified. His symptoms were those of paralysis. I sent for the nearest doctor—his father—and almost lost my reason because he was so long in coming. When he arrived, it was already too late. Gabriel’s mind was clear, but he had lost the power of speech—” Her composure, which had earned the bimb❖shi’s respectful admiration, threatened to break down, but she conquered this

weakness and went on. "Late that night, Hannibal came with a message, from Rafael de Maura. It was this, which you have seen. He left the room before I had read it, but I ran after him. What is more, I caught him—stealing out of the back porch with the shoes which Gabriel had worn! In one of them I found this thorn." She replaced it in the box.

"Now, I am sure you understand that I belong to a hot-blooded race—I was Mariana Borrego. I swore a most solemn—as I realized later, a most dreadful—oath, beside Gabriel's bed, that I would repay." She shrugged her shoulders and lighted a second cigarette from the stub of the first. "The de Mauras had met with misfortune. Indeed, we all had. Rafael fled to Spain so soon after Gabriel's death that I had no time to act. I went to Buenos Aires and later took my degree there. It was during my first year that I met my husband. He came as a visiting lecturer from the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine. Ah, Major Baruk, England seldom knows her greatest men. Beginning as an almost religious respect for a wonderful intellect, my affection for Julian grew into a love that nothing in life can ever change—perhaps nothing afterwards. If Gabriel had lived it would not have been possible, but, Gabriel dead, I found in Julian all that I had lost—indeed, more. He does not work for profit, nor to aid destruction. He works for human good. He has no vanity. He seeks no honors. You saw his name on our plate: Julian Allardyce, F.R.C.P. He holds five other degrees. He might have been wealthy, titled, if he wished. He does not so wish—nor do I."

She paused, and the bimb[❖]shi noted that her eyes glowed in a new way. He found occasion to reproach himself for his bad habit of jumping to conclusions. This was not the story as he had reconstructed it.

"We returned to England, and I set up in practice. I was fairly successful. Then, one day—nearly two months ago—I saw Rafael de Maura, and I remembered my"—she hesitated—"solemn obligation; but I made up my mind not to tell Julian, as I knew how it would disturb him. I saw Rafael going into the shop of an old patient, Jeremiah Stickle, and I could not refuse to believe that I had been chosen as an instrument of justice. My husband is working on a new treatment for tetanus: it is based on curare. And I remembered that I had a key of Stickle's door! All that remained was to get ready and to await another visit of Rafael to the shoemaker. I prepared a briar thorn, coating it with curare from Julian's laboratory and then fixing a bead of gum on the point, as had been done in Gabriel's case, so that the scratch would not take place until the heat of the foot dissolved the gum. This, a bradawl and a tube of seccotine were all that was

necessary.

“I made it my business to call often on Stickle when passing—for I should have known Rafael’s shoes at a glance because of their small size and high heels. My opportunity came a month ago—”

“A month ago?”

“Yes, my first opportunity. I discovered that a pair of Rafael de Maura’s shoes would be finished on a certain Wednesday evening—and I gave Stickle a seat for the local cinema. He blankly refused to go. I am afraid I got really angry. But the attempt had to be given up. He declared that nothing would induce him to leave the house at night. I thought over the problem for a week or more before a possible solution came to me: Stickle’s professional vanity and his love of money.

“In the meantime I found out all I could about Rafael de Maura. He saw me once, but owing to my ‘disguise,’ I suppose, failed to recognize me. I discovered the name of the poor little soul who was risking her happiness to amuse him. Beyond saying that she is the wife of a young officer commanding a submarine in the Mediterranean, I must be silent. Many women would condemn her—but few who had had the misfortune to be hunted by Rafael de Maura.

“Yes”—her brilliant eyes challenged the bimbo’s—“I know you thought at one time that I was his secret visitor. Well—my second opportunity came, and I put that absurd advertisement in the County Mirror. I typed it on a sheet of plain paper and enclosed a ten-shilling note. It succeeded. While Stickle was out on Thursday night, I opened his door and made a fairly neat job of what I had come to do.”

“Those shoes,” murmured the bimbo, and shook his head reproachfully. “Had you given due reflection to their history after they had served your purpose? My dear Mrs. Allardyce, you might now be responsible for a score of deaths!”

“Good heavens!” She bit her full, red lower lip, and he was sincerely glad to see a shadow of horror cloud those remarkable eyes. “To have overlooked that!”

He shook his head again. This woman’s emotional reactions were too tropical for analysis.

“But the telephone message?”

“It was purely by accident that I learned on Friday night how well I had succeeded. I was called out to a case in the same street and was told about the ambulance calling at Mrs. Saunders’. This tempted me to send the message from a public call-box, spoken in carefully bad English, which, I suppose, completed the case against me. So now you know how Rafael de Maura died, and why.”

“On the contrary, Marian,” came a light, vibrant voice, “you have grossly misled the major!”

Bimbi[❖]shi Baruk sprang up and turned, all in one movement. Julian Allardyce stood in a doorway directly behind him. His expression was puzzling, for he was looking at his wife, and there was something like a smile about his lips and in his steadfast eyes.

“Julian!” she whispered—and that was all.

“Major Baruk, I fear I have been eavesdropping. I beg your pardon. I happened, not by design, to see my wife take from her bureau certain—relics. I thought it to be my duty to do what I have done. The story which you have heard, of the death of Gabriel Varez, is true in every particular. I have, myself, examined the substance on the thorn which killed him. It is curare. But that upon the briar which you have is _ not.” _

“Julian!”—his wife’s voice was husky—“what are you saying?”

“I am endeavoring to correct any misapprehension under which Major Baruk may be laboring. Allow me to make my meaning clear, Major. When Rafael de Maura first appeared in this district, some two months ago, I chanced to hear of his arrival. I may say that I had never met him, but I knew the whole story. I knew also that one of Marian’s family might well hold views regarding the sanctity of an oath made to a dying man which others would look upon more tolerantly. I feared the outcome of a meeting.”

He crossed to his wife, with that light, lithe step which characterized his movements, and stood beside her, one hand resting on her shoulder.

“Nevertheless, Marian, I knew from your behavior that you had seen him—and those fears of mine were shown to be justified. Your earliest experiments with

briar thorns and small spigots of soft wood did not escape my attention.”

He fixed his analytical gaze upon the bimb❖shi. “You may possibly inquire, sir, why I hesitated to put an end to these preparations for murder. I will answer you in this way: By the common laws of men, de Maura’s life was forfeit; by the private laws of the Borregos, of whom my wife is one, it was forfeit to her. But I hoped and believed that if the attempt should be made, and fail, she would consider her duty—for as a sacred duty she regarded it—to be done. I knew, also, that de Maura was soon to be posted elsewhere.”

Julian Allardyce sat down beside his wife; and the bimb❖shi reflected that a wise man is uncertain of everything, because he believes nothing to be impossible.

“Forgive my discourtesy, Major. Please be seated. I cannot know if Marian has told you—I overheard only part of your conversation—but I am engaged upon experiments with a new antidote for tetanus, a condition which accounts for so many casualties in war. I am employing, not without success, one based upon curarine. It follows that I have a stock of curare in my laboratory. It is somewhat difficult to come by in England, and I keep what I have in a special container. However, detecting my wife’s purpose, I transferred it to another and placed a harmless preparation of similar appearance in the original flask—”

“But, Julian”—Marian Allardyce’s voice remained husky—“how could it have been harmless, when—”

“When de Maura died?” He patted her shoulder. “You planned your murder perfectly. Do not reproach yourself.” Unmistakably, now, Julian Allardyce was smiling. “You see, he did not die of curare poisoning; he died of tetanus.”

“If I may interrupt for a moment,” said the bimb❖shi diffidently, “I have seen the scratch on his foot as well as that on his finger.”

“No doubt, sir. I have conceded the point that this attempt was well planned. But there are laws higher than those of Spanish retributive justice. De Maura some days before had sustained a cut on his left calf from partly buried barbed wire. No doubt you have seen this scar also?” The bimb❖shi inclined his head. “He called upon a local practitioner, who noted unsatisfactory conditions and who also chanced to be acquainted with me and my special studies. Dr. Weldon and his patient came to consult me a few days ago—”

“You mean”—Mrs. Allardyce spoke in a low tone—“that Rafael de Maura came_ here?”_

“Certainly. I made the appointment for a time when I knew you would be away from home, and de Maura had no reason to suspect the identity of my wife. Perhaps I need not stress the point, Major Baruk, but prognosis in such cases is extremely difficult. Tetanus sometimes supervenes as late as ten days after infection. Even I am not infallible. Indeed, I am weakly human. In my second year at Edinburgh I was regarded as at least the equal of any middleweight in Great Britain, and I remain physically fit. I will not deny that the temptation to thrash de Maura to within an inch of his life was strong upon me. He would have defended himself, for cowardice was not among his vices; but man for man I stood in a different class, and I conquered the impulse. I examined the wound and gave the best advice in my power. Finally, I should be glad if you would arrange to have the substance upon the thorn examined by a competent person, other than myself. I naturally regret this exposure of intimate domestic matters, but I have complete confidence in your discretion. I do not pretend to apologize for my wife.”

He put his arm about her shoulders. “Circumstances, and the heritage of Borrego blood, explain her slightly irregular behavior. If I can assist you in any other way, at any time, pray call upon me, Major Baruk. I shall be at your service.”

Chapter 4

The Laughing Buddha Finds a Purchaser

BUT THE REAL purpose of Bimb[❖]shi Baruk's presence in Lychgate was in no way concerned with the lives of Julian Allardyce and his beautiful wife. It was concerned with a deadly secret menace for a time believed to overhang the Allied nations—a thing so frightful that it might not be contemplated without horror: and it was this which led to the curious behavior of Mr. Martin Brown and to the following events.

Before a small shop window in Lychgate High Street a man stood looking in. He was a well-built man wearing an expensive but rather shabby tweed suit: his dark skin, cleanly chiseled features, and drooping eyelids made for good looks, but good looks of a vaguely Oriental sort. The sign over the shop said: "Brown, Madder & Co., Artists' Requisites." Bright sunshine flooded the street, although already there was a wintry nip in the air.

The ancient bow window, partly of bottle glass, had lately contained a few paintings of Egyptian scenes and two or three water colors of Lychgate Heath by the well-known illustrator, Martin Brown, together with boxes of paints, brushes and an unusual pot or so. These, however, were now removed, and the sole exhibit consisted of a wooden figure, some eight inches high, obese but joyous, arms upflung, possibly of Chinese workmanship. A girdle about its pendulous belly was crudely gilded and some of the gilt had worn off. The right hand of this figure seemed to have been damaged and rather carelessly restored. A card resting against its pedestal announced:

*

LAUGHING BUDDHA

A Bargain.

Price [❖]100

*

When the inquirer who stood outside turned and glanced to right and left along the High Street, he was smiling, and one saw that his eyes were of the same color as the cloudless sky above Lychgate. He opened the shop door, so that a bell jangled, and went in. He carried a drawing under his arm. From behind a painted screen which masked an inner door, a man appeared—a tall but stooping figure in careless gray flannels, wearing a silver Vandyke beard and mustache and a wide-brimmed Stetson, a man of distinctive personality; in fact, Martin Brown. English illustrators had fallen on hard times, and Brown was no longer young. “Brown, Maddier & Co.” was his final bid to cheat bankruptcy.

“Hullo, B.B.,” he rumbled; he had a voice which suggested casks being rolled along a wine cellar. “Glad to see you.”

“Any bids?”

Martin Brown shook his head. “Don’t expect any.”

He fixed a glance of mock severity upon his visitor. During a year spent painting in Egypt, Martin Brown had met Mohammed Ibrahim Brian Baruk of the Camel Corps and had become his friend for life. This fascinating product of an Anglo-Arab marriage had made a strong appeal to the painter, and Bimb❖shi Baruk and he had gone on a number of expeditions into the desert, once as far as Siwa; for the bimb❖shi aspired to paint. But, alas, not even Martin Brown’s untiring tuition had enabled him to do more than daub. Bimb❖shi Baruk unwrapped the water color which he carried and propped it up on a chair. One psychically gifted might have divined that it was meant to portray the windmill on Lychgate Heath, presumably during a thunderstorm.

“Any improvement, Martin?”

Martin Brown studied the work.

“Do you ever clean your brushes?”

“Whenever I think of it; but I don’t clean them in my mouth as you do.”

Brown let loose a bellow of deep laughter.

“Try it,” he said, when the storm had subsided. “Paint hasn’t such a bad flavor as you’d suppose.”

“Yes, B.B.—there’s some improvement. But use clean brushes. Let me sell you some!” He obliged with an encore bellow. “Come into the factory.”

Through the small shop one entered a fairly large studio, which in turn gave access to a garden. The studio was bewilderingly untidy. French windows were wide open to the sunlit garden and a number of birds busily finished the remains of a frugal lunch which Martin Brown had thrown onto the steps. A charcoal sketch was removed and the bimb❖shi’s work set on an easel in its place. There followed a short, trenchant lecture.

“It won’t do,” Martin Brown concluded. “It is far from hot. But you are not past praying for.”

“Thanks, Martin,” said the bimb❖shi with humility, and began to fill his briar pipe. “Has nobody at all inquired about the Buddha?”

—“Nobody?” — growled the painter. “You make me laugh. It’s the bane of my existence. I really can’t put up with this sort of thing.”

“What sort of thing?”

The doorbell jangled, and Martin went into the shop. A choleric, elderly gentleman of military appearance was there; he wore a crossword check suit and undeniably yellow gloves.

“Good afternoon. What can I do for you?”

“You can answer a simple question, sir,” was the hoarse reply. “It concerns that figure in the window—”

“Do you want to buy it?”

“Buy it! Damn it, sir! I could buy a dozen for a pound in Singapore! I merely wish to know how, at a time when patriotic people are saving up for the war effort, you dare to ask a hundred pounds for—for—”

“That is my client’s price.”

Following a snorting sound, came the visitor’s final words. “In my opinion you should either be locked up or medically examined!”

The bell jangled, the door banged, and Martin Brown came back.

“You said, ‘What sort of thing?’” he remarked. “Well, _ that _ sort of thing. It’s only a question of time for me to slosh one of ‘em, and then I shall have confirmed an opinion already favored around here, that I am a dangerous lunatic.”

Bimb❖shi Baruk nodded sympathetically.

“I think,” the painter continued, extracting a jar of beer from behind a canvas stretcher, “that in fairness I should know the facts. A man who is trying to build up an honest business excites the wrong kind of interest by asking a hundred pounds for a thing that is worth about fourpence.”

“It cost me ten shillings.”

“You were swindled. I have never been able to make out what you are doing here, in the first place. You appear to spend your time haunting all the pubs in the neighborhood. But when it comes to trying to sell a bit of old junk for the price of everything else I have in the shop—”

“I agree. You are right. I will explain, Martin.”

And behind the bimb❖shi’s explanation of his presence in England a remarkable story lay. This was the story.

It began more than two years back—in fact, just before France was overrun—on the French Riviera, where Bimb❖shi Baruk was spending a short leave. During this time he made the acquaintance of Janson Runmede, the famous Harvard physicist who had once assured New York reporters that Einstein really _ had _ a theory. Runmede was living in a villa at Cap d’Ail and was popularly believed to be engaged upon abstruse experiments. Here, one evening, the bimb❖shi attended a small dinner party which formed the prelude to a tragedy. Those present were Dr. Runmede, his secretary, Ann Mertsham, Mr. and Mrs. Vandersen of Philadelphia, Bimb❖shi Baruk, and a Mrs. Vivian. Mrs. Vivian was a lustrous brunette, whose exact nationality he failed to determine but whose eyes held for the distinguished American an expression of rapturous surrender which embarrassed even the bimb❖shi.

However, it was a pleasant evening. The dinner—excellent—was cooked and

served by members of the staff of a near-by hotel. John Vandersen had a grand fund of anecdote, and his wife was a good teamer. Ann Mertsham would have been a pretty girl without her spectacles, but her persistent intelligence was a trifle exhausting, the bimb❖shi thought. Mrs. Vivian rather defeated him, until he decided that she didn't matter, provided that Runmede didn't permit her to matter.

The Vandersens were first to leave. Ann Mertsham lived at the big hotel in sight of the villa garden, and as it appeared that Mrs. Vivian lived there also, these two later set off together, observing a septic politeness to each other, frigid as the crescent moon which sailed above Cap d'Ail. Runmede detained Baruk.

"It's not fifteen minutes into Monte Carlo," he said—the bimb❖shi, who loved a gamble, was quartered there—"so let's have a leisurely old-fashioned and a quiet chat."

They had their whisky and their chat, and it was largely his memories of that final hour with Runmede which marked out Bimb❖shi Baruk's course some two years later.

Windows opening on the garden were thrown wide and lamplight played theatrically upon golden fruit gemming an orange tree, shadows of its branches painted on a mosaic terrace by the bold brush of the moon. Except for a chorus of crickets, a disturbing mosquito hum and, once, the deep note of a steamer's whistle from Villefranche, the night was still. Cap d'Ail long ago had ceased to be fashionable, and the villas immediately above and below Runmede's on that steep little street which tortuously wound down to the sea were vacant.

"Bit lonely at night, isn't it?" the bimb❖shi suggested.

A breeze stirred the curtains and bore with it a fragment of conversation from Ann Mertsham as, with Mrs. Vivian, she walked back to the hotel. "One instinctively distrusts these sudden winds from the Alps..."

Perhaps her words subconsciously prompted Dr. Runmede, for as he replied he closed shutters and windows.

"Yes. As a matter of fact, I have been warned that some crook or another has been seen around. But I don't mind. I've had my nose pretty close to the grindstone for a long while; I have had to listen to people, and I have had to talk

quite a lot. Here I can please myself.” Big and blond, he was more like a physical instructor than a professor of physics. “There’s nothing here to attract a thief, and if one dropped in I guess I could offer him a fairly stiff rough house.”

Bimb❖shi Baruk often recalled those words, later, but what he said at the time was: “You are just enjoying a long vacation?”

“Just enjoying every minute of it. A Harvard group put up a substantial sum two years back to finance an inquiry of mine, and I worked like a pack mule to justify their confidence. I may have overdone it a bit. Certainly I needed this rest.”

He said no more about his work, although the bimb❖shi would have been glad to listen, but talked of life on the Cote d’Azur, the queer people one met and, casually, of Mrs. Vivian. He had run into her, apparently, at the Sporting Club at Monte Carlo. She was lonely, rather down on her luck and, according to his own account, he had cultivated the acquaintance in a mood compounded more of quixotic chivalry than of passion. “She’s amusing, anyway,” he concluded.

It was not until Bimb❖shi Baruk was leaving that Dr. Runmede suddenly reverted to the subject of his isolation. A hired car was waiting at the lower or garden entrance, and as Runmede led the way down, he asked:

“Did you ever read ‘The Purloined Letter’ by Edgar Allan Poe?”

“Yes,” said the bimb❖shi, conscious of confusion.

“I know what the Britisher calls a ‘sahib’ when I meet one. You are a sahib. I’m going to take you into my confidence. There is one thing in this villa which, to a man who could understand its value, would represent a considerable fortune. Listen: What was the first object you noticed when you stepped into the front lobby?”

The bimb❖shi, whose powers of observation were inherited from a line of desert hunters, remembered immediately that he had noticed a figure which stood in a niche facing glazed double entrance doors. Some eight inches high, it was that of a man obese but joyous, arms upflung, one hand, the right, having been rather crudely restored. A more or less standardized Chinese ornament, he thought, and said so.

“Sure. You see it as you come in,” said Runmede. “Can’t miss it. Some people would lock it in a safe. Others would bury it. But Edgar Allan Poe would have put it just there. I don’t have to emphasize the fact that this is between ourselves. Good night.”

Heavy clouds swept the face of the moon, creating a weird lighting effect, so that as Bimb❖shi Baruk looked back, Runmede’s tall figure was alternately exhibited and obliterated as he stood there at the gate. Less than half an hour later, according to medical evidence, Dr. Runmede was murdered on that very spot. The villa was ransacked and found in wild disorder by Marcelle, the daily help, when she arrived in the morning. But, on the evidence of Ann Mertsham, nothing had been stolen except the laughing Buddha.

*

THE MANNER of the killing was not far to seek. The murderer had rung the bell at the lower entrance, and Dr. Runmede, thinking no doubt that one of his guests had returned for a belonging mislaid, had gone down and opened the gate. He had been struck on the head by some blunt weapon, a sandbag or a loaded tube, and had died of concussion. Marcelle almost stumbled over his body, which lay just inside the gate. It was unlikely that he had made any outcry, but, since a squall was raging at the time, no outcry would have been heard.

From its very outset the case presented unusual features, and Foubert of the Service de Surete was sent down post haste. With him, from Paris, came Mr. Lord, of the United States Intelligence. The villa had been sealed by the local authorities and guards posted. Everyone present at that last dinner party was closely interrogated—with one exception. The bimb❖shi’s evidence was recognized to be significant.

“Was this figure in its place when you left, monsieur?” he was asked.

“I left by another door.”

Ann Mertsham was positive on the point that nothing else was missing. Every scrap of paper in the villa had been examined by the thieves—and it was clear that the examination had been scientifically carried out—but nothing had been removed, although desk drawers were left lying on the floor, bureaux open, and cabin trunks and handbags with broken locks lay about Dr. Runmede’s bedroom.

“It is the work of expert agents,” declared the officer from Nice. “Paris must be advised.”

But before the arrival of Messrs. Foubert and Lord one highly curious fact came into possession of the police: Mrs. Vivian had disappeared! Ann Mertsham deposed that they had parted in the hotel lobby, Ann going to bed. But the management asserted—and proved—that Mrs. Vivian had given up her room at noon that day and had removed her baggage. She had left no forwarding address.

An intensive search was instituted, but no trace of her could be found. The Italian frontier post at Ventimiglia denied that she had crossed that night. “But what does one expect?” the examining magistrate exclaimed. “Almost certainly, but yes, that is where she went. Almost certainly, it is from there she came. This is a crime political, gentlemen.”

Ann Mertsham was unable to add anything to Bimbo[❖]shi Baruk’s evidence regarding the laughing Buddha. Dr. Runmede had bought it, or had had it given to him, since they had come to Cap d’Ail. He was far from secretive and she had always had access to all documents; in fact, she had recently sorted, filed and stored them; hence her certainty that none was missing. Inspector Brun, of Nice, threw fresh light upon the history of the absent Mrs. Vivian.

“She was also known as *Mme. Byas*, and was formerly associated with the Byas-Ardopolis group, a gambling syndicate, which went broke. Not a desirable friend for the poor Dr. Runmede, you understand. But beautiful? Ah, yes, but certainly.”

“Just the sort of woman who might be employed as a spy,” the bimbo[❖]shi agreed. “Except that I can’t make out what she was looking for. But if she is innocent, why doesn’t she come forward?”

Then the celebrated Paris detective arrived, and shattered the bimbo[❖]shi’s illusions upon that subject.

M. Foubert was a little, fat, round man, who resembled an overpainted cherub of the Flemish school, and who took snuff. He had an oddly sly smile. Mr. Lord, tall, grim, angular and taciturn, was the only American known to Bimbo[❖]shi Baruk who used a monocle. His voice suggested the presence of steel filings. Their arrival coincided with the discovery by Inspector Brun that a certain Jean Caron, of Monaco, who owned a motor boat and was licensed to carry

passengers, had set out on the evening of the tragedy, telling a friend that he was going to Cap d'Ail. He had never returned. It was feared that his craft had foundered in the violent squall.

"One asks," said Inspector Brun, "if *Mme. Byas* was on board."

But it was Mr. Lord, following an uncommunicative period during which he studied Bimb[❖]shi Baruk as an Egyptologist studies an unfamiliar scarab, who finally enlightened him concerning the probable purpose of the murderer.

"Professor Runmede had been at work for more than two years on an atomic bomb," he explained. "Its general principle is known to three governments; but there remained just one formula—some question of stresses—which he had failed to complete. The British War Office has a bomb, I believe, which, dropped in Times Square, would remove Times Square. But the Runmede bomb, if perfected, under similar conditions would obliterate a large part of New York City. That missing formula is the thing we must assume to have been hidden in the Chinese image."

The unforeseen collapse of France occurred so soon afterward that Bimb[❖]shi Baruk lost touch with the inquiry and the inquirers. His military duties wholly absorbed him. No trace had been found of Jean Caron, Mrs. Vivian or the motor boat. A crime that would have held world interest for several weeks was forgotten amid the greater horrors of war. The bimb[❖]shi, however, was unable to forget the fact that an instrument of destruction, possession of which might well decide the issue, was perhaps already in being. But two years had elapsed before the Cap d'Ail mystery flashed again across his path.

Walking through the streets of Port Said one evening on his way back from the docks, he was brought up as if by a blow outside the window of a dirty little junk shop. Among a litter of objects such as are offered for sale by those itinerant merchants whose boats besiege all incoming and outgoing liners, stood a laughing Buddha. The upflung right hand had been carelessly restored and from a gilded girdle part of the gilt was worn off!

Almost beyond possibility of error, here stood the figure stolen from Dr. Runmede. But the shop was closed—nor could the bimb[❖]shi discover to whom it belonged, nor where this person might be looked for. Dusk had fallen before he gave up the quest. "A fool is a fool all the time," he said to Martin Brown;

“but even a wise man is wise only part of the time.”

He went to a hotel, called up Cairo and explained that a matter of great urgency would detain him in Port Said overnight. Early on the following morning he returned to the shop near the docks, found it open—and the laughing Buddha missing! Mohammed Abd el-Musir, the proprietor, extended apologetic palms.

“How could I know, sir, that you wished to buy this thing? Give me two days, one day, and I will obtain another.”

He was an aged but agile Egyptian, whose long face, short beard and small, pointed ears lent him a pleasing resemblance to a camel. Bimb[❖]shi Baruk fixed a threatening stare upon Mohammed; he knew how to handle camels.

“This is a serious matter, O Mohammed. It is a matter of the_ Police._ Listen, then, attentively. To whom did you sell the Buddha?”

The bimb[❖]shi’s manner, his elegant Arabic, the word “Police,” reduced Mohammed Abd el-Musir to a state of abject servility.

“To a soldier on the transport which sailed at dawn, my lord. I went out in my boat.”

“To what regiment did this man belong?”

But Mohammed did not know.

“Very well. Tell me: Where did you get the figure and how long have you had it?”

“I have had it for many months, my lord, and no one ever wished to buy it except this soldier, who said that it reminded him of his wife’s mother. I swear in the name of the Prophet (may God be good to him) that I acquired it by honest trading.”

“From whom?”

“From a French sailor. It chances, my lord, that I can even tell your excellency his name, for the following reasons—”

“Forget the reasons. Tell me his name.”

“It was Jean Caron. He was mad, I think, for he believed that the piece had great merit and threatened to slay me when I offered him a just price. But, when he had visited many other dealers and had been thrown out of the great bazaar of Simon Artz, he came back most disgustingly drunk. It was then that I learned his name and also how he had once owned a vessel of his own in Monaco, which was lost with his passenger, a woman. He is now an ordinary seaman in a ship trading between Marseilles and Port Said. And so”—Mohammed spread eloquent palms—“the thing is worth very little. I buy it for a little less than it is worth, and this morning I sell it for a little more._ Ma’lesh!”_

Such evidence was indisputable. Mrs. Vivian had returned to Runmede’s villa that night and had stolen the laughing Buddha. She was, therefore, an Axis agent. Why her unknown accomplices had ransacked the house he was unable to imagine, since Mrs. Vivian evidently knew the real hiding place of the formula. Had she double-crossed them?

Jean Caron was not in the plot. This conclusion was based on his subsequent behavior. Mrs. Vivian had probably been drowned, and Caron had recovered the figure which she had had in her possession. Learning later of the Cap d’Ail murder, he had become convinced that the Buddha was worth a large sum. Accordingly he had disappeared until a time when he thought that it might safely be offered for valuation. That the Buddha itself possessed no value but contained something which possessed much, was an idea which had never occurred to the poor Jean. The circumstances of its sale clearly pointed to this. Bimb❖shi Baruk took instant steps. The transport carried the first battalion of a London regiment homeward bound to England, after eighteen months in the desert. He presented his case to the responsible authorities. They experienced no small difficulty in grasping its urgency, since they knew nothing of the_ dramatis personae_ and had never heard of Dr. Runmede. The merciful return to Cairo of the bimb❖shi’s old friend Colonel Roden-Pyne saved the situation. Colonel Roden-Pyne knew all about the Runmede bomb—and the bimb❖shi had great trouble in dissuading him from sending radio instructions to the officer in charge of the craft. This, he pointed out, was risking too high a stake upon that officer’s tact. A matter so delicate demanded delicate handling. After infuriating delays, therefore, it was arranged that Bimb❖shi Baruk should be sent by air to meet the transport on arrival. (This occurred during that long lull which followed the evacuation of Libya, and he welcomed any chance of action.) He arrived in good

time—to learn that the ship had been lost off the Irish coast!

It looked like the end of the laughing Buddha, but it was not. Every man on board had been safely transferred, with full kit and equipment, to an auxiliary cruiser. From a West Country port the battalion was drafted to Lychgate and accommodated in billets.

“SO now you see, Martin,” the bimb❖shi concluded, “what I am doing here.”

“I don’t,” said Martin Brown, refilling two glasses from the beer jug. “I would say, without much hesitation, that you are wasting valuable time. I would add that you are making Brown, Madder & Co., the laughing stock of Lychgate—not that that bothers me. What powers have you?”

“Full powers. But what are you thinking?”

“Of the simple, direct way.”

“Parade the battalion and fall-out all men home from Libya; then question them one by one?”

“Why not? We may wait weeks for the fellow who has this thing to see, or hear, that its twin brother is marked ‘Price ❖100.’ When that occurs, I grant you we shall hear from him—but think of all that could happen in the interval. He might give it to his mother-in-law. Why not go ahead and tell him it’s wanted?”

Bimb❖shi Baruk abstractedly filled his briar. When he spoke he did not look up.

“Have you ever tried to catch a runaway camel?” he asked.

“My experience of camels I acquired in your company in Egypt. I have said it before, and I say it again: They frighten me.”

“The best way to catch a camel is to pretend you don’t want him.”

“I shall recommend any unhappy lover to buy a camel.”

“You have noted, apparently with disfavor, that I haunt the local pubs. I converse with the troops and invariably ask them if they have glanced in your window.”

“Nice of you.”

“I had no difficulty in getting a duplicate. These figures are mass-produced, it seems, something like ginger jars. The gilt on Runmede’s had evidently been added, however, perhaps by Runmede himself. So I reproduced it from memory and also the appearance of the broken hand. You see, I have given this problem close consideration, Martin, and the success or failure of a direct attack would depend upon the type of man one had to deal with. The right type would come forward at once; but the wrong type would conclude that he had got hold of something valuable and would hide it—as Jean Caron did. No—I shall stick to my plan, for the present at any rate.”

“Please accept my grateful thanks,” said Martin Brown. “What would you do if someone really bought the blasted thing?”

“I should know that he was an Axis agent, and I should count on you to hold him pending arrival of reinforcements.”

And just such a contingency actually arose. News of it came to the bimb❖shi in this way. He was seated two days later, a morning destined to be memorable, on Lychgate Heath, patiently endeavoring to immortalize the ancient windmill in water colors, when a sound of running footsteps interrupted his concentration. He turned, looking back, as a spectacularly small boy, salmon pink and having large Cambridge-blue eyes, came sprinting toward him. Not the least uncommon feature of this breathless little person was his hair, ash blond, and growing straight up.

“Major, Major!”

“Hullo, Bungo.”

“He’s phoned!” The sprinter halted beside the painter. “Mr. Brown! He says please dash!”

Bimb❖shi Baruk frowned regretfully at his work, then made the best of stowing it away, forgot to wash his brushes, and packed the whole outfit onto a bicycle which lay beside him. Bungo, only son of the bimb❖shi’s landlady, panted, watching with wide-open eyes; his excitement was a form of worship.

“Good man, Bungo. I’ll tell you a story tonight.”

“Honest?”

“Honest to goodness, Bungo, a long one.”

“Something that really happened—to_ you?_

“It’s a promise.”

Ten minutes later the bimb❖shi was propping an art-laden bike against the outjutting window of Messrs. Brown, Madder & Co. An important car in charge of an important chauffeur stood near—and the laughing Buddha was absent. Bimb❖shi Baruk made a mental note of the car number and pushed the shop door open. Martin Brown came in as the bell jangled, making cabalistic signs.

“Where is he, Martin?”

“In the studio.” Brown’s whisper was like distant gunfire. “And he is a_ she._ Nice time I’ve had hanging onto her until you came. Began by bargaining and finally agreed to pay the full price! Phew! The temptations that assail artists—a hundred quid for nothing!” He removed his wide-brimmed hat and used it as a fan. “Surreptitiously, B.B., she’s been trying to find out if it opens.”

“Who is she?”

“I’ve no idea. Let me introduce you.”

He led the way through, and as they entered, a tall, slim woman from whose shoulders a sable wrap had slipped so that it lay across the chair behind her, stood up, slowly, and faced them. She was dressed expensively and well, a small hat of such ridiculous shape poised on gleaming black curls that the bimb❖shi knew it must be smart. Although too elegant for wartime, her presence exhaled a delicate and intriguing perfume.

“My dear Mrs. Vivian! What a delightful surprise!”

Her change of expression was so slight, so instantly effaced by a welcoming smile and that flame of glad surrender in her dark eyes, that the bimb❖shi saluted a worthy antagonist.

“It is really too wonderful!” She extended both hands; her hands were beautiful.

“Let me think. Is it two years, Major?”

“Rather more—but so much has happened.” She forced him to hold those slender hands longer than formal courtesy demanded, and as he looked into unfathomable eyes he wished that he might have had even two minutes to prepare for this encounter. He anticipated a keen contest. As they sat down facing one another, Mrs. Vivian, her lips slightly apart, was registering with perfect artistry the emotions of a woman unexpectedly thrown into the company of a man with whom she is hopelessly infatuated. Martin Brown withdrew, on some mumbled pretext, and listened behind the screen.

“It seems like fate that we should meet again, Major. Whatever brought you to this place—at this very moment?”

Bimbi Shi Baruk had decided upon his opening tactics, and he simply pointed to the laughing Buddha which stood upon a small table between them.

“Then you are a sentimentalist, too,” murmured Mrs. Vivian.

“But I cannot afford to pay for it.”

“Ah, that beastly money! Yet how helpless we are without it.” She paused, meeting the gaze of dreamy eyes. “Have you ever wondered what became of me?”

“Often.”

“Let me tell you. On that night we met”—she infused into the words a universe of meaning—“I was nearly at the end of things. I had been compelled to give up my room at the hotel and to move my very few belongings to a cheap pension at Mentone. I did not wish to confess my—destitution. I hired the old motor boat of a man called Jean Caron to bring me to Cap d’Ail and to take me back. A frightful storm”—she shuddered, and it was not acting—“swept the boat out to sea. The motor failed. Jean Caron gave me a life jacket. Great waves were sweeping over us. Hours there were of this agony, and then the boat sank.... I am uncertain about what happened after that. I remember, next, finding myself on board a Corsican fishing vessel. They carried me ashore at a place near Ajaccio. I was ill, desperately ill, for weeks. When I recovered—France was no more. What could I do?”

She leaned forward and rested both her hands on one of the bimb❖shi's which lay on the arm of his chair. He smiled sympathetically. He had not overestimated his adversary.

"What, indeed, could you do, Mrs. Vivian?"

Mrs. Vivian withdrew the caressing hands and opened a bag. She took out a case and offered a card to Bimb❖shi Baruk. He read:

*

LADY TREVELLIS

Abbotsway, Surrey.

*

"I was fond of Janson Runmede," the soft voice continued. "He was the only friend I had in those days of misfortune. This morning, driving past, I saw—that figure. Now I have plenty of money. Although I know little of such things, I think the price is ridiculous. But I truly believe it is the figure which used to stand in the lobby of his villa at Cap d' Ail—and we had shared many happy hours. I am a fool, perhaps; but, you see, I am a woman."

Bimb❖shi Baruk was keenly conscious of the fact that Lady Trevellis was a woman, but nothing told him that she was a fool. During part of the time that she had spoken he had become aware of a disturbance in the shop—muted by the sudden closing of a door. Now, heralded by peremptory taps, entered Bungo, still breathless. Blue eyes fixed gravely upon the bimb❖shi, he offered a scrap of paper, nodded significantly, and retired.

"Please excuse me, Lady Trevellis."

Unfolding the note, he read, in Brown's sprawling script: "Have got the real Buddha." There was no expression whatever upon his face when he looked up—but he had completed his plan of campaign.

"My landlady's son," he explained. "An urgent caller. Please don't think me impertinent, but is your husband"—he invented a name at random—"Sir Edward Trevellis?"

She shook her head. "Sir George. He was on holiday in Corsica, and became marooned by the new turn of affairs. I was a fellow maroon. When at last we managed to get away, we found that there was—mutual understanding. Life is very insecure for a lonely woman, and so—"

"I quite understand. May I call?"

"No one would be—so welcome. But—" she indicated the laughing Buddha.

"I withdraw my offer, Lady Trevellis. It is yours."

A check for a hundred pounds was made out in favor of Brown, Madder & Co., and signed "Estelle Trevellis." Bimb❖shi Baruk conducted Lady Trevellis to her waiting car, handed her wrapped-up purchase to the important chauffeur and returned to the shop. Martin Brown was executing a Highland reel. Without missing a beat, he opened a drawer and produced a laughing Buddha. Then, he paused.

"The man who had it was doing fourteen days C.B. The moment he got out he came in. He said if the thing we'd had in the window was worth a hundred pounds, 'wot about this 'ere?' I told him to leave it and come back in half an hour."

The secret of the Buddha was ingenious but simple. One hand had been removed and made to screw on and off. A small rod fixed to it ran down and clamped into the base. This locked it firmly. The figure had been sawed in two and a cylindrical space cut out. Metal threads were attached to the two parts so that they could be fastened together again. Gold paint had been used to hide the join.

Bimb❖shi Baruk drew out a roll of thin paper.

"Make your own terms with the owner, Martin. What's left of the hundred is yours—and you have earned it."

Lady Trevellis dined alone that night—Sir George was away—and had just retired to a restful and daintily feminine room, half library, half boudoir, for her coffee and a cigarette, when Bimb❖shi Baruk was announced. The shabby suit of the morning had vanished; he was in correct evening dress, and experienced eyes appraised him as a distinguished figure.

“Please try the armchair, Major Baruk. I was expecting you.”

“I thought you might be, Lady Trevellis, and my first duty must be to offer my apologies—”

“For what?”

“For swindling you.”

She laughed—a low-pitched, pleasant laugh. “Surely you realized that I was a consenting party? I bought the figure as the best way of getting out. I wanted time to think.”

“And I was willing that you should have it—at a price. You see, I required the money for another purpose.”

She watched him collectedly. She wore a simple rest gown which left her arms bare, with an implication of ivory shoulders, but he had sensed at once her abandonment of Delilah tactics and wondered what new form of onslaught he must anticipate.

“You have secured the original figure, I suppose?”

He inclined his head. “Jean Caron has been traced,” he said quietly.

Lady Trevellis shrugged resignedly; and something about the gesture gave him a clue which had long eluded him.

“Am I right in believing you to be Italian?” he asked.

“I am a French_ citoyenne,_ born of Italian parents and educated in England. Is it sufficient? How did you know?”

“The way you shrugged—shrugs are so patriotic. Perhaps I begin to understand.”

Brilliant eyes flashed a challenge.

“Your words tell me that you don’t, Major Baruk. Allow me to amplify my story a little. All that I told you today was true. A whole month elapsed before I heard of the tragedy at Cap d’Ail—and I was utterly, profoundly horrified. You see,

during my brief friendship with Janson—Dr. Runmede—he told me all about his experiments. He was a strangely trustful man in certain respects. In return, I was able to tell him that a dangerous German spy was covering the villa. I moved in queer society at that time and had means of information. Janson laughed; and do you know what he said?”

“I am anxious to learn.”

“He said that his great experiment had failed. There would never be a Runmede bomb. One formula, an essential one, would not, in his own words, ‘add up.’ So that he was—murdered, for no purpose.”

Following a clash of glances, the bimb❖shi nodded. Lady Trevellis was speaking the truth.

“Your own behavior becomes all the more remarkable.”

“If you refer to my taking the Buddha, which I am not going to deny, I cannot agree with you. What you don’t seem to understand is that I took it with me when I left with Ann Mertsham. I had slipped it inside my handbag before she joined me in the lobby. I must have been at sea when the tragedy occurred. This, Jean Caron can prove.”

“Pardon my stupidity,” said the bimb❖shi. “This simple possibility had escaped me. Jean Caron’s testimony shall be obtained on the point—but I don’t doubt your assurance. You had engaged him in order that you might get a start, if the—theft—should be discovered immediately?”

“Of course. I had come that night with the intention of taking it, and I did take it. I knew that what I wanted was hidden in the figure, because Janson once asked me, as we stood near it, if I had read ‘The Purloined Letter.’ I had not, but I made a point of doing so.”

“He asked me the same question,” murmured Bimb❖shi Baruk. “Am I to understand, then, that the remarkable document hidden in the figure—a document which I have in my pocket—was the one you sought?”

“If it is a roulette system, it is.”

“It is.”

Lady Trevellis betrayed momentary excitement, and then fell silent, hands clasped, but at last she said: "Janson Runmede met me in the Monte Carlo Sporting Club. I was a broken gambler. He told me that he would show me how to win enough to clear my immediate debts, but no more. He sat down beside me at a roulette table. I had a hundred and twenty francs—my last. He directed every stake. In less than an hour I had won a hundred thousand! That was the beginning of our friendship. Later, he explained to me that he had perfected a system against which no casino could play, and which he proposed to publish—in order that roulette might be abolished. He regarded it as a social evil. Well—the day came when I realized that he was—only amusing himself with me—"

"You were wasting your time?"

"I was sure I knew where Janson's secret was hidden—a secret which meant a fortune. It was Fate that sent someone else to murder him later that very night."

"Presumably this same Kismet," said Bimbo[❖]shi Baruk, "sent me from Egypt to England in pursuit of a gambling system, which, since Dr. Runmede's wishes must be respected, I cannot even try out!"

Chapter 5

Warning from Rose of the Desert

THE BIMBASHI, his mission accomplished, got back to Cairo just in time to be useful to Colonel Roden-Pyne. It will be remembered that two Nazi agents, Colonel Otto Gaudian, author of *Geschichte der Assassinen* and an orientalist of international repute, and Dr. Rosener, formerly of the German Legation at Istanbul, were rounded up in Afghanistan and that one of them came to a slightly sticky end. But the parts played in this drama of espionage by Mr. Horace Lord of the U. S. Army Intelligence and by Omar Ali Shah are not so generally known. The facts, although sensational, judged by Western standards, are simple enough in themselves, and are best related from the point where the fugitive officers had their first glimpse of the Scorpion of Kashan.

A red pass through the foothills, its sloping escarpments striated with steel-gray rock, lay in shadow, for the morning sun had not reached it, so that Colonel Gaudian and his companion, mounted upon sturdy Afghan horses, made rapid going. Although the year was young, today it would be hot at noon; but they knew that very soon they would come to the end of this dreary pass, that any bend in the path now might bring them in sight of that fertile plateau of Zamara, a floral carpet spread before the gates of Situn.

Both men wore native dress. In the case of Colonel Gaudian it was effective. A big man, swarthy, who lately had grown a beard, he looked remarkably like a tribesman, but rode, his horse like an officer of Uhlans, which in fact he was. Dr. Rosener, compelled to dispense with his spectacles, created an impression of blindness but was good for any chance meeting in that he spoke most of the dialects of the district with a veracity of accent peculiar to Germans, who know how to employ gutturals.

“Here is a bad business, Doctor,” said Gaudian, following a long silence. “Even if this man possesses the influence and has the sympathies which you lead me to suppose, our efforts in Syria, our work in Persia, are not of a kind to commend us to Berlin. It is true that our armies soon will be overrunning those countries, but our own parts in the triumph? Not so big, eh?”

He had a rich Rhine voice, of excellent vintage. Dr. Rosener, who was his senior

—he ranked as major general—was oppressed by him. Dr. Rosener was not a soldier, and his short legs prohibited his becoming a good horseman.

“The English have no generals,” he replied. “This I concede. But they have some unpleasantly efficient agents. Otherwise, Colonel, why are we here? You and I are hunted men—although at the moment we have thrown off pursuit. Others will avenge us; but I agree with you that we have failed in the tasks allotted to us. Very well. This is bad enough. There is something else.”

“What?”

“We carry valuables—they are our only safeguard; and at that wretched village where we spent the night I learned that the Scorpion of Kashan is known to have crossed the frontier. Already he is reported to have committed two assassinations.”

Colonel Gaudian checked his horse—Dr. Rosener rode slightly in the rear. The colonel turned and fixed somewhat protruding green-blue eyes upon the doctor.

“So this is what has been worrying you? Well, well!” He produced a sound of gargling. “As a politician, as a linguist, I salute you—Major General; but as an orientalist—well, well! Listen to me: The Scorpion of Kashan is not a man; he is a tradition—a legend. He comes to life always when danger threatens Persia. He is twin brother of Hassan of Aleppo, who is supposed to guard the relics of the Prophet. He is a Rhine maiden, he is Robin Hood.”

Dr. Rosener rode on in silence. He was borne down by a sense of impending harm. His best-laid schemes in Syria had gone agley; he had been expelled from Teheran. With Colonel Gaudian, and aided by Nazi sympathizers, he had succeeded in reaching the Afghan frontier assured of a welcome from Saffaridi Khan. Their route had been discovered and they had had some narrow escapes. Air reconnaissance was an ever-present danger: but for three days, now, no planes had been sighted. Nevertheless....

“Karasu is said to have preceded us,” he remarked presently. “Do you know him?”

Colonel Gaudian growled. The Marquis Karasu, formerly of the Japanese Legation in Teheran, thought too much of Nippon and too little of Herr Hitler, to appeal to the colonel.

“I met him during a ceremony,” he replied. “He resembled a lizard in uniform.”

“We should not underestimate our allies.”

“One does not underestimate locusts; but personally I have never invited any to dinner. These fellows must be sharply brought to heel, when they have served our purpose.”

They turned a bend in the path, to see ahead, aglow in morning sunlight, the fertile plain of Zamara. Prompted by a common impulse, both riders checked their horses and sat looking down upon the prospect: They saw well-ordered grain fields, vineyards and orchards, cattle grazing in green paddocks. Beyond, on a slight eminence, stood the town, its minarets pointing to a pale blue sky. North of Situn and overlooking it was a house, or palace, partly hidden in groves of poplars.

Colonel Gaudian unfolded a map, adjusted a monocle, and studied the landmarks. His appearance, bearded, turbaned, monocle in place, was not without interest. Producing gargling sounds, he was so engaged when Dr. Rosener spoke, urgently.

“There is someone overtaking us.”

Map and monocle vanished. A regular, dull, beating sound drew nearer.

“A racing camel,” said Gaudian.

And a moment later, camel and rider flashed into view. The camel was a lovely creature, creamy, clean-limbed, a beast fit to carry the Mahmal; its rider, the hood of a fleecy burnous drawn over his head, proved to be a hawk-faced old man whose snowy beard seemed out of tune with eyes that glittered like dark jewels, with an ease of carriage only to be appreciated by one who has ridden a speeding camel. Like a mirage, man and beast came, and passed.

“Ho, there, my good fellow!” shouted Colonel Gaudian. “Halt!” The rider rode on. “Halt, I say!”

A heavy repeater appeared in the colonel’s hand; he raised it. Dr. Rosener grasped his arm.

“Always will you forget that you are not in uniform, my friend,” he said quietly.

Colonel Gaudian turned green-blue eyes in the doctor’s direction; they were suffused redly, a symptom which betrays the killer.

“For this you are to blame, my friend,” he replied; and his tone was icy.

*

THE NEXT RECORDED appearance of the old man on the cream-colored camel was at a rest house in the valley. Ramshackle and evil-smelling, this caravanserai, had survived from days before the administration of Saffaridi Khan had brought prosperity to Situn. The road through the mountains which formerly it had served, now was by-passed and rarely used. The inn was built around a courtyard, in which were a number of goats and a tethered mule. The proprietor, together with all his family, was out at work in the fields. Storerooms and stables were gaping caverns, and certain apartments above which opened on a balcony promised disturbed and verminous slumber. Flanking the entrance were verandas shaded by upper rooms that threatened to fall down, and provided with rough wooden benches. The building was of lath and mud, and once had been plastered. On one of the benches a bearded dervish reclined, his staff laid on the ground, his blue eyes staring into space. One would have said that he meditated; and in fact this would have been true.

Bimb❖shi Baruk, seconded from the Camel Corps for special duty with the Intelligence Department, was considering a brief homily recently offered by his immediate chief. “The agent in war is a sort of one-man commando. His duties may be in the nature of routine less exciting than that of a bank cashier or may abruptly bring him up against an issue in which his wit, his nerve, his physical fitness, stand as the only shield between him and an inglorious finish.”

It was at this moment that the camel appeared. One glance at that thoroughbred animal and at a bright green turban visible under the hood of its rider (denoting that he was a sherif, or descendant of the Prophet) induced the dervish to murmur: “Quite—and ‘abruptly’ is a good word.”

Sweeping into the courtyard, the white-bearded rider uttered a sibilant order. The camel stopped dead, gently dropped to its knees, and the old man sprang off with an agility that reminded the bimb❖shi of a display of Cossack horsemanship he once had witnessed. His bearing, as he stood looking about him, resembled that

of an Eastern king. All of which was well enough, but this majestic descendant of the Prophet might prove a difficult person to deceive; and although Mohammed Ibrahim Brian Baruk was son of an Arab father, had visited Mecca and knew much of Moslem custom, the fact remained that he had had an English mother, had been educated at an English public school and was no true dervish. The old man considered him, and then approached him; his carriage was lithe as that of a panther.

“I need your service, dervish.”

Bimb❖shi Baruk noted, gratefully, that he spoke Persian.

“I serve none but God and his Prophet,” he replied, watching from beneath lowered lids.

Eagle eyes, which possessed the unusual property of never blinking, blazed at him, but he sustained their regard, unmoved. The old man snatched up the staff from the ground, swung it, hesitated, and then lowering it, studied it.

“This is no majanah for one of the Bektashiyeh,” he exclaimed. “It is not of almond, but of ash. I see that you are an impostor.”

But the bimb❖shi remained outwardly unmoved, resting on one elbow. “I broke my staff over the head of an infidel,” he replied indifferently. “Because it was of almond wood I failed to slay him. He, too, wore a white beard,” he added, with a snarl which revealed his excellent teeth.

“It is evident,” said the old man softly—but he was considering the pose of the dervish’s right hand, which remained concealed—“that thou art one who longs for the joys of Paradise.”

“Who fitter to announce my coming than a descendant of the Prophet—may God be good to him.”

The old man’s reaction to this studied insolence surprised the bimb❖shi, who was rarely surprised. His stark ferocity melted in a gentle smile; he dropped the staff, bent as if to conciliate the dervish—and seized his right arm just below the elbow with fingers which felt like steel cables!

“Show me the weapon which you hold,” he ordered.

It was only by means of an effort of will and the tensing of nearly every muscle that Bimb❖shi Baruk forced drooping lids to continue to droop and also to hold his right hand concealed. Inhaling slowly, he spoke calmly; at the moment he was helpless.

“Thou hast a mighty grip,” he said, and prepared, even at risk of a broken arm, to disentangle himself.

“You speak with the accent of Egypt. I suspect you to be a spy of the German despoilers. If so, prepare to die.”

Those words fell like balm upon the bimb❖shi’s troubled spirit. In a deliberate attempt to provoke this formidable old man to a declaration of his identity—which was what he wanted to know—he had succeeded only in placing himself in a particularly awkward position. He forced a smile.

“Pardon, O Sherif,” he replied, “I suspected the same of you. I am a British officer.”

“Speak me a sentence in English.”

“A pleasure, I assure you, sir. I am conscious of my faulty Persian!”

The stranglehold was relaxed, the gentle smile returned to soften hawklike features, and the old man took a seat on the mastabah. Bimb❖shi Baruk forced an aching arm to function and exhibited a blunt-nosed Smith & Wesson revolver of a pattern often found among tribesman, then replaced it beneath his ragged robe. He sat upright.

“As a young man, I spent some years in London,” explained the sherif, speaking English with no more than a faint accent. “May I ask your name?”

“I am Major Baruk.”

“It is an Arab name.”

“My father was an Arab. I am a Camel Corps officer.”

The old man nodded; his unblinking gaze had never left the bimb❖shi’s face. “I am Omar Ali Shah, sometimes called the Scorpion of Kashan.”

Bimb❖shi Baruk caught his breath; a legend had come to life. But the words had been spoken so casually that no comment seemed to be called for. He bowed slightly, feeling like one who acknowledges presentation to Sinbad the Sailor.

“I am a man with two distinct identities, like your Stevenson’s Dr. Jekyll. One of these—hereditary in my family for five hundred years—is known only to a few. I add you to that select number, Major Baruk, for I perceive that you are a man of coolness and address, adroit of speech and fearless in adversity. We are here of a common mind: your enemy is my enemy. I have far outdistanced my party, and indeed am now at a loss how next to proceed.”

“May I ask your destination?”

An appalling frown swept the smile away and, when he replied, Omar Ali Shah reverted to his own language.

“The house of Saffaridi Khan—intriguer, spawn of hell, voluptuary. Him I have never seen, nor his accursed dung heap, but all men know of his vices, of his plotting with the foreign enemy. Rarely do I take up the sword: in my own place I am justly esteemed as a man of peace. None save he Companions suspect me to be the One Appointed. I have many possessions and fair vineyards—and I_ had_ a fair daughter.” He paused, gnashing evidently powerful teeth. “Her beauty is renowned and the Saffaridi dog had the effrontery to ask her in marriage. Angered by my refusal, last night he caused her to be stolen from my house! Three of those concerned I have slain; but with my own hand”—from beneath his burnous he produced a huge knife—“I shall strike his head from his body.”

Such a story surprised the bimb❖shi less than it might have surprised another: he was a realist who knew his Orient from the inside. He was aware that practices such as slave dealing, those of the thugs, the dacoits and the hashishin had long ago ceased—officially, but not otherwise; and already he had formed a high opinion of this dangerous character, whose rectitude, if somewhat bloodthirsty, was beyond question. Furthermore, he had acquired information, for hitherto he had supposed the Scorpion of Kashan to be not a man but a myth. It was good news to learn that he was pro-Ally.

“Listen!” Omar Ali Shah concealed his knife. “Horses. I leave you to deal with this matter. Later I shall rejoin you.”

He walked silently away. When Bimb❖shi Baruk turned his head, the Scorpion

of Kashan had disappeared like a vision. Dropping back upon one elbow, the bimb❖shi prepared to make himself objectionable to the newcomers; such was his simple means of disarming suspicion, since few expect an enemy agent deliberately to attract attention. The usual routine had failed in the case of Omar Ali Shah, but Omar Ali Shah was a truly unusual person. "It seems," the bimb❖shi was reflecting, "that I am now one of the Companions, whoever the Companions may be. This could prove a blessing or a nuisance: it remains to be seen."

When the horsemen rode into view he gave no sign to show that he was interested, whereas, in fact, he had been waiting for them since an hour before dawn. Their conviction that they had shaken off pursuit was ill-founded. The bimb❖shi might temporarily have been deceived by Colonel Gaudian, whom he had never seen before, but not by Dr. Rosener, whom he knew well by sight.

"Hullo, there!" cried Gaudian. "Guide me to the house of Saffaridi Khan."

Bright eyes staring out from the bearded, dirty face of the dervish offered no indication of understanding; he did not stir. Dr. Rosener rested his hand for a moment on the colonel's knee.

"We seek a guide, hadji." He was conciliatory. "And our affair is urgent."

"That which must be bought should be paid for," snarled the bimb❖shi.

"You shall be paid—when we get there."

Bimb❖shi Baruk stood up, stretched himself, yawned loudly and then, grasping his staff, strode out on to the roadway.

"Follow," he said.

*

NEARLY AN HOUR elapsed before the bimb❖shi returned. He had made it his business to acquaint himself with the town and with the house, or rather palace, beyond. Accident, and sound staff work on the part of Colonel Gaudian, had enabled both fugitives to cross the frontier. Bimb❖shi Baruk had learned their destination, and by plane and car had been sent to intercept. But his position was one of some delicacy, and Kandahar the nearest place to which he could look for

assistance. He had led the Germans through narrow, winding and dirty streets and out of Situn by its eastern gate. Then, the route had lain up a gentle slope to the extensive walled property of Saffaridi Khan. The place was a sort of winter palace and, so far as he had been able to make out, accommodated a large number of inhabitants. Of great age in parts, it had been enlarged and modernized, architecturally: rumor whispered that, domestically, it fulfilled the ideals of Kubla Khan, from one of whose Persian generals Saffaridi claimed descent. Having seen the Nazi officers enter the courtyard, he had returned, deep in thought.

In fact, he had many things to think about, and another was thrust upon his notice as he strode through gaily-colored but septic-smelling streets of the market quarter by a belief, partly instinctive, that someone followed him. He adopted all the devices which he knew to force this follower to betray his presence, but failed to reap any reward. By the time he had regained the inn, which stood far outside the present area of the town, he was moderately sure that this mysterious surveillance had ceased; but he was far from satisfied.

He noted the absence of the cream camel and assumed that Omar Ali Shah had pushed on in pursuit of his just but murderous purpose. The mule, however, remained, and because it was a prosperous and well-barbered mule, he found himself wondering to whom it belonged—for, excepting Omar Ali, he had seen not a soul about the place. Standing at the foot of a rickety stair which led to the apartments above, he called:

“Ho, there! Why keep me waiting?”

There was no reply, so he went up. All the rooms into which he looked were simply furnished in the native manner; that is to say, there was no furniture. But presently he came to one which presented evidence of habitation. A camp bed stood under a window, and, noting a cupboard in the wall, below which was a narrow ledge, he crossed and opened the door. He saw two suitcases and was about to investigate further when a crisp, harsh order, spoken in good Persian with a bad accent, checked and tensed him.

“Put up your hands.”

The speaker stood behind him, and unhesitatingly he obeyed. He heard a light footstep; deft fingers explored his ragged garments; the footsteps retreated.

“Now turn around.”

Bimb❖shi Baruk did so—and saw a tall, lean man, wearing an unobtrusive blue suit and a soft brown hat, covering him with a practical-looking automatic. This man was clean-shaven, had dusky skin and that entire absence of expression which marks pictures of the once-great Sioux tribe. He wore a monocle. And Bimb❖shi Baruk had turned only just in the nick of time.

Behind this lean stranger who stood in the doorway, a sort of noiseless phantom materialized: gleaming dark eyes, a splash of vivid green, formed no more than a background for a broad, flashing blade.

“Stop, Omar Ali! This man is our friend!”

The dreadful knife was actually sweeping down—but its course became magically diverted. Omar Ali Shah stepped into the room and glared from face to face.

“You are German,” he said to the man who held the automatic—and he spoke in English.

“You have me wrong, sir. It’s the single eyeglass.”

“Mr. Horace Lord, I believe,” said the bimb❖shi. “I met you some years ago, but I am glad to note that you fail to recognize me. I am Major Baruk.”

“Thanks a lot,” said Mr. Lord, his voice suggesting the tones of a gramophone record which has been in a sandstorm. “Who’s your friend?”

“Allow me to present Mr. Horace Lord, of the United States Intelligence,” said the bimb❖shi; “the Sherif Omar Ali Shah.”

Mr. Lord nodded, and Omar Ali Shah bowed, concealing his knife.

“Glad to know you,” said Mr. Lord.

No perceptible emotion stirred his stoic features when Bimb❖shi Baruk from a long sleeve produced a blunt-nosed revolver and replaced it under his tattered robe. “I laid it on the ledge when you sang out,” he explained, “and picked it up as I turned.”

“It was adroit,” pronounced Omar Ali Shah, speaking as a master to a promising pupil.

But the bimb❖shi’s expression subtly changed; his heavy eyebrows were raised. “Hullo! I have lost my knife!”

“Yes,” said Mr. Lord wistfully, drawing a long blade in a shagreen scabbard from his pocket and returning it to the owner. “I got that all right. Clumsy of me to miss the trick with the gun.”

Selecting one of several cigars which protruded from his breast pocket, he lighted it with some care. “I won’t ask you to have a cigar—first, because it wouldn’t look right for a dervish to smoke; and second, because I have only three left. Now, what do you say we get the situation straight?”

“Someone followed me back from the house of Saffaridi,” said Bimb❖shi Baruk.

“That was me,” replied Mr. Lord, with ungrammatical brevity.

The bimb❖shi stared hard. “I never had a glimpse of you.”

“I didn’t intend that you should. I saw you with those two Huns and I thought you called for further investigation. I had been at the house myself, checking up.”

“It is by no means clear to me what you are doing here, Mr. Lord.”

Mr. Lord puffed at his cigar appreciatively. “I am hunting a concession to mine iodyrite. I don’t know a whole lot about iodyrite, but so far, fortunately, I have contacted nobody around these parts who ever heard of it. I speak Persian up to a point, but I have no Pushtu. I was at one time attached to the consulate in Teheran, which is why I came to be assigned to this job.”

“This job being?”

“The Marquis Karasu. He’s expected, but to date he hasn’t arrived. That’s a dangerous man, sir.”

“I am well aware of it; but Colonel Gaudian and Dr. Rosener are dangerous also.

How did you recognize them for Germans?"

"I could see the mark below the big one's right eye where he sometimes wears a monocle. I wear one myself and I know. And now, Major Baruk, perhaps your friend here would explain his place on the field."

Omar Ali Shah had stood, arms folded, silent, expressionless but for the fire in his dark eyes; now he spoke.

"I am here to slay Saffaridi the Rat. This I shall do at sunset."

"You see," the bimb[❖]shi explained, "his daughter has been abducted."

Mr. Lord nodded. "So the girl is his daughter? They brought her in just before daybreak. She is safe until tonight. Saffaridi has gone to fetch an obliging imam. It is to be a regular wedding. But the death rate among Saffaridi's women is pretty high."

"His affair will finish ere another moon arises," said Omar Ali Shah. "The Companions are secretly posted around his dunghill. I, myself, shall strike his head from his body at the hour appointed."

"We make a strong team," remarked Mr. Lord. "Let's work together."

*

ZARA, DAUGHTER of Omar Ali Shah, was sixteen, tiny, and a little creature lovely as Khorassan, whose women are noted, ever gave to the world.

Her__ miniature perfection was fascinating: she reminded the observer of one of those exquisite water-color drawings for which the artists of Ispahan were formerly famous. Her beautiful eyes, silken-fringed, were the eyes of a woman, but her face was the face of a child. She had been weeping. She had wept all through the wedding ceremony recently performed—a ceremony which she knew to be contrary to strict Moslem law; now, in an ornate bridal suite, women were preparing her to welcome her new lord and master. They loaded her with jewels which weighed down her slender arms; they draped her to allure. Unhappiness had given place to despair; despair to desperation. Up to this very hour she had prayed, and believed, that rescue would come; for Omar Ali Shah was rich and powerful, respected by his friends and feared by his enemies. She

knew that he wielded some mysterious influence, although she had no idea of its nature; but she had been told by her old nurse tales of his deeds which had led the child to look upon her father as a magician.

When a woman sprayed perfume upon her robe, “I shall kill him,” hissed Zara between clenched teeth.

Her attendants exchanged uneasy glances. This daughter of Omar Ali was unlike any other of the women whom the Lord Saffaridi had honored. A hasty consultation took place in an anteroom between one of the attendants and some invisible male who spoke in uncertain reedy tones. As the trembling Zara was led to a great canopied couch resembling a tent of green and gold, the attendant returned, carrying a tall Venetian glass containing perfumed sherbet.

“The Lady Zara must be parched with tears, for tears dry up the wells of the heart and also impair the voice. Drink this, then, and rest a while.”

And Zara, who in fact was desperately thirsty, drank the sherbet and then lay back on silken pillows. Hope had all but fled—except the hope of revenge; but she had searched those rooms in vain for some weapon which might serve her purpose. She had had to do so surreptitiously, for she had never been alone, and so now she spoke, in a dreamy voice.

“Leave me. I am weary.”

But it seemed to be a long time before the women withdrew. First, one of them lowered the green and gold draperies. A dim lamp hung inside, so that Zara, seen as through a haze, resembled a lovely vision. From somewhere in the distance stole faint sounds of music. Then, there was much business of clearing up the apartments and arranging gilt furniture for the eye of Saffaridi Khan. In fact, this was still going on when Zara experienced overpowering drowsiness. She hovered on the edge of sleep when the last woman retired. As a result, she remained unaware of a mysterious occurrence.

There was a deeply recessed lattice window at the left of the canopied bed, and one of its small grilles was raised silently. An arm reached in and released the bolts which closed carved shutters below. The shutters were pushed open, revealing a balcony which overhung a garden, and admitting a draft of keen night air. A tenor voice became audible, singing that plaintive ghazal of Hafiz, the burden of which (a theme familiar to every crooner) is: Why hast thou

deserted me, O my beloved? But Zara never stirred.

Omar Ali Shah stepped in, swept aside the draperies of green and gold and raised his daughter gently. She opened her wonderful eyes in a glare of horror—which melted into an expression of complete happiness, of absolute trust.

“O my father,” she whispered, “I knew you would come,” and pressing her face against the fleecy hood of his burnous, she fell asleep in his arms—for the sherbet had been drugged.

Omar Ali Shah laid the sleeping girl down for a moment while he stripped off his warm cloak. This he wrapped about her, raised her again and went out onto the balcony, where a second hooded man had appeared. There were whispered instructions, a low cry; and the second man, guided by a third, below, carried Zara over the rail and down a ladder which had been placed in the garden underneath. Omar Ali Shah watched from the balcony until another faint cry came; he returned to the bedchamber, closing the lattice. He wore a camel-hair tunic, white breeches and highly polished black riding boots. In his belt were a heavy repeater and the plaited hilt of a huge knife protruding from its leather scabbard. His fierce eyes surveyed the room searchingly. A long, narrow satin cushion attracted his attention. He crossed to where it lay, took it up and placed it beneath the sheets, disposing them to represent a hidden sleeper. Then, he merged with ghostly shadows in the window recess.

Downstairs, in a large saloon lighted by twelve lamps of perforated silver hanging from the ceiling, Saffaridi Khan entertained his guests. Three screened windows opened upon the garden and there were four doors to the saloon. On a dais at one end an entertainment had taken place; singers, musicians and dancers of Saffaridi’s extensive household had appeared. All this had been preceded by a feast which would have satisfied the appetite of Henry VIII, and had gone far to satisfy that of Colonel Gaudian. Nor had wine been lacking at this Moslem board; in fact, Dr. Rosener was slightly drunk and unmistakably happy. A dark-eyed damsel with an expensive figure filled his glass, and he beamed appreciation through misty spectacles. From time to time the doctor entertained a vague impression that her twin sister was present also. Seated, Dr. Rosener normally was not without dignity, since there was then no evidence of penguinitis, or as it is sometimes called, duck’s disease; but when he stood up he stepped down.

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THE NIGHT was yet young when Saffaridi Khan informed his guests that he must leave them. He was a man of fine presence, wearing a pointed beard which lent to him something of the character of a Saracen knight; but his amber eyes scowled while his lips smiled, and laughed when he frowned. His retirement, he insisted, did not mean the end of the entertainment; his steward was at their command, his musicians, his dancers at their disposal until dawn if need be. A matter of urgency demanded his attention—they would excuse him; he would be at their service in the morning.

Saffaridi Khan withdrew, and Dr. Rosener, glass in hand, turned to Colonel Gaudian. At their host's request, they had not discarded their native characters, but he had provided them with robes of a more dignified description.

"I am of opinion, Colonel," said the doctor, "that here we may redeem some of our lost credit."

"I do not share your opinion."

Dr. Rosener set his glass down and, one elbow propped on the table, bent toward Colonel Gaudian.

"What do you say?"

"I say I do not agree with you."

Dr. Rosener closed one eye, the better to discern Colonel Gaudian's expression; this he studied with some care.

"Oh," he remarked, and drank reflectively.

"In the first place," said the colonel, speaking German, "why has Karasu failed to appear? These yellow fellows seem to have sources of information denied to us. It is certain that Saffaridi Khan is known to be a friend of the Nazis; therefore it is not impossible that steps are to be taken against him. We may have walked into a trap; Karasu may have avoided it. Again—why has our host left us?"

Dr. Rosener winked, and having learned that he saw more clearly with one than with two, allowed the winking lid to remain closed. He bent again to Gaudian.

“A little bird whispered—” He looked about him. “Ah, she has gone. But a little bird whispered—”

He lowered his voice in a drunken confidence which ended in chuckles. Colonel Gaudian nodded and was about to speak, when a most appalling sound rang through the house. It struck some of the high color from Dr. Rosener’s cheeks and brought the colonel to his feet like a trumpet call. It was a wild, a despairing cry; it was a shriek which melted into a groan—a sound to chill the blood, laying icy fingers on the stoutest heart.

“Gott! what has happened?”

People seemed to be running about all over the building. The saloon had become deserted. There were remote voices, frightened calls; above all, a sound of persistent knocking from somewhere upstairs. Colonel Gaudian strode toward one of the doors, but before he could reach it another door was thrown open and a man ran in, wearing resplendent livery, a man unwholesomely fat who had a voice like a clarinet.

“My lord! We are afraid that something terrible has occurred!”

“Why don’t you make sure?” asked Gaudian reasonably.

“He is in the harem apartments, my gentlemen; they are locked, and I had his orders that whatever took place I was to allow no one to enter. He has the keys.”

“Those orders do not apply to me. Lead the way.” The command was obeyed, and as Colonel Gaudian set out Dr. Rosener followed. He was disagreeably surprised to learn that the floors of this house were not immovable, as he had supposed, and that a staircase upon which presently he found himself possessed certain qualities in common with escalators, furthermore presenting unusual features peculiarly its own. Fright had induced hiccoughs, which added to the doctor’s embarrassments.

In front of a door in a recess before which hung a brass lamp, the party paused. The corridor leading to this door was peopled by muffled shadowy women. They dispersed like ghosts. An effeminate young man, his handsome face pallid, stood in the recess.

Colonel Gaudian hurled his considerable bulk against the door. It creaked but

stood firm. A second and third assault found it still closed.

“Damnation!”

Dragging out his repeater, he stooped and fired a shot into a large keyhole. Then he hurled himself yet again at the door; and it burst open with such expedition that he pitched heavily into a lighted bedchamber beyond.

“My God!” Dr. Rosener was the speaker. “He has no head!”

This circumstance was objectionably obvious, but the solecism passed without comment. Clutching in his rigid fingers a considerable portion of green and gold drapery which he had dragged with him as he fell, Saffaridi Khan lay beside the bridal bed, a spectacle which a professional headsman might have viewed with satisfaction, but one to turn the stomach of a lesser man. After one glimpse, the handsome youth had swooned.

“Search the rooms!” roared Colonel Gaudian.

But search availed them not at all, and finally they trooped downstairs again, conscious of an urge for brandy. As they entered by one door, two men entered by another and confronted them. One of these was a tall, lean man, who smoked a cigar, and the other was a bearded dervish. Colonel Gaudian turned in a flash. A figure wearing a hooded burnous occupied the doorway through which he had come in and had a rifle raised. The colonel faced the saloon again; his green-blue eyes were suffused.

“Good evening.” The tall man was speaker; temporarily he had removed his cigar. “Colonel Otto Gaudian and Dr. Rosener, I believe. My name is Horace Lord. I represent the U. S. Army. This is Major Baruk, who represents the British. I shall be glad, gentlemen, if you will regard yourselves as our prisoners.”

He replaced his cigar, turning to Bimb[◆]shi Baruk; at which moment Colonel Gaudian twitched his pistol from its hiding place, fired, and Mr. Lord’s long cigar became reduced to a short stump. The colonel would have fired again if something had not glittered in the lamplight.

Dropping his weapon, he choked, raised his hands, dropped them and, still choking, crashed forward onto the floor. Several inches of a serviceable knife

skillfully thrown had completely severed his jugular.

Mr. Lord surveyed the cigar stump and glanced at a patch of broken plaster on a wall behind him.

“Near miss, that,” he remarked, as Omar Ali Shah appeared from somewhere and redeemed his knife, which he thoughtfully cleaned upon a portion of the dead man’s garments. Knife in hand, he stood upright.

“I am obliged, sir,” said Mr. Lord.

“Justice has been served tonight,” was Omar Ali’s simple acknowledgment. “Praise God to Whom be all glory.” He turned to Dr. Rosener. “Your friend was a brave man. Permit me to spare you also the inconvenience of a long journey,” he suggested courteously.

Arms outflung, the now sober doctor staggered toward Mr. Lord; but it was Bimb❖shi Baruk who answered.

“This man you must leave to_ our_ justice.”

Omar Ali Shah replaced the dreadful blade in its scabbard at his belt.

“You are of the Companions,” he said gravely. “Your wishes are mine. Take your prisoner away; we are about to fire the house.”

Less than an hour later, under a rising moon, Bimb❖shi Baruk and Mr. Lord, from outside the ancient caravanserai which formed the latter’s advanced headquarters, watched leaping flames and a reddened canopy of smoke over the ruins of the house of Saffaridi Khan. Omar Ali Shah had bidden them farewell half an hour ago, embracing the bimb❖shi and placing on his finger a silver ring fashioned to represent a scorpion with its tail in its mouth. Then he had disappeared silently on his thoroughbred camel. And now came the Companions, who rode Arab horses. In a compact body they appeared from the direction of the town and passed the inn like a dust-storm. Every man swung up his right hand in passing, and Bimb❖shi Baruk stood stiffly at the salute. As those hooded horsemen of the Scorpion of Kashan, a phantom company, swept on their way to the hills, he remarked:

“It seems to me that the Companions would make uncommonly sound

guerrillas.”

*

“GENERAL DESMOND COOPER and Colonel P. J. Western, of the U. S. Army, have left Cairo by air for Teheran to confer with British and Russian authorities on the problem of deliveries across Persia.”

The above paragraph appeared in scores of newspapers. It was official; it was a plain statement of fact; but it is also a plain statement of fact that the sequel introduced circumstances so totally inexplicable that even Bimb❖shi Baruk found himself at fault. These circumstances were brought to his notice by Colonel Roden-Pyne, of the Cairo Intelligence Department, sitting back, half sideways, with one long leg thrown across an arm of his office chair.

“Meaning that I am to go slinking around in disguise again?”

“Meaning that I am interested in a certain Mr. Ko.”

“How is it spelled?”

“K-o. He is a Japanese gentleman.”

Bimb❖shi Baruk, elbows resting on the big, neat desk, puffed at his pipe reflectively.

“I am not Nippon-conscious,” he declared. “All Japs look alike to me.”

“You must correct your perspective.”

“To contemplate the features of General Tojo is to find myself transported to the highest branch of the tallest coconut tree. I have never been able to take Nippon seriously.”

“You are compelled to take Mr. Ko seriously.”

“Why the personal note? You mean, no doubt, ‘*One* is compelled,’ et cetera.”

“Exactly—and that one is you.”

As old and intimate friends, the colonel and Bimb❖shi Baruk scrapped

formality in private, but now the bimbo-shi registered firm, Army Regulations opposition.

“Possibly you are mistaken, sir. I wish to rejoin my unit.”

“You are seconded for special duties.”

“For how long?”

“What does it matter? I have heard you say more than once that you disliked service with a mechanized unit.”

“I may have said that I would rather die of sunstroke on a camel than be suffocated in a tank.”

“Do you speak Japanese?”

“Certainly not. Why should I? Furthermore, I am imperfectly acquainted with Eskimo and my pronunciation of Choctaw is often criticized. I may add that I refuse to believe in the existence of any human being entitled Mr. Ko.”

Colonel Roden-Pyne gave a lifelike imitation of a mare whinnying to her foal. Himself, he would have described the sound as laughter. “I rather sympathize. Ko, in Japanese, means Marquis. I have been making inquiries, and I find that a Mr. Ko was formerly attached to the Legation in Baghdad, where, although ostensibly a clerk, he was treated with marked respect. The Iraqi authorities requested the Japanese representative to leave, and Mr. Ko disappeared. There is no evidence, however, to show that he returned to Tokyo. Later that very remarkable British agent known to me as A 14, but to you, I believe, as Rose of the Lebanon, reported that Mr. Ko was none other than the Marquis Karasu.”

Yasmina—A 14—daughter of the Sheikh Ismail ed-Din, represented a chink in the bimbo-shi’s armor, but he did not wince. “Who is the Marquis Karasu?”

“He is the brain behind Japanese Secret Service—a really formidable character.”

“I must decline to believe it—although some small apes can be trained to perform quite amusingly.”

“He financed the usurper, Raschid Ali, aided and abetted by Dr. Rosener of the

Nazi staff, and planned the Baghdad coup.”

“The coup failed. Dr. Rosener is a poor trainer.”

“But his latest coup has not failed; it has placed us in an uncommonly hot spot. My reputation in this Department is at stake. I—” he broke off.

The blue eyes of Bimbsi Baruk lighted up as if from within. Those clear English eyes shining out from a dark Arab face were a phenomenon which had puzzled many men, and which had intrigued several women. The bimbshi possessed an extra sense, possibly inherited from Eastern ancestors, or possibly from a half-Celtic mother. He could tell, sometimes, what another was thinking; hear the unspoken word. Now he had heard a call, urgent, pathetic, from this ultra-reserved officer whom he had known, and respected, since boyhood—for Baruk had won field rank while still a young man. It said, “I am in desperate trouble.”

“Count on me, Colonel, to do my best. What has happened?”

And Colonel Roden-Pyne, no trace of levity remaining, related a story which reduced the bimbshi to silence.

A transport plane equipped to accommodate six passengers, and capable of high performance, had set out from Cairo two days before. It was a well-ried machine reserved for a special purpose—the swift conveyance of staff officers from point to point. Piloted by Flight-lieutenant Walburton, with Flying Officer J. J. Camper as navigator, it was destined for Teheran via Habbaniyah, the airport serving Baghdad. Sergeant Marks was radio operator and Corporal Dimes acted as standby and steward. There were four passengers. Three of them were Brigadier General Desmond Cooper, with Colonel P. J. Western, both of the U. S. Army, and Captain Wallace of Headquarters Staff, an officer intimately acquainted with Russian and Persian affairs, and one who spoke both languages fluently. The fourth member of the party was Miss Lotus Yuan, a young lady of good family, a brilliant linguist and a graduate of London University, who had represented Free China at a number of international conferences. She was generally admired for her chic and respected for her talents.

The plane made good time to its first stop, in Syria. Walburton reported that the engines were behaving “like black velvet.” Recognizing the importance of those composing the party, Colonel Roden-Pyne had arranged for a chain of contacts.

When they took off again, it was on a course which would pass over Rutbah on the motor road, where a pipe line crosses it. A code word to establish identity was flashed down to the station there from the plane, which was flying low and twenty minutes late, together with a brief report, "All's well." Rutbah notified Habbaniyeh of the party's approach. But Habbaniyeh waited in vain.

In perfect weather, under an azure sky, the plane from that moment passed out of view, and out of the knowledge of men. Nothing whatever had been heard of it, or of those on board, since Rutbah had exchanged signals.

"There are some hundreds of miles of desert," the bimb❖shi pointed out, "in any spot of which they might have been forced down by engine trouble."

"This would have been reported, and the exact point of a proposed landing indicated by radio."

"Their radio might have cracked up."

"Rutbah is roughly two hundred and twenty miles southwest of Habbaniyeh. Reconnaissance has been carried out over a wide belt. There is no trace."

"There are wadis in the desert which lie in black shadow. In any one of these the plane might have crashed."

"A mechanized battalion from Baghdad is searching the whole area at this present moment. They have been on the job for twenty-four hours. They worked by the light of the moon all last night. I tell you, B.B., it's black magic. Incidentally, it's going to break me. I was responsible for the General's safety."

It was then that silence descended upon Bimb❖shi Baruk.

Certainly the case presented baffling features, not the least obscure being the behavior of the radio operator. Even allowing for sudden enemy interference, such as attack by a fighter aircraft—which possibility the colonel firmly wrote off—failure on the part of Sergeant Marks to send out an SOS remained inexplicable. There had been no electrical disturbances. Flight-lieutenant Walburton was an experienced pilot, recently awarded a bar to his D.F.C.; he had himself selected flying Officer Camper to accompany him. Supposing some unimaginable mishap to have befallen both, Marks and Dimes were fully competent to fly the machine. But when Bimb❖shi Baruk broke a long silence,

his words indicated that he was thinking of something else.

“I am naturally anxious to learn,” he said, “what Mr. Ko has to do with the matter.”

Colonel Roden-Pyne nodded; the bimb❖shi almost expected to hear the rattle of harness. He swung his leg free of the chair arm, opened a drawer and proffered a typewritten slip. The colonel typed execrably, not only running as many as four words into one another, but also using abbreviations; however, coughing dryly in disapproval, Bimb❖shi Baruk succeeded in making out the following:

*

“Agents of Ko, who is in Persia, planning intercept General C. on way to T. Escort should accompany plane. A 14.”

*

Bimb❖shi Baruk looked up: his eyes now seemed to dance, so bright was that inward fire.

“I received this warning from A 14 too late.” Colonel Roden-Pyne’s voice sounded off-key. “It arrived at about the same time as the message from Rutbah reporting ‘All’s well.’”

Chapter 6

Lotus Yuan Loses Her Vanity Case

BIMBASHI BARUK began his inquiry at dawn, proceeding there by air without an unnecessary moment of delay. His final words to the colonel had been, “I am deeply indebted. I was obliged to you already for several jobs which no mere human could, reasonably, be expected to carry out. But this one is the plum. What am I supposed to do? Crawl all over the Syrian desert with a magnifying glass looking for American footprints?”

On the way he studied a large-scale map of that desolate region which lies between Syria’s border and the Euphrates. Part of it seemed to be practically uncharted, just waterless rock and sand amid which few creatures could sustain life. Assuming General Cooper’s party to have been alive at the time that the plane landed (and it must have been hard-going), they were trapped in a forbidden wilderness the bimb❖shi found impossible to contemplate.

The dusk drew near again; black ribbons of fire striped the desert to show where wadis lay. The whole smoldering waste burned redly as though years of heat at last had set it on fire; and sunset, grand-master of a stage lighting which can change this prehistoric ocean bed into an enchanted carpet, passed his wizard wand across the scene. Then, out of the east, into prismatic glory from the west, came that wandering Arab who brought news at last.

His camel excited the bimb❖shi’s pity. The poor beast had been driven hard, for this nomad from nowhere bore a message which he knew would earn reward. Fifty miles southeast of Rutbah, on a stretch of level sand near the Wadi Amej, there was a deserted airplane. Bimb❖shi Baruk took the man in hand.

What kind of plane?

It was large—at least, it was large in the eyes of the one who had seen it. There was a ladder leading up from the sand to an open door.

What had he found inside?

He had not dared to enter such a magic chariot, which was the work of efreets

and other devils. The bimb❖shi challenged this statement, and was satisfied: the Bedawi's superstitious beliefs had held him back from exploration.

Was the magic chariot damaged in any way?

Apparently not. It had alighted, to judge from data familiar to a son of the desert, as one would expect such an invention of Sheitan to alight—smoothly.

What signs did it bear?

Here the informant failed. He began well by recognizing an R.A.F. disk shown to him, but he wavered, as to further indications, between correct identity marks and the slogan, "Beer is best," which Bimb❖shi Baruk offered, chalked on a board, as possible alternatives.

Was there any evidence to suggest that the occupants had gone to seek help?

None. Moreover, Rutbah, a pathless and waterless journey of fifty miles, was the nearest point at which they could have found it.

Would he swear by the Prophet that no one remained on board?

He would swear that no one remained on board, alive. He had ridden his camel around the plane many times, crying out in a loud voice. He was of opinion that no dead men were inside.

Why?

He had seen no vultures and had heard no jackals.

The Bedawi's firm refusal to act as a flying dragoman threatening to lead to a free fight, Bimb❖shi Baruk set out guideless, in moonlight, by air for the Wadi Amej, his pilot working by chart. The Bedawi was accommodated, with guard, beneath the roof of the rest house or beneath that part of it which had remained after German bombers and rebel Iraki troops had done their worst, and their best. The night was crystal-clear but bitterly cold, and Bimb❖shi Baruk found himself glad to be wearing one of those hooded camel-hair coats which enable a man to defy wind, rain or snow.

They experienced little difficulty in finding the deserted plane. It lay on a sort of

small plateau which appeared to be flat as a bowling green; but the light of a three-quarter moon is not the best illumination in which to attempt an experimental landing. However, the bimb❖shi instructed Flight-lieutenant Carr to land; and Flight-lieutenant Carr landed. He was intensely bucked to have been chosen to pilot this mystery man whose name was known in every mess from Reykjavik to Singapore; he would gladly have attempted a landing on the top of the Statue of Liberty. Now he taxied right to the port side of the other craft over a surface which might have been rolled for a golf course.

“A perfect natural airfield, sir,” he remarked. “Walburton must have been up on his maps.”

“H’m,” muttered the bimb❖shi, “one wonders.”

This, indeed, was the missing plane. Bimb❖shi Baruk walked all around it, silently, followed by Carr, Captain Maitland of the Sappers and a sergeant pilot, who had accompanied him. No one spoke as he went up the ladder; Maitland and Carr followed. The sound of their footsteps must have been audible for miles, so complete was the desert stillness.

When, at the end of twenty minutes or so, they switched off lights and descended again to the moonbright plateau, Captain Maitland stared blankly at Bimb❖shi Baruk.

“It’s supernatural,” he said, and he seemed to be afraid of his own voice. “It’s a Marie Celeste_ of the air.”

The facts justified his words. They had been able to identify places occupied by various members of the party for the reason that nothing, apparently, had been disturbed. On one table they found an open attache case initialed “P.D.C.”; it contained two recent handbooks on Persia, a sealed box of a hundred Turkish cigarettes, and a copy of the_ Egyptian Gazette._ Near it was a writing pad beside which lay a fountain pen and a pair of reading glasses. A letter headed “En route to Teheran,” and jerkily written, began with the words “Dear Jack.” A purely personal note to a friend, it contained such sentences as, “Lucky I gave up smoking years ago, as good cigars are unobtainable here”; and it concluded: “We are approaching a place called Rutbah which I understand is about halfway to Baghdad (where we spend the night). Desmond.” There was a P.S. It said: “At the moment of writing there seems to be...”

At this point, clearly enough, the General had laid down his pen. On the rack were a uniform cap, gloves and a regulation revolver. Similar equipment was found in a neighboring rack and on the table a pigskin portfolio bearing the words: "Colonel P. J. Western." It contained some large-scale maps and a quantity of forms and official correspondence. An open novel lay face downward beside a pack of playing cards. There was a cup containing coffee dregs.

Aft of these places they identified that occupied by Captain Wallace. He had been solving a crossword puzzle from an old issue of the *Daily Telegraph*. A short cane and a "brass hat" were near by. A portside seat adjoining told a like story, the story of a smooth and uneventful passage suddenly interrupted. There was a sewing bag on the floor in which were balls of wool and some illustrated pamphlets containing instructions for making jumpers. Part of such a knitted garment lay on the chair, needles in place; a fur cloak over the chair back. On the table Bimbashi Baruk noted a Persian dictionary, a volume of Keats and a Baedeker's *Palestine and Syria* in German. All were closed, but the last was marked by a long strip of red wool. A camera (Miss Lotus Yuan was a photographic expert) and a vanity case filled with cosmetics, perfumes and other toilet articles rested in the rack.

The baggage room was empty. The vacant cockpit and its instruments were left for later inspection. Baruk found himself particularly interested in the steward's pantry. Four clean glasses and a dish of biscuits and hors d'oeuvres stood on a tray, a cocktail shaker beside them—and the shaker was full. He seated himself on the sand, leaning back against the ladder, and began to fill his pipe.

"Deliberation," he remarked, "should always precede action."

But he knew that he was baffled.

*

BIMBASHI BARUK was still deliberating when dawn broke and when sunrise threw golden spears of light across the wilderness. He had completed his inquiry and was boiling down findings to a working residue. Established facts were these: All log books and other records had been removed, together with heavy baggage. There was evidence to suggest that the passengers' personal belongings had undergone careful searching before being replaced where they were found.

The engines were in order and there was enough petrol in the tanks for at least another two hundred miles. He knew that one case in possession of General Cooper might well have tempted enemy agents. This was a large leather portfolio, metal reinforced, with three Yale locks, and it contained scale plans and detailed directions for extending existing facilities by road and rail and speeding up Anglo-American supplies to Russia some three hundred per cent. This scheme was the work of a prominent transport expert dispatched to the area by President Roosevelt in person. Preknowledge of these designs on the part of the Axis might mean that they became worthless.

There were many problems which defeated him, but he had ample data, if only he knew how to use it, as he proceeded to point out to Captain Maitland.

“An important item,” he said, “is General Cooper’s P.S.: ‘At the moment of writing there seems to be—’”

“‘Something wrong with the engines’ is the conclusion of the sentence which leaps to one’s mind.”

“But there is nothing wrong with the engines.”

“No. What about ‘Something unusual taking place?’”

“Helpful, Maitland. I rather lean to that conclusion myself. Then there is the cocktail shaker.”

Captain Maitland, reddish, unimaginative, inclined to put on weight, stared. He had light blue eyes which meant little but ignorance of fear.

“There is nothing unusual about the cocktail shaker.”

“On the contrary: it is full. How long, after a cocktail has been prepared, does it remain in the shaker? A matter, not of minutes, but of seconds. Whatever disturbed the journey, therefore, entirely put Dimes off his stroke. He forgot to pour out the drinks. Again, at what hour would you expect cocktails to be served?”

“Six o’clock.”

“This gives us the time at which interruption probably occurred: six o’clock. We

may assume that Walburton at this hour was following his proper course, and I have worked out where he should have been at six o'clock. General Cooper's unfinished postscript bears this out. You agree with my figures, Carr?"

"To within ten miles, sir," the Air Force officer replied eagerly, "from the time when he set out for there. I have marked a likely spot on the map."

Capless, his fair hair disarranged, the enthusiastic pilot spread out a map on the sand before Bimb❖shi Baruk; it was a humble offering from a devotee. The bimb❖shi smiled appreciatively, and Carr was rewarded.

"About three miles short of a place called El Dag. Anybody know anything about El Dag?" Nobody knew anything about it. "We have to suppose, then, in endeavoring to reconstruct what happened, that at El Dag Walburton saw or heard something which led him to behave in a really singular manner; namely, to pass over Rutbah, and then change his course and come here. Why here? It would be difficult to give a pilot directions to a spot like this, wouldn't it, Carr?"

"I should say impossible—unless ground signals were used."

"Ah," murmured the bimb❖shi, and his heavy-lidded eyes half closed; "that is a point." His eyes woke up again. "We come, now, to Baedeker's_ Palestine and Syria._ What are we to make of_ Palestine and Syria?"_

"That's perfectly simple," said Captain Maitland. "Miss Yuan, a highly intelligent girl, was checking details of the route in a guidebook."

"Of course she was," the bimb❖shi conceded. "But why did she mark a certain page with a piece of red wool?"

"It was the page she was reading at the time something occurred,"

"There, Maitland, I fear I cannot agree with you. In my opinion, it was the page she had begun to read_ after_ something had occurred."

"How do you arrive at that, sir?" Carr asked.

"Very simply." Bimb❖shi Baruk took the book from a capacious pocket in his camel-hair coat. "She has not only marked the page but she has also placed a penciled ring around the paragraph. This is the paragraph:

” ‘Wadi-el-Hamiz (the_ Hamiza_ of the Crusades), a small, dried-up oasis on the Plain of Roty; once a resting place for caravans on the ancient road from Aleppo to Basra. Contains a ruined mosque erected by En-Nasir in 1318: is uninhabited.”

He returned the book to his pocket and glanced inquiringly from face to face. “Any comments?”

“Rather!” The cry came from Carr; he was galvanized. “El Hamiz is about sixty miles northwest of Rutbah, just over the Syrian border and plumb between the two pipe lines. There was a project floated not long before the war to make it a refueling station on a new commercial airway. The route was from Beirut to Basra and was intended to connect with a steamer service from Trieste. It was a German-Italian scheme, and I think our people smelled a big rat. Anyhow, it was washed up. There is supposed to be water somewhere, and I understand that artesian borings had actually begun.”

“Have you been there?”

“Personally, no; but it’s marked on all our maps as a good emergency landing. I fancy that the airfield had been partially laid out, but of course it would be overgrown now.”

“No doubt,” the bimb❖shi agreed, and his regard momentarily grew dreamy again. “You will note, Maitland, that El Hamiz is not on the normal route to Baghdad, although Miss Yuan had carefully marked it. But I hope that I have made it clear that quite a lot of our evidence doesn’t add up. For example, how can we fit in the deliberate misinformation given to Rutbah?”

“What misinformation?” asked Maitland. “I saw the plane myself; watched it through my glasses until it was nearly out of sight. The pilot’s report was handed to me. Simply read ‘All’s well. Walburton.’”

“That,” said Bimb❖shi Baruk, “is the deliberate misinformation to which I refer. Bearing in mind the fact that at Rutbah Walburton was twenty minutes late, a considerable time must have elapsed since the steward had prepared cocktails—and they were never served. General Cooper never completed his postscript—” He looked from face to face, noting effects as the implication of this small but remarkable episode became clear to Maitland and Carr.

“Good lord, sir!” Carr exploded. “It almost looks as though—”

“On the evidence found in the plane, you mean, it almost looks as though the party never reached Rutbah?”

“But, damn it, I can trust my own eyes!” cried Maitland. “With respect, I don’t see that your reasoning is necessarily right. It is always possible, for instance, that a member of the party was taken ill.”

“There is a medical officer at Rutbah. Walburton would have made a landing there, rather than report ‘All’s well.’”

“At any rate,” Carr exclaimed, “he wouldn’t have brought the patient_ here!”_

But Bimb❖shi Baruk had permitted his attention to wander; he was gazing analytically at a wheel of the undercarriage. In morning light it presented a curiously speckled appearance, seeming to be mottled with countless flecks of light blue. This phenomenon demanded closer inquiry, and he moved across, knelt down and began to scrape bright fragments from the wheel. Holding a number of these in his left palm, he stood up, turned—and the somewhat saturnine face was transfigured.

“Look!” He extended his hand. “Blue wind-flowers:_ anemones._ Walburton landed somewhere else before he landed here—at some place carpeted with early wildflowers! Anemones are among the first. You used the words quite recently, Carr, ‘But of course it would be overgrown now—’”

“El Hamiz!” cried Carr. “Good lord, sir! Walburton must have been forced down at El Hamiz!”

“Are you mad, or am I?” Maitland demanded. “If Walburton landed at El Hamiz, why did he afterward cross Rutbah and report ‘All’s well?’”

“There is no evidence whatever,” said Bimb❖shi Baruk, “to show that Walburton ever did cross Rutbah.”

*

RUTBAH REGAINED, the bimb❖shi had speedy corroboration of a theory which had presented itself to his mind as the only logical explanation of an

episode otherwise inexplicable. Colonel Roden-Pyne had telephoned an order to the effect that he was to be called up the moment Bimb❖shi Baruk returned. The call was put through.

“Hullo, B.B.—urgent news for you. Anything to report?”

“Yes; I have found the missing plane.”

“It was the real one, eh? Well?”

“Not a soul on board.”

“Good God!” Colonel Roden-Pyne’s voice gave the impression of a flat tire.

“But the transport plans?”

“I regret to say are missing. I have come to the conclusion—”

“Wait a minute. There’s something you must know. The new code—I call it Ack-Toc—is out of commission. The other side has got hold of it! I have the man responsible—a native clerk—but it’s cold consolation. They knew all about General Cooper’s journey—even the identity word—”

“That is the conclusion to which I had come.”

“What! How?”

“It’s a long story, and I am in the middle of a job.”

“Any hope?”

“Some. The plane has just come in, and I find myself curiously interested in the fact that General Cooper is a non-smoker. I have an inquiry to make on this subject before starting.”

“Where for?”

“El Hamiz.”

Reconnaissance of El Hamiz by plane revealed, notably, a V-shaped patch of brilliant blue shining like an enameled victory sign set in the desert. This was the abandoned airfield, now a meadow of wildflowers. Near by lay a long, squat

building, surrounded by what appeared to be remains of a wall. Ruins of smaller structures were dotted here and there. The mosque of En-Nasir stood some distance from the site, and about it there bloomed another floral carpet, so that from above its dome resembled a lonely mushroom growing in an azure field. Streaks of shadow, broken in places, marked the course of the ancient caravan road from Aleppo to Basra. Excluding an assembly of carrion crows, which took the air as the plane approached, no living thing was visible.

Bimb❖shi Baruk experienced an unpleasant pang. The presence of vultures is always significant; and while inclusion of a woman in the general's party must have added to their difficulties, it was reasonable to suppose that someone would have attempted the trek to Rutbah to summon aid. There were other possibilities, including that of his being in error throughout—the possibility that Walburton had never landed at El Hamiz at all.

“Apparently not in enemy possession,” said Carr; and then: “Hullo! What’s that?”

A flash of light had showed momentarily from a point between the wall and the low building.

“Field glasses,” replied the bimb❖shi: “somebody watching us.”

Carr banked in a sharp turn, and they swept back over the airfield. Almost at the same moment a man came running out into brilliant sunshine below; he was waving some white object which might have been—and was—a towel.

Bimb❖shi Baruk focused his glasses. He saw that the man with a towel was attired in shirt and trousers, both of khaki color; that he had a profusion of gray hair.

“Shall I make a landing, sir?”

“Yes.”

They sank down onto a carpet of blue anemones with shallow sandy soil beneath and some firm flat foundation. As Bimb❖shi Baruk climbed out, the gray-haired man, breathless but clear-eyed, came up.

“Do I address Brigadier General Cooper?”

“You do.”

“I am Major Baruk, and more than happy to see you well, sir.”

But General Cooper’s manner remained unaccountably furtive, even when he acknowledged the bimb❖shi’s salute and accepted his hand.

“Do you entertain some doubts concerning me?” Baruk asked sharply. “Possibly Flight-lieutenant Carr can reassure you.”

Indeed, the youthful joy of that officer had a most beneficent effect, and General Cooper explained himself.

“I apologize most sincerely, Major,” he said. “I believe you will understand when you know the facts.”

But even as he spoke, the bimb❖shi was glancing around him interrogatively.

“You are wondering about the other members of my party?” the general suggested. “If you will come across to temporary headquarters”—he smilingly indicated the squat building—“and permit me to complete my toilet, which your welcome arrival interrupted, I will tell you the story.”

And this was the story.

*

“ABOUT THREE MINUTES of six it happened. The steward was mixing drinks and I was writing a letter. I noticed some disturbance, and Sergeant Marks came to tell me that urgent orders had just come through. An unidentified plane was between us and Rutbah, and we were instructed to change direction north-northwest and make for a place called El Hamiz, where we would find a British party. There we must land, and await further orders. I asked him, ‘Is El Hamiz a regular airfield?’ He said he didn’t know, but that the situation was evidently serious, as we were warned not to use our radio. We couldn’t disturb the pilots for details, but Miss Yuan had a guidebook in which El Hamiz was mentioned. She marked the paragraph and passed the book around. It didn’t sound promising: in fact, even drinks were forgotten, and everybody was looking out for enemy aircraft....”

Walburton arrived at El Hamiz, exchanged messages, and alighted on the azure runway. A party of armed men wearing British battle dress surrounded the plane; a lieutenant of artillery received the general and other passengers. Accompanied by Miss Yuan, Colonel Western and Captain Wallace, the general engaged in conversation with Lieutenant O'Neil (for so he had introduced himself), crossed to that long, low building which they had observed from the air. "Don't bother to bring anything," Lieutenant O'Neil had said. "I am happy to tell you that the plane will be leaving again, on a new course, almost immediately."

Entering a bleak, concrete apartment, lighted by iron-barred windows, General Cooper found himself and his friends under cover of a machine gun, the nose of which protruded through an opening in the wall! Lieutenant O'Neil stepped outside, closed the door and addressed them through one of the windows.

"I must apologize for this interruption of your journey, but I am merely obeying orders. I am a German officer. Any sound will result in the machine gun opening fire. This I should regret. To your smaller personal belongings I fear you must say good-bye, but your heavy baggage will be restored to you. There is water and some rations."

A trifling misunderstanding arose, but was soon settled, before the R.A.F. complement of the plane, escorted by three armed men, marched up to join the general's party. Sergeant Marks was seen to be developing a black eye.

When all were securely locked in the sergeant explained. "I spotted the dirty business a minute too late. There's a_ Jap_ in charge out there!"

Such, indeed, proved to be the case, for the Oriental in question presently appeared at a barred window. General Cooper attempted to describe him, but Bimb❖shi Baruk interrupted.

"Please don't go in for a description, sir, because if you succeeded you would merely have described the entire Japanese race."

The yellow gentleman was liberal in apologies, but explained that the transport plans carried by General Cooper were indispensable to his purpose. He was sure that so many resourceful officers would find a means of extricating themselves, and their charming lady companion, from this predicament. He retired; so did the machine gun. The mortified prisoners, all of whom were unarmed, watched their baggage being rapidly but systematically searched. They saw the plane take off

again. They saw three cars, equipped with sand tires, set out bearing members of the “British party.” Last to embark were “Lieutenant O’Neil” and the Japanese. The latter, who was not in uniform, courteously raised his hat.

It was at this point in General Cooper’s remarkable story, which had been related while he finished dressing, that Bimbo Shi Baruk felt impelled to inquire about the fate of the others.

“We broke out in eighteen hours, Major. It was a tough proposition. Marks and Dimes worked miracles.”

“But where are they?”

“Marks and Dimes set out right away on the trail to Rutbah. They took enough water and rations to last the journey, on a low quota, in case they didn’t meet up with anybody or find a well on the road. Wallace and Camper followed—we drew lots; then Walburton and Western.”

“But Miss Yuan?”

“No doubt she, too, has been completing her toilet, for here she comes.”

Bimbo Shi Baruk turned as a slender girl entered from the sunshine. She wore a suit which Bond Street might have delivered that morning; her stockings and shoes were Fifth Avenue. Glossy black hair framed a face which resembled a placid ivory mask, but the fine, slightly oblique eyes said that there might be snow on sleeping volcanoes. Her acknowledgment of General Cooper’s presentation of Bimbo Shi Baruk was that of one making a new and welcome acquaintance in the Park. In middle distance, standing by the plane, Flight-lieutenant Carr was visible, his interest in Miss Lotus Yuan clearly discernible even at long range.

“This place is a regular fortress, Major Baruk,” she said. Her voice was that of a silver bell and she spoke English which had no trace of accent. “It is built of concrete; you can see the mixers overgrown with wildflowers. It was their storehouse, I suppose, and they had to provide against Arab raiders. Smaller wooden buildings had been carried off, piecemeal. A stockade existed at some time, but little more than its foundations stand. Abandoned artesian borings are a quarter-mile to the west. The airfield is as you see it—a carpet of blue anemones.”

“To blue anemones,” declared Bimb❖shi Baruk, “I owe the pleasure of meeting you. But I fail to understand how you have existed here for more than three days and still contrive to resemble a cover design for a New York magazine.”

“We found a water tank,” said General Cooper. “It was pretty foul, certainly. But there was enough of iron rations left us to keep the party alive for a week at a pinch. Our heavy baggage was handed back—with the exception of one portfolio.”

“But I left all my make-up in the plane,” added Miss Yuan. “I am not as a rule so pale as this. When the general first sighted you, we were terrified—”

“I venture to doubt it.”

“We thought it was the enemy returning; we thought they had found out.”

“Indeed!” Bimb❖shi Baruk’s white teeth were revealed in a smile which collaborated successfully with his blue eyes. “Found out what?”

“That the plans in General Cooper’s portfolio were not the plans of the Persian supply route! You see, there are plenty of old maps and plans in Cairo, and I had a sort of intuition—intuitions are not Hitler’s copyright. I scratched out some lettering and put other lettering in. It was easy.”

“She had a hunch, Major,” said the general. “It was right, too. We left the original plans at American headquarters. Those in the portfolio don’t mean anything. I guess the Japanese thief beat it right for the Persian border, or he’d be back by now. Miss Yuan tells me that this hold-up is the work of a certain Mr. Ko.”

The bimb❖shi turned to Miss Yuan, who was watching him contemplatively.

“Do you mean that the man that you saw was Mr. Ko?”

“No, no,” the Chinese girl replied. “Marquis Karasu would not have been so easily tricked. The marquis is clever. He is my enemy, the enemy of my people. I had never seen the man who was here. But what I persuaded General Cooper to do was this: I made photographs, much reduced, like aerographs, of the plans and of the text. These we brought with us. I could easily have printed suitable enlargements in Teheran. The negatives were in the general’s attache case on the

plane, and”—she performed odd little gestures with slim fingers—“the plane has gone.”

Bimb❖shi Baruk patted her gently on the shoulder.

“My dear Miss Yuan, your intuition has not been wasted. We have recovered the plane. Mr. Ko has failed through a fault common to his type of mentality—that of over-elaboration. The plane was flown to Rutbah, at a most terrific lick, to make up lost time, and, as he had stolen the code in use, messages were exchanged which allayed immediate suspicion. His chief object in getting rid of the plane was to defeat air reconnaissance here in case the radio messages had been picked up by someone else. Then it was abandoned in the Syrian desert, no doubt at a prearranged spot where some sort of transport for the pilots was waiting, and everything on board was left as found, further to confuse inquiry. They needed time for their journey, you see. I am concerned about your companions, I confess.” (As a matter of record, Marks and Dimes reached Rutbah some hours later and the other parties were picked up by patrols.) “But your aerographs are in safe hands.”

“What’s that!” cried General Cooper, and his expression changed magically.
“What’s that?”

“I considered it my duty to read your unfinished letter, and I noted, sir, that you were a non-smoker. Some hours later the significance of this, considered in conjunction with the presence in your bag of a tin of Turkish cigarettes, dawned upon me. I examined the seal, and found that it had been very neatly tampered with. I broke it—and discovered the films. May I congratulate you, Miss Yuan? It is a pleasure—and a vast relief—to know that we have you on our side.”

Miss Yuan took the bimb❖shi’s extended hand, and a faint flush, like that in the heart of a lotus, crept over her ivory cheeks.

Chapter 7

The Scarab of Lapis Lazuli

KHAMSIN, THAT scorching breeze from the south which, when it reaches Italy and the Levant, becomes the sirocco, has a bad reputation; and there was one occasion when khamsin, aided and abetted by Jane Watkin, of Bruton Street, brought about a tragedy which might have remained forever a mystery if oppressive heat, harbinger of the Serpent Wind, had not made Bimb❖shi Baruk uncommonly thirsty.

Shortly after his successful inquiries in the Syrian desert, he was passing the club not long before midnight on his way to his Cairo headquarters, when he decided to turn in there for a drink. He had the bar to himself except for young Cardew of H.Q. and a civilian whom he didn't know. In these circumstances it was unavoidable that he should overhear a conversation which had the most remarkable consequences.

The behavior of Dick Cardew, who would have been Army middleweight champion if he had learned to curb his temper, was so wholly unpredictable that when, tersely excusing himself to his friend and bidding the bimb❖shi good night, he dashed out, he left the bimb❖shi troubled in mind; so much so that he determined to follow. He liked Cardew and he sensed trouble brewing.

There was a nearly full moon, but as he drove across the bridge Bimb❖shi Baruk noted that the sky looked of a dirty blue, not unlike that which distinguished his own water-color paintings, stars twinkling dimly as through a veil. A puff of air met him which might have come from a furnace, and it carried a nearly impalpable grittiness. But he had come within sight of his destination before the hot wind, proclaimed by a furious lashing of palm fronds, burst in all its fury.

He saw as he reached the gates of the villa that a number of cars were being driven away. Waves of heat seemed to crush down upon him as he turned into the drive and huge leaves fell from the treetops as mastlike trunks bent back before the fiery breath of the desert. Clouds of dust now obscured stars and moon. Guests anxious to reach home hurried past in a darkness almost complete, and the Serpent Wind howled like demoniac voices of a hundred devils. This

was a first-class dust storm, a terror which rarely descends upon Cairo.

Double glazed doors were draped and a lobby beyond was dimly lighted. An Egyptian servant asked no questions when Bimbashi Baruk pushed these doors open and went in: he merely closed them again to keep out the hot wind. The air smelled like that of a recently crowded bar.

“Is Captain Cardew here?” the bimbashi asked rapidly in Arabic.

“Yes, sir. At least, I have not seen Yuzbashi Cardew go.”

He passed on. He did not know Mrs. Yardley Etherton well, although he had received an invitation to her buffet party now so hurriedly dispersing. Young and attractive wife of an elderly and respected U.S. diplomat, she was, in his own words, one of those women who mean no harm but who manage to do a lot.

Of course it was possible that Cardew had left unobserved by the bowwab. However, the bimbashi determined to seek out Mrs. Yardley Etherton. A sound of voices suggested that those guests who remained were assembled in a long, narrow lounge which, he remembered, opened onto the garden. He walked along a carpeted corridor. Khamsin howled ghoulishly outside, but its waitings were dimmed by closed shutters.

As he passed a door ajar, that of an apparently unlighted room, Bimbashi Baruk pulled up sharply; his fists became nervously clenched. Above wailing of the wind he had heard, coming from this room, another sound—a woman’s scream, a babble of words, upon which ensued sudden silence.

Seized by an unpleasant premonition, he pushed the door open and looked into the room. As he had supposed, it was in darkness, but he groped for and found a switch, so that a standard lamp became lighted. The room, furnished as a study, was empty. He saw a second door, behind an orderly desk. Crossing, he found a key in place, and the door locked. A curtained alcove at the other end, in which were a divan and coffee tables, afforded no explanation of the mystery; for this alcove also was empty. Drafts of hot, gritty air and the billowing of draperies before french windows gave him a clue at last.

He pulled a curtain aside, found one of the windows to be partly open, and was met by a full blast of khamsin. But he ignored it. Light from the standard lamp, shining dimly out onto the terrace, had shown him the figure of a man lying

outstretched not more than three feet from where he stood. Blood poured from a deep head wound.

In the adjoining room, someone had started a gramophone, and sibilant slippers told Bimb❖shi Baruk that they were dancing.

*

THESE WERE THE CIRCUMSTANCES which led to the awakening of Commandant Hatton of the Cairo police. Hatton, who was entitled to call himself Hatton Pasha, but never did so, was formerly attached to the C.I.D. He had survived two changes of regime since his Egyptian appointment, had overridden superannuation and generally was regarded as irreplaceable.

“This is not my idea of clean, healthy fun,” he remarked.

A chiming clock was clearing its throat preparatory to striking two. Hatton, seated in the villa study, looked up from his notes. A big man, fresh-colored, with close-cut, silver-gray hair and a small mustache resembling a midget currycomb, his light blue eyes had outlived a happy childhood.

“I am more than a little bothered, myself,” Bimb❖shi Baruk admitted. “We have bold, sturdy lying to deal with.”

Hatton nodded. He was glad to have Bimb❖shi Baruk with him in an inquiry at once so puzzling and so delicate; he held Bimb❖shi Baruk in high esteem. He had known, and had respected, his Arab father, had admired from afar, humbly and spiritually, his English mother. In the young Camel Corps major he recognized both, transmuted by that strange union into something fine and unusual. Occasional puffs of hot air alone remained as evidence that the desert had sought once more to blot out a city and had failed. The facts embodied in Hatton’s notes were bizarre and confusing. They were these.

The man discovered by Bimb❖shi Baruk, when dragged into the study, had proved to be dead. Neither host nor hostess being discoverable (it was learned later that Yardley Etherton was away from Cairo), the bimb❖shi had taken charge. A doctor was summoned, the police were notified, and guests still on the premises were asked to remain. The victim had a skull wound behind his right ear and a severe laceration of the jaw, but the physician was of opinion that these were not the direct cause of death—which he believed to have taken place

approximately at the time that the body was found. He suspected some contributory cause; probably a heart weakness. The doctor estimated the dead man, tall and of handsome presence, to have been about thirty-five years of age. His few possessions gave no clue to his identity.

“We can reasonably suppose,” said Hatton, “that he was a stranger to Cairo. Not because nobody has admitted to recognizing him, but because he wears a borrowed dress suit with no label. Short of hotel valets—who generally have a few on hand—places where he might have borrowed it are limited.”

A spell of silence followed, during which straggling puffs of khamsin whistled, elfin, in the trees outside.

“I think,” said Bimb❖shi Baruk, “that we may accept the evidence showing that Mrs. Yardley Etherton, finding her party dispersing, joined friends with whom she drove into Cairo.”

“Yes. Her slogan is, ‘Don’t break up the party.’

“It is not clear to me, though, of the four guests who remain, why one was detained.”

“Adrienne Arlen?”

“Yes.” Bimb❖shi Baruk’s eyes grew dreamy.

“First, her behavior when she viewed the body.”

“H’m—perhaps. No sensitive woman enjoys looking at a bloodstained corpse.”

“Then, you observed, no doubt, that she carries a handbag with initials in diamonds?”

“I had noted the fact.” The bimb❖shi’s drooping eyelids were raised momentarily. “These initials, although she hides them rather cleverly, are J. F.”

“Exactly. Either she has given a false name—”

“Or borrowed the bag.”

There was a rap on the door.

“Come in,” said Hatton.

The door opened and Cardew entered.

“Sorry if I seem to butt in, Hatton—but might I have a private chat with Major Baruk?”

“Certainly; by all means.”

Hatton went out, quietly closing the door. Bimb❖shi Baruk took the seat just vacated and began to fill his pipe.

“Try the armchair, Cardew,” he said. “It looks restful.”

Cardew crossed to the chair but did not sit in it; he sat on one arm, facing the bimb❖shi. Of no more than medium height, Richard Cardew was a man powerfully built; his dark brown hair grew in small, tight waves, and his gray eyes had sometimes been described as dangerous. If his jaw was a shade too heavy, a shy smile betrayed a sensitive nature; only a fool could have doubted his spirit and integrity.

“I want to get this thing clear if I can,” he began steadily, “for I find the present situation intolerable.”

Bimb❖shi Baruk struck a match. “It’s a police inquiry, Cardew,” he replied. “If my presence is not entirely accidental, it is in no way official. I am out to help everybody, so fire away.”

“Well, when I gave my evidence, there was one small point which I withheld. You will understand when I explain.”

Bimb❖shi Baruk lighted his pipe. “Suppose you start from the club,” he suggested. “I could not avoid overhearing your conversation, a fact which explains why I came out. I heard a man tell you that he had just come from one of Mrs. Etherton’s affairs at Gezira, and that Lady Avalon Westry was there. Go ahead from that point.”

“I will,” said Cardew grimly. “What you evidently didn’t hear was his

description of the behavior of the man with whom he had seen her. I was rather staggered.”

“Why?”

“Well, you see Avalon had called me earlier in the evening to say that she felt rather under the weather and was going to turn in. I__ dashed out here in a pretty foul humor. I never cared a lot for Nan Etherton, but she and Val were at the same finishing school in France, and I suppose there’s no real harm in the woman. When I arrived, there was every sign of a big storm blowing up, and the crowd was dismissing. I saw Peter Malmsey—Nan Etherton’s tame boy friend—and he told me that Val was still here. Nan had joined the Farquharsons and had pushed over to Cairo. Peter was acting as deputy host.”

“What did you do?”

“I went to look for Val.”

“And did you find her?”

“Yes. Now, I told Hatton that she was talking to someone whom I couldn’t see clearly, just outside this room.”

“I remember.”

“From the garden, I saw them come out. The breeze was rising and people were already dashing away. Well, she and the man went along the terrace towards the steps. I lost sight of them.”

“This tallies with what you told Hatton. Which is the part you wish to correct?”

“Well, when the surgeon had finished and we were asked to view the body, I said that I didn’t know the man. In a sense, this was true—but he is the man Val was talking to!”

Bimb❖shi Baruk’s expression grew grim.

“I understand your former—reticence, Cardew. Avalon had already denied that she knew him.”

Cardew dropped into the armchair and ran his fingers through tight waves of hair. “Exactly! That’s the devil of it. What could I do then?”

“The more urgent question is, what are you going to do now? Have you had it out with her?”

Cardew shook his head almost savagely. “She is highly strung, as you know, and at the moment on the verge of hysteria. It is painfully clear that Hatton, after a short interrogation, allowed everybody to go except Avalon, myself—and some woman I had never seen before. Peter Malmsey stayed as representative of the hostess. Since he can’t suspect Peter, what am I to infer?”

Peter Malmsey was one of those young men who are well connected and something at a Ministry; it was true that nobody could suspect Peter.

“The simple fact is, Cardew, that in the eyes of criminal law no man’s unsupported word is worth a damn. Hatton regards Miss Arlen’s evidence as unsatisfactory, and Avalon told him she was hunting for her car when I called on everyone to return. Unfortunately, she hunted alone. You said you were looking for Avalon. But you see, Cardew, no one saw you looking for her.”

“But Avalon—”

“Leave Avalon to me,” said the bimbo[◆]shi, quietly. “Just keep out of the way.”

“You are not going to tell her—”

“It is unnecessary that I should refer to our conversation.”

*

AVALON MARY WESTRY, only daughter of the Marquis of Derringham, would have been hailed as a beauty by social columnists had her debut been made in a normally silly season. She was tall, slight and delicately fair: to have described her as a blonde would have been coarse. She legitimately prompted the simile of a lily with her cool white skin and pale golden hair. Her eyes were calmly blue, and a suggestion rather than the presence of aggressiveness about her chin, alone disturbed the Madonna picture. Lady Avalon, in common with others, had undertaken war employments in England, but it had been noted that she rarely remained long in any one of them. Officially, indifferent health was

held to blame; actually, few girls of her age were more healthy.

The fact was that, although not strictly beautiful and although of a far from ardent temperament, Lady Avalon possessed that elusive appeal which in bygone days had made Phryne such a public nuisance. Upon certain men her presence acted like fumes of hashish, so keen was the desire which she provoked. This circumstance had caused her parents no small concern, since more than one scandal had been narrowly averted. When Dick Cardew came along—unlike her other suitors, he was unattached, wealthy and in every way eligible—an early marriage was urged by Avalon's anxious mother.

Avalon, however, had proved difficult; she declined to permit any announcement. But when Dick Cardew left for Egypt, Avalon saw him off—and broke down hopelessly as the train pulled out. Some months later, during the time that she was employed in the Ministry of Supply, information reached her father concerning yet another scandal about to bloom, and the historic “Westry jaw” of the marquis (delicately inherited by his daughter) became set in two right-angle triangles. Her health demanded sun and a dry climate: Lady Avalon was sent out to her aunt in Cairo. She went gladly, for Dick Cardew was there; but up to the time of the villa tragedy, no engagement had been reported....

The puff of khamsin having extinguished itself with its own violence, a nearly full moon held her Isis mirror above that land of Egypt in which the ancient gods were dying. Heat remained, bearing down oppressively upon the garden, and there were queer cracklings and rustlings among palm tops and in the flower borders. Night reopened her jewel casket and the sloping yards of moored dahabiyehs showed like silver slashes on dark velvet. There was a shaded path overlooking the Nile, but its seats were coated with dust, and Lady Avalon and Bimb[❖]shi Baruk leaned on a low stone parapet looking down at the muddy river.

She wore a white lace frock, with a sort of cowl which she had drawn over her fair hair, creating an effect similar to that of a mantilla; she appeared almost immortally ethereal. From a boat somewhere upstream, borne upon a faint breeze, came monotonous strains of a reed pipe.

“You see, Major”—Avalon's voice was low-pitched but peculiarly clear—“I am one of those unfortunate people who are always found out. I don't truly believe I have ever done anything desperately bad, but whatever I do, right or wrong, it

inevitably comes to light. I know lots of girls who have had secret affairs—in fact I know few who haven't; but if ever a man has even ventured to kiss me, some friend of the family has always seen him. Now, when everything was coming right, this thing happens.”

“You didn't expect Cardew to be here?”

“Oh, no!”

The bimbo[❖]shi studied Avalon's pure profile. “I am afraid,” he said quietly, “that you will have to explain to him why you came. Or should you prefer to explain to me?”

He saw her biting her lip.

“Suppose I did explain to you,” she replied, “would you consider it your duty to pass the explanation on to Mr. Hatton?”

“That would depend upon the explanation. You see, it is a serious offense to obstruct a police officer in the execution of his duty.”

“Whatever do you mean?”

“I mean that you told Hatton you had never seen the dead man before.”

“Well?”

“Well, I was led to my discovery of the body by hearing you call out, ‘Larry! Larry! What have you done?’ Those, I think, were your exact words?”

Avalon leaned forward, resting her hands on the dusty parapet. Faintly, strains of that distant pipe reached the bimbo[❖]shi's ears.

“Oh, you heard that?”

“Distinctly.”

“Does Dick know?”

“That I overheard your words? Of course not. Why should I have told him?”

“I don’t know; but he has been trying to cross-examine me all night, and I have clung like a limpet to Peter Malmsey. Oh, Major, I don’t know what to say!”

“Before you say anything, even to me—have you the slightest idea who committed the crime?”

“On my word of honor, not the slightest—unless it was a case of suicide. He said he would do it.”

“His injuries are not consistent with such a theory. And now, Avalon: Who was this man?”

*

THE STORY which Lady Avalon Westry told to Bimb❖shi Baruk was so true to pattern, except in its catastrophe, that the bimb❖shi quite easily could have concluded it without assistance from the girl. The dead man was Lawrence Bard, junior partner in a prominent firm of cotton brokers, Grantock, Ferez & Bard, of Manchester, London, Alexandria and Cairo....

“You see, he caught me very young. I was a little fool. It seemed like real romance to me. I didn’t think so afterwards. He used to manage to get invited wherever I went and he swore he would shoot himself if I didn’t marry him—although he had a wife already. But he said that she was grossly unfaithful and that he had evidence for a divorce.”

“And for how long did this friendship last?”

“Oh, perhaps a year. Then I met Dick—and somehow the affair with Larry Bard suddenly seemed vulgar, sordid. I was given a job at the Ministry of Supply; my French was my sole qualification—I suppose I have a flair for it. He—Lawrence Bard—got an appointment there too, and I simply couldn’t make him understand that it was finished. He positively haunted me, and people began to talk. Of course, Father heard the story; he would. You see, it was really because of Larry Bard that I wouldn’t agree to marry Dick. I felt he ought to know, but I hadn’t the pluck to tell him.”

Avalon’s voice remained low and clear, but not entirely steady. “Take your time, my dear,” said the bimb❖shi. “It would be pleasant to sit down, but ruinous to your frock, I’m afraid.”

“I am all right, Major. You are very kind. Because, really, I deserve no sympathy. As you know, I was packed out here to my Aunt Elfie and I had quite determined to make a clean breast of it and leave the result to Dick. Unfortunately, in a way, Dick is like no other man I know; he is early Victorian in some respects, and I have just been putting off the evil moment. I have been a wretched coward—because, you see, I adore Dick, and I dare not think—”

She was silent for nearly a minute.

“Imagine my feelings when Larry Bard rang me up and said he had just arrived in Cairo! He wanted to come along, but I definitely refused to see him. He was so insistent, though, that I knew I should have to see him sooner or later; and I made up my mind it should be for the last time. Since I had, well, come to my senses, I had heard a lot of things about Lawrence that I ought to have known before. He lived like a millionaire and had already squandered a considerable fortune brought to him by his wife. There were worse rumors, too.”

“And so you put off Cardew and met Bard?”

“Yes. Nan Etherton had invited me but I hadn’t meant to come. I thought I might safely see him here, among such a crowd, and meet no one who knew him. He had dashed up from Alexandria, where his firm has an office, and said he would have to borrow dress clothes. I called Nan, and she arranged to let us meet in the study as her husband was away; she gave me the key when I arrived.”

“What time was that?”

“It must have been some time after eleven. He didn’t phone me till about ten. I told him to come in by the garden gate down there—I described the way—and walk straight up to the house.”

“You met him out here, then?”

“No. I waited on the terrace and let him in through a french window to the study. He told me that the divorce decree had gone through, and seemed to think that as no obstacle remained I should fall into his arms. When I made him understand, finally, that everything between us was finished, he began to behave like a madman. I was terrified that someone would overhear him, and so I insisted that we should go out into the garden. Then, I fancied that someone was watching us, and I had to bring him in again. But at last he left me no choice. I ran out, and he

followed me.”

“Your last interview was in the garden?”

“Near the gate. It is at the end of this path. He made the most urgent appeals. For some reason they used to touch me, once. When I come to think of it, now, I can’t imagine why I ever listened to him. I simply could not induce him to leave. He didn’t realize how I had changed. He said if I turned him down he was going to shoot himself.

“Then khamsin broke like fury. I tore myself away and bolted up to the house. The trench window was open, just as I had left it, and I slipped in. The key was in the door, which was locked. I opened it and looked out; Peter Malmsey was just passing by!”

“Did he see you?”

“No. But I jumped back and forgot to close the door. I decided to risk the dust, to go out onto the terrace and to run around to the main entrance. While I stood there, hesitating, I heard someone stumbling up towards me. He must have seen me, for he gasped, ‘Avalon!’ I half stepped back; I was nearly suffocated. Then I saw him.”

“Where?”

“Just where he was found. He was—ghastly white, blood streaming down. Then he fell.”

“And you?”

“I screamed, and cried out before I could stop myself.”

“And then?”

“I thought I heard someone coming in. I ran onto the terrace and right around the house. It was pitch dark and people were hurrying away. I tried to find my car, but someone had moved it. Then Hassan came out to bring everyone back—and I knew that Larry had been found.”

“You are sure that no one saw you down here with Bard?”

“Practically sure. That is, there was no one in sight.”

“In short, this is absolutely all you know about the matter?”

“Absolutely.”

“You know nothing about Miss Arlen?”

“I never saw her in my life before the inquiry tonight.”

Bimb❖shi Baruk was satisfied.

“Keep out of Cardew’s way for the present. Go and make your peace with Hatton. He will understand.”

*

BIMBASHI BARUK watched the slender faery figure melt into shadow; then, he set to work, his task lightened by a clear moon, while a bullfrog in a stone pond jeered discordantly. Without much difficulty he found the spot at which that final interview had taken place. He read there evidence of just such a scuffle as Avalon had described, for the wall here, mantled in bougainvillea, swept up to a height of six feet and had protected the soft sand from the wind.

With his eye he measured the distance to the gate. It was a half-gate embowered in flowers; and, as he stared toward it, something focused his attention. Two large terra-cotta pots from which cascaded floral vines, marked the end of a narrow bypath leading up to the house. A native gardener—as is the way of native gardeners—had left a spade, its haft upright, driven into soft soil just at the corner of this path, and some sudden blow had jerked it violently sideways. Touched by moonlight, the tilted edge of the blade glittered evilly. Closer inspection—he avoided contact with the implement—confirmed conjecture.

The blade was wet with blood.

A number of other indications enabled him to reconstruct the scene; and as he did so his expression grew grimly apprehensive. It is hard to believe a man one has liked and respected to be a liar; yet here, written in blood and sand, was circumstantial evidence pointing plainly to the culprit.

Cardew, on his own admission, had seen the pair going into the garden. When Avalon had run back to the house he had confronted Bard, struck him (that would explain the cut on his jaw), and Bard, falling onto the pointed corner of the blade, had sustained that deep head wound. Wounded, but still conscious, he had staggered back and collapsed. So ran the bimb❖shi's facile reasoning—when, magically, his expression changed. With infinite care, using a leaf and a corner of his pocket handkerchief, he took up from the sandy path a small blue object. It was a beautifully carved scarab of lapis lazuli.

His investigation had taken longer than he had realized, and when he returned to the study, Hatton was just hanging up the phone.

“I have seen Lady Avalon,” he said shortly. “However, panic excuses her behavior, I suppose. Paul Ferez, one of the dead man's partners, happens to be in Cairo with his wife, and I have just established contact. He's on his way out here. Bard was in a financial jam. Ferez had a cable from England earlier tonight, and it seems that Bard has been swindling the Government for over two years. You see his game? He knew he had come to the end of the rope and he got official consent to visit their Alexandria office with the idea, first of all, of getting out before the crash. Also, if he could compromise Lady Avalon, he reckoned by blackmail to get the necessary funds from her family to save himself. He was a good-looker of sorts, and he dramatized his personality. She isn't the first to fall for him.”

He paused, staring at the bimb❖shi.

“But none of this makes the case any better for Cardew. Now that we have had the truth from Lady Avalon I suppose I might as well release Miss Arlen. Clearly, she is not concerned. Many people give wrong names to the police, unfortunately.”

But Bimb❖shi Baruk was staring into space, and when he spoke his voice sounded far off.

“I should not dream of intruding, Hatton, in the ordinary way; but this case involves the honor of a brother officer. Could you possibly allow me five minutes' private conversation with Miss Arlen before you let her go?”

Adrienne Arlen was a slenderly graceful woman who might have been twenty-seven. Dark and perfectly groomed, she had gray-green eyes which lent beauty

to a face otherwise no more than ordinarily pretty. She was engagingly_ degagee._ Over her white frock she wore a short ermine cape. She had a blue suede bag under her arm.

“My dear Miss Arlen,” said the bimb❖shi in his pleasant voice, “this interference in a matter which really doesn’t concern me must seem impertinent. But I am wondering if you can help to clear up a small point?”

“I shall be happy to do so, Major Baruk.”

Her voice was low-pitched and oddly soothing.

“Thank you. In the first place, then, how long have you known Lady Avalon Westry?”

“I don’t know her at all. I met her tonight for the first time. We decided at that very moment to change our dressmakers.”

“Change your dressmakers?”

Miss Arlen laid her bag, face downward, on a chair and slipped the cape from her shoulders.

“Jane Watkin of Bruton Street sold me this gown as an exclusive model. She sold another, an exact replica, to Lady Avalon just before she left London.”

Bimb❖shi Baruk smiled. His mood had changed entirely—for swift enlightenment had come.

“Might I ask you to raise the hood?”

She did so, drawing the cowl over her hair. “Perhaps you don’t realize what it means to two women to meet wearing identical gowns!”

“I appreciate its importance more keenly than you suppose. Jane Watkin of Bruton Street has made a pretty mess of things. By the way, Miss Arlen, do I understand that you came here alone?”

“Yes.” She nodded. “I came quite late, too. You see, one day recently I met Nan Etherton—I used to know her before her marriage—and she asked me to come

to her party. I don't think I should have done so, but during the evening I had a fit of the blues; so at last I found a cab and came along, hoping that company might cheer me up."

"What time was that—roughly?"

"Well, it must have been going on for midnight. The storm broke soon after I arrived. Nan had disappeared, and I didn't know a soul. I was just preparing to go, when—"

"You were caught up in the meshes of the law?" Bimb❖shi Baruk suggested.

"Yes, that was bad luck. But I am wondering"—he carefully placed something on a pad immediately under the lamp—"if this formed part of your white and blue ensemble."

Adrienne Arlen stepped forward, looked down at the lapis lazuli scarab, and turned so pale that the bimb❖shi grew alarmed. He sprang forward, but she shook her head and recovered her remarkable composure.

"Where—did you find it?"

"Is it yours?"

"No."

"It has evidently fallen out of a ring—and there are specks of blood on it. I am sincerely reluctant to pain you, but were you out in the garden tonight?"

"I have never left the house."

He challenged the gray-green eyes, and knew that this was true.

"I found it near the spot where Lawrence Bard was attacked. Whoever struck him down wore a ring from which this scarab was knocked out by the violence of the blow." Adrienne Arlen sank slowly back into the chair from which she had stood up. "You see, Miss Arlen, I am in your hands, and so I can only ask you—do you recognize this scarab?"

Adrienne Arlen avoided the searching gaze of Bimb❖shi Baruk; she retained

her composure with obvious difficulty, and when she answered it was in a murmur.

“No—I don’t.”

He shook his head reprovingly. “I am sorry that you felt it necessary to reply in that way,” he said, and the words were spoken quite gently. “I had hoped for your confidence, and I believe you would have done well to give it to me. However, in the circumstances, I am afraid I shall have to ask you to remain a little longer; I am truly sorry. Are you sure you would not like to reconsider the matter?”

She extended her hands in a pathetic gesture. The last shreds of self-confidence were slipping from her. “How can I?” she whispered. “How can I?”

Less than ten minutes later Hassan announced Paul Ferez. Hatton opened the door of an adjoining room and watched Ferez closely as he gave formal evidence of identification. Then all three returned and sat down.

“A great shock to you, Mr. Ferez?” Hatton suggested.

Ferez shook his head. Swarthy, thick-set, he had a mass of wavy black hair, bright dark eyes and a sort of restless alertness.

“He was a bad lot,” he replied simply. Ferez used short sentences with a queerly staccato effect.

“This was sure to come. It was probably his heart. He had lived too rapidly.”

“I agree,” Hatton replied; “but in order to avoid misunderstandings, I think I should ask you a question, Mr. Ferez.” He pulled aside a sheet of paper and uncovered a small object which lay under it. “Is this lapis lazuli scarab your property?”

Paul Ferez rested broad sun-browned hands on the desk and looked down at the scarab. Bimshi Baruk looked at Paul Ferez’ hands; and on the third finger of the left he saw a white circle, where a ring had habitually been worn. At which moment Ferez glanced up, and met the gaze of those accusing eyes; they were of the same blue as the scarab. He shrugged his shoulders and smiled, revealing a set of regularly and attractively white teeth. One might almost have described his

smile as one of relief.

“It is, sir. Where did you find it?”

“I found it at the spot where you attacked Bard,” the bimb❖shi replied. “It has some of his blood on it. Suppose you were to explain what occurred.”

“I must warn you,” Hatton interpolated, “that anything you say may be used in evidence.”

“That’s fair enough. I have been trying to make up my mind all the way along. I see that you gentlemen had already made it up for me. It’s pretty simple, too. First, here and now, I want to make one thing clear. I had no intention of killing Bard. I’m not a killer. But in doing what I did I had gross provocation, as I’m going to prove to you, quite frankly. I’m a Spanish-American by birth and maybe hot-tempered. You can judge for yourselves.

“I discovered sometime back—this is a very painful revelation to make—that my wife had been running an affair with Lawrence Bard. Well—I got over it, but I brought her out here and I took charge of the Alexandria office. A few days back I had to come to Cairo on business, and while Jean—that’s my wife—and I were at dinner tonight I had a message from our Alexandria manager, to say that Bard had arrived in Egypt. Maybe I jumped to conclusions; it’s quite likely I said too much. But we quarreled, and Jean went out. Soon after that came a cable—and I knew that Bard was a common crook.”

The words of Paul Ferez had a ring of honesty which Bimb❖shi Baruk did not fail to recognize.

“This was going on for midnight, but I knew where I could find my attorney—and I knew I needed him. I was just driving off from the Continental when another car passed—and Bard was in it!”

““The fate of every man have we hung around his neck,”” murmured the bimb❖shi. “So you followed?”

“Sure I followed. I followed him right here. But he didn’t come in at the front; he came in by a gate at the bottom of the garden. Now, I know this villa; I know Mrs. Etherton, and I know she and Jean used to be friends. What would any man have thought? That it was a rendezvous. Jean had come here too—come to meet

Bard. Well, I lost his trail. I was scouting around the garden, wondering whether to go up to the house or not, when I saw him—and Jean was with him!”

“Where was this?” asked the bimb❖shi.

“Near the point where he came in. They didn’t see me; I was ten paces away, but I could see them well enough, although it was getting black as hell. I just watched and listened. I couldn’t hear Jean’s words, only a murmur, but I heard most of Bard’s. Then he grabbed her, and I closed in nearer. The storm broke. She wriggled free and ran. He turned to follow—and found himself face to face with me.”

Paul Ferez stood up and began to pace the carpet, his dark eyes gleaming, the gestures of brown hands giving a Spanish interpretation of his English speech.

“It was very dark by this time, but I could read his expression. He knew what was coming to him. I hit him, just once, left him lying there, and went out to my car. When I got back, I found I had broken my ring—and Jean wasn’t home. She hasn’t come home. Those are the facts, gentlemen, and I have nothing to add except to repeat that Bard’s death was accidental. It was my fault, but not my intention.”

As Ferez dropped back into an armchair, bending forward and resting his chin on clenched fists, Bimb❖shi Baruk and Hatton exchanged glances; and the bimb❖shi went out.

“You have my sincere sympathy, Mr. Ferez,” said Hatton. “I believe a charge of manslaughter may be reduced to one of assault and battery. I am all the more sorry for you because of the mistake you have made—”

“What mistake?”

“We have a lady here who has already made a statement regarding what occurred in the garden tonight. As we hope to keep her name out of the matter, should this be possible, excuse me if I don’t introduce you. Come in, B.B.”

Bimb❖shi Baruk opened the door and ushered Avalon into the dimly lighted study. She had the cowl of her white frock drawn over her fair hair; but as she entered Paul Ferez came to his feet like one electrified.

“This lady,” exclaimed Bimsh[❖]shi Baruk, “is she whom you saw with the late Lawrence Bard. With the hood raised, since she is probably of similar figure—and possibly wears a similar dress—even a woman’s husband might be deceived—during khamsin. I don’t believe Mr. Hatton will wish to detain you tonight, although the facts must naturally be made the subject of further inquiry. You will probably find your wife at home when you return, and I should advise you, Mr. Ferez, for the present, to say nothing whatever to her about your movements this evening—and to ask her no questions about her own.”

Chapter 8

Vengeance at the Lily Pool

BIMBASHI BARUK had an insatiable curiosity concerning his fellow men. This was not prompted by any spirit of interference; in fact, he possessed a delicacy in approaching others which sometimes made an appointed task, already hard, harder yet. It was that kind of curiosity which is inseparable from an interest in mankind as a problem.

In consequence of this, Tom Eldon, host of the Bull, at Opley, came to look upon the bimb❖shi as a regular, rarely absent from the corner armchair whenever the bar was open. He had returned to his old quarters at the Bull after an interval of more than a year, and seemed to have nothing in particular to do, except that he often went out sketching, so that the cleanly chiseled, vaguely Oriental face, old Harris tweed suit and the stubby briar pipe had become familiar to all Tom's customers. The fact was that Bimb❖shi Baruk had formed one of a party of officers recalled home to make personal reports after the fall of Tobruk, and he was now awaiting return transport to Egypt.

It was here, in the Bull, just before closing time on a hot summer's afternoon, that he first set eyes upon the resentful Home Guard. Except for the bimb❖shi and Tom Eldon, the bar was empty when the Home Guard came in, a fact of which he seemed to assure himself in a quick glance around, before closing the door.

Crossing to the counter, "Double Scotch," he ordered peremptorily.

He wore battle dress and he rested a rifle against the bar while getting out his wallet. A tall, well-knit figure gave an impression of youth, but the lined, dark face and somber eyes belonged to a man middle-aged, to a man who had suffered much or to one who had drunk too deeply of the cup of life. His hands were those of a manual worker, so that his "public school" accent attracted the bimb❖shi's attention; furthermore, he had formulated a theory regarding the Home Guard's genealogy based upon subtle indications. As Tom Eldon set a glass before his customer:

"I see," came Baruk's pleasant voice, "that they still serve you out with Lee-

Enfields down here.”

The Home Guard tossed a note onto the counter, splashed some water into the whisky, and turned. His expression was lowering, his glance at once mocking and intolerant.

“They do. Does that fact interest you?”

He took a long drink without removing his gaze from the bimbo[❖]shi’s face. His manner was so provocatively rude that Baruk felt affronted, and when he replied he spoke sharply.

“I appear to have offended you, sir. But as a professional soldier I am naturally interested in the arms of all the Services.”

“Oh, I see. You are a regular officer.” The man’s tone was less offensive, but his glance no less mocking. Its quality was not due to any movement of his features; it danced, elfin, in his fine, restless eyes. “Yours is a sorry trade, sir. In me you see a most unwilling warrior. Two generations of fools have plunged us into this mess. Under a government of sane men there would be no need for armies. The mere existence of an army is an anachronism—if we are to claim to be civilized.”

Bimbo[❖]shi Baruk’s expression grew dreamy. He was interested.

“How should you propose that these sane men dispense with armed forces?” he inquired.

The Home Guard drained his glass. “If you have ever studied boxing, you will agree that the boxer does not waste his blows on bone and muscle; he seeks to paralyze heart and nerve. Armies are the bone and muscle of nations. Those who direct them are the heart and nerve. A sane government would ignore the armies and strike at those who directed them.”

“I take your meaning to be that you would endeavor to assassinate, shall we say, Hitler and Mussolini?”

“A representative committee would be charged with maintaining the world’s peace. Amply financed, they would command suitable facilities. Such characters as those you have named would be warned. If they ignored these warnings, they

would be removed.” He took up his change and swung his rifle over his shoulder. “Having publicly proclaimed these views during the past twenty years, I naturally resent being compelled to form part of the bone and muscle.”

He went out. Bimbashi Baruk smiled at Tom Eldon.

“Agreeable fellow,” he murmured. “Who is he?”

“That’s Mr. Peter Gillam, sir,” the landlord replied, glancing at the clock and then going across to bar his door. “I reckon he hates everybody, does Mr. Gillam. Queer, he is, and mad as they’re made. He’s what they call a mining engineer and he’s in charge of those excavations under the Hill. It’s no tittle-tattle to talk to you, sir, and there’s two hundred men under him up yonder, opening of the old stone quarries.”

Bimbashi Baruk nodded. “He’s not a native, then?”

“Not he. Come from foreign parts, I hear. Don’t know just where. But he lives in what they call Quarry Cottage, on the hillside. Lonely it is; and he’s got the prettiest little woman locked up there as I ever set eyes on.”

“Locked up?”

“Well, in a manner o’ speaking. No society, like. Seems to be frightened of everybody. Nervous as a squirrel, she is; and like a squirrel, too—soft and light and quick. Aye, they’re a queer couple.”

Somewhat less than an hour later, Bimbashi Barak found himself in a narrow winding path, all but indiscernible because of encroaching nettles, a path which traced an aimless way through a wood of firs. This wood possessed one peculiar and unpleasant feature: it contained a number of dead birds, chiefly blackbirds, in various stages of decay and overrun by wasps. The bimbashi carried water-color equipment, and was bound for a spot which he had long determined to try to paint—a pool opening out from a tiny stream, where there were water lilies and where baby moorhens might be seen running across floating leaves.

He was aware that this was private property, but, except by rooks, thrushes, squirrels and a rare rabbit, his trespass had never been challenged. The house, Court Oaks, stood at no great distance from the pool, but he knew that most of it was locked up, that the grounds were neglected. Dr. Manoel, its wealthy and

eccentric occupier, camped out in two rooms where he resided alone, except for a colored manservant.

Presently, through an opening in the trees which he remembered, the lily pool burst into view, its sudden beauty, with overhanging foliage mirrored in still water, almost violent. He stood still, gazing down at this fairy prospect. His abrupt halt had not been occasioned by the loveliness of the pool, however, but by the fact that a man was seated beside it.

He was sitting bolt upright in a split-cane chair set beneath a magnificent lime tree. On the grass beside him lay a book. Bimb❖shi Baruk, who instinctively moved through cover with the silence of a stoat, had not disturbed this solitary reader, and now he stood quite still watching him; for the man's behavior was so strange as to be arresting. He was perhaps sixty years of age, but possessed a slim figure and saturnine good looks. As he wore no hat, the sun quickened his thick, wavy hair to silver, accentuating the yellowness of his skin. Heavy eyebrows, mustache and a small pointed beard remained dark, and he wore a white linen suit; so that, recalling spoken descriptions, the bimb❖shi concluded that he was looking at Dr. Manoel, owner of Court Oaks.

And Dr. Manoel, without relaxing that rigid pose, sat holding a gold watch extended before him, his eyes fixed upon it and his expression one of such extreme horror that Bimb❖shi Baruk became physically chilled. Although Dr. Manoel's hand was steady, immovable as the rest of his body, perspiration shone upon his high forehead and he presented a perfect study of one facing imminent, and inescapable destruction!

That Dr. Manoel suffered from serious ill health was common gossip in the neighborhood, but the bimb❖shi's first idea—that he was about to witness some sort of seizure—he immediately dismissed. If Dr. Manoel (assuming his degree to be a medical one) had recognized symptoms of such an attack, it was reasonable to suppose that he would have remained within reach of assistance.

But speculation was abruptly, and melodramatically, ended. Bimb❖shi Baruk heard a dull, familiar thud. The gold watch fell to the grass; Dr. Manoel came to his feet like a puppet jerked upright on a wire; a speck of blood gleamed, a living ruby, on his wet forehead—and he pitched forward and lay, arms outstretched. The crack of a rifle shot echoed around the valley, and rooks rose, filling the air with their alarm calls.

The first shock of this dreadful killing being conquered—for the fact that he had witnessed an assassination was unmistakable—Bimbashi Baruk gained the victim's side in a period computable in seconds. Barbed wire intervened, but the bimbashi had learned all that one may know about barbed wire, in Libya. Breathing rapidly, he stood for a moment looking down. Then, twisting about, he stared up the slope.

From this point of view, owing to close-growing timber, no more than a corner of the east wing of Court Oaks was visible. Otherwise, a stone cottage on the hillside beyond seemed to be the only building in sight. There was, however, ample natural cover. Nothing stirred but the rooks above; their cries and the shriek of a hidden jay alone disturbed a hot silence.

Dr. Manoel had been killed by a first-class marksman. The bullet had passed clean through his brain, back to front. Death must have been swift and painless as that inflicted by a guillotine. His watch lay, dial upward, near his clenched hand: it recorded that the hour was 3.02 p.m. (Summer Time). The book on the grass beside the chair was a lavishly bound copy of Cardinal Newman's *Dream of Gerontius*.

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ALTHOUGH THE BIMBASHI wasted no time in running up to Court Oaks—an ugly, rambling stone mansion of mid-Victorian design—he met with infuriating delay in gaining admittance. The house presented every evidence of desertion. Many of the windows were shuttered and others clearly belonged to unoccupied rooms. The drive was liberally decorated with thistles, and the main entrance, its rusty bell-pull reluctant to function, had long forgotten the smell of paint. A sepulchral note, deep within the house, responded to his ringing.

At last came footsteps. A man, whom he judged to be a mulatto, opened the door. He was dressed in a sort of livery, with black trousers and a striped linen jacket; and his face, yellow like his master's, bore an habitual expression of hopeless despair.

“Are you Dr. Manoel's servant?” the bimbashi asked sharply.

“Yes. I am Jose. What do you wish? The doctor is out.” Jose had a slight accent and spoke almost tonelessly; the effect was that of a very old gramophone record.

“Did you hear a shot a few minutes ago?”

“Yes. The doctor is shooting rabbits, I suppose.”

“Does he often shoot rabbits?”

“Often. We eat many rabbits.”

Bimb❖shi Baruk fixed an analytical regard upon the man’s dull, dark eyes; but he could read nothing in them.

“Dr. Manoel has been attacked. Where is the telephone?”

“Attacked?” Jose’s intonation neither rose nor fell. “I don’t understand. Who are you, if you please?”

“I am Major Baruk. Show me the telephone.”

Jose inclined his head and led the way along a gloomy and shuttered passage to an even darker alcove which had the fusty smell of a place where daylight is unknown. Here stood a telephone.

And so in this way the outer world was notified of the death of Dr. Manoel, and on that sunny afternoon the neglected grounds of Court Oaks became peopled by unfamiliar figures: Inspector Horley and Dr. Whittington, both of whom the bimb❖shi had met before, and several others who were strangers. Police on motorcycles were soon weaving in and out of that maze of narrow lanes which embraced the grounds of Court Oaks. There was a sharp brush when the inspector suggested that Bimb❖shi Baruk had taken no steps to apprehend this mysterious assassin.

“Might I inquire,” said the bimb❖shi smoothly, “short of throwing a cordon around the neighborhood, what I could have done? Being but one, and indivisible, this maneuver presented certain difficulties.”

In fact, Inspector Horley was in a bad humor. It rankled in his memory that the bimb❖shi had once succeeded in unraveling a local mystery where he himself had failed; so that at the earliest opportunity which he could decently accept, the bimb❖shi withdrew.

He had gathered certain information, however, which dictated his course when he left Court Oaks. He did not set out downhill for the Bull at Opley; he went uphill toward that stone cottage which he had seen as he stood beside the dead man on the edge of the pool. It proved to be reached by a bridle path which branched off from a lane winding around the hill crest; and here he passed a constable standing beside a bicycle. A board at the corner bore the words:

Private

To Quarry Cottage only

The place, on close inspection, looked well cared for. The door was newly painted and its brasswork shone in the sunlight. Masses of pink roses rambled over its porch. Bimb❖shi Baruk rang the bell. A sound of movement followed, there were heavy footsteps, and the resentful Home Guard opened the door. He had discarded his uniform and wore blue overalls. At sight of the bimb❖shi, his large, deep-set eyes lighted up with that look of mockery.

“Hullo,” he remarked; “*you* here again!”

Bimb❖shi Baruk nodded, smiling. “And I must warn you, Mr. Gillam, that the police are close behind me.”

“The police?” Gillam’s expression was one of authentic misunderstanding. “Why the police?” His expression altered; a dreadful possibility seemed to have presented itself. “You don’t mean that something has happened to my wife?”

Bimb❖shi Baruk shook his head: his smile grew broader and became a happy smile.

“Have no fear on that score.”

Gillam’s eloquent eyes registered another change of mind. “Then what the devil do you want?”

“I want to come in for a chat. I am called Major Baruk, and I believe we shall have all our work cut out to save you from arrest.”

At that, Gillam’s habitual expression of intolerant mockery returned. “You amuse me, Major. Come in, by all means.”

He led the way into a sort of workshop-study at the right of the porch. There were laden bookshelves, a desk littered with papers and blueprints, and on a side table the bimb❖shi noted a drawing board to which a partially completed plan was pinned. Under one window he saw a bench where a model of a complicated piece of mechanism seemed to be in process of evolution. Peter Gillam, whose hands were oily, picked up a rifle and peered into the barrel.

“Sit down,” he said casually. “I have a job to finish.”

“Cleaning the Lee-Enfield.”

“Cleaning the damned thing, as you correctly observe. I was ticked off today by a certain sergeant, on the pretext that my rifle was dirty. The fact is that I happen to be the best shot in the platoon, and my arrival has put this gentleman’s nose out of joint. I am now assuring myself that the rifle is_ clean.”_

The bimb❖shi took out his pipe and pouch. “Do you mind if I smoke?”

“Not at all.”

As he began to fill his briar, watching this unusual man whom Fate had thrown across his path, Bimb❖shi Baruk observed an odd thing. A bee had flown in at an open window and was blindly endeavoring to fly out again through a pane of glass. Peter Gillam laid his rifle on the bench, captured the bee and wafted it on its way into the sunshine.

“A fellow worker, Major. We must help one another.” He sat down. “And now—what’s it all about?”

“May I ask if we are alone?”

“Quite. My wife has cycled into Moreton Harbor to buy our weekly rations. Why?”

Bimb❖shi Baruk replaced his pouch and struck a match.

“I am glad. You see, a charge of murder is hanging over your head.”

“Murder?” Gillam’s mocking voice robbed the word of its significance.

“Exactly. Did you hear a shot recently?”

“Yes—that is, within the last half-hour. Probably that swine Manoel shooting blackbirds.”

“Shooting blackbirds? What for?”

The match burned down to the bimb❖shi’s fingers, and he dropped it.

“Just wanton destruction. Sits at an open window picking them off. Remind him of Negroes, perhaps. Slaughters them for fun.”

—”Slaughtered, — Mr. Gillam, not slaughters.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that Dr. Manoel was murdered in his own grounds at almost exactly two minutes past three.”

Peter Gillam crossed the room and locked the door. “I begin to understand,” he said, returning to his chair. “Please give me the facts.”

Bimb❖shi Baruk lighted his pipe. “They are simple enough. Dr. Manoel was shot through the head as he sat by the lily pool. Several windows of this cottage command the spot, at a range of little more than two hundred yards. I gather that you have never troubled to disguise your dislike of Dr. Manoel, and it seems that he distrusted you to the extent of asking for police protection—”

“What!” Gillam stood up. “He asked for police protection against _me?”“_

The bimb❖shi, using the end of a pencil, pressed down burning tobacco in his pipe bowl. “He does not seem to have_ named_ you; but the police apparently had no doubt respecting the person implied.”

“Good God!” Gillam resumed his seat, watching his visitor. “Good God! And you found me with a rifle actually in my hands!”

Bimb❖shi Baruk nodded, fixing a steady regard upon the dark, somber face.

“As time is by no means on our side, perhaps you would like to make your

position in the matter more clear.”

“Do I understand, Major, that you are acting for the police?”

“Certainly not. My presence on the spot was accidental—perhaps providential.”

“You mean—you saw the crime committed?”

“I was less than twenty paces from Dr. Manoel when he fell. May I take it, Mr. Gillam, in the first place, that you did not regard the doctor as you regard Hitler and Mussolini?”

Peter Gillam smiled grimly. “You may take it that I hated him more than I hate either Hitler or Mussolini. Nevertheless, I didn’t shoot him. But I recognize the fact that I have no alibi, of course. His having asked for police protection practically pins the thing to me.”

“Why did you hate him?”

Gillam hesitated; the old mocking expression flitted across those dark features, so that Bimshi Baruk almost expected him to demand, “What the devil is that to you?” But if such a retort had been in his mind, Gillam thought better of it.

“As well tell you as tell it in court,” he said; “so listen. For two and a half years, Juan Manoel treated Antoinette as neither you nor I would treat a mongrel dog.”

“Who is Antoinette?”

“My wife. She was Manoel’s wife at that time. I was young, and prosperous. I had a big business in Santo Domingo. Antoinette and I were engaged; we should have been married in three months, when her family—she is of old French stock—found out—”

“Found out what?”

Peter Gillam stood up again and stared through the window; he had heard a car in the lane above. He replied slowly, as if choosing his words.

“The de Charnys—my wife’s people—and the Manoels, their near neighbors, came to the West Indies in the days of Henry Morgan. They had always prided

themselves on the purity of their respective races. The Manoels were notorious for their treatment of colored servants. My father was a British naval officer; I was born in Devon and I graduated from Merton. What they found out was this: They found out that my maternal grandfather was a Haitian Negro.”

He twisted around to face the bimb^oshi, and his strange eyes seemed to glow. “That he was also one of the finest men who ever breathed God’s air counted not at all. The engagement was broken. Antoinette was forced into marriage with Manoel, the second wealthiest man in the island, and thirty years her senior. She never loved him—and he never allowed her to forget that she had loved a quadroon.”

He paused, and in a momentary silence Bimb^oshi Baruk heard the voices of several people who were evidently approaching by way of the bridle path. The bimb^oshi congratulated himself. He had detected the fact at their first meeting—a fact which must have eluded most men—that Peter Gillam had Negro ancestry.

“I left Santo Domingo. I thought Antoinette shared her family’s prejudices. I was a fool—a coward. It was more than two years later, in Mexico, that I found out my mistake. Manoel had property there, and I was silver mining. By accident we met again. I found that Tony—I mean Antoinette—was leading a hell’s life. He tortured her; she was a nervous wreck. I found out something else—that she still loved me.” He smiled, shrugged his shoulders. “In plain English, we bolted.”

“And then?”

“Manoel, the swine—oh! I hate him no less dead than alive—got his divorce, and we were married in the States. But he used his wealth, and his influence, to try to ruin me. Time and time again, in the years that followed, he pulled wires and brought me down. Once, when I was flat out, he tried to get Tony to go back to him. I settled the matter with my bare hands, and he had evidence of assault. That made things worse. When the war started, being a quixotic lunatic, I came home, and they turned me over to the Ministry of Supply.”

“That is why you are here?”

“Just that. This cottage belongs to the Court Oaks estate—which was unoccupied. I leased it. A month later, Manoel bought Court Oaks!”

A bell rang.

“The police,” said Gillam, and looked out of the window. “Hell! Tony is with them!”

As Gillam crossed and unlocked the door, his wife stepped in from the porch followed by Inspector Horley and a police sergeant. The bimb[❖]shi had a glimpse of a small and girlishly slight figure, quick but graceful of movement, of a vivacious face characterized by a complexion peachlike in the Oriental sense and lighted by dark blue eyes whose expression conjured up the image of a gazelle. Hair of dull gold presented a mass of close, feathery curls.

“Peter dear!” she cried, and ran to her husband. “Whatever has happened? What do the police want to—” She broke off as Bimb[❖]shi Baruk appeared behind Gillam.

“Major Baruk. This is my wife.”

The bimb[❖]shi bowed, and Antoinette Gillam forced a welcoming smile, a smile so childlike that he found himself wondering at what age she had been married to Dr. Manoel, since she seemed so youthful now. He saw a bicycle leaning against the porch, a laden shopping basket strapped to it. Inspector Horley pointedly ignored the bimb[❖]shi and addressed Gillam.

“I have a few questions to ask you, Mr. Gillam, regarding the death of Dr. Manoel. After which I must request you to come with me to Moreton Harbor for further inquiries—”

He paused. Mrs. Gillam, her delicate color fading, had tottered to a chair, supported by her husband.

“Peter,” she whispered. “Peter!” Her dark blue eyes seemed to grow black with emotion. “Oh, my God!”

“it appears to me, Baruk, to be a clear case.” Colonel Brown-Maple, the Chief Constable, stared gloomily from a window of his car at one of the loveliest landscapes in the West Country.

“Here’s this fellow, Gillam—brilliant at his job, and a gentleman as far as that goes; but kinked, definitely kinked. He’s a dead shot. He has a rifle in his

possession. He's alone in his house at the time, and his house overlooks the lily pool. So I can't really see what evidence there is for the defense. Sudden impulse, perhaps. Tragic story. The eternal triangle. Sorry for his wife. Pretty little woman. Most attractive. Fatally so."

Bimb[❖]shi Baruk smoked. Twenty-four hours had elapsed since the death of Juan Manoel. Peter Gillam had been detained for the crime.

"Manoel," the colonel went on, "was a queer fish, admittedly. But he had pots of money, and influence. Why he bought Court Oaks in order to live in two rooms I don't know. Place used to be a Canadian headquarters. When the Canadians cleared out, Manoel moved in. He was allowed to retain some firearms for dealing with vermin, although everything had been confiscated except stuff issued to Home Guards. Shot a lot, I hear. Funny notion, because we have learned that he had only a short time to live. Angina pectoris. Harley Street had warned him the next attack would be the last."

"Another mysterious feature," murmured the bimb[❖]shi, "is why he asked for police protection."

"That should be clear enough. You're a hot man at this sort of thing. He suddenly discovered who his neighbor was! Events proved him right, too. You say you have found the bullet. Was it fired from a Lee-Enfield?"

"I think there's no doubt of it. But I want you to form your own opinion—and here we are."

A police sergeant opened the door of Court Oaks and smartly saluted the Chief Constable. "Anything you want me to see inside, Baruk?"

"Not at the moment, Colonel. Let's walk down to the pool."

But when, after passing through unfurnished, echoing rooms, and going out by way of a french window onto a weed-grown terrace, they began to descend the slope, Colonel Brown-Maple pulled up, shading his eyes against the sun.

"What the devil's that stuck on a tree, Baruk?"

Projecting from the trunk of that magnificent lime, beneath which the cane chair still stood, an object appeared which resembled a white disk—which, indeed, it

was.

“That is an alibi, Colonel.”

The Chief Constable faced Bimb❖shi Baruk, and his prominent eyes seemed to be more prominent than usual.

“An alibi! What the deuce do you mean?”

“Allow me to explain.”

Walking to the tree, while Colonel Brown-Maple favored him with suspicious side glances, the bimb❖shi pointed. “A round piece of wood, about the diameter of a human skull, and painted white. It is attached to the side of the tree by means of a rod. This rod fits into a slot which I found already cut in the bark.”

“You say you found a slot there?”

“Yes. I assumed that some similar device had been used before, and so I extemporized this target. Its position, immediately over the chair, corresponds to the head of a man seated there—and the chair, as you can judge from the marks in the turf, always stood on the same spot.”

“But you are merely confusing me, Baruk. Do you mean to say that—hullo!” He adjusted his monocle. “Your target is holed!”

“I know,” said the bimb❖shi. “I fired a shot through it this morning.”

“What the devil for?”

“Let’s walk around the pool and I will show you.”

In a frame of mind between mystification and annoyance, the Chief Constable followed Bimb❖shi Baruk to the trunk of one of several fine conifers which rose, mastlike, from the further bank of the pool. A cardboard target was pinned to this tree, pierced by a single shotmark.

“Outer—six o’clock,” muttered the colonel. “Isn’t this the bullet that passed through the wooden disk over there?”

“The same. And now, note the tree trunk as I found it before I attached my target.”

He removed the square of cardboard. The bark behind it was pock-marked with bullet holes over an area of no more than ten inches in diameter!

“What the devil—”

“On finding this, I knew that_ someone_ had been practicing rifle-shooting from a range of little more than a hundred yards, to judge from the penetration. Now, if you will note the general direction of the bullet holes and then glance back up the slope, it will occur to you that if one of those bullets is that which passed through Dr. Manoel’s brain, it could not very well have been fired from Quarry Cottage.”

Solemnly now the colonel inspected the marks, then turned and stared up the slope toward Court Oaks. It was possible from this point to see Quarry Cottage, but fairly obvious that it lay outside the line of fire. He spoke in a low voice.

“How did you find that?”

“When Dr. Manoel died, I heard the thud of the bullet striking, but I was uncertain of the exact point of impact. Having obtained your permission, after Horley had detained Gillam, I came and searched. Then I remembered the blackbird-shooting of which Gillam had spoken. The servant, Jose, told me that it took place from Dr. Manoel’s bedroom window at the top of the east wing. After several experiments, I fixed the wooden disk in its present position; and from the open window of the east wing, with a borrowed rifle, I fired a shot through it. You saw where my shot registered on the tree.”

“Baruk,” said the colonel, “I believe you have saved the life of an innocent man. But—who is the guilty man?”

The bimb❖shi watched him for a moment, and his regard grew dreamy; then, “Dr. Manoel,” he replied.

“*Dr. Manoel!* But—”

“Remember his record, Colonel: his contempt of the colored races; his insensate cruelty; his perverted pride. Then, remember that he was robbed of his wife,

whom he tortured mentally, by a man with black blood in his veins. I believe his latter years were entirely devoted to that man's ruin, and the ruin of the woman who had married him. Let's return to the house."

"But—"

"Remember—it is important for us to understand his motives—that he knew he had only a short time to live. When Gillam took Quarry Cottage, Dr. Manoel, who probably had Gillam's movements watched, immediately bought Court Oaks. What for? To be conveniently placed for his purpose."

"But, damn it! what_ was_ his purpose?"

"To bring Gillam to the scaffold."

"What do you say?"

They had reached the terrace, and Bimbs^hi Baruk pushed open a french window. "If you will be good enough to follow, Colonel, I will lead the way to the room from which Dr. Manoel carried out his target practice."

The room at the corner of the east wing had evidently been used as a bedroom. There was no carpet, but it contained a camp bed, a heavy kitchen table on which lay some carpenter's tools, an armchair, and little else except a number of books piled on old shelves which lined the walls. Those works which were not religious dealt chiefly with psychology. One window commanded a view of the hillside. Staring out of it, Colonel Brown-Maple saw a policeman apparently searching for something in the little garden of Quarry Cottage. The other window overlooked the lawn sloping down to the lily pool. Both windows were partially obscured by masses of untrimmed ivy which had climbed as high as the roof. A rifle lay on the window ledge of the southern window—Court Oaks had stone walls of dungeonlike thickness. The only other object on the ledge was a cheap alarm clock.

"So this was the shooting gallery, eh?"

"Yes, this was it, Colonel. Whether Manoel shot blackbirds because he hated them or just as a blind, I don't know. But from here he did his serious target practice."

The colonel examined the rifle, and then turned to Bimb❖shi Baruk. “Was this the weapon used?”

“No. That is the one I borrowed for my experiment. My discovery of the weapon used was due to a lucky accident. Since Manoel had a resident servant, I wondered why he wanted an alarm clock. Trying to pick up the clock, I found that it was screwed to the ledge. The problem became more odd than ever. Next I discovered that some sort of attachment went down through the base. Accordingly I borrowed tools and removed the oak panel below the ledge. I will lift it out and show you what I found there.”

The bimb❖shi did so, and Colonel Brown-Maple stooped, peering into a deep cavity at the end of which a certain amount of light was visible.

“Formerly a ventilating shaft, but the grille has been taken out.” The bimb❖shi directed the ray of a torch into the gap. “A Lee-Enfield, clamped down to an oak beam. There is a simple counterweight fixture attached to the striker of the clock above. The rifle is trained accurately on the target you saw just now, and its barrel is concealed by the ivy.”

He stood upright; so did Colonel Brown-Maple. The two men stared silently at one another for a moment.

“Unlikely to be discovered,” the bimb❖shi added, “until Gillam had paid the penalty. From this window, Manoel could watch all that occurred at Quarry Cottage and choose his time. His preoccupation with an afterlife may have been real or merely another pose. The clock was set to strike at three—”

“But he was actually shot—”

“Two minutes later? Quite so. I understand, now, the agony of suspense in which I found him. By some oversight which we cannot hope to explain, he forgot to put the clock right. It is just two minutes slow.”

Chapter 9

Adventure in the Libyan Desert

IN THE ADVENTUROUS LIFE of Margaret Starkie, special correspondent of the Philadelphia_ Globe,_ a certain mysterious hiatus occurred. Since Margaret Starkie has faithfully uncovered even the more intimate episodes of her private life for public consideration, no doubt in her long-promised, or perhaps one should say, long-threatened, volume of memoirs, full particulars of these missing incidents will be given to the world. Therefore, there can be no objection to this preview of a matter which provoked wide comment at the time. The scene appropriately opens in the Libyan desert during the final phase of that sparring and shadow boxing which preceded Rommel's final drive, and it introduces two men mounted upon camels, two men deeply concerned in the affair. Along an ancient caravan road in that dreary wilderness the camels plodded, tirelessly, but not patiently: patience is a word undiscoverable in the camel dictionary.

They were highly serviceable brutes of the type used by the Camel Corps, and capable of much endurance. Upon the first, for they proceeded in single file, rode an imposing sheikh, spectacled, but having a fiercely brushed mustache, and wearing the green turban of a hadji. Although he bore himself with a martial air, he carried no visible weapon. The second rider, a scrubby-looking person, with a round, bearded face and small, fierce, intolerant eyes, shared his camel with a load of baggage which rose up behind him craggily.

This intolerance may have been occasioned by the character of the prospect, consisting as it did of a seemingly endless expanse of sand, rock and wreckage. It was a point many miles inside the Nazi lines—so far as that term can be applied to the kind of desert warfare invented during the Libyan campaigns. Engagements, advances, retreats, leave grim testimonials behind; and this inland caravan route had been contested again and again. Sunset was an hour away, and the sky resembled a dirty copper bowl. One who knew this dreary waste might have surmised that the Arabs were bound for Bir Rumba, a well not far ahead at which they planned to camp for the night.

An angry sun, which sometimes sent red spears hurtling along their path when an opening in grim hills allowed of it, seemed to promise a dust storm at almost

any moment. But in silence the sheikh and his servant rode forward.

In such a sudden blaze of light, as they emerged from a patch of shadow, an armored car appeared, bearing down upon them. Twenty yards away it was pulled up, and a sergeant of the Afrika Korps sprang out, followed by two armed men.

“Halt!” He raised his hand peremptorily.

The camel ridden by the hadji had continued upon its stately way.

“*Usbur!*” the German shouted angrily.

The leading camel came slowly to a halt, and that behind gratefully followed suit. The hadji gazed sternly down at the sergeant, who advanced, one hand on a holster.

“Your name, your papers!” he demanded in German.

The eyes of the sheikh regarded him fiercely and unmoved. Appealing angrily to a man at his elbow, the German ordered: “Tell him in his own beastly language.”

“*Ismak eh?*”

At this, the hadji, from a bag at his girdle, produced a document in a cover, and without perceptibly altering his pose offered it to the sergeant, who now stood beside the camel. This failure to shrink before a member of the New Order was distasteful to the sergeant.

“Heil Hitler!” he snapped, snatching the papers.

The dignified Arab regarded him as a visitor might regard an unusual specimen in a zoo. The sergeant, fingering the cover impatiently, spoke again to the man at his elbow.

“Tell him what I said.”

“It is impossible, my sergeant.”

The sergeant turned, glared—and then gave it up.

Opening the folder, he glanced over a permit which it contained. This stated, in due form, that the Sheikh Mahdi Abdel Beyda, accompanied by his servant, Ismail Habun, were proceeding under safe conduct from General Rommel, to visit the sheikh's brother at Benghazi. This was all in order, and the sergeant merely thrust the permit back into the extended hand—a small, muscular but nervous hand, denoting that this brown brute was of good family—and waved his arm to indicate that the caravan of two might proceed.

“Heil Hitler,” he said mechanically as they passed.

But there was no response from the sheikh, and none from his servant. Their camels complained loudly at being compelled to move again, but their angry snarls could not possibly have been construed to mean “Heil Hitler.” In an otherwise unbroken silence the march continued until, passing through a gloomy wadi in the hills, a side track revealed itself to the spectacled eyes of the leader.

Leaving the direct route (which ultimately came to Benghazi), with its litter of a straggling battlefield, the two swung into the ravine, their camels proceeding through its blackness with extended necks and distended nostrils. This was evidence that there was water at the well.

Bir Rumba lay at the end, and slightly to the east, of this wadi which may at some period of history have accommodated a considerable stream. It was marked by two ill-nourished palms, and so situated that during a large part of every day it enjoyed considerable shade. Here, the sheikh and Ismail Habun made simple arrangements for the night.

The evening meal which they set about preparing was highly unconventional for Arab travelers. A bottle of whisky formed a conspicuous item of the menu. Ismail, employing himself about a fire which he had laid, while the sheikh carried out other duties, a silence of some duration—complete save for the whining of jackals—was broken.

“This job is not the sort of thing I really relish, B.B.,” said Ismail. “But in the rush of joining up perhaps I have missed certain details.” He thoughtfully uncorked the bottle. “There is just one small point which I should like to have cleared up. Save it for an after-dinner pipe, as we are both pretty whacked. I mean: What are we looking for—sand, or rocks?”

And so, their simple meal dispatched, reinforced by whisky and tepid water, with

pipes well alight they settled down by the fire in the wadi. Bimb❖shi Baruk and Captain the Honorable J. Popham Madden had shared a number of odd adventures, and their common knowledge of the ways of the Arab made them a valuable team. As Bimb❖shi Baruk talked, Pop Madden watched him in the light of the fire, for as yet there was no moon; and in the chiseled features of Mohammed Ibrahim Brian Baruk, he found a study to have delighted a sculptor.

This British officer whose father had been an Arab, this product of the harem and the public school, was unusual, was completely white, and was a charming companion. Furthermore, he was damnably clever.

The bimb❖shi, too, was studying the face of his companion. He had himself likened it to a ripe apple; and even, with the present stubble of beard and general dirtiness of Ismail, the simile held good. And it was under these circumstances, with that wary jackal choir as a chorus, that Bimb❖shi Baruk offered the following explanation.

*

MARGARET STARKIE enjoyed international reputation as traveler, lecturer, author and journalist. A comely redhead of irrepressible vitality, although perhaps past her attractional zenith, she remained nevertheless an almost startling personality, being, in the words of her Best Friend, one of those women who know how to grow old disgracefully.

A caravan journey from Baghdad to Samarkand undertaken for a New York magazine, and afterward published in book form as _ The Golden Road, _ was an early example of her self-revelatory style. It was characterized by a frankness which might have staggered Sir Richard Burton. Her two marriages, both dissolved, were front-page material. Her first husband, Paul Verity, the film actor, whom she divorced on the ground that he paid more attention to his own hair than he did to hers, she afterward admitted lacked everything but physical charm. Her second, to a fellow journalist and traveler, Robert Parker, one time editor of the _ Strange World Magazine, _ terminated in less than three months. He, too, was a redhead, and the result a conflagration. Since then, her name had been associated with a number of public characters, and her outspoken discussions of these friendships more than once had led perilously near to the Criminal Courts Building.

Shortly after the outbreak of war, she accepted an assignment from the Philadelphia_ Globe_ as special correspondent in Europe, with the inevitable result that she was expelled from a number of capitals. Perhaps her star achievement was that of inducing Hitler to invite her to luncheon at Berchtesgaden, only a few weeks before the United States became involved. Margaret proceeded from there to Geneva, to interview Dr. Richler, the famous alienist, and having first made her way to Lisbon, sent in to her paper that remarkable dispatch which disclosed that the Fuehrer was a certifiable lunatic.

This created no small sensation; and it may be recalled that she related with circumstantial detail how Hitler's paranoia centered upon the figure of Marshal von Hindenburg. She assured an astonished world that he employed a special medium for the purpose of establishing contact with the spirit of the departed marshal; that he ascribed his early victories to the guidance obtained in this way; but as the disease progressed, complete obsession had supervened, so that the spirit of the old soldier often appeared uninvited: his early encouragement was replaced by reprimand. In the watches of the night, those immediately about the Fuehrer had heard him in frenzied argument with the spirit of the marshal.

It appeared, so Margaret Starkie wrote, that his spirit guide had opposed the invasion of Russia, and had warned him to avoid the sea if he would save Germany. Secretly, the famous Swiss doctor had been introduced to those about Hitler, had studied the symptoms, and had notified Marshal Goering that a brain always unstable had now acquired a fixed bias. Hence Margaret's dash to Geneva, where, owing one presumes to her amazing powers of persuasion, she had secured from the scientist some confirmation of this. Dr. Richler's subsequent disappearance was susceptible of several explanations.

Syria—Iran—Russia—the inner secrets of their leaders were dissected and laid bare by the tireless and uncompromising Margaret Starkie. Second visits were rare, and in some cases might have been dangerous. Then she had descended upon Cairo, putting years on the life of the Director of Military Intelligence by insisting that she must be permitted to go to the Libyan front. She was never content with the base.

How it was managed, a number of harassed officers would very much have liked to know; but managed it was, and in due course Margaret Starkie impressed herself upon Libya.

“You see, Pop,” said Bimb❖shi Baruk at this point, “I had rejoined my unit, and it was from the post that I commanded at the time that she actually slipped off. By the way,” he added, “here comes a Hurricane. Douse the fire.”

“Damn the fool!” remarked Pop Madden. “It will take an hour to get it going again.”

He threw the muddy contents of a small bucket onto the flame and effectually doused it. The pilot, who no doubt had seen the fire, circled around querulously for a short time and then passed on his way. Pop set to work to fan up fading embers.

“I came to the conclusion,” the bimb❖shi continued, “when I heard of her approach, that Roden-Pyne had taken leave of his senses. It was touch and go all the time, with the limited resources available, and I might have had to retire in a cloud of dust at almost any moment of the day or night. Then, this torch-headed damsel comes rolling up.”

“What is she like?” asked Madden disinterestedly, relighting his pipe.

“She is rather like a stormy sunset: one looks out for squalls. She made a terrific impression on young Challoner. I am by no means satisfied that Challoner did not aid and abet her in her lunacy, but I don’t want to break him.”

“You have not found time so far to tell me what occurred.”

“Well, what occurred was this: I was doing our most advanced patrolling, except for the R.A.F., and she tried to persuade me to let her join in. Naturally, I was quite definite on the point. It was bad enough having her there at all, but to send her prowling into the enemy’s lines on my responsibility was more than I was prepared to concede. Well, some Arabs came in on camels about dusk one evening—I should add that Margaret is an expert camel rider—and some time during the night she managed to buy a camel from one of them, and with or without the knowledge of Challoner, slipped off into the wide-open spaces.”

“Great Scott! She’s probably dead!”

“Well, when it was discovered, I couldn’t think of anything bad enough to say to myself. But I did pretty well with Challoner. She had the impudence to leave a note behind, Pop, and it was this note which accounts for you and myself being

here tonight.”

“What did it say?”

“She informed me that her real aim, which naturally I had not suspected, was to get through to the German lines—and to interview Rommel. She seemed to think that she could persuade him to allow her to send a dispatch off—I don’t quite know by what route. In view of her reputation since the celebrated Hitler interview, I can only kneel in reverence to a woman with such colossal nerve.”

“By gad, B.B.! But what a jam you are in!”

“A jam! I expected to get the sack. I sent back post haste for instructions, and in consequence”—the bimb❖shi sighed wearily—“here I am, seconded once again, and here are you. For I insisted on your joining me.

“The Sheikh Mahdi, although his town has been occupied by Rommel’s troops for some time now, is solidly with us. He has persuaded the Nazis that he detests the sight of anything British. He really has a brother in Benghazi, and in view of our almost daily plasterings of that spot, it is highly probable that his brother is ill. At any rate, he had no difficulty in getting permits to visit him, accompanied by one servant. We managed to smuggle him back to my post, but I had to start in a hurry; hence the rush of which you complain. These beastly spectacles”—he indicated a pair upon the ground beside him—“actually belong to Mahdi Abdel Beyda, and I can hardly see through them at all. But I began to train my mustache to its present dimensions at the very moment that I conceived the plan.”

“The nature of this plan, B.B., is not too clear, What exactly is our game?”

“Our game is to find someone sufficiently well acquainted with Rommel to let us know if Margaret Starkie is at German headquarters.”

“That, I take it, will more particularly be my part of the game?”

“Yes. You will have to scrounge about, Pop. I have my sheikhish dignity to think of.”

“Suppose I find she is there?”

“In that case, we have to get her back. For more than a week we have hushed up the unpleasant story, but we can’t hush it up forever.”

*

EACH DAY of this odd pilgrimage resembled the day before. Bimshi Baruk was intimately acquainted with the district, and no one questioned the validity of his permit. From Germans, Italians and wandering Arabs, Pop Madden made almost continuous inquiries. But they were rapidly approaching the spot at which, according to information, the German general was quartered, before anything vaguely resembling a clue came into their possession. Often, from the north, they heard the thunder of guns.

“I don’t know about the other fellows you mentioned,” said Pop complainingly, “but this woman is putting years on my life. Couldn’t we turn a bit south at Wadi el Kuft and spend the night at Zawia Kuftah? I have heard wonderful stories about the place.”

“You have probably heard it referred to as the Hidden Oasis; and hidden it is. But I fear there are objections to your plan.”

“What are they?”

“Well, in the first place, Sidi Selugi, to whom the place practically belongs, is a dangerous fanatic. The Italians never attempted to interfere with him, and as the only practicable road to the oasis is easily defended, they permitted his very rude behavior to pass unchecked. Our latest information is that Rommel has adopted much the same attitude. Zawia Kuftah is of no military importance, and the Sheikh commands the services of a considerable body of tribesmen; so that in a job like the present one he is best left alone.”

“He sounds,” said Pop Madden, “just the kind of bird I should like to meet.”

“I am confident that you would find him charming. He is a handsome fellow, and cultured up to a point.”

“You know the way?”

“Quite well. But our German permits would be of no use whatever.”

“You mean they wouldn’t let us in?”

“They might even shoot us.”

“That,” said Madden, “would possibly be amusing from their point of view, but not from mine.”

“I agree. But nevertheless we could certainly spend the night there.”

“You think so?”

“Oh, yes. I know Sidi Selugi quite well, and he would give us a royal reception. But—”

“But, what?”

“After seeing us off in the morning, he is quite capable of sending a rider in to Rommel and claiming a hefty reward for his information.”

“I see.”

“Sidi Selugi is a born brigand,” the bimb❖shi added.

Following a short silence: “I don’t like your pals,” muttered Madden.

Midday heat compelled them to halt for some hours in the kindly shadow of a natural mound similar in outline to that of a vast sphinx; and it was as they pursued their way that Bimb❖shi Baruk suddenly pulled up, and dismounted without the formality of making his camel kneel. Watched by Madden, he crawled about on all fours, from time to time picking up certain small objects the nature of which Madden was unable to discern. At last he seemed to be satisfied and he sprang to the saddle again with that agility which derives from long practice.

Without offering any explanation, he swung his camel aside from the track, one of Africa’s most ancient caravan roads, into a narrow defile which must have been invisible to anyone not familiar with its whereabouts. This path, which became uncommonly narrow and so overshadowed by frowning crags as to resemble a tunnel, they pursued for some time. Then Bimb❖shi Baruk checked his camel. Discarding the sheikh’s spectacles? he stared down at a break in the

shadows drenched in sunlight.

“There has been a car along here,” he observed.

“I am looking at the same place,” replied Captain Madden, “but not with your eyes. I can see no evidence of a car having passed this way.”

“There was other evidence at the point where I turned off—otherwise I should have carried straight on.”

“What evidence?”

“Hairpins.”

“Good God! What does that mean?”

“It at least suggests that there was a woman in the car which passed this way. Now, study the track ahead.”

It was true that the surface was not of a character to carry normally visible impressions, but Bimb❖shi Baruk, who possessed that extra sensibility which belongs to the desert-born, nevertheless indicated these impressions. When one looked ahead, small pebbles and all but imperceptible mounds of sand distinguished the outside curve of the defile. On the left, or inside, although less clearly discernible, similar fragments had been cast against the side of the wadi; for nearly a mile the bed of this dried-up stream had wound in a southeasterly direction.

“Only car tires,” said the bimb❖shi, “would disturb the surface in that way. Therefore, a car has passed and not a tank.”

Pop Madden sighed and refreshed himself from his flask. “If I worked more frequently with you, B.B.,” he remarked, “I might learn my business—in time.”

They proceeded into the shadow of a spur of the scarp which presently arose to so great a height on the east that no direct light could ever have penetrated to this place.

“Look,” said Bimb❖shi Baruk, as he pulled up and pointed. “You see? I was right.”

The broad marks of tires might be discerned upon the softer surface.

“How old are those tracks?” Madden asked. “Several days old. You may judge from the extent to which evaporation so far has affected them.”

“Proceed, maestro,” said Madden.

With an abruptness that was shocking, the shadows of the wadi were burst open by hot sunshine, for here occurred a great gash in the cliff. Before this patch of flame, and hanging over so as to form a silhouette, a thorn bush offered a pattern not unlike that of a mushrabiyyeh screen. A second time Bimb[❖]shi Baruk checked his camel.

“Ah!” he murmured. “Here is something better than a tire track, and better than hairpins.”

Leaning sideways in his saddle, he extricated from the thorns a strand which gleamed redly in his fingers.

“What the devil have you there?”

Bimb[❖]shi Baruk turned and held up that which he had recovered. “A strand of undeniably red hair.”

“Do you mean it was torn off from someone’s head?”

“Not at all. It is a lock cut off with some care, and placed here quite deliberately.”

“You think that Margaret Starkie went this way?”

“I doubt if there is any other hair in Libya like hers. In an indiscreet moment I admired Margaret’s hair; and in the note which she kindly left behind she said, ‘If you don’t hear from me in a week, please come and look for me. I will try to leave a clue.’ She has left me two: hairpins—and this.”

“Then where the devil can she have been going?”

“That, Pop, is the interesting point. We are now following the only known route from the old caravan road to that spot which you recently expressed yourself so

eager to visit.”

“Zawia Kuftah!”

“Exactly. The Hidden Oasis.”

*

SOME TIME elapsed, however, before that mysterious and fertile valley burst upon their view. It was a sight so unexpected as to be breath-taking. Held in a sweep of striated cliffs rising sheerly to the skyline, and in many respects resembling a half-closed giant hand, Zawia Kuftah was a spot deliciously restful to eyes wearied by desert prospects. There were numerous caves high up in the cliff, and through the trunks of a considerable palm grove they saw a small, deep blue lake. East of the lake and the palm grove was a miniature town of mud huts, with a sort of tent suburb adjoining it, one tent set on a mound more imposing than the rest. There were sheep and cattle; in fact, every foot of Zawia Kuftah seemed to be under some sort of cultivation.

Madden drew a deep breath, cool with the tang of near-by water. “Your glowing description of the hospitality offered to travelers,” he said, “leads me to expect the worst. Why this change of heart? And why, if your old pal, Sidi Selugi, objects to callers, have we been allowed to get here?”

“We were spotted as we turned into the wadi,” Bimb❖shi Baruk replied. “You may take it for granted that we are expected.”

The words were barely spoken before two groups of armed Arabs rose up out of the shadows, right and left of the precipitous entrance to this magic valley. Glancing back, Madden saw that the narrow pass behind had become filled with tribesmen; their escape was cut off. A tall, lean, black-bearded man detached himself from one of the groups and approached Bimb❖shi Baruk.

“Who are you, O hadji,” he demanded, “and what do you seek in Zawia Kuftah?”

“I am the Sheikh Mahdi Abdel Beyda,” the bimb❖shi replied calmly. “I seek rest, refreshment and the delightful conversation of my old friend, Sidi Selugi.”

“So, you are a friend of the sheikh?”

“As I have told you. Be good enough to show me the way to his tent.”

All three groups of Arabs had now drawn in, so as to surround the camels. They watched, listened, but were silent. The lean, bearded man conferred in an undertone with another who was fat and of jovial appearance. Madden, who had a Shakespearean turn, mentally dubbed the pair Macbeth and Falstaff.

“Sidi Selugi is away,” said Falstaff, “but,” he added, “Sidi Selugi will return tonight, beyond all doubt.”

Apparently this was a witticism, for the hitherto silent onlookers laughed loudly; only Macbeth scowled.

“I will await his return,” replied Bimb[❖]shi Baruk.

The lean man and the fat conferred again, and presently, with an escort of armed Arabs, colorfully reinforced by excited women, sheep, goats and small brown children, the camels proceeded slowly. They passed through the camp, or town of tents, along paths dissecting cultivated land, and came to a halt beneath a sort of bastion of the embracing cliff. Some twenty feet up yawned the entrance to a cave. A ladder of rope with treads of palm wood was looped to a ring above the cave; it could be released by means of a running line. This being accomplished, the bearded man invited Bimb[❖]shi Baruk to dismount.

“In the spacious apartment above, O hadji,” he explained, “it is our custom to accommodate distinguished guests. Some of our people—I confess it—are avaricious, and Sidi Selugi is jealous of the good name of Zawia Kuftah. Your possessions shall be carried up, and here you may rest in safety. Refreshments will be brought to you, and Sidi Selugi be duly informed.”

These were the circumstances which led to the arrival of Bimb[❖]shi Baruk in the Hidden Oasis and to the remarkable discovery which he made there.

The cave was of considerable size and had been artificially and roughly squared at some remote time. There were remains of crude mural decorations at one point.

“Probably an ancient rock tomb,” remarked Madden. “I think less than nothing about being a distinguished guest—or the servant of one. As someone has thoughtfully hauled the ladder up to the ring, and as we can’t reach the line, if

there's any difference between being a distinguished guest and a prisoner it must have escaped me."

"The fellow with the black beard is uncertain about us," replied the bimb❖shi. "He is evidently Sidi Selugi's lieutenant."

"Yes, I distrust Macbeth. In short, we are likely to have our throats cut?"

Bimb❖shi Baruk, safe from observation, began to fill a pipe which had been concealed among the baggage. The best time of a desert day was approaching; and the sun, low behind the great line of cliffs, created a delicate pink glow which bathed all the valley and cast monstrous shadows right across to the palm groves.

"I had to risk it, Pop. You see what has happened? Margaret Starkie has fallen into the wrong hands. She must have been picked up by a patrol of Sidi Selugi's Arabs."

"You think she is here?"

"Can you doubt it?"

"But do these fellows scout in cars? If not, how do you account for the tire marks?"

"I am quite unable to account for them. But short of walking into the lion's den, I could think of no way of learning what had become of the missing woman." Bimb❖shi Baruk walked to the entrance and looked out over Zawia Kuftah, beautiful beneath its luminous pink veiling. "I confess that I had not anticipated being isolated in this way. Let me have the field glasses, Pop."

He made a careful inspection of every building in sight, and of those who came out of, or went into, each; but he observed nothing of importance until his attention became focused upon the large tent upon a mound. A subdued "Ha!" told Madden that the bimb❖shi at last had observed something significant.

"What have you spotted?"

Bimb❖shi Baruk lowered the glasses. "There is an armed guard around Sidi Selugi's tent. She is held prisoner there. No doubt he hopes to get a big ransom

from the Philadelphia_ Globe.“_

“And what, may I ask, do_ we_ hope to do?”

The bimb❖shi relighted his pipe, which had gone out during his inspection. “Our best chance is to frighten Sidi Selugi. He knows as well as we do that the Allies will clean up this territory sooner or later. I shall tell him that Margaret’s presence here is known and that I have been sent to bring her back. How we are going to get her back is a problem we can tackle later.”

“If we live to tackle it.”

“Sidi Selugi would never raise his hand against me.

“But he might sell you out to Rommel.”

“I agree. I shall nip that plan in the bud.”

“How?”

“By selling out Sidi Selugi to the gentleman you call Macbeth. He is already uneasy about the affair. Think of his behavior when the others laughed. Get Macbeth on our side, and Sidi Selugi will be easy money.”

A man who squatted on the ground below the cave was summoned, and sent with a message to the bearded one. That luminous veil which wrapped the valley began to assume magical tones of violet as sunset drew near.

The reaction of Sidi Selugi’s lieutenant was pleasantly dramatic. He swore by the beard of the Prophet that he had warned his chief of the dire consequences of holding an American woman captive. Although he had not met Bimb❖shi Baruk hitherto, he knew him to be a friend of Sidi Selugi and gave immediate orders to the effect that all Zawia Kuftah, its sheep and herds, its groves and meadows, its wine, its women and its song, were to be at the bimb❖shi’s disposal. Their lofty but somewhat dismal quarters were exchanged in favor of a commodious tent—one immediately adjoining that of the sheikh. A second procession escorted them, and certain elements, chiefly goats, took up temporary residence inside. Soon a prong of the jagged shadow cast by the cliff reached out, like a giant tooth, and claimed their tent.

“Well,” said Madden, staring up the slope of the mound, a purple mass against a bewilderingly beautiful background, “we have burned our boats. Your celebrated eloquence, B.B., alone stands between us and the wrath of Sidi Selugi, when he comes back.”

Bimb❖shi Baruk was silent for a while. “Somehow,” he replied, “we must get in touch with Margaret before Sidi Selugi’s return.”

Now, an Arab tent such as that which they occupied is long, low, brightly carpeted but otherwise unfurnished, and divided into two parts by striped rugs hung across the middle. As the bimb❖shi spoke, this dividing curtain was drawn aside, and a voice said, “Ssh! Don’t move, please, Major. I mustn’t be discovered.”

Madden, who was seated on a pile of carpets, visibly stiffened. Bimb❖shi Baruk, who stood near, made no perceptible movement.

“This is a delightful surprise,” he murmured.

“Allow me to present Captain the Honorable J. Popham Madden—Miss Margaret Starkie.”

“No need to get up and bow,” the voice went on; but Madden, stifling a pretended yawn, turned aside and looked into the violet dusk behind him.

He saw an Oriental figure, richly bedecked, bangles glittering on strangely white arms: a veil, thrown back, which framed a shadowy face crowned by flaming hair.

“It was just too sweet of you, Major,” Margaret Starkie went on, “to take up the trail. I don’t believe there’s another man in Africa could have found me.” Her voice was richly contralto, caressing. “I have missed the Rommel story but found another one that may be as big. Warn me if anyone comes near. It happened like this.”

Her escape, by camel, from the bimb❖shi’s post, had been managed without Challoner’s connivance—for which piece of news the bimb❖shi was grateful—and had enabled Margaret Starkie to penetrate some ten miles into enemy territory before daylight came and revealed her presence to one Captain von Hast, who, accompanied by two men and a driver, was out on an early morning

reconnaissance.

The German officer accepted Margaret's assurance that she regarded General Rommel as the greatest living commander and volunteered to escort her to the General's headquarters. One man was left behind to bring in the camel, and Margaret went on by car. In order that they might avoid meeting troops, Captain von Hast followed the less-frequented route later pursued by Bimbsi Baruk: he behaved throughout with exemplary courtesy. At a point which the bimbshi and Madden recognized from the description, a huge piece of rock blocked the road. An old Arab who stood beside it explained that it had fallen down the slope during the night. He undertook to lead Captain von Hast to a camp where assistance could be obtained to clear the obstruction. The captain and one man set out. They did not return. Left alone with the driver—she said that his teeth were chattering—Margaret looked back....

"Right then I spilled the hairpins. I don't know if you found them. I knew what a fool I had been. The path behind was full of armed Arabs!"

With the nose of a rifle prodding his back, the driver proceeded, swinging left. They passed a place where a thorn bush overhung the narrow path.

"I had cut off two tresses—to use as clues—for my hair is pretty noticeable," said Margaret; "and I hung one on the bush while I was pretending to clear it away from my head. Maybe you found that one?"

"How could I miss it?" murmured Bimbsi Baruk.

"Don't ask me what became of Captain von Hast and the others, because I don't know. But I was taken right from the car to a tent where Sidi Selugi was waiting. You know him, and so I need not say that he is everything a sheikh is supposed to be in Hollywood. It seems he had received information when the Germans picked me up. He knew nothing of my plans; so he just went right out to rescue me. That was seven days back."

"One up for Sidi Selugi," said Madden. "The next problem is, how do we get you back from here?"

"You don't have to," replied Margaret softly.

The tone, almost purring, in which the words were spoken, reduced both men to

thoughtful silence.

“At first,” she went on, “I was fighting mad—and I don’t mind admitting I didn’t fancy my chances. If Sidi Selugi hadn’t been a perfect Arab gentleman, it’s likely this story would have had a different ending. Fortunately, I speak good Arabic, as you know, Major, and I have studied the Moslem religion. Just take a peep, now, if nobody is looking.”

Bimb[❖]shi Baruk turned and stared at the barbaric, redheaded vision. “You are dressed as a bride.”

“Tonight I become a bride. Sidi Selugi is a hundred per cent real, and he divorced his other wife three days back—when I embraced Islam.”

“When you did what?” inquired Madden in a hushed voice.

“When I became a Mohammedan. Why shouldn’t I? They all teach the same thing. There’s a kind of local preacher in the town, but I stood out for a regular wedding. Sidi Selugi has gone to get a proper, certified imam, and he promised to be back by nightfall. Now, a thousand thanks. I know you have risked your lives to find me, and I shall be grateful and proud to my dying day. I have to slip back before I’m missed. Goodbye, and God bless you.”

And the faint swish of a falling carpet told Bimb[❖]shi Baruk that Margaret Starkie had returned to pursue her latest—and maddest, adventure.

Chapter 10

Pool-o'-the-Moon Sees Bimb❖shi Baruk

NOT THE LEAST remarkable adventure of Bimb❖shi Baruk was that of the Grand Imam of Khorassan. It began shortly after his return to Egypt from that quest of Margaret Starkie which ended in so singular a meeting; and almost certainly he would have declined the assignment if Colonel Roden-Pyne had not mentioned Yasmina, daughter of the Sheikh Ismail ed-Din.

“This Scotland Yard business is getting me down,” the bimb❖shi declared. “A tank can never be a camel, so there’s no reason why a Camel Corps commander should become a copper.” He fondled the hot bowl of his pipe, staring dreamily across a somewhat naked office at the Cairo Chief of Intelligence. “Who_ is_ the Grand Imam of Khorassan, anyway?”

Colonel Roden-Pyne bared large teeth. It was that officer’s exclusive rendering of a smile, but it reminded the bimb❖shi of a horse which scents its oats.

“Thought he’d intrigue you. He’s just an ordinary imam, or parish priest, from a mosque in Kashan, on the Khorassan frontier, but it seems he thinks he has a Mission.” Colonel Roden-Pyne pronounced the word with a capital M. “As a result, Rosener, of the Nazi Intelligence staff, has got hold of him. One must hand it to ‘em, B.B. These Germans are unbending in their purpose, such as it is.”

“Yes, the Nazi machine is made of cast iron. It doesn’t bend; it snaps.”

“Quite. I agree. But at any rate, this blighter is working slowly west, preaching red-hot sedition: a Holy War, nothing less. He’s making converts, too. Highly inconvenient for us, at the moment.”

“One of those crazy fanatics. Can’t you hire somebody to shoot him?”

“Not done, B.B. Best way, I grant you. No, he’s just got to be stopped. We laid a trap for him on the border, but he slipped through.”

“How do you propose to stop him? Send a missionary along to convert the

man?”

Colonel Roden-Pyne tapped his prominent teeth with a pencil.

“I had a brighter idea than that. I sent Pop Madden across some time ago to give this bloke the once-over.”

“Good old Pop. ‘Abdul the Camel Dealer.’ Haven’t they got him sized up yet?”

“No. He still gets away with it. He’s damned clever, B.B.”

Before Bimb❖shi Baruk there arose a mental image of Captain the Hon. J. Popham Madden, small, wiry but chubby-faced, wearing a rusty beard and a greasy turban and exuding an unavoidable odor of camel. Pop Madden, who could speak most of the dialects heard from Jordan to Oxus, whose contacts ranged from shady sheikhs to lurid ladies: good old Pop.

“What had Pop to say on the subject?”

“He confirmed the report of A 14 to the hilt.”

“A 14?”

“Yes—the best agent we have north of Cairo; otherwise your little friend Yasmina ed-Din, who is known, I am told, as Rose of the Lebanon.”

Colonel Roden-Pyne shot a quick glance at Bimb❖shi Baruk, stood up, smiled slyly aside like a horse about to kick, and stamped his feet. But the bimb❖shi did not acknowledge a hit; his blue eyes, a paradox in that chiseled Arab face, remained contemplative. He began to refill his briar.

“Things have been happening while I was away.”

“Things have. A 14, the source of whose information remains a mystery, put us onto this new scheme right at the beginning. Inquiries established an unmistakable link with the Nazis, and I was told to sit up and take notice. That was when I sent Madden off. It seems that the imam is a tough nut to crack. He does his howling under cover—in mosques and in the houses of sympathizers; so that direct action is difficult. It would be dangerous, too. His followers pretend to look upon him as a sort of evangelist. As I need not tell you, Islam is solidly

with us against the Germans. Freaks like this fellow no more reflect upon the Moslems than the Oxford Movement reflects on the Church of England. Those who listen to him are either disaffected, slightly cracked, or they are ambitious crooks. Every creed at one time or another has served as a cloak for such."

Bimb❖shi Baruk replaced his pouch and struck a match.

"Does he travel with much of a bodyguard?"

"None at all, according to Madden. He evidently considers himself safe from interference. His papers, issued in Teheran, describe him as a missionary preacher, and are in order. He started out from Kashan on a donkey, in good old Biblical style, but Madden reports that he has now acquired a camel and also a katib, or tame scribe of sorts. Evidently Pop thinks he is pretty hot. I received this, by one of our underground messengers, only yesterday."

He passed across the desk a typewritten sheet, many of the words running into one another, by which mannerism the bimb❖shi knew this to be a transcription made by the colonel personally. He skimmed lightly over the opening paragraphs and came to the following:

"The self-styled Grand Imam is a big, bearded brute, as poisonous as the black scorpions which make his native town so popular. His sermons, or speeches, are the kind of flatulent flapdoodle (laced with Arab and Persian stingo) which Hitler serves out to his customers. He speaks both languages as well as I do but in other respects he is an ignorant animal. Quite devoid of meaning, his patter acts on some poor clowns like hashish. What his stuff lacks of logic is made up for in volume. As a shouting solo it's not negligible."

Madden's report went on to say that the imam received extensive hospitality from political opportunists and was making disciples of a kind. Then came:

"He plans to cross into Irak and Syria. I have a hazy scheme and have succeeded in convincing him that I am a rabid Nazi as well as a devout Believer. But I cannot carry on lone-handed. If B.B. could join me at Kermanshah I believe we might make a job of the imam."

Bimb❖shi Baruk looked up.

"You know, B.B.," said Colonel Roden-Pyne, "we can't have this Mad Mullah

roaring into our territory just now. He simply must be stopped.”

“Yes,” murmured the bimb❖shi thoughtfully. A vision of Yasmina had come to haunt him. “What do you suggest?”

*

YASMINA SAT before the desk in her garden studio. The demesne was guarded by a high and ancient wall, so that inhabitants of el-Kasr, the town below, might not obtain so much as a glimpse of the household of Ismail ed-Din. Bright sunlight poured in at windows and through an open door, for it was only in spring and summer that the old walnut tree brushed one side of the kiosk with its shadow. A delicate water color lay on a table, the paper still wet; it was of golden carp among browning leaves and had been painted in the rock garden outside. On a bench were several unfinished plaques of inland woods, semiprecious stones and mother-of-pearl. Implements and little brass trays of materials lay near. A pair of doves strutted about on the paved steps hunting for grains of corn which Yasmina had thrown down. She had quite forgotten their existence, however, as she pored over the pages of a book printed in Arabic, from time to time writing a word in a manuscript. She wore white overalls decorated with smears of paint, but this workaday garb could not disguise her slenderly shapely figure, for Yasmina, Pool-o'-the-Moon (called Rose of the Lebanon), was lovely as she was clever.

She wrote in a cipher familiar to Cairo Military Intelligence, but this particular example was not intended for the eyes of Colonel Roden-Pyne; it was for someone who had never been far from Yasmina's thoughts since the moment when first she had seen him, in Beirut; someone she had met only twice, secretly, but someone whom she knew she would meet again: in fact, it was for Bimb❖shi Baruk. They had carried on in this way for a long time a clandestine correspondence, because Yasmina's father, the Sheikh Ismail, was of the old school and never permitted his daughter to go out alone; also, she was betrothed to Raschid Azem, their influential neighbor, whom she detested. He had been detained once, but Vichy influence had secured his release.

“I am always afraid of spies,” read the passage which she coded, “and I am never sure that someone may not find out the cipher. As I have had no word from you for nearly a month I fear a letter has perhaps been intercepted ...”

These letters went by way of the same underground post as did those for the Cairo authorities; that is, Aida, Yasmina's Syrian maid companion, left a note at the shop of Abu Hassan the barber in Damascus, and he in due course passed another note to Aida which stated the time at which a confidential messenger would present himself at a selected meeting place to collect the report. This time was always some hour after dusk, and either Aida or Yasmina herself kept such appointments. A letter for the bimb❖shi usually accompanied one containing information for Colonel Roden-Pyne, and that equine officer forwarded it, sometimes with a sardonic comment in pencil on the envelope. During the bimb❖shi's absence in England a hiatus unavoidably had occurred.

The official message which was to go with Yasmina's letter informed Cairo Intelligence that the Grand Imam had actually collected names of no less than four hundred enthusiasts sworn to smite down existing governments and protectorates. Backed by thousands of planes and tanks, pledged by Dr. Rosener, they would purge the East of Western influence and restore in all its grandeur the ancient Arab empire. A list of some twenty prominent supporters was appended.

In what manner a young girl, subject to those restraints associated with harem life, acquired this exact information was a mystery which Colonel Roden-Pyne had never solved, and Bimb❖shi Baruk, who knew, derived an impish satisfaction from keeping his knowledge to himself. It was really so simple. Ismail ed-Din, one of the largest landowners in the Lebanon, was being assiduously wooed by Nazi agents, of whom Yasmina's fiance was one, and his office adjoined his daughter's rooms. She had established an ingenious listening post at the back of a wardrobe, and only three days before had overheard a conversation between her father and Raschid Azem which afforded material for her present report....

"This mad imam is a godsend to our cause, my friend. He has won hundreds of important helpers.

"He says so," Ismail ed-Din had interjected.

"Ha!"—a rustle of paper—"here are some of the names. Listen closely."

And Yasmina had listened closely, notebook in hand.

Yes, it was really so simple, but it had greatly lightened the British task of mopping up undesirable elements.

*

A LITTLE-USED MOSQUE on the western outskirts of Kermanshah was uncommonly crowded when the maghrib, or sunset call to prayer, rang forth from its wooden minaret. Believers of all shades of opinion and of many social classes, few of whom normally crossed the threshold of this house of devotion, seemed to be possessed of unusual religious fervor. Led by a tall, bearded figure wearing the robes of an imam, all performed the subscribed ceremonies. The imam, who wore spectacles, was unable to touch the dust with his ascetic brow, owing to the presence of a paunch difficult to acquire by fasting and abstinence. Prostrations completed, the worshipers remained kneeling, and the imam mounted the pulpit. Many eyes were raised to the bearded face, none more eagerly than the light, fierce eyes of a ragged dervish who knelt by the door, his staff laid upon the floor beside him. A murmur ran from lip to lip. The Grand Imam of Khorassan was about to speak; what message did he bring to the Faithful of Kermanshah?

They remained not long in doubt. A voice issued from behind the black beard which would have penetrated the remotest galleries of St. Sophia and which threatened to crack the unstable dome above them. The imam said that Kermanshah had formerly produced the most famous carpets in the East, grown the best opium poppies, and in return had received from Baghdad rare merchandise and so acquired much wealth. He asked what had become of the looms of Kermanshah and where now were the poppyfields. Since he had selected declining industries, the answers were not clear to his congregation; but, as the imam proceeded to state, to him they were plainly revealed. European interference accounted for everything. The former prosperity of their Eastern world, from the frontiers of India to Damascus, could be restored in one way, and in one way only. Western ways, Western machinery and Western politics must go; railways be demolished. Once again the camel must be seen in the land.

“Hear, hear!” growled the dervish, so that those near to him started and stared curiously. They did not stare long, however. One glance at that fierce, black-browed face with its stubble of beard, at the tattered robe, at the green turban, was sufficient to identify a hadji of the Bektashiyeh; and prudent men desire no conversation with such. The Grand Imam, alone, seemed rather to single him out, as if anxious to add a member of the Order to his corps of converts. He began to speak of the glory of Islam, which would be fully restored when no European foot rested upon Eastern soil; he declared that he spoke with high

authority and that he had those supporters who would enable the Faithful to cast out their despoilers. He was beginning to grip those of his listeners who had axes to grind; such a campaign promised loot. And at this point his katib, or clerk, appeared carrying a large volume, pens and ink, and seated himself below the pulpit. The clerk, whose hazel eyes shone with fanaticism, exhaled an effluvium of camel perceptible above all other odors.

A slow starter, the Grand Imam, when he got into his stride put up a really impressive performance: he, the Broom of the Prophet, called upon every Believer to sweep the infidel out of the lands of Islam. When names of workers for Allah were demanded, more than a score came forward, the dervish striding to the front and offering himself first.

“Welcome to the fold, brother hadji,” said the katib, opening his book and inscribing the name of the fakir at the head of a blank page. “Here, my master”—turning to the Grand Imam—“here is one of deeds, O Broom of the Lord, one worth a hundred others.”

The imam, perspiring glossily from his efforts, peered through misty spectacles. “Do you seek the freedom of the Faithful, hadji?”

“Is it for thee to ask one of my Order such a question?” snarled the dervish. “What do I teach as I roam the pastures of the Prophet?”

“May we count upon brethren of the Bektashiyeh to sweep despoilers into the sea?”

“To the last brother, preacher of the Word. What said our divine Founder, the Old Man of the Mountain?”

“I would have further speech with thee, hadji. Take meat, then, at the house of Omar Rakkum tonight. My katib will guide thee.”

As a result of this conversation, the dervish later formed one of a party of guests in the anteroom of a large house, for Omar Rakkum was a wealthy merchant fired by political ambitions. The room was sparsely furnished and surrounded on three sides by divans. Kermanshah stands nearly five thousand feet above sea level and the nights are cold. A charcoal stove burned in the center of the room. Beside this stove the dervish seated himself, counting his beads and muttering prayers. From time to time the imam’s clerk came to a door, beckoning one or

more of the men assembled. They would go out and presently return, resuming their places. When the call of the dervish came it proved necessary to touch him on the shoulder; and he sprang up, fierce-eyed, staff in hand, as if rudely aroused from meditation.

“Follow me, O hadji,” the katib directed, and led the way.

Along a passage, uncarpeted and dim, he led, then up a short stair. The dervish found himself in a square cabinet of a room, lighted by a brass lantern, in which the only furniture consisted of a finely inlaid table and two chairs. On the table were the big book of names, the pens and the ink. His guide carefully closed the door.

“Glad you managed it, B.B.,” he said, “because the plot thickens stickily and I need help.”

They shook hands; and the gleam in the hazel eyes of the clerk was no longer one of fanaticism nor that in the blue eyes of the dervish a gleam of anger.

“Glad to be here, Pop. What became of the original scribe whom you mentioned in one of your reports?”

“He met with an accident,” said Pop darkly, “and had to be left behind. I volunteered, saying that I was used to keeping accounts. Also, I presented the Grand Imam with a camel. For your sake I shall be glad to push on. This is dangerous territory for that green turban.”

Now, there were few traditions of the Bektashiyeh with which Bimb❖shi Baruk was unacquainted, for he had devoted close study to the subject. Islamic ritual was second nature to one reared in a Moslem household, and had not been effaced by the later influence of an English public school. Nevertheless, Madden’s fears were well founded.

“They are a poisonously unpleasant crew,” the bimb❖shi admitted, “which is why I usually work out as one of them; but this is the first time that I have found myself so near to their headquarters.” (The Order was founded in Khorassan.) “Heaven help me if I meet an authentic specimen! Where is the imam?”

“Counting his money.”

“Counting his money?”

“Yes. He gets a sort of head-tax from Rosener on all disciples.”

“Fat brute.”

“Wait until you see him feeding. I pointed out to him that if we could interest the Bektashiyeh, we should have a ready-made organization at our service, and I am going to propose you as the fat one’s bodyguard.”

“Some duties are a keen pleasure. Where do we go from here?”

“Into Irak. But more later. In that book”—he pointed—“are the names of most of the gang we shall round up when the fun starts. Do your best at the banquet. I have a bottle of Scotch hidden in the baggage.”

And the bimb❖shi found confirmation, in a long, narrow saloon, of Colonel Roden-Pyne’s words: “Those who listen to him are either already disaffected, slightly cracked, or they are ambitious crooks.” A vast dining table, conjuring up visions of medieval feasts, occupied the center of the floor. Nearly a score of covers appeared, and the chairs (the seats tipped up), gilt with purple plush, had been bought at an auction of the effects of some over-enterprising movie-palace proprietor. “Lot 21” had not been removed in every case. Windows facing on the garden displayed exquisitely carved lattices; three finely proportioned lamps of priceless perforated bronze hung from the carved roof; and Omar Rakkum’s black butler wore a white tie and tails, and had a silver chain around his neck supporting a disk which said “Sherry.”

Here, surely, were those “Western ways” denounced by the guest of honor—for the Grand Imam sat on the right of his host; and here, around the mighty board, was a crew motley as any to be imagined. Omar Rakkum clearly saw himself as an up-to-date Harun el-Raschid. The success of impudent adventurers—Hitler, Mussolini and their like—had injected large ideas into a small brain.

A feast of ten courses was served. These included lumps of goat floating in fatty gravy, sheep’s-milk cheese, eggs flavored with saffron, and other dishes of which the Grand Imam partook of double helpings. There were many odors to compete with those of the menu, but that contributed by Abdul the Camel Dealer remained outstanding. He smelled like a whole caravan.

*

YASMINA WAS unhappy. She feared for the safety of Bimbi[❖]shi Baruk, from whom no word had come although two more weeks had elapsed. Into the life of this lonely girl, educated in a European school in Beirut only to be condemned to a marriage with one whom she loathed, the bimbi[❖]shi had burst like a spear of light. The sudden, fierce love of the East had flared up in her heart at exchange of a first glance; it had burned steadily ever since. Their stolen meetings had come to mean the only really important events in her life; and it was because of him, always it had been because of him, that she risked so much to transmit information to Cairo.

She knew that her father, the Sheikh Ismail ed-Din, was not involved, but only held the candle to the devil, in the persons of Satan's representatives, Dr. Rosener and Yasmina's fiance, Raschid Azem. She was guilty of no disloyalty to Ismail; she felt sorry for him, since she was well aware that his true sympathies lay with the Allies. But regarding his views of her subterranean correspondence, should he discover it, she had no illusions.

Spies employed by Raschid Azem watched her continuously, not because her real purpose was suspected, but because Raschid Azem, consumed by desire, believed that Yasmina had a secret lover. It became increasingly difficult to meet the messengers dispatched by Colonel Roden-Pyne; and now came a letter of instruction from "Yosef" (the colonel's cover name) which added to her perplexities. At a late hour Aida—Yasmina's link with a wider world—had slipped in at the little postern gate to rejoin her mistress in the studio. It was no uncommon thing for Yasmina to work upon her plaques long after nightfall, so that she enjoyed a certain measure of freedom from sunset onward. Anxiously, she decoded the message.

"Who was the messenger, Aida?"

"The old Jew who has come twice before."

Aida was discarding a voluminous black garment and a veil with a brass nose-piece which they both employed for such occasions.

"Do you think anyone saw you?"

"No. They have not discovered the new meeting place."

“Listen, Aida. This is terrible. He—the bimb❖shi—was sent to Persia to stop the Grand Imam: the message says ‘Acting on your information.’” She turned and stared at the comely Aida; her eyes were tragic. “No report has been received from him since he left Baghdad—and the imam is already in Syria!”

“I don’t understand at all,” said Aida; “and why does Yosef tell you this?”

“Because he thinks I may have heard from him. He is evidently worried. He asks me to find out where the next meeting is to take place and to try to arrange for some reliable person to be present who can prepare a full report. Aida, whatever shall we do?”

“They meet at the Old Mosque in the town below on Friday night after the adan” (Call to Prayer). “The Jew took the news back. But there is no one we can send—no one we can trust.”

“Aida—they may have trapped him!”

“He is too clever.”

“Then what has become of him?”

“Let me think what we can do.” The shrewd Syrian watched Yasmina’s boyishly slender figure moving nervously to and fro in shaded lamplight; her brilliant eyes remained heavy with apprehension, but her lips were firm, her chin was resolute. “There must be a way...”

*

THE CIRCUMSTANCES which led to Colonel Roden-Pyne’s anxiety had occurred some time before, and they were these: In spite of Madden’s mastery of his part and of an equally capable performance by Bimb❖shi Baruk, the Grand Imam had detected their imposture; the fact had crashed upon him, like a blow between the eyes, that dervish and camel dealer were British agents. It came about in this way.

A complete list of names from the imam’s ledger had been forwarded to G.H.Q. Cairo, in order that the responsible authority could arrange with Teheran for suitable action; but when the Nazi evangelist crossed into Irak, Pop Madden suggested that what he described as “the catch” might be dealt with more

expeditiously; that is, by arrangement with Baghdad. The bimb❖shi agreed, and accordingly, after three gatherings west of the Persian frontier, Abdul the Camel Dealer appeared in Baghdad one evening and succeeded in establishing contact. (The Grand Imam was lying at the house of a sympathizer on the western outskirts of the capital.) A senior British officer by whom Pop was interviewed seemed disposed to make himself a nuisance.

“We have ample evidence, Madden, to justify this fellow’s arrest. I’ll send a party along right away.”

“But that would be a mistake, sir.”

“It’s what I understand Colonel Roden-Pyne wishes.”

“Possibly you may be right. But the man’s a perfect honeypot. Why throw him away until we have caught all the wasps?”

“You are suggesting that we allow him to continue this treasonable tour right across to Syria? The last thing the colonel desires.”

“But the best thing all the same, sir. We shall get to know what enemies we have nearer home. By all means gather in the crew whose names I have given you—but leave me my Grand Imam!”

In the end Pop Madden had his way, and managed to get back undetected. The imam proposed to address a select gathering at the house of his present host on the morrow and then proceed further westward. Now that mountainous country was left behind, the camel had been sold, quite profitably, by Abdul, and from a Nazi source an old but serviceable Buick had been unearthed and placed at the evangelist’s disposal. Abdul volunteered to drive it. Shortly before the meeting, a group of converts was privileged to listen to a relay of Hitler’s Reichstag speech, which the bimb❖shi described as “the best imitation of Charlie Chaplin I ever heard.” Twelve names were added to the ledger later on; and the katib secured leave of absence for the evening.

A moon of mother-of-pearl looked down into the misty mirror of the Tigris when he and Bimb❖shi Baruk appeared on its bank. Ancient Baghdad, although so near, showed only as a mysterious phosphorescent glow, like that of some vast opal, behind them. By a clump of trees, where a landing stage sent up liquid whisperings from the stream, they paused.

“There lies the _ Lily Queen,” _ said Madden. Bimb❖shi Baruk stared across to where a vessel lay at anchor. “An old Thames paddle steamer which has been a feature of the landscape for some forty years. Tradition says she crossed under her own steam, but I don’t vouch for it. Anyway, MacMurdoch, her chief, is a good friend of mine.”

A sort of large, flat-bottomed craft and also a leaky boat fretted against the landing stage, and in the boat they pulled out to the _ Lily Queen._ They found MacMurdoch, a big-boned, gray and untidy Caledonian, sharing a small cabin with a large black cat and a bottle of whisky. Apparently no one else was on board.

“Scots wha hae,” he observed, when the bimb❖shi had been introduced and two more tumblers taken from a locker. “I never heard tell of the Clan Baruk, but man, ye’d look grand in the kilt. Mrs. MacMurdoch would divorce her bonny man Jock if she kenned he was in the blackbirding trade. Here’s to you and here’s to her.”

“When do they come aboard, Mac?” asked Madden. “I don’t want them to see me.”

“*See you!*” cried MacMurdoch. “Man, Pop, they’ll _ smell _ you from the shore! Regard poor Rob Roy.” He indicated the black cat. “Robbie never could abide camels, and the poor wee beastie is going on deck a’ready.” This was true; the animal went slinking out with sidelong glances of disfavor directed toward Madden. “Any minute now our saloon passengers should come off.”

In fact, a few moments later there stole across silent waters a sound which struck a discordant note, coming as it did from the banks of a river kissed by memories of Arabian romance; it was that which can be made only by a number of motor buses.

“Here they are,” said MacMurdoch. “What do you want to do?”

“We rather wanted to check them,” the bimb❖shi replied. “These Irak authorities—”

“Follow me. Don’t mention Irak authorities. It’s my own pet subject. I’ll have to bid ye good night. We pull out at sun-up and I have a major operation to perform on my engines before I can turn a paddle over.”

From the bridge, Bimb❖shi Baruk and Madden watched the flat-bottomed boat make several journeys from landing stage to_ Lily Queen,_ laden with manacled “catches” of the three preceding days, under a military police escort. The_ Lily Queen_ in her old age had become a prison ship. These potential quislings would ultimately reach Basra, and from Basra be shipped elsewhere for the duration. Madden checked the numbers and proclaimed, “All present and correct, sir.” At which moment it was that a swift disturbance broke out.

There came a scuffle, a shouting, a rattle of irons—and a man burst onto the forward deck, paused, looking right and left, and then began to run aft. Hot on his heels came an armed guard; but he in turn paused on reaching the darkened deck and so missed his quarry. Active as a monkey, the escaped prisoner swarmed up to the bridge, found himself confronted by two figures in the cloudy moonlight, sprang to the port wing and dived overboard.

“Smart lad,” murmured the bimb❖shi, “but I am wondering if he recognized us.”

They were still discussing this point, and its possible bearing upon future plans, when they regained their quarters, a stable which also accommodated two donkeys. An imperfect lantern afforded the only light, but, faint as it was, the bimb❖shi observed a door being slowly and noiselessly opened. He reached it in one long leap, jerking it forward so that the eavesdropper all but fell into the stable. The spy was the Grand Imam, and he wore an evil grin.

*

EL-KASR, ALTHOUGH a small town (Ismail ed-Din owned it) was of great antiquity, and boasted two mosques, generally known as the Old Mosque and the New Mosque. The New Mosque was three hundred years of age, and the Old Mosque dated back to the First Crusade; indeed, some skeleton pennants, warped lances and fragments of armor belonging to knights of Godefroi de Bouillon decorated its walls. Reluctantly, Ismail ed-Din had consented to permit the Grand Imam of Khorassan to speak there.

Frantic anxiety regarding Bimb❖shi Baruk no doubt explained Yasmina’s daring; but, following earnest discussion with Aida, she had determined to be present. One thing which she had learned had given her greater confidence: neither her father nor the cautious Raschid Azem would attend, for this would

have amounted to official recognition of the evangelist.

Nevertheless, when the time came to steal out of the little postern, her heart beat furiously. She had often impersonated an old woman in order to meet messengers, but had never gone into the town after dusk, nor had she, hitherto, attempted the part of a young man. Aida had produced from somewhere an abayah, or black woolen cloak, and certain necessary undergarments, also a pair of flat-heeled shoes, a _tarbush_ and a white cloth to wind around it. Yasmina had darkened her complexion with water color and had traced a faint mustache above her lip. Finally, wearing a pair of spectacles which magnified enormously, borrowed (without permission) from Mohammed Ibriz, her father's secretary, she had felt that she might pass for a studious youth of the middle class; at least, she sincerely hoped so.

From times even earlier than those of Crusaders, the main, or western, gate of el-Kasr had been closed at sunset; but the smaller eastern gate remained open. Through grain fields and orchards Yasmina approached this gate and entered el-Kasr unnoticed. The town had been built on a hillside, and its narrow, crooked streets from the east gate descended jaggedly with unexpected flights of steps to add variety to their perils. Lighting was absent, but at a point where a miniature square embraced a fountain, lanterns splashed dim rays upon the doors of the Old Mosque. Yasmina went in, shed her shoes, performed perfunctory washing in the vestibule and entered that ancient building.

She discovered the Grand Imam in the act of addressing a group of some twenty listeners. Two only of the mosque lamps had been lighted, and mystic shadows raised ghosts. Yasmina slipped silently to the side of a small man who smelled vilely; she knelt down on uneven paving which once had formed part of a Roman temple.

European interference, a bellowing voice proclaimed, accounted for all the troubles of Syria. "Western ways, Western machinery and Western politics must go..."

This was, all but word for word, the address which the imam had delivered in Kermanshah, which indeed he delivered everywhere. If Hitler could do it, why not the Grand Imam of Khorassan? His black beard, shorter than Yasmina had expected it to be from descriptions overheard at her listening post, stuck forward truculently when he spoke; the tones were those of a cracked trumpet; light,

fierce eyes glittered behind his spectacles.

When names of Believers “earnest to do Allah’s work” were called for, the man who smelled like a camel and who had been watching Yasmina furtively, rose and suddenly grasped her arm. She stifled a cry: he had a grip like a carpenter’s vice. With his disengaged hand he took up from the pavement a large book, an inkpot and a vessel containing pens.

“My little master,” he said, using accent and intonation of a cultured Syrian, “your testimony to the Prophet (may God be good to him) is required.”

She found herself one of a group of seven who had come forward. Even in her desperate fear, she tried to memorize the faces of the others. The small man released her arm, seated himself on a step of the pulpit and began to enter names. Yasmina was unable to catch those names. The Grand Imam looked down from above, growling a deep blessing upon each of his new disciples and dismissing them. Yasmina’s heart throbbed so wildly that she knew she was a woman and that, soon, these men would know—for now she was alone with them. The katib beckoned her forward; she was shrinking in shadow.

“Bit of a problem here, B.B.,” he reported. “This is a girl. I’m wondering what we should do with her.”

The Grand Imam descended at a run. His horn-rimmed glasses he cast aside. His eyes were fired with a light which seemed to shine from within. He grasped Yasmina, firmly but fondly, took off the spectacles of Mohammed Ibriz, stared into those disguised features—and continued to grasp Yasmina.

“Pool-o’-the-Moon,” he said, “how truly wonderful you are.”

*

“YOU SEE,” Madden explained—Bimb❖shi Baruk had called upon him to do so—“the Grand Imam spotted our game in Baghdad. An escaped prisoner brought him the glad tidings. It was touch and go. I laid him out with a tummy punch—and he wasn’t built to stand it. I speak to you, my dear, as man to man—Pop to A 14, so to speak. Delighted to meet you. I had nail scissors and shaving gear hidden in the baggage, and we shaved him, didn’t we, B.B.?”

“We did,” said Bimb❖shi Baruk. “Beard and mustache became memories.”

“Of course, he was trussed up,” Madden added. “One of the donkeys who shared our suite raised hell for some reason, but that was by the way. We dressed the imam in odds and ends and then we got out the old Buick and drove down to the river. MacMurdoch, who’s chief, and only, engineer of the *Lily Queen*, agreed to add him to the ‘catch.’ We told Mac the man was half-blind (we had pinched his specs), quite mad and likely to claim to be anybody from General Wavel to Abraham Lincoln. Then the fun started. You don’t know the chief personally, A 14; but our plan was hardly the kind of thing he would O.K.”

“It was the sort of plan,” said Bimb❖shi Baruk, “that he would, most definitely, have scotched. I claim no credit for it, Yasmina; it was Madden’s plan. You see, my beard had produced a fair crop during the weeks which had elapsed, and aided by padding—highly inconvenient—and the imam’s spectacles, I was in a position to continue the tour and to complete the list of crooks willing to work for the Nazis. It was a chance in a million. It has worked perfectly. I have not dared to report to Cairo—nor have I been able to write to you—since I became the Grand Imam of Khorassan, but Pop and I have some names to send in to G.H.Q. which may surprise them.”

Major Baruk and Captain Madden escorted Yasmina as far as the postern in that high wall which surrounded the house of Ismail ed-Din, at which point Captain Madden fell back slightly in order that? he might be in a position to deal with possible enemy movements on either flank or from the rear.