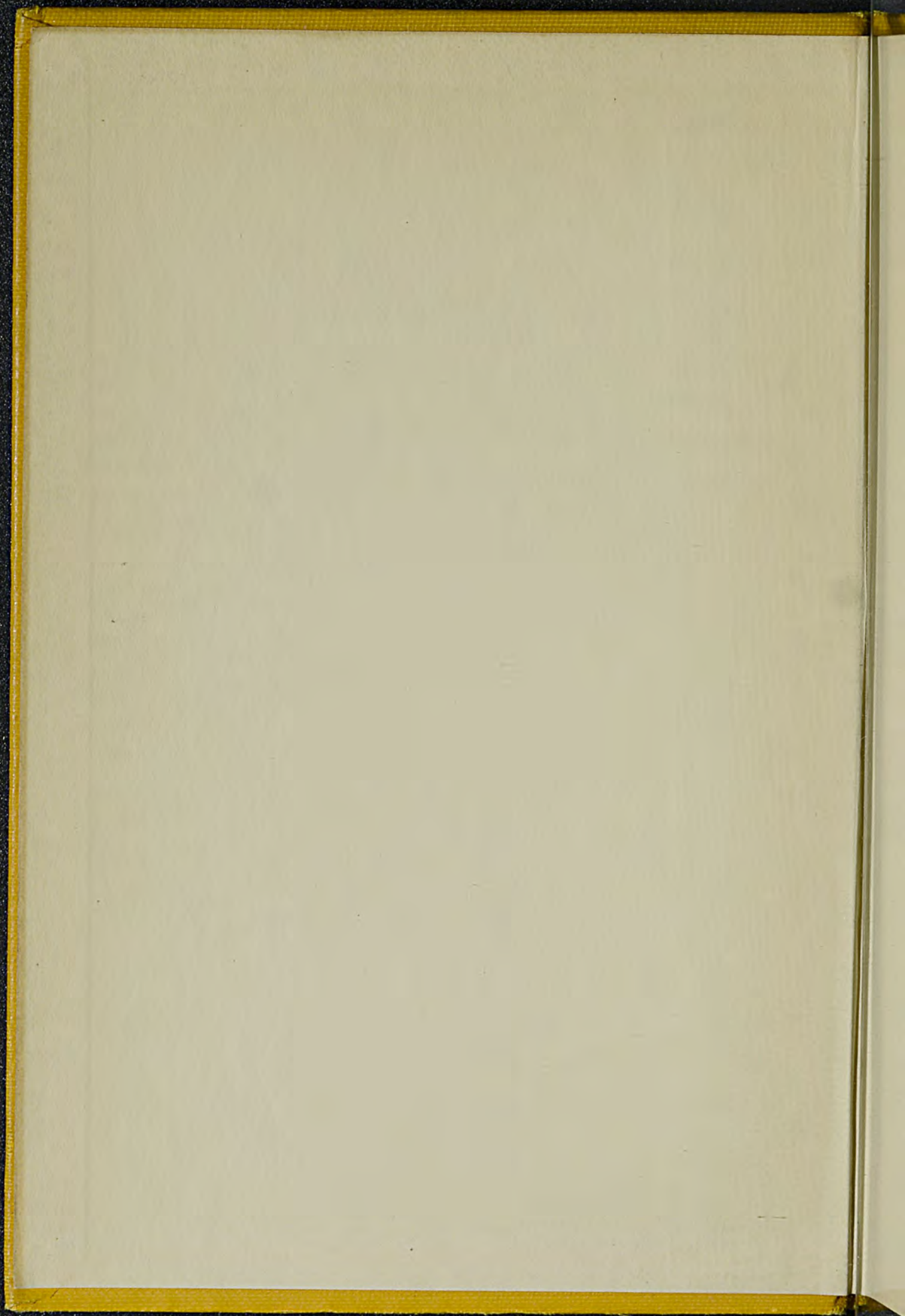


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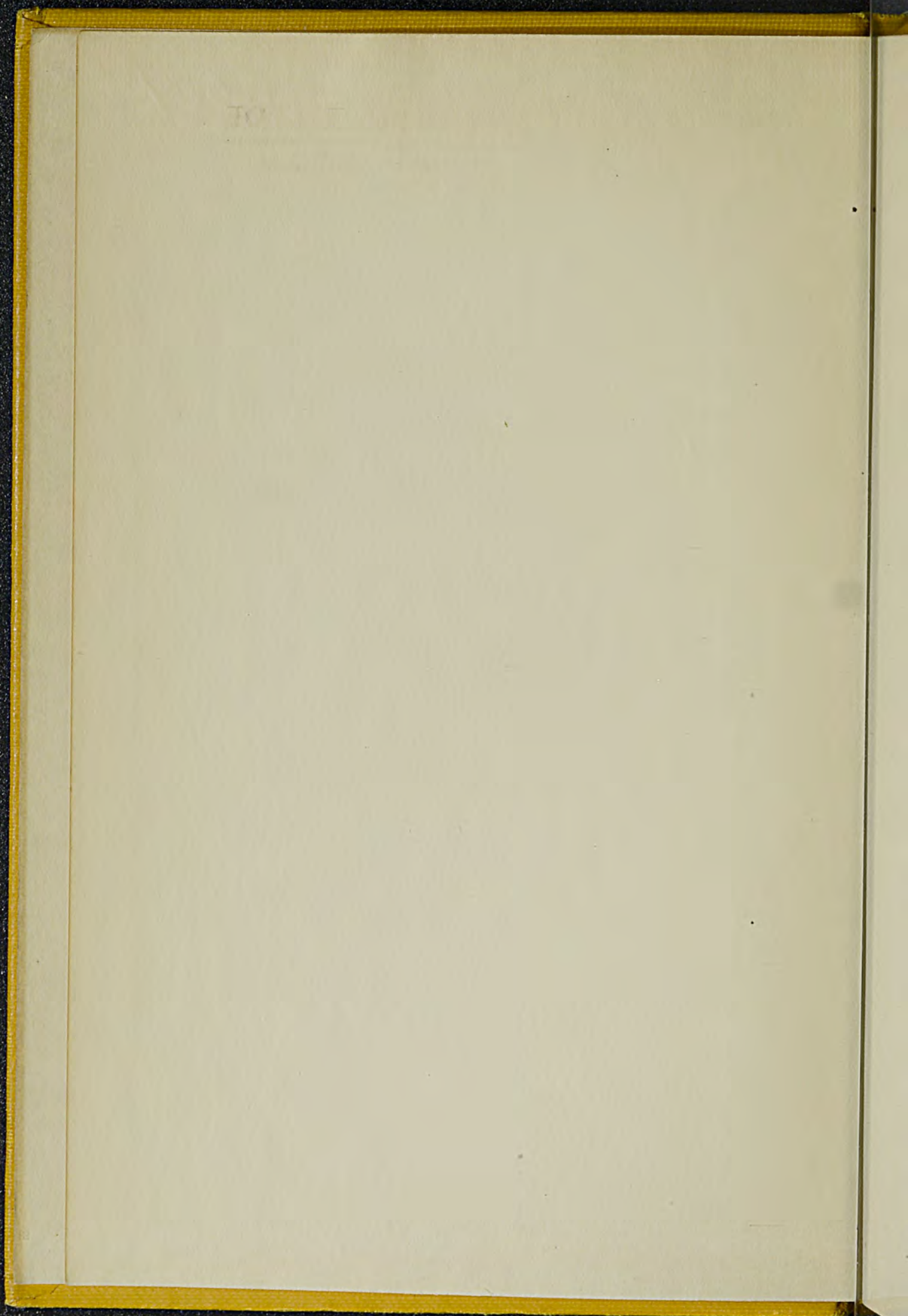
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STEEL AND JADE

ACHMED ABDULLAH

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STEEL AND JADE

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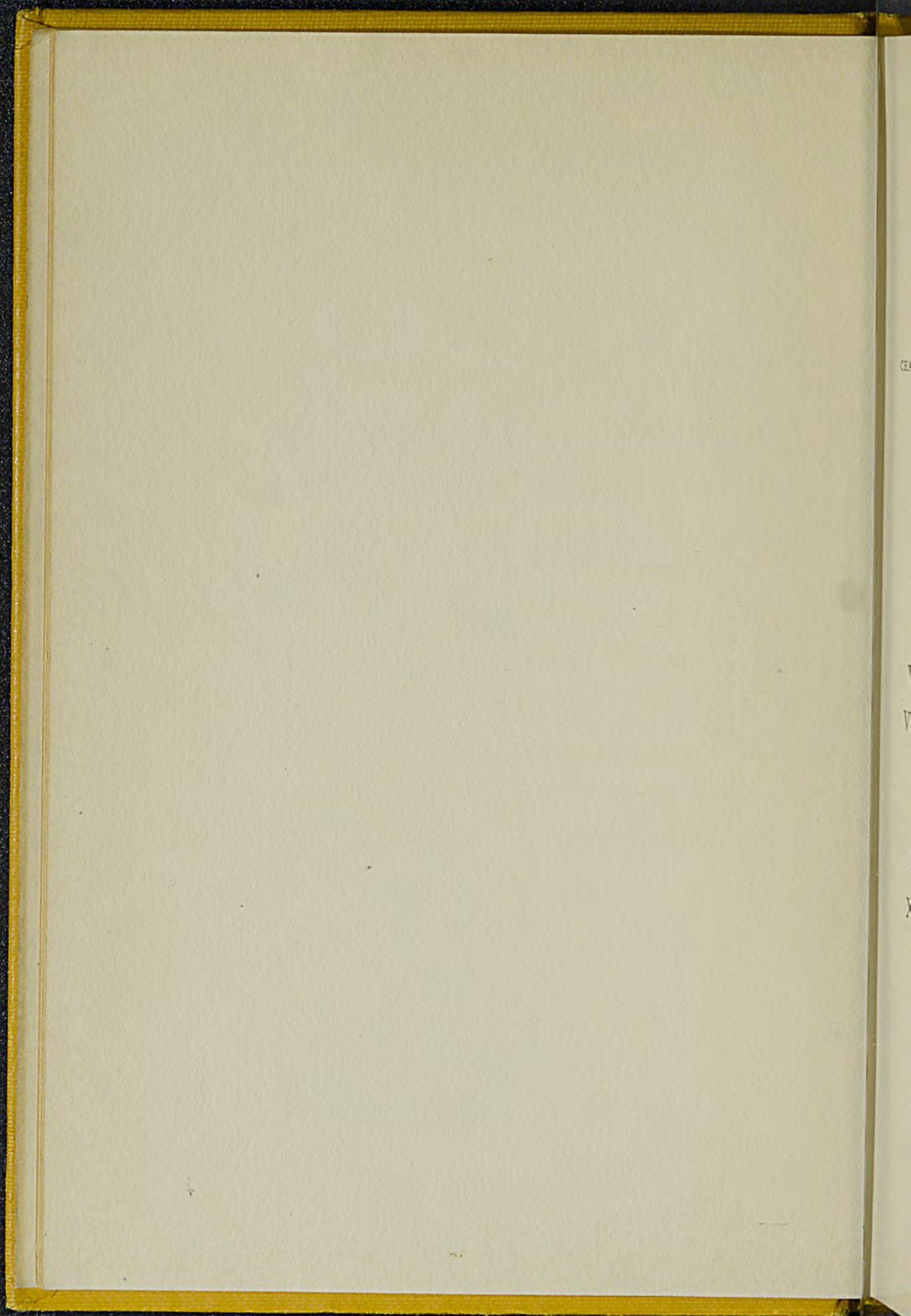
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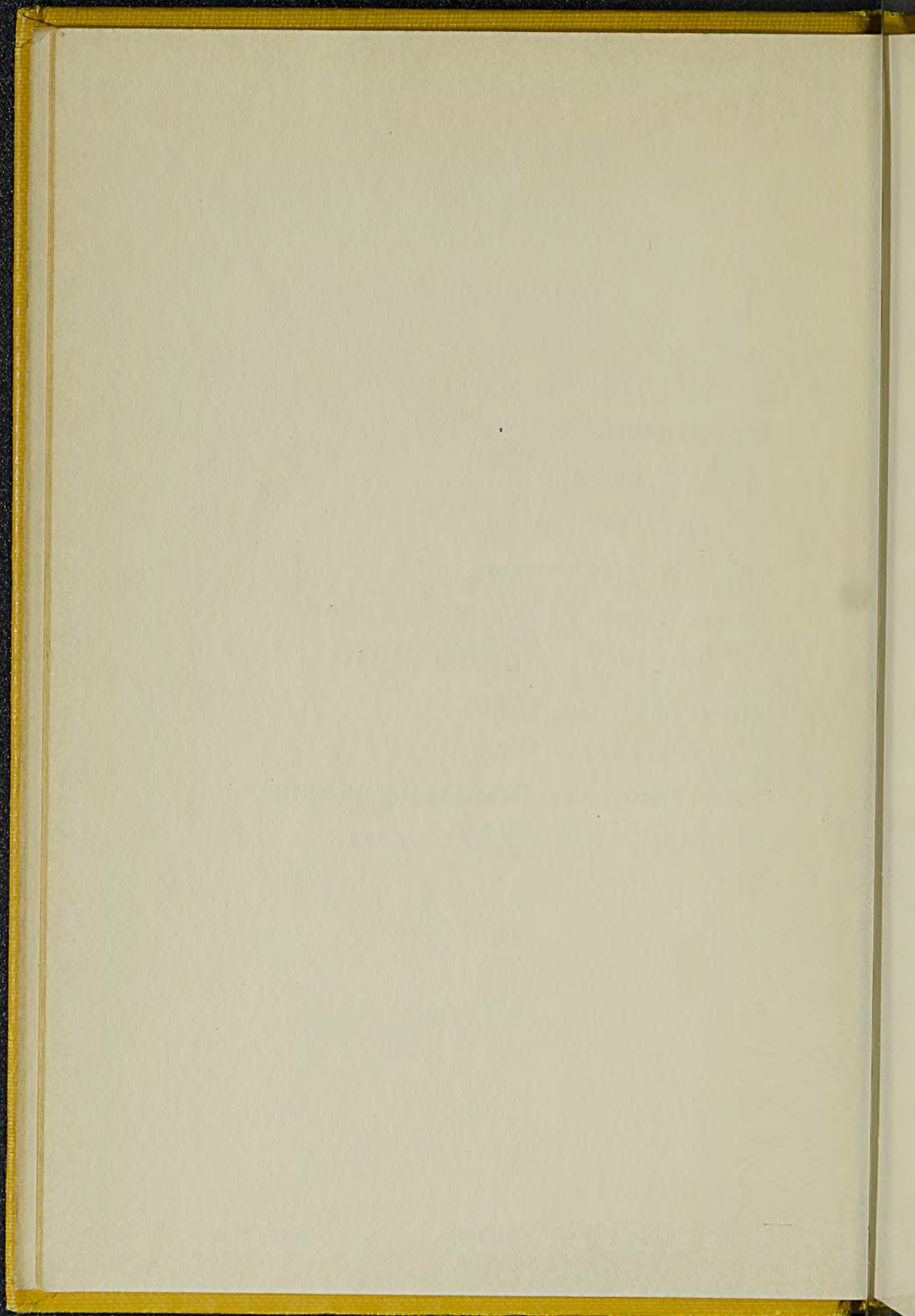
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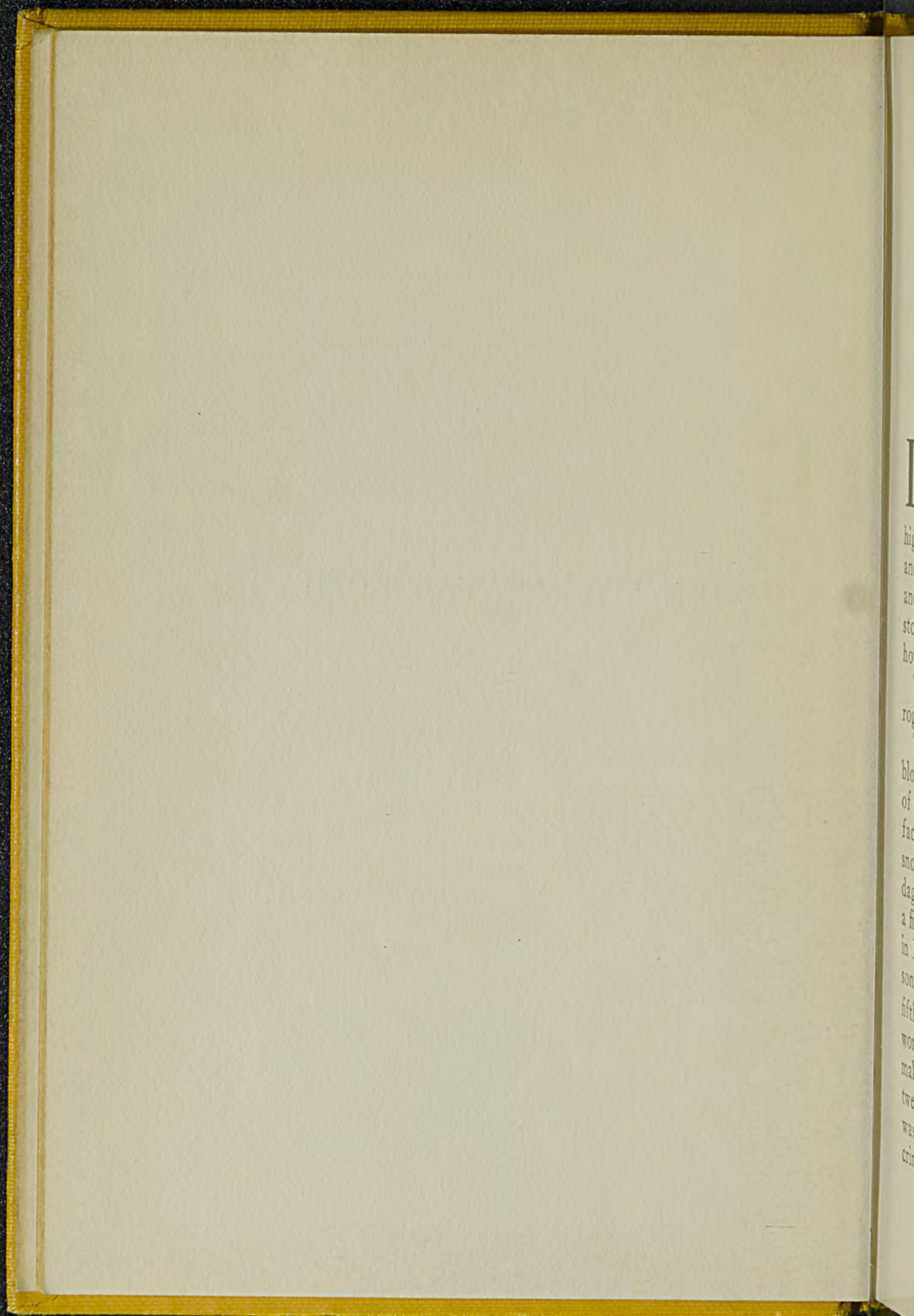
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WHEN MY CARAVAN COMES IN



ONE

WHEN MY CARAVAN COMES IN

LONG the valley had been empty of life, except for the great, red stags and a stealthy, grey slinking of timber wolves. Then, one day, the higher peaks had echoed rough steel and rough voices; and down the steep, wooded slopes had come five men and five women, a bellowing, stamping drove of stolen cattle and, at their heels, a dozen or so Afghan hounds, snarling and snapping.

These five men—to believe the ancient tales—were rogues, every one of them.

Two were twin brothers of the Afridi tribe, with blood staining their hands and souls, and the marks of the lash on their broad backs. One was a copper-faced infidel from High Tartary who prayed to a pig-snouted idol which he hid in his belt between his little dagger and his big dagger. The fourth had once been a fine, silken gentleman at the Hindu emperor's court in Delhi, whence they had driven him forth for reasons too shameful to mention with words. And the fifth was a Turkish giant who wore ear-rings like a woman and a moustache like a tom-cat, could sing to make you cry or laugh—just as he wished—and between the verses, if the need arose or no need at all, was capable of slitting a brace of throats or kissing crimson lips be they willing or unwilling . . . though

he used to claim they were always willing after the first kiss.

Strong men, the five rogues—satisfied with spending the nights with a cheek to the naked earth and the days with their faces frankly to the sun or rain.

But there were the women whom they had picked up on their rollicking way through the hills: golden, lithe, grey-eyed, high-breasted women out of the farther East—and let nobody demand their true names or why they had left their homes!

Being women, they cared not for the sun and rain and the savage, shelterless life. They thought of spinning wheels and shining copper pots and the warm, comfortable dust of roofed houses. They thought of small hands—little children's helpless, clutching, selfish hands.

So, when they reached the valley, they spoke to the five rogues.

"Let us bide here," said one. "I want to lay my head where I shall find it in the morning—and no searching for this handsome head of mine in a tiger's stomach!"

"This is a good land," said the other four. "The earth is fat. The grass is green. The water is pure. Here is the fine stretching of trees and piling of rocks to clout into houses with the skill of your arms, O strong men! Here we shall thrive—God willing!"

The five rogues grumbled—and obeyed.

They became farmers and cattle breeders, while the women attended to the spinning and milking and bending backs over kitchen and garden tasks.

There were, of course, children. Many children.

Then there were grandchildren; and the grandchildren, too, said presently:

"Have we not reached a splendid, green age? Allah! Behold our own great-grandchildren playing about our knees!"

So generations lived and died, lived and bred, until the valley was settled from rim to rim with the seed of the five rogues.

And the earth—and the earth's prosy toil—succeeded where man's law had failed.

For today their descendants are simple, honest peasants; tilling the fields, herding the sorrel cattle, doing a profitable trade with passing caravans from Russia and India and China; with no regret in their souls for the free road, the wild road. Today the valley is very much like the rest of the world. Today there are here, as wherever man lives, births and deaths, joy and sorrow, great love and small strife.

Still—nor insult meant—the neighboring tribes refer to the valley as "The Meeting of the Five Rogues," and if a man be blessed with shrewd observing, he might occasionally catch a glimpse of the Old Adam peeping through—or, belike, of the Old Eve.

There was, for instance, the girl Aziza whose widowed mother kept the *han*, the roadside inn.

Aziza, at least, was the name given her at birth, though there were many by-names for her in the valley, according to the ancient superstition which makes us Afghans seldom speak directly of whom we love, lest evil spirits have their attention stirred and cause black Fate to happen. So, since love and friendship followed as a shadow to the stepping of her narrow feet, she was known as "the Dove" or "the Wee Carved Jewel" or "the Seven Green Stars."

She would walk about the fields and the clustered

dwellings with ever a smile or a song; with a jest for the grouchy, a turned pillow for the ailing, housewifely gossip for the old women, sweets for the children, and a keen reply for the bold, staring lads. And it was told of her that when she entered a house blithe happiness entered with her, and when she left dullness returned.

"Allah be between her and whatever harm!" said the old man.

"Her head on my pillow—and it's not the Grand Khan of Tartary I'd envy!" said the young men.

"It is the presence of her," said the women, "which is good for our fine, strong villages—as a tree is to a windy hill!"

"There is her rich, ruddy beauty," said Kara Ali, he whom they nicknamed Kara-of-the-Firs. "There is the understanding of her brain and heart. There is the help of her wits and her blessed hands."

He loved her. But he never spoke to her of love. For she was rich, and he was poor.

Twice blight had stripped his acres grey; twice Mongolian tigers, drifting south with the melting of the blue ice in spring, had raided his sheep-fold; three times lightning had struck his house. Nowadays it squatted bare and tragic among fields that ever wanted crops, among meadows that lacked the carpet of soft, thick grass. Nothing was left of his patrimony except a planting of tall fir trees. The lightning, perhaps in irony, had spared them; and they were hardly stout enough to keep the wind off him—just stout enough to be cut into lumber and sold for his meagre living.

A lean man was Kara Ali. A keen man. A man tainted by no town reek; with teeth drift-white and

a slow, queer smile and eyes that quested like an eagle's and swooped on distant things and never narrowed at the sight of danger. Fearless he was, and yet modest; and there was fearlessness as well as modesty in his words when he would say to his mother:

"It is Aziza makes the flowers sweeter and the sunshine warmer! Some day I shall ask her to marry me. Some day—ah—" smiling his slow, queer smile—"when my caravan comes in!"

"Yes, yes, O just son!" the mother would reply, with more confidence in her voice than in her heart—and a sob in her heart but not in her voice. "Surely, O child of kings!"

And then she would think of Mogul Khan, the rich, handsome young miller, and her soul would grow bleak.

An Afghan of Afghans was Mogul Khan. And how can we explain this with the writing of words to those who do not know our hills?

Perhaps it might best be explained by saying that his ingenuous charm overshadowed his ingenuous conceit, and that both charm and conceit were overshadowed by his tight, hacking strength of purpose. Sure of himself and his Fate he was; sure, too, that whenever he should go to Aziza and tell her: "It is you, O rejoicer, I have chosen for wife! Be pleased to prepare the bridal robe and stain your nails with henna!" she would salaam and reply:

"Listen is obey, my lord!"

"Aye!" he said often to his friends who applauded the manly sentiment. "Some day I shall whistle to her, and—by the Prophet Mohammed!—she'll come, like a good hound, to the heel of me!"

So, if Kara Ali was too proud in his modesty to speak to Aziza of love, Mogul Khan was too proud in his selfishness.

Was he not young—he would ask himself. Were there not sixty minutes of laughter in each hour of living?

The girl was pretty. Yes.

He loved her. Yes, yes.

But marriage meant iron bonds. It meant the yoke and drag of one's own fireside. It meant the plain ways of life; the orderly, homespun ways. Why hurry?

So he trod his careless path in the way of rollicking good-fellowship, happening on many a jovial adventure—of which some day we may tell the tale—and singing boisterous songs and meeting free-handed folk, nor himself stingy with palm or finger.

But though he never proposed, the villagers were sure that the miller and the innkeeper's daughter would make a match of it.

They seemed made for each other . . . "as the scabbard is made for the sword," the peasants put it in their stilted speech, "the ripe corn for the sweep of the scythe, and the mare for the pull of the bit."

Even Kaizaran, Aziza's mother—a woman still soft of mouth and clear of eye, with the most wanton chestnut curls and a briskness of body that showed no sign yet of her accomplished years—spoke of it; hoped for it; grew angry when the girl shook her head, saying:

"No, no! Never my head to the crook of his arms! Never my hands to the curve of his neck! Never my thighs to the touch of his thighs! Never my lips to his!"

"A stout neck—the miller's! Strong—his arms and thighs! Red, red—his lips!"

"I know, mother!"

"Then why not . . . ?"

"One reason—he has not asked me."

"The question is in his heart."

"The answer is not in mine own heart."

"He is rich."

"But I do not love him."

"He is young and handsome."

"But I do not love him."

"He might have his choice of all the young girls hereabouts. They all would envy you."

"But I do not love him."

"Love is a nothing. Love is a barren dream that pales and dies in the waking. *He loves you!* Why bother if *you love him?* Whether the knife fall on the cucumber, or the cucumber on the knife—the result is the same!"

"Did you say so, little mother, when my own father came to you with the flaming torches of passion?"

Kaizaran smiled a little; blushed a little; sighed a little; then returned to the attack:

"Whom do you want to marry? The emperor of yellow China? The Grand Khan of Tartary? The Amir of Afghanistan in splendour of green emeralds and glory of Persian silks?"

"I would give the three of them nor miss their treasures for a kiss of Kara Ali's mouth!"

"He is poor . . ."

"Only in purse! Steady his hands! Steady his mind! And we need a man's strength about the inn."

"For a handful of rupees we can hire his strength."

"And would you then want me to kiss our servant—and you such a proud woman?"

"He has never spoken to you of love." And, suspiciously: "Has he?"

"No. Because—" the girl smiled—"he is a fool."

"How can you love a fool?"

"I love him the more for being a fool."

And, suddenly, the Old Eve had peeped through; the lawless blood of whichever of the five rogues—or all of them—was her ancestor, had come to the surface with a rush and a high, triumphant laugh.

"Allah!" she exclaimed. "If Kara Ali does not ask me for my hand, some day I shall ask him for his!"

"Have you no shame, daughter?"

"No. For it's Kara Ali has a lover's eyes—and those are the eyes for himself and me!"

Then, one day, spring came to the land with the way and wind it has in our mountains.

It came with no scented breeze nor soft, blue mists; no buds showing timid heads nor slow, soft green of tree and grass. But tearing furiously, riotously out of the South it came; stabbing like crackling spears over the hundred hills; bending the oaks and firs like corn before the scythe; clawing life out of the frozen earth with speed and greed, so that where ice was yesterday there was today a crimson blooming, and where yesterday the jackal nosed for carrion there was today the lordly stag pawing the ground and giving his deep-throated love call.

Spring roaring and rich and unashamed. Spring to forest and field, to beast and bird.

Spring, too, to the heart of man . . . and so, when

the sun came out and stared golden and full, Mogul Khan laughed and turned to a friend.

"Now is the time of year," he said, "when the wonderful, new things happen."

"What things, miller?"

"Women's lips—that are still to try! Today I shall whistle to Aziza. It has been in my mind these many months."

And he tilted his immense, shaggy fur bonnet—good against cold, good against heat, hold the Afghans—over one ear and walked along with that wide step of his, pride stiffening him from head to hip, from hip to heel.

When he reached the inn, he found the girl sitting on a bench in front of it, by her side, his eyes on the ground, was Kara Ali.

"What are you thinking of, Kara-of-the-Firs?" he heard the girl ask; heard the slow reply:

"I am thinking of my caravan."

"And since when have you turned trader? Ah!"—her laugh came high and clear—"are you going to grow a fat paunch and a long nose to sniffle coined gold? Are you going to loan out money to the villagers and take for security the cow and the unborn calf?"

"It is a different caravan I am thinking of."

"Oh . . . ?"

"The caravan of my luck, my fortune. Some day—may Allah grant it—it will come in!"

"Surely it will!" exclaimed Mogul Khan, stepping up and slapping Kara Ali heartily on the back.

He had always liked the latter; had always pitied him and wished him well; nor had the thought of him as a rival for Aziza's love ever entered his head.

"But why don't you give Allah a helping hand?" he continued. "Why don't you force your caravan along the path you wish it to go?"

"It has been my Fate to . . ."

"Fate? Pah! A rotten fig for it! I master my own Fate!"

"A rich man can!" There was no envy in Kara Ali's words, nor in his heart. "But I . . ."

"Try a trip with the Amir's soldiery to the foreign wars! Many are the lads who come back from there with brave loot."

"And many," the girl interrupted shrilly, "come back wounded and crippled—and some there are who never come back! *Wah!*—if piping to the far wars it must be, why don't you listen to your own tune—and follow it, Mogul Khan?"

Then, all at once, the latter knew that here was a mouth never meant for his, and black rage dried his brain. He flexed his hairy arms. He was on the point of leaping at Kara Ali's throat—the rival who had won her heart and sat there, so quiet, as if the whole thing did not concern him.

But, almost immediately, his rage passed; his muscles relaxed; and it was typical of his Afghan trick of being able to find a shift with any of Fate's wiles, that he became conscious of an overwhelming feeling of relief.

He loved Aziza. But did he not love freedom more?

"It is the single man," he laughed, "who travels through the wonders of the world! It is the single man who stops at the cross-roads on a dark night—and has there the pick of the farmers' full-breasted daughters!"

"Of what are you talking?" asked Aziza, impatiently.

"Of the single man—the clever man—myself! For it is the single man has the fine feeding of other men's mutton—and the fine kissing of other men's wives! And here am I, as jaunty a creature as ever trod these hills, and I have escaped a dread danger to my freedom, and I wonder that I am not on my knees this very minute blessing Allah and—" turning to Kara Ali—"perhaps, a little, also blessing *you*, whom but a second ago I meant to kill with my bare hands!"

Kara Ali did not understand. But Aziza did. She blushed; was not sure whether to be angry or grateful.

"Oh—" she stammered; was suddenly silent; looked up; started forward.

So did the two men.

For there came a thundering tattoo of horses' feet, a clatter of pebbles, a confusion of cries—cries of fear, cries for help—brushing down the road in a staccato symphony.

This road, which passed the inn, was being built with the help of Russian engineers to shorten the northern caravan route. The preceding year, winter had put a temporary stop to the work, while now, with spring, would come again the song of pick and spade. Thrown across the land as straight as a lance it was; floating on brushwood over treacherous morasses; cutting through virgin forests; flanking steep abysses on timbered fascines; spanning turbulent rivers with steel and stone; climbing uncounted mountains and dropping into uncounted valleys—"and a sorry jest on the road," said the Afghan peasants, "that it must toil to the peaking of peaks only to find that it must go down again the other side!"

A short distance beyond the inn, where work had ceased, it turned sharply, leaping into space and tumbling to the rocky bed of the Kabul River a thousand feet below; and toward this abyss, carrying its rider to certain death of broken neck and shattered limbs, galloped a black stallion, completely out of control, its bit between its teeth, followed by a dozen troopers who, spurring their mounts as they might, were unable to catch up.

The cavalcade swept on. Once the horse stumbled; almost fell; squatted on its hind quarters like a dog; slid for a short distance in a sitting posture through loose sand and gravel. Then, before the rider could disentangle his feet from the stirrup leathers or the troopers could reach him, once more it jerked into a frantic gallop toward abyss and death.

A short, fat man was the *sirdar*—the commander-in-chief of the Afghan army who had gone into the North to inspect the road—and a brave man. For even as he passed the inn in a whirlwind of dust and flying hooves; even as Kara Ali ran forward and stood there, ready to help, to do what he could, feet well braced on straddled legs, body slightly bent, arms curved like a wrestler's, eyes clear and fearless—even at that moment the *sirdar* succeeded in raising a hand in a warning gesture, crying:

"No, no!"

But already the other had leaped from the ground and, brain and muscles acting in perfect unison, had caught the crazed animal around the neck. He swung himself up in front of the rider; reached out; inserted strong fingers into the stallion's nostrils.

Double weight and cruel fingers acted like a brake.

Less than a foot away from the abyss the horse stopped, snorting, shivering.

A few minutes later, sitting in front of the inn, sipping tea, the *sirdar* turned to Kara Ali.

"How is it with your life—" he asked— "you who have saved mine?"

"My—life . . . ?" The other was puzzled.

"Is it filled to the brim with everything you desire?"

"It is not!"

"What do you miss?"

"One thing!"

"I shall give it to you—because of my gratitude—and because of your courage!"

"My thanks at your feet! But—the thing I miss . . . ah!—you cannot give it to me—nor can the Amir himself—nor . . ."

"Fool!" interrupted the miller in a headlong, sibilant whisper. "Can you not see your caravan bobbing up on the horizon?" And, in a loud voice, to the *sirdar*: "He is poor. It is his fortune which he is missing."

"He has already found his fortune!" said the dignitary. He rose. "I return to Kabul at once. Come with me, Kara Ali! Before your moustache sprouts another inch, you shall be a captain in scarlet and gold and at your back, like a dog's tail, seventy steel-rattling bullies who'll lift their own pay from the bazaar merchants like rents on quarter-day. Hey!"—he called to one of the soldiers—"a horse for the hillman! He rides my way!"

"He rides his own way!" said Aziza, stepping forward, a hand on Kara Ali's arm.

The *sirdar* looked at her. He laughed.

"Such a girl you are," he exclaimed, "with hair like a cloud and eyes that shine and skin smooth as a trout's back! And yet here you stand, O calf of my heart, in the way of a poor lad and his fortune! You are his wife?"

"No!"

"His sister?"

"No!"

"His sweetheart?" And when she did not reply and Kara Ali, also silent, though his heart beat like a trip-hammer, stared at the ground, he repeated: "Why stand in the way of his fortune?"

"Could he not find his fortune here?" demanded Aziza. "Why should he listen to the red thump of the war drums when he might listen to the humming of the spinning wheel and the lowing of cattle?"

"Why, indeed?" echoed the *sirdar*, rather morosely. "Often have I had the same thought—and I only followed the sword trade to give the lie to this great belly of mine. Still—you saved my life, Kara Ali, and I am a just man who repays hate with hate and friendship with friendship." He paused; went on: "Last year when an enemy lied about me to the Amir—may Allah prolong his days!—the executioner had already sharpened his cleaver. Then I spent fifty thousand rupees and hired witnesses, and they swore to an even greater lie than did my enemy, and so his head went to feed the carrion-crows, while mine is still on my shoulders. Fifty thousand rupees was the price, the worth of my life—which you saved today! Fifty thousand rupees I owe you! Fifty thousand rupees I shall pay into your hands when we reach Kabul! Come, Kara Ali!"

So Kara Ali mounted and was off with the *sirdar*

to the South; and the last he saw was the mirroring of the sun in Aziza's eyes and the red curve of her lips as she stood in the middle of the road, looking after him.

"Wait for me!" he called over his shoulder. "I shall come back with my own caravan!"

She waited.

Day after day she waited, week after week, and Kara Ali did not return, nor did he send word; and when she spoke of him to passing traders, they shook their heads.

"Kara Ali?" they replied. "No. We never heard his name. Neither in Kabul nor in Kandahar. Who is he?"

"Who *is* he?" she echoed indignantly. "Round and round the world—where is his equal? You must have seen him! Lean he is and tall and strong—brave and silent and shy—yet with a quirk in his eyes you would never forget!"

"We do not know him!" the merchants insisted.

"But—how can it be? He went in splendour and glory! With the *sirdar* he went!"

"And what do we know of the *sirdar*?" The strangers snapped rapid fingers to ward off ill-fortune. "We are peaceful traders. The yard-stick is our weapon. What dealings should we have with those who carry ever the naked daggers on their hips?"

And, quickly, they went on their way.

"He has forgotten you, daughter," said Kaizaran.

"He can never forget me, mother."

"*Wah!*—he is wandering up and down the world—with his fifty thousand rupees itching in his waist shawl—and kissing women's lips—and roistering with the merry, laughing men of the South!"

"He is thinking of me—wherever he is—as I am thinking of him!"

"Thinking—aye—with ridicule and derision! He has gone to the brisker places where the winds are scented and soft—and he has no longer the mind of the days that were in our valley. Marry the miller!"

"I will not marry him. But I will speak to him."

"Of what?"

"Of my heart's grief!"

And she went to Mogul Khan and said:

"Will you go to Kabul—soon, soon?"

"Why should I? My mill is here."

"To see what has become of my lover—who has never yet been my lover except in my dreams! You will go?"

"This afternoon Bokharan cameleers leave for the South with salt and hides. I shall travel with them."

"May Allah reward you! You are a good beard!"

"I am a foolish beard, and I know that some day a woman's whim will be the cord to strangle my neck!" He laughed. "I like your supple hips! I like your hair! I like the toss of your head! Will you kiss me?"

"I will—for the sake of friendship!"

"For no other sake! For yesterday I asked for the hand of the blacksmith's daughter, and she accepted—unlucky, I, to have my wings clipped!—and she is jealous. Thus, if kissing it must be, step behind this tree!"

So the miller was off to Kabul, and he, too, disappeared; and there were now two girls—the inn-keeper's daughter and the blacksmith's daughter—staring with cold, black eyes into the South and praying to the Lord of the Worlds for their lovers' return;

and there was also Kara Ali's mother sitting alone by the bleak hearthstones and thinking that never more would she see her son crossing the fields and looming dark and brave against the sky; and Aziza's mother singing the praises of Tcherkess Khan, the wealthy cattle breeder.

"He spoke to me yesterday, daughter," she said. "*Wah!*—he sat on top of the heap when courage was given away and good looks were to be had for the asking, and . . ."

"If you were not my mother," interrupted Aziza, "I would raise a hand to you!" And she slumped down on the ground and sobbed bitterly.

Then she felt Kaizaran's arms about her; heard crooning words:

"Do not cry, child! Kara Ali will surely return! And if I must have a grandson, I wish him no better father than this same Kara Ali—may his be the luck of the seventh son's seventh son! Small daughter of mine—please, please—do not cry! The Lord is merciful! His bounties are untold!"

And mother and daughter knelt side by side, and prayed to Allah.

So spring died and summer. There was no more work on the road nor merchants' caravans from Kabul, for rumor had it that the South was red with strife.

Winter came, piling blue ice and silvered frost.

Winter passed.

Then spring came again with boisterous winds, and the melting snows running down the gashes of the rocks, and the whistling of the wild geese flying north, and the echoes of the higher peaks that laughed and taunted; and no longer was it told of Aziza that when she entered a house blithe happiness entered

with her, and when she left dullness returned.

"Ill luck follows her feet like a shadow!" said the superstitious old women.

"Aye! Yesterday she looked at my little red cow—and it sickened and died."

"Formerly," said the young men, "there was always the light in her eyes that found the core of your soul, and her voice was so ringing and clear! Now her voice is grey, and her eyes are dim."

"There was the time," said the old men, "when she had the sweet word of day for rich and poor. Now she has never a word for anybody . . ."

"Except to speak of Kara-of-the-Firs!"

"Saying—I heard it with these ears—that she will marry him when he comes home with his caravan!"

"And he doubtless dead—and his caravan nothing but a phantom!"

"What she ever saw in him the Devil alone knoweth!"

"The fool! And sending the miller after him!"

"And the miller, too, gone—swallowed by the cruel, crimson South!"

"And the blacksmith's daughter eating her heart out!"

"How she can forgive Aziza is something else the Devil alone knoweth!"

But the blacksmith's daughter did forgive.

Sitting one day beside the latter on the bench in front of the inn, Aziza said to her:

"I did not know—but I felt, I feared that danger was awaiting Mogul Khan when I sent him to Kabul to search for Kara Ali. Allah—I was selfish, selfish!"

"I would have done as you did. Love is a bitter thing—a grim, ruthless thing!"

"It is indeed!" sobbed Aziza. "I wish my heart would not beat so! I wish—oh—I wish I were in my grave!"

"Keep a place for me by your side," said the blacksmith's daughter, "so that we may not be too lonely and cold in the clods!"

Then, quite suddenly, she was silent. She rose. She pointed.

"Look!" she went on in a flat voice. "Do you see what I see? Or is it only my desire and my grief showing me things and men that are not?"

For down the road, walking slowly, painfully, their clothes in rags, holding on to each other, came Mogul Khan and Kara Ali; and it was characteristic of the miller that he was the first to speak:

"Here we are back again like birds in spring! And have you ever seen two birds with feathers more bedraggled and wings more stiff?"

Later on the telling of what had happened to the two went all over the hills: how the *sirdar*, on his arrival at Kabul, had been arrested and how—this time given no chance by his enemies to hire the many witnesses who might swear to truth or lie—his head had been chopped off and stuck on a tall, spiked pole for a while, as a warning to traitors yet uncaught, an amusement to the righteous, and food for the vultures and carrion-crows. A like fate had befallen his friends and relations, and it was only Kara Ali's unimportance which had saved him from death. But at all events, since he had ridden into Kabul by the *sirdar's* side and was thus somewhat under suspicion,

they had beaten him with rawhide flails and thrown him into prison; had almost forgotten his existence when the miller had come to town, clamouring loudly and arrogantly, as was his wont, that he was Kara Ali's friend . . . and what had these pigs of Southerners done to the latter? Then they had remembered Kara Ali—and had sent Mogul Khan to jail to keep him company; until one day a good Moslem priest had heard of their plight, had become convinced of their innocence, and had interceded in their behalf with the Amir.

And they returned across the hills, and here was Mogul Khan whispering to the blacksmith's daughter:

"Come with me, O moon of the world! I know a tree that will shelter our kisses!"

So they walked away, and Aziza and Kara Ali were alone.

"Poor I left," said Kara Ali, "poor I returned. My caravan has not come in."

He turned to go; turned back when he heard Aziza's low words:

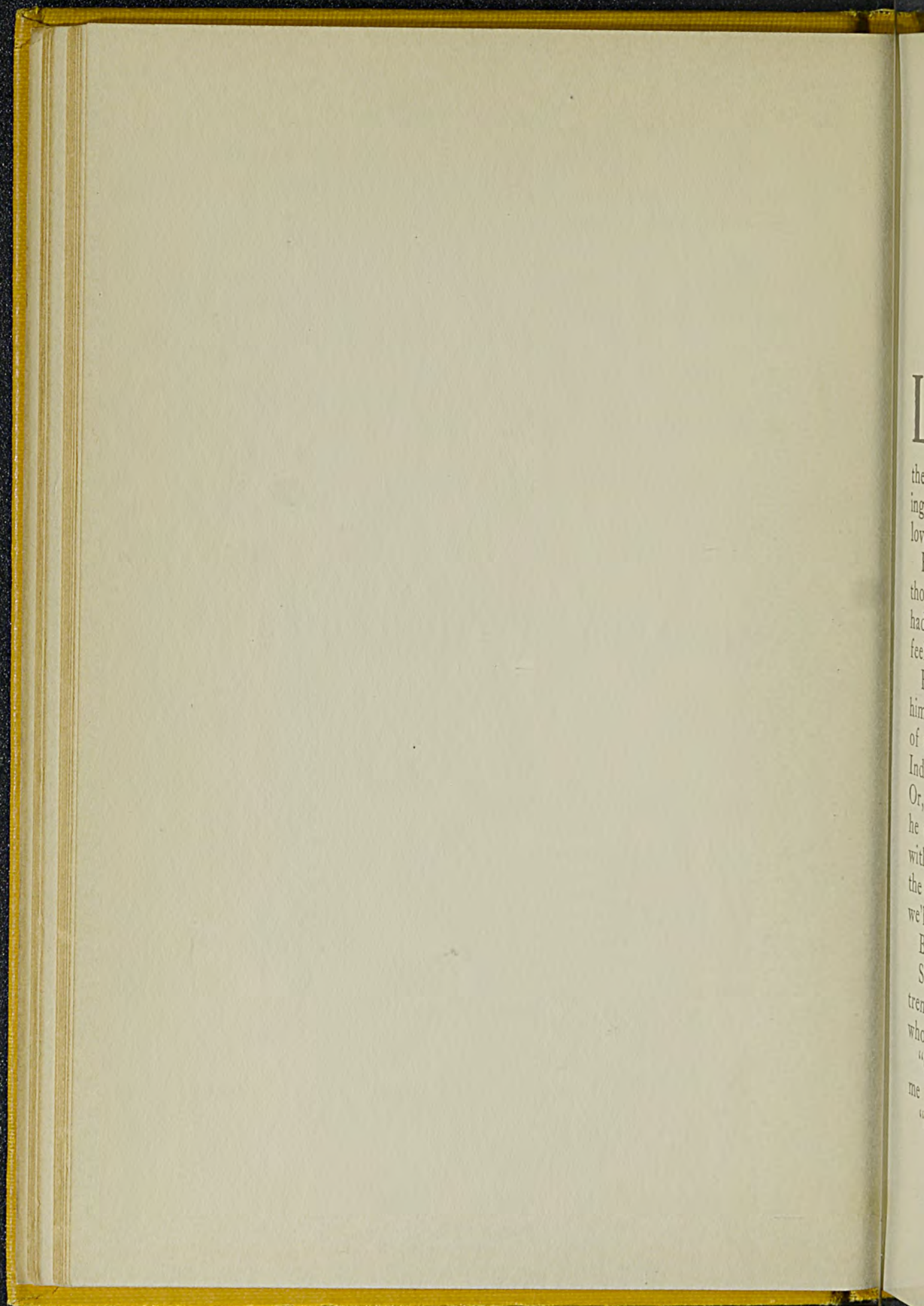
"Are you then so greedy that you want a finer caravan than the caravan which has reached my heart, my soul, my love, my desires? Oh—" her voice broke a little—"Kara Ali—Kara-of-the-Firs . . ."

He took her in his arms.

"Give me your lips, O mouth of honey!" he said; said no more.

He was always the silent man.

MUSTAFA-OF-THE-TRICKS



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TWO

MUSTAFFA-OF-THE-TRICKS

LOVE," said Mustaffa-of-the-Tricks, "is like a hot, strange, happy day of sun that gives way soon enough to the long night, the black night, the cold night. So why should I waste my time standing here and talking to you, Jahanara, since I do not love you at all?"

Had she been a proud girl she would have laughed, though her heart was tangled in his and though she had never a dream or a thought of him but she would feel a queer, bitter-sweet shiver in her being.

Had she been a clever girl she would have asked him what of the weather—and was it true, this telling of the Tartar caravan guides, that the tribes on the Indian border were back at their old trade of fighting? Or, perhaps, she would have lied bravely, saying that he was quite right—for was she not herself in love with the very pick of the swank, roaring fellows on the high hills? And so, good luck to you—and maybe we'll meet again some day!

But Jahanara was not proud. Nor was she clever.

She looked down at the ground, and her hands trembled, and her voice was like the voice of one who feels sharp steel pricking her throat.

"Once—" she stammered—"once you swore to me . . ."

"Did I? Once?" He shrugged his massive shoul-

ers; cocked his immense, shaggy fur cap to one side. "What of it? *Hai*—you are as slow at understanding a burly man's soul as the grace of Allah at an unbeliever's funeral. Once I loved you—yes—and it was the truth. And now I love your cousin Nurmahal—and there is another truth for your ears."

"Last week you told me—only last week . . ."

"When I said it I meant it, and when I meant it I kissed your mouth—being an honest man. And, being still that same honest man, I am telling you today that I am thinking of another girl's mouth."

He was silent; then went on:

"Have you ever seen her hair? Like waves of red, red copper rolling over the snow of her forehead! And the age of her—sixteen—the age that is a mother's heartbreak—and the grey mellowing in her eyes which gives the notion to a man to look again—and never to look away. I love her," he said, "and I shall marry her."

"You loved me, too. But you never spoke to me of marriage," whispered Jahanara.

"Which proves—do you not see?—that here at last has true love come to me. Not love for a night, nor love for a week—but love that cares not for Allah's seven eternities and stops not for the seven black weavings of Fate!" said Mustaffa-of-the-Tricks.

Mustaffa Yamud Khan was his real name.

But Mustaffa-of-the-Tricks the men called him. So did the women.

Yet there was a different meaning to the nickname when it was on the lips of the former or the latter. For the men hated him and—a little—feared him; while the women, too, feared him, but did not hate him. Indeed he had a way with the women—a way,

as we say in our hills, like sudden seeing to the blind eye of darkness.

It is a strange art, is this art of a man who has his way with the women.

It is not good looks, nor kindly heart; nor is it the pleasant wit, the generous hand, the gentle, town-bred Persian manner; nor yet the nimble foot dancing over crossed swords to the wailing of the reed-pipes and the hollow thump of the tomtoms; nor the strong, skilled wrist when dagger meets dagger for sport or death. But it is some glint and fire in a man's eyes, and a curling of his lips, and a careless swing of his shoulders—and, belike, a soft voice into the bargain that at times can hold a spice of cruelty.

Whatever it was, Mustaffa had the trick of it—had all the tricks.

And for this we have the testimony not only of his own tribe, the Aga Khel, whose fortified villages studded the eastern slopes of the Kohee-Baba range beyond the Helmund River, but also the rather grudging testimony of the Zunni Khel who tilled the western slopes . . . high up, these slopes, with ever the wheeling, glamorous mountain mists above, torn here and there by jagged rocks and black-green fir trees, and a faint glisten of snow far into the heart of the year.

"There are a hundred better men in the hills—a hundred men more strong and more handsome," said the women of the Aga Khel. "But none there is we would miss more were he dead."

"It is an ill day for the poor fool of a girl who takes his arm for a pillow," said the women of the Zunni Khel; and, like as not, they would add in their hearts: "O Allah—let me rest in his arms tonight!"

The two tribes were hereditary enemies; had been enemies—for a cause long forgotten, perhaps simply because they were neighbours, and because there is no hate in all the world more blighting than the hate of an Afghan for a brother-Afghan—since a day beyond the reckoning of the oldest man in these parts. Thus forbidden by unwritten hill law, forbidden by sword and dagger and by rifle snicking from ambush, were the eastern slopes to the Zunni Khel, the western to the Aga Khel, Mustaffa's tribe.

And so would not Mustaffa-of-the-Tricks—he who had the choice of the fine, sturdy girls amongst his own clan—be the very man to go stalking for kisses in the enemy's land?

Would he not be the very man to risk his neck for the sake of soft arms—to swing himself across treacherous ravines that cleft the mountain top—to thumb his nose at the armed watchers and go sneaking through the thickets on his belly like a fox to the kill—to slide down the lichened stones and climb up the steep sides at the farther end, hand over hand, using precarious hold of twisted roots and slippery granite boulders?

He said something of the sort to Jahanara.

"God's splendour!" he exclaimed. "They would come running up the trail, would your clansmen—nosing the ground, like slobbering, harrying hounds—if they knew I was here, on their own heath!"

She gave a shudder; spoke of the danger:

"I am afraid . . ."

"I am not!" Nor was he boasting. "Allah—there is both sweet and salt to the kiss when you know that presently there might be the enemy to face you—and then fast cut and drive, and a long reach with the short dagger! Still—" contemptuously—"not

overmuch danger—worse luck! For the day I saw your cousin Nurmahal—when, seeing her, I fell in love with her—and, loving her, asked her to be mine . . .”

“What did she say?” interrupted Jahanara.

“She slapped my face. But her eyes gave the lie to her hand. Nor did she call out to warn her people of my presence. Yes—” he laughed—“the day I saw her I crept on my stomach between the very legs of one of your stout patrols—watching the east he was, while I came from the south—and, had I been so minded, I could have stood up in back of him and slashed his throat from ear to ear. Blind sons of pigs—your tribesmen, the Zunni Khel!”

“But tigers were I to tell them that . . .”

“That I am here?”

“Yes.” She spoke without looking up.

“No fear! You would not sell my neck—not for all the wealth of Hindustan.”

“What makes you so sure?”

“Your own heart holds the answer.”

She bowed her head. He was right. He knew it. So did she.

She turned to go.

But he called her back.

“I came here today,” he began, rather hesitatingly, “thinking I might meet your cousin—and I met you instead . . .”

“Thus wasting your time?” she asked bitterly.

“Perhaps not.”

He smiled. He was silent, a little amused at what was in his mind, a little ashamed.

“Will you do something for me,” he went on, “because of our former love?”

“I would do anything for you—anything—I give

oath before the Prophet Mohammed—on Him the salute!" There was in her voice a queer mingling of self-hurting pride and self-hurting humility. "Nor because of our former love, but because of the love I bear you now, now—the love I shall never forget—and mine the shame that I must say it with words!"

He caressed her braided, blue-black hair; and she shivered.

Perhaps, for a moment, he was conscious of remorse. But quickly, impatiently, he brushed it aside. It was true, what he had said to her: that love had come to him—not love for a night, nor love for a week, but love that cared not for Allah's seven eternities and stopped not for the seven black weavings of Fate. Yet, try as he might, when he looked at Jahanara, when he remembered that once he had thought her lips so soft and vibrant and her arms so generous, there was still, deep in his heart, the aftertaste of forgotten sweetness, akin to pain. . . .

Pain in her heart, too, he thought—a different pain; and again he felt conscious of remorse, again he brushed it aside.

He made up his mind.

"The wandering priest is with my tribe tonight," he said.

"I know. He spent two days with my people."

"Tomorrow he goes away, to Kabul, and until his return, two months from now, lovers will have to stay unwed and the dead unshriven." It was true. For these were poor hill villages, unable to afford the luxury of a resident Moslem priest. "And so—will you give a message to Nurmahal?"

"What message?"

"That I shall be waiting for her tonight, at the

time the moon swings into the second quarter, at the foot of the Durani castle. The priest will be with me to make us man and wife. . . ."

"No, no!" She gave a cry like a wounded animal. "Do not ask me—*me*—to . . ."

"Did you not swear you would do anything for me? Was then your oath only a line written on water?"

"She will not come—even were I to give her your message!"

"She will come! It was her eyes said 'yes' that time her hand said 'no' and slapped my cheek. Tell me," he added, watching Jahanara's face and guessing shrewdly, "does she ever speak to you of me? Has she, belike, ever whispered to you that she would die of longing were I to go away from here and seek my fortune out on the strange roads of the broad, broad world?"

The girl's silence held the answer, and he laughed triumphantly, then lowered his voice:

"Would you stand between her heart's desire and mine?"

"I shall give her your message," replied Jahanara.

"Tonight—near the Durani castle!" he called after her, as she walked away.

The ancient Durani castle stood on the top of the Kohee-Baba ridge, on a neutral strip of ground that separated the lands of the Zunni Khel from those of the Aga Khel.

Once it had been a place of gentility and stirring deeds. Today it was ruined. The carved slabs of marble and granite of its walls—stolen by dead Durani lords during raids into the Indian plains—had been carried off and clouted into the peasants' squat

stone huts; the tall, braggart trees of the park that had surrounded the castle in bygone days had been hacked to the roots by the woodman's whittle, and there was today a second growth, tangled, interlaced, of gnarled oaks and dwarf acacias, of tamarisk and mulberry and pistachio trees, of thick, thorny clumps of *goorgooreh* and *umlook* bushes.

Here Mustaffa-of-the-Tricks was wending his way that night, and with him Hajj Othman, the wandering priest.

Less a priest he looked than a coarse man of the sword—the sort, as our Afghan saying has it, who would fill his chest with two men's breath and whistle to the winds of heaven to follow him. But he was sternly pious, inclined to preach his four-square Moslem faith amongst these rowdy hillmen with a swing of his hairy, freckled fists when the need arose. Thus he was respected: respected even by Mustaffa, who walked by his side, with never a doubt in his heart but that Nurmahal would come.

For did he not love her? And—how could it be otherwise—did she not love him?

Nor was he afraid of the Zunni Khel's revenge. While the latter, as well as his own tribe, would do all in their power to prevent the match, there would be, on the other hand, no reprisal from either clan once the marriage was an accomplished fact, a union of a man and a woman made sacred by the Lord God. Such was the law of the hills.

Speed, though, was necessary—with the priest going away on the morrow, and always the danger of leaky tongues.

"No time to be lost," he said to Hajj Othman as, stepping warily, noiselessly, they neared the castle.

"For this is the season of short nights, and armed watchers will come with the grey mouth of morning. So be ready with your priestly babble!"

"Be you ready, too!" growled the other. "Ready to be different from what you used to be! I know what they say of your tricks. No more tricks once you are married—no more sneaking through the hills for red kisses! Or—" raising a threatening fist—"may the curse of Allah . . ."

"There will be no need for Allah to curse me," interrupted Mustaffa. "Everything I shall give to her—everything except sorrow!"

They reached the castle. It had rained earlier in the evening, and they stood in the shelter of a spreading wild olive tree, away from the drip of the branches.

They were silent.

Now and then the moon would come from behind the clouds and take a look at them—a roe would leap from the gloom, and away into the woods with a fearing hoof-plunge—far off a thunderbolt would strike against the brow of the higher range and rock the world.

Then, out of the dark west, from the lands of the Zunni Khel, a woman came, her face completely swathed in the three black wedding veils, as is the proper custom of the hills.

Mustaffa walked up to her.

"Will you be my wife?" He spoke haltingly, simply—his heart was drumming so.

"Yes," she whispered.

So Hajj Othman made them man and wife and, the short ceremony over, again threatened Mustaffa!

"May Allah curse you if . . ."

"Have I not told you," laughed the other, "that there will be no need for Allah to curse me? Hear me give oath!"

He turned to the woman.

"May my right arm wither—may I be struck blind—may I eat dirt if ever my feet stray from alongside the stepping of your feet, O crusher of hearts!"

With trembling hands he raised her veils.

Then, the moon laying a mocking silver ribbon across her features, he saw that it was Jahanara, not Nurmahal.

Silence dropped.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I do not love you," he said. "But I have given oath."

And he kissed her, quite gently.

Nor was he untrue to his oath during the months that followed.

Perhaps it was—whatever the bitterness in his heart—because he was a Moslem, a fatalist; perhaps because, somehow, he admired this woman who had tricked him—*him*—Mustaffa-of-the-Tricks.

There was also his rollicking humour which, typically Afghan, could even see a joke played on himself.

"Jahanara-of-the-Tricks!" he would call her at times.

"I did it because I loved you," she would reply.

"I shall always love you. And you—do you . . . ?"

"I shall always keep my oath," would come his grave answer.

And he kept it, though there was the gossip how Nurmahal had refused the hand of the Zunni Khel's handsome young chief—had refused a fine, silken,

city-bred gentleman, a courtier of the Afghan Amir, who had gone into the hills to shoot big-horn and snow-leopard—had refused a rich Tartar trader who had passed through the land with a string of seventy dromedaries laden with the wealth of yellow China . . . and there were the nagging old women who grumbled that Nurmahal was botching her life—which was bad enough; but worse that she must be the temptation and despair of many a decent bachelor—and—“by the honour of my nose!—some day it will be the crooked way her fancy will go—and then disgrace to her and black shame to the mother that bore her!”

So the months passed, and finally there was an evening when Mustaffa came home from hunting and found his wife stitching small, fleecy clothes.

He looked at her.

“So?” he asked.

“So!” she replied, blushing a little; and she added, pointing through the window, that soon it would be spring again, with the piping of birds and the whirling of swift wings and the winds scented with the scent of the fat soil, and new life everywhere—new life, too, to her and to him . . . “may our child be a man-child, O my lord!”

It hurt her, as her time crept close and she had hours of dizzy weakness when she was unable to rise from her couch, to see Mustaffa staying in from his hunting and fishing; to see him busy himself about their dwelling, attending to women’s tasks of household and kitchen-garden with his strong, clumsy man’s hands, laughing a little shamefacedly when he broke a pot or pulled out an unripe turnip instead of a weed.

But what was he to do? This was a poor land, a cold land, however warm hearts here may be, and the women of the Aga Khel had enough to do looking after their own; all they could give to Mustaffa was advice.

He had always been patient and kindly with her; had never permitted her to feel whatever bitterness was in his soul.

Now he began to treat her with a queer kind of affection.

But it was like a brother's affection to his sister; and—puzzled Jahanara—tricked into marriage or not, was he not her husband? Was this not his child which she would bear?

"Perhaps," she said to herself, "if it should be a man-child—a son to give strength and meaning to his life—perhaps then he will . . . O Allah!"—and she would pray fervently.

Then, one morning, he noticed how wan and pinched her face was and how blurred her eyes; and the thought came to him that this was the time when a woman needed a woman and when her own mother's voice would be sweeter to her than a song, her own mother's hands softer than silk; and he said to her:

"I shall go across the hills and fetch your mother."

A light came into Jahanara's eyes; for the very thing had been in her mind.

"Please—please—go . . ." she cried.

But at once fear came to her.

"How can you go?" she exclaimed. "Your name is a stench in the nostrils of my clan."

He laughed negligently.

"I have always been the man to fight my own fights. If it is your mother you want, your mother you shall have."

"But—it must be soon—soon—today. . . ."

"Today it shall be!"

He smiled when, as of old, he swung himself across the treacherous ravines that cleft the mountain top, as he sneaked through the thickets on his belly.

By Allah!—he thought proudly—but he had not lost his skill.

But the next moment he gave a startled cry when, from behind a rock, a watcher of the Zunni Khel stepped out with steel in his fist and a black curse on his lips.

A giant he was, heavy-armed, broad-shouldered, and with a fine, rust-red beard curled up on either side of his face like a goat's horns.

Mustaffa looked him over appraisingly. He remarked, not altogether in banter, that at times the Zunni Khel seemed to breed a man amongst their usual litter of mangy pigs, and so he would pay him the courtesy of crossing blades instead of strangling him with his bare fists as was his custom—a compliment lost on the other, who advanced, his Persian broadsword most ominously raised.

Mustaffa's hand gripped the hilt of his small dagger which was his favourite weapon. But, almost at once, he reconsidered. He thought of his wife. How could he waste his time, in fighting, with every minute so precious?

"It is not for death I came today, but for life," he said; and he explained what had brought him.

The Zunni Khel was angry. For no man likes to miss a chance at rough steel play. But he dropped his sword.

"I am not the one," he grumbled, "to stand in the way of an unborn brat—though it be conceived by an

Aga Khel's loins. Go on before I change my mind and skewer you as I might a bit of lean mutton."

Thus spoke Afghan generosity.

Then, a second later, as Mustaffa turned to go, spoke Afghan greed:

"That small dagger at your hip—a pretty toy of steel—and with a hilt splendidly fashioned to fill a strong man's hand!"

"My father's father's dagger."

"To be inherited by my son's son."

"Eh?"

"Give it to me!"

"Why should I?" demanded Mustaffa.

"To pay for the freedom of the road—and your child's life!"

So, since he was helpless, Mustaffa cursed him for a Jew, a Christian, an eater of dirt; threw the small dagger at his feet; and went leaping down the trail, increasing his speed as he reached the edge of the slope where it flattened into a rocky plateau with here and there tiny gentians peeping from granite splits and opening their stiff, azure stars.

He bent and picked one of the flowers to put in his waistshawl for good luck when, straightening up, he heard a shrill voice call, "Stand!"; and there stepped forth another of the Zunni Khel patrols.

He was as dark as a Hindu, hook-nosed, beetle-browed; like a wolf's for hair his chest seen through the ragged shirt; an eagle's wing in his shaggy fur cap; a sabre cut across his left cheek; altogether as desperate-looking a gallows-bird as you might find between the snows of the Himalayas and the steppes of High Tartary; and with a steady finger on the trigger of his rifle.

"Since this seems to be your day for risking your

life," he said, "I might as well take it before anybody else attends to the trifling business."

He was about to fire when Mustaffa touched forehead, lips, and heart in sign of submission, and told how he was on his way for Umteyra Begoom to give comfort in her hour of trial to Jahanara, his wife, her daughter—"and of your own clan, O man of the Zunni Khel!"

"Of my own clan no longer, since she mated with a hound of your breed! Still—" he laughed disagreeably—"what profit is there in killing the unborn? Let your child be a son and let him grow up sturdily—so that some day my own son may have his bit of sport in cutting his throat. Go in peace!"

Then his eyes caught a gleam of turquoise-studded silver where the scabbard of Mustaffa's great dagger stabbed through the folds of his waistshawl. Better loot without fight than neither fight nor loot, he thought; and he stretched out a hand.

"Let me have it," he said, "or they will be saying that I kept out of your way."

"Allah!" cried Mustaffa, red with rage. "The backs of seven black Fridays to you, O son of a noseless she-devil!"

"Noseless or not, it was my mother bequeathed to me her taste in jewelled trinkets," replied the other as Mustaffa surrendered his weapon and hurried on.

The sun was already dipping to the west when he reached the Zunni Khel village. He found Umteyra Begoom in her house, stretched out on a couch. She was a withered old hag, but with her eyes still dark and lambent and piercing, to tell of passions unconsumed.

Those dark eyes lit up when she saw Mustaffa . . . for have we not said that he was the sort of man who had his way with the women?

"Are you not satisfied with stealing my daughter?" she laughed. "Have you come to steal me, too?"

"Was I not the blind man to miss your beauty?" Mustaffa countered gallantly; and then, a sudden, queer fear gathering strength in his heart, he stated his errand and begged her to hurry.

"How can I?" Umteyra pointed at her left leg, that was wrapped in bandages. "It's swollen."

"I shall carry you on my back."

"And fall—and break my neck?"

"But . . ."

"There is another way. I shall call my niece."

She clapped her hands, and from the inner room came Nurmahal.

"The salute, O Mustaffa!" she greeted him; and she added she had overheard what had brought him here and was ready to go with him and do for Jahanara whatever was needed.

"Take my cloak and my thorn stick," said Umteyra Begoom, "and cover well your face with my black veil, and do not forget to limp a little and cough a little. "Or," she cackled with shrill mirth, "the tribesmen will think that Mustaffa has been at his tricks again."

Not long afterwards, cloaked and veiled and limping as her aunt had advised, Nurmahal followed Mustaffa towards the Kohee-Baba range.

They were silent for many minutes.

He spoke very suddenly:

"It is in my heart like a rain of spears. And I do not know if it is love for you and regret for the

might-have-been—or fear for Jahanara.” And he pronounced the name ever so gently.

“Nor do I know,” replied Nurmahal, “if I feel hate for Jahanara because she has lain in your arms—or gratitude because she has given you her sweetness.

Again they were silent.

They reached the rocky plateau.

There the dark-faced watcher laughed when he saw Nurmahal. For he thought her Umteyra Begoom.

“Hobble on, old woman!” he said. “Help your daughter bring a son into the world. For a son means a man, a man means a fight, and a fight means loot. And,” turning to Mustaffa, “speaking about loot—I like your waistshawl, which seems of excellent Bokharan fabric, your fur cap which will well fit my head, and your thonged shoes which will look better on my feet than on yours. Hand them over! Toll for the freedom of your road home!”

“Squint-eye! Crooked-mouth!” cursed Mustaffa while, at his elbow, Nurmahal whispered to him to be done and give in and hurry. For what was the worth of cap and shawl and shoes when, perhaps, it meant his wife’s life and his child’s? “Hail!” he cried. “It is not by my will that you take these things—” throwing them in the other’s face—“nor, some day soon, will it be by your will that I shall take your life.”

Bare-headed, barefooted, unbelted he walked on, furious that he, Mustaffa-of-the-Tricks, should be tricked and tricked again; and, farther up the hill, the red-bearded Zunni Khel slapped his thighs with grim amusement when he saw him and opined that a plucked rooster had no right to wear fighting-spurs.

He pointed at Mustaffa's sword.

"Let me have it!" he said.

"Aye—through your heart!" exclaimed Mustaffa, forgetting his wife, forgetting Nurmahal, forgetting everything but his hate and rage—and out at the other with a clatter of iron.

"Good enough!" laughed the Zunni Khel. "Here are we two hardy men to the fore—and let the women wait! *Wah!*"—with a flailing blow, immediately parried—"but you'll look well on a stretching-board!"

They danced about, lunging, thrusting, advancing, receding, lustily seeking to bring death to each other by point as well as edge. For a long time they fought, being evenly matched, while Nurmahal watched, breathless, excited.

She, too, had forgotten Jahanara; forgotten why she was here. She clapped her hands. Hill-bred she was, as were the men—and had not her father, dead these many years, told her how, in his youth, he had been up the road and down the road, going among strange swords with a sword of his own, as had his father and his grandfather?

Then, suddenly, she remembered. Her face flushed. She gave a guilty start. But, clever girl, she knew that Mustaffa was now too deep in his savage mood to listen to reason—knew another way to make him mind.

"Ho!" she cried contemptuously. "You are mighty long about a small fight!"

"Am I?"—and, at once, Mustaffa's hot, swift sword hissed through the air and slashed across the other's chest.

The Zunni Khel fell on the ground, bawling la-

mentably as big men will and trying to stanch the copious flow of blood; and Mustaffa bent over him.

"If I had time," he said, "I would finish this business and kill you today. But—did I not tell you so before?—I came here for life and not for death—and I must hurry home."

So he took back his small dagger; took the other's fur cap and waistshawl and shoes; helped himself, as an afterthought, to a handsome bracelet that clasped the wounded man's stout wrist; and went with Nurmahal over the brow of the Kohee-Baba range into the lands of his own people.

Already the sinking sun was gold and lavender as they reached his house. From the inside came a low, weak moaning; and he snapped his fingers to guard against ill-fortune.

"Have I bartered her life," he said, "for the sake of a fight?"

He was about to rush in. But Nurmahal stopped him. She told him to let woman do woman's business, and she went inside.

He waited.

He was prey to a terrible loneliness—a spiritual loneliness he would have called it had the word been in the rough dictionary of his life . . . yes!—so lonely—and yet, just beyond the threshold, were the two women: the one he loved—and the other—his wife . . .

As he thought of her, something crept over his soul that put a mist into his eyes.

He tried not to think—not to think at all.

He stared into the distance. He watched the sun sink deeper and deeper, striking the jagged cliffs

with dusted purple, finally dying out in a coppery haze. He watched the moon come up and reel above him through the clouds; watched a far, solitary peak pointing at the mute stars, like a gigantic icicle, frozen, austere, desolate.

Somewhere, suddenly, a dog barked—was suddenly silent.

He shivered.

Then he heard his name called. Nurmahal was standing beside him. Without a word she pointed at the house. He crossed the threshold and closed the door behind him.

He walked over to his wife's couch. Cuddled in her arms lay a tiny bundle—a bundle that was alive—that cried protestingly.

He stretched out a hand; felt the small, selfish clutch of baby fingers; and he heard his wife's voice—it sounded as if it came from very far off:

"Such a boy I have borne my lord! Such a little hero! Look! Already a bit of a quirk in his eyes—as though some day he would rival his father in the playing of tricks . . ."

Her words feathered into a faint whisper; and he felt—he knew—that the end of days, the end of the road had come for her; and again he wondered if he had bartered her life away for the sake of crossing swords.

Perhaps she guessed what passed through his mind—indeed we say in the hills that the dying soul can read the living.

"No, no!" she said; and her voice was suddenly quite strong. "It was Fate—the will of Allah the Redeemer. . . ."

She was silent.

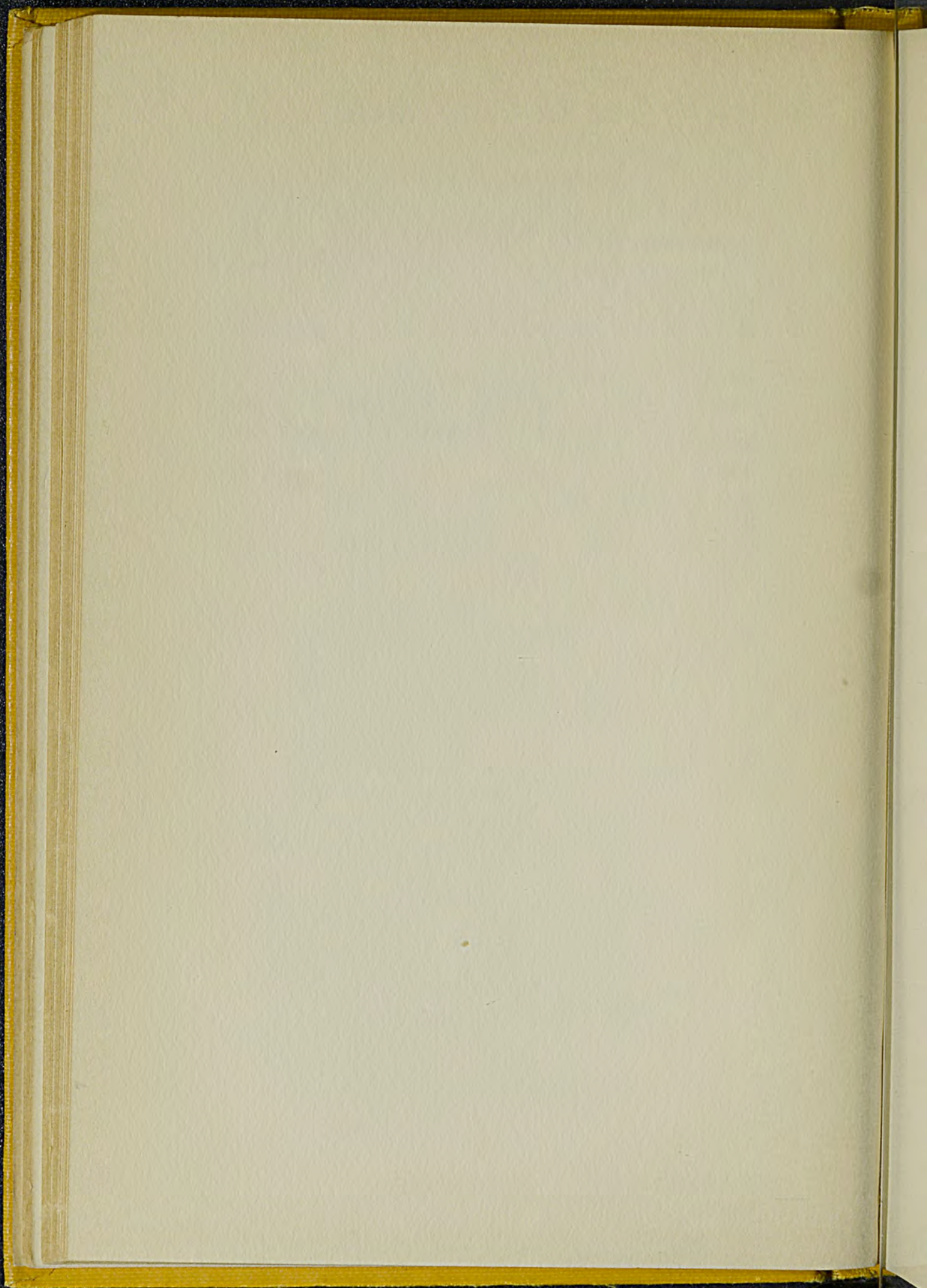
Then she went on:

"Our little son will need another mother when I am gone . . . ah—" in the ghost of a whisper—"Nurmahal—there is the mother for him—and the wife for you—the right wife . . . why, best beloved, you love her . . ."

"No!" he said, kissing her. "I love only you—you——"

"Oh—" she replied, with a tiny laugh—"how you can lie, Mustaffa-of-the-Tricks! And yet I would rather listen to this lie of yours than to Allah's own blessed truth. . . ."

And she spoke no more.



THE EVENING RICE

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THREE

THE EVENING RICE

Up there in the grey North a great triple tomb thrusts its frowning parapet obliquely into space. On its outer walls, to left and right of the entrance, are bas-reliefs in sea-green majolica, representing five-claw, imperial dragons.

It is the Fu-Ling, the Happy and August Tomb, where lies the T'ai Tzu, the Nurhachi, the Iron-capped Prince, the founder of the Manchu dynasty, who centuries ago swept out of the barren Central Asian wastes at the head of his host of red-skinned, flat-nosed horsemen, and turned placid China into a crimson shambles.

Last year the hereditary keeper of the sacred tomb, a Ch'i-jên, a Manchu bannerman, sold it to a moon-faced Chinese farmer for a lean sack of clipped silver taels. Next year it will house the farmer's squealing, red-bristled pigs.

And still the Manchu has his sword and the strength of his sword-arm; still the moon-faced coolie is a coward who shrinks at the swish and crackle of naked steel.

Yet, next year, the pigs will dirty the tomb's yellow imperial tiles.

And the pigs, too, are symbolic—and necessary.

For what is the evening rice without a few slivers of fried pork?

THE last time Ng Ch'u had seen him had been nearly forty years earlier in the squat little Manchu-Chinese border town of Ninguta, in the hushed shelter of an enamelled pagoda-roof that mirrored the sun rays a thousandfold, like countless intersecting rainbows—endless zigzag flashings

of electric blue and deep rose and keen, arrogant, glaucous-green, like the shooting of dragon-flies and purple-winged tropical moths. There had been murder in the other's, the Manchu's, eyes; murder in the hairy, brown fist that curled about broad, glistening steel.

But on that day he, the despised Chinese coolie, had had the whip-hand.

"A Manchu you are!" he had said; and his eyes had glistened triumphantly through meagre almond slits. "A Manchu indeed! A Pao-i bannerman, an aristocrat—sloughing your will and your passions as snakes cast their skin, brooking no master but yourself and the black desert thunder! And I am only a mud-turtle from the land of Han." He had sucked in his breath. "But—" he had continued; had slurred and stopped.

"But?"

"But—there is one thing, perhaps two, which the Huang T'ai Hou, the Empress, the Old Buddha, does not forgive—not even in a Manchu, an iron-capped prince!"—and a few more words, sibilant, staccato, and at once Yang Shen-hsiu had sheathed his dagger with a little dry, metallic click and had walked away, while Ng Ch'u had returned to his home.

There he had kowtowed deeply before an elderly peasant woman with bound feet, gnarled hands, and shrivelled, berry-brown features.

"Mother," he had said, "I am going away today. I am going away *now*. I—and the Moonbeam!"—pointing into the inner room at a lissom, blue-clad form that was bending over the cooking-pots.

"Why, Son?"

"There is Yang Shen-hsiu, the Manchu!"

"But—I thought——"

"Yes. I know. But a Manchu never forgets. And some day—perhaps tomorrow—his passion and his hatred, since he is a fool, will vanquish his fear. On that day—by Buddha and by Buddha—I shall not be here. Nor shall the Moonbeam!"

Nearly forty years earlier—and now he saw him again.

For just the fraction of a second, the unexpected sight of those glittering, hooded eyes—for he was conscious of Yang Shen-hsiu's eyes even before he saw the rest of the face: the thin nose breaking away bold and aquiline, the high cheek-bones that seemed to give beneath the pressure of the leathery, ruddy-gold skin, the compressed, sardonic lips brushed by a drooping Mandarin moustache, and the flagging, combative chin—for just the fraction of a second, the unexpected sight of those sinister eyes, rising quickly like some evil dream from the human maelstrom that streaked down Forty-second Street, threw Ng Ch'u off his guard. It conquered in him the long habit of outward self-control which he had acquired in a lifetime of tight bargaining, of matching his algebraic Mongol cunning against the equal cunning of his countrymen.

He stopped still. His round, butter-yellow face was marked by a look of almost ludicrous alarm. His tiny, pinkish button of a nose crinkled and sniffled like that of a frightened rabbit. His pudgy, comfortable little hands opened and shut convulsively. His jaw felt swollen, out of joint. His tongue seemed heavy, clogging, like something which did not belong

to him and which he must try to spit out. Little blue and crimson wheels gyrated madly in front of his bulging eyes.

Ng Ch'u was a coward. He knew it. Nor was he ashamed of it. To him a prosy, four-square, sublimely practical Chinese, reckless, unthinking courage seemed incomprehensible, and he was too honest a man to find fascination or worth in anything he could not understand.

Still it was one thing to be afraid, by which one lost no face to speak of, and another to appear afraid, by which one often lost a great deal of face *and* of profit, and so he collected himself with an effort and greeted the Manchu with his usual, faintly ironic ease of manner.

"Ten thousand years, ten thousand years!"

"And yet another year!" came the courtly reply; and, after a short pause, "Ah—friend Ng Ch'u!" Showing that recognition had been mutual.

They looked at each other, smiling, tranquil, touching palm to palm. They were carefully, even meticulously, dressed: the Chinese in neat pin-stripe worsted, bowler hat, glossy cordovan brogues that showed an inch of brown-silk hose, and a sober shepherd's plaid necktie in which twinkled a diamond horseshoe pin; the Manchu in pontifical Prince Albert and shining high hat with the correct eight reflections. Both, at least sartorially, were a very epitome of the influence of West over East.

In that motley New York crowd, nobody could have guessed that here, in neat pin-stripe worsted and pontifical Prince Albert, stood tragedy incarnate: tragedy that had started, four decades earlier, in a Manchu-Chinese border town, with a girl's soft song

flung from a painted balcony; that had threatened to congeal into the darkening blood, and that had faded out in a whispered, sardonic word about the Huang T'ai Hou, the Empress, the old Buddha, and a coolie's stupendous Odyssey from a mud-chinked Ninguta hut to a gleaming Fifth Avenue shop; tragedy that, by the same token, had started four centuries earlier when red-faced, flat-nosed Tartars, led by iron-capped Manchu chiefs, had poured out of Central Asia, to be met by submissiveness—the baffling submissiveness of placid, yellow China—the submissiveness of a rubber ball that jumps back into place the moment you remove the pressure of your hand—the submissiveness of a race that, being old and wise, prefers the evening meal of rice and fried pork to epic, clanking heroics.

For a moment Ng Ch'u wondered—and shivered slightly at the thought—if Yang Shen-hsiu's perfectly tailored coat might hold the glimmer of steel. Then he reconsidered. This was New York, and the noon hour, and Forty-second Street, youthful, shrill, but filled with tame, warm conveniences, and safe—sublimely safe.

"I hope I see you well, honourable Manchu?" he asked casually, lighting an expensive, gold-tipped cigarette with fingers that were quite steady.

"Thank you," replied Yang Shen-hsiu. "I am in excellent health. And yourself?"

"Nothing to complain of."

"And—" purred the Manchu; and, beneath the gentle, gliding accents, the other could sense the hard, unfaltering resolve of hatred emerging from the dim, wiped-over crepuscule of forty years into new, brazen, arrogant freedom—"the—Moonbeam?"

"Is the Moonbeam no longer."

"Her spirit has leaped the dragon gate—has rejoined the spirits of her worthy ancestors?"

"No, no." Ng Ch'u gave a little, lopsided laugh. "But the Moonbeam—alas!—has become Madame Full Moon. She has grown exceedingly fat. As fat as a peasant's round measure of butter. *Ahee! ahoo!* Age fattens all—age softens all—and everything——" His voice trembled a little, and he repeated, "All and everything!"

Then, rather anxiously, his head to one side, with a patient and inquiring glance in his eyes,

"Does it not, Yang Shen-hsiu?"

The latter scratched his cheek delicately with a long, highly polished finger-nail.

"Yes," he said unhurriedly. "Age softens all and everything—except belike——"

"So there are exceptions?" came the meek query.

"Yes, Ng Ch'u. Three." A light eddied up in the glittering, hooded eyes. "A sword, a stone, and—ah—a Manchu."

Ng Ch'u dropped his cigarette. He put his fingers together, nervously, tip against tip.

"You have recently arrived in America?" he asked after a short silence.

He spoke with a sort of bored, indifferent politeness, merely as if to make conversation. But the other looked up sharply. The ghost of a smile curled his thin lips.

"My friend," he replied, "I, too, am familiar with the inexplicable laws of these foreign barbarians which put the yellow man even beneath the black in human worth and civic respect. I, too, know that we of the black-haired race are not permitted to enter

this free land—unless we be students or great merchants or dignitaries of China or came here years ago—like you. I realise, furthermore, that babbling, leaky tongues can whisper cunning words to the immigration authorities—can spill the tea for many a worthy coolie who makes his living here on the strength of a forged passport. But—” smoothly, calmly, as Ng Ch’u tried to interrupt, “it so happened that the Old Buddha looked upon me with favour before she resigned her earthly dignities and ascended the dragon. I, the very undeserving one, have been showered with exquisite honours. Very recently I was sent to America in an official capacity. Thus—as to the Chinese exclusion law, also as to babbling, leaky tongues that whisper here and there—do not trouble, Ng Ch’u. Your tongue might catch cold—and would not that cause your honourable teeth to shrivel?”

He paused, stared at the other, then—and a tremor ran over his hawkish features, as a ripple is seen upon a stagnant pool even before the wind of storm strikes it—went on in a voice that was low and passionless, yet pregnant with stony, enormous resolve.

“Coolie! I have never forgotten the Moonbeam. I have never forgotten that once the thought of her played charming cadences on the lute of my youthful soul. I have never forgotten that once her image was the painted pleasure-boat that floated gently on the waters of my dream-ruffled sleep. I—ah—I have never forgotten that once the Moonbeam was a yellow, silken rose, and that a coolie brushed the bloom from her petals with his objectionable lips. No—I have never forgotten.”

"And—" asked Ng Ch'u, a little diffident, but quite matter-of-fact, like a bazaar trader who is not yet sure of the size of his customer's purse and must therefore bargain circumspectly—"is there no way to—make you forget?"

"Assuredly there is a way," the Manchu laughed.

"Oh——?"

"What sayeth the Li-Ki——? 'Do not try to fathom what has not yet arrived! Do not climb the tree if you wish to catch fish!'"

And Yang Shen-hsiu went on his way, while Ng Ch'u looked after him with a rather comical expression of devout concentration of his round face, clasping and unclasping his short, pudgy fingers, pursing, his lips, and emitting a sort of melancholy whistle.

He was a coward, and very much afraid. He was only a coolie, though the receiving teller of the Hudson National Bank purred civilly over his deposit-slips.

And the other? A Manchu. An aristocrat. A sharp hatchet of a man who cleaved his way through life. Why, even Yang Shen-hsiu's back, beneath the prim and decorous folds of the Prince Albert, gave an impression of steely, ruthless efficiency—the efficiency of a hawk's claw and a snake's fang.

"Assuredly," Ng Ch'u said to himself, as he turned east down Forty-second Street, "if I were a fool, I would now write to China and complete my funeral arrangements. I would order longevity boards of seasoned wood and cause the priests to pick out a charming retreat for my earthly remains. Too, if I were a fool, I might quote the Book of Ceremonies and Outer Observances to the tiger about to gore me. Ah—but I am not a fool—I am only a coward—I beg

your pardon!" as, his head sunk on his chest, he bumped into an indignant dowager who came from a department store, her plump arms crowded with bargains. "I beg your pardon——"

"Goodness! Can't you see where you're going——?"

A bundle dropped. Ng Ch'u bent to pick it up. So did the woman. Ng Ch'u straightened up again and, in the process, butted her chin with a round face that was still earnestly apologetic.

Another bundle dropped. People stopped, snickered, nudged each other. The woman suppressed unwomanly words. Ng Ch'u then decided to go away from there.

"*Haya! haya!*" he continued in his thoughts as he went on his way. "Blessed be the Excellent Lord Gautama who made me a coward! For—is there a keener foresight, a better protection, than fear?"

And, head erect, he walked along, toward his uptown shop that faced Fifth Avenue, beneath an enormous sign bearing his name in braggart, baroque, gilt letters, with a profusion of China's and Japan's choicest wares—dim, precious things—bronzes mellowed with the patina of the swinging centuries and embroideries and white and green and amber jade; kakemonos in sepia and gold and pigeon-grey, on which the brush of an artist long since dead had retraced the marvels of some capital of the Ashikaga dynasty; ancient koto harps with plectrums of carved ivory; satsuma bowls enamelled with ho-ho birds; but mostly the porcelains of China—porcelains of all periods—Wen-tchang statuettes in aubergine and lambent yellow Kang-he ginger-jars painted with blue and white hawthorn sprays, Keen-lung egg-shell

plates with backs of glowing ruby, Yung-ching peach-blow whose ruddy-brown shimmered with flecks of silver and green and pink like the first touch of spring that is coaxing the colours from the shy sepal of the peach-blossom.

He loved porcelains. They represented to him more than money, more than success. He had attached himself to their study as an old Florentine attached himself to the study of theology, caring nothing for religion, but with a sort of icy-cold, impersonal, scientific passion. Somehow—for there *was* his fabulous Odyssey, from a mud-chinked Ninguta hut to a gleaming Fifth Avenue shop—these porcelains were to him the apex of his life, the full, richly flavoured sweetness of his achievement; and he often gently teased the Moonbeam, who had become Madame Full Moon, because, in their neat Pell Street flat, she preferred to eat her evening rice from heavy, white American stoneware with a border of improbable forget-me-nots.

"Good morning," he smiled as he crossed the threshold of his shop.

"Good morning, sir," came the answering chorus from the half dozen Chinese clerks, while his chief salesman, Wen Pao, stepped forward and told him that, an hour earlier, his good customer, Mrs. Peter Van Dissel, had come in and bargained about that pale-blue Suen-tih Ming bowl with the red fish moulded as handles.

"Seven thousand I asked," said Wen Pao. "Five thousand she offered—then five thousand five hundred—then six thousand. She will return tomorrow. Then she and I will talk business." He smiled. "The eye of desire fattens the price," he added.

"Ah—excellent!" replied Ng Ch'u. "Trade indeed revolves like a wheel. She can have the bowl for six thousand five hundred dollars. It is a noble piece, worthy of a coral-button Mandarin's collection."

He turned to look at the sheaf of letters that awaited his perusal on a teak-wood table at the back of the store.

Then, suddenly, he again addressed the clerk.

"Wen Pao," he said. "I have reconsidered. The bowl is not for sale."

"Oh—?" the other looked astonished.

"No," repeated Ng Ch'u. "It is not for sale. Put it in the small safe in my private office. One of these days, when a certain necessary thing shall have been pleasantly accomplished, I shall use the bowl myself, to eat therefrom my evening rice. There is no porcelain in the world," he went on rather academically, "like ancient Ming marked on the reverse side with the honourific seal of peace, longevity, and harmonious prosperity. It rings sweetly—like a lute made of glass—under the chopsticks' delicate touch."

"Ho!" whispered Nag En Hin, the American-born son of Nag Hop Fat, the Pell Street soothsayer, who had recently graduated from high school. "In the estimation of some people the strings of their cotton drawers are equivalent to a Manchu's silken breeches of state."

Ng Ch'u had overheard.

"They *are* equivalent, little, little paper tiger without teeth," he purred—"in durability——"

He turned and bowed low before a customer who had entered the shop; and, for the next three hours, there was in his coward's heart hardly a thought of his old enemy. Only dimly the figure of Yang Shen-

hsiu jutted into the outer rim of his consciousness, like a tritling annoyance, which, presently, when the time was ripe, he would cause to pass out of his consciousness altogether.

Nor, except indirectly, did he speak of him to the Moonbeam that night, after he had returned to his Pell Street flat that, close to the corner of Mott, faced the gaudy, crimson-bedaubed joss temple—he rather liked its proximity. Not that he believed much in the ancient divinities—the Tsaou Kwo-kiu who sits on a log, the Han Seang-tse who rides upon a fan, the Chang-Ho-laou who stands on a frog, the Ho Seen-koo astride a willow-branch, or any of the other many idols, Buddhist or Taoist. For he was a Chinese, thus frankly, sneeringly irreligious. But he had rare, thaumaturgical moments when his bland-philosophical soul craved a few ounces of hygienic stimulant in the form of incense-powder sending up curling, aromatic smoke, a dully booming gong, a priest's muttered incantations before the gilt shrine, or a meaningless prayer or two written on scarlet paper and then chewed and swallowed.

It was so tonight.

"Moonbeam," he said to his little fat wife, who smiled at his entry as she had smiled at him every day these forty years, ever since she had married him, the coolie, in preference to a Manchu who had courted her riotously, swaggeringly, extravagantly, willing to leap all barriers of caste, "I think that after the evening rice I shall go to the temple and burn a couple of Hunshuh incense-sticks before the three gods of happiness—the Fo, the Lo, and the Cho." He smiled amusedly at the thought. "Perhaps the gods are powerless to help me," he added with pa-

tronizing tolerance, "perhaps they are not. Still—" again he smiled and waved a pudgy hand.

The Moonbeam continued setting the table for dinner.

"You are in trouble, Great One?" she asked, quite casually, over her shoulder.

"Oh—the jackal howls in the distance," he answered, metaphorically, easing his plump body into a comfortable American rocking-chair. "Yes——" He lit a cigarette. "The jackal howls. Loudly and arrogantly. And yet—will my old buffalo die therefore?"

She did not reply. Nor was she worried.

For she knew Ng Ch'u. For forty years she had lived in intimate daily alliance with him, physically and psychically. She knew that he was a one-ideal man who always surrendered completely to the eventual aim and object of his slow, patient, persistent, slightly nagging decision; who never took the second step before he was sure of the first; who possessed, at the core of his meek, submissive soul, a tremendous, almost pagan capacity to resolve his mind in his desire, and his desire in the actual, practical deed. Yes—she knew him. And never since that day in the little Manchu-Chinese border town when she had become his bride, according to the sacred rites, with all the traditional ceremonies complete from *kuei-chü* to *laoh-shin-fang*, had she doubted either his kindness or his wisdom; never, though often she walked abroad, in Pell Street, to swap the shifting, mazed gossip of Chinatown, had she envied the other women—whites and half-castes and American-born Chinese—their shrill, scolding, flaunting, naked freedom; always had she been satisfied to regulate her life accord-

ing to the excellent Confucius' three rules of wifely behaviour: not to have her marital relations known beyond the threshold of her apartment, either for good or for evil; to refrain from talkativeness, and, outside of household matters where she reigned supreme, to take no step and to arrive at no conclusion on her own initiative.

Ng Ch'u was in trouble. He was the Great One. Presently he would conquer the trouble.

What, then, was there to worry about?

And so, dinner over, she busied her fat, clever little hands with strips of blue-and-blue embroidery, while he prepared for himself the first pipe of the evening—"the pipe of august beginning," as he called it.

"Ah!" he sighed contentedly, as he kneaded the opium cube with agile fingers, stuck the needle into the lamp, the flame of which, veiled by butterflies and moths of green enamel, sparkled like an emerald, dropped the red-hot little pellet into a plain bamboo pipe without tassels or ornaments, and, both shoulders well back, inhaled the soothing fumes at one long whiff—"this black bamboo pipe was white once—white as my youth—and the kindly drug has coloured it black with a thousand and ten thousand smokes. It is the best pipe in the world. No pipe of precious wood or ivory or tortoise-shell or jade or carved silver can ever come near that bamboo."

He stopped; prepared a second pipe. The fizzing of the amber opium drops as they evaporated over the lamp accentuated the silence.

Presently he spoke again.

"Moonbeam!"

"Yes, Great One?"

She leaned forward, across the table. Her

wrinkled, honey-coloured old face, framed by great, smooth wings of jet-black hair, loomed up in the ring of light from the swinging kerosene lamp.

"An ancient pipe," he repeated, "blackened with a thousand and ten thousand smokes. *Ahee—*" he slurred; then went on, "such as——"

Again he halted. Then he continued, just a little diffidently, a little self-consciously, as, Mongol to the core, he considered the voicing of intimate sentiments between husband and wife slightly indelicate—"such as our love, Moonbeam—burned deep and strong and black by a thousand and ten thousand days of mutual knowledge——"

She looked at him. She rose. She put her arms about him.

They were rather ludicrous, those two. Yellow, fat, crinkled, old, decidedly ugly. Standing there, holding each other close, in the centre of the plain little room. With the garish lights of Pell Street winking through the well-washed window-curtains, the symphony of Pell Street skirling in with a belching, tawdry chorus; a street organ trailing a brassy, syncopated jazz; the hectic splutter and hiss of a popcorn-man's cart; some thick, passionate words flung up from a shadow-blotched postern, then dropping into the gutter: "Gee, kid, I'm sure nuts about you!" "G'wan, yer big slob, tell it t' the marines——"

Yes. Ludicrous, that scene.

And ludicrous, perhaps, the Moonbeam's words, in guttural, staccato Chinese:

"Great One! Truly, truly, all the real world is enclosed for me in your heart!"

He looked at her from beneath heavy, opium-red-dened eyelids.

"Moonbeam," he said, "once you could have been a Manchu's bride."

She gave a quaint, giggling, girlish, high-pitched little laugh.

"Once," she replied, "the ass went seeking for horns—and lost its ears." She patted his cheeks. "I am a coolie's fat old woman, Great One! An old coolie's fat, useless old woman——"

"Little Moonbeam," he whispered, "little, little Moonbeam——"

It was the voice of forty years ago, stammering, passionate, tender. He held her very close.

Then, unhurriedly, he released her. Unhurriedly, he left the room, walked down the stairs and over to the joss temple.

There—his tongue in his cheek, his mind smiling at his soul—he went through a certain intricate ritual, with shreds of scarlet paper, and incense sticks, and pieces of peach-wood especially dreaded by ghosts.

Yu Ch'ang, the priest, watched him, and—since even holy men must eat and drink—suggested that, perhaps, the other might like sacerdotal intercession with the *Shang Ti*, the Supreme Ruler of Heaven.

Ng Ch'u laughed.

"I have always avoided middlemen," he said. "That's how I made my fortune. Shall I then offend the deity by talking through a priest's greedy lips?"

And he left the joss temple, and walked out into the street.

It was late. Rain, that had started in fluttering, flickering rags, had driven both dwellers and sight-seers to shelter. Black, silent, the night looked down. Across the road, from his flat, the lights sprang out warm and snug and friendly. But he remembered

that there was some urgent business matter he had to talk over with Ching Shan, the retired merchant who was his silent partner, and that at this hour he would be most likely to find him sipping a cup of hot wine in the back room of Nag Hong Fah's restaurant, which, for yellow men exclusively, was known euphoniously as the Honourable Pavilion of Tranquil Longevity.

So he turned towards Mott Street. But he kept to the middle of the street, and he stepped slowly, warily, heels well down, arms carefully balanced, head jerked slightly forward, his whole body poised for instant shift or flight, all his senses primed to give quick warning of anything unusual or minatory.

For again, now that he was alone, fear of Yang Shen-hsiu had rushed upon him full-armed; and here—with the sodden, pitchy blanket of night painting the shadows with deeper shadows, and the rain-whipped streets deserted by everybody—was the very place where murder might happen, had happened in the past, in Tong war and private feud.

Ng Ch'u shivered. Should he turn back, make a run for his home?

And—what then?

Tomorrow was another day. Tomorrow the sun would shine golden and clear. True. But tomorrow the Manchu would still be the Manchu; and Ng Ch'u was sure of two things: that Yang Shen-hsiu would plot his speedy death, and that, even supposing he broke the unwritten law of Pell Street, it would be quite useless to go to the police of the red-haired devils and ask them for protection.

For could he, the merchant, accuse the other, the great Chinese dignitary sent to America on a diplo-

matic mission? And of what? What could he say?

Could he make these foreigners believe in this tale of China, of forty years ago? Could he tell them that he and the other had been in love with the same girl, that she had preferred the coolie to the aristocrat, and that the latter had sworn revenge? Could he tell them that those had been the days directly after China's war of eighteen hundred and sixty against France and England, when the imperial court had been compelled to leave Peking and flee to Jehol, when the Summer Palace had been taken and sacked by the barbarians, when a shameful treaty had been forced on the Middle Kingdom, and when the Huang T'ai Hou, the Empress, the Old Buddha, had issued an edict that, until a "more propitious time" the lives of foreigners should be sacred in the land of Han? Could he tell them how he had found out that the Manchu, in a fit of rage, had murdered, and quietly buried, a British missionary; how thus, by threatening exposure to the Peking authorities, he had held the whip-hand; how, discretion being the better part of valour, he and the Moonbeam had emigrated to America; and how now, today, forty years later, he had met the Manchu here, in New York—still the same Manchu—hawkish, steely, ruthless——?

Ng Ch'u shook his head.

He could imagine what Bill Devoy, detective of Second Branch and Pell Street specialist, would say:

"Cut it out! Ye've been hittin' the old pipe too hard. What? Manchu? Dowager Empress? Moonbeam? Missionary? Revenge? Say—ye've blown in too many dimes on them—now—seven-reelers! Keep away from the movies, Chinkie—see?"

Ng Ch'u jumped sidewise rapidly as he heard a rustling noise. Then he smiled apologetically—it had just been a dim stir of torn bits of paper whirled about by a vagabond wind—and turned, at a sudden right angle, towards Nag Hong Fah's Great Chop Suey Restuarant where it slashed the purple, trailing night with a square of yellow light.

A minute later, his heart beating like a trip-hammer, he was up the stairs. Two minutes later, outwardly composed, he bowed, his hands clasped over his chest, to the company of merchants who were gathered in the Honourable Pavilion of Tranquil Longevity, some quietly smoking or sipping tea, others gossiping, still others playing at *hsiang ch'i* chess and *ta ma*.

The soft, gliding hum of voices, the sizzling of the opium lamps, the sucking of boiling-hot tea drunk by compressed lips, the clicks of the copper and ivory counters—it was all tremendously peaceful and reassuring; and Ng Ch'u sighed contentedly as he dropped into a chair by the side of Ching Shan, his silent partner, and began talking to him in an undertone about a shipment of Sheba pottery which could be picked up at a bargain in San Francisco.

Presently, business over, he asked a question.

"Brother very old and very wise," he said, "what are the protections of the day and the night against an evil man?"

Ching Shan was known throughout Pell Street for his stout wisdom—a reputation which he upheld by quoting esoterically and didactically from some hoary tome of learning, whenever asked a question, and then reinforcing his opinion by a yet lengthier quotation from another book.

"Ng Ch'u," he replied, "it has been reported in the Shu King that the sage Wu once spoke as follows: 'I have heard that the good man, doing good, finds the day sufficient, and the night, and that the evil man, doing evil, also finds the day insufficient, and the night.'" He paused, looked around him, made sure that not only Ng Ch'u but also the rest of the company were listening to him attentively, and continued: "Yet, as to the evil man, and the good, has it not furthermore been said that the correct doctrine of the good man is to be true to the principles of his nature and the benevolent exercise of these principles when dealing with others?"

"Even when dealing with evil men?" asked Ng Ch'u.

"Decidedly, little brother."

"Ah—" smiled Ng Ch'u, "and the principle of my nature has always been to see that I have pork with my evening rice—to bargain close and tight—to know the worth of money——"

"Money," said Nag Hong Fah, the restaurant proprietor, "which is the greatest truth in the world——"

"Money," chimed in Yung Long, the wealthy wholesale grocer, "which is mastery and power and sway and shining achievement——"

"Money," said Ching Shan rather severely, since he had retired from active business affairs and was not worried by financial troubles, "which is good only when used by a purified desire and a righteous aim——"

"What aim more righteous," rejoined Ng Ch'u, "than peace and happiness and the evening rice——"

And then, quite suddenly, a hush fell over the Hon-

ourable Pavilion of Tranquil Longevity. Tea cups were held tremblingly in mid-air. Pipes dropped. Voices were stilled.

For there, framed in the doorway, stood three figures, lean, tall, threatening; faces masked by black neckerchiefs; pistols held steadily in yellow hands.

"Oh—Buddha!" screamed Nag Hong Fah. "The hatchetmen—the hatchetmen——"

"Silence, obese grandfather of a skillet!" said the tallest of the three. "Silence—or——" His voice was terse and metallic; his pistol described a significant half-circle and drew a bead on the restaurant proprietor's stout chest. He took a step nearer into the room, while his two colleagues kept the company covered. "My friends," he said, "I have not come here to harm anybody—except——"

His eyes searched the smoke-laden room, and, as if drawn by a magnet, Ng Ch'u rose and waddled up to him.

"Except to kill me?" he suggested meekly.

"Rightly guessed, older brother," smiled the other. "I regret—but what is life—eh?—and what is death? A slashing of throats! A cutting of necks! A jolly ripping of jugular veins!" He laughed behind his mask and drew Ng Ch'u towards him with a strong, clawlike hand.

The latter trembled like a leaf.

"Honourable killer," he asked, "there is, I take it, no personal rancour against me in your heart?"

"Not a breath—not an atom—not a sliver! It is a mere matter of business!"

"You have been sent by somebody else to kill me—perhaps by——!"

"Let us name no names. I have indeed been sent by—somebody."

Ng Ch'u looked over his shoulder at Ching Shan who sat there, very quiet, very disinterested.

"Ching Shan," he said, "did you not say that the correct doctrine of the good man is to be true to his principles and the benevolent exercise of these principles?"

"Indeed!" wonderingly.

"Ah—" gently breathed Ng Ch'u, and again he addressed the hatchetman. "Honourable killer," he said, "the nameless party—who sent you here—how much did he promise you for causing my spirit to join the spirits of my ancestors?"

"But——"

"Tell me. How much?"

"Five hundred dollars!"

Ng Ch'u smiled.

"Five hundred dollars—eh?—for killing me?" he repeated.

"Yes, yes!" exclaimed the astonished hatchetman.

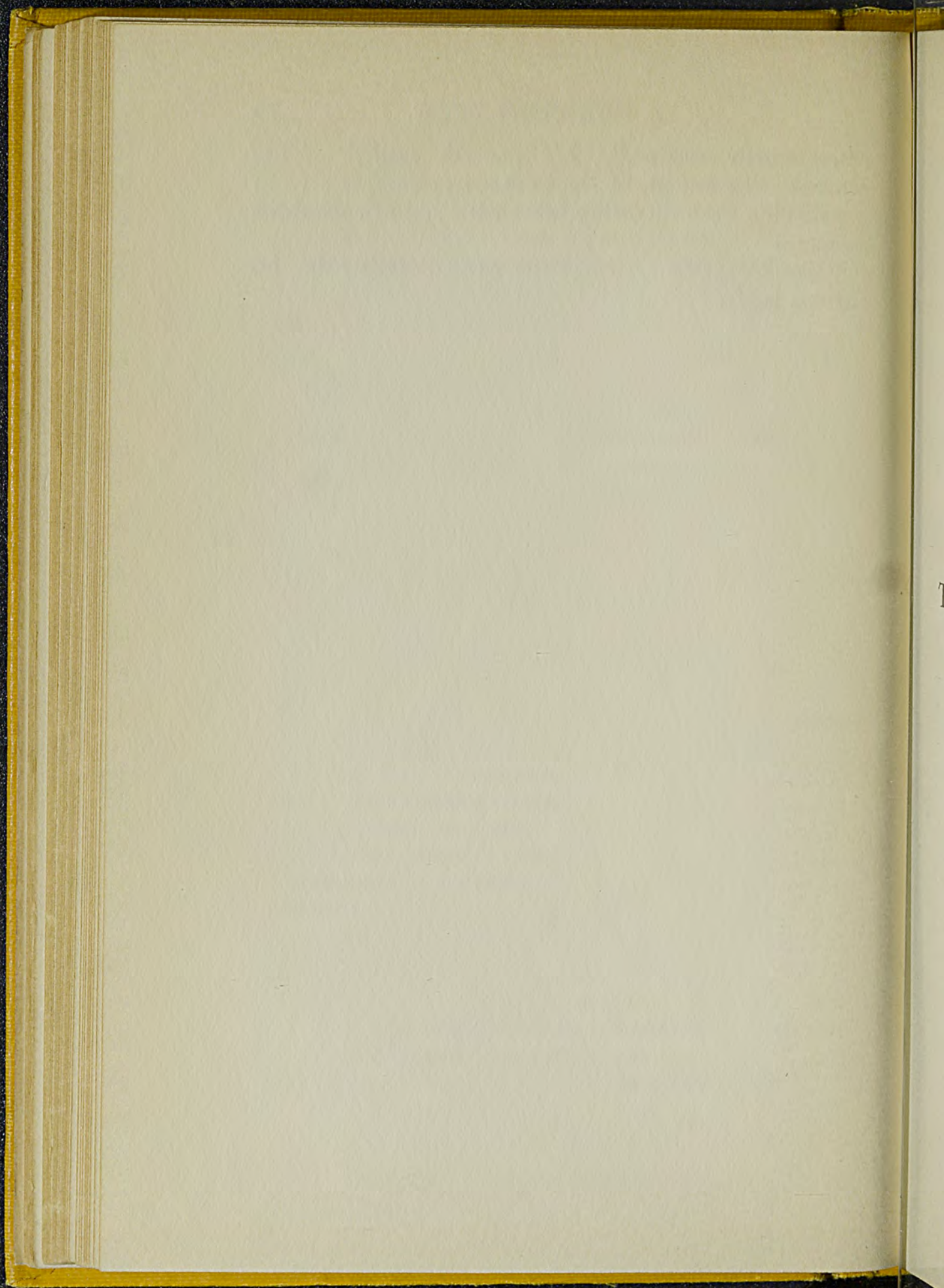
"Five hundred dollars—eh?—for killing me?" he rebroke into burgling laughter. "Correct doctrine to be true to one's own principles! Principles of barter and trade—my principles—the coolie's principles—*Ahee!—ahoo!—ahai!* Here, hatchetman!" His voice was now quite steady. Steady was the hand with which he drew a thick roll of bills from his pocket. "Here are five hundred dollars—and yet another hundred! Go! Go and kill *him*—him who sent you!"

And, late that night, back in his neat little flat, Ng Ch'u turned casually to his wife.

"Moonbeam," he said, "the little trouble has been

satisfactorily settled." He paused, smiled. "Tomorrow," he added, "I shall eat my evening rice from a pale-blue Suen-tih Ming bowl with red fish moulded as handles."

"Yes, Great One," came the Moonbeam's calm, incurious reply.



THE TALE THE DRUM TOLD

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THE TALE THE DRUM TOLD

OFTEN in after years, in a distant part of the world, Pitts Burton would remember the happening.

He would remember it vividly, at length, in detail, even now that the pain and futility of it had passed; too, he would remember it at incongruous moments, in the midst of a gay dinner party, or driving his ball from the first tee of the Sleepy Hollow links, or perhaps during a walk up Fifth Avenue, as though his spirit had winged back and crashed into an air pocket of memory. And with it would come to his ears the ghost of Mahdi Ibrahim's drum; its thud and drone, the tok-tak-tok, staccato, tenuous, increasing, then a solid wall of sounds, suddenly receding in a way that seemed sinister, like a riddle of incomplete achievement—his life, and the woman's fate.

Of course, he remembered his house in Tugurt, in the heart of the Arab town, with its flat roof a little higher than the sea of roofs which tossed about it, the near distance dominated by the green poem of the Shafyieh mosque, the rim of the street barred by a screen of dark, lanky palms driven straight into the fox-brown earth like iron candlesticks, and beyond them the bazaar quarter, a snailshell containing all the windings of traffic and barter.

He had come to Tunis to stay a week; had remained to stay out the season.

For he liked the land, the people, the faith. It was all so uncomplex; that praying Arab whom he could see from the roof top where he spent the cool evening hours—what a close intimacy with his God! What a nonchalance of dreamy sensuousness in those delicate-faced, delicate-robed Tunisian dandies who strolled down the street! What a superb harmony and singleness of purpose in all this land!

It seemed as if the irking soul had gone out from it and blended back with the surge of the desert. It gave a sense of complete ease and disburdenment. It made a minimum demand on the intellect. It disregarded the mechanical chaos, the hysterical mental charnel-house of the Occident, and wrote simple things—wrote them large and bold and clear upon a background of vast spaces and vague distances.

Yes. He had liked it from the first; had remained, though he said to himself that sooner or later he would return to America, that this half year was going to be only an interlude, a sentence in brackets, not meant to influence the flowing tale of his life.

He never knew how Mahdi Ibrahim had happened to come up that evening. But there he was, as he had often seen him in the market square, squatting on slippered heels, the flat, rush-woven basket a few feet away.

"Snakes, *yah Sidi?*" he asked. "They dance when I order them. Want to see?"

"Sure they don't bite?"

"Not as long as I beat the drum, *Sidi.*"

"And if you stop——"

The Arab shrugged his shoulders. "*Fi aman 'illah,*" he said—"we are all in the guardianship of God."

"Small consolation!" smiled Pitts Burton.

But he settled himself comfortably in the shadow of the high marble parapet that circled the roof, preparing to watch. At his back, by standing on tiptoes and craning his neck, he could see the roof top of the next house and beyond it others, flat, white, stretching away into the lavender-misted evening, gradually blending into the distance without a break.

The neighbouring house had been empty until this morning when an Arab family had moved in with a great deal of hustle and confusion and laughter. A rich and orthodox Shareefian clan, evidently—for the women had driven up in a carriage with tightly closed wooden shutters, supervised by a gigantic Kisslar Agassi, or head eunuch; a band of Jewish musicians had blared a paean of welcome; market porters had come carrying baskets of roses and hyacinths and geranium leaves and digitalis, while other porters had balanced the household goods on turbaned heads—chairs and mattresses and French mirror wardrobes, gaily painted chests, kitchen utensils, brass pestles and mortars, huge zinc trunks and beds and ivory inlaid tabourets, rugs, pillows, *derboukas* and *rebabas*, yellow plates and copper braziers. A dozen negresses, swinging pails and brooms, had invaded the front gate; and early in the afternoon, regarded with superstitious and admiring eyes by all the neighbourhood, a white-haired, shrivelled negro had squatted on the threshold to propitiate the scorpions that swarm in old Arab houses. He had been surrounded by the magic properties of his craft—a ragged end of carpet, three torn conjuring books, a small bag of sand, another filled with dried beans, and a square, battered, shiny box on which he seemed to put especial value and which on closer inspection, Burton, who

had joined the throng, had discovered to be an ancient cocoa tin.

The negro had spent an hour over his incantations—"to make peace with the scorpions," Nadj Omar, Burton's house boy and dragoman, had explained, "so they won't bite. Also to bring luck to the house of Si Mohammed el-Busiri."

"Is that my new neighbour's name?"

"Yes," Nadj Omar had replied; adding in the amazing mixture of English slang which he had picked up from tourists and during a journey as stoker to Liverpool and back, "No end bloody swanky family—descendants of the Prophet and all that sort of rot—eh what, old dear?"

Even now Burton still heard a commotion behind the parapet—a heavy dragging of furniture; a girl's high laugh; a faint shimmering and brushing of guttural voices; the Kisslar Agassi's peaked falsetto as he berated a female servant:

"What manners be these, *yah oudj al-gahss*—O countenance of misfortune! *Allah ijjiblah rehba rama*—may Allah send an earthquake to destroy thee!"

A woman's sniffing whine. Then:

"O almost entirely destitute of shame!" the exclamation mark being supplied by the sound of a hand evidently coming into violent contact with bare flesh.

Burton laughed. He turned to the snake-charmer.

"Proceed, Mahdi Ibrahim!"

"*Fi aman 'illah!*" repeated the latter piously.

He altered the position of his head so that it jutted sharply into the rays of the dying sun, showing a dead-white, bearded face. His left hand disappeared in the burnoose, came out with the drum. He rose

to a kneeling posture, sank back on his heels, swaying from side to side. He raised the drum on its thin silver chain. It commenced swinging, right, left, right, left, like a pendulum.

It was small, the size of a child's head, of a dull mottled ivory with a tiny orifice covered by a tightly-stretched skin. He beat it with gentle, dry taps, alternating thumb and palm of his right hand; and presently the drum spoke:

Tok-tak! Tok-tocketty-tak!—with a hiccoughy, syncopated rhythm. Tok-tocko-tok! insistingly.

He stared at the basket with a fixed, dreamy immobility. His lips opened.

"*Hayah—ho!*" he said in a wiped-over, purring voice; then, a little more loudly: "Come! Dance for me! Come, *yah bent*—O daughter!" And with sudden ferocity: "Come, *yah ikhs ya'l khammar*—O thou drunkard! Jew! Christian! Uncouth wart!"

The top of the basket gave a convulsive tremor.

Tok! sobbed the drum as with far thunder—tok-tocko-tok-tocko-tok . . . and again the top of the basket stirred, heaved; until all at once it was raised a few inches and a flat, wicked, triangular head appeared; a second; a third. They swayed from side to side, trying to locate the sound.

Tok-tok!

Three glistening lengths of rope plopped down. They coiled; uncoiled.

Never for a moment did Mahdi Ibrahim stop beating the swinging drum—left, right,—tok-tak—rhythmically; and somehow Burton was not afraid. Somehow he felt soothed and happy as if a gentle hand had taken from his soul the weight of his body. His eyes opened; closed; opened. He saw a few feet away the

snakes' eyes glimmering like mica discs with a filmy overglow; saw the tongues shoot out, reddish-black, nervous, quivering; saw the steely whips of bodies glide across the roof top with a wavy motion, a pitiless stretching of strength and cruelty, the black spots on the stripes of their sulphur-yellow, scaly skins glittering like cressets of evil desire.

The drum sobbed with a nasal cadence, with tiny, breathless pauses. The snake-charmer stared.

"Come!" he said. "My bride! My love! Come, my scented sprig of jessamine and myrrh!" And to a nine-foot male snake: "Please deign to come, O great king! O my lord! O elephant!"

Still the drum kept swinging, zumming, calling, relentless, resistless; and as if hypnotised the snakes came nearer, drawing their white bellies across the roof top with a noise of dry leaves rustling. They separated. They formed a half circle about Mahdi Ibrahim. Suddenly, as if in concerted attack, they lifted a foot of their bodies from the ground, swaying and jerking. Their jaws opened wide, exposing sneering, bluish-black gums. They bloated the loose skin on their necks so that it was like curved golden shields with sable spots. They shot out their mean flat heads, the eyes piercing in the direction of their old enemy, man, tonguing and hissing with the inherited hate and fear of a thousand generations of snakes. But calmly, dreamily, Mahdi Ibrahim stared at them. A silent battle it was, for mastery, for life and death, with the eyes the only weapon and the drum—the tok-tak-tok of the swinging ivory drum.

Then as Burton watched, first one, then another, then the third snake moved; right, left, right, following the pendulum of the drum, dancing, gyrating,

circling; right, left, right; drunk with the thumping, droning rhythm, with Mahdi Ibrahim's blurred call: "Dance—*hayah*—dance!"

And they danced faster and faster until one, then another, then the third stretched exhausted on the ground, their flat eyes closed, their striped bodies shuddering as with the weakening aftermath of a great passion.

"Ho!" cried the Arab.

He slid the drum back in his burnoose, rose, pounced upon the snakes, picked them up, two in his right, the male reptile in his left hand, crammed them quickly into the basket, closed it, tied it with a stout rope and turned to Burton with a smile and an outstretched hand.

"Is the *Sidi* satisfied?" he asked in the fluent English which he had learned years earlier in an American circus.

"Bully! Here you are." There was the clink of money. "But——"

"Yes, *Sidi*?"

"I've seen you do your little parlour trick before. You usually get the brutes up again—force them to do a second dance."

"I could not today."

"Oh?"

"The other music, *Sidi*! It interfered with my drum—made the snakes nervous."

"What other music?"

"Can't you hear?" Mahdi Ibrahim pointed to the parapet in back of the American.

The latter listened.

"You're right!" he said suddenly as, with a thin, tremulous distinctness, the pizzicato twanging of a

one-stringed guitar drifted up, sobbing softly through the gathering night that dropped with the thick, lazy dew of the tropics, jewelling a thousand spider webs, painting the palms a silvery pastel shade, clothing the spiky cactus clumps in the garden with a robe of lemon and green.

"Hush!" he whispered as the guitar coiled into a maze of baroque dissonances, an embroidery of fantastic, chromatic arabesques, as a woman's voice picked up the lilting melody and tossed it high with an abandon of eerie, wailing, minor harmonies:

*Yah benti, yah benti,
Akh idjbleq erradjel . . .*

The accompaniment lilted and quivered. It wafted as with the scent of roses. It swished like a naked wind across the sweep of the desert:

Yah benti, yah benti . . .

The voice sobbed, rose higher and higher to a clear, bell-like note, rested there trembling like a butterfly on a leaf, dropped a full octave:

Akh idjbleq . . .

It rose again with the rush and surge of a wave, with an infinite, throbbing joy of the senses, then stopped, cut off suddenly in mid-air as clean as with a knife, leaving a stark void of silence; and Pitts Burton gave a little shudder. Somehow the song had seemed to him pregnant with a vast, symbolic appeal, had seemed to hold the very soul of this Arab land, the red days, the black-winged nights and the gold-dusted sands that crept to the south.

He pulled himself together, feeling rather like a

fool. Never had he suspected in himself such a overwhelming emotional reaction to music, and so he was a little ashamed and smiled sheepishly at the snake-charmer.

"Pretty, eh?" he asked, knowing that the word was ludicrously inadequate. "What was it?"

"A love-song, *Sidi*. A love-song of the Black Tents, the Bedouin——" And then suddenly, as Burton turned to the parapet, about to raise himself and look down: "No, no! You mustn't!"

"Why not?"

"The woman who sang—she is on the roof top—the roof top next door!"

"Sure enough. That's just why I want to——"

"No! She may be unveiled!"

"Let's hope so."

"But"—the other was shocked to the depths of his narrow Moslem soul—"this is an Arab town—there are the customs——"

"All right!" laughed Burton. "You are deliciously Mid-Victorian, quite like my uncle, the Bishop." And when Mahdi Ibrahim looked surprised, catching the words without their meaning, he slapped him on the shoulder and cried: "Don't you worry. I'll behave."

Mahdi Ibrahim picked up his basket. "Shall I come back," he asked, "and make the snakes dance again?"

"Drop in any time."

"The salute, *yah Sidi!*"

"So long, old boy!"

But as soon as the other had left Burton turned once more to the parapet. He drew himself up carefully, inch by inch. He looked down.

The roof top of the house of Si Mohammed el-

Busiri was directly beneath his, only a few feet away, the outer walls touching. It lay sharp and clear in the sun's crimson afterglow, heaped with a profusion of silken rugs and pillows in rich blendings of purple and maroon and peacock-green. There were a number of tabourets with sweetmeats and bottles of perfume, a silver hubble-bubble pipe and a dwarf peach-tree in full bloom set in a square pot of turquoise-blue Persian porcelain. In the centre stood a *mazah*, a sort of pergola, closed on three sides with screens of fretted marble, while the fourth was covered by a curtain of brown wool embroidered with silver.

As he looked, the curtain moved and a woman stepped out, a guitar in her hand.

She was dressed in a long kaftan of mauve silk with a *mansouryiah*, an overdress, of spidery lace. Her tiny feet were in orange velvet slippers stitched with golden crescents. Her black hair was twisted up in an orange silk handkerchief bordered with seed-pearls.

He saw her face very clearly as she raised her chin to look at the sky. She seemed very young; perhaps seventeen, he said to himself, or eighteen—no more. She was of a light, golden complexion, the even texture of her skin enhanced by the blue tattoo mark on her forehead and by the great diamond nose-stud fastened to her left nostril. Her keen, large eyes seemed even larger through the curved frame of her immense black brows.

She crossed the roof top with the swinging gait of the desert-bred, and at every step the elastic cords and smooth, long muscles of her bare throat moved rhythmically. Different, he thought her, from the women he had known in America. The magic of

tropical stars had ripened her. The motley pageantry of tropical skies had shaped her young body.

He held himself perfectly quiet, so quiet and silent that he could hear the flutter of a moth's wings that sped past him. The woman was now directly beneath him, and a scent drifted up as, a strand of her hair escaping from under the handkerchief, she caught up the loose lock with a gesture of her rounded arm. It was not the scent of perfume or flowers but the scent of the woman herself, the aroma of her warm young body; and again, as before when he had listened to her song, a shudder ran through him, of fear—too, of longing, unformed yet overwhelming. He felt the blood in his veins singing with a puissant rhythm.

The next second, before he could drop from sight, her glance met his. She stared up at him from beneath half-closed lids. He felt the look physically. It touched his heart and body together. It stirred him, unreasonably, like some great awakening, like the facing of a riddle which he must read to the end.

She stood very still, yet poised on her toes, ready to dart away should he move. Her eyes opened to their full width. Her nostrils quivered nervously, like those of a mare, causing the diamond nose-stud to twinkle with a million rainbow facets. Her kaftan, caught by the tail end of the desert breeze, slid to one side, exposing a soft shoulder.

Burton heard his own breath come rapidly, staccato. He felt his imaginings drive along like a sheet of flame, rippling through his body in a huge, red wave. A strange tumult as of some ecstasy of long forgotten, again remembered primitive savagery invaded him, honeycombing his wire-drawn, respectable soul, melting down the walls of his civilisational re-

sistance. He could not turn his eyes away. He wanted to speak; to say—anything. Could not utter a sound.

Then he heard a voice at his elbow:

"Sidi Burton!"

With a jerk of his whole body he turned, grasping the parapet in back of him with both his hands, and blinked stupidly. Nadj Omar, his house boy and dragoman, bowed before him.

"She's rather jolly well corking, eh what?" he asked with impudent familiarity.

"You——" Burton was angry; less at having been found out than because he heard on the roof behind him a rushing of slippered feet and thought that the dragoman had frightened the woman away. His rage choked him. He clenched his fists.

"Si Mohammed knows how to pick out his wives," continued the other imperturbably; and seeing the expression of anger in his master's eyes changing to curiosity, he added: "Janina is his youngest wife. How do I know? I am a *yaouled*, a bazaar boy. The tongue is my weapon and the ear my shield—right-o! Throw me in the river—and I rise with a fish in my mouth!" He looked over the parapet. "She's gone. Too jolly damn bad. Still—*rabbi ma ighleq bab hataa iheul bab*—God does not close one door without first opening another. You want to meet her, Sidi? How much you pay? Two hundred francs? I am not a Jew or an Armenian that I should bargain! One hundred and ninety——"

"Go to the devil!"

Pitts Burton left the roof top, while Nadj Omar smiled.

"He who is bashful with his cousin gets no boy by

her!" soliloquized the servant in the direction of the night that fell thicker and thicker, wrapping the town in her trailing cloak of shadows. He put his head on one side, considering. Then he stepped close to the parapet and whistled: two high notes, followed by a fluting tremolo and ending in a throaty gargle, exactly like a crane calling to its mate. He waited, listening tensely; repeated the call; and presently the answer came in a soft warble from Si Mohammed's house.

He stared down. It was now quite dark. But he caught the blurred impression of a white-robed, enormous figure waddling flat-footedly across the roof top, heard a voice drift up in a falsetto whisper:

"*Meunhoo*—who is it?"

"I—Nadj Omar. Is that you—Fayruzabadi, the Kisslar Agassi?"

"The same," replied the head eunuch.

He struck a wax match. It flared like a yellow wedge, bringing his face into sharp relief, heavy-jowled, thick-lipped, the face of a perverted, latter-day Roman emperor blended with the unhuman, crushing calm of a Buddhist sage and with a suspicion of negro coarseness in flattened nose and rolling, bloodshot eyeballs.

He held up the match, recognised Nadj Omar's vulpine features, dropped the match. There was once more darkness, steadily increasing.

"You remember me?" asked the dragoman. "A small business matter we had in Algiers—last year——"

"I remember when I wish. At times memory is a hangman's noose. Why should I remember—tonight?"

"Money!" was the laconic answer.

"Money is on the lips of the liar!"

"Money"—the dragoman continued—"is the key which opens the lock of desire!"

"How much?" demanded the practical Kisslar Agassi. "And what key, O brother of the horse-leech?"

"This!" Nadj Omar whispered at length, winding up with: "The lady Janina looked long at the *Sidi*. I am not the one to roll scandal over my tongue. But she came seeking him with a lighted candle in her eye."

"Oh?"

"Indeed. What is she like?"

"A young woman—very young! With warm intestines—very warm!"

"Ah!" sighted the dragoman. "*El chem fassghar qi klurda fel ghzenn*—during youth pain is like a rose on a bush!"

"Just so."

"But what about the thorn on the rosebush? What is Si Mohammed like?"

"Old, Nadj Omar. Once he was the hammer. Now he is the anvil."

"So—it can be arranged?"

"It can be tried. If you cannot take things by the head, take them by the tail."

"Meaning——"

"That there is a back door," said the Kisslar Agassi. "There is also myself."

"Who guards the back door?"

"Yes."

"Allah's peace on you, Fayruzabadi!"

"And on your own head!"

Feet brushed across the roof tops, right and left, and vanished into the memory of sound. There was the stillness of the night. High in the west gleamed a sickle moon. From the hectic maze of the bazaar quarter came a very faint rubbing of drums and wailing of reed-pipes.

Pitts Burton heard. He could not find sleep for a long time; tossed nervously on his bed. The thought of the woman would not leave him.

Love? Perhaps. Desire? Doubtless.

But, too, negatively, the fear of middle age. He dreaded it. It meant lotions for the hair and patent medicines for the liver. It meant dowagers in purple velvet at dinner, and a rise both in his weight and his handicap at golf. It spelled flannel underwear and hot springs and stodginess and respectability—not by preference but by *force majeure*.

And youth meant romance.

Romance—why! he had missed it all through life; had sneered at it; had buried it beneath the stony drag and smother of business, ambition, self-consciousness, fear of his own and his friends' ridicule. His had been the common school logic in which all the truths stand behind one another, neatly marshalled and labelled. Flotsam—that's what he had been: flotsam on the tide of other people's opinions and prejudices.

Romance! He needed it; wanted it. Why not, he said to himself, why not? There had been the woman's eyes, with the suggestion in them of infinite dreams, infinite sweetness, infinite thrills.

Why not—why not? He had been a fool to jump down Nadj Omar's throat. The dragoman was all right; a little too familiar perhaps, with his mixture

of English slang and Arab proverbs, but loyal and shrewd. He would know a way. Why—he had even suggested that for a few hundred francs he might . . .

So Burton fell asleep, to be awakened by Nadj Omar, who came with the breakfast tray and smiling words:

"Ripping day, *Sidi!* You dream of Janina, eh?"

Burton sat up. Morning lay through the room with a brocaded mantle of rose and silver.

"Oh!" he yawned. "Janina——" He rubbed his eyes.

"Damn pretty, *Sidi!*"

"I'll say she is." The American sipped his coffee.

"Her husband is old," continued the other. "Also weak. Also trusting. Also a fool."

And, master psychologist, he let the matter drop until that evening when, the snake charmer having come, performed and left, Burton once more watched the neighbouring roof top. Janina was sitting cross-legged on a pillow. She did not look up. She twanged her guitar, and again the flame of desire burned through Burton's soul and set his heart to beating fearfully, hammering against his ribs, leaving him breathless, without volition, without resistance.

The dragoman stepped to his side.

"The lady Janina likes your face—right-o!" he said with calm directness.

"How do you know?"

"The Kisslar Agassi told me—the head eunuch. No end clever chap—my word! Once he lost a she-camel and four years later knew her colt by its foot."

Burton laughed.

"It is now nine o'clock," the other went on.

"Well?"

"Si Mohammed's other two wives are very old and very fat. They are asleep." He lighted a cigarette. "The Kisslar Agassi is at the back door—waiting——"

"But—how——"

For answer the dragoman hummed a current Tugurt bazaar song:

*Noosig yah alli man andeq khooq achqiq,
Khooq achqiq hooah ed-douro——*

which he translated into:

"I tell thee, O thou who hast no real brother,
Thy real brother is the dollar!"

"How much?" asked Burton.

"Two hundred francs—perhaps a little more afterwards, *Sidi*."

Burton felt slightly disgusted, felt tempted to draw back. But he shook his head. Romance—it was waiting for him; and after all, he thought, it was no better or worse than tipping the head waiter in a New York restaurant and sending him across the waxed floor to a woman dining alone, with a word scribbled on a visiting-card.

"All right," he said.

He followed the dragoman downstairs, through the garden, to the back door of Si Mohammed's house. The Kisslar Agassi was waiting. There was talk in guttural, explosive Arabic, the clink of money, and the eunuch's pudgy hand grasping Burton's and drawing him across the threshold.

"Come, *yah Sidi*. Be careful."

Then a rapid crossing of darkened rooms, a mounting of darkened stairs, a rustle of curtains, a heavy odour of musk and attar of roses, somewhere the sound of a sleeper snoring rumblingly, sluggishly, a final word:

"I shall watch, *Sidi*."

And Burton found himself on the roof top of Si Mohammed's house. Janina rose and came up to him, the moonlight glinting down her black tresses, gleaming with diamond points in the sombre orbit of her eyes. He heard his own voice stammering, ludicrous:

"You—you speak English?"

"A little—and a little French——"

"And I know about two words of Arabic."

She laughed.

"I shall teach you more," she said. "Listen. Repeat after me: *Aqarbi h'ulana, anna sahauff Janina barka, maqueh fathma lashor!*"

"What does it mean?"

"Repeat!" she insisted; and word for word, clumsily, haltingly, his lips echoed the strange sounds.

"Please tell me what it means."

"It means: I swear by Allah that I shall see only Janina, and no other woman!"

Then he kissed her.

He never knew how and when he parted from her. There was just a vague memory of the Kisslar Agassi looming up with warning words to hurry because day was near, a quick descent and crossing of rooms where morning was beginning to shoot in with a ghostly wedge of white, a dash across the garden.

At noon he woke up. There was in his soul the

knowledge of something sweet and strange that had taken possession of him, heart and body, and somehow a sense of immense sadness; there was in his mouth the sweetness of wild honey, with a bitter after taste to prick the tongue and set the nerves to longing; and again that night he saw her.

Earlier in the evening the snake-charmer had come. He had dismissed him curtly.

The Kisslar Agassi took him to the roof top. She came up to him with the magic of her touch, the burning message of her young body, with the brusque stirring of sleeping desires awakening suddenly to the surge and rush of new thrills.

"*Yah amri!*" she said in her low, throaty voice. "O my life!"

He saw her almost every night, except on those rare occasions when Nadj Omar brought word that Si Mohammed's other two wives were on the roof; and so the days passed into weeks. They had little to talk about. At times, of course, he tried to speak to her, to ask her questions about herself. But she seldom opened her lips except to kiss him or whisper words of love.

"Tell me of what you think, dear," he would ask.

"*Yah amri—O my life!*" she would reply, "*Yah aini—O my soul!*"

Then a flood of passionate words, in Arabic, in quaint French, in the little English which she knew; and after a while he gave up asking her questions. She was right, he said to himself. There was no truth but that of the senses, God given. Such was now the single thought which dominated him.

Occasionally Mahdi Ibrahim came and squatted on the roof top and beat his drum—tok-tak-tok—

forcing the snakes to dance drunkenly. But as a rule Pitts Burton dismissed him, impatiently, curtly. For he had begun—quite unreasonably, he owned up to himself—to dislike the snake-charmer's hawkish, sneering face. He wondered if he knew. If he did, he did not let on. Only once he made a certain cryptic allusion.

"If Allah proposes the destruction of an ant, He allows wings to grow upon her!" he said one evening, apropos of nothing, as from the neighbouring house drifted up the wailing of Janina's guitar.

By this time the year had swooned into the sharp, glaring summer of North Africa, with myriads of bundles of vegetation transformed in a day into fully expanded leaves and riotous, blazing flowers, and dead in another day; with the birds opening their beaks in a painful effort to gasp for air; with a splintering, jaundiced heat that veiled the levels; and the very desert a carpet of bloom. All day long Burton sat behind closed shutters, coming out only in the evening and sitting at Janina's feet, looking dreamily at the rainbow twinkle of her diamond nose-stud, listening dreamily to her soft words:

"I love you, *yah aini!*"

"And I love you, small Janina!"

"Why do you love me, *yah amri?*"

"Oh—just because——"

"And I love you for the same reason—O my life—my soul—O eyes of my soul!"

Another week passed and summer was over. The desert came into its own again, with chilly night breezes which swept the yellow sands into shifting, carved waves, which clothed the rock waste with a

fitful, scraggly, fantastic tangle of tamarack and dwarf acacia.

Every day Pitts Burton rode his little blue-mottled stallion out into the desert. He left Nadj Omar at home, preferring to be alone with the great peace and the enormous, vaulted silences of the Sahara, with no sign of human habitation except, occasionally, a camel rider looming on the horizon, a ragged Bedouin boy driving his goats towards brackish water and green food. The strength of the bare land came to him with a mighty sweep, a feeling of triumphant elation, a falling away of the useless burdens of life, the useless thoughts, the useless worries and ambitions. It seemed to him that he was being purged of his past—his too human, too complex past. This new life had come to him with a sort of effortless, elemental, cosmic power. His days, immensely simple, seemed charged to the brim with an overwhelming loveliness, a radiant, stainless happiness and cleanliness; and there were the nights. There was Janina. He loved her, and she loved him. Why did he love her? Why did she love him? What did it matter? What did anything matter?

When, with the sun below the horizon and the sky a frosted magic of purple and silver, he returned from the desert, he spurred his stallion to a furious gallop in the last few miles. He wanted to see Janina, to hold her in his arms, to look into her black eyes, to kiss her lips.

He loved her. She loved him.

And then one evening, as he crossed the garden and gave the pre-arranged signal at the back door—two short knocks followed by a long, low drumming

—the Kisslar Agassi appeared on the threshold and motioned him away.

"Oh—are Si Mohammed's other wives on the roof top?"

"No—*Sidi*."

"Then—why? Is Janina sick?"

"She is dead, *Sidi*!" And the Kisslar Agassi closed the door in Burton's face.

In the next few seconds, that passed all scale of time, Burton lived through a series of emotions too vivid for remembrance of gesture, of action, of thought. He did feel. But it was as if he felt it in another's body, a stranger's. This stranger gave a strangled cry; he passed through certain absurd physical details—a foot that was asleep, a hat that fell on the ground, a mosquito that bit savagely and was savagely crushed, shaky legs that crossed the garden with short, broken steps, a body that stumbled through the hall and dropped into a chair; and then out of the whirlwind and the tumult a figure came and looked down upon him, with words softly, pitifully spoken:

"I ran after you to tell you. You did not hear me, *Sidi*!"

"Is it—true—Nadj Omar?"

"Yes, *Sidi*."

"You—oh!" Burton sat up. "You lie—you lie! You are crazy——" Then he read the truth in the other's eyes. An ashen pallor spread to his very lips. His voice shook: "Oh, God!"

"It came suddenly this afternoon," said the dragoon, forgetting the English slang of which he was so proud, speaking gently as he might to a child. "A fever. Then death. Come, my master!" He

forced Burton to rise. "A woman is a woman, and fate is fate. Who can escape what is written on the forehead? *Bismillah irrahman errahmin!*" he mumbled piously as he saw that Burton was tottering, about to fall. "Take my arm. Sit on the roof. It is cool and sweet there, and I will bring you a glass of fig wine—iced, as you like it."

Burton hardly heard. Unresisting, he accompanied Nadj Omar to the roof top.

He sat down and stared into the west with stony eyes. A chill wind sobbed from the desert. It rattled dismally in the palms and blew the sand in conical whirls. A sad, sleepy night crept over the roofs of Tugurt with black fingers. From a puddle, where a camel had wallowed, rose an evil odour. He had the confused sensation of pain that wrapped about his soul as with the curling sting of a whip-lash.

Dead. How? Why?

Perhaps—the suspicion came suddenly—Si Mohammed had found out, had . . .

No, no—came the second thought—it was on him, the man, that the husband's revenge would have fallen first.

Death. There was the fact.

"*El ouad*—destiny!" whispered Nadj Omar, who had come up with a glass of fig wine.

Dead. There was the fact. His life shook upon its foundations. Now that he had lost her, his heart was like a house without any light where his thoughts wandered about, lonely children afraid of the dark. So he sat there all that night until the mists of morning rose and coiled. The mists of the desert! The mists in his own heart! They echoed this day to the tolling of the death gongs that came from the house

of Si Mohammed el-Busiri, to the sobbing of the tomtoms, the wailing of the negresses. The next day he sat there and the next, knitting his riven soul to hold the pain in his breast. He ate mechanically what the dragoman put before him. He saw the burial cortège leave the house of Si Mohammed, and his heart's remembrance followed, the tiny body in its big coffin; followed it, followed it back to the evening when he had first heard her lilting song—"yah *benti*, yah *benti*!", when he had looked across the parapet, had seen the lithe, young form, the small, bare feet, the twinkling diamond nose-stud, had read the message in her black eyes.

Darkness stalked over his soul. Grief was about him like an iron wall from which there was no escape. He spent evening after evening on the roof top, staring at the place where once had been his paradise; empty now except for the occasional presence of Si Mohammed's other two wives.

He could hear their guttural voices:

"Allah bard yareff bel cloob!"

"Echchah!"

Their shrill laughter, and the Kisslar Agassi's angry falsetto:

"Esseqtoo, yah nass—be quiet, people!"

Speech, action, thought, all seemed to him alike useless and vain, not worth the effort of hand or brain. Go back to America? And to what purpose? There was always in his heart the fact of Janina's death. Why had she died? How?

"Fever!" the dragoman told him, often, patiently. "Just a fever, *Sidi*. It was so quick."

At times doubt came to him. Was she really dead? Or was it perhaps that Si Mohammed had

found out, was trying to keep her a prisoner, away from him, had hit upon this plan—a make-believe death?

No, no! She was dead and buried. He knew it, sensed it. And he sat on the roof top night after night. He felt something, something like a heavy chain, which held him there.

So the short winter passed, and December brought the beginning of the Saharan spring with soft winds and blue nights and golden days and the melody of the young year, like a slow sob of melting harmonies. And one evening Mahdi Ibrahim, whom he had not seen since before Janina's death, came on the roof top with his basket.

"Snakes, *yah Sidi?*" he asked. "Shall I make them dance for you?"

Pitts Burton shrugged his shoulders.

"All right——" It made no difference. Nothing made any difference.

Mahdi Ibrahim squatted down. His left hand disappeared in the burnoose, came out with the drum. It commenced swinging, left, right, left, like a pendulum, as he beat it with gentle, dry taps.

Tok-tak! spoke the drum. Tok-tocko-tak!—with a hiccoughy syncopated rhythm. Tok-tak-tok! insistingly, while the snake-charmer stared at the basket with dreamy immobility. Tok-tak-tok!

And presently a flat, wicked head appeared from beneath the top of the basket; a second; a third. The snakes plopped down. They began to dance, swaying, circling, gyrating, following the pendulum of the drum.

Tok-tak-tok!

Desolate in an empty world of grief, Burton

listened and stared, with eyes too hot for tears, yet with a coldness of ice upon his very heart.

Tok-tak-tok!

The memory came back to him, through the low roll of the drum, of Janina's love-song:

Yah bentî, yah bentî!

He heard it again in his soul's ears:

*Yah bentî, yah bentî,
Akh idjbleq erradjel . . .*

He heard the embroidery of fantastic, chromatic arabesques, the abandon of eerie, minor harmonies:

Yah bentî, yah bentî . . .

He heard the voice rising higher and higher to a clear bell-like note, with an infinite, throbbing joy of the senses, naked and unashamed:

Akh idjbleq . . .

Tok—! said the drum. He heard its rhythm within the rhythm of Janina's voice; heard the vibrating tok-tak-tok within the edges of Janina's wailing cadences. The two sounds blended; they joined hands above the snake's flat, glistening eyes, and a bleak terror invaded the hidden corners of Burton's heart as the beating of the drum seemed to cease, as from the drum itself came Janina's song, sobbing, unearthly:

*Yah bentî, yah bentî,
Akh idjbleq erradjel*

He thought of her, her crimson lips, her black eyes, the twinkling diamond nose-stud. He stared. Then, suddenly, he screamed. He rose to his

feet, stumbling, tottering, his hands outstretched.

"The drum!" he cried. "Give it to me!"

"Hush—for the love of the All-Merciful!" came Mahdi Ibrahim's whisper, warning, yet in it a lilting accent of elation. "Death is on the roof top, *yah Sidi!*" as one of the snakes flopped down, nervous, frightened out of its drunken rhythm.

"The drum! Give it to me!" repeated Burton in a high, cracked voice.

He jerked forward. He saw the male snake move, glide, directly, beneath his feet, heard the hiss distinctly; and even in that moment of stark, enormous horror, horror too great to be grasped, horror that swept over and beyond the barriers of fear, he still heard the song come wailingly from the inside of the drum, calling him, luring him on:

Yah bentì, yah bentì . . .

He tore it from the other's hand. He looked at it. It was of a dull, mottled yellow, no larger than a child's head. Then he began shivering all over as if in an ague. Cold sweat ran down his face as he saw that it was a human skull, the eye sockets and ear holes and nose openings closed with minutely fitted pieces of ivory, a skin stretched tightly across the place where the mouth had been, and, fastened by a silver wire to the left nasal bone, a diamond that twinkled evilly.

And in after years, when the memory of the thing came back to him, in the midst of a gay dinner party, or driving his ball from the first tee of the Sleepy Hollow links, or perhaps during a walk up Fifth Avenue, he could never explain, not even to himself,

what happened during the next few seconds. It was like one of those incredible incidents which loom out of the dark without beginning or end.

There was just the snake charmer's warning cry, "Look out, *Sidi!*" changing rapidly into a bitter laugh of triumph, a sibilant, cutting: "*Hayah!* If Allah proposes the destruction of an ant, He allows wings to grow upon her!"—another voice, the dragoman's "Quick!"—the sharp bark of a shot. Suddenly his knees seemed to give. The roof top heaved like the bow of a ship. The drum in his hand swung to and fro in a blazing, yellow pendulum. He felt a dull jar as he fell on his knees and rolled over.

When he came to he found himself on his bed, in his own room. He lay still for a moment. Then he opened his eyes. Through the semi-darkness he saw a white-robed figure standing above him. He recognised Nadj Omar's vulpine features, heard the man's voice:

"No harm done, *Sidi*. I came—shot the snake just in time. No end jolly lucky for you—my word! Wait. I shall bring you a glass of fig wine."

The dragoman left, and Burton stretched himself in utter lassitude. His hand came in contact with something cool and smooth. He lifted it up. It was the drum. Shudderingly his knuckles brushed across the place where the mouth had been, trembling over the tightly spanned skin.

"*Yah aini!*" he seemed to hear. "*Yah aini*—O my soul!" as with the ebbing of a far, high spring tide.

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THE GODLESS MAN

YOU deny the Lord Allah, O Iskandar son of Iskandar!" said the red-haired girl.

"But I do not deny that I love you, O Istar Sultana!" replied the young peasant. "Nor do I deny that in all the hills there is none more sweet than you—with a slim, strong height like a young pine, and a voice to put the birds to the trees, and a look in your grey, grey eyes to break young hearts and heal old hearts."

"The Prophet Mohammed—on Him the salute!—will not grant you the blessing of salvation."

"I depend on salvation—if there be such a thing—by reason of a fair decency in my living and a trick I have of wronging no man. I love my fellow-creatures, not because the Koran commands it; but offhand and freely, one and all, because it is the way of me. And I have seldom seen the lad, rich or poor, noble or commoner whom, be he ordinarily honest and cheerful, I could not stretch out with side by side, in front of the same camp fire and with the same night of stars above us."

"My father says . . ."

"Your father is a priest. Prayers he chants while I tend the fields and milk the full-uddered goats. He to the truth of his prating trade—I to the truth of my clouting trade! Look at me!" Iskandar rose

and stood up on his feet, tall and broad and dark and handsome and fearless. "Am I not the trim and burly one? *Wah*—there is not a man in this village, nor in the whole of Afghanistan, but I can sing him or run him or wrestle him! Not a man but I can dance him or play him a glittering play of curved daggers! Look at me—look at me, O mouth of delight!" he repeated exultingly. "It is myself who made myself and my fortune—my own strength, my own pluck, my own will! So why should I bend my knee before the Lord Allah?"

The girl shuddered a little. She snapped her fingers rapidly to guard against the wind of ill-luck—the designs of the Evil One.

"Blasphemer!" she whispered; and she looked at Iskandar, half frightened, half fascinated.

He laughed.

"Blasphemer?" he echoed. "And why? I know that when I sow, I reap—and when I do not sow, my fields lie fallow. I know that I live because my mother bore me—and that some day I shall die because the Black Camel-rider will knock at my door. I know how high the hills are, because I climb them—how wide the river is, because I swim it. I know what I know! But what do I know of Allah except what grey-beards tell me? And what do *they* know—except what other grey-beards told *them*? Suddenly he took her into his arms. "Do not let us quarrel over a matter of faith! What is such a thing as a priest's mumble or the written word of the Koran, to come between your lips and mine?"

She tore herself free.

"No!" she said.

"Don't you love me, O treasure of all the women of the world?"

"I do!"

"Good! Let us set the wedding date! Tomorrow will be as proper a day as any for our mating. Up in the forest we'll wed—as our fathers did in the olden days—with spruce boughs for our couch and the scented winds for our coverlet, with a wall of pines growing about us tall and strong and shutting out the world's ways for the span of that night, and in the morning the fair, small children of the country-side coming to us and pelting us with flowers!"

"And there you go again with your heathenish notions! Am I then a beast or an infidel Tartar that I should mate in the thick of the wilderness, without the prayers of the True Believers and the mosque's golden lights shining their blessings? Never shall I be your wife! Never!"

"But—" he stammered—"you said . . ."

"I do love you—yes!—with all my soul . . . and bitter my grief that I must tell you so! For I cannot marry a man who denies Allah—a man who follows the godless road—a man without faith, without . . ."

Tears choked her words; and he stared at her with hard, black eyes.

"And how much of this is your own heart talking?" he demanded. "And how much your father, the priest? And how much, belike, the whispering in your ear of Timur Khan?" He turned on his heel. "I shall go now—and speak a word or two to that same Timur Khan!"

And he walked away, with a lilt and swagger in his step, his enormous fur cap tilted at a rakish angle, his black beard thrust out like a battering-ram, leaning on his broad Bokharan sword—the which was a conceit of his, since it was but seldom that there was need of bright, swishing weapons in this peaceful valley.

“I may need the sword this day!” he said to himself, as he strode down the hill through a dawning of pleasant weather, with a warm wind out of Persia, full of wholesome dryness for the soil that was still clogged with the spring rains.

As he crossed the village, the men and women greeted him smilingly:

“May life be wide to you!”

“May your deceased parents reach Paradise!”

“There is luck to the threshold when you are near!”

For—though godless he, and this a place where the faith in Allah and the Prophet was unweakened, untainted—he was yet beloved in the valley: nobody he wronged; was ever ready and shrewd with advice, ready and generous with help of hand or purse; and whoever wished could come to his hearth and eat and drink his fill; and when blight dropped over the fields or sickness struck the small, shaggy cattle, it was always Iskandar son of Iskandar who would share his last with those who had less than he.

He met Timur Khan at the crossing of roads which was called Half Village.

They smiled at each other. For they were friends.

Of the same height and breadth and strength they were: as sturdy a pair of Afghan peasants as you would meet between Kabul and Kandahar—staunch

as rocks, keen as eagles, swift as foxes, with thick chests swelled out a little braggingly, and voices like bullying war trumpets.

They touched hands, and gave each other the word of day.

"Good morning to you!" said Iskandar.

"Good morning!" echoed Timur Khan; and he stood upon his toes to make himself the taller, and the other did likewise.

"Come with me!" said Iskandar.

"Where?"

"To the far hills!"

"To hunt?"

"No. To talk of a girl's heart—and mine own heart and yours, Timur Khan!"

"Shall I take my sword?"

"Yes."

"And whom shall we have as witness—to watch fair play?"

"We need no witness. Are we not friends? Do we not love each other—trust each other?"

So Timur Khan went to his house and fetched his blade—an ivory-handled Turki yataghan, curved like the croup of a young stallion, which his father had used in the days before peace had come to the valley—and they walked up the hill, chatting and laughing; and the sun was high before they stopped in a clearing of a deep forest where the dappled deer were belling in their season.

"Speaking about Istar Sultana," said Iskandar, "it is I whom she loves—and not you. And if you say different I would call you a liar."

"You need not call me a liar. It is you indeed whom she loves—*now*. But . . ."

"But . . . ?"

"You have no faith in the Lord Allah. I have. It is I whom she will marry."

"She will not!"

"She will! And after she has become my wife she will forget you. And then her love will be mine. And the first son she will bear me I shall call Iskandar . . . for you are my friend!"

"The first son she will bear me I shall call Timur Khan . . . for *you* are *my* friend!"

"It is for her to decide."

"Being a woman, she will follow the stronger!"

"Decidedly!" Timur Khan unbuckled his Turki sword. "I am the stronger. She will marry me. Shall we now make a test of it?"

"Gladly!" Iskandar unsheathed his Bokharan weapon. "My godless skill and strength against your praying, prating skill and strength!"

"And the loser, the weaker, to stand aside—and give the victor his chance with the girl—freely and without rancour!"

"It is agreed!" Iskandar threw off fur cap and duffel cloak. So did the other. "And sorry I am that I must mark a pretty man's face with a blow from my iron because of mere woman! Are you ready, my darling?"

"Yes!"

"Come on, then!"

Timur Khan needed no urging. He rushed in, giving a savage, guttural war-cry in the back of his throat, as Turki blade crossed Bokharan blade:

"*Y'ellah!*"

Both were cunning of fence.

They fought after the manner of Afghan swordsmen: bending almost double—skipping in a circle—leaping high from the ground—executing frantic gambados and measured steps—springing forward and backward and sideways—beating time, steel upon steel, so that it sounded like drums rattling.

"Wah! Bageddin belagardan!"—as Timur Khan stooped, twisted, slashed at his friend's legs with a wicked backhand stroke.

"Shaitan belade!"—as Iskandar jumped nimbly into the air, causing the other's weapon to whistle harmlessly under him.

Like two dolls in some cruel old Persian marionette show. Unreal. Unhuman.

Like two grotesque silhouettes bobbing up and down—doing a dance of death—lunging and thrusting and counterthrusting—with a dry stamping of feet and harsh, high-peaked cries.

"Take this, O my hero!"—as the Bokharan sword, thrice twirled round Iskandar's head, descended like lightning in a slanting direction.

"Not today, O soul of my soul!"—as Timur Khan parried and side-stepped.

Hai—hai—hai! the gorgeous Afghan savagery of it! The glinting, sardonic sun rays sparkling on both blades from point to pommel!

Silver blades! Diamond blades! And the steely ring and rattle—the staccato stamping and tapping of feet making ready to support the arm's vicious lunge!

"Ho there—ho!"—Turki sword dancing a swishing, triumphant saraband . . . Bokharan sword dancing no less skilfully!

Then, suddenly, Timur Khan's weapon hissed past

Iskandar's ear and buried itself inch-deep in his forearm; and, at exactly the same fraction of a second, Iskandar's weapon sliced savagely across Timur Khan's wrist.

Two cries of pain, quickly suppressed. Two spurts of blood. Two swords dropped.

Wounded, panting, tired, they stood there; and it was Iskandar who spoke first:

"You are a swordsman of parts, my darling!"

"There has lived none more subtle at fencing than yourself—since the Seven Witches of Samarkand poisoned the Dog in the Moon!"

"Not mine the right to crow over you—nor yours to crow over me! We are evenly matched at steel play!"

"What then is to be done in the matter of the girl's heart, Iskandar?"

"Let our wounds heal. Afterwards we shall make another test or two of skill and strength."

"Horses! A bareback race from Half Village to the Yellow Springs!"

"Perhaps a swim across the river and back—with left leg tied to right arm!"

"Or wrestling!"

"Or, belike, shooting at a target!"

"Tossing the great stone!"

"Throttling a he-wolf with naked fists!"

"Dagger-throwing!"

"One and all we shall try—until we know who is the stronger!"

"Would it not be better," laughed Timur Khan, "to ask the girl's consent—for contest and prize?"

"She will go with the victor," said Iskandar, as he had said before. "Night and morning, in the

white moon and the full, blue day, an Afghan woman aye follows the bolder lad's piping—though he be godless, like myself!"

So they washed and bandaged their wounds and walked down the hill together, each with a friend's arm about the other's shoulder.

Iskandar had been right enough in claiming that here, in the northern mountains, it was the man's sword-arm that opened the maiden's bedchamber. . . nor much difference whatever rank or tribe: be the girl noble or commoner, Durani princess or rough Kizil-bashi peasant—be the man bred to the wild hunting-trail or to a proud Kabuli palace that aped soft Hindustan with turrets and balconies and domes and twisted bartizans. But what Iskandar did not know was that, being a woman, Istar Sultana, though arriving at the same result, reasoned in a way less direct, more mazed, than he.

For a few evenings later her father Abderrahman, the priest, spoke to her reproachfully:

"A burning, black day of shame it is for you that here be two men brawling over your kisses with freckled, hairy fists on hilts!"

"Is it my fault?" she replied. "Besides—the young ravens are beaked like the old. Is there not the telling how once there was the glint of steel in your own fist—that time you courted my mother? And you a priest, a man of peace!"

"The Lord His mercy!" Abderrahman sighed at the memory of his vanished, brave, intolerant youth, and went on more gently: "Timur Khan will make you a good husband. He is a True Believer. A brisk, healthy lad he is, with a fine house and a green stretch-

ing of fields and plenty cattle. There are worse than he between hill-top and hill-top."

"And perhaps there are better than he between valley and valley. I shall marry the stronger of the two. Yesterday I spoke to them both. I gave them my promise—" she smiled— "though they did not trouble to ask me for it."

"But suppose that Iskandar, the godless, should . . ."

"Suppose he wins—would it not be proof that Allah is with him?"

"Daughter!" The priest was shocked. "Little, little daughter!"

"Or," she demanded triumphantly, "is your own faith so weak that you cannot trust Allah's judgment?"

Here then was a woman's way of arguing; and again Abderrahman sighed.

"Child," he said, "you are like your dear, late mother—may she have her share of Paradise!"

"Was she as lovely as I?" laughed Istar Sultana.

"Indeed! And her brain was as coiling, her tongue as gliding and persuasive as yours! Often when I was right and she wrong—though she made it appear with the words of her mouth that she was right and I wrong—did I have to leave the house and find sanctuary in the mosque. There I go now!"

"Say a prayer for me, father, and my heart's desire!" she whispered.

"I shall, my small love, my white love!"

He kissed her and went to the mosque where he prostrated himself, facing the East, and prayed to the Lord Allah in whom he believed so fervently, with all his simple, peasant soul.

Fervent, too, the girl's prayers, that day and the next and the next:

"Thine the grace—Thine the power—Thine the mercy! Send him victory, O Lord of the Seven Worlds—O King of the Day of Judgment!"

Yet victory came neither to Iskandar nor to Timur Khan.

For week after week their contests of strength and skill went on; and always—at swimming and wrestling, at dagger-throwing and wolf-throttling and a dozen other hill sports—they were evenly matched . . . "like twin brothers rocked in the same cradle!" said the old women, as they sat in front of their houses and pounded grain and carded wool and passed the gossip of the day.

But when a third man thought that here, with both of them striving and neither winning, was his own chance and was seen to stop once or twice at Istar Sultana's threshold, with flowers in his hand and flattery on his lips, he was promptly pounced upon by Iskandar and Timur Khan and given the father and mother of a beating as well as the pertinent advice that only a fool puts his fingers between two wolves and their fodder.

So summer died, and autumn came with gloaming.

The hills gathered fog-thick and fog-heavy about the scattered little village; the shivering cattle lowed for the warm reek of stable and byre; and in the morning the people would hug themselves under their blankets and say: "Here is a raw, cutting day! Why hurry and get up?"; and the tips of fir and pine moaned in the wind—a wind out of the North with a chill in it and a sorrow to crack hearts—a slow, grey wind full of hints of stormy nights and old, forgotten wars.

Then autumn—the short, bitter autumn of the mountains—died, too; the wind grew in speed and cold; there was a flight of screeching wild-geese across the horned silver moon; and, on a day when the whole land was white with snow, Iskandar said to his rival:

“My soul is sick with longing. I would kill you if you were not my friend.”

“Not to mention,” suggested Timur Khan, “that I am as strong as you—and as wary.”

“That is indeed another reason why my hands are in my cloak—and not about your throat. It would not matter,” he went on, “if we were striving for the sake of a night’s passion with a light, silken woman of the Kabul bazaars—or for as mean a thing as a kingdom or as cheap a thing as all Persia’s golden, jewelled loot. But it is striving we are for the full, red, terrible thing called love of woman—striving with the striving that stops for neither sleep nor supper nor mercy! For many months now have we neglected our daily work—our fields, our cattle—to try in fair sport and tourney who is the stronger—who, by the same token, shall marry Istar Sultana. Everything we have tried, and yet today I am no nearer victory than you—you no nearer victory than I! So what is to be done—except, belike, for both of us to go away from here and wander up and down the world and forget our heart-break in the dust of an alien road?”

“There is yet another test you might use, my bold lads, my strong lads, my sweet lads!” piped a shrill, ironic voice—and they turned to see Kadisha, who had overheard.

She was a withered, old gipsy woman, her yellow face speckled with brown spots like the back of a fern leaf, her thin, pendulous nose almost meeting the up-

tilted chin . . . and yet it was told of her that once her lovers had been as thick as grain in a corn-crib. People feared her because—so rumour had it—hers was the evil eye that brought ill-luck to men and disease to cattle.

"One more test, my sweet lads!" she repeated. "A test which brings my mind back to the days when there was still courage in this valley—and lips that kissed—and stirring deeds! When there was still decent, clashing strife here—instead of fat, foul peace! When swords were out in the morning, sharp and shining like mirrors—and crimson those same swords at night when they clicked into the scabbards! When tempers were quicker than flames—and poor the man who said 'Against whom?' When his chief asked him to go to war! There were in those days two men in this village who loved me—*me!*" She slapped her shrivelled old breasts. "Friends they were—as you are! Evenly matched in strength and skill—as you are! And yet one lost—and the other won!"

"How?" demand Iskandar.

"How?" echoed the other.

"Listen!" began Kadisha, her red-rimmed eyes glistening with intense, wicked mirth.

So she told them. And that night Timur Khan prayed to Allah and implored His help, while Iskandar looked on and said:

"My luck that I am godless—so I need not waste my breath on empty, tinkly prayers! It is for the gipsy's test that I am saving my own breath. And a bit of it, too, am I saving to kiss Istar Sultana's mouth when I shall return—from there—" jerking a thumb at the snow-clad mountain—"the victor—to claim her as my bride."

"Once," came Timur Khan's caustic comment, "a little donkey tried to swim the river that had drowned the elephant." He turned to go. "Are you ready, Sultan Donkey?"

"I am, Rajah Elephant!"

Not long afterwards Kadisha called on Istar Sultana and asked:

"Will you really marry the stronger?"

"What is it to you?"

"Will you?" insisted the other.

"As soon as, beyond doubt, he has proved himself to *be* the stronger! Within the hour of such proof, will he become my husband! I give oath upon the Koran!"

"And do you know which of the two . . ."

"My heart knows! My soul knows! It is an assured thing!"

"*Hai!*" laughed the gipsy.

"Why do you laugh?" And when Kadisha was slow in replying, Istar Sultana stood up against her, straight and hard and young. "What is it?" she demanded, clenching a threatening fist.

"It is," the gipsy's voice shrilled in evil triumph—for ever since she had lost her own youth and her youth's passion had she hated the youth of others—"that here are two gallant fools gambling with death for the sake of your kisses!"

The girl trembled a little.

"What do you mean?" she stammered.

"Look!" said Kadisha, opening the door, and pointing at the steep hill which in the Afghan tongue was called the *Muz-Davan-Khor*, the Peak of Frozen Death.

Straight up from the valley, not over a thousand

feet high, but fantastic, cruel, cleaving the heavens as with the thrust of a dagger, rose this hill; rose like a grim sentinel of death in a sheer, lonely sweep of granite, covered with ice, giving no foothold to man or beast, torn here and there by deep crevasses roofed with frozen snow where a careless or gliding step would break through as through a thin veil and hurtle the body into the abyss. Clear and sharp in the moonlight soared the hill; and as Istar Sultana narrowed her eyes against the diamond glisten of the ice she saw something like two small, brown spots toiling up the slippery, treacherous incline, so slowly, so cautiously; heard Kadisha's sibilant whisper:

"The final test! Up to the Peak of Frozen Death—which has never been climbed by man except once, for love of me, when I was a girl with sap in my spine and lips that knew how to kiss! Look at them—Iskandar and Timur Khan—the gallant young fools! Look!"—as the little brown spots toiled on. "And—the cream of the jest, the cream of the test—blindfolded they are, with only their tapping sticks to show them the way! Death to one of them—there is no doubt of it—perhaps to both, eh? But if one should return, be he the godless one or the other, he will indeed have proved himself the stronger—will claim you as his bride on the morrow! Thus their message to you—which they gave to me! Thus your own oath upon the Koran!"

"My own oath!" the girl repeated dully.

"Your own oath, daughter!" echoed Abderrahman, who had come from an inner room.

She did not reply. She stared at the hill; saw the two little brown spots moving up—slowly, slowly. Silent she was, her lips white and drawn, in her soul

an agony of blinding pain and fear, alternating with brief spasms of shining hope—as she watched, watched.

“I shall face it!” said her silent, humble heart. “My trust is in the Lord Allah—may His name be exalted!”

“I shall face it!” said her silent, proud heart. “For I am of the Afghan race.

So she watched, watched—while seconds dragged out into hours, eternities, as though time had halted; watched, watched, watched the little brown spots toiling on and up, on and up—growing ever smaller—so pitifully, so ineffectually small against the towering ice peak—then completely vanishing as, suddenly, a sharp snow flurry cut furiously through the valley, blotting out everything in a moist, white veil.

“We are Moslems!” said Abderrahman. “We honour Allah and His Prophet! We may not break a word sworn upon the Koran!”

“I shall not break my word,” replied Istar Sultana in a queer, flat voice. “Let the wedding be prepared for the morning.”

“Bride tomorrow, eh?” laughed the gipsy. “Or, perhaps, widow? Perhaps doubly a widow?”

The girl shuddered; nearly fainted as again her hope gave way to an agony of fear.

“Go to sleep, daughter!”

“I cannot sleep.”

But she did sleep—a quiet, dreamless sleep of utter emotional exhaustion; awakened to see the young sun pouring into her room, to see her father standing by her bed, to hear his gentle, mournful words:

“It is thus our lives grow—like fir trees—some straight, and some crooked—some strong, and some

weak—some that break, and some that do not break . . . just as the wind of Fate would have it, Little Pigeon!" He kissed her. "Fate has decided!"

"Who . . . ?" she asked—though, subconsciously, she already knew the answer.

"Timur Khan awaits the coming of your feet. Already the mosque is being prepared. Already the women are crying the wedding cries! Listen—" as from the outside drifted in long-drawn, quivering yells of:

"Yoo-yoo-yoo!"

"Yoo-yoo-yoo-yoo!"

"Timur Khan and Iskandar both reached the top," Abderrahman went on. "And then Iskandar slipped. He fell into a crevasse. Ah!" he sighed. "Timur Khan looked—called—tried to help and . . . there was no sight of him, no answer! May Allah have mercy upon his soul!"

He left. The girl rose. She stood quite still.

"Yoo-yoo-yoo—" the shouting in the village—"for Timur Khan son of Timur Khan and Istar Sultana daughter of Abderrahman, the priest!" The cries tore her heart, ragged, paining, like a dull knife. *"Yoo-yoo-yoo-yoo!"*

The marriage procession forming. Shouts from the crowd that milled down the street.

"Long life to the bridegroom!"

"Long life to the bride!"

Hard, hard these people; Afghans of the hills. Death was forgotten. Life alone mattered.

She shook her head. Iskandar dead? No! It could not be. It was only the figment of an evil, lying dream.

She put her hands to her ears to shut out the quivering yells of the wedding procession:

"Yoo-yoo-yoo!"—ever louder, as Timur Khan crossed the threshold of the outer room; as the women entered the inner room with silks and scents and henna, to prepare the bride; as a wrinkled old grandmother kissed Istar Sultana and mumbled:

"Youth dreams in the night. Comes young day. Day of facts. And the dream is forgotten—a thing of star-dust."

"Yoo-yoo-yoo!"—as Timur Khan bowed before her; as the procession made ready to go to the mosque.

"Yoo-yoo-yoo!"—the cry grew, swelled a thousand-fold. It drifted through the village; winged up to the hills; climbed the Peak of Frozen Death; dropped down an icy crevasse where a crumpled figure lay.

"Yoo-yoo-yoo!"—Iskandar heard it first in a fragment of his brain that was numbed with pain and cold as was his whole body. The cry echoed, reverberated; filled his brain; beat against its walls—beat, beat—enormous, challenging.

"Yoo-yoo-yoo!"—can you not hear, O Iskandar son of Iskandar? Listen—listen! The cry of love—of life! The sweep of life in an open world! Golden! Golden! Golden to the winds, O Iskandar son of Iskandar! Golden to the hills . . .

And his brain stirred a little. It spoke to his consciousness. He opened his eyes.

The ears of his body heard:

"Yoo-yoo-yoo-yoo-yoo!"

What was it? What was it?

Then he knew.

He tried to rise. Could not. Felt a terrible pain shoot through his left leg. He touched it; pressed; screamed as the pain increased unbearably; nearly

fainted; controlled his quivering nerves with a tremendous effort.

His face seemed wet, sticky, sore. He felt it with probing fingers. There was blood—frozen, caked.

"*Yoo-yoo-yoo!*" came the echo, sarcastic, malicious, rebounding from crag to crag. And he laughed. It was the way of him.

"Here am I, a dead man," he said to himself, "and yonder is Timur Khan claiming a red-haired girl's kisses! Now we shall see how strong the dead man is!"

With infinite care, infinite agony, he drew himself up a little.

It had stopped snowing. A sun ray danced in. He looked. The rim of the crevasse was a dozen feet above his head; and, half way up, ran a narrow ledge giving precarious foothold.

A leap—a clutch—and then . . . ?

"If I were not a godless man, I would pray to Allah for help! But how can I—being as I am? By the crimson pig's bristles!" he exclaimed. "Am I not the fellow of many gifts—with the whole world before me like an open road! And how shall I travel this road? *Wah!*"—shifting his weight; turning white with pain—"no enemy have I, except this broken left leg of mine!"

He gave a jerk, a heave, a tortured cry; stood up on his right leg which was only bruised.

"Here," he said, "is a leg that is my friend—a leg after my own heart—a brisk, stout, handsome leg—a prince among legs! Come on, prince! Hobble, prince! And hobble quick, quick! For have you no ears to hear—?" as from the distance came again the "*yoo-yoo-yoo*" of the marriage procession.

"Yoo-yoo-yoo all you want to!" mocked Iskandar. "It is myself who will change your silly, wee tune!"

But it was not hobbling but crawling like a beast, dragging himself through the snow and over the rocks like a wounded wolf, that Iskandar after an eternity of torment reached the mosque; and he crept through the open door just as Timur Khan—so ruddy and merry—and Istar Sultana—so white and weary—were standing up in front of Abderrahman to be made man and wife, while the old women, according to the ancient custom, went the rounds of the sacred building, kneeling in each corner and chanting in unison:

"Here is the threshold of men-children!"

"Here is the threshold of sheep and cattle!"

"Here is the threshold of safety and peace!"

"Here is the threshold of God the Eternal!"

Then the priest's sonorous accents: "*Farhi yah bent uh zid, t-tkaab jaq menn Bni Solaymeni*—rejoice, O daughter, for a bridegroom has come to you from among the sons of Afghans!"; and the women's shrill chorus: "Ho, Timur Khan! Ho, bridegroom! The stronger—the stronger—you!"—when, suddenly, from the door, came a voice—a voice that queerly blended infinite pain and infinite triumph:

"The stronger—I!"

Cries. Excitement. Exclamations.

A rush to the door.

Istar Sultana pushing the people to right and left; throwing herself across the dirty, bleeding body:

"O my beloved! O piece of my soul!"

"The stronger—I!" repeated Iskandar; and, as Timur Khan advanced: "Am I not the stronger? Both we reached the height of the Peak of Frozen Death! Both we returned! You with your limbs

whole and uninjured! I broken and bruised and in torment! Each inch of the way a hell of torture! Am I not the stronger, O my friend?"

There was something in Iskandar's eyes which caused the other to incline his head.

"You are!" he replied; and since he was not the man to mourn long over what was lost, he added "Maybe I shall find me another red-haired girl—and some day listen to the hum of her spinning wheel in my own house—and the crooning of her lullabies to my own children!"

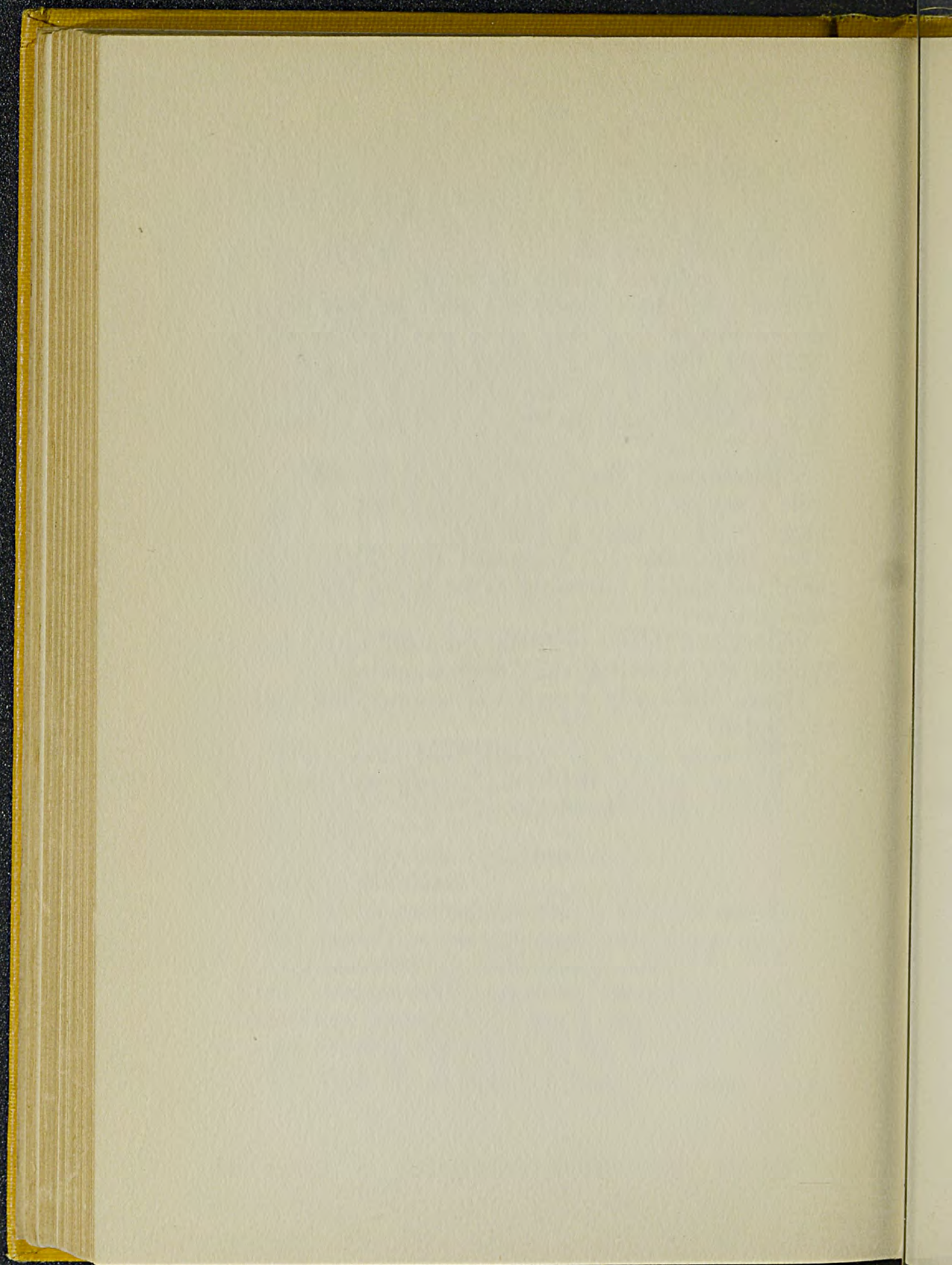
So it happened that here was a wedding with the bride erect on her two feet and the bridegroom on the ground, crumpled and in pain.

So, furthermore, it happened that Abderrahman the priest smiled tolerantly as he heard the godless man whisper:

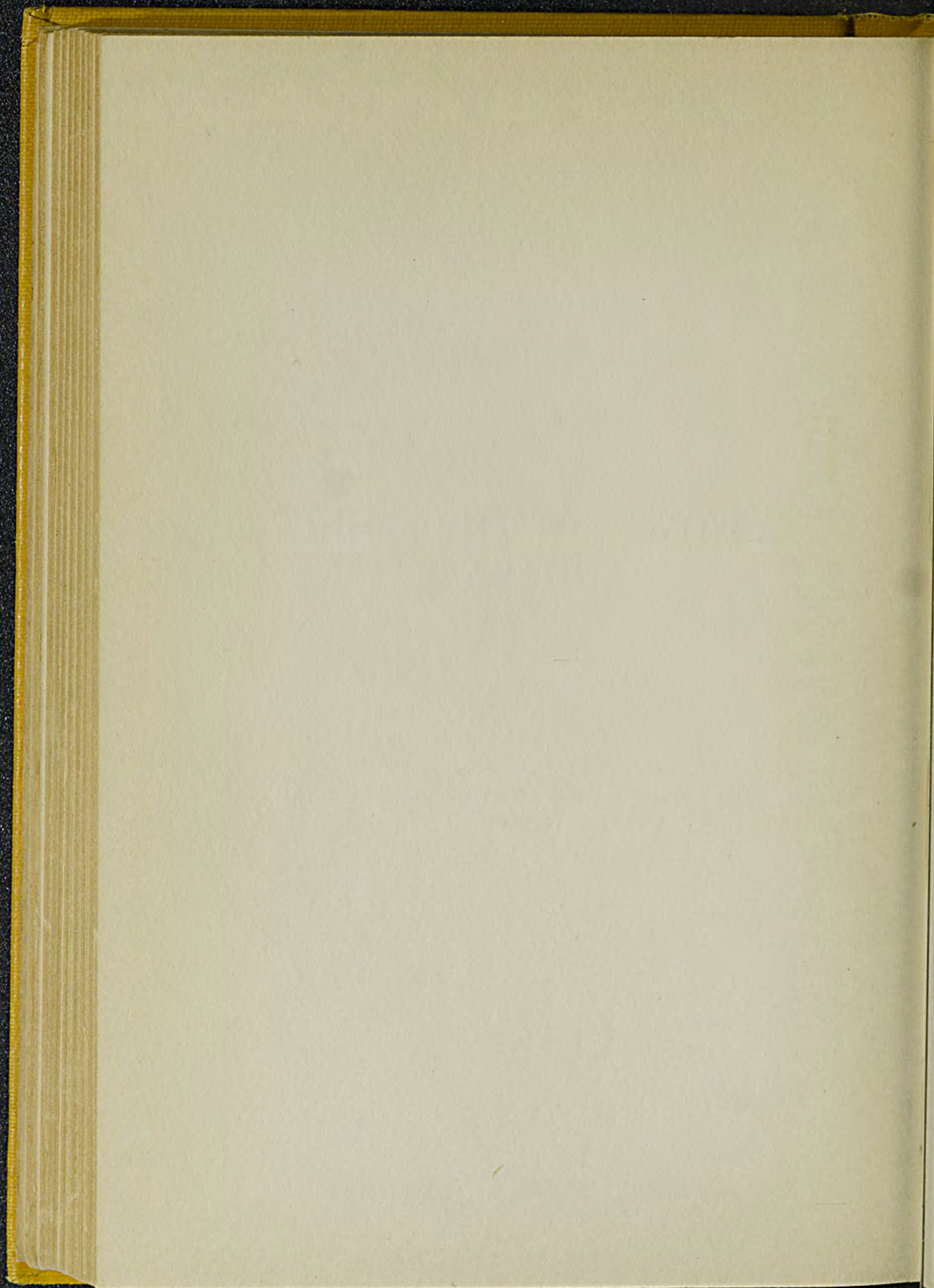
"Glory and thanks to Allah, the Lord of the Seven Worlds, the Merciful, the Compassionate!"

Heard him say in a yet lower whisper, just before he fainted:

"And some glory to myself, too! For am I not the hearty, strong lad—bold among warriors and among splendid, storied heroes?"



A WOMAN OF THE BENNI
FUHARA



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SIX

A WOMAN OF THE BENNI FUHARA

FOR the second time the loud, insistent knocking at the outer door, five flights down, splintered the silence. It filled them with a stark terror that was intensified by the brown pall of darkness.

There was a candle stuck in a bottle. But they had not lit it since that night a week earlier when the two—Mansur-el-Andalusi, shiek of the Benni Fuhara tribe, and Atheba, his wife—had come to Algiers; when, hugging the shadows, flitting like ghosts across moon-white squares, they had sought refuge in this immense, ramshackle, deserted old house.

Once it had been a bustling, prosperous caravanserai of Saharan traders. Now, killed by railway competition, it was rapidly disintegrating into primeval mud and dust—there on the outskirts of town, pinched in between the puling reek and riot of the ghetto and the grey, morose peace of the Moslem cemetery.

Dirty and grimy the place. A mass of broken furniture. Rags piled in closets. High on the cobwebby ceilings tiny, furry bats cheeping dismally. The *tchk-shk-tck* of scorpions scurrying into their holes. A mousing owl rustling somewhere in the thatch of the roof. A metallic buzzing of flies above heaps of viscous refuse.

"An abode of nothingness," Atheba had called it.

"But safer than the mercy of the Benni Hossayn," Mansur-el-Andalusi had replied. "They would sell our heads to the French as a Christian butcher sells unclean pig's flesh."

He had added:

"I am shrivelled entirely with weariness and famishing."

It was characteristic of his brittle, desert-bred sensitiveness that he had not mentioned the real reason for seeking precarious asylum in the city slums, instead of continuing the flight towards the Moroccan border, where there was hospitality and safety in the stone huts of distant cousins who herded their goats and garnered their meagre crops in the mountainous region; and it was characteristic of his wife that she had put this reason into plain statement of fact:

"There is also the child to be considered—the child which I shall bear you, O my lord."

"May Allah grant it be a man-child!" he had murmured, snapping his fingers rapidly to ward off the winds of misfortune. "A man-child to carry on our race."

"And our feud against the Benni Hossayn," Atheba had interrupted, "and our hate against the *roumis*, the French! May the Lord God bless neither the one nor the other!"

For, of the Benni Fuhara as was her husband, she belonged to a sub-division of the tribe who—the saying was wide-blown through the nomads' black felt tents—were so thin-skinned in their Arab pride that they might hardly bear the weight of their own garments; so turbulent and ready to take offence that they might hardly agree with the thoughts in their own brains; so haughty that they reckoned the strings

of their cotton drawers equal in splendour to a Pasha's silken breeches of state.

Indeed it was Atheba who a few months earlier, after a dispute over water and grazing rights and an increase of taxes on their small, sorrel cattle, had asked Mansur to mount his young men on their swift-footed war dromedaries and to go, in raid and rebellion, against the French. Mansur—to use his own words—preferred riding with an idle whip and unused spurs. But there had been the lash of his wife's words, the rowelling sting and hurt of her ambition, the cold iron of her masterful will.

He had gone.

At first the tribesmen had been victorious. They had ambushed and massacred a cavalry squadron near an oasis, had cut off the red-bearded captain's head and, sealed in a leathern sack with the head of a hyena and that of a goat, had sent it to brigade headquarters, accompanied by a ribald and defiant message.

Then the French had swept into the desert with three columns, white troops and black troops, horse, foot, and the guns. Spreading a net of finest mesh from which escape had been impossible, they had caught the Benni Fuhara and had slaughtered the flower of their manhood. They had been helped by the Benni Hossayn, a vulpine, dark-faced race of Bedawin cameleers whose felt tents stippled the wilderness near the Fa oasis.

Not that the latter bore the French yoke any too patiently. But for over five hundred years—with always an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, with treble woe for woe, and hate taloned as the yellow-eyed desert eagle—they had been the Benni Fuhara's blood enemies.

So now the Benni Hossayn, creeping out of the shadow of their ancient, blighting enmity, had followed in the steely wake of the French advance as a pack of jackals follows a hunting lioness—to gorge themselves with the offal of the kill. The strong desert sun rippling red on red lances and red sword blades, they had rolled over the villages of the Benni Fuhara with jingling headstalls and galling bits, with torch and noose and lean, plunging knife, leaving behind grim, charred ruins, where mounds of skeletons bleached in the wind and the sun, and corpses of man and woman, of child and animal.

The few surviving Benni Fuhara had scattered into the wilderness, spreading afar the tale and the pity of their doomed, stubborn race; some demanding the sacred refuge of bread broken and salt tasted and hand clutching tent rope amongst the veiled Touaregs of the Southern Sahara; others, with always the carrion-hawks paralleling their weary Ishmaelite flight on stiff wings, crossing the thousand-thousand miles of sand to the Sudan and imploring the British for protection and, belike, a strip of land and a few head of cattle; while the sheik had been outlawed by the French.

He had fought gallantly; foot to foot; breast to breast; sword to sword. Then, his tribe wiped out by fire and blood, he had bound Atheba on the saddle behind him and had ridden forth from that reeling wreck of strife. The camel had stumbled, had broken its leg; and on foot, with no shelter but the naked wind overhead, league after league, travelling by night, hiding by day, they had gone into the North. They had run away for dear life—aye! and for the sake of the life to come, their unborn child's life—

and had reached Algiers on their way to the mountain fastnesses of the Scorpion.

"Algiers is safest," Mansur had argued. "Men of a hundred tribes crowd the streets and bazaars. Who can tell one grain of desert sand from another? All look alike to the French."

Too, a railway connected the city with the Moroccan frontier. Later on, after the child's birth, they would take it, passing unnoticed amongst the swarms of Moorish labourers who every year made the journey to and from Algeria to help the Italian and French vintners and olive growers with their crops.

They had felt secure; had not despaired of the future. And here they were now, in this ramshackle, deserted old caravanserai, and there was the insistent pounding at the outer door, downstairs.

It did not matter who had seen them and given the alarm: a Benni Hossayn come to town to spend his loot in a week's crimson spree, or native shopkeeper remembering Mansur from former peace-time visits, eager to earn the three thousand francs blood money which the French had put on his head. Whoever the traitor or enemy or spy, here was the fact of it: the loud knocking brushing through them with a bleak horror, setting every nerve a-quiver to its utmost capacity.

A moment later sharp commands rasped out in French and Arabic:

"Who goes there?"

"Halt!"

"Quick! quick!"

Soldiers, doubtless; driving away the curious who gathered from the neighbouring slums.

It chilled the blood of those two up there on the top floor. They stared at each other across the brown gulf of darkness.

They could see no more than their dim contours where they squatted on the bare ground by the side of the bed. But they could feel each other's eyes; could feel the fear that grew under the burden of sounds as the pounding at the door was repeated violently and, presently, metal smashed on wood, and there came a popping, bursting noise, and then the crackle of steel, the dull, brutish thud of rifle butts, again a confusion of French and Arabic voices—and footsteps mounting the creaking stairs—nearer, ever nearer.

"May Allah protect my lord's life!" sighed the woman.

High on the left wall a small, square iron-grilled window let in the moon's rays. They stabbed through the trooping shadows with a wedge-shaped, silvery gesture.

Atheba saw her husband's high-veined hands swim out upon that silver wedge, dip down, about to pick up the hiltless Arab sword that lay there.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"There will be too many for you to fight," she said.

"I know it."

He rose.

The whole man passed into the moon's rays. They showed him of medium height, stocky beneath the swathing folds of his camel's-hair burnoose, the bearded face hawkish and keen, yet about the lips just an elusive suggestion, not exactly of weakness

but of easy-going submission to a will more impatient and hardy than his own.

He was not quite forty years of age. In his youth he had spent some time at an ancient Moslem university famed for its mediæval, Koranic learning and piety, and his natural bent had been to devote himself to the twin arts of the musician and poet—to become one of those wandering bards, those chartered vagabonds, who to this day roam through the lands of Islam, tambourine in hand, improvising poems subtle or florid, repulsed by none, welcomed by most.

But his father's death had forced him to assume the sheikship of the Benni Fuhara. And marriage with Atheba had substituted for his gentle ambition a keener, sharper one: ambition to make his tribe masters of the Sahara; ambition to dare the rage and power of the French overlord; ambition that, ultimately, had brought him here—caught like a rat in a trap—a price on his head.

But he loved his wife very dearly. Each morning of his life—as he put it in his archaic Bedawin phrasing—his love for her was “flung headlong into birth again.” There was no reproach in his heart nor bitterness, not even now, with Fate spreading a grey snare across his path.

His words asked for no pity. They held no self-pity:

“It is useless to fight, as useless to surrender. I am like the man astride a lion—afraid to ride on, yet more afraid to dismount.”

“The Lord God does not close one door against the righteous without opening another,” she replied, trying to feel the confidence which she voiced.

“Child,” he smiled, “I am not so sure about my

righteousness. Indeed, it seems that the Lord God has closed all His doors against me—blessed be His name! Death stands on my left side. On my right stands death's twin brother. Still"—he continued, and he spoke in his usual dispassionate undertone, though he unsheathed his sword—"I would prefer to die fighting."

"It would be more decent," she agreed gravely, "more in keeping with the traditions of the people of the tents."

She listened to the ominous rhythm and surge of the footfalls downstairs. A rattle of glass as rifle butt smashed window. A clumsy shuffling of soldiers' hobnailed boots. A clinking, and murmuring of voices. Occasionally, as the invaders searched the lower floors of the immense, ramshackle old caravanserai, a pause dropping violently, breathlessly through the tumult. And suddenly this savage, primitive creature of ineffable mastery and unconquerable courage covered her face with her hands in a spasm of despair.

"Forgive me, my lord," she sobbed.

He gave a little laugh.

"Allah! Allah! The night of miracles! Never before have I heard you ask anybody's forgiveness!"

"Oh—please—do not jest! It was all my fault. It was I who——"

"No. It was a sending of Fate. Who can escape what is written on the forehead by the Angel of the Scrolls?"

"You are great-hearted. But I know. It was my fault. I carry the curse of unstanch'd pride."

She spoke the last words in blame and, too, a little in excuse of self. Yet perhaps these very words gave back to her a measure of chilly wisdom.

"Put down the sword," she said calmly though hurriedly. "You can appeal to it when all else has failed."

"What else is there?"

"You must hide."

"Where? The holes are only big enough for rats and scorpions."

"There are a dozen cupboards. Here!" She pointed to where the moon's rays, stabbing more sharply into the gloom, painted a flickering silver saraband on a dirt-caked door. "The closet behind you—it is deep—filled with rags."

"Useless!" he argued, while steadily, from the lower floors, stammered and grew the threatening, iron surge. "They will search there and everywhere. They will find me. There will be no room in that closet to clear a blade or strike a blow. And—oh—the greater, blacker shame! My beard will be dishonoured. I shall not even be able to die fighting—to take some of my enemies with me to Paradise."

"Go, go!" She pushed him towards the cupboard. "These soldiers; listen"—as the voices drew nearer—"they are of the Arabs, of the Moslems! Of our own blood and faith! A whispered word in their ears, imploring their help——"

"They have eaten the bread and salt of the French. They are in the French service——"

"Please! It is your only chance."

At last, as always, he gave in, saying he had obeyed her during life, so why not in the hour of death?

"You will not die, my lord. I know it, feel it. Oh"—she interrupted herself—"quick, quick!" as beyond the door feet came, feet slurred to a stop with a sibilant, tattered confusion of Arabic voices accent-

uated by clipped, metallic French words of command, as a heavy fist pounded on the door, as a rough shout came:

"Open! Hey here! Open!"

She kissed him passionately.

"On thee the peace of God, O beauty of the turban!" she whispered.

She shut the cupboard.

Then, slowly, she turned. She faced the door. For a fleeting second stark terror led her brain to the point where numbness succeeds upon excess of fear. But she regained her self-control with a tremendous, shuddering effort. She tightened her quivering nerves against the coming ordeal.

She drew up her face veil.

Crash! Bang! Crash!—the heavy, pounding, brutish fist.

"Open! Open!" the rough, impatient shout.

A grating, tearing sound as a bayonet was forced into the jamb.

"Open! *Nom de Dieu!* Open—in the name of the Republic!"

Crash!

The door protested; splintered; gave; gaped wide open.

Somebody held a lamp. A ruddy light flickered; steadied; bored through the brown gloom. A sweep of bearded faces there on the threshold, crimson, blue-tasselled head-dresses pulled deep over broad foreheads. Uniforms. The gleam of a sword. Black holes of rifle barrels levelled in a straight, threatening line.

An order rasped out:

"Halt!"

Silence. Another order. Then a thud of rifle butts dropping punctuations on the floor.

A voice from the coiling, purple shadows near the stairs landing:

"Surrender!"

And pushing to the front, the first to enter—followed by a young French lieutenant and a dozen Arabs in the army of the Republic—was a white moustached, elderly French civilian in the pomp of double-breasted frock-coat and high silk hat, a red-white-and-blue scarf wound about his middle to show that he was on official business. He saw a woman standing before him. She was robed in a loose, dark violet robe. Of her face, between the top seam of her veil and the triangular droop of the kerchief about her blue-black hair, nothing was visible except an olive forehead tattooed in a bizarre, indigo design—the tribal mark of Benni Fuhara—and two grey, gold-flecked, almond-shaped eyes.

The man bowed politely. He introduced himself, in excellent Arabic, as M. Sevier, the examining magistrate, adding that he had a warrant for the arrest of Mansur-el-Andalusi sentenced to death for high treason, murder, and armed rebellion.

"My husband is not here," she replied calmly. "Be pleased to go away."

"Your tongue is false. Half an hour ago, coming from the bazaar where he bought dates, he entered this house. It is being watched. Nobody saw him leave."

"He is not here," Atheba repeated. "I swear it by the adorable Prophet Mohammed—on Him the salute!"

"I was not born yesterday. I know the Arabs. To them an oath to Christian or Jew is meaningless—a line written on water. Also, standing outside the door, I heard voices. So, you see——"

"I was speaking to God," she interrupted.

"Oh?"

"I was cursing the French. I was imploring Allah to pour out their blood upon the edge of the sword and to make their women like barren mules."

She heard a faint, quickly suppressed laugh amongst the Arabs. A moment or two earlier, immediately after they had entered, her terror had returned to her, flooding her with grey, choking waves. She felt utterly alone, utterly helpless. Now, hearing that faint laugh, her terror ebbed away once more; once more she felt mistress of herself, confident, capable of anything.

That laugh—yes, a laugh of mockery against the French; of sympathy for herself.

These soldiers—she had told her husband so—were of the Moslems. They were of the Arabs, children of the same soil with her!

She swept a glance at the row of soldiers, their faces blurred into indistinct shadows by the crimson head-dresses deeply pressed over foreheads at the proper, swashbuckling angle.

"Be pleased to go away," she continued. "This is the harem." And with superb arrogance: "It is not fitting for a man to enter here with loud words and the clank of strife."

"But, look here——"

"I have spoken, sir. I have nothing to add," she said with dry finality.

And, as if casually, she turned on her heel and

leaned against the cupboard where her husband was hidden.

The Frenchman sighed. He felt conscious of an illogical liking and admiration for this savage, fearless woman. But there was his duty as an official of the Republic; and he turned to the lieutenant, telling him to proceed with the search.

Some of the troops accompanied the magistrate to the garret. Others, led by the lieutenant, dispersed through the wide, curtainless Moorish arches that connected the room with a sweep of apartments, all dusty and grimy.

Electric torches were switched on. Lights stabbed into dark holes. From above and next door came sounds of wooden floors creaking under heavy boots, closets smashed open, furniture tossed about.

For a moment the lieutenant reappeared on the threshold.

"Go ahead," he said to the three soldiers who had remained in the room with Atheba. "Remember: three thousand francs to the one who gets the rebel—dead or alive!"

The men saluted.

Two busied themselves looking under the bed, behind rickety tables, into great, painted, mouldy boxes and cupboards along the farther wall, while the third walked straight to where Atheba stood and, by the same token, straight to the cupboard that concealed her husband.

Once more dread swept over her in grey waves. Once more she mastered it with all her savage intensity; and as the soldier advanced, rather leisurely, she addressed him in a flat, wiped-out voice so that the others might not hear:

"Three thousand francs the French offer for the sacrifice of a Moslem's head. What are three, or thirty, or thirty times three thousand francs between children of the same soil?"

When he drew nearer she touched the sergeant's chevrons on his sleeve as a Bedawin, running away from the toll of blood feud, touches another Bedawin's tent rope to claim protection.

"Behold!" she continued. "I have alighted at your tent, O son of Adam!"

The man did not reply, but he gave a low, mocking laugh. He reached up with one hand, brushing away the head-dress from his forehead. And the first thing Atheba saw was the criss-cross, purple tribal mark of the Benni Hossayn, the Benni Fuhara's ancient enemies; and the next moment, as the moon's rays slashed across his features, she recognised the nervous, flaring nostrils, the sloe-black eyes, the flagging, predatory jowl ill concealed by a sparse beard—and she whispered his name with utter, shuddering incredulity:

"Zeid ibn-Reshid!"

"Aye!" he echoed. "I am indeed Zeid ibn-Reshid. It seems that I cannot escape you, O crusher of hearts. Nor"—and again he gave that low, mocking laugh—"can you escape me!"

She was silent.

She stared at him with the eyes of her body while, to the eyes of her soul, there rose a picture of the past—of a day seven years ago, shortly before her marriage to Mansur during the short, sweet spring herbage of the desert, when the dun waste is a fairy-land of blossoms, covered with wild rape and sorrel and pimpernel and tiny, starry weeds that give green

food and new life to the tribesmen's parched cattle; when the great, clumsy, shuffle-footed camels frolic like yearlings and come home at sunset full-bellied and bouncing hugely, grotesquely before the herds-men's painted sticks; when the rock pools are filmed with silvery, cool moisture; when at night, in the shiek's coffee tents, the young men sing of love and desire.

Her father's only child, Atheba had taken his herd to pasturage, driving the lowing animals out to the little oasis with high, throaty yells, addressing each cow or calf by given name or nickname or name of abuse.

Then, passing through the rising ground between the craggy, swart towering of twin basalt rocks, bending her back against the up-hill pull, she had suddenly seen Zeid ibn-Reshid standing square in her path.

A lawless cameleer he was, like all the Benni Hossayn; of hardy soul and coarse breeding, looking to violence and strong-thewed vitality to help his loose living and loving.

"Ho, crusher of hearts!" he had shouted, walking up to her with a heavy swagger. "By Allah—there are secrets on your lips which I must read with the touching of my lips!"

He had clutched her shoulders. She had tried to tear herself free, had not succeeded against his tough strength; and, bending down to the redness of her mouth, he had laughed:

"A Benni Fuhara, you? A Benni Hossayn, I? Pah! What does feud matter when soul speaks naked to soul and passion answers for both?"

He had dragged her off, roaring a bridal song of his tribe.

But, returning from the farther desert where they had searched for a stray camel filly, three youths of the Benni Fuhara had chanced on the scene. They had leaped upon Zeid ibn-Reshid before he could draw his crooked girdle-dagger. They had pulled him down as hounds pull down a stag. They had beaten him within an inch of his life with camel sticks and hippo-hide flails, while Atheba had danced about the prostrate man, kicking him with her hard little feet, asking him jeeringly to forget his bridal song.

And here he was now, no longer a rough cameleer but a proper sergeant in the French army; and, with that low, mocking laugh of his, he repeated the whisper:

"It seems that I cannot escape you, O crusher of hearts. Nor can you escape me——"

Still she was silent. Her silence cloaked no plan of action, no living thoughts. There was now only despair. Hope had guttered out like a candle in the wind. Fate was closing its grey web. Her mouth felt dry. Her eyes bulged and smarted. There was a crawling of the skin down her spine. Instinctively she receded against the closet that hid her husband; instinctively stretched out wide, ineffectual arms as if to protect him, just as, followed by the soldiers, the two Frenchmen returned from their fruitless search.

"Our bird must have flown the coop in spite of our precautions," said the magistrate.

"Unless he's in this room," replied the other. "Hunted everywhere?" he asked the soldiers who had remained with Atheba.

"Oui, mon lieutenant!"

The officer turned to Zeid ibn-Reshid.

"What about that cupboard over there?" He

pointed to where Atheba stood with outstretched, sheltering arms. "The woman seems to be vitally interested——"

He slurred; stopped. He saw the tense, tragic expression in her eyes. He saw that a small, pinkish-grey spider was creeping up her left arm and that she was not even aware of the insect's touch. Like the magistrate, he felt sorry for her; exchanged a look with him. Then he shrugged his shoulders. They were both cogs in the same logical, pitiless machine of civilisation—both in the service of France.

"Have you looked, sergeant?" he continued.

"It is the only place where I have not looked." Zeid ibn-Reshid's face was turned towards Atheba. An ambiguous smile curled his lips.

"Go ahead!" The lieutenant spoke gruffly, because he was ashamed of his sympathy. "What the devil are you waiting for?"

He gave a sharp word of command. The soldiers drew up in a line, levelling their rifles at the cupboard door, while Atheba—there was nothing else for her to do—stepped to one side. But in the split second between her stepping aside and Zeid ibn-Reshid's advance, her eyes met his, and there was a woman's full tale, a woman's full life in that passing glance.

"Forgive me, forgive me, O son of Adam!" pleaded the eyes above the veil, while her lips were tight and silent except for a staccato intake of breath. "Have pity, O creature of God!" implored the grey, gold-flecked eyes. "By my unborn son's life—have pity! Are we not both of the Moslems, of the Arabs? Look, look at me!" whispered the mute eyes. "I am still beautiful! I am still young! I can still stir the heart! Oh—for the love of Allah—for the love of

the Prophet Mohammed—for the love of Esa, the son of Mary—have pity, have pity!”

“Go on, sergeant!” the lieutenant barked impatiently.

“Be careful!” warned one of the soldiers. “The rebel may be inside. The nomads are full of wiles.”

“I, too, am full of wiles,” laughed Zeid ibn-Reshid. And to Atheba, in a sibilant, equivocal murmur: “Place thy reliance upon God!”

He entered the purple gloom of the cupboard while she waited, breathless, rigid. In her heart hope and despair rose in even waves that overlapped, mingled. The blood sang and buzzed in her veins. Ludicrously, unreasonably, trivial things impinged on her consciousness: she watched a beetle scuttling over the floor—listened to a night-moth’s silken wings flopping softly, distinctly through the silence.

Then Zeid ibn-Reshid came out of the closet. He was alone. He closed the door behind him.

“No living thing is inside,” he said to the lieutenant.

And when Atheba almost swooned with an overwhelming reaction of exultation and joy he steadied her with a strong arm, whispered to her:

“Did the French indeed offer three thousand francs for the sacrifice of your husband’s head? What is gold between children of the same soil—between Benni Hossayn and Benni Fuhara?”

A few minutes later the room was again in brown darkness. The soldiers’ clumsy hobnailed boots stamped down the rickety stairs. The outer door shut with a bang.

“Come, my lord!” she called. “The French have gone.”

There was no answer.

"Come!" she repeated more loudly.

When still there was no answer, suddenly a dread premonition swept over her. Something naked reached out and touched her soul, leaving the chill of an indescribable uneasiness.

She lit the candle. She opened the cupboard. She looked.

She saw that Zeid ibn-Reshid had spoken the truth. No living thing was inside. Only a dead man, his throat slashed with the rip and twist of a bayonet blade, the blood trickling slowly, staining the earth-brown burnoose a rich, dark red.

A cry went up from her lips, a single cry: ugly, hoarse, grating.

Then she was silent.

Outside, a crack of wind broke through the window, flaring the candle light, clattering the unfastened shutters. Stillness again—and the waiting, hopeless silence—and the purple rush of the night.

She was a Bedawin. She was a Moslem.

She thought: "What is written is written!" Fate was like a blind camel, coming out of the dark with no warning, no jingling of bells.

So she sank on her knees and prayed to the Lord Allah in whom she believed with all her hard, fervent soul:

"He bringeth forth the living from the dead!" she repeated. And was not her husband dead? And, stirring beneath her heart, was there not life to be brought forth—her unborn child's life, her husband's child?

The living from the dead! The blessed, eternal miracle of creation! "Blessed be Allah, the Lord of

Daybreak!" she exclaimed triumphantly. And she rose; she crossed over to the window; she looked out into the South, towards the desert a thousand leagues away.

There, then, was the answer. For the race was not yet run. The doom of the Benni Fuhara was not yet sealed. There was the life to come; her unborn child's life.

"Allah, Thou All-Merciful, let it be—oh—let it be a man-child! And let him grow up strong and lusty and ruthless and wide-stepping! And, when he has reached manhood, let him find a wife amongst his cousins on the stony range of the Scorpion—a proper, healthy wife, fit to bear many children! Let his breed increase a thousandfold, O Lord God!"

And then—no hurry, no hurry, for what did years or decades matter among the spawning eternities of the Sahara?—would come the day of revenge against the French, yet redder revenge against the Benni Hossayn.

She picked up Mansur-el-Andalusi's sword. It gleamed like a star in the light of the candle. Allah willing, her child would wield it some day.

She went down the dark stairs.

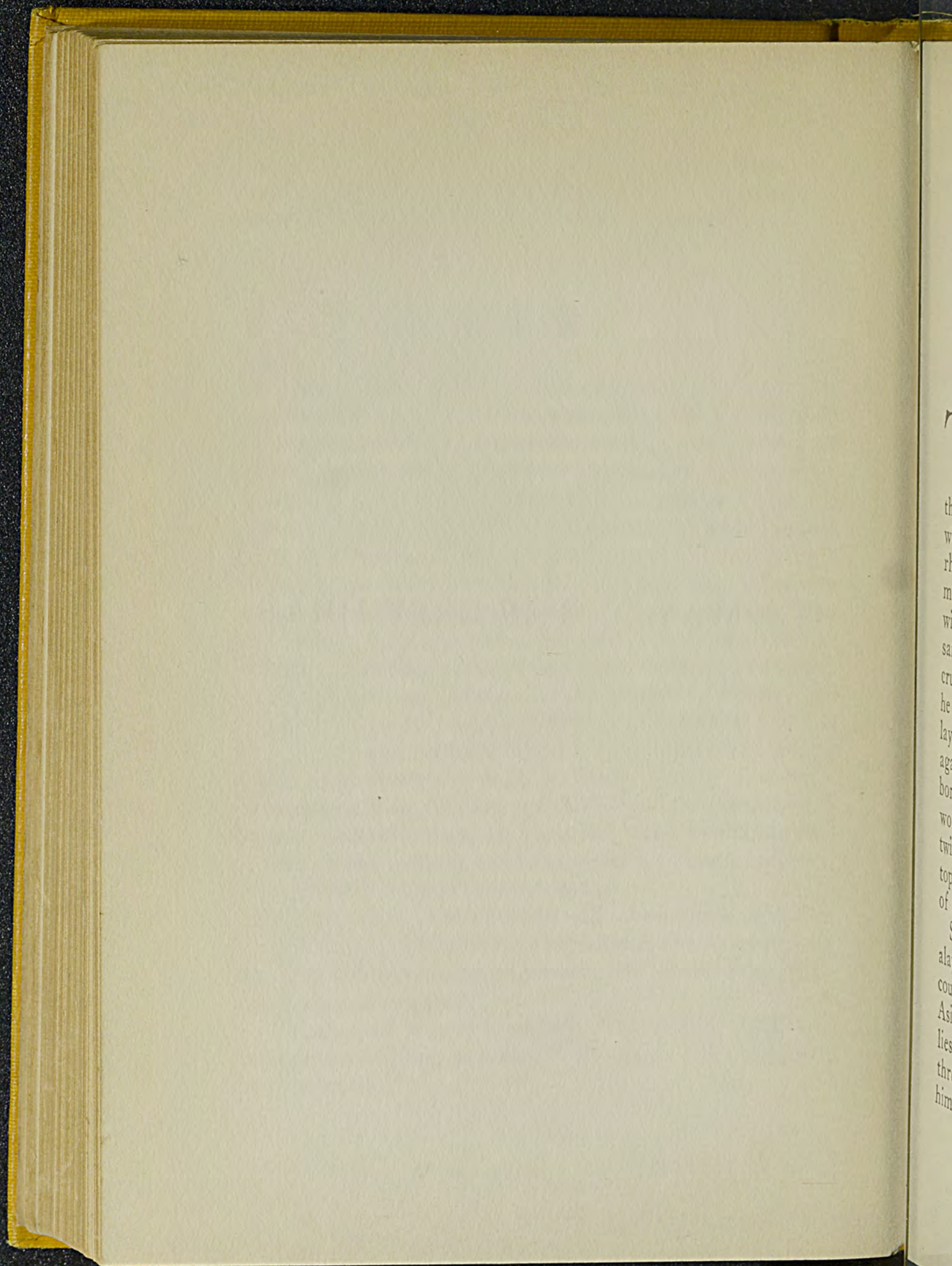
Somewhere in this city of Algiers there would be a decent Moslem couple to bury her dead husband, and to give to her asylum until the child was born. Allah, grant that it may be a man-child!

So, dry-eyed, the woman of the Benni Fuhara stepped into the street. The broad, level wedge of morning was beginning to stream out of the East with lemon and elfin-green.

She stopped a grey-bearded, respectable Arab.

"*Ana bi wejhaq, yah Sidi,*" she said. "I crave thy protection, sir."

THE WAY OF THE GREY HILLS



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THE WAY OF THE GREY HILLS

TUGLUK KHAN was off to his own country. Up the long northern trail he went, his rough, wadded sheepskin coat folded across the small of his back to give free play to his lungs, while his arms, sleeves rolled to the elbows, moved rhythmically up and down. He walked with the stammering, suspicious step of the hill-bred who reckons with inequalities of ground, lifting his rope-soled sandals gingerly over slippery timber falls and crumbling granite slides; putting on extra speed when he crossed a wide spread of rust-brown bracken that lay like a scarf athwart the summer hue of the slope; again warily slowing as he forded swift little streams bordered with scented, wild peppermint and spiky wormwood and stiff, starry, azure gentian and, betwixt water-rounded pebbles, tufts of moss yellow as topaz or red as ruby, and here and there an edging of ferns green as a spring wind.

South and east he left the towering, tortured Himalaya peaks, the Roof of the World, where three great countries—British India, China, and Russian Central Asia—link frontiers and swap trade goods and trade lies and, occasionally, a steely, bluffing crackle of threats; and he kept as straight as the road would let him towards a dun-coloured village which was

perched on a flat, circular mountain top, called *The Wrath of the Thunder Gods* in the Afghan tongue.

There the Zakka Khel, his native tribe, garnered their meagre crops and herded their small, shaggy goats among the purple rhododendrons. Below, a narrow valley cleft the hills, and beyond was a second mountain top, called for a reason long forgotten *The Neighing of the Black Horse* and inhabited by another tribe, the Momand Khel, his own clan's ancient enemies.

Not that there had ever been blood feud.

For blood feud means an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. A life for a life it means, with rifles cracking from ambush, and knives leaping crimson through the black of the night, and a killing even of women and little children when they go to the brook to fetch water for the evening meal.

Blood feud was proper and honourable for the tribes of the South, near the Indian border, that counted their fighting men by the thousands. But here, in the high, bitter hills of the North where lean birch met stunted pine and pine met eternal snow and snow met the naked wind of Allah, the clans were small—not more than a hundred families to each—and nobody would be the gainer by blood feud except, belike, the slinking, grey wolves and the circling carrion-hawks.

Still, there had always been the enmity, the bickering hate and turgid, churlish jealousy; and never intermarriage which would have brought peace: and often, when Zakka Khel met Momand Khel, an exchange of rich, salty abuse, an angry shaking and threatening of hairy fists, and at times a hurling of stones and thorn sticks.

Tugluk Khan, thinking of home, recalled a day seven years earlier, a week or two before he had gone south to Kabul to seek service in the Amir's army.

He had been a boy of fifteen, though in the mountains they reckoned him almost a man, and he had descended into the valley, driving his father's goats so that they might eat their greedy fill of the rich, blossoming spring herbage. He had met there a girl of the Momand Khel, a few years younger than he, and very lovely she had seemed to him with pale gold for her skin and ebony for her hair, with the velvety red of rowan berries for the curve of her lips and shiny, fearless steel for the grey of her eyes. So, in his stilted peasant speech, he had said to her:

"*Benjam-i-shuma*—by your life and mine! But yours is the fine beauty to the seeing of my eyes. . . ."

"And the quick fist," she had interrupted, "and the unerring aim!"

And she had picked up a jagged stone, had thrown it with all her young strength, hitting and bruising his forehead, and had leaped nimbly away, up the trail towards *The Neighing of the Black Horse*.

Then, from behind the safety of a granite boulder, she had called him a number of names which, while giving the lie to her sex and tender years, had been as emblematic of her tough, aggressive breed as ice is of winter. In shrill accents she had demanded by what right he, a Zakka Khel, thus "an abuser of the salt—a loathly beast with pig's ears—a creature of quite unmentionable begetting—an almost Hindu in lack of the nobler qualities!", dared as much as look at the shadow of a girl of the Momand Khel, and had wound up triumphantly:

"Pah! Brother of seventeen dogs! Be pleased to return to your kennel—at once!"

Tugluk Khan laughed at the memory.

He rubbed his forehead. A ragged scar was still there where her stone had struck him.

A wildcat, he thought. A biting, scratching wildcat. But—hayah!—those steel-grey eyes of hers—those red, red lips. And she would be seven years older now—no longer a child——"

He wondered if she was married.

Then he shrugged his shoulders.

Married or not, she was a Momand Khel. Their tribes were enemies.

When, the next moon, he reached the higher mountains he opened wide his lungs and filled them with the snow-sharp air, as though to cleanse himself from the reek of that southern city of Kabul where he had lived seven years of his youth; where, a private, afterwards a sergeant in the Amir's army, he had learned to shoot straight, to embroider his earthy peasant speech with spiced, flowery metaphor, and to twirl his moustache and, perhaps, whisper the soft ghost of a word—"tomorrow at this time near the Kashmere caravanserai, O Mouth of Honey!"—when some supple Afghan woman, veiled after the manner of town-bred people, passed him in the bazaar with a clink-clonk of silver anklets and a brazen message in her black eyes.

This serving in the Amir's army, as freemen not conscripts, was a tribal custome of the Zakka Khel, as it was a tradition of the Momand Khel youths to spend certain years in wandering as wrestlers throughout Afghanistan, even crossing the western border into Persia and the southern into the yellow plains of

India. Unlike the Zakka Khel, who were small-boned and lithe and wiry, the latter were a race of giants, with chests like deep drums and bodies made for crushing and crunching. For generations the wrestling craft, with a dozen shrewd tricks and twists, had descended from father to son until today, in all Central Asia, no gladiators were more famed or feared than they.

A week or two earlier—he had left Kabul that same day—Tugluk Khan had met one of these wrestlers, a certain Ali Yussef, the son of the Momand Khel's village priest.

Followed by a fawning, admiring, chattering rabble of city Afghans, Ali Yussef had come down the street, ogling the women, his right hand toying with a red rose which a dancing girl had tossed to him from a screened balcony. He had stalked along with a lumpish, ponderous strut and swagger, naked but for a loin-cloth and a gold bracelet set with enormous, off-colour diamonds that encircled one large wrist, his bronzed torso like a barrel, his arms and legs packed with a fantastic layer of muscle, his shoulders swaying heavily with every step of his broad feet, his short neck like a bull's and blending without break or curve into a bullet-shaped head that was close-shaven except for a single long, black scalp-lock in the center of his skull.

They had recognised each other. Momentarily they had stopped, had stared—the inherited, unreasoning hate of centuries surging up in their brains, causing the wrestler's fingers to curl murderously, while the soldier, being the weaker man, had reached instinctively for the crooked dagger in his uniform belt.

Then each passed on his way.

Enmity? Yes. But there was no blood feud between their clans.

That evening—perhaps seeing the other had been the illogical reason for it—homesickness had come to Tugluk Khan. Suddenly his heart had called back to the sharp, chill tang of the North. The longing had been upon his soul like a stinging brand, and, with the rapid decision typical of his race, he had gone straight to the *Koolar Aghassi*, the Colonel of his regiment.

"Sir," he had announced simply, "tonight I am returning to mine own people."

The *Koolar Aghassi*, a paunchy, red-bearded Durani noble, was a shrewd judge of human nature. There would be no holding this man, he had said to himself, except by an iron ball and chain. Besides, Tugluk Khan was a Zakka Khel, a freeman, not a gutter-bred rat of a Kabul conscript.

"Go in peace," he had said. "You have been a good soldier. Have you a brother?"

"Yes."

"How old?"

"Fifteen—perhaps sixteen."

"Send him to take your place in the regiment."

"*Hookum hai*—it is an order!" Tugluk Khan had replied, salaaming.

He had been off to his own country within the hour, and two weeks later he found himself in the narrow valley that cleft the hills between *The Wrath of the Thunder Gods* and *The Neighing of the Black Horse*.

Above him he saw the stone huts of his tribe. Shapeless, dwarfed, huddled, they squatted among the jagged granite boulders, stretching on towards the north like a smudge of sooty grey beneath the glis-

tening band of the eternal snows—the higher mountains limning ghostly out of the purple distance, offering their immense, stony stillness to the fiery face of the sun.

He was about to turn up the trail that led to his native village when he heard a stirring of leaves, a snapping of dry stalks, a herder's high-pitched call; "*Woh-ho! Y'ellah! Y'ellah!*"; and out of a rhododendron thicket came a flock of goats and, driving them with a pointed thorn stick, a young girl.

Tugluk Khan recognised her at once; recognised those fearless, steel-grey eyes, the lips red as rowan berries, the slim, strong hands.

Seven years had passed. Had passed her childhood. And now her slender body was budding into the promise of womanhood beneath the thin, fringed, brown and ochre striped fustian robe that covered her from her shoulders to just below her knees. Her ebony hair was braided with blue and saffron ribbons, and by this he knew, with a curious feeling of relief and elation, that she was not yet married.

She did not recognise him.

For a huge fur cap was pressed deeply over his forehead, and his face, with its short-cropped moustache, was no longer smooth and boyish. Under his sheepskin coat he wore his regimental uniform. Perhaps, she thought, he was one of the Amir's soldiers come to the hills to recruit among the tribes. She knew the breed: rowdyish, boisterous, quick at picking a quarrel, as quick at making love.

So she raised her stick threateningly, and Tugluk Khan laughed.

"O Hirfa," he said, calling her by name, "it seems that seven years have not changed you. Look!"—

pushing back his cap and showing the ragged scar on his forehead—"once you greeted me with a stone—and today with a stick!"

Then she remembered. She joined in his laughter.

"Why did you leave Kabul?" she said mockingly. "Is it true what they say?"

"What do they say?"

"That you deserted because our lord the Amir is going on the war-path against the infidels, the British—and that more ready you are to scent your moustache delicately among the women than show your fine skin to flying lead."

"Quite true!" he replied calmly. "Let wolf fight grey wolf. I am a man of peace."

"Doubtless," she continued, "the girls of the Zakka Khel are already dyeing the palms of their hands with henna against your coming?"

"The one I long for is not of my own clan."

"No?"

"No!"

"Who is she then?"

"A Momand Khel!"

"Oh . . . ?"

"Yourself, O Heart of Three Roses!"

He had meant to give her mockery for mockery; had said it with a laugh.

But all at once, as with the cracking of a whip, he felt that this jest of his lips had not been a jest of his heart. Seeing her there, vibrant with the promise of her soft, blossoming womanhood, with the proud beauty of her face so finely chiselled and the brave uptilt of her chin and the movements of her hands like music, he knew suddenly that there would be emptiness in the house where she was not. It was

not as it might have been with a woman of the Kabul bazaars, a roughing it or flirting it for the sake of a kiss, quickly forgotten. Love it was; a thing, a fact, for the space of a man's life and a woman's; and life was serious—more serious than death.

So, before the riddle and the fear of it, he was silent, quite silent—until he heard her voice, coming as from a distance, with a faint tremor causing it to soar as a bird soars into the wind.

"*Allah-hadig*—may the Lord God lead you! You have said either too much—or too little . . ."

"Too little, Hirfa!"

"Have they then cut out your tongue in Kabul that you cannot say the rest?" This time there was no tremor in her accents, but a high note, triumphant and clear, like the clashing of well-tempered blades.

"Which of the two in my soul do you wish to speak?" came his slow question.

"Two . . . ?" she echoed, wonderingly.

"Yes. Two I am. And one is the Zakka Khel, your enemy, and the other is myself—Tugluk Khan, the creature of God's making . . ."

He looked at her. He saw that her hands, plucking at her robe, were as unquiet as butterflies.

"Which of the two?" he insisted.

"Let Tugluk Khan speak!" she said in a slurred voice; and so he told her that he loved her—told her with that great epic sweep and surge which comes to Afghans in moments of overwhelming emotion:

"I love you—you who are all my dreams come true. When I look into your eyes, the sun rises, and the waters bring the call of the deep, and the boat of my life rocks on the dancing waves of your life. You have made your heart a prison for my heart, and you

have tossed away the key into the turbulent whirlpool of my eternal love. . . ."

He stretched out a hand.

"O Hirfa . . ."

Their fingers touched.

Did he kiss her first—or she him . . . ? He did not know; nor did she. They only knew that they were kissing each other.

There was now no outside world. There was no sky, no sun, no valley. There was no Zakka Khel, nor Momand Khel. There was only he and she—only a man and a woman who loved each other . . .

Suddenly a high, reedy yell startled them; drove them apart:

"Y'ellah—y'ellah . . ." a goatherd's call.

"Tomorrow?" he whispered.

"Tomorrow!"

"My love is greater than yours!"

"No, no! Mine is the greater. . . ."

"Y'ellah!" again the herder's call, coming nearer; and Tugluk Khan leaped up the trail towards the village, while Hirfa gathered her scattered goats and drove them through the thicket.

So the next morning came, and they met—and another morning, and still another.

They spoke of little except their love, with ever the feeling in their souls that they were reaching out to some amazing beauty of Fate which would sift the glory of gold and fire about life's drab, harsh ways.

Then one morning—an hour earlier his mother had begged him to marry and settle down, for: "Look, my son! Your father is dead—may he find Paradise!—and you are now the head of the house, and there is not a young girl among the Zakka Khel

but would welcome the sound of your feet stepping into the bridal chamber!"—he spoke to Hirfa of the future.

He asked her to run away with him and become his wife.

She shook her head.

"No, no!"

"Child," he argued, "neither your tribe nor mine will allow us to marry."

"I know."

"So you see—we must go away."

"No, no!" she repeated.

"What else can we do?" And when she did not reply he went on: "There are other lands, north and east, where we can live. I am a soldier and—*hayah!*—a good soldier. I can find service in the army of the Amir of Bokhara or with one of the independent Turkoman chiefs who roam the Siberian steppes or . . ."

"There is my grandfather," she interrupted. "You know—my parents are dead, and he is alone except for me. Father and mother he has been to me. I love him."

"More than you love me?" he demanded jealously.

"Neither more nor less. But—oh—differently. He is old. I cannot break his heart."

"You are breaking mine."

"You are younger and stronger than he."

"Younger? Doubtless. But—by the red pig's bristles—perhaps not so very much stronger!" came silent, unspoken commend in a thick clump of *goor-gooreh* bushes where Hirfa's grandfather, Aminullah Khan, was hiding not far from the lovers.

During the last week he had wondered at the haste

with which, every day, she drove the flock to pasture; had wondered, too, why she took the long, steep trail down to the valley when she might have remained on a mountain top which had begun to flush green with the rich, late summer herbage. So this morning Aminullah Khan, still agile in spite of his age, had followed her, had hidden, had watched and listened—and now a smile spread over his wrinkled, bearded face.

He was different from the rest of the Momand Khel. In his youth he had been a wrestler, indeed the most famous wrestler of his generation, so that to this day, when fifty years had passed, they were still telling tales of his prowess.

Fantastic tales; homeric, incredible tales; but perfectly true tales.

He had travelled farther than any other Momand Khel, to Bombay, Peking, Stamboul, even to Moscow, and had brought back not only a wealth of gold, but also a wealth of new ideas, a broader, fairer conception of life. But when he had tried to explain his new-found wisdom to the tribesmen he had run against a stone wall. Narrow, mediaeval, obstinate, typical mountaineers, they were bewitched within an invisible sweep of turgid tradition and superstitions, a magic circle which nothing could pierce. At last he had grown tired of their accusations that he had become a foreigner, that he had cast off the old ways, the good ways, the ways of his ancestors. He had locked up his ideas in his own soul.

So, today, his old heart exulted when he saw that his granddaughter, blood of his blood and bone of his bone, had taken a Zakka Khel for her lover and, by the same token, was rebelling against the obsolete,

fanatical clan laws as he had rebelled fifty years earlier.

His first impulse was to step out and say to her:

"*Mbarak m'sud*—be blessed and lucky! Go away with this man since you love him!"

But he reconsidered.

By running away, these two, Tugluk Khan and Hirfa, would break the shackles of ancient prejudice—but only where they themselves were concerned. There would be gossip and scandal and rage in both villages. Then, after a while, Zakka Khel and Momand Khel would settle back in the stony, stupid groove of their bigotry as if nothing had happened. On the other hand, thought Aminullah Khan, suppose he found a way of using the love of these two young people so as to break the ancient shackles once and for all? He would wait and watch, then act. Thus, as a wrestler, had he won his most memorable victories; by waiting patiently for his chance, watching his opponent's weak points, then acting with a sudden, irresistible co-ordinating of sinew and brain. And the weak point in the armour of his tribesmen was—strangely—their respect for the laws of the hills. Here, too, would be his chance.

He tiptoed out of the sheltering bushes and took the trail to the village. Half an hour later, when Hirfa entered the low stone house, he greeted her with more than his usual affection. He kissed her, whom years ago he had called his wife:

"*Mahi-alum soz-i-mun*—O Moon of the World and Burner of my Heart!"

His chance came soon. For the next day Ali Yusef, the son of Mortazu the village priest, returned from Kabul. His waistshawl was swollen with gold,

and on his lips were quite veracious stories of his exploits which caused the old men to exclaim that never—"by the teeth of Allah!"—had there been a greater gladiator among the Momand Khel, except one; the white-bearded giant who smiled with sardonic amusement as, that night, he watched the feast in honour of Ali Yussef.

The latter was a simple, rather bovine soul. Whereas in Kabul he had worn the traditional, scanty costume of a tribal wrestler, here on his native heath he was robed in the motley glory of a city dandy. He had stained his finger tips red with henna, had wristed a voluminous, purple turban about his head, had perfumed his enormous body with pungent oil of geranium, had thrown about his wide shoulders a peach-coloured velvet *khalat* embroidered with an intricate Persian design.

He was enjoying himself hugely and ingenuously.

First there had been a splendid meal of a fat goat, well stuffed and spiced and roasted whole over an open fire. Then he had dipped large, generous hands into a tiger-skin bag and had tossed presents right and left. Presents for everybody. Daggers for the young men. Tobacco and Persian pipes for the old men. Sweetmeats and Indian dolls for the children. And for the women an abundance of silks and scents and filigree jewellery.

"*Manda na bash*—may your feet never grow weary nor your hearts, O my friends!" he had shouted.

"*Hai! Hai!*" came now his rumbling, rollicking laugh as, while the torches flared in a golden sea and the flutes wailed and the tomtoms throbbed, the young girls, their hair covered with the dower of hillside and forest, danced before him to do him honour—the

fringes of their shawls jerking sideways to the swing of their supple hips, their bare feet slurring over the ground with a jingle of silver anklets.

The dance over, they gathered about him where he squatted cross-legged, like a gigantic idol, on a heap of pillows, and the stout, wise mothers looking on benignly and smiling broadly paid him extravagant compliments.

For was he not rich and famous? Was he not handsome with his immense, muscular bulk and his gorgeous finery? Would not his wife have the right to lord it over the other women?

They asked him a dozen questions.

Was it true that, single-handed, he had defeated three Tartar wrestlers in the service of the Amir?

True!

Was it true that the British, the unbelievers—Allah's curse on them!—had invited him to visit their homeland there to exhibit his strength?

Quite true!

Was it true that he had challenged the copper-faced Manchu of whom the travelling traders and caravan-men told fabulous tales?

True indeed!

"Tell us! *Ahee!* Tell us! Seven foot tall the Manchu is—the saying goes . . . ?"

"Slightly over seven feet. And broad in proportion. But I tilted him upside down. I put him on his head and, with my hands about his ankles, twisted him as a child spins a top!"

"But," demanded little brown-eyed Kurjan, the daughter of Attila Gurah Khan, "is it true that seventy times seven women loved you in Kabul?"

"That, too, is true," he admitted naively. "When-

ever I passed through the bazaars Afghan women and maids would look at me above close-meshed veil and . . ."

He interrupted himself. Hirfa, whom he had not seen since his return, had come from the house. She loomed up in the golden ring of light shed by the torches.

"*Tawwul Ullah amraq, yah daif Ullah*—may your life be long, O Guest of God!" she greeted him pleasantly. She had always rather liked the artless youth.

He rose and walked up to her. He could hide his feelings no more than he could his strength.

"See what I brought you from Kabul," he said; and he drew from his second finger a ring set with a large star-sapphire which, until this very moment, he had intended solely and exclusively for his personal adornment.

She shook her head.

"No!" she said.

She turned. She looked away, across the valley, towards the village of the Zakka Khel.

Up on the mountain top of the Momand Khel there was during the next two weeks a good deal of gossip sifted through the sieve of eager, pursed lips when the old women met at the brook to draw water for the morning meal.

So today:

"Every day Ali Yussef begs her to marry him—and every day she refuses him."

"And he so rich—so famous—so handsome—so strong!"

"But not strong enough to tear the iron of desire from his own soul!"

"He has placed his head and his heart on the sill of the door of love, and Hirfa—*wah*—she yawns!"

"And what is she with her airs and graces? Her grandfather is rich. Yes. But otherwise she is nothing but a grey slip of a hill-girl . . ."

"And that buffalo of an Ali Yussef salaams before her as if she were a princess out of China—one of these golden, round women with slender, red mouths and smiles like honey!"

"Yes, yes. It is the crimson passion turns a giant into a weakling!"

"What does he see in her?" shrilly demanded the mother of three unmarried daughters.

"*Shaitan belade*—the Devil alone knows."

"If she were my child I would give her the father and mother of a beating."

It was not that they really disliked Hirfa. But their souls had been stunted by the pitiless tribal customs that weighed upon their lives like a sodden, stifling blanket; and so, perhaps subconsciously, they envied the girl's savage independence.

"Nor," commented Ali Yussef, "is she so very young. Yesterday was her seventeenth birthday—and not yet married!"

"Aye! Almost a barren old spinster she is—for all the haughty stepping of her feet!"

"When I reproached her she laughed at me."

"The lawless whelp!"

"So was her grandfather lawless when he came back from the far places," exclaimed an aged man who joined the group. "*Ahee!* The young ravens are beaked like the old."

And, with the mentioning of Aminullah Khan's name, the gossip took another turn:

"What can he be doing up there on the Salt Range day after day . . . ?"

"Allah! What *can* he be doing?"

For it had been noticed by everybody except Hirfa, who was too busy with her lover in the morning and thinking of him in the afternoon, that recently Aminullah Khan was behaving in a strange manner.

Formerly, after age had whitened his beard and dimmed his eyes, he had hugged his own fireside. Seldom even—and this was counted against him—had he bothered to attend the *mejless*, the weekly council where, under the leadership of the priest Mortazu, the Momand Khel debated communal matters and settled local quarrels. But, since Ali Yussef's return, every day at the shock of noon he took his rifle and went to the high hills, the hard-baked, shimmering snows of the Salt Range, "to shoot big-horn," as he explained.

Not that anybody believed him. For he never made a kill, nor was there ever so much as the muffled echo of a shot drifting down. But when, overcome, by curiosity, a tribesman had followed him one day, the old wrestler had turned.

"I am a bad marksman," he had said, smiling as he might at a child. "Suppose I should aim at a big-horn—and hit you by mistake . . ."

"You"—the other had stammered—"you would not kill me . . . ?"

"Not deliberately. But is it my fault that I am such a wretched marksman?"

Since then nobody had taken the risk of spying on him. But curiosity grew, and there was always the gliding gossip:

"What can he be doing there—day after day?"

"Allah! What *can* he be doing . . . ?"

It was on a Monday night that Mortazu summoned the tribal council for a secret session, and Wednesday morning he passed through the low, narrow entrance into the purple shadows of Aminullah Khan's house, murmuring courtly greetings:

"May the Lord God give you cattle and plenty!"

"I am your slave and your offering!" was the reply, equally courtly.

He smiled. He knew the priest for what he was: almost as simple and ingenuous as was his son Ali Yussef.

Through the darkness of the windowless room Mortazu felt the other's chilly eyes boring into his. It embarrassed him. He had always been afraid of the wrestler; formerly of his strength, then, when age had softened his muscles, of his caustic wit.

He spoke in a thin, flat voice:

"My son wants to marry your granddaughter." He stopped; sighed.

"I am sorry." Aminullah Khan felt a stirring of sympathy. "But Hirfa does not love him."

"Even should she hate him, he wants to . . ."

"Foolish boy!"

"So I told him. But a heart flushed with passion does not listen to reason. A hungry belly has no ears."

"Nor has a stubborn mind ears to speak of. And Hirfa is stubborn. She is of my own blood."

"That is why, two nights ago, I appealed to the *mejliss*."

"Oh—did you?" The faintest flicker of a smile disturbed Aminullah Khan's composure. He knew that the *mejliss* had been summoned; had in fact glued a shameless ear to the thin back wall of the

council hall; knew that the priest would call on him this morning as well as the reason for the call; had already made certain preparations accordingly.

"What else could I do?" Mortazu spread apologetic hands. "My son is eating out his heart. So I spoke to the elders. They agreed when I quoted the ancient tribal law."

"Which one?" came the malicious question. "There are so many."

"The one which says that a girl who has passed her seventeenth year and is still unmarried, must accept as her husband the first man of her tribe who proposes to her, if he be of healthy mind and body, of decent family and honourable occupation. And my son——"

"Is that all you claim?"

"Ah——" Mortazu felt relieved—"then you submit to the decree of the *mejliss*?"

"None honours the ancient laws more than I," came the ironic reply. "I honour all of them—even the one which you seem to have forgotten."

"What do you mean?" Mortazu looked up, nervous, suspicious.

"When the *mejliss* decides a girl must marry against her will, she still has one more chance. For any man, even a foreigner, has the right to come here and challenge the prospective bridegroom to a wrestling bout. And—according to the ancient law which we both respect—the girl must marry the victor."

"There is such a law," admitted the priest. Doubtless the other was jesting. "But——" he laughed—"who in all the hills can stand up against my son?"

"There is one who will try. He will be here at the noon hour. Bid your son be ready."

Aminullah Khan seemed perfectly serious, and the priest stared at him.

"You cannot mean it!" he exclaimed.

"I do."

"But who . . . ?"

"Wait and see."

Again Mortazu laughed. Some rash youth of the Momand Khel, he thought; perhaps one of the half dozen who even now were in training to show their wrestling skill in Kabul.

"There will be this day a grand twisting of legs and breaking of arms," he said. "To beat my son . . ." his laughter peaked to a high note of derision . . . "Allah! Allah! What arrogance! What conceit! Like the fat bird that bastes itself!"

He left; and when shortly before noon Hirfa returned from the valley the village was humming like a beehive. The girls were neglecting their flocks; the men their crude husbandry; the women their spinning wheels and their *semilas*, the bloated milk skins which they rocked upon their knees till the butter rolled yellow and frothy.

Hirfa listened. She entered the house, her eyes sombre and gleaming like a starry winter night.

Of late she had been bitter at the world, and chiefly at Tugluk Khan. For the latter, since the morning when he had begged her to run away with him, had not again mentioned the subject. And while she had made up her mind to refuse as often as he should ask her, still—with a superb feminine contempt for logic—she blamed him for not urging her against her will. So for days she had been the victim of a smouldering, sulky resentment, and now it broke into flame.

"Is it true what those leaky-tongues are babbling outside?" she demanded of her grandfather who was smoking his water-pipe.

"Quite true."

"Why don't you stop it?"

"How can I, O Very Small Thing? I myself suggested the bout."

"You did, eh?" Hirfa's rage rose in crimson waves. "What am I? Am I a slave, a goat, a thing without rights or soul, that two men—the Devil take them both!—should fight—and I the prize—without being consulted or asked or . . . ?"

"It is the ancient law," came her grandfather's slurred voice as he choked his laugh into the snake of his pipe so that the water bubbled and gurgled like an ill-natured camel.

"And since when are you, O father of my mother, so submissive to the laws of the hills?"

"Age has made me obedient."

"Pah! You are like the tom-cat—that stole a thousand chickens—then went on pilgrimage to Mecca!"

Momentarily her rage gave way to curiosity.

"Who is this man who has challenged Ali Yussef?" she asked. Somehow, though she hated to admit it to herself the thought was flattering.

Her grandfather did not reply. He continued pulling at his pipe.

"Who is he?" she repeated, stamping her foot. "Tell me! Tell me!"

Aminullah Khan laughed.

"You must have been in a hurry this morning—that you did not hear him follow you!"

"What do you mean?"

"Look!" He pointed through the open door. "Here he comes—the man ready to risk his limbs and neck for the sake of your kisses!"

And Hirfa, following the direction of his finger, saw Tugluk Khan climb up the trail and emerge in front of the village mosque where a small square lay bathed in the cold, golden sunlight of the mountains.

She rushed to the door.

"Oh . . ."

Her cry of astonishment was drowned in a growling, guttural chorus as the Momand Khel gathered about Tugluk Khan.

"A Zakka Khel!" came the savage cries. "A Zakka Khel!"

"What seek you here?"

"Go back to your own people, O cow-maiming jackal-spawn!"

"Ah—may pigs defile your mother's grave!"

More men and women gathering; more insults and threats; stones and thorn sticks raised; while Tugluk Khan waited, a slight smile on his lips, until the storm had subsided a little.

"I am here," he announced, in a high, clear voice, "to give battle to your champion Ali Yussef for the soul and body of Hirfa, granddaughter of Aminullah Khan."

The latter had come from his house, Hirfa clinging to his arm, asking excited questions:

"Why did you not tell me? Why did you let him come? Do you want him killed—crushed by this buffalo of an Ali Yussef . . . ?"

The old wrestler looked down at her.

"Child!" he said rather sternly. "Have you so little faith in the man you love—or in me?"

And suddenly Hirfa became calm. Her eyes met Tugluk Khan's and exchanged a world of silent messages.

By this time, while the people had given way, clearing a space, Ali Yussef, accompanied by his father, had come out on the square.

There were no preliminaries, no ceremonies, no grand mouthing of boasts and challenges, of proper pomp and circumstance. Such would have been the way in Kabul. But it was not the way of the grey hills.

Ali Yussef removed the white, silken robe he was wearing, untwisted his gorgeous turban, and handed both to an admiring youth. He kicked away his sandals. There was the dramatic appearance of an immense torso, bare but for a loin-cloth, of legs like oaks and arms like columns of granite.

Tugluk Khan followed suit. Tall, just a little under six foot, lithe and wiry though of a fair sweep of shoulders and knotting of muscles, he seemed almost a child compared to Ali Yussef's fantastic bulk.

The latter smiled. There was no malevolence in the giant's guileless heart. He looked at Tugluk Khan with amused tolerance and shook his head.

"No, no," he said. "I do not care to wrestle with you."

"Are you afraid?" demanded the other.

The tribesmen roared with laughter.

"A reckless lad, this Zakka Khel!" shouted one.

"Aye! A lad with tearing, ripping passion that he is willing to step between Ali Yussef and Hirfa—between the bear and its fodder!"

"The wee sweet sound the breaking of his neck will be when our Ali twists it—as he would a bird's!"

Ali Yussef turned on the last speaker.

"Shut your lips," he said, "lest your teeth catch cold. This is a brave man." And gently, to Tugluk Khan: "I shall not hurt you much."

He felt sorry for his opponent. But he had to do this. He loved Hirfa. Very well. He would make the bout short. There was no glory in it, and the outcome was inevitable.

He moved forward with a shambling gait. Then he dropped into a crouch. His hands jerked out like the paws of a bear, trying to draw the other into a crushing embrace.

There are no wrestling rules in the hills. There are no forbidden holds, no fouls of any sort. The fists, the kicking foot—all is permitted. It is not the question of who is right; Anglo-Saxon or Asiatic. The fact remains that, with the latter, the game is not to pin the opponent's shoulders to the ground, but to twist or wrench or smash him into unconsciousness, whatever the means.

So, when Ali Yussef's hands jerked out, Tugluk Khan remembered a certain lesson he had learned—had learned patiently, wearily, these last two weeks, up on the Salt Range. He jumped sideways. He fell flat on his back, making no attempt to rise, almost as if he were motionless with fear.

Hirfa breathed hissingly, and her grandfather caressed her hair.

"Don't be afraid!" he whispered. "Watch!"

The crowd was laughing. So was Ali Yussef. It would be over in a moment. With great legs broadly straddled, he stood above the prostrate man. He reached down with his enormous, muscle-packed arms. He would pick up this little man and smash

him on the hard earth until he fainted or cried for mercy.

He shrugged his shoulders apologetically. One felt that he hated to do this.

But, as, absolutely sure of himself and forgetful of his defences, he reached down—with an immense, ponderous certainty, slowly, too slowly!—suddenly, viciously, Tugluk Khan raised, bent, straightened his legs, sending them home into the other's chest just below the heart.

Ali Yussef groaned. He trembled. He gave a cry like a hurt dog.

Then he fell with an immense crash. He lay unconscious, while a long, shuddering sob rose from the crowd.

The foreigner had won. But no fists were raised. No threats were muttered. It was the way of the grey hills. It was the ancient law. They respected it.

A sluicing of cold water brought Ali Yussef back to consciousness. He staggered to his feet, scratched his bullet-shaped head, and smiled sheepishly.

"Only once have I been beaten," he said without the slightest ill-feeling, but thoroughly puzzled, as he looked down at Tugluk Khan from his towering, bulky height. "And beaten by you—Allah!—forgive me—I mean no offence—by you!"

"And the man who beat me," laughed Aminullah Khan, "was even smaller than Tugluk Khan!"

"Eh?" Ali Yussef was astonished. "You—beaten? When? Where? How? Why—I thought that . . ."

"I have never told a soul. But years ago when I was in Peking a little brown rat of a Mongol beat me by the same trick which—" again he laughed—"these last two weeks up in the Salt Range—*hayah!* but my

old bones are black and blue with it—I taught our Tugluk Khan.”

“Oh”—exclaimed Hirfa indignantly. “And you let me worry! You never told me! Why didn’t you?”

“Am I a fool?” smiled her grandfather. “Would I tell a woman a secret? Would I keep cheese on trust with a mouse?”

He turned to the priest, who stood there, silent, morose. “Mortazu,” he said, “friendship is better than enmity. Did not the Prophet Mohammed himself—on Him the salute!—say so? Hereafter seed of Zakka Khel and Momand Khel will mingle . . .”

“It will indeed!” interrupted Ali Yussef.

Already he had regained his naïve self-esteem. Already he was beginning to forget Hirfa. He had lost her. It was a sending of Fate. Who could avoid what was written on the forehead by the Angel of the Scrolls?

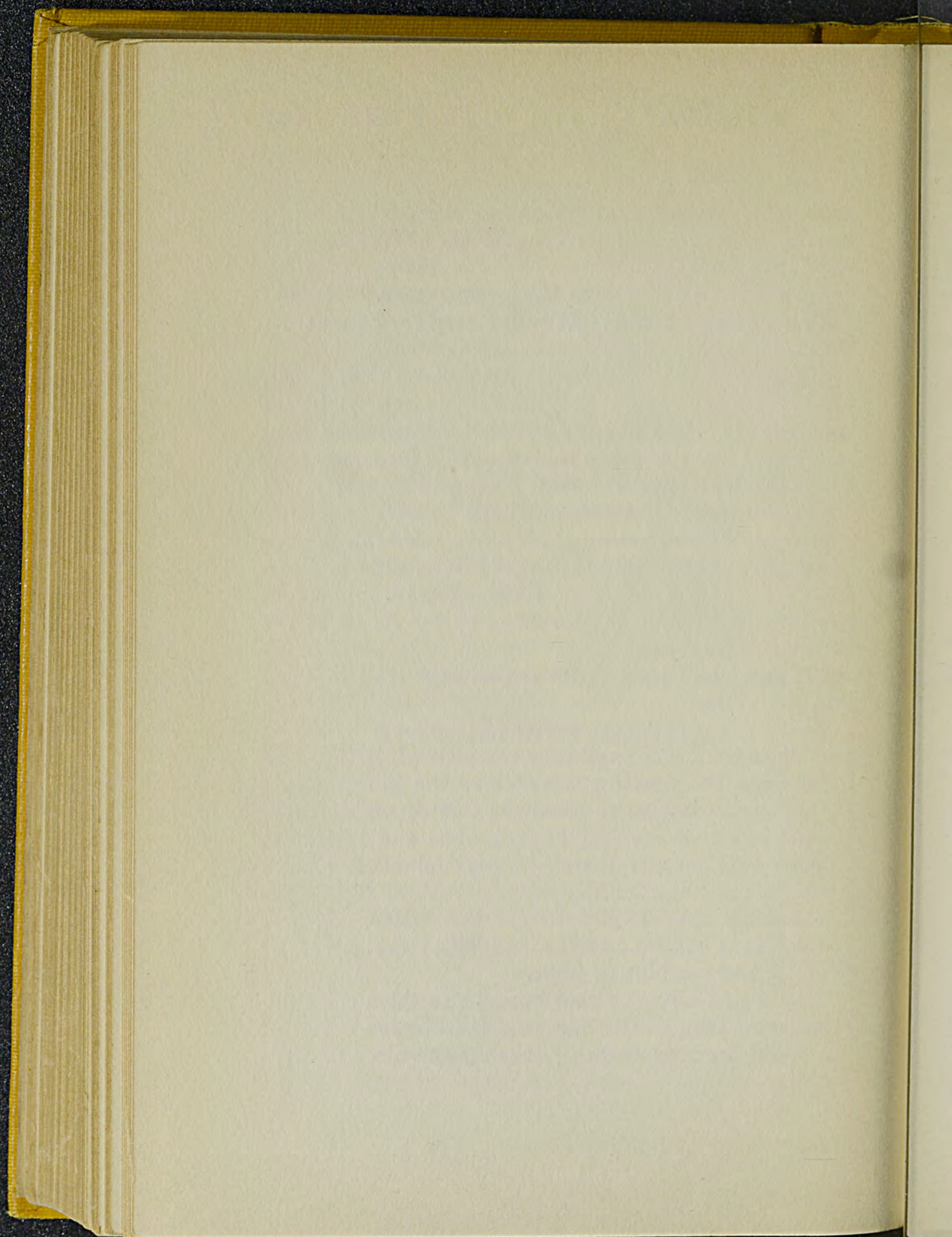
He turned to walk down the narrow trail that led into the valley.

“I hear that there are pretty girls among the Zakka Khel,” he said. “I shall take my pick while they still believe me the greatest wrestler in the hills—before loose tongues babble to them the tale of my defeat!”

And late that evening Tugluk Khan and Hirfa sat side by side on the threshold of Aminullah Khan’s house.

Dreamily they looked across the valley. It was bathed in a mist of silver and blue: the silver of promise and the blue of hope.

There was a breeze that brought to them the chill, clean snow tang of the hills, and the blurred noises of the night were to them as the happy voices of little children.



A MATTER OF FACE

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EIGHT

A MATTER OF FACE

HE had always believed that sooner or later his chance would come; that sooner or later, ready-moulded to his hands, there would be a weapon for revenge which would permit him to cause Ho Tin Yu such a loss of face as would disgrace him and his ancestors for a dozen generations back. Now fate itself had cheated him. He reflected that Ho Tin Yu was dead; Ho Tin Yu, his worst enemy; Ho Tin Yu, who had stolen from him the woman who had been dearer to him than the blessed Lord Buddha's ten thousand lotus fields. And how then could he revenge himself on a dead man? How could he cause a dead man to lose face?

"Ah—" he breathed. "Is it true?"

"Yes," replied Nag Hong Fah, the paunchy proprietor of the Great Shanghai Chop Suey Palace. "Ho Tin Yu's spirit took wings this morning at a quarter to nine sharp, and jumped the dragon gate. Mu Lan will be a charming widow. Also rich. Her second husband will not sip vinegar."

There were questions which Shen Mok wanted to ask, questions about Mu Lan. There was an eagerness in his heart, and a faint hope. But he did not want to expose his naked soul to the other's expectant gaze. He said:

"Ho Tin Yu's widow sent you to me, I suppose?"

"No. Ho Tin Yu himself. Nearly with his last words. He felt sure you would not refuse his dying request, chiefly given the fact that you are the only embalmer, the only one of your ancient and honourable craft east of San Francisco, and the journey from there is long, the heat is great. Too"—he smiled—"there is your oath to your guild—your oath to your Tong. Really"—he smiled again—"you cannot refuse."

Shen Mok lost his self-control. His right hand stabbed out like a dagger. It was butter-yellow, strong, hairless, high-veined, with short fingers, and broad across the wrist; rugged and brutally powerful, it seemed like the hand of an artist or a sailor, at all events that of a man whose craft is delicate and minute. The hand was now completely in the light of the lemon-shaded lamp, while the rest of the man's great bulk was part of the shadows that trooped uneasily through the room, softened by the window curtains which gave just a faint silhouette of Pell Street, its packed wilderness of squat, tuberculous tenements and, cutting across the street's tunnel-like opening, the Bowery making an inky frame to the night sky with the eerie, clawing steel structure of the elevated road.

He was silent for a few minutes. Then he said quite calmly, with his usual, faintly ironic suavity of manner:

"It is my duty. I shall attend to the embalming of Ho Tin Yu's earthly remains."

"Delightful!" Nag Hong Fah raised hypocritical hands to a problematical heaven. "You are a

righteous man, O wise and older brother. And yet"—he coughed flatly—"we thought——"

"We?"

"The members of the Azure Dragon Trading Corporation. Ho Tin Yu was our president—which, of course, you know——"

"Which, of course, I can never forget!" came Shen Mok's interruption, with the strength of a whip-lash, while the crooked slant of Nag Hong Fah's thin lips curled silent laughter. "And what then did you think?"

"We remembered your old misunderstanding," countered the restaurant proprietor, folding his hands across his immense chest, and looking peaceful and mean and shrewd and passionless.

"Ah—in the matter of dollars and cents?"

"No—in the matter of Mu Lan—who is now a rich and charming widow. There used to be tales about you and Ho Tin Yu and Mu Lan. True tales, be-like?"

"Perhaps. And yet I shall come and see to it, with the help of my skilled hands, that Ho Tin Yu's body be properly embalmed according to the ancient rites, so that at a future date his earthly envelope may be returned to China and there buried while his spirit mounts the dragon chariot."

"Indeed?"

"Indeed! As to Ho Tin Yu and Mu Lan—why—a rose sometimes falls to the lot of a monkey."

"Perhaps to reward the monkey for merit acquired in a former life?" suggested Nag Hong Fah.

"Perhaps, too, because life is three things: Illogical, sardonic, and obscene! But," added Shen Mok,

"death wipes out all scores." And he lied, and Nag Hong Fah knew that he lied.

"Speaking about Mu Lan," the restaurant proprietor commenced after a pause, "and the sipping of vinegar——"

"Well?" Shen Mok did not succeed in wiping altogether the tremor of eagerness from his voice.

"A curious thing happened."

"Indeed?"

"Yes. On his death-bed Ho Tin Yu made her swear a solemn oath that she would take for second husband his cousin, Chun-Jien Pao, the opium merchant."

"Ah?" Shen Mok rose, passing into the yellow ring of light. He stared at the other with eyes that were intent, shadowy beneath their black pupils, suggesting a murky depth like water in an earth-stained spring; observant, reflecting eyes, immensely powerful in the patience of their scrutiny. "And"—came his staccato question—"Mu Lan gave the oath?"

"What could she do?" Nag Hong Fah sighed gently. "Her husband was dying. There was also other pressure—the clan—the priest—the Tong——"

"I understand." Shen Mok sat down again. "Death," he repeated, "wipes out all scores."

"So?"

"Yes."

"The harmony of your voice is exquisite!" Nag Hong Fah rose with a swish-swish-swish of his silken, plum-coloured robe. "Then you will come?"

"As soon as I have prepared the instruments. Permission to embalm the body has been obtained from the authorities?"

"Yes. Doctor En Hai has taken the proper steps. Too, during life, Ho Tin Yu was not without honour amongst the coarse-haired barbarians. And," he added with casual brutality typical of his race, "the heat is great, you know."

He bowed and left, while Shen Mok paced up and down the length of the room, a prey to conflicting emotions.

He thought of the dead man, successful even in death, beyond death; thought of himself; thought of the woman; thought how he and Ho Tin Yu had been friends.

They had been children together in Canton, in neighbouring houses not far from the Temple of the Monkey and the Stork, in that hectic maze of barter and bargain where the blue-bloused coolies mix with the sweat of their hands and brows as bees mix with their honey and where the tortuous shops thrust up their towering trade-poles with the swinging, scarlet-and-gold sign-boards against a thick sky of shimmering, mauve clusters. There had been a little moon-shaped park where twisted peach-trees bloomed grotesquely from an oozy ground studded with splinters of pink granite, and there they had played together at shuttlecock and kite-flying and horn-goring. With youth had come the zest for adventure and gain; and so—he, trained in his father's craft and knowing that his countrymen abroad were punctilious about having their embalmed bodies shipped back to China thus permitting their spirits to find salvation, and Ho Tin Yu, an untrained coolie, but endowed with a shrewd brain and a stonily pagan resolve to clout his way to success—they decided to emigrate to America. Of

course there was that strange law of the coarse-haired barbarians, the Asiatic Exclusion Act, which puts the yellow man below the black in human worth and civic respect, which forbids the former to emigrate to the New World of plenty, and forces him to cheat and hide and forge if he would obtain his object—a chance to earn a pittance, to save another pittance, to live peacefully and usefully, then to return to his own land, alive or dead. So Shen Mok and Ho Tin Yu suffered untold hardships before they reached their goal. They greased hands on all sides, paid exorbitant “squeezes” to many.

But the hardships, the dangers and injustices and shifting uncertainties, brought the two friends even more closely together, and shortly after they had joined San Francisco’s Chinatown, it became an ordinary saying in laundry shop and restaurant, in curio store and gambling club, that Shen Mok and Ho Tin Yu were never apart.

In those early days it was Shen Mok who was the nose, sharp for the reek of profit and chance, while Ho Tin Yu was the belly clamouring for food. For the embalmer found his services in demand right and left, since there were few of his profession in America, and given the rigid Chinese customs, each and all laid down either by law or by tradition for uncounted generations back, and chief amongst them the one which says that a Chinese, to find salvation for his soul, must after death have his body buried in the home land, the home village, amongst those of his ancestors, that moreover his body must be carefully preserved and unmutilated, lest the body of his soul, in the realm of the spirits, be an incomplete and ludicrous thing, worthless, hideous, losing face before the

shining face of the Buddha. So Shen Mok was well paid, while the coolie only earned a miserable pittance.

But as the latter, with his slow-grinding brain, learned the prejudices as well as the golden potentialities of the land, as he learned to fashion them into a weapon for his own gain, this relationship changed, mainly after they had moved to New York, to Pell Street. There Shen Mok was still the embalmer, a delicate craftsman, respected and honoured by his countrymen and his Tong, while Ho Tin Yu did not long remain the coolie. Laundry-worker at first, owner of a laundry, of two, three, four, a whole string of them, blossoming forth into a merchant, first retail, then wholesale, a contractor, a politician of local renown and influence; working only for one end, his own enrichment; never touching any question without a whole-hearted and sweeping reference to the particular benefit he himself would derive from it; making money with a selfishness that was entirely and sublimely shameless—his finally became a name to conjure with in that slab of real estate which is pinched in between the Bowery and Mulberry Street like a thin wedge of Asia driving apart bartering, narrow-chested, whining Russian Hebrew and bartering, bull-necked, shrill Sicilian.

He pitted his Mongol wits both against Latin and against Semite, daily putting new and amazing twists into his algebraic brain in order to meet the beggar competition of Europe's backstairs; and he succeeded, greatly to the confusion of the latter and the sound increasing of certain accounts carried by New York financial institutions as well as by the Hongkong &

Shanghai Bank, Ltd., thousands of miles away, under the picturesque ledger heading: "The Azure Dragon Trading Corporation."

For by this time, following the advice of Jake Rosenzweig, the Bowery lawyer, he had taken out incorporation papers for his business and had gathered around himself a number of shrewd junior partners carefully handpicked amongst Pell Street's merchants for their worth and influence—all but Shen Mok.

The latter, too, owned a block of stock in the Azure Dragon Trading Corporation, Ho Tin Yu's free gift because—to quote the latter:

"*I lou fou sing*—may the star of good fortune protect you! We are friends. You helped me, fed me, encouraged me! *Hayah!* When the dogs are sated, they make presents to each other of what remains. And I—I am not a dog!"

"You are my brother, very wise and very old!"

"We are more than brothers. We are friends. Ah—by the Buddha—there are three things never hidden: friendship, a mountain and one riding on a camel!"

As the years passed, every cent which Shen Mok earned by his craft, all but his living expenses, he entrusted to his old friend, who invested the money for him, carefully, shrewdly, honestly, and again, as in San Francisco, their friendship became a byword.

"Ah!" would say Yu Ch'ang, the priest of the joss temple. "If Ho Tin Yu were to trade in shrouds, Shen Mok would die!"

Then, quite suddenly, almost overnight it seemed, the friendship turned into enmity, into hate. A matter of business, a disagreement in dollars and cents, commented Pell Street, pointing to the fact that Ho

Tin Yu ruthlessly stripped Shen Mok of all his savings down to the last cent, by—for there was Jake Rosenzweig, the lawyer, versed in the intricacies of the coarse-haired barbarians' law—strictly legal methods.

"A simple matter of business," said the grave company of yellow men assembled in the "Place of Sweet Desire and Heavenly Entertainment," sighing heavily, and carefully avoiding looking at each other; and nobody could have guessed that each was rolling under his tongue one of the choicest bits of gossip that happened in Pell Street for many a day; that each and all knew, behind the carved masks of their faces, that it was passion, and not money, which had splintered the years-old friendship.

For a young girl had arrived in America, luringly preceded by the description which Susie Liang, the San Francisco matchmaker who, under contract with her parents, had smuggled her in from China, had sent out broadcast, and which proclaimed that Mu Lan was of excellent family, a polished emerald of beauty, a blending of poppy and jade, a carved crystal of coquetry, an exquisite fan, exciting, then cooling, then again exciting the seven desires of man, that moreover she had been carefully trained to avoid the seven grounds on which a marriage might be dissolved, namely, disobedience of the wife to her husband's parents; refusal to bear children; dissolute conduct; jealousy of other women; incurable disease; thieving; and talkativeness.

"She has small feet," said Yung Long, the wholesale grocer, who had seen her during a trip to the Coast, "golden lilies, each worth a *kang* of tears. Her nineteen summers have only increased her charms nineteen times. Ah—when she washes, her hands

scent the water. I would have married her myself, were it not for the fact that my honourable first wife has a mouth like a running tap."

There being a financial stringency in California, the matchmaker sent her to New York, and when she came there she surpassed all expectations, with her dead-white complexion, her large, keen, almond-shaped eyes, the small ears close to the head, and the true walk of the woman whose feet have been bound since early childhood, swaying, undulating—"skipping over the tops of golden lilies," as the ancient poet has it.

It was a sardonic gesture of fate that both Ho Tin Yu and Shen Mok should fall in love with her; that she herself should prefer the latter, but that Susie Liang, the matchmaker, a shrewd old woman, should remark sententiously that gain on dirt was to be preferred to loss on musk and that to marry the poor when one had a chance to marry the rich was like trusting a paper fan to keep off the winter storms.

"Moreover," Susie Liang wound up, "your parents have given you to me. Your parents are poor. But twice a month have they a shred of pork with their evening rice. Ho Tin Yu has agreed to send them a princely sum in payment for your charms. Hereafter they will be able to eat pork twice a day."

So Mu Lan, typically Chinese in filial piety and devotion, decided to marry Ho Tin Yu.

"I love you," she said to Shen Mok, "but there is my duty. There are my parents. I"—hiding her emotions behind her stilted Chinese speech—"I shall hereafter sit in a darkened house with all the lamps blown out by the bitter wind of my longing and despair."

"It is proper," replied Shen Mok, bowing deeply with hands clasped across his breast, "that a child should obey her parents. It is written in the *Hsiao King* that the child who serves her parents at home has no need to go far away to burn incense to the gods. My heart hereafter shall be a music of toneless strings brushing dissonantly across a broken lute. Hereafter my friendship for your future husband shall turn into hate. My hate for him shall be as my love for you: a flock of homesick cranes flying night and day back to their nests in the grey marsh country."

The day after the wedding Mu Lan listened through the keyhole to the conversation between her husband and Shen Mok.

"I shall never forget," said the latter. "I shall never forgive."

"Nor I!"

"Sooner or later I shall pay you back," Shen Mok continued with boundless, challenging assurance.

"Bah!" laughed her husband. "The dream of the blind cat is all about mice—and it has also been said that an empty stomach will chew incense smoke. I am rich and you are—ah—not so very rich. And"—a pause full of elusive suggestion and hesitations—"speaking about paying back, there is the matter of a little note for three thousand dollars which will fall due tomorrow——"

Thus came enmity, bitter, searing hatred, Shen Mok's financial ruin and, as the years passed, a careful nursing of his lust for revenge until it became more than a pathological obsession. It became a pathological fact.

After a futile attempt or two he gave up trying to fight the other in trade and barter. For the merchant

sat solidly entrenched behind his swollen moneybags, clear above the shifting swing of the market. He had become the Boss of Pell Street to whom even the Boss of Greater New York spoke civilly. So Shen Mok tried to fight him socially, in the Tong, in the nightly gatherings in the "Place of Sweet Desire and Heavenly Entertainment," tried to make him lose face by coining new metaphors or twisting old metaphors into soft but deadly insult. But there, too, he failed. Ho Tin Yu would stare at him with heavy-lidded eyes that were contracted into narrow slits, studying him as he would study a new, exotic, and rather repulsive insect—not yet sure if he should crush it under foot or simply ignore its existence. Then would come the answer, sharp, caustic, turning the other's verbal weapon into a boomerang, and the merchants, partly because Ho Tin Yu was the richest man in Pell Street, partly out of honest Mongol appreciation, would laugh at Shen Mok who, his soul rising and bristling with fury, would burst into mazed, frothy, incoherent speech, while Ho Tin Yu would smile upon him as he might upon a babbling child.

Wherever he turned, he found his road blocked, and finally he realised that, after all, it was just one thing which foiled him: Ho Tin Yu's brain, shrewd, cool, a marvel in patience and ruthlessness and pertinacity, a merciless instrument that ruled Chinatown from the Bowery to Mulberry Street. And so, in his baffled rage and bitterness, he suffered all extremes and knew no mean.

Yet he had always said himself that sooner or later his chance would come; that sooner or later, ready moulded to his hand, there would be a weapon for

revenge which would permit him to cause the other such a loss of face as would disgrace him and his ancestors for a dozen generations back. And he had dreamed of this revenge through the years. He had digested it in the grey smoke of his opium-pipe. He has relished it with an almost sensuous pleasure; and now—as he paced up and down the room—he said to himself that Fate had cheated him. Ho Tin Yu was dead. How could he revenge himself on a dead man? Not only that! Even from beyond death Ho Tin Yu had struck him, wounded him, was forcing his old enemy to embalm his body, so that with the help of Shen Mok's hands the spirit of Ho Tin Yu might wing back to his ancestors in proper rite and pomp!

And Mu Lan—she was still beautiful, with the promise in her eyes of untold passion, untold hopes and sweetness; he still loved her—and she was lost to him forever through the oath which her dying husband had forced from her.

Ho Tin Yu's mazed, pertinacious brain—it had foiled him even from beyond the grave!

Mechanically he took the instruments in their neat, red-leather cases, the tiny knives, the saw, the many needles and curiously-shaped blades. He packed them into a bag, with a number of bottles and vials and porcelain pots that contained drugs and herbs, in paste and powder and liquid.

He crossed the room, left the house.

Outside, turning the August heat into foul steam, rain had begun to fall, sputtering in the eaves-troughs, dropping through the huddled, greasy streets, mumbling angrily in the brown, clogged gut-

ters. Pell Street stared at the heavens with a mawkish, prurient face—a mixture of filth and ashes, of garlic and opium and offal.

A turmoil in his heart that left him breathless, he walked to the corner of Mott Street. There, halfway up the block, connected by a narrow alley that cut brutally into the labyrinth of buildings, was the house of Ho Tin Yu. He walked up the alley that was like a long tunnel of blackness ending unexpectedly in a very dim spot of delicate green. The green spot grew larger and brighter, till he came to the door of Ho Tin Yu's house, wide open so as not to bar the way of the "little devils who follow the soul" and who are servants and guides to the dead man's spirits; and, as he stood on the outer threshold, he saw that the light came from the ceremonial candles tended by Wong Ti, the hatchet-man, while Yu Ch'ang, the priest, prepared with skilled hands, from strips of crimson paper and split bamboo reeds, the little bridge which is put in the coffin to aid the dead across the river which leads to the beyond, and the tiny ladder enabling him to climb steep places should he meet such impediments on his soul's journey.

He watched the assembly of grave merchants who crowded the room, come here to do honour to the dead Ho Tin Yu as they had given honour and obedience and respect to the living Ho Tin Yu, to his shrewd, pertinacious, ruthless brain—that merciless brain, thought Shen Mok, which had foiled him in life, had foiled him after life had left the body. The thought linked him, bitterly, fiercely, to Mu Lan. He looked at her from beneath lowered lids. She sat in a corner, in white mourning-robcs, dry-eyed, her head on her breast, by the side of Chun-Jien Pao,

her future husband, who was whispering in her ear.

"If he who attains honour and wealth in a foreign land does not return to his native place after death, he is like a finely dressed person walking in the dark! His soul will never reach the Excellent Buddha's ten thousand pale-blue lotus-fields!" pronounced the priest with pontifical unction. "His body must be embalmed according to the proper rites—must bow before the spirits of his honourable ancestors!"

He pointed to the next room where Ho Tin Yu's body lay stretched on a bed covered with white and purple. He walked as far as the threshold, holding high in his right hand a lacquered ancestral tablet, and called upon Ho Tin Yu's spirit to occupy it, while the merchants commenced a long-drawn wailing.

The priest turned and approached a teakwood table in the centre of the room. On it was a variety of small objects, cut of coloured rice paper to resemble a Peking cart, ponies, dromedaries, coolies, servants, women, and a driver. He picked them up one by one; burned them one by one in the flames of the candles.

"May they help Ho Tin Yu through the spirit world!" he chanted sonorously, while the merchants mumbled fervent prayers and while an old woman in an alcove busied herself with the twelve white garments and the crimson paper fan for the dressing of the dead.

"Shen Mok is here," said Nag Hong Fah.

Faces looked up, turned; they stared at him curiously, thought Shen Mok, with something expectant and mean beneath their veneer of grief and mourning. They, too, he considered, remembered the old tale, the old enmity, enjoying the cynical idea that

here he was—he, Shen Mok—to prepare the body of his foe for his soul's journey.

He bowed, controlling himself with an effort.

"Good evening," he said.

"You have come to give honour to Ho Tin Yu?" asked the priest, gathering eyes like a hostess about to rise from the table, and with a faint suspicion of mockery in his bland accents.

"No," came the stoical reply. "I have come here to do my duty. There is my oath to my guild—to my Tong." And he added, businesslike: "Where is the body?"

"Would you care for a drop of wine, O wise and old brother?" suggested Nag Hong Fah, winking a sardonic eye at the company in general. "Perhaps a slice of cake—in honour of the dead?"

"Where is the body?" reiterated Shen Mok.

"This way!"

They ushered him into the adjoining room. He closed the door.

He was now alone with the corpse of the man who, once his friend, had become his bitterest enemy, and he looked speculatively at the still figure on the bed; hate again searing his heart with the strength of a flame, with the strength and sweep of a wind in a far place.

He thought of Mu Lan. He remembered how, when he had seen her for the first time, it had seemed like a great, whirling dream in which his heart sang, in which his body had been rigid as with a sensation of utter triumph and exultation.

Mu Lan! He had loved her; loved her still. And she had loved him—perhaps loved him still? And

for fifteen years she had shared the couch of Ho Tin Yu; the memory of these fifteen years, every day, every hour, every minute, was traced as with a hot iron upon the depths of his soul.

Ho Tin Yu—who lay there, dead!

He stared and stared.

Even in death the man's features held a certain greatness, a certain cruel, massive, satanic beauty. Even in death there was still in that bullet-shaped head the coiling brain which had ruled Chinatown, which had made of the other a failure and a mock and a stench in the nostrils of Pell Street, which had robbed him of the one dream that once, for a moment, had flashed in Mu Lan's eyes, had flashed across the drab of his life—never attained, never more to be attained.

He hated Ho Tin Yu. But most did he hate the dead man's brain, mazed, powerful, pertinacious. Death—he considered mournfully—had cheated him of his revenge, and even in that moment of supreme failure he was curiously conscious of a strengthening of his will; conscious, furthermore, of a chain of amazing, spiritual intimacy which connected his skilful hands with Ho Tin Yu's brain—dead, useless—that had ceased to pulse and function. But—came the next thought—was it dead, this brain, was it useless? Why—he considered—Ho Tin Yu would need it, when his spirit, beyond the dragon gate, was bowing before the spirits of his ancestors. For the soul, too, needed a brain to achieve perfect salvation.

So he thought as he took the instruments and vials and bottles from the case and bent to his ghastly task with the skill and the strength of his delicate, sensi-

tive fingers, cutting, binding, stabbing, lancing, using the tiny knives with minute precision, mixing the herbs and drug pastes according to the ancient craft, to embalm the body for the long journey to China. He worked for hours, ceaselessly, while outside the rain sputtered in the brown gutters; while, curiously, illogically, he became more and more conscious of a strengthening of his will to conquer yet, to taste yet his fill of revenge; and while from the next room drifted in the wailing of the merchants and, occasionally, a singsong voice telling the praises of the dead man.

"He took wisdom from his hair and put it in his moustache! Keen he was and eloquent!"

"He lived according to the rule: Hide your secret if you want to reach your aim!"

"His philosophy was a charming and exquisite bridge which led to success!"

"He never withdrew his wisdom into his stomach!"

"A great man—with the brain of a great man!"—this from Nag Hong Fah. "The brain which ruled us all—which beat him, crushed him—in there—next door!"

"The brain which beat me, crushed me!" echoed Shen Mok as his fingers, the body duly prepared, turned now to the final task, the head, the incision in the ear-drum, the cutting and chiselling behind the ear, the drawing out of the brain which then, carefully, scientifically embalmed with the help of drugs whose use was ancient in China when Europe was young and America not even a dream, would be put back into the cavity of the head so that the soul might enjoy in the hereafter whatever qualities had been the body's in this world.

Then, very suddenly, a thought came to Shen Mok.

"The wisdom of certain great ones is eternal, like the Buddha!" he heard the priest in the next room.

"Eternal—like the Buddha!" echoed Shen Mok, smiling, while his hands, gently, rapidly, minutely, worked here and there.

"Never once, during all his life, did Ho Tin Yu lose face," came Nag Hong Fah's voice. "Nor will his spirit lose face. On the contrary, his spirit will accumulate a great deal of face. For has he not, from beyond death, forced his worst enemy to——?"

The words were swallowed in gurgling laughter, and Shen Mok, too, laughed. His work was ended. He rose. He washed his hands with scrupulous care. He bowed to the statue of the Buddha of the Paradise of the West and gave thanks. He opened the door and returned to the front room.

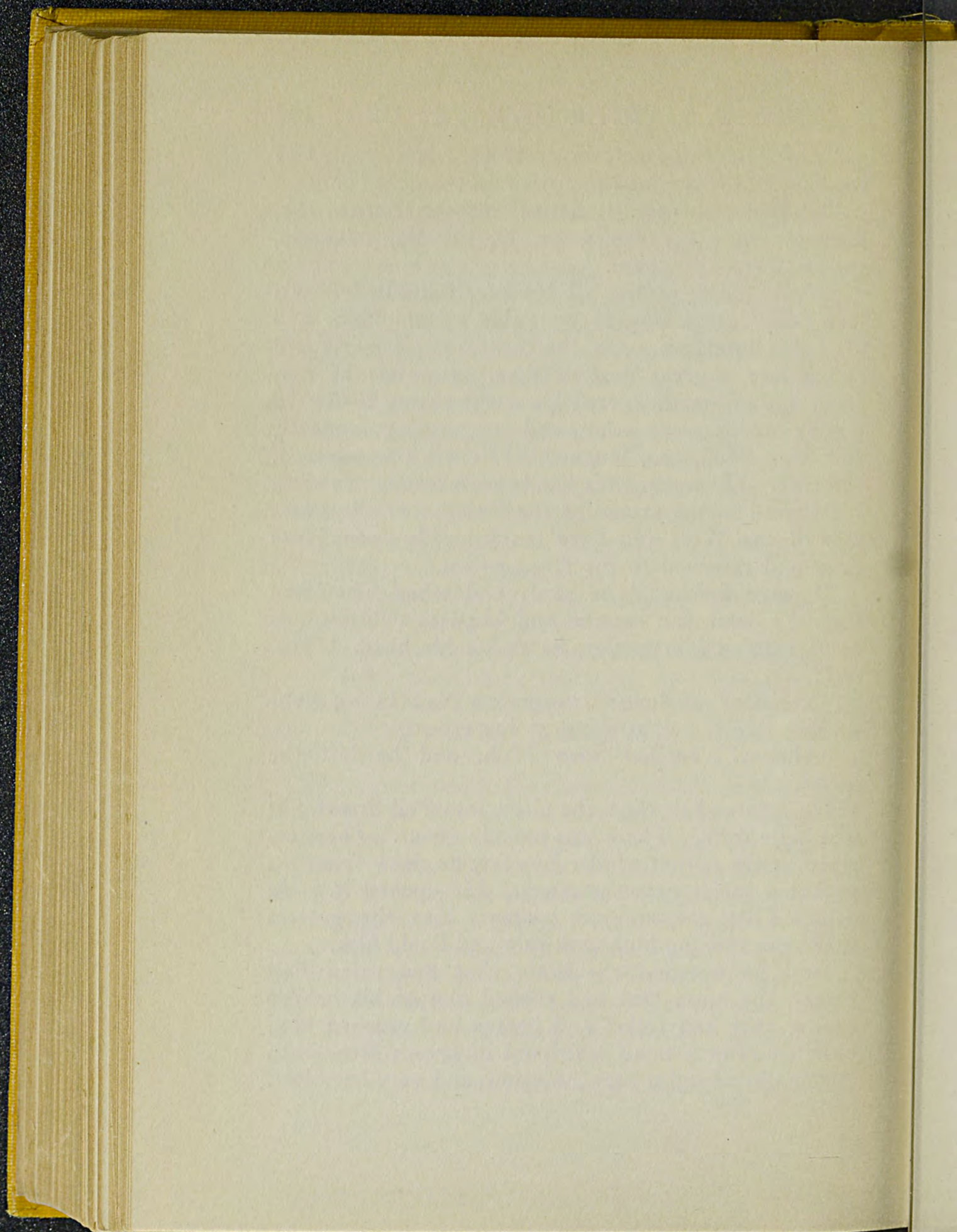
"I have finished," he said; and when Chun-Jien Pao, the dead man's cousin and Mu Lan's future husband, offered him money, he shook his head. "No, no!"

"A labour of love?" suggested Nag Hong Fah, smiling thinly, and winking at the crowd.

"Almost!" replied Shen Mok, and he left the house.

He returned through the alley, into Pell Street. It was quite dark. There was nobody about. Then, arrived at the corner of the Bowery, he drew from his pocket a moist paper package. He opened it. He dropped its grey-and-red contents into the gutters that were running high with rain and liquid filth.

And he watched the brain that had ruled Pell Street, the brain that had robbed him of his heart's desire, that had foiled and beaten and crushed him, swirl away in a small whirlpool of brown dirt—then gurgle out of sight, very innocuous and very harmless.



THE LUTE OF JADE

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NINE

THE LUTE OF JADE

INTO the focus of this tale, a year or two beyond the proper dramatic climax, come two pictures. One is of Pell Street, where it happened. The other is across land and sea and land again. Yet is the latter, too, known, for after all there is little that can be hidden from mortal ken.

And this second picture shows Prince Yi, the Manchu, the Imperial Clansman, the poet, walking one day by the lotus-pond in his garden near the Ha-ta Gate of Peking's Tartar City, and seeing there a bird flutter from one tree to another.

It was a sparrow, and by every rule of nature it should have been a melancholy grey stippled with brown. But as it flew in the wash of the dying sun its plumage seemed brushed with ruby and flecked with gold.

It was then that, with a pain in his heart that was both sweet and poignant, thoughts of the Lotus Bud came back to him, and he crystallised them into archaic, rather stilted verse.

"Lute of Jade," he called the poem—perhaps, to his twisted Mongol imagining, there was gall-bitter, incongruous significance in the very title; and it read:

The turbulent waters in the pool of my soul
Have vanished—vanished.
The mellow sunlight of growing years steeps—

Steeps the panes of my heart;
And the autumn winds ply many a pleasant fan.

Across the shadow of my remembrance falls—
Falls the shadow of her lisping feet.

But in the Pavilion of Exquisite Purity sings—
Sings always the Lute of Jade.

Always, beyond the Rain Dome,
In the Pagoda of Chang O, the Moon Goddess,
Is there the white purity—and the cold.

Tomorrow, belike, the Lute of Jade will break . . .

This, then, is the picture of Prince Yi; and the other, the one of Pell Street, shows, in the front room of a little squat, turgid house, the Lotus Bud, lissom, high-breasted, slant-eyed and sweet, sitting, dressed in white mourning-robcs, near the bier of her elderly husband, Ming Shen, and talking in gliding undertones with Quong An-shih, the young produce merchant; and, in the back room, the executors of Ming Shen's estate.

They had examined the great, leather-backed, brass-clamped ledger, and found to their amazement that the deceased had made no provisions to have his body sent back to his native province of Canton, there to be buried in the family graveyard below Cock's-comb Rock with the proper rites and ceremonies, with numbers of crimson-cloaked relatives carrying embroidered soul-banners and lacquered ancestral tablets, with Taoist priests wagging their shaven polls and chanting the sacred litanies, and at the head of the cortège the empty palanquin for the *k'ai lu shen*, the "spirit that clears the way."

"Let my useless remains mingle their dust with that of the coarse-haired foreigners," had been his last words to Yu Ch'ang, the priest of the Pell Street joss-

temple; and the latter, as well as the half dozen grave Chinese burgesses who surrounded the sick-bed, had sucked in their breath apologetically and had looked at each other from beneath hooded eyelids meaningly lowered, as if to say that the dying man's thoughts were wandering, that already the hands of his soul were beating at the portal of final oblivion.

But now it was clear that Ming Shen had meant what he had said. Not even a single cent had he set aside for as much as a white cock to be placed on his coffin to ward off the evil spirits and to secure the presence of the *yang*, the essential element of future life.

Nag Hong Fah, the owner of the Great Shanghai Chop-suey Palace, shook his head. He was shocked to the depths of his cold, meticulous soul.

"During life," he said, "Ming Shen observed scrupulously the ancient customs. His respect for honourable tradition was steel mated to silk: strong and delicate. Why then—ah——?"

He was silent. A certain naïve wonder filmed his shrewd, beady eyes. He sighed; spread pudgy, puzzled hands, the thumbs curling like question marks.

"I cannot understand it," came the priest's nagging comment. "Always he hated those who are unobservant of the proprieties. And now—he himself——? *Wo ti t'ien! Wo ti t'ien!*"—he clipped Pharisee appeal to problematical heaven. "To be buried among foreigners, in the sneering, patronising shadow of the foreigners' cross! Assuredly, his spirit will lose a great deal of face. So will the spirits of his ancestors." He spoke with ponder-

ous impetuosity. "If he had been a pauper——"

"He was not rich," mildly suggested Ming Yat, a cousin of the deceased.

"But not a pauper!" insisted the other. "He could have saved enough money for a decent funeral in China, a charming little 'white' affair with perhaps a dozen hired mourners and——"

"A suitable present to the blessed Gautama Buddha's anointed?" sardonically interrupted Nag Hong Fah.

The priest looked at him with eyes that were like narrow steel circlets around the shifting, purplish blackness of the pupils.

"The Spiritual Precious One will not forgive him his remissness!" he said with hard, slightly triumphant finality; and his hand stabbed out accusingly.

Ching Shan, the retired merchant, sat there silent and motionless. But, somehow, he made his graven immobility appear profoundly responsive. His thoughts were tinged with melancholy. For he was old himself. He knew that his span of years was nearly run and that soon his spirit would resign its earthly dignities and ascend the dragon. And the preparations for his own funeral were elaborate and princely.

Too, he had been a friend of Ming Shen. This afternoon he had arrived a few minutes before the others.

He had casually opened the ledger that contained the meagre profit-and-loss rubrics of his late friend's business; had casually shuffled the pages; casually looked.

Then suddenly, he had sat up with tense, rigid alertness.

He had bent over a certain page; had read and re-read it.

He had drawn up his heavy eyelids, had breathed deeply; had again perused the scrawled, vertical, brush-stroke hieroglyphics. And, on an instantaneous but deliberate impulse, he had torn out the page.

Crumpled into a tight ball, it reposed now in the bottom of his trousers pocket. He felt guilty in the possession of it—not guilty towards his co-executors, but towards his dead friend. He did not know what to say. Finally, he pursed his thin lips and blew out a sort of mournful whistle.

He rose.

"My friends," he said, "I myself shall pay for Ming Shen's funeral—if I may be honourably permitted. Everything shall be done in fitting style, and—yes, yes!" as the priest opened his mouth to utter words of protest—"I know. It is not quite according to traditional etiquette. Man—sayeth the *Hsun Tze*—should aye attend to his own spiritual weal, should not rely on the charity of others. Still"—he smiled—"perhaps, by offering largess to the joss—and to the priest?"—he coughed—"ah——"

"Assuredly!" said the priest, shamelessly. "It is a good, a very good deed. It is permitted."

Ching Shan did not reply. He passed into the front room and looked, with neither curiosity nor reproach, at the Lotus Bud, who, near Ming Shen's bier, was talking in gliding undertones with Quong An-shih.

He smiled. He thought of a line in the *Park of Narratives*—"swift as the twining of serpents, vast as the growths of lianas in a forest, are the all-en-circling growths of the plant of love."

Waving a courteous, re-assuring hand at Quong

An-shih, who had risen, he left the house and walked out into the snug, greasy reek of Pell Street.

And so the end of the other picture:

Ching Shan ambling along on padded slippers, the crumpled page guiltily hugging the bottom of his trousers pocket, gently ironic thoughts about life and love playing hide-and-seek in the mazes of his tough old brain; and Quong An-shih talking to the Lotus Bud in an eager whisper.

Not that—and here, if we can read his thoughts, Ching Shan, too, was mistaken—Quong An-shih really comes in the tale at all except, perhaps, years beyond the telling, the climax, the segment of life which is the tale. If he comes, he must come in his own good time. But, here at least, he has nothing to do with the Lotus Bud, nor with the dead Ming Shen, who had left no provisions as to proper burial in China, nor with Prince Yi—Prince Yi, who, across land and sea and land again, was composing archaic verse about the Lute of Jade that sings in the Pavilion of Exquisite Purity—Prince Yi, who, a year or two earlier, had not been quite sure, as he put it in his own, self-mocking thoughts, if the Lute of Jade was not perhaps only a sham and a pinchbeck illusion——

On that day, a year or two earlier, Prince Yi came up from Washington, where he was junior attaché at the Chinese Legation, to attend to some official matters in New York.

Business finished, he telephoned to several of his American friends, but they were all away, in the mountains or at the seaside. For it was summer—New York summer—with the heat rays coming down like crackling spears, melting the asphalt, and rising

again like a gigantic, golden-hot mass of jagged brass; with the very birds gasping for breath; and a bloated, crimson, evil-faced moon hanging down in the utmost west.

Prince Yi was nervous. The stagnant, dust-laden air of the hotel dining-room was clawing at his throat with almost physical violence. The thought of food appalled him, and yet he was hungry. He fretted, considered, then smiled with faint irony at the obsequious head waiter, who was asking what *Monsieur le Prince* desired for dinner.

"Anatole," replied the Prince, in that soft English which he had learned at Eton and Oxford, "tonight I shall dine well."

"May I suggest——?"

"Wait. Dinner shall not be a duty to my mortal stomach, but a function, a ceremony to my immortal soul—it shall be a memory."

"*Pardon, Monsieur le Prince?*"

"A memory, I repeat."

"*Monsieur le Prince* is jesting?"

"Jesting? I? With memory? Would I be guilty of such an indelicacy, Anatole?"

The latter was puzzled. Then, suddenly, a light eddied up in his brown, Gallic eyes.

"I understand!" he exclaimed. "Memory—of Paris—of the boulevards—of the Grand Vatel! Some little Russian appetizers, hein?" He scribbled rapidly on his order-pad. "A slice of truffled sea-bass à la Montaigne? A kernel of lamb à la Caruso? Some tiny Italian peas à la Bourdillon? A half-bottle of Mouton Rothschild '66? Perhaps a——?"

"No!" Prince Yi laughed. "Keep Messieurs Montaigne and Caruso and Rothschild on ice until to-

morrow!" he said, rising. "Tonight—ah—" he pointed a finger through the open window at the imaginary spot, far in the south of the town, where a glittering, staccato band of light lay across the purplish smudge of night—"tonight I shall grow melancholic over a boned duck cooked sweet and pungent and served with bamboo sprouts stewed in honey. I shall drown my nostalgic heart in many cups of Cloudy Mountain tea. I shall astonish, and probably ruin, my digestion with a generous platter of noodles fried crisp and golden-brown. I shall—why, Anatole, do not look so shocked! Here's a salve for the injured gastronomic prejudices of *la belle France*!"

And Prince Yi flipped a ten-dollar bill to the rather mortified head waiter.

Half an hour later, in a teak-screened box of the Great Shanghai Chop-suey Palace, he electrified a lackadaisical Chinese waiter with a riotous volley of orders in clipped Chinese, yet with the faintly guttural inflection of the man from the North, the Manchu, the hated aristocrat.

"The best!" he demanded. "The best you have, O very great and soulless wart!" His ringing laugh drew the sting from the insult. "Serve me dinner——"

"Chop-suey? Chow-mein?" automatically sing-songed the waiter.

"Chop-suey? I? By the teeth of Buddha and mine own honour! Am I a red-haired barbarian to stuff my gullet with San Francisco's bastard hash? Ho! Serve me a dinner worthy of Peking—worthy of a coral-button mandarin—worthy of an Iron-capped Prince—worthy of the Old Buddha, the blessed Dowager Empress herself! Away, O goat of a smell

most goatish, and tell the skillet-twister that a red-faced rider of the North has cast his shadow across Pell Street—a Manchu, clamouring for food as his sires used to clamour for golden tribute!"

Excited, breathless, the waiter hurried into the kitchen.

"A Manchu!" he stammered. "A Prince! A seed of the Three-clawed Dragon! An *aisin cioro*—an Imperial Clansman!"

"Where?" asked the cook.

"There!" replied the other, pointing through the swinging doors. "The best he demands—and he demands it loudly!"

Nag Hong Fah, the proprietor of the restaurant, looked up from the table where he was busy with account-books and abacus.

"A Manchu, eh?" He sniffed contemptuously. "Pah! Me—" he went on in English— "me—I'm an American. I vote the Democratic ticket, straight, see? And——"

He rose. He walked over to the spotless kitchen-range.

The other—through the half-open door he could see the keen, arrogant young face, the ruddy complexion, the aquiline beak of a nose—was a Manchu, an aristocrat—yes!—a conqueror, an enemy; while he himself was a Chinese, a Cantonese, a man from the South, a Republican, in whose nostrils the very name of the Old Buddha and her red-faced clansmen was a stench and an abomination.

And this was America, the free land. True. And yet——

"An aristocrat!" Nag Hong Fah mumbled under his breath. "A seed of the Three-clawed Dragon!"

An Iron-capped Prince! Here—ah—” long-forgotten and long-despised phrases bubbled to his lips—“under my worthless roof——”

He sent the cook spinning with a thrust of his short, stout arms.

“Away!” he shouted, grasping a long-handled mixing-spoon. “Away, man with two left hands! I myself shall cook a meal for this roistering, swaggering, brawling Manchu—a noble meal that will presently tickle his honourable throat!”

So Prince Yi dined in state, waited on by Nah Hong Fah in person, and sipping his mandarin-blossom tea from a King-te-chin crackle-glaze cup that had long been a prized heirloom in the latter’s family, while the leaky, babbling tongues of Pell Street and Mott spread the news through alleys and mews.

A Prince had come! A haughty, wide-stepping Nurhachi! A steel-clanking rider from the North. A Man-chou-jen!— “Have you heard, neighbour?”—rustle, rustle, rustle, like wind through dry reeds, whispered the news.

A Prince! A Bannerman! A cousin-in-blood to the Son of Heaven himself!

“Look, look, up there, neighbour—there—behind the second window of Nag Hong Fah’s place—you can catch a glimpse of his face!”—flickered hushed, singsong voices, like hobgoblins, through the uncertain, adventurous shadows of birds’-nest balconies and fabulous, scarlet-and-gold Chinese sign-boards.

And when, dinner over, generously, extravagantly paid for, Prince Yi strolled leisurely down the crooked length of Pell Street, the whispers preceded him, followed him, ran alongside of him like powder under spark.

Slant eyes glanced his way. Yellow hands were clasped ceremoniously across breasts lean and stout. Even the reddest Canton revolutionaries experienced, though fighting against, a thrill of pleasure. Even Tsing Yu-ch'ing, the radical newspaper editor, whose pet slogan was that the duty of Young China consisted in "brushing away the Bourbos cobwebs of Manchu and Tartar with the lusty hand of Democracy," felt impressed, and sucked in his breath.

Men bowed and spoke and bowed again, addressing him with their baffling Oriental mixture of obsequious politeness and utter, riotous familiarity, with stilted phrase of etiquette and the baroque, gargantuan slang of the Canton gutters—and he replied in kind, taunt for taunt, and politeness for florid politeness.

"Ten thousand years!" shrilled a snobbish old hag, hobbling along on bound feet. "Ten thousand years, Heaven-born!"

"And yet another year, mother of many scented charms!" came the courtly reply.

"*Hoh! Ayioh-yi-yi!* A hunchback making a bow!" cried a moon-faced coolie pointing an indelicate thumb, and meaning, in his metaphorical Mongol manner, that the Prince, with his swaggering, hip-swinging gait, was rather overdoing it; and the latter cut in quickly that the other was a "paper tiger—harmless—with paper teeth."

"There was never yet virtue in a man from the North," observed a paunchy merchant, with great unction, winking a heavy, opium-reddened eyelid; followed by the Manchu's arrow-sharp reply:

"Virtue! Thou fattest ass, dost thou speak of virtue—thou, who only last night—?" and then a monstrous, unmentionable, and decidedly untruthful

statement that sent Pell Street into roars of laughter.

Prince Yi was happy.

This was Pell Street, and August—mean, wheezy, dusty, jaundiced, stifling: a foul-fermenting cesspool of yellow man's greed and white man's vice. Yet, somehow it was home; and the poet in his soul saw beyond the reek and the turgid, viscous heat; sensed beyond the brutish grime and dirt of the mazed, packed alleys a subtle and elusive vision, like the golden-flowered dawn of Ming and Han.

He looked at his watch. It was a few minutes after half-past nine. He had just about enough time to return to his hotel, pack his things, and catch the eleven-fifteen for Washington. There was a dinner-dance tomorrow at Mrs. Mahonri Van Kraaft's, on Pennsylvania Avenue. Miss Lucille Van Kraaft would simper at him and try to appear embarrassed. Old Mrs. Van Kraaft would stare at him through her lorgnette and ask him a hundred searching questions about the intimate home life in Peking's Tartar City, and he would reply with a hundred charmingly ingenious lies. Mr. Van Kraaft would force a big, black cigar on him and talk vaguely about oil and mineral concessions in Szechuan and Yunan——

He sighed. Reluctantly, he turned towards the Bowery.

And then he saw the Lotus Bud.

Heard her, first.

She was leaning from the balcony of her flat above the grocery-store of Ming Shen, her husband. A gossiping neighbour, who had been there a moment earlier, had told her about the stranger, the Manchu Prince, who had come to Chinatown, had pointed him out in the distance.

Now she saw him, tall and strong and massive-

shouldered and straight as a lance, walking along with a swinging, lilting step—a Manchu—an Imperial Clansman—a seed of the Three-clawed Dragon.

It was not long since she had left school. She still remembered haunting American fairy-tales about Prince Charming. Remembered, too, other tales her mother had read to her from the *Po-Hiao-Tou-Choue*—about the great noble who afterwards, because of his shining righteousness, became the Lord Gautama and meditated in the shadow of the cobra's hood, and the maiden Amara Devi who came to him out of the jungle——

Prince Yi stopped to light a cigarette. The spurt of the flame cut his features as with a knife, bringing into vivid relief the high-bridged nose, the smooth, ruddy skin, the well-shaped ears with the large, aristocratic lobes.

"A Manchu! A Prince!" she said, in a headlong and vehement whisper.

And he heard, looked up, and saw, sharply outlined in the light of a great, violet-and-gamboge paper lantern, the Lotus Bud—saw her scarlet mouth with the white flash of small, even teeth, the lack-lustre orbits of her eyes—saw her sweet with the slumbering sweetness of seventeen years.

He laughed softly, raised his hat, and was about to pass on, when another voice chimed in.

"Lotus Bud!"—reproachfully.

And Ming Shen stepped out on the balcony from the trooping shadows of the room beyond. He was short, wizened, middle-aged, round-shouldered.

"Lotus Bud!" he continued, just a little fretfully. "What manners be these—to talk to a stranger—like a *shuey kee*—like a shameless Canton sampan girl!"

She turned.

"I—I did not mean to—" she began.

"You cause me to lose face, Lotus Bud!"

Prince Yi had stopped. He smiled.

"Wise and older brother," he began, "no face has been lost. Do not chide your little daughter."

Ming Shen, too, smiled.

"She is not my daughter, Manchu," he replied.

"She is my wife—a respectable married woman——"

"Hi-yi-yi!" cried the Prince. "A respectable married woman—twelve years of age—or thirteen, be-like——?"

"I am seventeen!" cut in the Lotus Bud, rather indignantly.

"Seventeen—or seventy-seven!" grumbled Ming Shen. "All women are curious—about strangers—it is a most besetting sin——"

"It is indeed!" laughed Prince Yi. "And—I admit it freely—it is my own worst failing. Why—by the sacred toe-nail of Sakyamuna Buddha!—I am as curious to see the Lotus Bud and"—with a polite bow to Ming Shen—"the lucky gardener who scents her perfume as the Lotus Bud is to see a steel-crackling rider from the North! Ah—may I be honourably permitted——?"

And without waiting for yes or no, he was over the threshold and up the stairs, two steps at a time.

Half an hour later he had forgotten all about the eleven-fifteen train to Washington and tomorrow's dinner-dance at the Van Kraafts'. He was sitting in the tiny living-room of Mr. and Mrs. Ming Shen, entertaining them with spiced, scandalous tales of Peking's Forbidden City; tales about the Dowager Empress and her Tartar favourite, Captain-general Jung Lu, which caused the Lotus Bud to clap her hands

and laugh ecstatically, and her elderly husband, who was a stout, reactionary monarchist, to make little staccato, deprecating noises in his throat—but to enjoy the gossip just the same.

An hour later he had accepted a shyly-tendered invitation to sip tea with his new friends the following Saturday; and two hours later he was walking down the street, looking up at the sky that was a frosted magic of sable and silver, a song in his heart, a song on his lips.

He did not know if he was in love, did not even ask himself the question. He only knew, deep in his poet's heart, that, out of the Lotus Bud's slant, lacklustre eyes, something had swept forth with a whirring of wings, had flashed through the hidden passages of his being, rising like a wave, flooding all barriers, burning away, with a thousand flickering flames, the caked dross of the outer world.

He only knew that the lawless blood of his Tartar ancestors was screaming in his veins, negligent of the scattered, choking civilisation of this stone-clouted New York, whose spires and towers and sky-scrapers were soaring up like eager lances, calling him back, across the swinging, grey centuries, to a life utterly primitive and utterly glorious—and plans, half-formed plans, whirling in his brain——

The Nurhachis, the iron-capped warriors of the Manchurian plains, had fought on horseback, beneath the oriflamme of their pointed banners that were stiff with gold, stiffer with gore; they had courted on horseback—and the spoils of victory had always been to the young, the strong, the ruthless. There was a tradition in his clan of one Huglagu, his remote sire, riding his stallion, its mane tricked with silver and

crimson, into the domed silk tent of a Sungarian Khan and picking up the latter's young wife, where she sat among her handmaidens—and galloping away with her.

Away—to his own land, beyond the sea. Golden was the memory of this land: golden and subtle and swooning——

And then, suddenly, unbidden, came another memory of a day a year or two earlier when, on the eve of his departure to take up his diplomatic duties in Washington, he had said good-bye to his grandfather, Prince Ch'un, a retired Taotai of the Imperial Circuit, in the latter's summer residence, fifty miles up the river from Peking. He remembered the place: the little island rising abruptly from the cloudy white of the waters, black-green with cedar and scarlet with swamp-maple, and his grandfather speaking to him, in his age-cracked, slightly petulant voice, about the Lute of Jade, which was the emblem of their clan.

"The spiritual light of the essential being is pure, little grandson," the old Prince had said. "Pure, always pure is the Lute of Jade—pure and clear through the night of storms, the bitter night of passions . . . and you *are* a Nurhachi!"

"I," echoed Prince Yi now, in a sibilant whisper, very much to the surprise of a hansom-cab driver, crooking his finger in search of potential 'fares,' "I *am* a Nurhachi!"

"Oh—damn!" he added, with a loud voice, as he stepped into the lobby of his hotel.

"Beg pardon, sir?" asked the doorkeeper.

"Nothing, nothing," replied Prince Yi, and went upstairs.

Slowly he undressed. He decided that he would take an early train for Washington. There was work to do—work would help him to forget.

He looked out of the window. Again, far in the south, he could see the glittering band of light stammering across the bunched purple of the sleeping town. Down there was Pell Street—and the Lotus Bud.

He turned away from the window and, after a moment's hesitation, bowed ceremoniously before his ancestral tablets. They seemed ludicrously, incongruously out of place on the mahogany of the dressing-table, flanked by a pin-cushion and a framed card of hotel regulations.

Three times he kowtowed. He spoke in a whisper:

"Ships that sail the ocean, drifting clouds, the waning moon, shores that are washed away—these are symbolic of change. These, and the body. But the human mind is essential, absolute, changeless, and everlasting. Changeless and everlasting is the Lute of Jade!"

And then, rising, in English:

"Rather tough on a chap to be a Nurhachi—to be an honourable gentleman!"

And, just before he fell asleep:

"I wonder if she cares for that elderly husband of hers——"

But, if he wondered, he never asked her; neither directly nor indirectly; neither the following Saturday when, after a short, violent struggle with himself, he took train for New York and sipped tea and ate rice with Mr. and Mrs. Ming Shen, nor, as time went on, the Saturdays to come when he repeated his visits until

the weekly supper-party in the little Pell Street flat had become an institution.

His love for her was like autumn rain, the kind which one does not see nor hear, but which one feels, unceasing, penetrating, slightly chilling. Only, if the Lotus Bud felt, or knew, or cared, she said no word, made no gesture. She was always the same, eager for his stories, his laughter, his faintly ironic comments on life and people, and the occasional poems which he recited, with the correct, singsong cadencing, accentuating the *shih tzu*, the "essential words," and lowering his voice when he came to the *hsu tzu*, or "empty words."

She would sit there and listen, putting at times a pert little question, looking very sweet and very placid, and beneath the mist of her black hair the slant eyes soft with the sort of feminine pathos which—had Prince Yi known it—meant nothing in particular; and Ming Shen would sit by her side, cutting in, when the mood took him, with shrewd proverb or flowery metaphor.

Supper over, the two men would talk politics over a couple of tasselled, red-bowled pipes, while the Lotus Bud cleared the table and washed the dishes.

For Ming Shen could not afford to keep a servant. He was not a rich man. He earned just about enough money in his grocery-store to satisfy his three main objects in life; to live modestly, but respectably; to pay his bi-yearly life insurance premiums so that the Lotus Bud should not suffer want after his death; and to set aside a weekly sum for his funeral expenses, back home in his native province of Canton, in the family graveyard below Cock's-comb Rock.

Prince Yi, enormously wealthy, would have liked to help his friend with loans or gifts of money. But

he realised that the other's Chinese burgess pride matched his own Manchu pride. And so he made believe as if he knew nothing, keeping strictly to the saying in the *Li Ki* that "what is whispered in the private apartment must not be shouted aside." The only thing he did was to bring the Lotus Bud an occasional box of chocolates, a bouquet, a book, perhaps—with a polite bow to Ming Shen and a ceremonious "may I be honourably permitted, O wise and older brother?"—a bright ribbon that had caught his fancy in a Fifth Avenue shop window.

He liked to hear her exclaim over the little gifts, to hear her stammered, excited thanks:

"Oh, Manchu, you are so good to me!"

And then, to her husband:

"Isn't he good to me, Ming Shen?"

It gave him pleasure, yet a pleasure not altogether unalloyed by pain. For she had so little, and he had so much. And he loved her. Dearer she was to him than the ten thousand blessed Lotus Fields of the Lord Buddha; and, in his poet's soul, he thought that he wanted to weave his love for her into a chain of precious stones and tie it gently about her wrist—that he wanted to change his love into a rose-red pearl to hang into her little white ear.

"I am glad you like the flowers, Lotus Bud!" he would say, quickly, lest the catch in his voice betray him.

It was by chance that he gave her money, that first time.

He had arrived a little earlier than usual, and Ming Shen, still in his shop, motioned to him to go upstairs. The Lotus Bud was in the kitchen, busy with pots and pans.

"Good evening, Lotus Bud!"

"Good evening, Manchu—" and, fretfully, impatiently, staring at a meagre platter of rice cakes and preserved kumquats: "Oh——" She choked back the exclamation, and stamped her foot.

"What is wrong?" he asked, smiling, coming nearer.

"Nothing, nothing!"

"But—you seem upset. What has happened?"

"Nothing!"

"Come. Tell me, child."

"There is nothing to tell!"

"Oh, yes, there is!" he insisted. "Please—if there is anything I can do—why—you know—it would make me happy——"

"No!"

"Please!"

Finally she told him. It was a matter of a few dollars; less, he thought, than he gave to the steward at his Washington Club for some trifling service. She had meant to prepare a specially good dinner, for today was the festival of the *Tsao Shen*, the Kitchen God. But she had not been shrewd in her shopping, had spent too much for duck and rice and condiments; and now—she pointed tragically at the platter of rice cakes and kumquats—here was all she had for the dessert, and she would lose face before the Kitchen God.

"But—why——?" He was going to ask her why she did not go to her husband for more money, but he stifled the question. For he knew that Ming Shen never went above a certain fixed weekly allowance for household expenses, because of the simple reason that he could not afford to.

"I—I am sorry, Lotus Bud—" he began again, slurred, stopped. Suddenly he made up his mind, put his hand in his pocket, and took out a roll of bills. "Run downstairs and buy what you want. How much——?"

"I can't take money from you, Manchu."

"Of course you can."

"No!"

"Let it be my offering to the Kitchen God," he laughed.

"No, no!"

"Why—aren't we friends?"

"Yes. But——"

"But what?"

"Ming Shen!"

"He needn't know. Don't tell him."

She considered. All at once she laughed.

"All right. I won't tell him."

And she took the money.

Thus it started, and, after a while, like everything else in life, the exception became the rule, the contingency became a precedent: a dollar, then five, ten, finally twenty, as a weekly institution every Saturday, when Prince Yi came up from Washington. And, since he hardly ever saw her alone, he got into the way of slipping a twenty-dollar bill beneath his plate where she would find it when she cleared the table.

After a month or two, he thought little about it, nor did she. For it had become a habit. Some of the money she spent on the household, but the greater part on herself, on the pretty, dainty trifles she had always craved and which her husband had never been able to give her: a silk dress and stockings, a pair of

grey suède pumps, loop ear-rings, once a modest set of furs. She explained their possession to Ming Shen with glib little lies; she had shopped so well, so shrewdly, had saved a dollar here and a dollar there from her household allowance.

And the lies, too, became a habit.

So a year passed, and August came again with days of brazen gold and evenings of sombre, crushed rose-pink, and the Prince's love grew steadily until, through the mists of his apprehension, floated the knowledge that his desire was smothering in him the precepts of Confucius, that it was drowning in a flood of passion all the laws of the Lord of the Cobra, that the strings of the Lute of Jade were taut to the breaking-point.

He had liked Ming Shen from the beginning, had admired his wire-drawn, yet never surly, moral rectitude, and the frank, four-square candour of his philosophy.

Then, one evening without conscious or subconscious warning, he felt cognisant of a sharp antagonism towards Ming Shen. It was as sudden as it was unexpected. He saw, as if for the first time, the grocer's lined, elderly, patient face, the thin, slightly-drooping lips, the prominent Adam's apple in the scrawny throat, the gnarled hands. He saw them mercilessly outlined in the bright rays of the kerosene-lamp, and he realised that his liking had changed to dislike, to hatred, actual, physical hatred that swept through him like a wind-sucked flame.

He did not try to beguile his conscience by psychological subterfuge. He understood at once that Ming Shen was the same as he had always been, that there was no personal fault of the other's doing for this abrupt and deadly antagonism.

It was only because Ming Shen was the husband of her whom he loved; and shame floated down upon him—it reached out and touched his soul, his secret self.

That night, in his hotel room, he kowtowed again before the ancestral tablets.

"A flaw in a mace of white jade," he whispered, "may be ground away by skilful hands, but not even the Buddha can mend the deed done wrong."

He rose. Rapidly he made up his mind; and when next Saturday came, Ming Shen entering his apartment, said casually to the Lotus Bud:

"We'll be only two tonight."

"Why? Isn't the Manchu coming?"

"He has returned to Peking." After a pause he added: "For good. He sent me a telegram."

"Oh—I am sorry—I do wish he had said goodbye to me," she replied, busying herself in the kitchen, while he watched her closely, carefully.

Closely, carefully, he watched her all during supper, speaking little.

Closely, carefully, he watched her from his chair in the corner as, supper over, she cleared the table—and found beneath his plate the twenty dollars he had put there.

She looked at it, slightly puzzled; then turned to him with a wistful little smile——

When, weeks earlier, Ming Shen had seen by chance the twenty-dollar bill protruding from beneath Prince Yi's plate, there had been a sudden tumult in his heart, leaving it vacant and dry and red. The harrow had driven over his soul. Blurred, the world had seemed, blurred and stinking and ironic.

A great sob had risen in his throat.

But, almost immediately, he had changed it into a

cough, had controlled himself with a hard, bitter effort. He had said to himself that there might be an innocent enough reason and that, presently, Prince Yi would explain. Meanwhile, the latter was his guest, and he had no right to insult him by question or insinuation.

But no explanation had been forthcoming. Out of the corner of his eye he had seen the Lotus Bud take the money and slip it into her dress; and the same thing had happened the next Saturday, the next, and yet the next, when, by this or that subterfuge, he had busied himself with Prince Yi's plate, and had always found there a crisp twenty-dollar bill.

Twenty dollars! The wages of—what?

The answer in his own mind had been direct and brutal; and direct and brutal had been his intention, many a Saturday to come, when he had sat down to supper, a dagger up his loose sleeve, ready to kill.

But, each time, something had prevented him. For, seeing the Lotus Bud, sweet and young, seeing the Prince, young, too, and handsome and eager, seeing himself in the dim looking-glass above the sideboard, middle-aged and bent and gnarled, thoughts had come to him. He had said to himself that—yes—he loved her, but that perhaps, through his very love, he had been guilty of selfishness, wrapping himself in the mantle of his own emotions, and never considering the Lotus Bud's.

She had given him a year or two of her youth, a gentle breeze of happiness to fan the grey drabness of his declining years. And now the Manchu had come into her life. Youth had called to youth——

"Love is love," he had confided to his opium-pipe,

at night, after his wife had gone to bed, "and passion is passion. To change them, would be as futile as tethering the tiger with a silken rope, as squeezing oil from sand."

But—he had brooded—she was his wife, wedded to him with the proper, respectable rites! And again he had felt for the dagger up his sleeve, to soothe again his whirling, murderous thoughts with bland reflections.

"Love," he had said to the curling poppy-smoke, "is a pitcher. And the pitcher holds the same quantity of water, whether it be filled from a shallow pool or from the depths of the ocean. Ah! There is no end to the deceit of passion—there is no end, and no beginning, to the beard of the beardless!"

Thus he had drowned his rage in philosophical submission. But he had taken, rather sneeringly, self-torturingly, to observing his wife and the Manchu, wondering when they would give themselves away, by whispering word or furtive, caressing gesture.

Then, tonight, the Prince's telegram had come, and it was a morbid curiosity, a certain elemental Mongol cruelty, which had caused him to slip the money beneath his plate; to see what she would do—how she would react——

He looked at her.

"Ming Shen!" she began.

"Yes?" he asked, after a deliberate silence occupied in the careful lighting of his pipe.

"I am so glad you know!"

"You are—" his voice leaped up extraordinarily strong— "glad——?"

"Yes. I meant to tell you all the time—you know that, don't you?"

"Why—I—" his words seemed to him muffled, choked in an irresponsive immensity.

"Of course I did!" she resumed, a little petulantly. "I hate to have secrets from you. And—really—I wanted to tell you right away when the Manchu gave me the money that first time, when I had spent all my household money and didn't have a cent left for dessert and was about to lose face before the Kitchen God. There was no harm in his giving me money, nor in my taking it, was there, Ming Shen?" she asked coming a step nearer.

"Yes—yes—" he said, uncomprehending, staring at her with dull, motionless eyes.

"Good! I knew you would understand! And afterwards, when he gave me more money, every Saturday, it was harder and harder to tell you."

She was silent for a moment; put her hands on his shoulders.

"I"—she went on—"I'm afraid I lied to you an awful lot, told you I saved the money for my silk dress and all the other things I bought from my household allowance, when it was the Prince's money all the time. But—don't you see?—I am young. I've always wanted pretty, dainty things." She smiled. "I am not yet a Buddha in patience and resignation—and we are so poor—and he is so rich! And— isn't he a real Prince, though? To give you that money for me! Oh! It was such a wonderful surprise, such a darling thing to do! How much did he give you?" she prattled on, excitedly.

He drew in a deep, sharp breath. His hands sought hers, found them, tightened about them.

"I—I love you, Lotus Bud," he stammered.

"Yes, yes. And I love you, too. You're the dearest

man in all the world. But—tell me—how much did the Prince give you for me? I saw such a beautiful, beautiful dress over on the Bowery—at Rosenboro's——"

"Plenty, plenty!" replied Ming Shen. "He gave me enough so that, in his memory, I can put twenty dollars beneath my plate—every Saturday—for a long time to come——"

And, as an afterthought, he added:

"For as long as I live, Lotus Bud!"

And so, a year or two later, while the Lotus Bud was sitting by the bier of her husband and talking in gliding whispers to Quong An-shih who does not enter into the tale at all (it was December before she married him), Ching Shan, the retired merchant, the friend of the dead Ming Shen, ambled down Pell Street on padded slippers, the crumpled page which he had torn from the grocer's ledger guiltily hugging a corner of his pocket.

He never said a word about its contents to anybody.

For it is not right that a staid and honourable Chinese burgess should cover a page of his ledger with foolish stammerings about love; saying that love is a quality and not a desire, that it is the solution of all riddles and the answer to all doubts—that love is faith, the greatest faith in the world.

Nor is it right that the same burgess should waste the weekly twenty dollars set aside for a proper burial in the family graveyard below Cock's-comb Rock, in his native province of Canton, to buy fripperies and flummeries for a little, silly, thoughtless Lotus Bud.

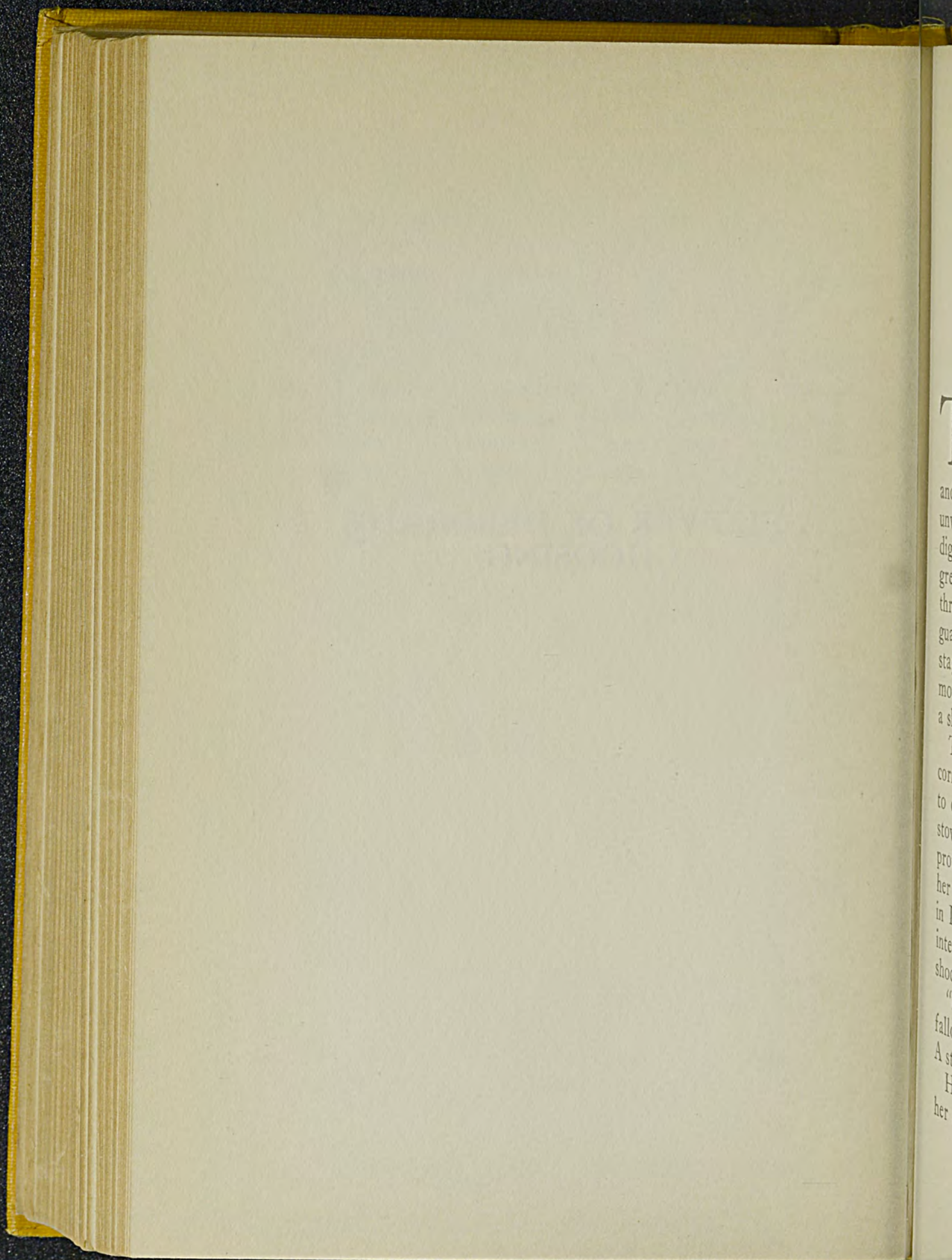
"Love," said Ching Shan sadly, as he burned the crumpled page, "is an infidel act—thus it is

written in the Book of the Yellow Emperor——”

“Love,” said Prince Yi, walking in his garden near the Ha-Ta Gate of Peking’s Tartar City, “is but the passing breath of passing life. But the Lute of Jade is always the same—sings always, always, in the Pavilion of Exquisite Purity!”

He looked out to the west where the dying sun was a rapidly-whirling wheel of gleaming dust, shedding golden and crimson sparks. Already, near the lotus-pond, the shadows of night were beginning to dance their wild, purple saraband. A bird came from nowhere with a whirring of brown wings, then vanished into an eddy of wind and cloud——

A FLOWER OF DEBORAH'S
CHOOSING



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TEN

A FLOWER OF DEBORAH'S CHOOSING

TUNIS stood heaped white on its hill, all its windows afire with the dying sun; and Henna el-Atteq walked beneath the glow, moving hips and shoulders with a dancing girl's swing, her golden, unveiled face showing on cheeks and forehead the indigo tattoo marks of her tribe, the Ouled Nayil; her great, hooded eyes darting everywhere at the homing throng of Arabs and Jews, down at the ground to guard her tiny, lemon slippers from the scum of the stagnant pools, and up at the faint shaving of the moon that, very thin and far and nostalgic, hung in a sky of jade.

There was an old Kabyle woman huddled in a corner of the market-place, her wrinkled neck twisted to one side as she blew into the fire of the open-air stove where small, skewered rags of mutton sizzled protestingly. She looked up, saw the girl, recognised her tribe and profession—and be it remembered that in Islamic Africa Ouled Nayil and dancing girl are interchangeable terms—and pointed at her with a shocked and unwashed finger.

"*Wah!*" she cried. "*Mithil esseyd*—like as the fallow beasts, savage scatterlings of the wilderness! A stench in the nostrils of the righteous!"

Henna el-Atteq laughed. She was rather proud of her ancient, inherited profession. She gave a mock-

ing salute, the seed-pearl edging of her orchid and pistache burnoose sweeping the ground.

"*Slubbia*—gipsy!" she replied in a voice as passionless as Fate, as if the words were not an insult but a calm statement of facts. "*Yahudi*—Jew! *Baghrila*—she-mule! What will not a goat eat or a fool say, O Almost Noseless?"

She walked on amidst the laughter of the crowd, turning the corner of the Street of the Grain-Merchants; then, by a crumbling staircase veiled with hoary, slate-grey lichen, descended into the pungent shade of a clump of cinnamon trees and straight up to her lover's house.

But when, directed by the thoroughly disapproving Hajji Nejm, her lover's cousin, she crossed the hall and rushed with birdlike, high-pitched cries of delight into the patio where Othman er-Riffa was waiting for her, she was disappointed. For tonight there were no lips to give her welcome, no bending of the Moroccan's lithe young body to the level of her dimpled knees, no strong hands to hold her tight, no surge of words, to tell her that "*Hayah!* my heart is a tasselled floor-cloth for your little, little feet! Step gently, child!"

Tonight Othman er-Riffa did not even look up as she entered. He was squatting on a silken pillow, in front of him a half-emptied brandy bottle wrapped in moist rags to keep it cool. Next to it he had heaped up a small mound of sand and pebbles, had stuck a row of green-leaved twigs upright in it, and had so turned over an earthen jar that its contents trickled slowly, in a tiny stream, under the verdure, while he stared at it with an outward show of grimly quixotic affection, swaying rhythmically from side to side, and

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singing a throaty, homesick song about his fatherland in the far western mountains of Morocco—which were evidently represented by the miniature landscape.

Loud was his song and yet tender; warlike and yet melting.

"*Ioom mahalia khiooli teffaha!*" he chanted, waving the bottle and giving a fearless hiccup.

*Raqeb oudi ouh slahi
Ouh bnat elhai qa thaiali
Meun albiha . . .*

Three times he repeated the song, crescendo, playing with the words, embroidering them with gorgeous similes, adding quivering little falsetto grace-notes, smiling beatifically through half-closed eyelids, utterly pleased with himself. For Othman er-Riffa was a poet; a poet who knew the sweetness of his own songs, the tender, dim beauty of his own rhymes; an exceedingly vain young poet who—to quote the ungracious judgment of his cousin Hajji Nejm, who was a mullah, a Moslem priest—imagined that he could winnow the threshing floor of all emotions with the wind of his nostrils.

"*Meun albiha—*" his voice rose to a high, thin quavering, suddenly stopped; and Henna el-Atteq looked at him, waited for him to speak, then, when he said nothing but applied his lips to the neck of the bottle, shrugged her slim shoulders and sat down by his side.

"Are you homesick, soul of my soul?" she whispered, playfully pulling at his moustache. "You know the saying: 'Rather bear the pain than the remedy!' For if you go home to Morocco you will find there no

woman—no woman like me, my lord!" she added coquettishly.

Again she was disappointed. For instead of responding to her caress, Othman er-Riffa turned a stony, grey eye on her. Like many a Western man he was inclined to be both solemn and irreproachably respectable when in his cups.

"No woman like you indeed shall I find at home," he said thickly, "nor do I want to."

"Hey?" she looked up, surprised.

"Good women I shall find there," he went on, "sweet women, proper women, women of the house and the hearth!" And he wiped a tear from his left eye which had no business there.

"But—but—" stammered the girl, hurt, discomfited, "my lord——"

He pushed her away.

"Begone!" he said roughly. "Begone, naughty daughter of a naughty mother!"

She burst out weeping.

"And only last night you told me that you loved me!" she whimpered.

"Did I indeed say so?"

"Yes."

"What of it? I am a poet, and poets have forked tongues!" He tilted the bottle to his lips with a jaunty movement of the arm. "Allah!" he continued. "This Tunis is a soft land—and the women of Tunis——? *Wah!*" contemptuously. "Give me the West, say I, and the women of the West!"

Then with a sudden change of temper he rose, upsetting the miniature landscape which he had so carefully heaped up in memory of his birthplace. Unsteadily he went to the door and flung it open.

"Leave my presence!" he wound up. "Nor ever return again! It has occurred to me that I do not like your face, nor your hands, nor your eyes, nor your nose, nor your morals. *Es-salaam!*" he bowed mockingly.

"Pig!" the Ouled Nayil raised her accents to a shriek as shrill as a kite's. "Son of a pig with a pig's heart! Father of little piglings!"

"Sister mine!" came his sardonic rejoinder.

She took a threatening step in his direction, her small, henna-stained hands clenched tight.

"Are these the customs of Morocco?" she asked. "To play with a woman, to steal her heart and then to break it like a brittle toy because of the sport of it?"

"What?" he demanded with a rumbling laugh. "Break your heart? Your *heart*? And what would you do with a heart? Ho! What would a monkey do with a rose bottle?"

And he clapped his hands, ordered the black servant who came running to remove "this person who has come into my presence, loudly and shamelessly, shocking me with improper words and gestures." And this for the time being was the end of the affair as far as Henna el-Atteq was concerned, while the Moroccan, very suddenly, sat down on the floor and fell peacefully asleep, to be awakened an hour later with a clear eye, a clear head, and a clear conscience, and to find, looking down at him reproachfully the moonlike features of Hajji Nejm, his cousin.

The latter sniffed.

"It is not permitted the true believer to drink fermented spirits," he began. "It says in the Koran——"

"Koran——? A book! *Wah!*" interrupted the

other. "If a book it must be, O saintly son of my father's sister, let it be a book of love!"

Hajji Nejm sighed.

Three weeks earlier news had reached their little home town in the Riffian hills of Morocco that an uncle of theirs, a certain Tereq el-Toork, a wealthy horse trader, had died in Tunis and left all his money to Othman er-Riffa, who had set out at once to claim his inheritance, inviting the other to accompany him as his guest. Hajji Nejm had accepted gladly. For, a student of theology and a mullah, he knew that there were great libraries in Tunis, dealing with the *Shariat-Islam*, the "Road to Heavenly Bliss." But from the day of their arrival his cousin's mode of living had interfered disastrously with his own.

The twanging of Othman er-Riffa's guitar had throbbed and zummed in Hajji Nejm's ear when he had tried to unriddle the involved passages of Diwan Umr ibn Fariz, the celebrated mystic; the provoking thought of Othman er-Riffa's kisses had disturbed Hajji Nejm's tranquillity of soul when he had endeavoured to dive into the *Ilm al-Tafsir*, the "Exegesis of the Koran"; the clink and clank of Othman er-Riffa's glass had splintered the solemn dignity of Hajji Nejm's *maghrib*, or evening prayer; the throaty laughter of Othman er-Riffa's dancing girls had cut discordantly through the nasal, sacerdotal drawl of Hajji Nejm's *isba*, or night prayer. Never a moment's peace!

He sighed as he thought of it; spoke of it:

"Never a moment's peace! Three weeks since we left home and . . ."

"Time for us to return!"

"Good!"

"No. Bad! For home is as full of nagging grey-

beards and their unbeautiful wives as a Mzbite's bur-noose is of vermin. But what can I do? You see—"he spread his hands, showing flat, empty palms,—“all my money is gone”

“What?” demanded the other incredulously. “You mean that you——”

Othman er-Riffa cut through the other's exclamation with a lordly gesture.

“Gone!” he announced. “Taken wings and flown away! Every last piastre! I even sold the house. By the end of the week we'll have to move——”

“But—over ten thousand——”

“Spent just the same!”

“How?”

“Women—mostly!” came the laconic reply.

“But——”

“Woman is both the honey and the gall of my life, my crown of roses and my crown of thorns. Woman, O great mud-turtle of my father's sister's breeding, eats minted gold as a goat licks salt.” He rose, affected by his own eloquence. “For I am generous and splendid. A Rustam in munificence am I! A Haroun-al-Raschid in liberality! A Sultan Mansoor in bounteousness! In fact——” he shrugged his shoulders raised his eyebrows, blew a kiss into the air—“a poet!”

“Still——” the other shook his head—“it is incredible!”

“Why?”

“Ten thousand golden piastres—in three weeks—on women——?”

“Belike not altogether on women. Most indeed of my money the dancing girls swallowed. But some of it, too, went to buy me fine raiment. Some to wet

my gullet with the infidels' charming drinks. With some I bought *jadoo*—powerful magic—to send slow death to my enemy. Some—I forget. What difference how and where? The piastres are gone—blown away as the sirocco blows away a grain of sand in the desert!"

"Hm-hm!" Hajji Nejm smiled, pityingly, superciliously, self-righteously.

Then, all at once, the smile left his face. His jaw dropped.

"By the Prophet!" he exclaimed.

"What is the matter?"

"How are we going to get home, to Morocco?"

"On twice two feet—yours and mine!" laughed the poet. "Food? The people of the black tents will give us bread and figs and sour milk. To you, because of your saintliness; to me, because my speech is sweet as the chittering of birds. No fear. *Hennah el-Beduw, wa eth-thaif aziz*—to the Bedawins the guest is as one dearly beloved."

Hajji Nejm sat down in a disconsolate heap. He was a young man, but of comfortable rotundity, not used to physical exertion.

"*Istugfur Ullah*—" he said weakly—"Lord, I cry Thee mercy!"

He fanned himself with the edge of his burnoose. Home was three hundred miles away, across desert and mountain and desert again; and his feet were small and narrow—much too small and narrow for his paunch and girth.

"You have no money at all?" he demanded in a flat, thin voice. "Not even enough to hire us the use of a brace of camels?"

"Not as much as the smell of gold is sticking to

my fingers," replied Othman er-Riffa. "Here. Convince yourself!" He stretched out both his hands and held them beneath the other's nose. "Attar of roses you may smell there—attar of jasmine—the scented memories of four, perhaps five, dancing girls. But of gold—not even the shadow of a smell!"

"*Istugfur Ullah!*" repeated Hajji Nejm.

Then suddenly, he looked up as he heard his cousin's ringing laugh, as he heard him say that "*wa hyat ruqbaty*—by the honour of my neck—I forgot!"

"Forgot what?" asked Hajji Nejm hopefully.

"That I am still rich."

"Blessed be the forty-seven true Moslem Saints! You saved a little——?"

"Not money."

"Not money? Then—what . . . ?"

"Am I not a poet, regrettable mud-turtle? Is not the lilt of my words like diamonds and rubies and emeralds from the far kingdoms of Hindustan?"

"What do you mean?"

"Reach me my guitar. Thanks." He took the long-necked, two-stringed instrument and fastened its ribbons across his left shoulder. "Come."

He left the patio, crossed the hall, and stepped out of the house, while the other followed, gesticulating excitedly, asking breathless questions:

"How? When? Where?"

"To the quarter of the Jews—the Benni Israel!"

"But—why, why, why?"—and with each "why" the man's voice peaked a shrill, hysterical octave.

"Great feasting is there—so I heard in the bazaar—the clank of cymbals and tomtoms—the smell of rich food—flowers and perfume and wine—for to-night Deborah, the daughter of Moïse ben Yakoob

Lebhar, the rich banker, becomes the bride of Saffar Elias, the worthy talmudist."

"*Yahudis*—Jews!" sneered Hajji Nejm. "Sons of burnt Fathers! Unbelieving cattle! What have you and I, being Moslems of the Faith, to do with the cursed seed of Israel?"

"Do you want to walk to Morocco, all the way?"

"No."

"Then come with me. You see, down amongst the Jews there will be a noisy welcome tonight for you and me—and a handful of gold when they hear the twanging of my guitar and the honeyed rhymes of my songs."

"I see. You want me along—to—ah——"

"To collect. My voice is sweeter than yours, but your hands are larger than mine."

Again Hajji Nejm thought of the long journey to the Riffian hills, across desert and mountain; and the fear of it overcame his narrow Moslem prejudices.

"Very well," he said; and he waddled after his cousin down the street, under the sweep of the African night that was dimming the houses to delicate silver, into the quarter of the Jews that jutted like a wedge between Old Tunis and New Tunis, the former swarming with Arab life smoothly running in its well-worn, fatalistic grooves, the latter steeped in the pioneering glow of modern French enterprise.

"Here we are!" said Othman er-Riffa, pointing. "*Hayah!* But it is good to be alive and young and a poet! Night—and gold—and the scent of flowers—and perhaps a spice of adventure—and spring in the air, spring in my blood!"

Spring was indeed in the *Mellah*, the ghetto.

Beneath the flicker and stammer of innumerable

tiny, coloured lights—festive lights strung from house to house and from tree to tree that, to believe the bazaar gossip, had cost Moïse ben Yakoob Lebhar, the rich banker, an even thousand francs—spring brushed through the ancient, coiling streets with purple and orange and glaucous-green; deepening the shiny lac of the rubber plant that spiked its broad leaves in the shop of Cohen Zaraffa, the chicken-butcher; showering the pretentious plate-glass of Avram Stamboli's store with soft moon dust; mirroring the dance of stars and fleecy clouds in the bottles of Saif Belache's liquor shop; stabbing gold into the brass cups of Maccabeo Zadroo, the coffee-seller, as he passed through the alleys with his traditional call of: "*Yallah! Yallah! Hallah! Yesully ali Israel—Jahveh karim!—Come! Come! Come! The Lord bless Israel—the Lord is bountiful!*"; painting rainbow tints in the shimmering display of Melchisedech Kahoua, the jeweller; and reflecting with a thousand flat facets on the neat window panes of the Great Zion Restaurant behind which Levy Tordjeman, the obese proprietor, was preparing the wedding supper with the aid of his entire chattering personnel.

"Lobster—from France!" he said, splitting a long, red shell with the point of a crooked blade. "Not kosher, you say? Pah—everything is kosher to wealth. And, too, won't there be seventy times seventy talmudists and rabbis here tonight to make all clean with their prayer of '*Ioom achichi maqrai Koodish—?*'" He inspected a deep pan. "Crinkled, broiled bits of fat goose skin—palatable even to the stomach of a prince in Israel when blended with a drop of oil—thus! a sprig of fine parsley—thus! and a mocking suspicion of garlic—thus!" Suddenly he

turned. "Ho!" he shouted, bringing the knife handle smartly on the second cook's knuckles. "Curse thee all the angels! Curse thee all the Moslems! Curse thee all the Jews! Let all the heathens curse thee, son of a donkey! Is this the way to stir a cake? Stir gently, fool!"

He crossed to another range where from an immense iron pot savoury odours drifted to the smoke-stained ceiling. He dipped a long-handled, wooden spoon into the pot, brought out a generous measure, and sipped it noisily.

"Delicious!" He licked his loose lips. "Moïse ben Yakoob Lebhar is a man who does honour to his stomach—and his guests' stomachs!"

He stepped to the window, opened it, and inhaled the soft spring air.

The coming union of Deborah Lebhar and Saffar Elias was a social event of the purest water, and thus the *Mellah* was filled with a festive crowd that lapped over from house to sidewalk and thence to the road, laughing, gossiping, gesticulating. Everybody was there, rich and poor, young and old, orthodox and reformed: Jews in kaftans and broidered skull-caps from the inmost ghetto; expatriate, silk-hatted Jews returned from Paris just for the marriage; Jews from the fashionable Tunis suburbs of Belcourt and Saint-Eugène; cousins come all the way from Morocco and Algiers and Egypt. And every once in a while somebody in the human eddy looked up and tossed a word at the restaurant proprietor, and always he returned the salutation, often mixing it with raillery, carefully grading it according to the speaker's purse and social standing.

"Good evening!" said Rabbi Ishmail Azoulay, who

was going to officiate at tonight's wedding.

"*Barrookh abbah*—welcome, venerable father!" returned Levy Tordjeman, waving a pudgy hand.

Then, seeing Melchisedech Kahoua, the jeweller, notorious for his greedy appetite:

"Hm-hm-hm! But the roasted goose will warble its death prayer when it beholds your paunch tonight!" He cupped his lips with his hands, imitating the nasal crooning of a Hebrew wake: "*Eleolam hassdoo! Eleolam hassdoo!*"

He bowed mockingly as he saw Isaac Cardoza, the usurer, the miser.

"*Chaloom alikhim!*" he chanted, "*malakhi acharit*—grant us peace, Angels of mercy! Ho! Did you ever try stripping two skins off one cow?"

And when the other stammered weak threats Levy Tordjeman shook his wooden spoon at him and cried:

"Pah! May that happen to your backside what happens to the drum on feast days!"

Laughter; jests; terse, picaresque comments; and, clear above the tumult, a voice speaking up:

"Well said, grandfather of a skillet!"

It was a guttural, metallic voice, without the whining Jewish singsong, and Levy Tordjeman, anxious to see the speaker before returning appropriate answer, leaned far out. The man he saw, flanked by another who was short and stout, was young and good-looking, evidently an Arab, as evidently a Moroccan. He had a fine, slim length of limb with shoulders that were supple and wide. His nose was audaciously beaked and contrasted strangely with his heavily fringed, black eyes that were those of a dreamer; his short beard was well curled; and beneath his burnoose of

fleecy, white wool he had a swinging gait that partook not a little of strut and swagger.

"Ah!" exclaimed Levy Tordjeman, half sarcastic, half impressed by the rare sight of a Moroccan Moslem, a gentleman, not a beggar or artisan, in the ghetto. "Behold the Shareefian Emperor who has stepped amongst the lowly!" He toned his voice to a husky whisper that dropped to the street like a flat soute. "Why this honour, Arab? Why have you come amongst the Benni Israel?"

Othman er-Riffa snapped his fingers.

"Necessity!" he replied shortly.

"Necessity?"

"Indeed. An empty belly knows no religious scruples."

"Poor?"

"Only in money."

"Come up and eat your fill!" invited the hospitable restaurant proprietor.

"Thanks. I shall presently. It is also that I need money."

"We all do. Money—ah—is like the beard of the beardless."

"Just so!" agreed Othman er-Riffa. "But I need it."

"Oh——"

"Yes. A handful of coined gold."

"Anything else?" inquired Levy Tordjeman sardonically.

"Let me see—well—yes! They speak favourably of the daughters of Israel. Thus—produce them, son of naught. Perhaps a daughter of your own or—" insolently studying the other's elderly face—"a granddaughter?"

A FLOWER OF DEBORAH'S CHOOSING 255

Levy Tordjeman creased his sagging lips into a smile. The smile broadened into gargantuan laughter. Here was a man after his own heart, a man of glib tongue and twisting metaphor.

"You talk almost like a poet," said Levy Tordjeman.

"I am a poet—charming-voiced, sweet-lilting! Amongst the blue Riffian hills I am acclaimed a Hafiz, unchallenged!" He pointed a thumb at Hajji Nejm. "Ask the mud-turtle, my cousin!"

"Conceit, eh?" countered the Jew.

"No. A sober fact. Listen to the proof."

Othman er-Riffa slid the guitar to his hand, twanged the strings, and raised his voice to the quivering falsetto of the ancient Arab love song:

*Tabat assigha ouh itah essquam
Yah sad menn saad sadoo . . .*

"The saying is true!" laughed the other.

"What saying?"

"*El Mghrabi qtaloo rassoo mah tahdar; idah khal fammu sallaq rassul*—Cut off a Moroccan's head before he talks; if he opens his mouth he has saved his neck!"

He turned as he heard the second cook ask his advice about the spicing of a sauce and stepped away from the window with a parting invitation:

"Come up, anyway, you and your cousin. Perhaps there may be a way to . . ."

A minute later as he was tasting, then spicing the sauce, he was joined by Othman er-Riffa who had come up the stairs two steps at a time, followed by Hajji Nejm. Levy Tordjeman held out the wooden mixing-spoon.

"Good, eh?"

"Exquisite!" Othman er-Riffa smacked his lips.
"And now—as to gold——"

"If a few francs will help you——?"

"I am not a beggar!" came the haughty reply.

"Tut-tut! Rather ride on a beetle than walk on carpets!"

"Too," continued the poet, "a few francs would not help me."

"Tell me your troubles," invited the Jew; and the Arab described to him his predicament.

"So I thought," he wound up, "that tonight, being a poet—a singer . . ."

"Can be done." Levy Tordjeman inclined his head. "Moïse ben Yakoob Lebhar is rich and generous and by birth a Moroccan. He may like a bard from his own land. I myself shall talk to him. And now—eat and drink! Here! A full bottle! Wet well your gullet that you may pipe the more sweetly!"

So Othman er-Riffa and Hajji Nejm ate and drank, sitting near the window, watching the festive crowds; and presently the former rose and looked out as the wedding *smala* burst into sight, with flickering torches, with men and women and children running alongside, with the very animals, rangy alley dogs and dusty, guilty-looking, ash-bin cats, taking part in the merriment with chattering, laughing, barking, meowing.

Yells and high-pitched comments drifted up:

"How find you the bride-to-be, neighbour?"

"I myself could not have chosen better—may I be father to my sons!"

"Cry yoo-yoo-yoo, O children of Israel!"

"Yoo-yoo-yoo!"

"One would believe a Queen in Spain!"

"A virgin—hm-hm-hm—lucky the husband!"

"Sugar-cane she has planted on those crimson lips of hers!"

"Yoo-yoo-yoo!"

"To speak of her makes my mouth like honey!"

"Have you seen the *tifoor*—the wedding basket?"

"All her grandmother's emeralds—and she was a Carasso from Tangier——"

"Aye! One of the rich Carassos!"

"The face of a Rachel she has—and the breasts of a Judith—and the softness of the flowers of Z'ohar!"

"Yoo-yoo-yoo!"

"Yoo-yoo-yoo!" shouted Othman er-Riffa with the best, as the little bride-to-be came into view escorted by her father, seated on a gaily-caparisoned white donkey, decked out in all the wedding finery of Tunis, from the lace shawl that covered her black curls and the immense pearl and gold filigree ear-rings hanging down to her narrow, pretty shoulders, to her loose trousers of rose-red satin and her tiny slippers embroidered with silver and black.

Her forehead was broad and snow-white. Her eyes were shining brown pools. Her small nose . . .

"Look at her nose!" exclaimed Othman er-Riffa, leaning out so far from the window that Hajji Nejm, afraid his cousin would lose his balance, held on to his burnoose for dear life. "A nose? What do I say? A dream! A thrill! A flower!"

He blew her a kiss from the tips of his fingers; and Deborah, happening to look up just at that moment, blushed an even rose while the poet broke into another quivering cry of:

"Yoo-yoo-yoo!"

Then he laughed mockingly as the bridegroom-to-be came down into view escorted by a dozen solemn-visaged rabbis and talmudists from his seminary. For Saffar Elias was not a good-looking man. Tall he was, ungainly and angular. The nose, the eyebrows, the thin, ascetic mouth, the curve of his bony hips, the knees, the clumsy, hairy hands, the very feet in their ill-fitting, patent-leather shoes—everything was at sharp angles.

"*Kelamata Engleysay*—by the word of an Englishman!" mumbled the poet. "Here is a pig that does not blush for its face! Here is a cockroach to be mated to a butterfly!"

Disgusted he turned away from the window while the wedding procession filed into the Great Zion Restaurant; and not long afterwards Levy Tordjeman came into the kitchen and called to the Moroccan.

"I have talked to Moïse ben Yakoob Lebhar," he said. "He is delighted. He wants to show his guests how they do it in his old fatherland, in Morocco. He wants you to be *haufiz wa muskhurek wa fueae-kutkhoda*—bard and jester and major-domo. And he will pay you well—three hundred francs!"

"Money and to spare to take us home!" commented Hajji Nejm.

"Money and to spare," came Othman er-Riffa's dark rejoinder, "to grease a Moslem mullah's hand!"

"But—" said Levy Tordjeman—"this is a Jewish wedding!"

"I know." Othman er-Riffa laughed loudly and snapped his fingers. His cousin, well knowing the signs, looked up while the other continued: "When will the ceremony be performed?"

"Tonight, after the feast—in the banker's house."

"Hm—and Deborah—is she happy?" asked the poet.

The restaurant proprietor winked.

"She must be happy!" he replied.

"Must?"

"Yes. Is she not going to become the wife of a learned talmudist, a man of God? Did not her father command her to be happy? Has it not been decreed as the promise of her life to find happiness in the arms of Saffar Elias?"

"*Wah—*" cried the poet. "Promise of her life, is it? And yet I have heard tell that the promise of the night is rubbed with butter—which melts with the young day's sun. Lead the way, grandfather of a skillet!"

They passed into the banquet room.

Great was the feasting there. And everybody spoke with praise of Othman er-Riffa, the bard, the jester, the major-domo, whom Moïse ben Yakoob Lebhar, unwilling to share the glory with Levy Tordjeman, introduced as an idea of his own.

"All the way to Morocco I sent for him to lend splendour to the feast. A poet of renown and distinction he is in his native Riffian hills."

"Ah—from Morocco?" breathed Deborah's grandmother's mother-in-law, a snobbish old dame. "An Arab—are you—a Moslem?"

"Yes," smiled Othman er-Riffa, "and a poet. I will sing you a stave. I will charm your ears with a dainty lilt in honour of Deborah, that exquisite flower."

He bowed low twanged his guitar, picking the two tough strings, the G and the B, into melancholy, minor cadences, looked at the blushing Deborah with melting eyes, and broke into song:

Qoolthoom sabt arraha
Behaooaqoom tab frahi
Ellilah asidi nredroo
Kissann arraha . . .

He wound up with a high, throaty cry, and the applause was deafening. They shook his hands. They pressed food and drink on him and on his cousin.

Othman er-Riffa was in his element. He was a success. Here he was and there and everywhere; slapping Saffar Elias on the back and cracking a wholly appropriate and wholly naughty joke; bending over Deborah's white, pleasurable hand and hoping in flowery phrases that she would bear a hundred and three hundred men-children and adding under his breath: "To the man you love, O heart of a thousand and seven roses!"; addressing the whole merry company with quips and jests and puns.

"A worthy gentleman!" said Deborah's grandmother's mother-in-law, raising her glass. "May you live a thousand years."

"And may you live long enough to shed tears at my funeral!" came his quick rejoinder.

Again he sang. Again he was congratulated. Again they pressed food and drink on him.

"A piece of almond cake!"

"A cup of coffee!"

"Food to my cousin—a priest in Islam—thus always hungry!" laughed the poet, pointing at Hajji Nejm who, in spite of his nervous apprehension as to what the other might or might not do, was squatting in a corner near the door on his heels, busily engaged with a heaped dish. "But to me—a flower!"

"Aye! A flower of Deborah's choosing!" chimed in Levy Tordjeman.

"A flower of Deborah's choosing!" The cry was taken up, and the young girl rose and stepped up to Othman er-Riffa.

He looked at her boldly; and then, since he dared not speak to her with his lips, he spoke to her with the flash and depth of his eyes.

"I love your hair!" said his black eyes.

Her brown eyes caught the message and sent back answer, silent, demure, yet heavy with sudden longing:

"Then why don't you kiss me?"

"I love your mouth!" said his black eyes.

"Then why don't you kiss me?" replied her brown eyes.

"I love your throat!"

"Then why don't you kiss me?"

"I shall—presently!" said his black eyes, and he bowed as, blushing, amidst the laughter and cheers of the crowd, she took a crimson rose from her wedding bouquet and gave it to him.

Once more he broke into song, improvising couplets in her honour.

Carried away by her beauty and by what he had read in her eyes, his fancy soared higher and higher. His young blood raced and throbbed. He was hardly conscious of the room, the people. He only saw her, tiny and soft and charming; he only knew that he loved her—and he told her so, with a poet's winged licence, while people applauded and laughed:

*Nehmet dagget elmezraq
Aouida chooftha thamaq . . .*

Sublimely regardless of the fact that he had never to this hour seen her, he told her—and believed what

he told—that daily his love for her echoed through the vaults of his life, that daily his love for her was born again, poignant, challenging, restless. He told her in skilled, impromptu rhymes that daily her pageant moved across the stage of his life, motley, radiant, inscrutable; that daily she came to him with flowers and songs; that daily he sought her, daily he found her; that daily the lute of his life was vibrant with the rhythm of hers.

*Achqu fazzim ennsaha
Ghiooanoo sadd djrahi . . .*

Twanging his guitar to melting, minor harmonies, he sang that daily he struggled for words to tell her he loved her; that daily he cried out baffled and balked, for the song in his heart was caught and entangled in the meshes of hers; that daily she came to him with the wayward perfume of spring.

*Hafed elmanni khoud triz enndamm
Ghenni ouh . . .*

"Bravo!" Saffar Elias, the bridegroom-to-be, splintered song and spell with vociferous applause. "Bravo!"

Othman er-Riffa dropped his guitar. A string snapped with a dry, dull click of finality. Tumbled from the pinnacle of his emotions, he looked at the other with distaste and mockery as he told himself that it was this man who tonight would take Deborah close to him.

"Bravo!" the guests echoed the shout; were silent when Moïse ben Yakoob Lebhar stretched out a hand and turned to Rabbi Ishmail Azoulay:

"Time to end the feasting?"

"Yes," replied the rabbi. "Time for the blessed

ceremony. It is nearly midnight. Let us be going."

Then, while the guests rose and while the banker stepped up to him and thanked him and paid him in crisp French banknotes, Othman er-Riffa glanced at Deborah.

"Shall I—?" the black eyes asked silent question.

"Why don't you take me—and kiss me—and hold me?" asked the brown eyes, and there was in them just a trace of tears.

"I will!" said the black eyes.

He faced the company with ringing words:

"I claim the Moroccan privilege!"

"What privilege?" demanded Saffar Elias, who was vaguely suspicious.

"The privilege of bard and jester! Let me—so that her luck may always be white—carry the bride-to-be across the threshold. Let me escort her to her father's house. Let all you people follow later. It is the ancient custom." He turned to Moïse ben Yakoob Lebhar. "I claim it."

"Justly spoken!" laughed the banker.

"Justly spoken!" agreed Deborah's grandmother's mother-in-law. "The old customs are the right customs. It was thus that I was carried from my own wedding banquet in Tangier—seventy years ago."

"Justly spoken!" Rabbi Ishmail Azoulay smiled tolerantly.

"But—" spluttered Saffar Elias.

"Justly spoken!" Levy Tordjeman's deep basso drowned the talmudist's objections.

"Good! Good!" shouted the crowd; and the poet whispered rapid words to his cousin:

"Open the door. Lead the way."

Hajji Nejm rose. He sighed. He was worried.

There was something in the other's accents and flashing eyes which he mistrusted as instinctively as a cat mistrusts water. But he obeyed, opened the door, and left the room while Othman er-Riffa bowed before Deborah.

His accents were low:

"Little, little flower of the Benni Israel!"

And amidst the applause and approval and laughter of the guests, he lifted her in his arms, raised her to his wide, supple shoulders and swaggered gaily out of the banquet hall, down the stairs, out of the house. At the outer door he stopped for the fraction of a second. Holding the girl on his shoulder with his left hand, he fumbled with his right, sought the lock, found it, turned it, clicked it shut; and he ran away into the streets that lay now lonely and deserted beneath the purple night sky. He could hear Deborah's heart beat with a strong staccato pulsing.

"I love you—love you!" he stammered, as he turned into a dark alley.

"And I love you!" her voice drifted down to him from his shoulder.

"I need you, little flower!"

"And I need you!"

"I want you, heart of my heart!"

"And I want you!"

"Good—by the Prophet!" he laughed. "So we both agree—the which augurs well——"

"For what?" demanded Hajji Nejm, who was trotting at the other's heels.

"For married happiness, mud-turtle!" replied the poet, putting Deborah on her feet.

"Whose?" asked Hajji Nejm.

"Ours!" laughed the girl before Othman er-Riffa could find words.

Hajji Nejm fingered his rosary.

"*Allah Akbar!*" he sighed. "O Lord of Justice! Protect Thou all true believers against the wiles of infidel women!"

But when a moment later, from the direction of the Great Zion Restaurant, he heard a humming and zумming of voices that steadily grew louder and nearer and more threatening, he girt up his burnoose and rushed rapidly after the other two; nor did they cease hurrying until they had safely crossed the edge of the *Mellah* and reached the Arab town where no Jewish mob would dare follow.

They stopped in front of the mosque of Al-Mustansir b'Illah that jutted out with a squat, lethargic trooping of shadows; and there Othman er-Riffa drew Deborah to him and smiled at her.

"Child," he said, "there are three ways of marriage for you and me. There is the Jewish rabbi, but—" pointing a thumb at the ghetto's flickering lights—"to ask one of the Benni Israel to tie your life to mine would be like a dry weed seeking the friendship of the fire. There is the French way—I have heard of it—with a great French pasha speaking the words. But, being French, he may ask too many questions, and their laws are mad, and you know the saying: he who makes chaff of himself, the cows eat. There is finally the way of Islam—with a Moslem mullah blessing our hands." And, very tenderly, he added: "The Moslem is the only way. Do you mind, you being of the Benni Israel?"

"*Anna buzilaq, yah Sidi*—I have alighted at your tent, my lord!" she said rather solemnly. "There is no question of the splitting of faiths between you and me, Othman er-Riffa."

"Right—by the Prophet! *Kool wahed alu din-hoo*

—everyone of his own religion. And are not your religion and mine the same, little flower? Love and desire and tenderness and friendship for each other? Right again!" Then he laughed with full-throated gaiety, "As to the Moslem priest—we have him with us." He turned to his cousin. "Yourself, mud-turtle!"

"No, no, no!" Hajji Nejm protested and argued. He had harnessed his mind in all the bombastic superfluities of a narrow, soul-crushing creed. "She is not of the Arabs! She is not of Islam!" he pleaded almost in tears.

To prove his point he quoted largely from the *Ilm al-Mikat* and the *Ilm al-Kaf*, reinforcing their wisdom by three lengthy paragraphs from the *Al-Jami al-Kabir*; and it was only when the other produced the money which Moïse ben Yakooob Lebhar had given to him and mentioned that there were other mullahs in Tunis and that it would be easy to gild their crooked fingers with crisp French money, that Hajji Nejm surrendered.

So it was in the shadow of the mosque of Al-Mustansir b'Illah, above them the stars rushing over the crest of the dying night, that Hajji Nejm made them man and wife, according to the rites of Islam, with the ancient prayer of:

"Praise be to God, the Lord of the Worlds, the King of the Day of Judgment, and All-Knowing, who has allowed marriage and has forbidden all crimes! Let all heavenly and earthly existences give praise to Mohammed, the Messenger of God, and to his pure and honourable posterity!"

Three times he bowed towards the East, towards Mecca, the others following suit, and went on:

"Is it your mutual will to marry each other?"

"Yes," said Othman er-Riffa.

"Yes," said Deborah.

"There is no God but one God, and Mohammed is the Messenger of God!" Again Hajji Nejm bowed in the direction of Mecca. "Beneath the countenance of God have I accomplished at this hour the marriage between a man and a woman, a woman and a man, according to the power given to me by their willingness!"

Thus, man and wife, hand in hand, they walked along towards Othman er-Riffa's house, while steadily the sun of young day rose, stemming the night with gossamer vapours of rose and gold, and while the voice of the world whispered to them through the easy, yellow roll of the far desert.

"Home!" said Othman er-Riffa, opening the door.

"Home, best beloved!" said Deborah ben-Riffa, a tiny catch in her throat.

"Home—pah!" Hajji Nejm grumbled. "Wait till Moïse ben Yakoob Lebhar finds you!"

But when the following morning, accompanied by Rabbi Ishmail Azoulay and three respectable Moslem burgesses, the banker entered the house, prepared to threaten the runaways with the stern arm of civil law and with the curses of mosque and synagogue, he found it hard to withstand his daughter's pleadings and kisses and her husband's insolent charm, and so he gave in, with just a parting shot of advice as Othman er-Riffa escorted him to the street:

"I have heard tales about you in the bazaars."

"What sort of tales?" demanded the Moroccan, trying to look innocent.

"Wicked tales."

"Lying tales, belike, father-in-law!"

"No. True tales, son-in-law!"

The other shrugged his shoulders.

"What will you?" he smiled. "I am a poet."

"But, in the future, a poet who will only sing on feast days——"

"And—the rest of the time——?"

"You will work!" laughed the banker.

So, too, it happened that a week later, with Hajji Nejm on his way home to the Riffian hills, when Henna el-Atteq, the Ouled Nayil, tried to enter Othman er-Riffa's house, she found her way barred by a black servant. The girl was furious. She had come ready to forget and forgive. Besides, had she not heard that Othman er-Riffa had married a wealthy banker's daughter? There was a moonstone-and-diamond bracelet she had seen in a jeweller's window of New Tunis, on the Boulevard de la République, which would look well on her rounded, golden-brown arm.

"I must see him!" she said. "It is important!"

"No!"

"Really—I must!" she implored. "Please—please——"

But the negro was adamant.

"You cannot enter," he said, "not today—nor ever!"

"Oh,—is that so? You tell your master——"

"Master's orders! He thought that you might come. Go away!"

"By Beelzebub, Father of Fleas and Lies!" she shrieked. "Tell your master that he is a dog and the son of a dog! Tell him that his ancestors have been noseless for countless generations! May pigs defile his mother's grave! May——"

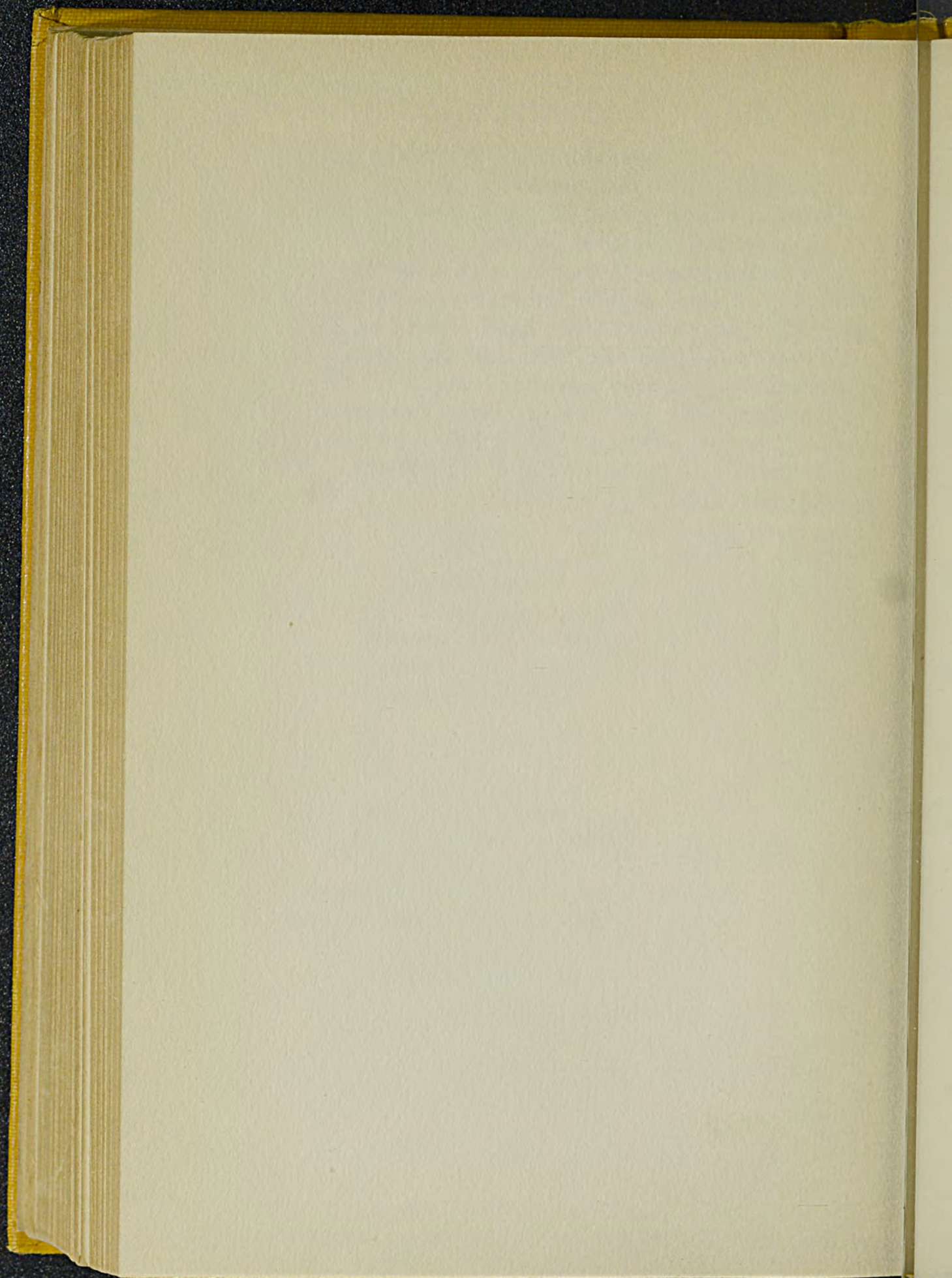
"Begone, shameless woman!" cried the servant, threatening her with his *kurbash*, his whip.

"Who was she?" asked Deborah, who had watched the scene from her latticed balcony.

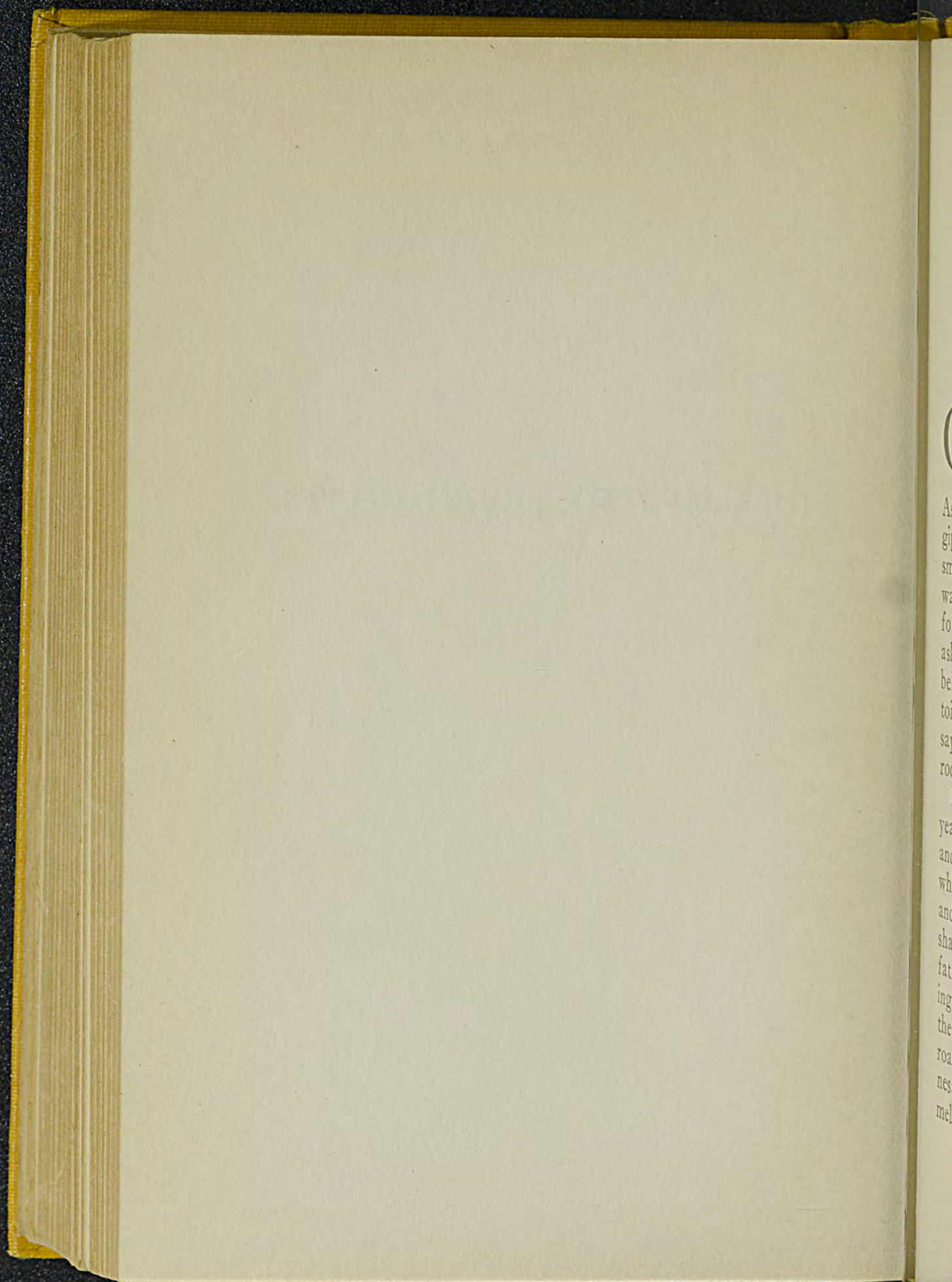
"An Ouled Nayil—a dancing girl. Ah—the world is filled with sin!" sighed Othman er-Riffa. "Don't you bother your pretty little head about her, child!"

"Yes—yes—" she said, with just the faintest tang of suspicion—"but who *was* she?"

"Oh—just one of Hajji Nejm's disreputable friends," replied Othman er-Riffa, lighting a cigarette; and tolerantly he added: "But I am not the sort to cast the first stone!"



MUSA-OF-THE-SEVEN-GOATS



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ELEVEN

MUSA-OF-THE-SEVEN-GOATS

OF all the lawless Afghan clans that had once roamed the mountainous Durrah Yousseff wilderness southwest of the Russian Central Asian border only a few were left, still roving like gipsies; preferring the deer and wolf trails to the smooth roads and the forests and moors to tight, warm, stone-built houses; plunging to the knees at icy fords below the shadow of the bridges they looked on askance as meant for women and Persians and swag-bellied bazaar traders; mocking at the proper, decent toil of the fields and cattle-pens; living—as the Afghan saying has it—on the wind and the pines and the grey rock's lichen.

Even these clans, scanty in numbers, grew smaller year after year as brazen freedom gave way to barter and the age of steel to the age of coined silver. And while their fathers had felt a fidget in their scabbards and their sword-arms, they felt a fidget in the waist-shawls where they hid their money. While their fathers had hunted men, they were satisfied with pilfering the farmers' chicken-roosts and sheep-folds. While their fathers had danced over crossed blades and roared defiant war-songs to the disgrace of his highness the Amir's very nose they crooned more sober melodies and stepped more gentle dances for the price

of clipped rupees at village fairs or of some rich peasant's marriage feast.

The freest of the remaining wandering tribes was a band of twenty men and women led by Musa Khan.

Jaunty, ragged fellows they were, lean as rakes, a bit hard in the look, a bit braggart. Tall, supple women, unveiled, loud of voice, stag-sure of step. And Musa Khan himself a grand six feet of brawn and muscle. His beard was long and curled and russet-red, sticking out like a battering-ram ahead of his thick chest or, if the wind veered, fluttering across his broad shoulder like a banner. His eyes were chilly and grey; his nose was an eagle's beak; his mouth was wide and crimson and with ever a laugh lurking at the corners; in the shadow of his huge, shaggy fur cap an old scar slashed livid through the sunburned brow; and his was a trick and twist of putting large, hairy hands upon whatever he fancied with a certain insolent possession.

Musa-of-the-Seven-Goats they called him, because—for which he had been soundly bastinadoed by an Afghan judge—he had stolen that same judge's seven goats in one memorable night's exploit. Musa-of-the-Seven-Heads had been his grandfather's proud nickname, because the latter, in one night's scarlet encounter, had sliced off the handsome, pallid heads of seven Persian gentlemen—and he alone and armed with nothing but a short dagger, and the seven Persian gentlemen with iron-bossed bucklers at their left elbows and curved Bokharan scimitars circling from their right wrists!

But while Musa Khan was more peaceful than his grandfather, he was still a man of the hidden glens

and the high, torn crags. There lay his kingdom—and his subjects the fish of the pools, the dappled deer that roamed through the laurel wold, the birds that clucked and chirped in the thickets, the brown foxes that barked in the underbrush. Winter and summer, with sky serene or dark clouds surly and threatening, with the sun's rays like molten gold or the snow thudding down in blinding, white eddies, he would lead his band through the mountains, the forests, the moors.

His work—besides stealing—since man cannot live by stealing alone?

"I have played at seventy-seven things," he would say, "and tired of them and finished nothing. And if I be tinkering above an anvil I would be dreaming of herding cattle up there in the northern steppes, and if I be driving cattle perhaps I would be dreaming of climbing a tall, tall mast on one of those ships in the South the Hindu traders speak of. *Hai! hai!* It is because I am free! As free as the storm which—so my mother told me, and she the most truthful woman in all the Afghan hills—was my father! I am a perfect master only of myself. But it's a fine, glorious thing, is myself. And you can buy me for a spice of love and friendship. Or maybe—if you be the other sort of man or woman—I would not sell myself to you for all the treasures of High Tartary!"

Still, he did work—at times. And there was none like him to mend a pot or shape a horseshoe, to sharpen a knife or weave wicker or carve wood; none like him to catch a hare with his bare hands or plunge these same hands into a pool and grip the brown, speckled trout by their gills and jerk them out on the bank; none like him, finally, to tell the many tales.

Tales—may Allah forgive him!—of his own prowess as often as not. Tales—may Allah forgive him again!—that were mostly lies.

But they were splendid lies, with a swing and a clank and a way to them; and so, when he stepped out of the wilderness, with his tail of twenty lusty followers, walking one behind another, all bearing weapons, smelling of leather and heather, taunting the echoes of the Durrah Yousseff peaks with their roaring, guttural voices, there would be a great shouting of welcome and the peasants' laughing demands:

"Sing us a stave, O Musa-of-the-Seven-Goats!"

Or:

"Tell us a tale, O son of the world!"

"Tell us how you battled with the Shirazi giant for the necklace made of phoenix eggs and dragon teeth and green diamonds from the mountains of the moon!"

"No, no, no! Tell us how you fell in love with the red-haired Badakshani woman, and she, on the wedding night, turning out to be a vampire with bird's claws for feet, and in back a little furry tail she gestured with as mere humans use their hands!"

"And a true tale it is, too—may I eat dirt if it is not!" he would begin. "True—by the honour of my beard, O Moslems!"—and already the peasants would loosen rupees from their knotted waistshawls and the women would kill and pluck a brace of fat fowls and set them to simmer in an iron pot with saffron and honey and eggplant.

Most welcome was Musa Khan at the ancient, feudal castle of the Ghilzai Tartar lords that topped the crest of the Durrah Yousseff range with an ava-

lanche of square granite blocks and bold masonry and had been built, many centuries earlier, by copper-faced Tartar freebooters out of Central Asia who had scarred and conquered the land as far as Balkh and Kandahar with torch and rope and the crackle of steel.

But Uzbek Khan Haydar, last of the line of feudal lords, was even less like his ancestors than Musa-of-the-Seven-Goats was like Musa-of-the-Seven-Heads. He had forgotten the haughty, cruel prowess of his race in the pleasures of the flesh-pots, the wine jugs, and the soft, silken divans. He was valiant with steel only where the carving of juicy mutton joints was concerned, and there was malicious gossip in the bazaars that it took seven yards of muslin for a shawl to twist about his enormous stomach.

Quick at forgiving he was, good natured, easily moved to laughter, fond of a jest and a song and a salty tale—and who was there like Musa Khan to warble and rhyme and string together a grand lilting of words?

“Who is there like him in all the world’s hills?” he said to the girl who sat curled at his feet.

Umteyra was her name, which means Born-in-the-Rain. She was his second cousin and, since her parents had died, his ward, and he loved her very dearly.

Her looks?

There we have a triple testimony.

For Uzbek Khan Haydar, who was as sentimental as he was fat, compared her to a light burning in a dark house, a jewel to be worn in the turban of his soul, a precious casket filled to overflowing with all the arts and charm and grace and coquetry.

Many other compliments—stilted, extravagant,

old-fashioned, for he was nearer fifty than thirty—he paid her; and when Habeebah, his wrinkled, berry-brown old housekeeper, overheard him, she would interrupt impatiently:

“Wah! You are a fool, O my master! A soft-hearted, pot-bellied fool! By Zulzaban, son of the Devil! What do you see in her? Why do you let her step on you with the impudent stepping of her feet? And she nothing but a wisp of a girl—nor her nose very straight—nor her ears very small!”—which, being the second, was also perhaps the more truthful testimony as to Umteyra’s looks.

There was finally Musa Khan’s judgment.

He said that her face was like a baffling, sweet melody of spring floating on the current of a far wind, that all Allah’s mountains must have stood around to shelter her birth, and that a glance of her black eyes was like the sudden unsheathing of a sword.

But this he said afterwards.

For that day, when Uzbek Khan Haydar spoke to her of Musa, the two were unknown to each other, since the girl had only arrived at the castle a week earlier—a week during which Uzbek Khan Haydar had told her of his love over and over again, to hear her smiling reply:

“I like you, cousin mine. O, so much! But—no—I do not love you. Shall I ever love you? How am I to know? Love is like the flying of the wild-goose. It is a sending of Fate—Fate which is written on the foreheads of all of us!”

“Will you be angry if I tell you again—many, many times—that I—” he slurred; stopped.

“That you love me? Why—I like to hear it!”

“Of course you do! Pah! Little Tartar cat!”

came Habeebah's screeching comment. "Young girls are like young fleas—eager for blood! And is there blood sweeter than a man's heart blood? And—" turning to Uzbek Khan Haydar—"as for you? You, Oh, by my teeth!—you are old and not lean! Only your waistshawl and the Lord Allah know how not lean you are! What do you want with love? What does a bald-headed man want with a hair comb? *Nak na kan, bali ke arman*—you are like the noseless and earless one who yet desires nose and ear-rings!"

And, squatting in a corner, she would glower and grumble and storm and pull at her water-pipe until it gurgled with splashing, sucking protest.

She did so today, with loud, contemptuous shouts of: "*Yahoo! Yahee! Y'ellah! Errahman! Irramin!*" as her master repeated:

"Who is there like Musa Khan in all the world's hills?"

"Who is this Musa?" asked Umteyra.

"He might be your twin brother," suggested Habeebah. "He is another one of Allah's useless creations. At times I wonder why Allah, being All-Wise——"

"Peace!" he commanded, and he explained to Umteyra that the other man was a man of the wilderness. "The day's work," he added, "has no great hold on his fancy."

"Nor the day's honesty!" interrupted Habeebah. "Father and mother he is of seven times seven unmentionable sins!"

"But also," smiled the Tartar, "of seven times seven glorious songs, of seven times seven spiced jests, of seven times seven splendid and incredible tales! Ah, listen!"

Suddenly he was silent. He pointed at the window as, nearer and nearer, drifted a fluting voice with the tail end of an Afghan war-song that was the rage of all the bazaars—for those were the days when the English, to the sorrow of their women and children, had invaded the hills, had been slaughtered in the hills:

*They say: Dost Mohammed makes ready for war at Kabul!
Loud is the crackle of steel in Kabul, the king's town!
Dost Mohammed is a master of the sword in battle!
He is a reckless man at sword-time!
He is a keen gambler at sword-play!
He has girt on his shining Persian weapons!
He is a killer of the English, the eaters of pig's flesh!
They say: Dost Mohammed makes ready for war at Kabul!
Hai! Loud is the crackle of steel in Kabul, the king's town!*

The song finished on a high, throaty yell.

"Ah!" sighed Uzbek Khan Haydar, "I wish I had him here with me in this castle, always, as my ancestors in the olden olden days used to hire bards and jesters!"

"Is he rich?" asked Umteyra.

"As poor as a rabbit in the bracken!"

"Then," she suggested, "ask him to live here. Pay him well. Your wealth is great."

"He is as free as a bird. He would not live in a cage."

"Even an eagle would live in a cage of gold. Ask him, cousin mine!" For she imagined that thus, by Musa's coming to live in the house, Uzbek Khan Haydar would cease a little from his love-making and give her time for her own thoughts. Not that her thoughts were much. Just a young hill-girl's thoughts: a mingling of misty desires for something

she did not know—and misty melancholy for something she did not understand.

Just then above the window-sill showed the top of Musa Khan's shaggy fur cap, and the Tartar cried: "Hey! Come up, Musa-of-the-Seven-Goats!"

A moment later the Afghan appeared on the threshold and bowed politely.

"You called, my lord?"

"I did." And Uzbek Khan Haydar told him what was on his mind. "Leave your wild tribe," he invited. "Live in my castle. You shall have whatever you wish. A silken bed to sleep in—money to spend—rich food."

"I have what I wish now!" replied the hillman. "I have the heather to sleep in during the burning of summer, and a camel's-hair cloak in the biting of hard winter. I have money enough—" he slapped his waistshawl so that the rupees—three of them—clicked and clanked. "And as for food, I have fish and game."

"Fish and game are scarce at times."

"My hands are clever. There are always the peasants' goats."

"And always," laughed the Tartar, "the punishment—the soles of your feet to be slashed to ribbons by the bastinado!"

"The soles of my feet heal again. I know a salve of wild herbs that is cunning and soothing."

"Stealing is a bad deed."

"What of it? If other folks could get as sound contentment out of their good deeds as I out of my bad deeds, it would be the happy, happy world to live in a while. I shall sing for you any time, my lord. I shall tell you all the tales you desire. But live here

—between these cramping, stifling walls. No, no! It would kill me!”

He was on the point of leaving when Umteyra moved a little from the shadowy place where she was curled at her cousin's feet. A ray of sunlight danced in. It cut across her small face.

Musa Khan looked at her. Their eyes met; and quickly he turned back and spoke once more to the Tartar.

“And yet—” he said, and sighed, and was silent, and bowed his head as though ashamed.

“And yet—what?” demanded the other, who had not seen the byplay.

“And yet,” continued the Afghan, “perhaps you are right after all. Stealing—may Allah forgive me!—is wicked indeed. There may be soft, golden truth in the soft, golden summer days. But there is also the bleak, bitter truth in the bleak, bitter winter days! Homelessness and cold—and the foe of hunger on the heels of me! And here—in this place—food and warmth and——”

“Then why hesitate?” exclaimed Uzbek Khan Haydar. “Live with me, O son of the world!”

“I shall! Allah—but this will be the grand, grand palace for my father's only son!”

“And the sorry, sorry day for the palace itself and its master!” grumbled Habeebah.

“Bite off your tongue, thus giving to your pinched belly a square meal, O misbegotten daughter of a drunkard and a spotted, odorous she-hyena!” laughed the Afghan. “Be quiet, O, mother of no children at all!”

He walked over to the window. Outside, his ragged followers were waiting and clamouring.

"The day is open and wide and far!" they shouted. "Come with us, Musa-of-the-Seven-Goats! The wilderness is lonely for the treading of your feet!"

"Hereafter," he replied magnificently, "the wilderness shall know me no more. Hereafter my feet shall tread on silk and velvet. Begone, children of polecats!"

He closed the window with a bang, and turned to his host.

"And now, to seal the bargain," he announced, "I shall sing you a song the like of which has not been heard in these hills since the red Tartar gaint ate the bull elephant and choked to death on swallowing the trunk!"

"Good—by my beard!" Uzbek Khan Haydar was delighted. "Let me hear the war-song—how Dost Mohammed defeated the English."

"Pah! A silly bazaar ditty! I shall give you a song of my own—a song of love! Wait, my lord, until I find the proper rhythm and rhymes!"

Again his eyes met Umteyra's, and a few minutes later he lifted his voice in sweet melody:

*Since my sight fell on those dark eyes of thine,
Never can I forget those lovely eyes of thine.
Of the hawk's are they? The peacock's or the falcon's?
Or of the soft-eyed antelope's? The glances of thine eyes?
As the lambs crouch hidden in the pasture,
From the shade of thy tresses look those gentle eyes of thine.
As the armed trooper stands, his lance in arm beside him,
Thus stand the long lashes round those warring eyes of thine,
Ah! on each one's heart they feed, those cruel eyes of thine!
Yet whatever thou wouldst gaze on, look well upon me,
O child! while there is power of seeing in thine eyes. . . .*

The song finished suddenly, on a high, quavery note. The Tartar applauded violently until his im-

mense stomach shook like jelly. Umteyra was strangely silent, and Habeebah broke into cackling laughter—laughter repeated, reverberating, bloating grotesquely, as Uzbek Khan Haydar turned to Musa with a question:

“A song to a girl you love?”

“No, my lord. A song to a girl whom I shall love—presently!”

So the hillman came to live in the proud castle, and he used to walk about the splendid rooms with an air and a swagger and say to himself: “Allah! Am I not the sturdy fellow come into his own?”

And at night, when his clansmen would stop before the room where he slept and call to him from the dark with the crane’s call and the eagle’s, and some of the younger lads would scurry up the outer wall like weasels and stick their tousled heads above the sill, he would mock them and say: “Go away, O creatures! You reek of wood fire and gutted fish!”

“Come back to us!” they pleaded. “Few are our tales and meagre our songs since you took to living in a great stone house.”

“No, no. Leave me in peace!”

“Come with us to the peaks, the cleft and tarn! Last night we heard a stag there roaring to his queen.”

“Let him roar! What have I to do with brown, antlered stags and such savageries? Am I not the fine gentleman who sleeps on silk—and silk beneath and—*hayah!*—above him?”

“Come back to us, O our hero! Think of the brooks mumbling and the purple deeps of the woods! Think of the scent of the moist, gusty forest nights!

Think of the horned, far moon sitting in the skies and the wonderful, ancient wilderness!"

"*Hai!*" he laughed. "There is a wonderful new wilderness within these walls—where wonderful new things happen! You cannot tempt me! Begone! Go you to your jaunting and scraping and scrambling!"

They left. They mourned him as one dead, and they wondered what heathen spell had bewitched him until one day—a day of late autumn, with winter already in the air and a wind out of Siberia booming down and sweeping the North of all its chill and piling it, drift-white, drift-wide, in the jagged higher crags—an old woman of the tribe returned from her berry-gathering and stepped up to the ruddy camp fire with excited words: "I have seen our Musa."

"Where?"

"Far off in the Valley of Seven Spears. A woman was in his arms."

"Who?"

"Umteyra, the Tartar's ward."

A young girl looked up.

"He is lost to us for good," she sighed. "He has taken the soft, warm, silken road."

"A good road for winter," laughed the old woman. "But winter will end. Spring will come back—and spring always brings the riddle of new lips to kiss."

So for many months the clansmen were seen no longer about the castle, and Musa Khan had almost forgotten them, had almost forgotten the wilderness. For there were so many tales to tell and songs to sing—to the Tartar, who would laugh and clap his hands and toss him purses filled with clanking silver rupees; and other tales to tell and other songs to sing—

to Umteyra, who would look at him starry-eyed.

"You love me, Musa? Really—really?"

"Do not my lips say so?"

"But your heart? How can I read its secret?"

"You can read it wherever you go! You can read its secret in the nightingale's cry, in the blowing of the south wind, and in the throbbing, winglike call of all the unborn children of the world."

"And still I do not know if you really love me."

"Why not?"

"Maybe because my own love is too clamorous—because it deafens the song of yours. Ah"—she whispered—"there was never greater love than mine. And I am ashamed that I must say it to you with words."

"Ashamed? Allah! Is the queen bee ashamed of her honey—the jasmine of its scent?"

"You have loved before, Musa?"

"Let me tell you how it is with me." He smiled. "In the past it was always the way my fancy went—went the one way or the other. And at times my fancy wandered alone; and at times it sought a fine marching company with men of hard daring; and at times it danced down the road, with a woman's subtle feet echoing alongside. But"—he lowered his voice, took her hands in his—"it is now the final way my fancy has gone—straight to your soul, child—to the fresh, sweet wilderness there—and the birds in it chiming and warbling—and the sun above it shining polished and hearty!"

So they kissed.

So it was day after day.

Habeebah knew. But she never spoke of it to her master. Perhaps she did not want to make him un-

happy. Perhaps she imagined that thus, because of her love for Musa, Umteyra would step out of Uzbek Khan Haydar's life. Perhaps her gnarled, tough old heart softened at the sight of the lovers' happiness. Not that she ceased from her grumbling and storming.

Often and vociferously she berated the Afghan as a vagabond, a tramp, a ne'er-do-well, and the father of seventeen pigs; and one day, seeing Umteyra come from Musa's presence with shining eyes and heightened colour, she said to her: "*Wah!* The dinner over, and an ungrateful dog values not the spoon! Have you already forgotten how my master picked you, a scrawny and most disgusting child, from the gutters of nowhere"—a slight exaggeration, since Umteyra's parents had been rich and noble Tartars—"and raised you to a high seat of dignity in his own castle? And here—like a shameless Persian bazaar goat—you come from your lover and . . ."

"No, no, no!" exclaimed the girl, blushing a deep, even rose. "I did not."

"You did! The tale of it is in your eyes! Do not lie to me!" And, with a sudden change of manner and accent: "Child! A drop of peach perfume on the back of your hand—behind your ear! It is that a lover likes. I know. I, too, was once desired in the hills and the fine houses."

But never a word did she say to Uzbek Khan Haydar, and it is a debatable point whether, at least at first, he knew what was going on. If he did, he was wilfully blind—because, in the great, simple, ludicrous gentleness of his soul, he did not want Umteyra to know that he knew, for fear of hurting her fluttering young heart.

There was, of course, gliding, malicious gossip in the village below the castle.

But there was also his own ancient, racial pride; and one day, when a peasant made a slurring, malicious allusion, he replied: "I am of the Ghilzai Tartar lords. We are the sons of kings. The tree is not more old than we, nor yet the mountain, nor yet the sky. I am fat—yes—and I am old. But I am still and always of the Ghilzai lords. If sorrow must happen to me, let it happen with banners and steel and the roll of drums—not with the twisting of unclean, whispered words!"

And he smote the peasant heavily across the face, and hereafter there was little gossiping in the village.

So the long winter months passed, and spring came—suddenly, almost overnight, as it does in this northern land.

"And what sort of a heart is it," said Musa to himself, looking one night from the window, "that would not lift and soar to see the fresh, moist green blown upon the grey oaks—to see the hedges burst white and pink—to see the young firs prick up proudly and insolently among the slower, elder pines?"

And, the next morning, to Umteyra, who vaguely understood, vaguely feared: "There are places in the high hills where the most startling and varied things are ever happening. Once I saw a white hare up there play hide-and-seek with a white fox—and once I saw a heron's nest, with seven eggs, blue-green like Persian jewels of great worth, and I saw the eggs burst and seven quaint, grey birds come out—and each with a fluffy little tuft on its head. And I know a pool up there that is like a piece of the sky tumbled among the grasses—and to fall into it, on a night, would be

to get all tangled up with the moon and the stars."

"Take me there, Musa."

"No, no!"

"Why not?"

"I cannot!" And when she insisted he repeated a little impatiently: "I cannot! It is not for you—this far, wild place. It is only for"—he said it thoughtlessly—"my own people."

"Oh——" She was hurt. "Your own people? And am I not?"

"Of course, you are! Please—child—forgive me!"

"You do not love me!"

"I do!"

"You do not!"

"I do!"

"Then take me with you! Up to the pool that is like a piece of sky!"

He shook his head.

"No, heart of my heart," he replied. "Your feet are too small and tender and white. They cannot step the wilderness road."

At last they made up. They kissed.

But fear grew in Umteyra's heart, and in Musa's a deep, welling restlessness, and that night when he was alone in his room and stared from the window towards the purple silhouette of the hills and the forests, he sighed.

"O my grief!" he whispered. "Am I not the poor, caged one that I must live in this grand stone palace—and me choking for want of air? That I must sleep in a silken bed—and me aching for a couch of spruce bough?"

He leaned a little from the window to drink in the fresh air; and suddenly he heard a faint throaty laughter out there in the dark and the sound of bare feet running away—turned as something, thrown from the outside, missed his head by a hair's breadth and dropped on the floor behind him.

He bent. He looked.

It was a young eagle his tribesmen had caught. They had tied its wings and claws and beak, and had tossed it into the room.

He laughed as he read the silent message.

He picked up the bird, put it on the window-sill, and cut its bonds. He watched it try its wings, then suddenly whirl away into the night.

"It is thus my way lies," he said. "Let the eagle show it to me!"

And he swung himself from the window and went out into the woods to look for his own people.

Half an hour later he found them.

The men were there, jaunty, ragged, lean as rakes, a bit hard in the look, a bit braggart; and the tall, supple women, loud of voice, stag-sure of step.

They hardly looked up when Musa Khan loomed into the ruddy light of the camp fire.

Only one young girl spoke.

"So you have come back to us, Musa-of-the-Seven-Goats?" she asked.

"I have never been farther than the width of a passing thought, O child of the moon!" he replied; and he lay down on the ground with his tousled head in her lap.

Neither the next day, nor ever again, was there heard the sound of his voice echoing through the Tartar castle, except far, far off drifting from the hillside

with the tail end of a riotous, carefree song; and as the weeks passed, and never a sign of him, fear and anguish grew in Umteyra's soul until there came a night when she sobbed out loud in an agony of despair that shook her from head to foot.

It was at supper time. She was sitting across from her cousin, while Habeebah was bustling about with steaming platters of rice and curried mutton.

Uzbek Khan Haydar rose. He walked around the table. He put his fat, clumsy, gentle hand upon Umteyra's shoulder. His heart was filled with love and pity. But he could not think of anything to say. He might have said a dozen things to her—stilted, extravagant, old-fashioned—in an hour of gladness. But not in an hour of sorrow.

He turned when he heard Habeebah's gruff voice:

"Be pleased to go away, O my master! What good are men in time of trouble?"

She took the weeping girl to her room.

She went on in the same gruff voice: "Be quiet, little Tartar cat! Hey! What is the matter, O Quite Useless? Are you crying because of that tramp—that vagabond—that hound of the wilderness? Allah! A fine thing it is to redden your nose—nor such a small nose—and your eyes—nor such large eyes—for his sake! *Wah!* There are other stout lads—and no lack of them—to be picked up hereabouts by a shrug and a glance. Come—tell me—what is the matter?"

"I cannot tell you," stammered the girl.

"You must. Am I not your friend? Has not my old heart—and Allah alone knows why, O Less than

Nothing!—gone out to your young heart? Come—tell me—tell me.”

She folded the girl to her lean old breast. She paled when Umteyra sobbed out the full tale of her shame and despair.

But she spoke with the same sort of negligent, passionless ferocity: “And what of that? Why are you ashamed, small fool? It is the way of God—the way of nature—the way of fate. A life must aye bring forth a life—it is so written!”

And she sank on her knees by the side of the weeping girl and prayed to the Lord God: “By the night when she spreadeth her veil—by the day when it is manifested—by what made the male and the female—I beseech Thee, O Allah, protect Thou this girl! Praise be to Thee, the Lord of the Seven Worlds, the Compassionate, the Merciful! Thee I worship, and Thee I ask for help! Thou art God the Eternal! I beseech Thee—protect Thou this girl, the apple of my eye!”

She rose. She returned to her master.

“Tomorrow,” she said, “I shall go to the village. I shall bring back Mustaffa Aziz, the man of the faith.”

“The priest?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“To make you and Umteyra man and wife—according to the teachings of the blessed Koran.”

He shook his head.

“No,” he replied. “She does not love me. You saw, old woman, how she grieves for Musa-of-the-Seven-Goats?”

“She will grieve for him in vain. The snake back to the cactus hedge—the dog back to the dung-heap

—the vagabond back to the wilderness! But"—and in these words, calm, slightly dragooning, she said it—"it is not proper that a woman of your flesh and bone, cousin to you, a Tartar of the blood, should become a mother—and no father to give to the child name and inheritance!"

He looked up. His face was like a carved ivory mask.

"It is not proper indeed!" he said; and, haughtily: "It is the pride of me which stiffens me from heel to hip! I am of the Ghilzai Tartar lords. We are the sons of kings. The tree is not more old than we, nor yet the mountain, nor yet the sky!"

And the end of the tale?

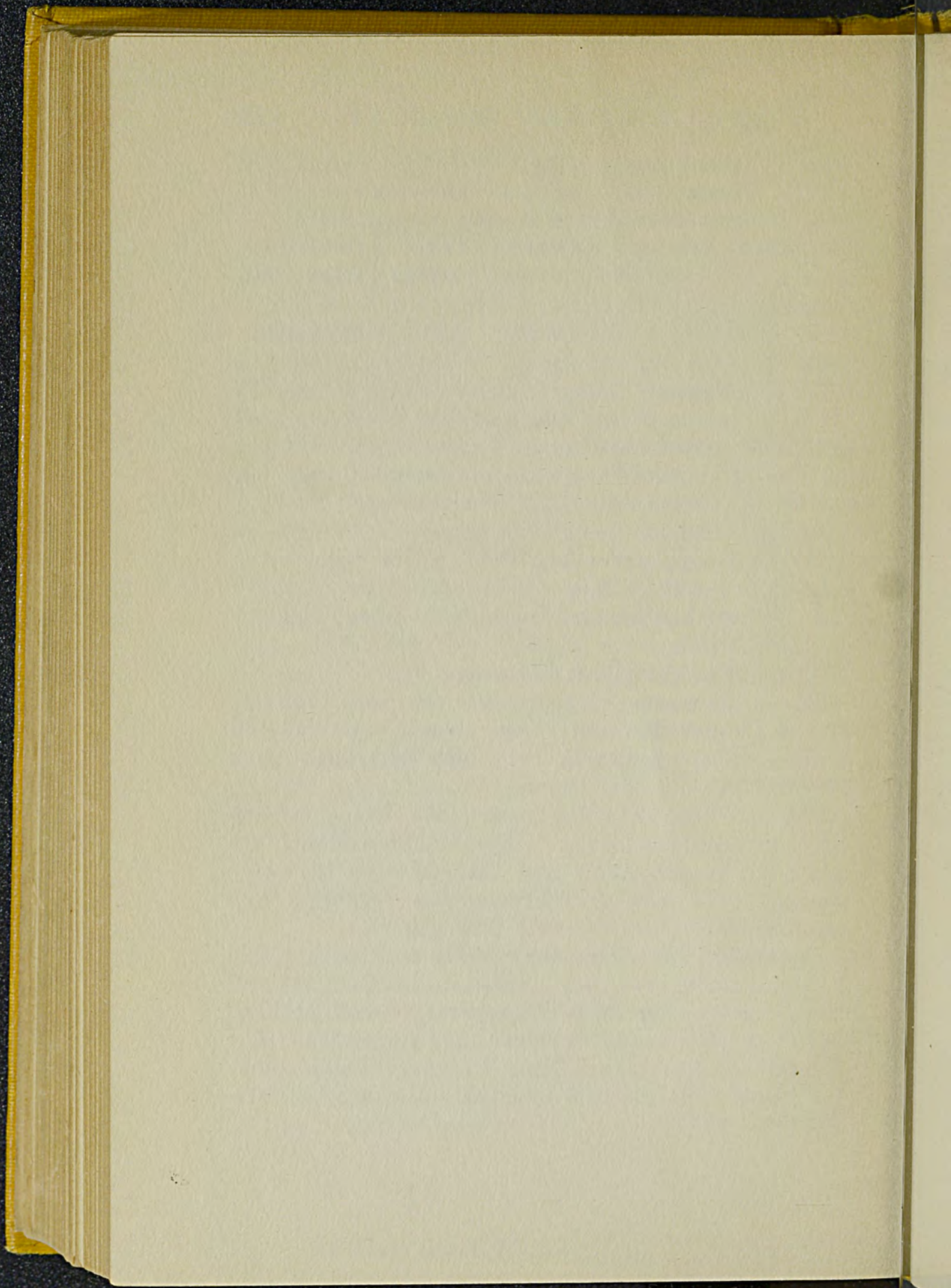
For this happened many, many years ago, at the time when the English, to the sorrow of their women and children, had invaded the hills, had been slaughtered in the hills.

The end of the tale is not yet.

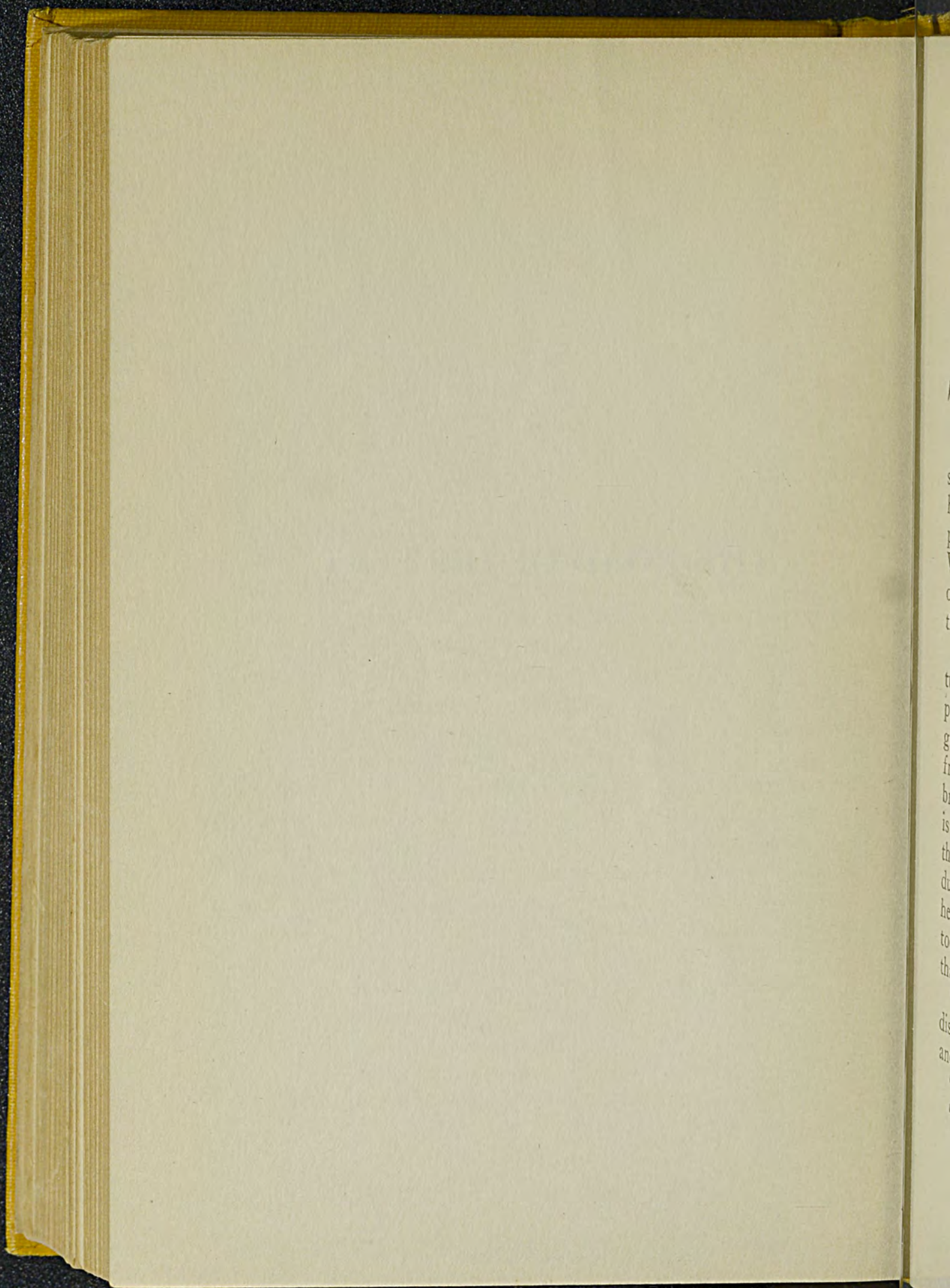
But in the ancient, feudal castle that tops the crest of the Durrah Yousseff range, lives a wrinkled old woman. She is Umteyra, the widow of Uzbek Khan Haydar.

She has forgotten the past. She has forgotten Musa-of-the-Seven-Goats. She—and this is a truth which all women know and the few men to whom women speak with free hearts—has forgotten him completely.

And when her only son, a burly man with ruddy hair and chilly, grey eyes, comes into her presence and bows courteously, she will exclaim: "Look at him! Is he not a Tartar of Tartars? Is he not exactly like his father—like Uzbek Khan Haydar? *Hai!*—may my lord's departed soul have its full share of Paradise!"



THE ROAD OF HIS FEET



TWELVE

THE ROAD OF HIS FEET

THERE were still here faint memories of the scarred, bitter years before the Tsar's Cossacks conquered and pacified the Central Asian steppes, when the northern Afghan villages, that huddled their houses and barns, their fields and cattle-pens and sheep-folds in the Valley of the Wealth of Waters, were ever watching and listening, at dawn or nightfall, for the threat of glittering scabbards and the grim, nasal beat of Tartar war drums.

But those days had passed—"May they never return!" prayed the grey-beards—and today there was peace and a pleasant rumour of spring; with sappy, green shoots thrusting through the dry bushes that fringed the slopes, and the water sobbing in the brooks with the lilt it has in a man's dreams when he is far from home, and the rich, moist smell where the wooden plough cut and turned the clods, and gold dusting the willows—and peace and spring, too, in the heart of Dost Murad as he walked by Turkan Katoom's side and told her in his earthy Afghan speech that he loved her.

"Your mother—may she have her share of Paradise!—must have been the pretty woman of the hills and the plains."

"How do you know?" she smiled.

"Because the saying goes that she resembled you as

one barley grain resembles another, O treasure of all the women in the world!"

She stopped. She looked up at him.

"And what then?" she demanded; and, when he did not reply, only blushed a little: "Ah—the shame of me!—that I must offer you my lips!"

So she kissed him.

She was neither white nor rosy nor brown, but a clear, even gold the strong mountain sun and wind had dyed her, and her hair the fox-red of autumn leaves and her eyes the silvered grey of a well-tempered blade. In peasant's stout duffel and peasant's gay, fluttering holiday ribbons, staunch of body and with the promise, some day, of hale motherhood . . . not bad-looking, you would have said, and passed on, nor turned for a second glimpse.

But Dost Murad saw more in her than the bare telling of the words. And she saw more in him than what he was: a tall, broad-shouldered, ruddy-skinned Afghan lad; handsome enough to go on with, as his mother said of him; with a wide, generous mouth more ready to spread than to tighten and, above the chasm of deep, brown eyes, like an unbroken ebony line where the brows joined as is the way with those of a headlong, stubborn tendency to leap the fences of their own careless building.

"Allah!" he whispered. "If we could always be young—and shun the world—and be as we are today—unchanging like the rocks . . ."

"*Hai!*" she exclaimed. "But I want to change, O my hero!"

"Oh . . . ?"

"Shall I not be the mother of your sons—some day?"

"Soon?"

"Soon!"

Their eyes met; held each other.

"I have the marriage portion nearly saved," he said after a while. "If my crops are good—and if the red cow has a calf . . ."

"The price for my heart and hand?" she laughed.

"More than that!" He joined in her laughter.

"There are also the fifty rupees my mother promised me, and three goats, and a string of Persian gold coins. Your father is the greedy man . . . ho! Not greedy enough—for you, with the shining of your eyes like the hiving of far stars!" He grew serious. "My mother talked to your father . . ."

"Last night. I listened at the curtain. Father is willing."

"There will be soon—may Allah grant it—the *ta-zallit n-tslitt*, the Prayer of the Bride!"

"Prayer for you, Dost Murad!"

"For both of us, beloved!"

Again she kissed him. He buried his face in the curling hair about her neck.

Thoughts fell away from them. They stood still—so still that a thrush dropped from a branch, hopped nearer, and shrilled a thin, piping tune.

He heard it; turned; smiled.

"Be off!" he said to the bird. "Do you not see that you are interrupting two lovers? And you nothing but a wee beast—of no importance at all!"

The thrush flew away; and they went into the dip of the Valley of the Wealth of Waters.

The afternoon was sinking into the calm it ever has in these hills, drowsing, mellowing. Already the shy, dappled deer were nosing through the birch clear-

ings. Already a timber-wolf loped out greyly for his evening kill. Already the blue-winged mountain wrens—the messengers of night—were beginning to lace the bushes with a filigree of reedy sound. And so—with day's work done, the seeding well strewn, the long-horned, shaggy cattle lowing in the pens, the full-uddered goats leaping home from the upper pastures—there was music and rejoicing and laughter in the *hujra*, the communal hall of the tribe that faced the simple village mosque with the pride of stout walls and a great, thatched roof.

It was an old Afghan peasant custom, this meeting, on a spring evening, in the *hujra*. They would gather here, men and women—women of the North, free, unveiled, high-coloured, strong-bosomed—and smoke and drink tea and munch dried sunflower seeds and swap the news of the day.

Local gossip.

A goat had gone astray . . . “or perhaps stolen? Who can tell, neighbour? Our young men—*Ullah karim!*—are getting lawless. It is not as it was in the good old days!”

Musa Khan's grandmother—“*hai! hai! hai!*” peaked guttural laughter—had chased her lusty, six-foot grandson all the way up to the Rock of the Tooth of Time, brandishing a thorn stick, because she had caught him smoking her pipe.

Hunji, the unclean Hindu gipsy—“May Allah send an earthquake to destroy all gipsies! Pah! Eaters of offal! Abusers of the salt!”—had snared and killed the chief's pet hunting-falcon and stewed it in a pot with a handful of wild garlic and devoured the unsavoury mess.

Or belike:

"Have you heard, Shikandar Khan?"

"What?"

"This morning Siberian geese flew over the Tukrum hills. The weary creatures—so far from home . . ."

"A bad, bad omen!"

"Aye! Perhaps there will be again the beating of Tartar war drums and the swish of the red sword!"

"No, no! A good omen!"

"Let us ask the priest!"

Then that white-bearded, green-turbaned worthy's devout if meaningless explanation:

"There is no refuge nor strength save in Allah, the Lord of Daybreak!"

There would be, too, chiefly if a stranger, travelling Bokharan trader or Persian caravanman, had passed through the valley, rumours of the far places: of tribal feud on the turbulent frontier; of a salty scandal amongst the Amir's grandees at the court of Kabul; of political intrigues in Moscow and Peking and Calcutta; of a British army column wiped out by the savage Waziris of the Indian border, and envious comment: "*hayah!* the grand, brave looting! And all to gorge the gullets of these lousy southerners!"—until finally, when the news had been told and re-told and spiced with the good-natured, coarse jesting of the hills, some old man would clap his hands to enjoin silence.

"Music!" he would demand.

"And then a great roaring of ancient ballads and a trilling of *misras*, songs improvised on the spur of the moment in which the singer glorifies his own or his tribe's prowess, or croons a melody of love.

Thus the *hujra*, tonight as always; and Dost Murad and Turkan Katoom entered hand in hand, and exchanged greetings with their friends who had gathered there.

Men and women. Old and young. Some squatted on their heels, pulling noisily at the jade or amber stems of gurgling water-pipes. Others were stretched out on camel's-hair rugs or on soft beds of springy, scented spruce boughs, their back to the huge fir logs that crackled in the fireplace since here, in the North, even May has a touch of frost.

At the far end of the room, facing them as an actor faces an audience, stood a man, six and a half foot of brawn and muscle and bone from his head to his ankles; seeming all the taller for an owl's grey wing that jutted at a slant above his immense, shaggy fur cap, almost scraping the rafters; seeming all the broader for a snow-leopard's pelt rolled around his thick chest.

There was about him little of the earth-bound peasant. Straight was his back; not crooked with the pull of the plough and the pain of the long, clogged furrows. High in the instep were his feet, bounding and stag-sure; not flat and slouching with the dragging through the sticky, sodden soil.

His face was raised at a keen angle on the square, flagging chin; and above it the beaked nose with the flaring, nervous nostrils, throwing a purple shadow across the high cheek-bones; the moustache brushed up aggressively until its points threatened the black, opaque, almond-shaped eyes—a Mongol's eyes, not an Afghan's—and a flash of even, white teeth as, with pursed lips and the sweetest voice in all the world's hills, he sang an old Afghan ballad:

*Last night I went for a stroll
In the bazaar of black locks;
Like a bee I sipped honey
In the jungle of black locks.*

*Last night I strolled leisurely
Through the garden of black locks;
Like a bee I tasted the sugar
On my love's pomegranate lips.
I inhaled the scent of the garland
About my little queen's neck—
The garland of black locks. . . .*

His voice rose triumphantly. His great hands beat staccato time:

*Last night I went for a stroll
In the bazaar of black locks;
Like a bee I sipped honey
In the jungle of black locks. . . .*

He finished his song. There was deafening applause. Demands for more—"More, more, O son of the world!" And again and again he stood upon his feet, singing ballad and *misra*, until his voice echoed far out into the valley and the hills, stilling the murmuring of the wood-doves, causing the dappled deer to look up from their nibbling, awakening the willows that dreamed of summer as they swayed in the lullaby wind of night.

Yet—and here was this man's tragedy—you would hear in the applause only the men's rough, deep shouts and never a woman clapping her hands or stamping her feet or crying a high-pitched:

"Well done, O Yar Khan!"
since, of all the young men in these villages, there was only Yar Khan upon whom sloe-black eye did not look with hope, nor steel-grey eye with flame of desire.

"A dog aye back to the dung-heap!" said the women. "A Tartar aye back to the wild road!"

For Yar Khan's father had been a Tartar raider who had flashed through the Valley of the Wealth of Waters with a tail of thirty men—and, by the same token, of thirty crooked swords—demanding, and obtaining, tribute.

"Give me a halter, and I'll soon pick up camel or horse to fit it!" had been his lawless boast.

At the time there had been gossip that Yar Khan's father had been no ordinary freebooter, but had once been a prince—with peacock feather and yellow, dragon-embroidered jacket—in far Peking at the court of the Old Buddha, the Dowager Empress. Indeed, even in robbing the peasants, he had still been the finely-spoken and mannered gentleman and, while his followers had guarded the door with naked steel, had often shown a handsome leg in stepping the measure of a hill dance or rolled out bits of classic Persian quotations—with not too much of a singsong Mongol accent—that had even impressed the priest.

Then, one day, he had carried off the daughter of a petty village chief. Two years later she had returned, barefooted, in rags, broken in spirit and body, a tiny boy riding astride her hips.

The child's father?

Killed by Kirgiz shepherds, far on the brittle steppes of Outer Mongolia, during a raid on their flocks—and his head spiked on a tall, black lance, twisted in the obscene grimace of death, its long, green jade ear-rings ludicrously jerking and tinkling in the cold wind of the plains!

Thus her home-coming; she had not survived it by more than a week; and it was Yar Khan's grand-

father who had brought him up—as an Afghan, not as a Tartar.

But his father's blood screamed in his veins, and he was never the lad to till the ground nor herd the goats, but a wild, free creature of the woods and the hills. It was ever for him his horse and his shaggy hound, and a snatched meal, and off and out of the Valley of the Wealth of Waters to see what lay beyond the ridges—to watch the badger-folk burrowing into their hamlets—to give close ear to the wild-goose crying—to thrill and laugh at the brook trout jumping madly for the fly—to climb the high peaks and listen to the brown eagles barking at the evening mists—to fill his nostrils with the acrid scent of wood smoke at twilight and the sweet scent of coarse, tufted grass moist with morning dew. And it was said of him that at a whistle he could coax flopping birds to drop to his shoulder, and at a whinny shy deer to come to his heel and nuzzle his hand.

"Allah!" he replied one day to his grandfather's mild reproaches. "My father was a Tartar. Tell me—was ever lamb born in the grey wolf's litter?"

"May the Lord not let you see the evil! You—oh—you think of raiding, of the nomads' speary war-ring?"

"No. I am not eager for the clash of weapons. But the hunting-winds are loose—and there's a grand, jaunty tune in the scratching of claws in the deep forest and the swaying of the trees in the higher hills my ears want to listen to!"

The older man had sighed; then smiled. He liked Yar Khan. So did the other tribesmen.

There was nobody like him to stalk or fish or trap; nobody like him to chant an ancient ballad. And so,

as he wandered through the villages, it was always the hearty handshake, the offer of a glass of tea or a water-pipe filled with finely-shredded Persian tobacco, and:

"Sing us a stave, O son of the World!"

Perhaps, in their inmost souls, they envied Yar Khan a little, and felt like putting by their ploughs and letting their herds shift for themselves and following him to the hills and woods. For, many centuries earlier, their ancestors had been men on horseback who had come to this land as conquerors. They were now no longer warriors; were peaceful husbandmen. But, deep in their racial consciousness, there was still the lure of the old days, the calling back to the free days; and when occasionally—he did it but seldom—Yar Khan asked one of them to join him during the pause of time before morning, when night and day came to grips and the great stags bayed in the laurel wold, the other would be flattered and glad to go.

It was different with the women.

They, too, had vague racial memories. Memories of centuries ago. Memories of their men riding with jingling steel and throaty, savage war-cries behind a chief astride a stallion whose mane was dyed scarlet in sign of strife. Memories of how the men had come back; many wounded, maimed, broken—and some who had never come back except stretched stark on their buffalo-hide shields, their eyes glazed, their breath stilled. Memories of grey grief and red death.

There had been fighting a-plenty—to the older women's remembrance—the last time the freebooting Tartars had ridden over the land. They saw no romance in death, however glorious. Death was death.

It was the end—but for the tears and the sorrowing.

Not that their life was easy. Lean comforts here, in this chilly, northern valley. But comforts enough to their tight imagining. Better the scant present than the bloody past.

They did not care to rise above the tough facts of the soil. Peasant women of meagre living and prosy soul, their eyes were always fixed upon the cold, sane congruities of the earth. They did not want their fathers and husbands and sons to stray, not even in their thoughts; did not like this Yar Khan, who harked back to the free life, the wild, lawless life.

Only a few days earlier Turkan Katoom had met him on the road to the White Village. She had not read the light of tenderness and desire eddying up in his almond-shaped eyes; had stared at him with stony contempt when—he did not know why—he had told her his creed:

“Why do I not stay in the valley and till and herd? *Hayah!* If man says to himself: ‘This is a good place! Here shall I bide!’ it is the end of his life, the end of his road. But the road which I take leads beyond all roads, beyond the last of all God’s days!” And, when she had not replied: “Don’t you understand? Tell me—have you ever heard the song of the wilderness—the little merry song of the hidden world that thrives in the trees’ green shade and roams at night in the star-shine?”

“There is also the song of the plough! The song of the harrow! The song of the lowing cattle!”

“Cattle are bred to the yoke! And the plough squeaks! And the harrow grates on my ear!”

She had looked at him with a sudden, queer swelling of hate; had exclaimed:

"Tartar! Tartar!"

And tonight, when Yar Khan had finished his singing and when she heard Dost Murad's applause peaking clear and high above that of the other men, she spoke to him in a whisper, repeating the mumble of the women:

"A dog aye back to the dung-heap! A Tartar aye back to the wild road!"

Dost Murad laughed.

"There are moments," he said, "when I envy him the stepping of this way! Allah! Allah! But I warrant it is a careless, gay way!"

It was then that fear came to the heart of Turkan Katoom; yet greater fear when Yar Khan stepped up to Dost Murad and slapped his shoulders and said:

"Yours is a voice as smooth as honey. Yesterday I heard you in the pastures, warbling to the goats. Stupid beasts—goats! They know nothing of music." He swept a hand about the *hujra*. "We here are better judges. Come! Sing us a *misra*—a *misra* of love—a *misra* to fox-red hair and silver-grey eyes. For—" he bowed to Turkan Katoom—"if the gossip be true . . ."

"I don't know how to rhyme—nor how to swell and trill the sounds."

"It is easily learned. Shall I teach you—some day?" asked Yar Khan.

"Yes!" eagerly. "When will you?"

"Tomorrow at sunrise. Meet me in the Tukkrum hills, beside the gnarled beach, west of the little brook. And the songs I cannot teach you, the eagles will—and the tiny, grey foxes."

He walked away; and Turkan Katoom turned to Dost Murad.

"Do not go with him!" she begged.

"Why not, heart of my heart?"

"His path leads away from the day's proper work."

"There may be laughter in his path."

"And there may be tears."

"Laughter is rich."

"Plain contentment is richer. Please—" she pleaded—"do not go with him. There is the sowing to be done . . ."

"I have finished my sowing."

"The garden to be weeded," she continued feverishly, "and the cattle to . . ."

"Pah! Am I forever slave to nine long-horns? Let them graze by themselves for the span of a morning!"

"But," she whispered in a bleak agony of foreboding, "you must save—for our wedding—the marriage portion . . ."

"I shall show you a quick way to earn it," interrupted a deep voice, as Yar Khan's shadow fell between them as with the cutting of a sword. "Seven weeks from today, on the first Friday of the month of Hassan-Hussain, will be a great gathering in the *hujra* of the Red Village—and a thousand rupees to him who sings the sweetest *misra*." He glanced at Turkan Katoom, saying: "My grief—that I was never the one to win a woman's heart with the arts of my mouth nor of my eyes. I shall teach you, Dost Murad. And you will win the prize."

"*Hai!*" exclaimed the other. "Is this Tartar not a good friend, Turkan Katoom?"

So tomorrow came; and the herders on the Tukrum slopes heard a fine, quaint blending of two

voices rolling down and, later on, saw two men climbing the higher peaks.

And the next day a peasant, looking for stray goats, came upon Dost Murad and Yar Khan a spear's throw away from the ruined castle where, centuries earlier, the Ghazni Sultans had ruled in pomp of silver and crimson. Storm-tossed, crumbling, its windows empty and blue against the sky like innocent young eyes, the ancient, feudal keep rose from its granite foundation as if it were part of it.

About it the land seemed darkly brooding, blind to sunsets, deaf to the winds; and there, in the face of a precipice that gave upon the valley, Yar Khan one day had found a great cave that was unknown to the tribesmen. Snug and safe and secret, with cool water dripping from its roof into a hollow, it had been formerly a shelter for northern raiders when the peasants had turned on them in the strength and hardihood of despair and had driven them away. A huge fire might blaze at night in the stony heart of it; a steer roasted whole might sizzle on a spit; the roar of songs might shake its granite bowels—but the world outside would never guess.

Here Yar Khan spent many a night. For, as he said to himself:

"It is in such a place that a man may sleep soundly—and no worse than himself for company."

Nor did he ever speak about it to a soul, not even to Dost Murad, though today the two were friends closer than brothers; always together, hunting, trapping, fishing; strolling from village to village, from *hujra* to *hujra*, singing ballads and *misras*—until there were some who said that the pupil was beginning to be better than the master, and that there was

a haunting sweetness in Dost Murad's voice which was like the mirroring of the riding, curved moon in a clear pool.

"And he does not even grudge me the glory of my singing!" said Dost Murad one day as he met Turkan Katoom. "Is he not the best friend in the world?"

She stared at him. He was an amazing figure in savage, drenched garments, an eagle's wing boldly in his fur cap, a crooked dagger flat against the brawn of his bare arm—a man of the wilderness, no longer a man of the orderly fields.

"The best friend in the world?" she echoed bitterly.

"Yes!"

"And yesterday when you were hunting—so your mother told me, and her eyes were sore with weeping—the red cow fell down a ravine and broke her neck. And there—by Allah and by Allah!—went part of our marriage portion to feed the kites and the wolves!"

He laughed.

"Let them fill their shrivelled bellies! Why—wait till the great *hujra* of the month of Hassan-Hussain, and I shall buy you the pick and pride of all the cows in the land when I win the prize—as I shall. And I shall buy you the handsomest shawl to be had in all the bazaars of Bokhara, and such a necklace of green stones and blue stones as would make the Hindi Queen herself pale with envy. *Hai*—but you will be prettier even than you are now!"

"I would rather have you see me the ugliest witch in the valley—and taste a spice of joy when you are with me."

"I do, O my heart! I love you!"—and, as he

spoke the words, he glanced over his shoulder to where Yar Khan stood waiting, with a look as if to say he would not be long.

"I do not believe you," she replied. "You would not stay away from me—day after day—if you did."

"What?" His voice slurred with faint impatience. "Are you jealous of him? It is not he has locks like russet snakes nor eyes like a memory of stars!"

"And even that compliment," she exclaimed cuttingly, "you learned from him. It sounds like the *misras* he sings—to the trees, the birds, the rocks—belike to his own mazed, choked desires. For there is not a woman in all the villages to find pleasure in the Tartar's company!"

She walked away.

She did not notice that Yar Khan had overheard her last words; did not read the expression on his face—a queer mingling of love and hate, of grief and triumph, of candour and cunning.

So spring died; and early summer brushed into the valley on quivering, guazy pinions, gilding the barley fields, hovering birdlike over the thatched roofs, dropping liquid silver across the hard toil of the fields. And still Dost Murad followed the Tartar along the wilderness road until one day, not long before the great *hujra* of the month of Hassan-Hussain, Turkan Katoom conquered her pride and spoke of her heart's woe to the man she hated most:

"Why come between me and my love, Yar Khan?"

"Is it my fault," he smiled, "that Dost Murad prefers the road of my feet to the road of yours?"

"You showed him your road!"

"He was keen to take it. Do not blame me. Blame yourself."

"Myself?"

"Yes. Because you are not strong enough to hold him."

She stared at him out of her cold, grey eyes.

"Happy your mother that her bones are below the sod!" she cried. "There is less worth in you than there are hairs in the beard of the beardless!"

"Maybe!" he laughed. "But I am free! There is no yoke about my neck—no whip to bend my back to the toil of the brown clay!"

"*Wah!* Is there another animal suited to a donkey's nose? I despise you. So do all the women. There will never be lips to whisper to you of love!"

"And still I am stronger than you. Still I hold what you desire."

"What?"

"Dost Murad!" And, with a hawk's gleam in his narrow eyes, "Perhaps some day you will be begging me for a kiss of my mouth that I may help you get back a little, little kiss of Dost Murad's mouth!"

Then she struck him across the face with her hard fist; and she went to Dost Murad's mother and lamented her fate.

"*Allahee! Allahoo!*" crooned the old woman. "It is thus the world is, my small dove. For sin was created before virtue—and tears before laughter—and hate before love. . . .

Early the following morning came the drums.

It was one of those days that are often in our northern land at the peak of summer; with a heavy, opaque mist, just before sun-up, oozing from the bloated skies, lying thickly upon the laboured, sweating fields, clothing everything in a sodden, grey blanket, blending on the higher hills to a dark, pur-

plish drab that might hold the yellow heart of thunder.

Blind seemed the world. Deaf.

And then, suddenly, the drums droning up, slashing through—*bannng! bannng! bannng!*—muffled, nasal, sardonic, cruel . . .

Tartar drums!

There had been, these last few weeks, occasional news brought by caravanmen of bloody war in the west. Christians were killing Christians, it was said.

Allah! What did the tribesmen care? They were of the Moselms. And the others? Infidels all—God's curse on them and their fathers, fathers of pigs! Let them strangle each other, and let Shaitan feed upon the corpses!

Then—overnight it seemed—catastrophe came in the North. The army of the Russians was beaten. The *Ak-Padishah*, the White Tsar, was deposed. The revolution was no longer a dream of frightened, spineless visionaries, but a red fact. It rolled on from Moscow, north, west—and east and south into Central Asia. It rushed across towns and villages, across fields and steppes, like a sheet of smouldering fire. It thundered with the hate and hope of all that motley Slav-Tartar world, and killed the hope of it with the hate of it.

For it brought liberty. But it also loosened all shackles of restraint. It crushed the old order of things, but without building a new. So here, on the Afghan border, with no Cossacks to stem them, were once more the old raids, and there droned into the Valley of the Wealth of Waters—*bannng! bannng! bannng!*—half forgotten, shudderingly remembered,

the beat of Tartar war drums, loaded with thoughts of death and torture and rapine.

The villagers rushed from their houses. They stopped, stricken, in a helpless cluster about their chiefs and priests. They strained their ears for the ever-nearing thump of the drums, the echo of hooves, the clash of blades.

The mist was still about the land. But here and there, through its clogging ooze, rose vague, ghostly forms of rider and horse; and, out of the crackle and roar, a single shout peaked clear—a Tartar war-cry, savage, guttural:

"Hurr! hurr!—kill! kill!"

Mumbled prayers rose:

"O Allah . . ."

"O Thou All-Merciful . . ."

"O King of the Day of Judgment . . ."

A woman broke into terrible, hysterical laughter. A child cried. And the phantom riders galloped free. Yellow faces, wolfish, grim. Crimson banners. A flash of lance points and sword-blades and metal-bossed arm shields. War-cries, like the responses in some satanic litany:

"Hurr! hurr!—kill! kill!"

The villagers had no time to make a stand and fight; no chance to escape. Voices bellowed. Voices implored. Steel struck home. Bodies fell, were trampled, crushed. A torch was tossed up to a thatched roof. Flames—fire—licking with pink and orange tongues—spreading with a hissing and popping . . .

Came death to the Valley of the Wealth of Waters.

Death to Trukan Katoom's father and brothers

slaughtered by her side . . . the swish of a battle-axe which missed her by the width of a hair.

She dropped as one dead; saw the Tartar butchers leap out of the house and on to the next; felt—through the wrack and ruin, the mist, the flames, the grey smoke wreaths—strong hands touching hers, gripping hers, jerking her up; heard Yar Khan's sibilant whisper:

"Come . . . the castle of the Ghazni Sultans . . . I know a cave there . . ."

And a thinner voice, Dost Murad's:

"Come, O my heart . . ."

Her knees tottered. Her senses reeled. But muscular arms picked her up; and she had a vague impression of broad, heaving shoulders, of feet running swiftly beneath her—up—up . . . while farther and farther receded the cries of triumph and death.

When finally she regained consciousness and opened her eyes, she saw that she was flung like a bag across Yar Khan's broad back, with one of his hands curving up and holding her. A few paces in the rear ran Dost Murad. His breath came in short, staccato bursts.

They put her down. She raced between them—faster and faster, higher and higher, to the crest of the northern hills.

In the valley the mist still coiled, shot with scarlet flames.

"If it holds, we are safe," said Yar Khan. He stopped. He listened tensely. There was that roaring wave of sound which men call silence; then, very faintly, a patter of feet, a clash of steel. "You hear?" he asked.

"They saw us?"

"I do not think so. But doubtless they will scour the hills and woods for stray cattle . . ."

There was a strong, twisting puff of wind.

"Come! Come!" cried Dost Murad. "The mist is tearing!"

They increased their speed. They reached the castle of the Ghazni Sultans and ran to the rim of the rocky precipice that faced the valley. The wind grew. The upper layers of mist rolled off like a blanket.

"Here is the place," said Yar Khan. He told them of the cave, bent, drew a leather rope from under a granite slab, and tied it to a gnarled oak. "Food is down there and water," he added, "and the rope to slide down on, and to swing up with a hitch and catch this tree—in a day or two—when the Tartars will have had their fill of killing and looting and will leave the valley." And, with something like irony, to Turkan Katoom: "There will still be the proper fields waiting for the toiling of your lord's brawn—and be-like a brace of sheep bleating somewhere . . ."

He turned to Dost Murad:

"You go first. Make the rope fast below."

Hand over hand, the length of knotted, tough rawhide swinging crazily, perilously, Dost Murad went over the side. A few moments later his voice drifted up from the mouth of the cave, telling them he had secured the rope.

Turkan Katoom stared at Yar Khan.

"You saved my life—" she murmured—"and the life of the man I love. And I—I insulted you—I struck you . . ."

"And you mocked the road of my feet! You said there would never be lips to whisper to me of love!"

"Yes—yes . . ." her words were choked.

"Then—will you kiss me—in friendship . . . ?"

She pressed her mouth to his. He held her close.

"Allah!" he said exultingly. "You with the morning on your forehead and the stars in your eyes . . ."

He slurred; was silent. His sharp ears had caught what hers had not: the crackle of steel, guttural voices brushing up the trail.

"Down with you!" he spoke rapidly.

"But—what about yourself . . . ?"

"I shall come last! No fear, little queen! I shall trill a fine, sweet *misra* at your wedding!"

She swung herself across the precipice. He waited until he heard that she had reached the cave.

The mist had cleared completely. The raiders were very near. There was time enough for him to follow. Yes. But the Tartars would come up, would find the rope, would guess . . . and then . . . ?

Or he might cut the rope from below. But there was no other way to leave the cave. It would be a grave, with the rope missing.

There was only one thing to do. He did it. He slashed the rope with his dagger close to the tree. He threw the severed knots down the precipice so that no sign remained. Then he turned towards the trail.

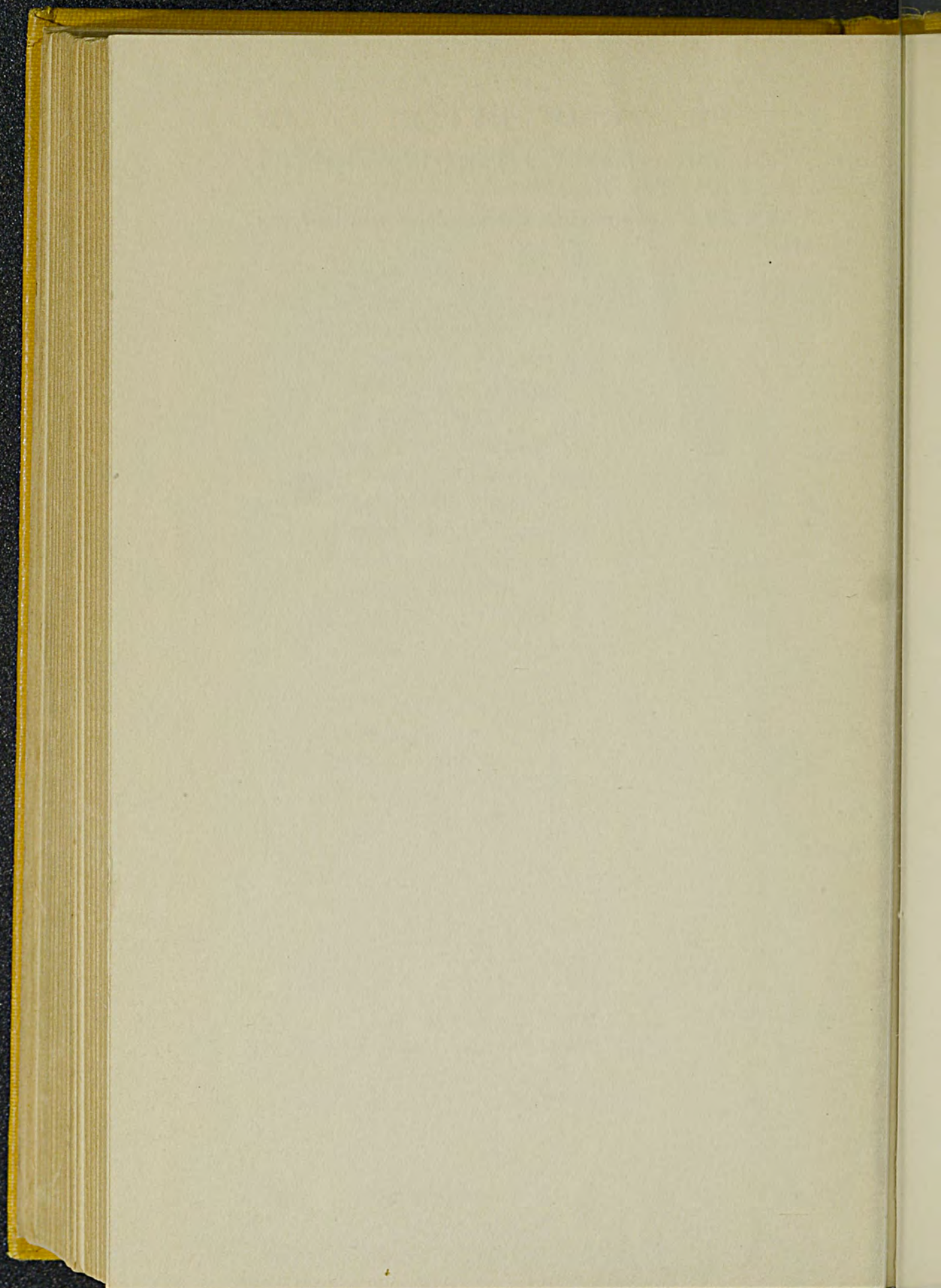
"Allah! Allah!" he said to himself, with a deep, throbbing melancholy, an infinite pity for his own fate. "But there is the dark, dark night in me—like a man's heart craving for the door of escape . . ."

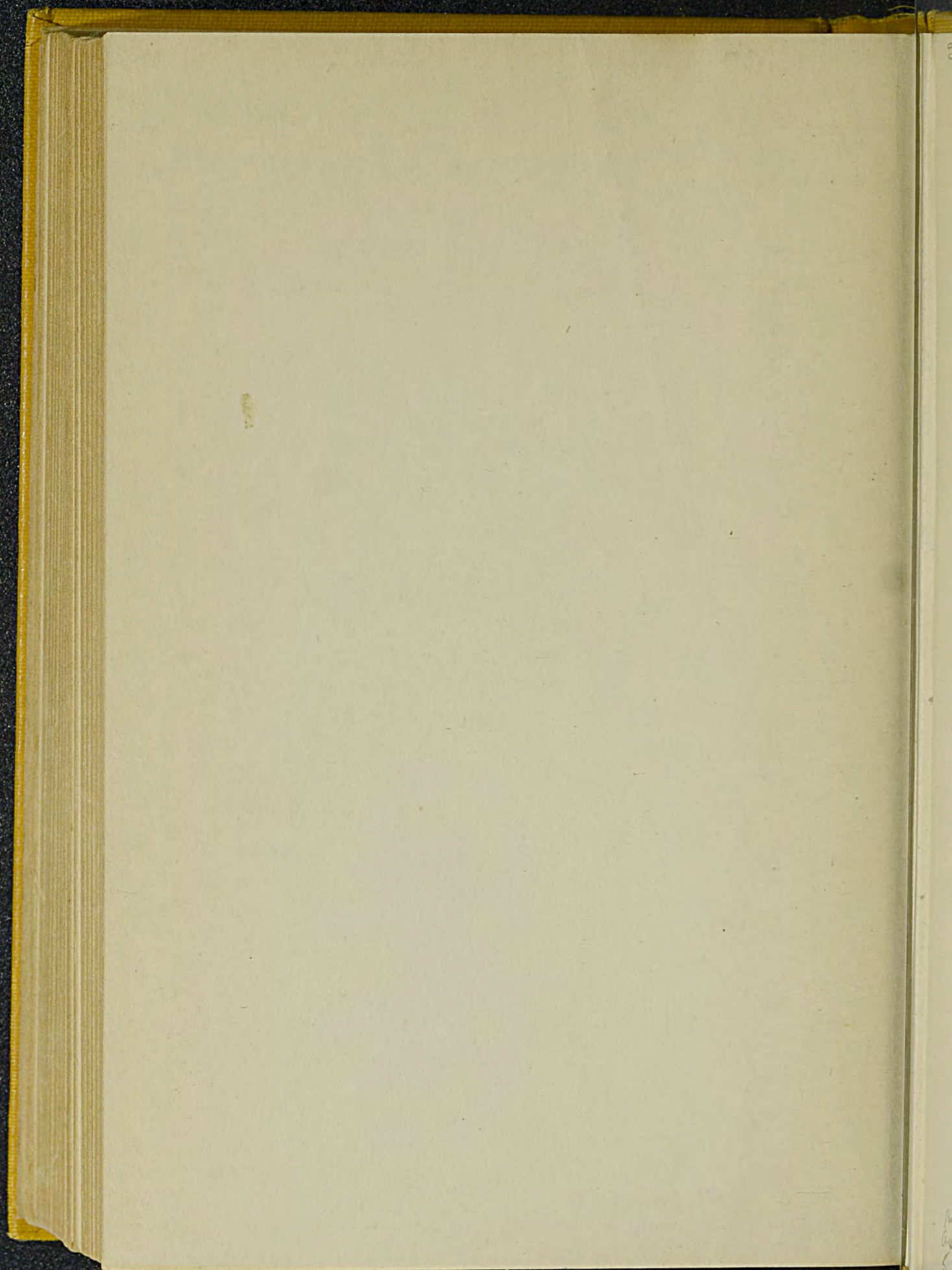
Just then he saw shaggy fur caps on the slope—saw the glint of weapons—saw the raiders climb up the trail. He stood there, sharply outlined against the light, pigeon-blue sky.

"My sorrow," he thought as he advanced towards

them, "that Tartars must kill Tartar! *Hai*—but I follow the road of my feet!"

And he went down beneath the crimson wind of the scimitars.





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