



The Country of The Knife
Howard, Robert Ervin

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About Howard:

Robert Ervin Howard (January 22, 1906 – June 11, 1936) was a classic American pulp writer of fantasy, horror, historical adventure, boxing, western, and detective fiction. Howard wrote "over three-hundred stories and seven-hundred poems of raw power and unbridled emotion" and is especially noted for his memorable depictions of "a sombre universe of swashbuckling adventure and darkling horror." He is well known for having created — in the pages of the legendary Depression-era pulp magazine *Weird Tales* — the character Conan the Cimmerian, a.k.a. Conan the Barbarian, a literary icon whose pop-culture imprint can be compared to such icons as Tarzan of the Apes, Sherlock Holmes, and James Bond. Between Conan and his other heroes Howard created the genre now known as sword-and-sorcery in the late 1920s and early 1930s, spawning a wide swath of imitators and giving him an influence in the fantasy field rivaled only by J.R.R. Tolkien and Tolkien's similarly inspired creation of the modern genre of High Fantasy. There is no evidence that Tolkien was influenced by the earlier author, however. A full century after his birth, Howard remains a seminal figure, with his best work endlessly reprinted. He has been compared to other American masters of the weird, gloomy, and spectral, such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, and Jack London. Source: Wikipedia

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Chapter 1

A Cry out of the East

A cry from beyond the bolted door—a thick, desperate croaking that gaspingly repeated a name. Stuart Brent paused in the act of filling a whisky glass, and shot a startled glance toward the door from beyond which that cry had come. It was his name that had been gasped out—and why should anyone call on him with such frantic urgency at midnight in the hall outside his apartment?

He stepped to the door, without stopping to set down the square amber bottle. Even as he turned the knob, he was electrified by the unmistakable sounds of a struggle outside—the quick fierce scuff of feet, the thud of blows, then the desperate voice lifted again. He threw the door open.

The richly appointed hallway outside was dimly lighted by bulbs concealed in the jaws of gilt dragons writhing across the ceiling. The costly red rugs and velvet tapestries seemed to drink in this soft light, heightening an effect of unreality. But the struggle going on before his eyes was as real as life and death.

There were splashes of a brighter crimson on the dark-red rug. A man was down on his back before the door, a slender man whose white face shone like a wax mask in the dim light. Another man crouched upon him, one knee grinding brutally into his breast, one hand twisting at the victim's throat. The other hand lifted a red-smearred blade.

Brent acted entirely through impulse. Everything happened simultaneously. The knife was swinging up for the downward drive even as he opened the door. At the height of its arc it hovered briefly as the wielder shot a venomous, slit-eyed glance at the man in the doorway. In that instant Brent saw murder about to be done, saw that the victim was a white man, the killer a swarthy alien of some kind. Age-old implanted instincts acted through him, without his conscious volition. He dashed the heavy whisky bottle full into the dark face with all his power. The hard, stocky body toppled backward in a crash of broken glass and a

shower of splattering liquor, and the knife rang on the floor several feet away. With a feline snarl the fellow bounced to his feet, red-eyed, blood and whisky streaming from his face and over his collar.

For an instant he crouched as if to leap at Brent barehanded. Then the glare in his eyes wavered, turned to something like fear, and he wheeled and was gone, lunging down the stair with reckless haste. Brent stared after him in amazement. The whole affair was fantastic, and Brent was irritated. He had broken a self-imposed rule of long standing—which was never to butt into anything which was not his business.

"Brent!" It was the wounded man, calling him weakly.

Brent bent down to him.

"What is it, old fellow—Thunderation! Stockton!"

"Get me in, quick!" panted the other, staring fearfully at the stair. "He may come back—with others."

Brent stooped and lifted him bodily. Stockton was not a bulky man, and Brent's trim frame concealed the muscles of an athlete. There was no sound throughout the building. Evidently no one had been aroused by the muffled sounds of the brief fight. Brent carried the wounded man into the room and laid him carefully on a divan. There was blood on Brent's hands when he straightened.

"Lock the door!" gasped Stockton.

Brent obeyed, and then turned back, frowning concernedly down at the man. They offered a striking contrast—Stockton, light-haired, of medium height, frail, with plain, commonplace features now twisted in a grimace of pain, his sober garments disheveled and smeared with blood; Brent, tall, dark, immaculately tailored, handsome in a virile masculine way, and self-assured. But in Stockton's pale eyes there blazed a fire that burned away the difference between them, and gave the wounded man something that Brent did not possess—something that dominated the scene.

"You're hurt, Dick!" Brent caught up a fresh whisky bottle. "Why, man, you're stabbed to pieces! I'll call a doctor, and—"

"No!" A lean hand brushed aside the whisky glass and seized Brent's wrist. "It's no use. I'm bleeding inside. I'd be dead now, but I can't leave my job unfinished. Don't interrupt just listen!"

Brent knew Stockton spoke the truth. Blood was oozing thinly from the wounds in his breast, where a thin-bladed knife must have struck home at least half a dozen times. Brent looked on, awed and appalled, as the small, bright-eyed man fought death to a standstill, gripping the last

fading fringes of life and keeping himself conscious and lucid to the end by the sheer effort of an iron will.

"I stumbled on something big tonight, down in a water-front dive. I was looking for something else uncovered this by accident. Then they got suspicious. I got away—came here because you were the only man I knew in San Francisco. But that devil was after me—caught me on the stair."

Blood oozed from the livid lips, and Stockton spat dryly. Brent looked on helplessly. He knew the man was a secret agent of the British government, who had made a business of tracing sinister secrets to their source. He was dying as he had lived, in the harness.

"Something big!" whispered the Englishman. "Something that balances the fate of India! I can't tell you all now—I'm going fast. But there's one man in the world who must know. You must find him, Brent! His name is Gordon—Francis Xavier Gordon. He's an American; the Afghans call him El Borak. I'd have gone to him—but you must go. Promise me!"

Brent did not hesitate. His soothing hand on the dying man's shoulder was even more convincing and reassuring than his quiet, level voice.

"I promise, old man. But where am I to find him?"

"Somewhere in Afghanistan. Go at once. Tell the police nothing. Spies are all around. If they know I knew you, and spoke with you before I died, they'll kill you before you can reach Gordon. Tell the police I was simply a drunken stranger, wounded by an unknown party, and staggering into your hall to die. You never saw me before. I said nothing before I died.

"Go to Kabul. The British officials will make your way easy that far. Simply say to each one: 'Remember the kites of Khoral Nulla.' That's your password. If Gordon isn't in Kabul, the ameer will give you an escort to hunt for him in the hills. You must find him! The peace of India depends on him, now!"

"But what shall I tell him?" Brent was bewildered.

"Say to him," gasped the dying man, fighting fiercely for a few more moments of life, "say: 'The Black Tigers had a new prince; they call him Abd el Khafid, but his real name is Vladimir Jakrovitch.'"

"Is that all?" This affair was growing more and more bizarre.

"Gordon will understand and act. The Black Tigers are your peril. They're a secret society of Asiatic murderers. Therefore, be on your guard at every step of the way. But El Borak will understand. He'll know where to look for Jakrovitch—in Rub el Harami—the Abode of Thieves—"

A convulsive shudder, and the slim threat that had held the life in the tortured body snapped.

Brent straightened and looked down at the dead man in wonder. He shook his head, marveling again at the inner unrest that sent men wandering in the waste places of the world, playing a game of life and death for a meager wage. Games that had gold for their stake Brent could understand—none better. His strong, sure fingers could read the cards almost as a man reads books; but he could not read the souls of men like Richard Stockton who stake their lives on the bare boards where Death is the dealer. What if the man won, how could he measure his winnings, where cash his chips? Brent asked no odds of life; he lost without a wince; but in winning, he was a usurer, demanding the last least crumb of the wager, and content with nothing less than the glittering, solid materialities of life. The grim and barren game Stockton had played held no promise for Stuart Brent, and to him the Englishman had always been a little mad.

But whatever Brent's faults or virtues, he had his code. He lived by it, and by it he meant to die. The foundation stone of that code was loyalty. Stockton had never saved Brent's life, renounced a girl both loved, exonerated him from a false accusation, or anything so dramatic. They had simply been boyhood friends in a certain British university, years ago, and years had passed between their occasional meetings since then. Stockton had no claim on Brent, except for their old friendship. But that was a tie as solid as a log chain, and the Englishman had known it, when, in the desperation of knowing himself doomed, he had crawled to Brent's door. And Brent had given his promise, and he intended making it good. It did not occur to him that there was any other alternative. Stuart Brent was the restless black sheep of an aristocratic old California family whose founder crossed the plains in an ox wagon in '49—and he had never welshed a bet nor let down a friend.

He turned his head and stared through a window, almost hidden by its satin curtains. He was comfortable here. His luck had been phenomenal of late. To-morrow evening there was a big poker game scheduled at his favorite club, with a fat Oklahoma oil king who was ripe for a cleaning. The races began at Tia Juana within a few days, and Brent had his eye on a slim sorrel gelding that ran like the flame of a prairie fire.

Outside, the fog curled and drifted, beading the pane. Pictures formed for him there—prophetic pictures of an East different from the colorful civilized East he had touched in his roamings. Pictures not at all like the European-dominated cities he remembered, exotic colors of veranda-

shaded clubs, soft-footed servants laden with cooling drinks, languorous and beautiful women, white garments and sun helmets. Shiveringly he sensed a wilder, older East; it had blown a scent of itself to him out of the fog, over a knife stained with human blood. An East not soft and warm and exotic-colored, but bleak and grim and savage, where peace was not and law was a mockery, and life hung on the tilt of a balanced blade. The East known by Stockton, and this mysterious American they called "El Borak."

Brent's world was here, the world he had promised to abandon for a blind, quixotic mission; he knew nothing of that other leaner, fiercer world; but there was no hesitation in his manner as he turned toward the door.

Chapter 2

The Road to Rub El Harami

A wind blew over the shoulders of the peaks where the snow lay drifted, a knife-edge wind that slashed through leather and wadded cloth in spite of the searing sun. Stuart Brent blinked his eyes against the glare of that intolerable sun, shivered at the bite of the wind. He had no coat, and his shirt was tattered. For the thousandth futile, involuntary time, he wrenched at the fetters on his wrists. They jangled, and the man riding in front of him cursed, turned and struck him heavily in the mouth. Brent reeled in his saddle, blood starting to his lips.

The saddle chafed him, and the stirrups were too short for his long legs. He was riding along a knife-edge trail, in the middle of a straggling line of some thirty men—ragged men on gaunt, ribby horses. They rode hunched in their high-peaked saddles, turbaned heads thrust forward and nodding in unison to the clop-clop of their horses' hoofs, long-barreled rifles swaying across the saddlebows. On one hand rose a towering cliff; on the other, a sheer precipice fell away into echoing depths. The skin was worn from Brent's wrists by the rusty, clumsy iron manacles that secured them; he was bruised from the kicks and blows, faint with hunger and giddy with the enormousness of the altitude. His nose bled at times without having been struck. Ahead of them loomed the backbone of the gigantic range that had risen like a rampart before them for so many days.

Dizzily he reviewed the events of the weeks that stretched between the time he had carried Dick Stockton, dying, into his flat, and this unbelievable, yet painfully real moment. The intervening period of time might have been an unfathomable and unbridgeable gulf stretching between and dividing two worlds that had nothing in common save consciousness.

He had come to India on the first ship he could catch. Official doors had opened to him at the whispered password: "Remember the kites of Khoral Nulla!" His path had been smoothed by impressive-looking

documents with great red seals, by cryptic orders barked over telephones, or whispered into attentive ears. He had moved smoothly northward along hitherto unguessed channels. He had glimpsed, faintly, some of the shadowy, mountainous machinery grinding silently and ceaselessly behind the scenes—the unseen, half-suspected cogwheels of the empire that girdles the world.

Mustached men with medals on their breasts had conferred with him as to his needs, and quiet men in civilian clothes had guided him on his way. But no one had asked him why he sought El Borak, or what message he bore. The password and the mention of Stockton had sufficed. His friend had been more important in the imperial scheme of things than Brent had ever realized. The adventure had seemed more and more fantastic as he progressed—a page out of the "Arabian Nights," as he blindly carried a dead man's message, the significance of which he could not even guess, to a mysterious figure lost in the mists of the hills; while, at a whispered incantation, hidden doors swung wide and enigmatic figures bowed him on his way. But all this changed in the North.

Gordon was not in Kabul. This Brent learned from the lips of no less than the ameer himself—wearing his European garments as if born to them, but with the sharp, restless eyes of a man who knows he is a pawn between powerful rivals, and whose nerves are worn thin by the constant struggle for survival. Brent sensed that Gordon was a staff on which the ameer leaned heavily. But neither king nor agents of empire could chain the American's roving foot, or direct the hawk flights of the man the Afghans called "El Borak," the "Swift."

And Gordon was gone—wandering alone into those naked hills whose bleak mysteries had long ago claimed him from his own kind. He might be gone a month, he might be gone a year. He might—and the ameer shifted uneasily at the possibility—never return. The crag-set villages were full of his blood enemies.

Not even the long arm of empire reached beyond Kabul. The ameer ruled the tribes after a fashion—with a dominance that dared not presume too far. This was the Country of the Hills, where law was hinged on the strong arm wielding the long knife.

Gordon had vanished into the Northwest. And Brent, though flinching at the grim nakedness of the Himalayas, did not hesitate or visualize an alternative. He asked for and received an escort of soldiers. With them he pushed on, trying to follow Gordon's trail through the mountain villages.

A week out of Kabul they lost all trace of him. To all effects Gordon had vanished into thin air. The wild, shaggy hillmen answered questions sullenly, or not at all, glaring at the nervous Kabuli soldiery from under black brows. The farther they got away from Kabul, the more open the hostility. Only once did a question evoke a spontaneous response, and that was a suggestion that Gordon had been murdered by hostile tribesmen. At that, sardonic laughter yelled up from the wild men—the fierce, mocking mirth of the hills. El Borak trapped by his enemies? Is the gray wolf devoured by the fat-tailed sheep? And another gust of dry, ironic laughter, as hard as the black crags that burned under a sun of liquid flame. Stubborn as his grandsire who had glimpsed a mirage of tree-fringed ocean shore across the scorching desolation of another desert, Brent groped on, at a blind venture, trying to pick up the cold scent, far past the point of safety, as the gray-faced soldiers warned him again and again. They warned him that they were far from Kabul, in a sparsely settled, rebellious, little-explored region, whose wild people were rebels to the ameer, and enemies to El Borak. They would have deserted Brent long before and fled back to Kabul, had they not feared the ameer's wrath.

Their forebodings were justified in the hurricane of rifle fire that swept their camp in a chill gray dawn. Most of them fell at the first volley that ripped from the rocks about them. The rest fought futilely, ridden over and cut down by the wild riders that materialized out of the gray. Brent knew the surprise had been the soldiers' fault, but he did not have it in his heart to curse them, even now. They had been like children, sneaking in out of the cold as soon as his back was turned, sleeping on sentry duty, and lapsing into slovenly and unmilitary habits as soon as they were out of sight of Kabul. They had not wanted to come, in the first place; a foreboding of doom had haunted them; and now they were dead, and he was a captive, riding toward a fate he could not even guess.

Four days had passed since that slaughter, but he still turned sick when he remembered it—the smell of powder and blood, the screams, the rending chop of steel. He shuddered at the memory of the man he had killed in that last rush, with his pistol muzzle almost in the bearded face that lunged at him beneath a lifted rifle butt. He had never killed a man before. He sickened as he remembered the cries of the wounded soldiers when the conquerors cut their throats. And over and over he wondered why he had been spared—why they had overpowered and fettered him, instead of killing him. His suffering had been so intense he often wished they had killed him outright.

He was allowed to ride, and he was fed grudgingly when the others ate. But the food was niggardly. He who had never known hunger was never without it now, a gnawing misery. His coat had been taken from him, and the nights were a long agony in which he almost froze on the hard ground, in the icy winds. He wearied unto death of the day-long riding over incredible trails that wound up and up until he felt as if he could reach out a hand—if his hands were free—and touch the cold, pale sky. He was kicked and beaten until the first fiery resentment and humiliation had been dissolved in a dull hurt that was only aware of the physical pain, not of the injury to his self-respect.

He did not know who his captors were. They did not deign to speak English to him, but he had picked up more than a smattering of Pashto on that long journey up the Khyber to Kabul, and from Kabul westward. Like many men who live by their wits, he had the knack of acquiring new languages. But all he learned from listening to their conversation was that their leader was called Muhammad ez Zahir, and their destiny was Rub el Harami.

Rub el Harami! Brent had heard it first as a meaningless phrase gasped from Richard Stockton's blue lips. He had heard more of it as he came northward from the hot plains of the Punjab—a city of mystery and evil, which no white man had ever visited except as a captive, and from which none had ever escaped. A plague spot, sprawled in the high, bare hills, almost fabulous, beyond the reach of the ameer—an outlaw city, whence the winds blew whispered tales too fantastic and hideous for credence, even in this Country of the Knife.

At times Brent's escort mocked him, their burning eyes and grimly smiling lips lending a sinister meaning to their taunt: "The Feringi goes to Rub el Harami!"

For the pride of race he stiffened his spine and set his jaw; he plumbed unsuspected depths of endurance—legacy of a clean, athletic life, sharpened by the hard traveling of the past weeks.

They crossed a rocky crest and dropped down an incline between ridges that tilted up for a thousand feet.

Far above and beyond them they occasionally glimpsed a notch in the rampart that was the pass over which they must cross the backbone of the range up which they were toiling. It was as they labored up a long slope that the solitary horseman appeared.

The sun was poised on the knife-edge crest of a ridge to the west, a blood-colored ball, turning a streak of the sky to flame. Against that crimson ball a horseman appeared suddenly, a centaur image, black

against the blinding curtain. Below him every rider turned in his saddle, and rifle bolts clicked. It did not need the barked command of Muhammad ez Zahir to halt the troop. There was something wild and arresting about that untamed figure in the sunset that held every eye. The rider's head was thrown back, the horse's long mane streaming in the wind.

Then the black silhouette detached itself from the crimson ball and moved down toward them, details springing into being as it emerged from the blinding background. It was a man on a rangy black stallion who came down the rocky, pathless slope with the smooth curving flight of an eagle, the sure hoofs spurning the ground. Brent, himself a horseman, felt his heart leap into his throat with admiration for the savage steed.

But he almost forgot the horse when the rider pulled up before them. He was neither tall nor bulky, but a barbaric strength was evident in his compact shoulders, his deep chest, his corded wrists. There was strength, too, in the keen, dark face, and the eyes, the blackest Brent had even seen, gleamed with an inward fire such as the American had seen burn in the eyes of wild things—an indomitable wildness and an unquenchable vitality. The thin, black mustache did not hide the hard set of the mouth.

The stranger looked like a desert dandy beside the ragged men of the troop, but it was a dandyism definitely masculine, from the silken turban to the silver-heeled boots. His bright-hued robe was belted with a gold-buckled girdle that supported a Turkish saber and a long dagger. A rifle jutted its butt from a scabbard beneath his knee.

Thirty-odd pairs of hostile eyes centered on him, after suspiciously sweeping the empty ridges behind him as he galloped up before the troop and reined his steed back on its haunches with a flourish that set the gold ornaments jingling on curb chains and reins. An empty hand was flung up in an exaggerated gesture of peace. The rider, well poised and confident, carried himself with a definite swagger.

"What do you want?" growled Muhammad ez Zahir, his cocked rifle covering the stranger.

"A small thing, as Allah is my witness!" declared the other, speaking Pashto with an accent Brent had never heard before. "I am Shirkuh, of Jebel Jawur. I ride to Rub el Harami. I wish to accompany you."

"Are you alone?" demanded Muhammad.

"I set forth from Herat many days ago with a party of camel men who swore they would guide me to Rub el Harami. Last night they sought to

slay and rob me. One of them died suddenly. The others ran away, leaving me without food or guides. I lost my way, and have been wandering in the mountains all last night and all this day. Just now, by the favor of Allah, I sighted your band."

"How do you know we are bound for Rub el Harami?" demanded Muhammad.

"Are you not Muhammad ez Zahir, the prince of swordsmen?" countered Shirkuh.

The Afghan's beard bristled with satisfaction. He was not impervious to flattery. But he was still suspicious.

"You know me, Kurd?"

"Who does not know Muhammad ez Zahir? I saw you in the suk of Teheran, years ago. And now men say you are high in the ranks of the Black Tigers."

"Beware how your tongue runs, Kurd!" responded Muhammad. "Words are sometimes blades to cut men's throats. Are you sure of a welcome in Rub el Harami?"

"What stranger can be sure of a welcome there?" Shirkuh laughed. "But there is Feringi blood on my sword, and a price on my head. I have heard that such men were welcome in Rub el Harami."

"Ride with us if you will," said Muhammad. "I will get you through the Pass of Nadir Khan. But what may await you at the city gates is none of my affair. I have not invited you to Rub el Harami. I accept no responsibility for you."

"I ask for no man to vouch for me," retorted Shirkuh, with a glint of anger, brief and sharp, like the flash of hidden steel struck by a flint and momentarily revealed. He glanced curiously at Brent.

"Has there been a raid over the border?" he asked.

"This fool came seeking someone," scornfully answered Muhammad. "He walked into a trap set for him."

"What will be done with him in Rub el Harami?" pursued the newcomer, and Brent's interest in the conversation suddenly became painfully intense.

"He will be placed on the slave block," answered Muhammad, "according to the age-old custom of the city. Who bids highest will have him."

And so Brent learned the fate in store for him, and cold sweat broke out on his flesh as he contemplated a life spent as a tortured drudge to some turbaned ruffian. But he held up his head, feeling Shirkuh's fierce eyes upon him.

The stranger said slowly: "It may be his destiny to serve Shirkuh, of the Jebel Jawur! I never owned a slave—but who knows? It strikes my fancy to buy this Feringi!"

Brent reflected that Shirkuh must know that he was in no danger of being murdered and robbed, or he would never so openly imply possession of money. That suggested that he knew these were picked men, carrying out someone's instructions so implicitly that they could be depended on not to commit any crime not included in those orders. That implied organization and obedience beyond the conception of any ordinary hill chief. He was convinced that these men belonged to that mysterious cult against which Stockton had warned him—the Black Tigers. Then had their capture of him been due merely to chance? It seemed improbable.

"There are rich men in Rub el Harami, Kurd," growled Muhammad. "But it may be that none will want this Feringi and a wandering vagabond like you might buy him. Who knows?"

"Only in Allah is knowledge," agreed Shirkuh, and swung his horse into line behind Brent, crowding a man out of position and laughing when the Afghan snarled at him.

The troop got into motion, and a man leaned over to strike Brent with a rifle butt. Shirkuh checked the stroke. His lips laughed, but there was menace in his eyes.

"Nay! This infidel may belong to me before many days, and I will not have his bones broken!"

The man growled, but did not press the matter, and the troop rode on. They toiled up a ridge in a long shadow cast by the crag behind which the sun had sunk, and came into a valley and the sight of the sun again, just sinking behind a mountain. As they went down the slope, they spied white turbans moving among the crags to the west, and Muhammad ez Zahir snarled in suspicion at Shirkuh.

"Are they friends of yours, you dog? You said you were alone!"

"I know them not!" declared Shirkuh. Then he dragged his rifle from its boot. "The dogs fire on us!" For a tiny tongue of fire had jetted from among the boulders in the distance, and a bullet whined overhead.

"Hill-bred dogs who grudge us the use of the well ahead!" said Muhammad ez Zahir. "Would we had time to teach them a lesson! Hold your fire, you dogs! The range is too long for either they or us to do damage."

But Shirkuh wheeled out of the line of march and rode toward the foot of the ridge. Half a dozen men broke cover, high up on the slope, and

dashed away over the crest, leaning low and spurring hard. Shirkuh fired once, then took steadier aim and fired three shots in swift succession.

"You missed!" shouted Muhammad angrily. "Who could hit at such a range?"

"Nay!" yelled Shirkuh. "Look!"

One of the ragged white shapes had wavered and pitched forward on its pony's neck. The beast vanished over the ridge, its rider lolling limply in the saddle.

"He will not ride far!" exulted Shirkuh, waving his rifle over his head as he raced back to the troop. "We Kurds have eyes like mountain hawks!"

"Shooting a Pathan hill thief does not make a hero," snapped Muhammad, turning disgustedly away.

But Shirkuh merely laughed tolerantly, as one so sure of his fame that he could afford to overlook the jealousies of lesser souls.

They rode on down into the broad valley, seeing no more of the hillmen. Dusk was falling when they halted beside the well. Brent, too stiff to dismount, was roughly jerked off his horse. His legs were bound, and he was allowed to sit with his back against a boulder just far enough away from the fires they built to keep him from benefiting any from the heat. No guard was set over him at present.

Presently Shirkuh came striding over to where the prisoner gnawed at the wretched crusts they allowed him. Shirkuh walked with a horseman's roll, setting his booted legs wide. He carried an iron bowl of stewed mutton, and some chupatties.

"Eat, Feringi!" he commanded roughly, but not harshly. "A slave whose ribs jut through his hide is no good to work or to fight. These niggardly Pathans would starve their grandfathers. But we Kurds are as generous as we are valiant!"

He offered the food with a gesture as of bestowing a province. Brent accepted it without thanks, and ate voraciously. Shirkuh had dominated the drama ever since he had entered it—a swashbuckler who swaggered upon the stage and would not be ignored. Even Muhammad ez Zahir was overshadowed by the overflowing vitality of the man. Shirkuh seemed a strange mixture of brutal barbarian and unsophisticated youth. There was a boyish exuberance in his swagger, and he displayed touches of naive simplicity at times. But there was nothing childish about his glittering black eyes, and he moved with a tigerish suppleness that Brent knew could be translated instantly into a blur of murderous action.

Shirkuh thrust his thumbs in his girdle now and stood looking down at the American as he ate. The light from the nearest fire of dry tamarisk branches threw his dark face into shadowy half relief and gave it somehow an older, more austere look. The shadowy half light had erased the boyishness from his countenance, replacing it with a suggestion of somberness.

"Why did you come into the hills?" he demanded abruptly.

Brent did not immediately answer; he chewed on, toying with an idea. He was in as desperate a plight as he could be in, and he saw no way out. He looked about, seeing that his captors were out of earshot. He did not see the dim shape that squirmed up behind the boulder against which he leaned. He reached a sudden decision and spoke.

"Do you know the man called El Borak?"

Was there suspicion suddenly in the black eyes?

"I have heard of him," Shirkuh replied warily:

"I came into the hills looking for him. Can you find him? If you could get a message to him, I would pay you thirty thousand rupees."

Shirkuh scowled, as if torn between suspicion and avarice.

"I am a stranger in these hills," he said. "How could I find El Borak?"

"Then help me to escape," urged Brent. "I will pay you an equal sum."

Shirkuh tugged his mustache.

"I am one sword against thirty," he growled. "How do I know I would be paid? Feringi are all liars. I am an outlaw with a price on my head. The Turks would flay me, the Russians would shoot me, the British would hang me. There is nowhere I can go except to Rub el Harami. If I helped you to escape, that door would be barred against me, too."

"I will speak to the British for you," urged Brent. "El Borak has power. He will secure a pardon for you."

He believed what he said; besides, he was in that desperate state when a man is likely to promise anything.

Indecision flickered in the black eyes, and Shirkuh started to speak, then changed his mind, turned on his heel, and strode away. A moment later the spy crouching behind the boulders glided away without having been discovered by Brent, who sat staring in despair after Shirkuh.

Shirkuh went straight to Muhammad, gnawing strips of dried mutton as he sat cross-legged on a dingy sheepskin near a small fire on the other side of the well. Shirkuh got there before the spy did.

"The Feringi has offered me money to take a word to El Borak," he said abruptly. "Also to aid him to escape. I bade him go to Jehannum, of

course. In the Jebel Jawur I have heard of El Borak, but I have never seen him. Who is he?"

"A devil," growled Muhammad ez Zahir. "An American, like this dog. The tribes about the Khyber are his friends, and he is an adviser of the ameer, and an ally of the rajah, though he was once an outlaw. He has never dared come to Rub el Harami. I saw him once, three years ago, in the fight by Kalat-i-Ghilzai, where he and his cursed Afridis broke the back of the revolt that had else unseated the ameer. If we could catch him, Abd el Khafid would fill our mouths with gold."

"Perhaps this Feringi knows where to find him!" exclaimed Shirkuh, his eyes burning with a glitter that might have been avarice. "I will go to him and swear to deliver his message, and so trick him into telling me what he knows of El Borak."

"It is all one to me," answered Muhammad indifferently. "If I had wished to know why he came into the hills, I would have tortured it out of him before now. But my orders were merely to capture him and bring him alive to Rub el Harami. I could not turn aside, not even to capture El Borak. But if you are admitted into the city, perhaps Abd el Khafid will give you a troop to go hunting El Borak."

"I will try!"

"Allah grant you luck," said Muhammad. "El Borak is a dog. I would myself give a thousand rupees to see him hanging in the market place."

"If it be the will of Allah, you shall meet El Borak!" said Shirkuh, turning away.

Doubtless it was the play of the firelight on his face which caused his eyes to burn as they did, but Muhammad felt a curious chill play down his spine, though he could not reason why.

Shirkuh's booted feet crunched away through the shale, and a furtive, ragged shadow came out of the night and squatted at Muhammad's elbow.

"I spied on the Kurd and the infidel as you ordered," muttered the spy. "The Feringi offered Shirkuh thirty thousand rupees either to seek out El Borak and deliver a message to him, or to aid him to escape us. Shirkuh lusted for the gold, but he has been outlawed by all the Feringis, and he dares not close the one door open to him."

"Good," growled Muhammad in his beard. "Kurds are dogs; it is well that this one is in no position to bite. I will speak for him at the pass. He does not guess the choice that awaits him at the gates of Rub el Harami."

Brent was sunk in the dreamless slumber of exhaustion, despite the hardness of the rocky ground and the chill of the night. An urgent hand

shook him awake, an urgent whisper checked his startled exclamation. He saw a vague shape bending over him, and heard the snoring of his guard a few feet away. Guarding a man bound and fettered was more or less of a formality of routine. Shirkuh's voice hissed in Brent's ear.

"Tell me the message you wished to send El Borak! Be swift, before the guard awakes. I could not take the message when we talked before, for there was a cursed spy listening behind that rock. I told Muhammad what passed between us, because I knew the spy would tell him anyway, and I wished to disarm suspicion before it took root. Tell me the word!"

Brent accepted the desperate gamble.

"Tell him that Richard Stockton died, but before he died, he said this: 'The Black Tigers have a new prince; they call him Abd el Khafid, but his real name is Vladimir Jakrovitch.' This man dwells in Rub el Harami, Stockton told me."

"I understand," muttered Shirkuh. "El Borak shall know."

"But what of me?" urged Brent.

"I cannot help you escape now," muttered Shirkuh. "There are too many of them. All the guards are not asleep. Armed men patrol the outskirts of the camp, and others watch the horses—my own among them."

"I cannot pay you unless I get away!" argued Brent.

"That is in the lap of Allah!" hissed Shirkuh. "I must slip back to my blankets now, before I am missed. Here is a cloak against the chill of the night."

Brent felt himself enveloped in a grateful warmth, and then Shirkuh was gone, gliding away in the night with boots that made no more noise than the moccasins of a red Indian. Brent lay wondering if he had done the right thing. There was no reason why he should trust Shirkuh. But if he had done no good, at least he could not see that he had done any harm, either to himself, El Borak, or those interests menaced by the mysterious Black Tigers. He was a drowning man, clutching at straws. At last he went to sleep again, lulled by the delicious warmth of the cloak Shirkuh had thrown over him, and hoping that he would slip away in the night and ride to find Gordon—wherever he might be wandering.

Chapter 3

Shirkuh's Jest

It was Shirkuh, however, who brought the American's breakfast to him the next morning. Shirkuh made no sign either of friendship or enmity, beyond a gruff admonition to eat heartily, as he did not wish to buy a skinny slave. But that might have been for the benefit of the guard yawning and stretching near by. Brent reflected that the cloak was sure evidence that Shirkuh had visited him in the night, but no one appeared to notice it.

As he ate, grateful at least for the good food, Brent was torn between doubts and hopes. He swung between halfhearted trust and complete mistrust of the man. Kurds were bred in deception and cut their teeth on treachery. Why should that offer of help not have been a trick to curry favor with Muhammad ez Zahir? Yet Brent realized that if Muhammad had wished to learn the reason for his presence in the hills, the Afghan would have been more likely to resort to torture than an elaborate deception. Then Shirkuh, like all Kurds, must be avaricious, and that was Brent's best chance. And if Shirkuh delivered the message, he must go further and help Brent to escape, in order to get his reward, for Brent, a slave in Rub el Harami, could not pay him thirty thousand rupees. One service necessitated the other, if Shirkuh hoped to profit by the deal. Then there was El Borak; if he got the message, he would learn of Brent's plight, and he would hardly fail to aid a fellow Feringi in adversity. It all depended now on Shirkuh.

Brent stared intently at the supple rider, etched against the sharp dawn. There was nothing of the Turanian or the Semite in Shirkuh's features. In the Iranian highlands there must be many clans who kept their ancient Aryan lineage pure. Shirkuh, in European garments, and without that Oriental mustache, would pass unnoticed in any Western crowd, but for that primordial blaze in his restless black eyes. They reflected an untamable soul. How could he expect this barbarian to deal with him according to the standards of the Western world?

They were pressing on before sunup, and their trail always led up now, higher and higher, through knife cuts in solid masses of towering sandstone, and along narrow paths that wound up and up interminably, until Brent was gasping again with the rarefied air of the high places. At high noon, when the wind was knife-edged with ice, and the sun was a splash of molten fire, they reached the Pass of Nadir Khan—a narrow cut winding tortuously for a mile between turrets of dull colored rock. A squat mud-and-stone tower stood in the mouth, occupied by ragged warriors squatting on their aerie like vultures. The troop halted until Muhammad ez Zahir was recognized. He vouched for the cavalcade, Shirkuh included, with a wave of his hand, and the rifles on the tower were lowered. Muhammad rode on into the pass, the others filing after him. Brent felt despairingly as if one prison door had already slammed behind him.

They halted for the midday meal in the corridor of the pass, shaded from the sun and sheltered from the wind. Again Shirkuh brought food to Brent, without comment or objection from the Afghans. But when Brent tried to catch his eye, he avoided the American's gaze.

After they left the pass, the road pitched down in long curving sweeps, through successively lower mountains that ran away and away like gigantic stairsteps from the crest of the range. The trail grew plainer, more traveled, but night found them still among the hills.

When Shirkuh brought food to Brent that night as usual, the American tried to engage him in conversation, under cover of casual talk for the benefit of the Afghan detailed to guard the American that night, who lolled near by, bolting chupatties.

"Is Rub el Harami a large city?" Brent asked.

"I have never been there," returned Shirkuh, rather shortly.

"Is Abd el Khafid the ruler?" persisted Brent.

"He is emir of Rub el Harami," said Shirkuh.

"And prince of the Black Tigers," spoke up the Afghan guard unexpectedly. He was in a garrulous mood, and he saw no reason for secrecy. One of his hearers would soon be a slave in Rub el Harami, the other, if accepted, a member of the clan.

"I am myself a Black Tiger," the guard boasted. "All in this troop are Black Tigers, and picked men. We are the lords of Rub el Harami."

"Then all in the city are not Black Tigers?" asked Brent.

"All are thieves. Only thieves live in Rub el Harami. But not all are Black Tigers. But it is the headquarters of the clan, and the prince of the Black Tigers is always emir of Rub el Harami."

"Who ordered my capture?" inquired Brent. "Muhammad ez Zahir?"

"Muhammad only does as he is ordered," returned the guard. "None gives orders in Rub el Harami save Abd el Khafid. He is absolute lord save where the customs of the city are involved. Not even the prince of the Black Tigers can change the customs of Rub el Harami. It was a city of thieves before the days of Genghis Khan. What its name was first, none knows; the Arabs call it Rub el Harami, the Abode of Thieves, and the name has stuck."

"It is an outlaw city?"

"It has never owned a lord save the prince of the Black Tigers," boasted the guard. "It pays no taxes to any save him—and to Shaitan."

"What do you mean, to Shaitan?" demanded Shirkuh.

"It is an ancient custom," answered the guard. "Each year a hundred-weight of gold is given as an offering to Shaitan, so the city shall prosper. It is sealed in a secret cave somewhere near the city, but where no man knows, save the prince and the council of imams."

"Devil worship!" snorted Shirkuh. "It is an offense to Allah!"

"It is an ancient custom," defended the guard.

Shirkuh strode off, as if scandalized, and Brent lapsed into disappointed silence. He wrapped himself in Shirkuh's cloak as well as he could and slept.

They were up before dawn and pushing through the hills until they breasted a sweeping wall, down which the trail wound, and saw a rocky plain set in the midst of bare mountain chains, and the flat-topped towers of Rub el Harami rising before them.

They had not halted for the midday meal. As they neared the city, the trail became a well-traveled road. They overtook or met men on horses, men walking and driving laden mules. Brent remembered that it had been said that only stolen goods entered Rub el Harami. Its inhabitants were the scum of the hills, and the men they encountered looked it. Brent found himself comparing them with Shirkuh. The man was a wild outlaw, who boasted of his bloody crimes, but he was a clean-cut barbarian. He differed from these as a gray wolf differs from mangy alley curs.

He eyed all they met or passed with a gaze half naive, half challenging. He was boyishly interested; he was ready to fight at the flick of a turban end, and gave the road to no man. He was the youth of the world incarnated, credulous, merry, hot-headed, generous, cruel, and arrogant. And Brent knew his life hung on the young savage's changing whims.

Rub el Harami was a walled city standing in the narrow rock-strewn plain hemmed in by bare hills. A battery of field pieces could have

knocked down its walls with a dozen volleys—but the army never marched that could have dragged field pieces over the road that led to it through the Pass of Nadir Khan. Its gray walls loomed bleakly above the gray dusty waste of the small plain. A chill wind from the northern peaks brought a tang of snow and started the dust spinning. Well curbs rose gauntly here and there on the plain, and near each well stood a cluster of squalid huts. Peasants in rags bent their backs over sterile patches that yielded grudging crops—mere smudges on the dusty expanse. The low-hanging sun turned the dust to a bloody haze in the air, as the troop with its prisoner trudged on weary horses across the plain to the gaunt city.

Beneath a lowering arch, flanked by squat watchtowers, an iron-bolted gate stood open, guarded by a dozen swashbucklers whose girdles bristled with daggers. They clicked the bolts of their German rifles and stared arrogantly about them, as if itching to practice on some living target.

The troop halted, and the captain of the guard swaggered forth, a giant with bulging muscles and a henna-stained beard.

"Thy names and business!" he roared, glaring intolerantly at Brent.

"My name you know as well as you know your own," growled Muhammad ez Zahir. "I am taking a prisoner into the city, by order of Abd el Khafid."

"Pass, Muhammad ez Zahir," growled the captain. "But who is this Kurd?"

Muhammad grinned wolfishly, as if at a secret jest.

"An adventurer who seeks admission—Shirkuh, of the Jebel Jawur."

While they were speaking, a richly clad, powerfully built man on a white mare rode out of the gate and halted, unnoticed, behind the guardsmen. The henna-bearded captain turned toward Shirkuh who had dismounted to get a pebble out of his stallion's hoof.

"Are you one of the clan?" he demanded. "Do you know the secret signs?"

"I have not yet been accepted," answered Shirkuh, turning to face him. "Men tell me I must be passed upon by the council of imams."

"Aye, if you reach them! Does any chief of the city speak for you?"

"I am a stranger," replied Shirkuh shortly.

"We like not strangers in Rub el Harami," said the captain. "There are but three ways a stranger may enter the city. As a captive, like that infidel dog yonder; as one vouched for and indorsed by some established

chief of the city; or"—he showed yellow fangs in an evil grin—"as the slayer of some fighting man of the city!"

He shifted the rifle to his right hand and slapped the butt with his left palm. Sardonic laughter rose about them, the dry, strident, cruel cackling of the hills. Those who laughed knew that in any kind of fight between a stranger and a man of the city every foul advantage would be taken. For a stranger to be forced into a formal duel with a Black Tiger was tantamount to signing his death warrant. Brent, rigid with sudden concern, guessed this from the vicious laughter.

But Shirkuh did not seem abashed.

"It is an ancient custom?" he asked naively, dropping a hand to his girdle.

"Ancient as Islam!" assured the giant captain, towering above him. "A tried warrior, with weapons in his hands, thou must slay!"

"Why, then—"

Shirkuh laughed, and as he laughed, he struck. His motion was as quick as the blurring stroke of a cobra. In one movement he whipped the dagger from his girdle and struck upward under the captain's bearded chin. The Afghan had no opportunity to defend himself, no chance to lift rifle or draw sword. Before he realized Shirkuh's intention, he was down, his life gushing out of his sliced jugular.

An instant of stunned silence was broken by wild yells of laughter from the lookers-on and the men of the troop. It was just such a devilish jest as the bloodthirsty hill natures appreciated. There is humor in the hills, but it is a fiendish humor. The strange youth had shown a glint of the hard wolfish sophistication that underlay his apparent callowness.

But the other guardsmen cried out angrily and surged forward, with a sharp rattle of rifle bolts. Shirkuh sprang back and tore his rifle from its saddle scabbard. Muhammad and his men looked on cynically. It was none of their affair. They had enjoyed Shirkuh's grim and bitter jest; they would equally enjoy the sight of him being shot down by his victim's comrades.

But before a finger could crook on a trigger, the man on the white mare rode forward, beating down the rifles of the guards with a riding whip.

"Stop!" he commanded. "The Kurd is in the right. He slew according to the law. The man's weapons were in his hands, and he was a tried warrior."

"But he was taken unaware!" they clamored.

"The more fool he!" was the callous retort. "The law makes no point of that. I speak for the Kurd. And I am Alafdal Khan, once of Waziristan."

"Nay, we know you, my lord!" The guardsmen salaamed profoundly.

Muhammad ez Zahir gathered up his reins and spoke to Shirkuh.

"You luck still holds, Kurd!"

"Allah loves brave men!" Shirkuh laughed, swinging into the saddle.

Muhammad ez Zahir rode under the arch, and the troop streamed after him, their captive in their midst. They traversed a short narrow street, winding between walls of mud and wood, where overhanging balconies almost touched each other over the crooked way. Brent saw women staring at them through the lattices. The cavalcade emerged into a square much like that of any other hill town. Open shops and stalls lined it, and it was thronged by a colorful crowd. But there was a difference. The crowd was too heterogeneous, for one thing; then there was too much wealth in sight. The town was prosperous, but with a sinister, unnatural prosperity. Gold and silk gleamed on barefooted ruffians whose proper garb was rags, and the goods displayed in the shops seemed mute evidence of murder and pillage. This was in truth a city of thieves.

The throng was lawless and turbulent, its temper set on a hair trigger. There were human skulls nailed above the gate, and in an iron cage made fast to the wall Brent saw a human skeleton. Vultures perched on the bars. Brent felt cold sweat bead his flesh. That might well be his own fate—to starve slowly in an iron cage hung above the heads of the jeering crowd. A sick abhorrence and a fierce hatred of this vile city swept over him.

As they rode into the city, Alafdal Khan drew his mare alongside Shirkuh's stallion. The Waziri was a bull-shouldered man with a bushy purple-stained beard and wide, ox-like eyes.

"I like you, Kurd," he announced. "You are in truth a mountain lion. Take service with me. A masterless man is a broken blade in Rub el Harami."

"I thought Abd el Khafid was master of Rub el Harami," said Shirkuh.

"Aye! But the city is divided into factions, and each man who is wise follows one chief or the other. Only picked men with long years of service behind them are chosen for Abd el Khafid's house troops. The others follow various lords, who are each responsible to the emir."

"I am my own man!" boasted Shirkuh. "But you spoke for me at the gate. What devil's custom is this, when a stranger must kill a man to enter?"

"In old times it was meant to test a stranger's valor, and make sure that each man who came into Rub el Harami was a tried warrior," said Alafdal. "For generations, however, it has become merely an excuse to murder strangers. Few come uninvited. You should have secured the patronage of some chief of the clan before you came. Then you could have entered the city peacefully."

"I knew no man in the clan," muttered Shirkuh. "There are no Black Tigers in the Jebel Jawur. But men say the clan is coming to life, after slumbering in idleness for a hundred years, and—"

A disturbance in the crowd ahead of them interrupted him. The people in the square had massed thickly about the troop, slowing their progress, and growling ominously at the sight of Brent. Curses were howled, and bits of offal and refuse thrown, and now a scarred Shinwari stooped and caught up a stone which he cast at the white man. The missile grazed Brent's ear, drawing blood, and with a curse Shirkuh drove his horse against the fellow, knocking him down. A deep roar rose from the mob, and it surged forward menacingly. Shirkuh dragged his rifle from under his knee, but Alafdal Khan caught his arm

"Nay, brother! Do not fire. Leave these dogs to me."

He lifted his voice in a bull's bellow which carried across the square.

"Peace, my children! This is Shirkuh, of Jebel Jawur, who has come to be one of us. I speak for him—I, Alafdal Khan!"

A cheer rose from the crowd whose spirit was as vagrant and changeable as a leaf tossed in the wind. Obviously the Waziri was popular in Rub el Harami, and Brent guessed why as he saw Alafdal thrust a hand into a money pouch he carried at his girdle. But before the chief could completely mollify the mob by flinging a handful of coins among them, another figure entered the central drama. It was a Ghilzai who reined his horse through the crowd—a slim man, but tall and broad-shouldered, and one who looked as though his frame were of woven steel wires. He wore a rose-colored turban; a rich girdle clasped his supple waist, and his caftan was embroidered with gilt thread. A clump of ruffians on horseback followed him.

He drew rein in front of Alafdal Khan, whose beard instantly bristled while his wide eyes dilated truculently. Shirkuh quietly exchanged his rifle for his saber.

"That is my man your Kurd rode down," said the Ghilzai, indicating the groaning ruffian now dragging his bleeding hulk away. "Do you set your men on mine in the streets, Alafdal Khan?"

The people fell tensely silent, their own passions forgotten in the rivalry of the chiefs. Even Brent could tell that this was no new antagonism, but the rankling of an old quarrel. The Ghilzai was alert, sneering, coldly provocative. Alafdal Khan was belligerent, angry, yet uneasy.

"Your man began it, Ali Shah," he growled. "Stand aside. We take a prisoner to the Abode of the Damned."

Brent sensed that Alafdal Khan was avoiding the issue. Yet he did not lack followers. Hard-eyed men with weapons in their girdles, some on foot, some on horseback, pushed through the throng and ranged themselves behind the Waziri. It was not physical courage Alafdal lacked, but some fiber of decision.

At Alafdal's declaration, which placed him in the position of one engaged in the emir's business, and therefore not to be interfered with—a statement at which Muhammad ez Zahir smiled cynically—Ali Shah hesitated, and the tense instant might have smoldered out, had it not been for one of the Ghilzai's men—a lean Orakzai, with hashish madness in his eyes. Standing in the edge of the crowd, he rested a rifle over the shoulder of the man in front of him and fired point-blank at the Waziri chief. Only the convulsive start of the owner of the shoulder saved Alafdal Khan. The bullet tore a piece out of his turban, and before the Orakzai could fire again, Shirkuh rode at him and cut him down with a stroke that split his head to the teeth.

It was like throwing a lighted match into a powder mill. In an instant the square was a seething battle ground, where the adherents of the rival chiefs leaped at each others' throats with all the zeal ordinary men generally display in fighting somebody else's battle. Muhammad ez Zahir, unable to force his way through the heaving mass, stolidly drew his troopers in a solid ring around his prisoner. He had not interfered when the stones were cast. Stones would not kill the Feringi, and he was concerned only in getting Brent to his master alive and able to talk. He did not care how bloody and battered he might be. But in this melee a chance stroke might kill the infidel. His men faced outward, beating off attempts to get at their prisoner. Otherwise they took no part in the fighting. This brawl between rival chiefs, common enough in Rub el Harami, was none of Muhammad's affair.

Brent watched fascinated. But for modern weapons it might have been a riot in ancient Babylon, Cairo, or Nineveh—the same old jealousies, same old passions, same old instinct of the common man fiercely to take up some lordling's quarrel. He saw gaudily clad horsemen curvetting and caracoling as they slashed at each other with tulwars that were arcs

of fire in the setting sun, and he saw ragged rascals belaboring each other with staves and cobblestones. No more shots were fired; it seemed an unwritten law that firearms were not to be used in street fighting. Or perhaps ammunition was too precious for them to waste on each other.

But it was bloody enough while it lasted, and it littered the square with stunned and bleeding figures. Men with broken heads went down under the stamping hoofs, and some of them did not get up again. Ali Shah's retainers outnumbered Alafdal Khan's, but the majority of the crowd were for the Waziri, as evidenced by the fragments of stone and wood that whizzed about the ears of his enemies. One of these well-meant missiles almost proved their champion's undoing. It was a potsherd, hurled with more zeal than accuracy at Ali Shah. It missed him and crashed full against Alafdal's bearded chin with an impact that filled the Waziri's eyes with tears and stars.

As he reeled in his saddle, his sword arm sinking, Ali Shah spurred at him, lifting his tulwar. There was murder in the air, while the blinded giant groped dazedly, sensing his peril. But Shirkuh was between them, lunging through the crowd like a driven bolt. He caught the swinging tulwar on his saber, and struck back, rising in his stirrups to add force to the blow. His blade struck flat, but it broke the left arm Ali Shah threw up in desperation, and beat down on the Ghilzai's turban with a fury that stretched the chief bleeding and senseless on the trampled cobblestones.

A gratified yell went up from the crowd, and Ali Shah's men fell back, confused and intimidated. Then there rose a thunder of hoofs, and a troop of men in compact formation swept the crowd to right and left as they plunged ruthlessly through. They were tall men in black chain armor and spired helmets, and their leader was a black-bearded Yusufzai, resplendent in gold-chased steel.

"Give way!" he ordered, with the hard arrogance of authority. "Clear the suk, in the name of Abd el Khafid, emir of Rub el Harami!"

"The Black Tigers!" muttered the people, giving back, but watching Alafdal Khan expectantly.

For an instant it seemed that the Waziri would defy the riders. His beard bristled, his eyes dilated—then he wavered, shrugged his giant shoulders, and sheathed his tulwar.

"Obey the law, my children," he advised them, and, not to be cheated out of the gesture he loved, he reached into his bulging pouch and sent a golden shower over their heads.

They went scrambling after the coins, shouting, and cheering, and laughing, and somebody yelled audaciously:

"Hail, Alafdal Khan, emir of Rub el Harami!"

Alafdal's countenance was an almost comical mingling of vanity and apprehension. He eyed the Yusufzai captain sidewise half triumphantly, half uneasily, tugging at his purple beard. The captain said crisply:

"Let there be an end to this nonsense. Alafdal Khan, the emir will hold you to account if any more fighting occurs. He is weary of this quarrel."

"Ali Shah started it!" roared the Waziri heatedly.

The crowd rumbled menacingly behind him, stooping furtively for stones and sticks. Again that half-exultant, half-frightened look flitted across Alafdal's broad face. The Yusufzai laughed sardonically.

"Too much popularity in the streets may cost a man his head in the palace!" said he, and turning away, he began clearing the square.

The mob fell back sullenly, growling in their beards, not exactly flinching from the prodding lances of the riders, but retiring grudgingly and with menace in their bearing. Brent believed that all they needed to rise in bloody revolt was a determined leader. Ali Shah's men picked up their senseless chief and lifted him into his saddle; they moved off across the suk with the leader lolling drunkenly in their midst. The fallen men who were able to stand were hustled to their feet by the Black Tigers.

Alafdal glared after them in a curiously helpless anger, his hand in his purple beard. Then he rumbled like a bear and rode off with his men, the wounded ones swaying on the saddles of their companions. Shirkuh rode with him, and as he reined away, he shot a glance at Brent which the American hoped meant that he was not deserting him.

Muhammad ez Zahir led his men and captive out of the square and down a winding street, cackling sardonically in his beard as he went.

"Alafdal Khan is ambitious and fearful, which is a sorry combination. He hates Ali Shah, yet avoids bringing the feud to a climax. He would like to be emir of Rub el Harami, but he doubts his own strength. He will never do anything but guzzle wine and throw money to the multitude. The fool! Yet he fights like a hungry bear once he is roused."

A trooper nudged Brent and pointed ahead of them to a squat building with iron-barred windows.

"The Abode of the Damned, Feringi!" he said maliciously. "No prisoner ever escaped therefrom—and none ever spent more than one night there."

At the door Muhammad gave his captive in charge of a one-eyed Sudozai with a squad of brutal-looking blacks armed with whips and

bludgeons. These led him up a dimly lighted corridor to a cell with a barred door. Into this they thrust him. They placed on the floor a vessel of scummy water and a flat loaf of moldy bread, and then filed out. The key turned in the lock with a chillingly final sound.

A few last rays of the sunset's afterglow found their way through the tiny, high, thick-barred window. Brent ate and drank mechanically, a prey to sick forebodings. All his future hinged now on Shirkuh, and Brent felt it was a chance as thin as a sword edge. Stiffly he stretched himself on the musty straw heaped in one corner. As he sank to sleep, he wondered dimly if there had ever really been a trim, exquisitely tailored person named Stuart Brent who slept in a soft bed and drank iced drinks out of slim-stemmed glasses, and danced with pink-and-white visions of feminine loveliness under tinted electric lights. It was a far-off dream; this was reality—rotten straw that crawled with vermin, smelly water and stale bread, and the scent of spilled blood that still seemed to cling to his garments after the fight in the square.

Chapter 4

Crooked Paths

Brent awoke with the light of a torch dazzling his eyes. This torch was placed in a socket in the wall, and when his eyes became accustomed to the wavering glare, he saw a tall, powerful man in a long satin caftan and a green turban with a gold brooch. From beneath this turban, wide gray eyes, as cold as a sword of ice, regarded him contemplatively.

"You are Stuart Brent."

It was a statement, not a question. The man spoke English with only a hint of an accent; but that hint was unmistakable. Brent made no reply. This was Abd el Khafid, of course, but it was like meeting a character of fable clothed in flesh. Abd el Khafid and El Borak had begun to take on the appearance in Brent's worn brain of symbolic will-o'-the-wisps, nonexistent twin phantoms luring him to his doom. But here stood half of that phantasm, living and speaking. Perhaps El Borak was equally real, after all.

Brent studied the man almost impersonally. He looked Oriental enough in that garb, with his black pointed beard. But his hands were too big for a high-caste Moslem's hands—sinewy, ruthless hands that looked as if they could grasp either a sword hilt or a scepter. The body under the caftan appeared hard and capable—not with the tigerish suppleness of Shirkuh, but strong and quick, nevertheless.

"My spies watched you all the way from San Francisco," said Abd el Khafid. "They knew when you bought a steamship ticket to India. Their reports were wired by relays to Kabul—I have my secret wireless sets and spies in every capital of Asia—and thence here. I have my wireless set hidden back in the hills, here. Inconvenient, but the people would not stand for it in the city. It was a violation of custom. Rub el Harami rests on a foundation of customs—irksome at times, but mostly useful.

"I knew you would not have immediately sailed for India had not Richard Stockton told you something before he died, and I thought at first of having you killed as soon as you stepped off the ship. Then I

decided to wait a bit and try to learn just how much you knew before I had you removed. Spies sent me word that you were coming North—that apparently you had told the British only that you wished to find El Borak. I knew then that Stockton had told you to find El Borak and tell him my true identity. Stockton was a human bloodhound, but it was only through the indiscretion of a servant that he learned the secret.

"Stockton knew that the only man who could harm me was El Borak. I am safe from the English here, safe from the ameer. El Borak could cause me trouble, if he suspected my true identity. As it is, so long as he considers me merely Abd el Khafid, a Moslem fanatic from Samarkand, he will not interfere. But if he should learn who I really am, he would guess why I am here, and what I am doing.

"So I let you come up the Khyber unmolested. It was evident by this time that you intended giving the news directly to El Borak, and my spies told me El Borak had vanished in the hills. I knew when you left Kabul, searching for him, and I sent Muhammad ez Zahir to capture and bring you here. You were easy to trace—a Melakani wandering in the hills with a band of Kabuli soldiery. So you entered Rub el Harami at last the only way an infidel may enter—as a captive, destined for the slave block."

"You are an infidel," retorted Brent. "If I expose your true identity to these people—"

The strong shoulders under the caftan shrugged.

"The imams know I was born a Russian. They know likewise that I am a true Moslem—that I foreswore Christianity and publicly acknowledged Islam, years ago. I cut all ties that bound me to Feringistan. My name is Abd el Khafid. I have a right to wear this green turban. I am a hadji. I have made the pilgrimage to Mecca. Tell the people of Rub el Harami that I am a Christian. They will laugh at you. To the masses I am a Moslem like themselves; to the council of imams I am a true convert."

Brent said nothing; he was in a trap he could not break.

"You are but a fly in my web," said Abd el Khafid contemptuously. "So unimportant that I intend to tell you my full purpose. It is good practice speaking in English. Sometimes I almost forget European tongues.

"The Black Tigers compose a very ancient society. It originally grew out of the bodyguard of Genghis Khan. After his death they settled in Rub el Harami, even then an outlaw city, and became the ruling caste. It expanded into a secret society, always with its headquarters here in this city. It soon became Moslem, a clan of fanatical haters of the Feringi, and

the emirs sold the swords of their followers to many leaders of jihad, the holy war.

"It flourished, then decayed. A hundred years ago the clan was nearly exterminated in a hill feud, and the organization became a shadow, limited to the rulers and officials of Rub el Harami alone. But they still held the city. Ten years ago I cut loose from my people and became a Moslem, heart and soul. In my wanderings I discovered the Black Tigers, and saw their potentialities. I journeyed to Rub el Harami, and here I stumbled upon a secret that set my brain on fire.

"But I run ahead of my tale. It was only three years ago that I gained admittance into the clan. It was during the seven years preceding that, seven years of wandering, fighting, and plotting all over Asia, that clashed more than once with El Borak, and learned how dangerous the man was—and that we must always be enemies, since our interests and ideals were so antithetical. So when I came to Rub el Harami, I simply dropped out of sight of El Borak and all the other adventurers that like him and me rove the waste places of the East. Before I came to the city, I spent months in erasing my tracks. Vladimir Jakrovitch, known also as Akbar Shah, disappeared entirely. Not even El Borak connected him with Abd el Khafid, wanderer from Samarkand. I had stepped into a completely new role and personality. If El Borak should see me, he might suspect—but he never shall, except as my captive.

"Without interference from him I began to build up the clan, first as a member of the ranks, from which I swiftly rose, then as prince of the clan, to which position I attained less than a year ago, by means and intrigues I shall not inflict upon you. I have reorganized the society, expanded it as of old, placed my spies in every country in the world. Of course El Borak must have heard that the Black Tiger was stirring again; but to him it would mean only the spasmodic activity of a band of fanatics, without international significance.

"But he would guess its true meaning if he knew that Abd el Khafid is the man he fought up and down the length and breadth of Asia, years ago!" The man's eyes blazed, his voice vibrated. In his super-egotism he found intense satisfaction in even so small and hostile an audience as his prisoner. "Did you ever hear of the Golden Cave of Shaitan el Kabir?

"It lies within a day's ride of the city, so carefully hidden that an army of men might search for it forever, in vain. But I have seen it! It is a sight to madden a man—heaped from floor to roof with blocks of gold! It is the offerings to Shaitan—custom dating from old heathen days. Each year a hundred-weight of gold, levied on the people of the city, is melted

and molded in small blocks, and carried and placed in the cave by the imams and the emir. And—"

"Do you mean to tell me that a treasure of that size exists near this city of thieves?" demanded Brent incredulously.

"Why not? Have you not heard the city's customs are unbending as iron? Only the imams know the secret of the cave; the knowledge is handed down from imam to imam, from emir to emir. The people do not know; they suppose the gold is taken by Shaitan to his infernal abode. If they knew, they would not touch it. Take gold dedicated to the Shaitan the Damned? You little know the Oriental mind. Not a Moslem in the world would touch a grain of it, even though he were starving.

"But I am free of such superstitions. Within a few days the gift to Shaitan will be placed in the cave. It will be another year then before the imams visit the cavern again. And before that time comes around, I will have accomplished my purpose. I will secretly remove the gold from the cave, working utterly alone, and will melt it down and recast it in different forms. Oh, I understand the art and have the proper equipment. When I have finished, none can recognize it as the accursed gold of Shaitan.

"With it I can feed and equip an army! I can buy rifles, ammunition, machine guns, airplanes, and mercenaries to fly them. I can arm every cutthroat in the Himalayas! These hill tribes have the makings of the finest army in the world—all they need is equipment. And that equipment I will supply. There are plenty of European sources ready to sell me whatever I want. And the gold of Shaitan will supply my needs!" The man was sweating, his eyes blazing as if madness like molten gold had entered his veins. "The world never dreamed of such a treasure-trove! The golden offerings of a thousand years heaped from floor to ceiling! And it is mine!"

"The imams will kill you!" whispered Brent, appalled.

"They will not know for nearly a year. I will invent a lie to explain my great wealth. They will not suspect until they open the cave next year. Then it will be too late. Then I will be free from the Black Tigers. I will be an emperor!

"With my great new army I will sweep down into the plains of India. I will lead a horde of Afghans, Persians, Pathans, Arabs, Turkomen that will make up for discipline by numbers and ferocity. The Indian Moslems will rise! I will sweep the English out of the land! I will rule supreme from Samarkand to Cape Comorin!"

"Why do you tell me this?" asked Brent. "What's to prevent me from betraying you to the imams?"

"You will never see an imam," was the grim reply. "I will see that you have no opportunity to talk. But enough of this: I allowed you to come alive to Rub el Harami only because I wanted to learn what secret password Stockton gave you to use with the British officials. I know you had one, by the speed and ease with which you were passed up to Kabul. I have long sought to get one of my spies into the very vitals of the secret service. This password will enable me to do so. Tell me what it is."

Brent laughed sardonically, then. "You're going to kill me anyway. I certainly don't intend to deprive myself of this one tiny crumb of retaliation. I'm not going to put another weapon in your filthy hands."

"You're a fool!" exclaimed Abd el Khafid, with a flash of anger too sudden, too easily aroused for complete self-confidence. The man was on edge, and not so sure of himself as he seemed.

"Doubtless," agreed Brent tranquilly. "And what about it?"

"Very well!" Abd el Khafid restrained himself by an obvious effort. "I cannot touch you to-night. You are the property of the city, according to age-old custom not even I can ignore. But to-morrow you will be sold on the block to the highest bidder. No one wants a Feringi slave, except for the pleasure of torturing. They are too soft for hard work. I will buy you for a few rupees, and then there will be nothing to prevent my making you talk. Before I fling your mangled carcass out on the garbage heap for the vultures, you will have told me everything I want to know."

Abruptly he turned and stalked out of the dungeon. Brent heard his footsteps reecho hollowly on the flags of the corridor. A wisp of conversation came back faintly. Then a door slammed and there was nothing but silence and a star blinking dimly through the barred window.

In another part of the city Shirkuh lounged on a silken divan, under the glow of bronze lamps that struck sparkling glints from the rich wine brimming in golden goblets. Shirkuh drank deep, smacking his lips, desert-fashion, as a matter of politeness to his host. He seemed to have no thought in the world except the quenching of his thirst, but Alafdal Khan, on another couch, knit his brows in perplexity. He was uncovering astonishing discoveries in this wild young warrior from the western mountains—unsuspected subtleties and hidden depths.

"Why do you wish to buy this Melakani?" he demanded.

"He is necessary to us," asserted Shirkuh. With the bronze lamps throwing his face into half shadow, the boyishness was gone, replaced by a keen hawk-like hardness and maturity.

"We must have him. I will buy him in the suk tomorrow, and he will aid us in making you emir of Rub el Harami."

"But you have no money!" expostulated the Waziri.

"You must lend it to me."

"But Abd el Khafid desires him," argued Alafdal Khan. "He sent Muhammad ez Zahir out to capture him. It would be unwise to bid against the emir."

Shirkuh emptied his cup before answering.

"From what you have told me of the city," he said presently, "this is the situation. Only a certain per cent of the citizens are Black Tigers. They constitute a ruling caste and a sort of police force to support the emir. The emirs are complete despots, except when checked by customs whose roots are lost in the mists of antiquity. They rule with an iron rein over a turbulent and lawless population, composed of the dregs and scum of Central Asia."

"That is true," agreed Alafdal Khan.

"But in the past, the people have risen and deposed a ruler who trampled on tradition, forcing the Black Tigers to elevate another prince. Very well. You have told me that the number of Black Tigers in the city is comparatively small at present. Many have been sent as spies or emissaries to other regions. You yourself are high in the ranks of the clan."

"An empty honor," said Alafdal bitterly. "My advice is never asked in council. I have no authority except with my own personal retainers. And they are less than those of Abd el Khafid or Ali Shah."

"It is upon the crowd in the streets we must rely," replied Shirkuh. "You are popular with the masses. They are almost ready to rise under you, were you to declare yourself. But that will come later. They need a leader and a motive. We will supply both. But first we must secure the Feringi. With him safe in our hands, we will plan our next move in the game."

Alafdal Khan scowled, his powerful fingers knotting about the slender stem of the wineglass. Conflicting emotions of vanity, ambition, and fear played across his broad face.

"You talk high!" he complained. "You ride into Rub el Harami, a penniless adventurer, and say you can make me emir of the city! How do I know you are not an empty bag of wind? How can you make me prince of Rub el Harami?"

Shirkuh set down his wineglass and rose, folding his arms. He looked somberly down at the astounded Waziri, all naiveness and reckless humor gone out of his face. He spoke a single phrase, and Alafdal

ejaculated stranglingly and lurched to his feet, spilling his wine. He reeled like a drunkard, clutching at the divan, his dilated eyes searching, with a fierce intensity, the dark, immobile face before him.

"Do you believe, now, that I can make you emir of Rub el Harami?" demanded Shirkuh.

"Who could doubt it?" panted Alafdal. "Have you not put kings on their thrones? But you are mad, to come here! One word to the mob and they would rend you limb from limb!"

"You will not speak that word," said Shirkuh with conviction. "You will not throw away the lordship of Rub el Harami."

And Alafdal nodded slowly, the fire of ambition surging redly in his eyes.

Chapter 5

Swords in the "Suk"

Dawn streaming grayly through the barred window awakened Brent. He reflected that it might be the last dawn he would see as a free man. He laughed wryly at the thought. Free? Yet at least he was still a captive, not a slave. There was a vast difference between a captive and a slave—a revolting gulf, in which, crossing, a man or woman's self-respect must be forever lost.

Presently black slaves came with a jug of cheap sour wine, and food—chupatties, rice cakes, dried dates. Royal fare compared with his supper the night before. A Tajik barber shaved him and trimmed his hair, and he was allowed the luxury of scrubbing himself pink in the prison bath.

He was grateful for the opportunity, but the whole proceeding was disgusting. He felt like a prize animal being curried and groomed for display. Some whim prompted him to ask the barber where the proceeds of his sale would go, and the man answered into the city treasury, to keep the walls repaired. A singularly unromantic usage for the price of a human being, but typical of the hard practicality of the East. Brent thought fleetingly of Shirkuh, then shrugged his shoulders. Apparently the Kurd had abandoned him to his fate.

Clad only in a loin cloth and sandals, he was led from the prison by the one-eyed Sudozai and a huge black slave. Horses were waiting for them at the gate, and he was ordered to mount. Between the slave masters he clattered up the street before the sun was up. But already the crowd was gathering in the square. The auctioning of a white man was an event, and there was, furthermore, a feeling of expectancy in the air, sharpened by the fight of the day before.

In the midst of the square there stood a thick platform built solidly of stone blocks; it was perhaps four feet high and thirty feet across. On this platform the Sudozai took his stand, grasping a piece of rope which was

tied loosely about Brent's neck. Behind them stood the stolid Soudanese with a drawn scimitar on his shoulder.

Before, and to one side of the block the crowd had left a space clear, and there Abd el Khafid sat his horse, amid a troop of Black Tigers, bizarre in their ceremonial armor. Ceremonial it must be, reflected Brent; it might turn a sword blade, but it would afford no protection against a bullet. But it was one of the many fantastic customs of the city, where tradition took the place of written law. The bodyguard of the emir had always worn black armor. Therefore, they would always wear it. Muhammad ez Zahir commanded them. Brent did not see Ali Shah.

Another custom was responsible for the presence of Abd el Khafid, instead of sending a servant to buy the American for him; not even the emir could bid by proxy.

As he climbed upon the block, Brent heard a cheer, and saw Alafdal Khan and Shirkuh pushing through the throng on their horses. Behind them came thirty-five warriors, well armed and well mounted. The Waziri chief was plainly nervous, but Shirkuh strutted like a peacock, even on horseback, before the admiring gaze of the throng.

At the ringing ovation given them, annoyance flitted across Abd el Khafid's broad, pale face, and that expression was followed by a more sinister darkening that boded ill for the Waziri and his ally.

The auction began abruptly and undramatically. The Sudozai began in a singsong voice to narrate the desirable physical points of the prisoner, when Abd el Khafid cut him short and offered fifty rupees.

"A hundred!" instantly yelled Shirkuh.

Abd el Khafid turned an irritated and menacing glare on him. Shirkuh grinned insolently, and the crowd hugged itself, sensing a conflict of the sort it loved.

"Three hundred!" snarled the emir, meaning to squelch this irreverent vagabond without delay.

"Four hundred!" shouted Shirkuh.

"A thousand!" cried Abd el Khafid in a passion.

"Eleven hundred!"

And Shirkuh deliberately laughed in the emir's face, and the crowd laughed with him. Abd el Khafid appeared at a disadvantage, for he was a bit confused at this unexpected opposition, and had lost his temper too easily. The fierce eyes of the crowd missed nothing of this, for it is on such points the wolf pack ceaselessly and pitilessly judges its leader. Their sympathies swung to the laughing, youthful stranger, sitting his horse with careless ease.

Brent's heart had leaped into his throat at the first sound of Shirkuh's voice. If the man meant to aid him, this was the most obvious way to take. Then his heart sank again at the determination in Abd el Khafid's angry face. The emir would never let his captive slip between his fingers. And though the Gift of Shaitan was not yet in the Russian's possession, yet doubtless his private resources were too great for Shirkuh. In a contest of finances Shirkuh was foredoomed to lose.

Brent's conclusions were not those of Abd el Khafid. The emir shot a glance at Alafdal Khan, shifting uneasily in his saddle. He saw the beads of moisture gathered on the Waziri's broad brow, and realized a collusion between the men. New anger blazed in the emir's eyes.

In his way Abd el Khafid was miserly. He was willing to squander gold like water on a main objective, but it irked him exceedingly to pay an exorbitant price to attain a minor goal. He knew—every man in the crowd knew now—that Alafdal Khan was backing Shirkuh. And all men knew that the Waziri was one of the wealthiest men in the city, and a prodigal spender. Abd el Khafid's nostrils pinched in with wrath as he realized the heights of extravagance to which he might be forced, did Shirkuh persist in this impertinent opposition to his wishes. The Gift of Shaitan was not yet in his hands, and his private funds were drained constantly by the expenses of his spy system and his various intrigues. He raised the bid in a harsh, anger-edged voice.

Brent, studying the drama with the keen, understanding eyes of a gambler, realized that Abd el Khafid had got off on the wrong foot. Shirkuh's bearing appealed to the crowd. They laughed at his sallies, which were salty and sparkling with all the age-old ribaldry of the East, and they hissed covertly at the emir, under cover of their neighbors.

The bidding mounted to unexpected heights. Abd el Khafid, white about the nostrils as he sensed the growing hostility of the crowd, did not speak except to snarl his offers. Shirkuh rolled in his saddle, slapped his thighs, yelled his bids, and defiantly brandished a leathern bag which gave out a musical tinkling.

The excitement of the crowd was at white heat. Ferocity began to edge their yells. Brent, looking down at the heaving mass, had a confused impression of dark, convulsed faces, blazing eyes, and strident voices. Alafdal Khan was sweating, but he did not interfere, not even when the bidding rose above fifty thousand rupees.

It was more than a bidding contest; it was the subtle play of two opposing wills, as hard and supple as tempered steel. Abd el Khafid

realized that if he withdrew now, his prestige would never recover from the blow. In his rage he made his first mistake.

He rose suddenly in his stirrups, clapping his hands.

"Let there be an end to this madness!" he roared. "No white slave is worth this much! I declare the auction closed! I buy this dog for sixty thousand rupees! Take him to my house, slave master!"

A roar of protest rose from the throng, and Shirkuh drove his horses alongside the block and leaped off to it, tossing his rein to a Waziri.

"Is this justice?" he shouted. "Is this done according to custom? Men of Rub el Harami, I demand justice! I bid sixty-one thousand rupees. I stand ready to bid more, if necessary! When has an emir been allowed to use his authority to rob a citizen, and cheat the people? Nay, we be thieves—but shall we rob one another? Who is Abd el Khafid, to trample the customs of the city! If the customs are broken, what shall hold you together? Rub el Harami lives only so long as the ancient traditions are observed. Will you let Abd el Khafid destroy them—and you?"

A cataract of straining human voices answered him. The crowd had become a myriad-fanged, flashing-eyed mass of hate.

"Obey the customs!" yelled Shirkuh, and the crowd took up the yell.

"Obey the customs!" It was the thunder of unreined seas, the roar of a storm wind ripping through icy passes. Blindly men seized the slogan, yowling it under a forest of lean arms and clenched fists. Men go mad on a slogan; conquerors have swept to empire, prophets to new world religions on a shouted phrase. All the men in the square were screaming it like a ritual now, rocking and tossing on their feet, fists clenched, froth on their lips. They no longer reasoned; they were a forest of blind human emotions, swayed by the storm wind of a shouted phrase that embodied passion and the urge to action.

Abd el Khafid lost his head. He drew his sword and cut a man who was clawing at his stirrup mouthing: "Obey the customs, emir!" and the spurt of blood edged the yells with murder lust. But as yet the mob was only a blind, raging monster without a head.

"Clear the suk!" shouted Abd el Khafid.

The lances dipped, and the Black Tigers moved forward uncertainly. A hail of stones greeted them.

Shirkuh leaped to the edge of the block, lifting his arms, shouting, cutting the volume of sound by the knifing intensity of his yell.

"Down with Abd el Khafid! Hail, Alafdal Khan, emir of Rub el Harami!"

"Hail, Alafdal Khan!" came back from the crowd like a thunderclap.

Abd el Khafid rose in his stirrups, livid.

"Fools! Are you utterly mad? Shall I call my riders to sweep the streets clear of you?"

Shirkuh threw back his head and laughed like a wolf howling.

"Call them!" he yelled. "Before you can gather them from the taverns and dens, we will stain the square with your blood! Prove your right to rule! You have violated one custom—redeem yourself by another! Men of Rub el Harami, is it not a tradition that an emir must be able to defend his title with the sword?"

"Aye!" roared back the mob.

"Then let Abd el Khafid fight Alafdal Khan!" shouted Shirkuh.

"Let them fight!" bellowed the mob.

Abd el Khafid's eyes turned red. He was sure of his prowess with the sword, but this revolt against his authority enraged him to the point of insanity. This was the very center of his power; here like a spider he had spun his webs, expecting attack on the fringes, but never here. Now he was caught off-guard. Too many trusted henchmen were far afield. Others were scattered throughout the city, useless to him at the moment. His bodyguard was too small to defy the crowd. Mentally he promised himself a feast of hangings and beheadings when he could bring back a sufficient force of men to Rub el Harami. In the meantime he would settle Alafdal's ambitions permanently.

"Kingmaker, eh?" he snarled in Shirkuh's face, as he leaped off his horse to the block. He whipped out his tulwar and swung it around his head, a sheen of silver in the sun. "I'll nail your head to the Herati Gate when I've finished with this ox-eyed fool!"

Shirkuh laughed at him and stepped back, herding the slave masters and their captive to the back of the block. Alafdal Khan was scrambling to the platform, his tulwar in his hand.

He was not fully straightened on the block when Abd el Khafid was on him with the fury of a tornado. The crowd cried out, fearing that the emir's whirlwind speed would envelop the powerful but slower chief. But it was this very swiftness that undid the Russian. In his wild fury to kill, Abd el Khafid forgot judgment. The stroke he aimed at Alafdal's head would have decapitated an ox; but he began it in mid-stride, and its violence threw his descending foot out of line. He stumbled, his blade cut thin air as Alafdal dodged—and then the Waziri's sword was through him.

It was over in a flash. Abd el Khafid had practically impaled himself on the Waziri's blade. The rush, the stroke, the counter-thrust, and the

emir kicking his life out on the stone like a spitted rat—it all happened in a mere tick of time that left the mob speechless.

Shirkuh sprang forward like a panther in the instant of silence while the crowd held its breath and Alafdal gaped stupidly from the red tulwar in his hand to the dead man at his feet.

"Hail to Alafdal Khan, emir of Rub el Harami!" yelled Shirkuh, and the crowd thundered its response.

"On your horse, man, quick!" Shirkuh snarled in Alafdal's ear, thrusting him toward his steed, while seeming to bow him toward it.

The crowd was going mad with the senseless joy of a mob that sees its favorite elevated above them. As Alafdal, still dazed by the rapidity of events, clambered on his horse, Shirkuh turned on the stunned Black Tiger riders.

"Dogs!" he thundered. "Form ranks! Escort your new master to the palace, for his title to be confirmed by the council of imams!"

They were moving unwillingly forward, afraid of the crowd, when a commotion interrupted the flow of events. Ali Shah and forty armed horsemen came pushing their way through the crowd and halted beside the armored riders. The crowd bared its teeth, remembering the Ghilzai's feud with their new emir. Yet there was iron in Ali Shah. He did not flinch, but the old indecision wavered in Alafdal's eyes at the sight of his foe.

Shirkuh turned on Ali Shah with the swift suspicion of a tiger, but before anyone could speak, a wild figure dashed from among the Ghilzais and leaped on the block. It was the Shinwari Shirkuh had ridden down the day before. The man threw a lean arm out toward Shirkuh.

"He is an impostor, brothers!" he screamed. "I thought I knew him yesterday! An hour ago I remembered! He is no Kurd! He is—"

Shirkuh shot the man through the body. He staggered to a rolling fall that carried him to the edge of the block. There he lifted himself on an elbow, and pointed at Shirkuh. Blood spattered the Shinwari's beard as he croaked in the sudden silence:

"I swear by the beard of the Prophet, he is no Moslem!

"He is El Borak!"

A shudder passed over the crowd.

"Obey the customs!" came Ali Shah's sardonic voice in the unnatural stillness. "You killed your emir because of a small custom. There stands a man who has violated the greatest one—your enemy, El Borak!"

There was conviction in his voice, yet no one had really doubted the accusation of the dying Shinwari. The amazing revelation had struck them all dumb, Brent included. But only for an instant.

The blind reaction of the crowd was as instantaneous as it had been before. The tense stillness snapped like a banjo string to a flood of sound:

"Down with the infidels! Death to El Borak! Death to Alafdal Khan!"

To Brent it seemed that the crowd suddenly rose like a foaming torrent and flowed over the edge of the block. Above the deafening clamor he heard the crashing of the big automatic in El Borak's hand. Blood spattered, and in an instant the edge of the block was littered by writhing bodies over which the living tripped and stumbled.

El Borak sprang to Brent, knocked his guards sprawling with the pistol barrel, and seized the dazed captive, dragged him toward the black stallion to which the Waziri still clung. The mob was swarming like wolves about Alafdal and his warriors, and the Black Tigers and Ali Shah were trying to get at them through the press. Alafdal bawled something desperate and incoherent to El Borak as he laid lustily about him with his tulwar. The Waziri chief was almost crazed with bewilderment. A moment ago he had been emir of Rub el Harami, with the crowd applauding him. Now the same crowd was trying to take him out of his saddle.

"Make for your house, Alafdal!" yelled El Borak.

He leaped into the saddle just as the man holding the horse went down with his head shattered by a cobblestone. The wild figure who had killed him leaped forward, gibbering, clawing at the rider's leg. El Borak drove a sharp silver heel into his eye, stretching him bleeding and screaming on the ground. He ruthlessly slashed off a hand that grasped at his rein, and beat back a ring of snarling faces with another swing of his saber.

"Get on behind me, Brent!" he ordered, holding the frantic horse close to the block.

It was only when he heard the English words, with their Southwestern accent, that Brent realized that this was no dream, and he had at last actually encountered the man he had sought.

Men were grasping at Brent. He beat them off with clenched fists, leaped on the stallion behind the saddle. He grasped the cantle, resisting the natural impulse to hold onto the man in front of him. El Borak would need the free use of his body if they won through that seething mass of frantic humanity which packed the square from edge to edge. It was a frothing, dark-waved sea, swirling about islands of horsemen.

But the stallion gathered itself and lunged terribly, knocking over screaming figures like tenpins. Bones snapped under its hoofs. Over the heads of the crowd Brent saw Ali Shah and his riders beating savagely at the mob with their swords, trying to reach Alafdal Khan. Ali Shah was cool no longer; his dark face was convulsed.

The stallion waded through that sea of humanity, its rider slashing right and left, clearing a red road. Brent felt hands clawing at them as they went by, felt the inexorable hoofs grinding over writhing bodies. Ahead of them the Waziris, in a compact formation, were cutting their way toward the west side of the square. Already a dozen of them had been dragged from their saddles and torn to pieces.

El Borak dragged his rifle out of its boot, and it banged redly in the snarling faces, blasting a lane through them. Along that lane the black stallion thundered, to smite with irresistible impact the mass hemming in Alafdal Khan. It burst asunder, and the black horse sped on, while its rider yelled:

"Fall in behind me! We'll make a stand at your house!"

The Waziris closed in behind him. They might have abandoned El Borak if they had had the choice. But the people included them all in their blind rage against the breakers of tradition. As they broke through the press, behind them the Black Tigers brought their rifles into play for the first time. A hail of bullets swept the square, emptying half the Waziri saddles. The survivors dashed into a narrow street.

A mass of snarling figures blocked their way. Men swarmed from the houses to cut them off. Men were surging into the alley behind them. A thrown stone numbed Brent's shoulder. El Borak was using the empty rifle like a mace. In a rush they smote the men massed in the street.

The great black stallion reared and lashed down with mallet—like hoofs, and its rider flailed with a rifle stock now splintered and smeared with blood. But behind them Alafdal's steed stumbled and fell. Alafdal's disordered turban and his dripping tulwar appeared for an instant above a sea of heads and tossing arms. His men plunged madly in to rescue him and were hemmed in by a solid mass of humanity as more men surged down the street from the square. Hamstrung horses went down, screaming. El Borak wheeled his stallion back toward the melee, and as he did so, a swarm of men burst from a narrow alleyway. One seized Brent's leg and dragged him from the horse. As they rolled in the dust, the Afghan heaved Brent below him, mouthing like an ape, and lifted a crooked knife. Brent saw it glint in the sunlight, had an instant's numb realization of doom—then El Borak, reining the rearing stallion around,

leaned from the saddle and smashed the Afghan's skull with his rifle butt.

The man fell across Brent, and then from an arched doorway an ancient blunderbuss banged, and the stallion reared and fell sprawling, half its head shot away. El Borak leaped clear, hit on his feet like a cat, and hurled the broken rifle in the faces of the swarm bearing down on him. He leaped back, tearing his saber clear. It flickered like lightning, and three men fell with cleft heads. But the mob was blood-mad, heedless of death. Brainlessly they rushed against him, flailing with staves and bludgeons, bearing him by their very weight back into an arched doorway. The panels splintered inward under the impact of the hurtling bodies, and El Borak vanished from Brent's sight. The mob poured in after him.

Brent cast off the limp body that lay across him and rose. He had a brief glimpse of a dark writhing mass where the fight swirled about the fallen chief, of Ali Shah and his riders beating at the crowd with their swords—then a bludgeon, wielded from behind, fell glancingly on his head, and he fell blind and senseless into the trampled dust.

Slowly consciousness returned to Stuart Brent. His head ached dully, and his hair was stiff with clotted blood. He struggled to his elbows, though the effort made his head swim sickeningly, and stared about him.

He was lying on a stone floor littered with moldy straw. Light came in from a high-barred window. There was a door with a broad barred wicket. Other figures lay near him and one sat cross-legged, staring at him blankly. It was Alafdal Khan.

The Waziri's beard was torn, his turban gone. His features were swollen, and bruised, and skinned, one ear mangled. Three of his men lay near, one groaning. All had been frightfully beaten, and the man who groaned seemed to have a broken arm.

"They didn't kill us!" marveled Brent.

Alafdal Khan swung his great head like an ox in pain and groaned: "Cursed be the day I laid eyes on El Borak!"

One of the men crept painfully to Brent's side.

"I am Achmet, sahib," he said, spitting blood from a broken tooth. "There lie Hassan and Suleiman. Ali Shah and his men beat the dogs off us, but they had mauled us so that all were dead save these you see. Our lord is like one touched by Allah."

"Are we in the Abode of the Damned?" asked Brent.

"Nay, sahib. We are in the common jail which lies near the west wall."

"Why did they save us from the mob?"

"For a more exquisite end!" Achmet shuddered. "Does the sahib know the death the Black Tigers reserve for traitors?"

"No!" Brent's lips were suddenly dry.

"We will be flayed to-morrow night in the square. It is an old pagan custom. Rub El Harami is a city of customs."

"So I have learned!" agreed Brent grimly. "What of El Borak?"

"I do not know. He vanished into a house, with many men in pursuit. They must have overtaken and slain him."

Chapter 6

The Executioner

When the door in the archway burst inward under the impact of Gordon's iron-hard shoulders, he tumbled backward into a dim, carpeted hallway. His pursuers, crowding after him, jammed in the doorway in a sweating, cursing crush which his saber quickly turned into a shambles. Before they could clear the door of the dead, he was racing down the hall.

He made a turn to the left, ran across a chamber where veiled women squealed and scattered, emerged into a narrow alley, leaped a low wall, and found himself in a small garden. Behind him sounded the clamor of his hunters, momentarily baffled. He crossed the garden and through a partly open door came into a winding corridor. Somewhere a slave was singing in the weird chant of the Soudan, apparently heedless of the dog-fight noises going on upon the other side of the wall. Gordon moved down the corridor, careful to keep his silver heels from clinking. Presently he came to a winding staircase and up it he went, making no noise on the richly carpeted steps. As he came out into an upper corridor, he saw a curtained door and heard beyond it a faint, musical clinking which he recognized. He glided to the partly open door and peered through the curtains. In a richly appointed room, lighted by a tinted skylight, a portly, gray-bearded man sat with his back to the door, counting coins out of a leather bag into an ebony chest. He was so intent on the business at hand that he did not seem aware of the growing clamor below. Or perhaps street riots were too common in Rub el Harami to attract the attention of a thrifty merchant, intent only on increasing his riches.

Pad of swift feet on the stair, and Gordon slipped behind the partly open door. A richly clad young man, with a scimitar in his hand, ran up the steps and hurried to the door. He thrust the curtains aside and paused on the threshold, panting with haste and excitement.

"Father!" he shouted. "El Borak is in the city! Do you not hear the din below? They are hunting him through the houses! He may be in our very house! Men are searching the lower rooms even now!"

"Let them hunt him," replied the old man. "Remain here with me, Abdullah. Shut that door and lock it. El Borak is a tiger."

As the youth turned, instead of the yielding curtain behind him, he felt the contact of a hard, solid body, and simultaneously a corded arm locked about his neck, choking his startled cry. Then he felt the light prick of a knife and he went limp with fright, his scimitar sliding from his nerveless hand. The old man had turned at his son's gasp, and now he froze, gray beneath his beard, his moneybag dangling.

Gordon thrust the youth into the room, not releasing his grip, and let the curtains close behind them.

"Do not move," he warned the old man softly.

He dragged his trembling captive across the room and into a tapestried alcove. Before he vanished into it, he spoke briefly to the merchant:

"They are coming up the stairs, looking for me. Meet them at the door and send them away. Do not play me false by even the flick of an eyelash, if you value your son's life."

The old man's eyes were dilated with pure horror. Gordon well knew the power of paternal affection. In a welter of hate, treachery, and cruelty, it was a real and vital passion, as strong as the throb of the human heart. The merchant might defy Gordon were his own life alone at stake; but the American knew he would not risk the life of his son.

Sandals stamped up the stair, and rough voices shouted. The old man hurried to the door, stumbling in his haste. He thrust his head through the curtains, in response to a bawled question. His reply came plainly to Gordon.

"El Borak? Dogs! Take your clamor from my walls! If El Borak is in the house of Nureddin el Aziz, he is in the rooms below. Ye have searched them? Then look for him elsewhere, and a curse on you!"

The footsteps dwindled down the stair, the voices faded and ceased.

Gordon pushed Abdullah out into the chamber.

"Shut the door!" the American ordered.

Nureddin obeyed, with poisonous eyes but fear-twisted face.

"I will stay in this room a while," said Gordon. "If you play me false—if any man besides yourself crosses that threshold, the first stroke of the fight will plunge my blade in Abdullah's heart."

"What do you wish?" asked Nureddin nervously.

"Give me the key to that door. No, toss it on the table there. Now go forth into the streets and learn if the Feringi, or any of the Waziris live. Then return to me. And if you love your son, keep my secret!"

The merchant left the room without a word, and Gordon bound Abdullah's wrists and ankles with strips torn from the curtains. The youth was gray with fear, incapable of resistance. Gordon laid him on a divan, and reloaded his big automatic. He discarded the tattered remnants of his robe. The white silk shirt beneath was torn, revealing his muscular breast, his close-fitting breeches smeared with blood.

Nureddin returned presently, rapping at the door and naming himself.

Gordon unlocked the door and stepped back, his pistol muzzle a few inches from Abdullah's ear. But the old man was alone when he hurried in. He closed the door and sighed with relief to see Abdullah uninjured.

"What is your news?" demanded Gordon.

"Men comb the city for you, and Ali Shah has declared himself prince of the Black Tigers. The imams have confirmed his claim. The mob has looted Alafdal Khan's house and slain every Waziri they could find. But the Feringi lives, and so likewise does Alafdal Khan and three of his men. They lie in the common jail. To-morrow night they die."

"Do your slaves suspect my presence?"

"Nay. None saw you enter."

"Good. Bring wine and food. Abdullah shall taste it before I eat."

"My slaves will think it strange to see me bearing food!"

"Go to the stair and call your orders down to them. Bid them set the food outside the door and then return downstairs."

This was done, and Gordon ate and drank heartily, sitting cross-legged on the divan at Abdullah's head, his pistol on his lap.

The day wore on. El Borak sat motionless, his eternal vigilance never relaxing. The Afghans watched him, hating and fearing him. As evening approached, he spoke to Nureddin after a silence that had endured for hours.

"Go and procure for me a robe and cloak of black silk, and a black helmet such as is worn by the Black Tigers. Bring me also boots with lower heels than these—and not silver—and a mask such as members of the clan wear on secret missions."

The old man frowned. "The garments I can procure from my own shop. But how am I to secure the helmet and mask?"

"That is thy affair. Gold can open any door, they say. Go!"

As soon as Nureddin had departed, reluctantly, Gordon kicked off his boots, and next removed his mustache, using the keen-edged dagger for a razor. With its removal vanished the last trace of Shirkuh the Kurd.

Twilight had come to Rub el Harami. The room seemed full of a blue mist, blurring objects. Gordon had lighted a bronze lamp when Nureddin returned with the articles El Borak had ordered.

"Lay them on the table and sit down on the divan with your hands behind you," Gordon commanded.

When the merchant had done so, the American bound his wrists and ankles. Then Gordon donned the boots and the robe, placed the black lacquered steel helmet on his head, and drew the black cloak about him; lastly he put on the mask which fell in folds of black silk to his breast, with two slits over his eyes. Turning to Nureddin, he asked:

"Is there a likeness between me and another?"

"Allah preserve us! You are one with Dhira Azrail, the executioner of the Black Tigers, when he goes forth to slay at the emir's command."

"Good. I have heard much of this man who slays secretly, who moves through the night like a black jinn of destruction. Few have seen his face, men say."

"Allah defend me from ever seeing it!" said Nureddin fervently.

Gordon glanced at the skylight. Stars twinkled beyond it.

"I go now from your house, Nureddin," said he. "But lest you rouse the household in your zeal of hospitality, I must gag you and your son."

"We will smother!" exclaimed Nureddin. "We will starve in this room!"

"You will do neither one nor the other," Gordon assured him. "No man I gagged ever smothered. Has not Allah given you nostrils through which to breathe? Your servants will find you and release you in the morning."

This was deftly accomplished, and Gordon advised:

"Observe that I have not touched your moneybags, and be grateful!"

He left the room, locking the door behind him. He hoped it would be several hours before either of his captives managed to work the gag out of his mouth and arouse the household with his yells.

Moving like a black-clad ghost through the dimly lighted corridors, Gordon descended the winding stair and came into the lower hallway. A black slave sat cross-legged at the foot of the stair, but his head was sunk on his broad breast, and his snores resounded through the hall. He did not see or hear the velvet-footed shadow that glided past him. Gordon slid back the bolt on the door and emerged into the garden, whose broad leaves and petals hung motionless in the still starlight. Outside, the city

was silent. Men had gone early behind locked doors, and few roamed the streets, except those patrols searching ceaselessly for El Borak.

He climbed the wall and dropped into the narrow alley. He knew where the common jail was, for in his role of Shirkuh he had familiarized himself with the general features of the town. He kept close to the wall, under the shadows of the overhanging balconies, but he did not slink. His movements were calculated to suggest a man who has no reason for concealment, but who chooses to shun conspicuousness.

The street seemed empty. From some of the roof gardens came the wail of native citherns, or voices lifted in song. Somewhere a wretch screamed agonizingly to the impact of blows on naked flesh.

Once Gordon heard the clink of steel ahead of him and turned quickly into a dark alley to let a patrol swing past. They were men in armor, on foot, but carrying cocked rifles at the ready and peering in every direction. They kept close together, and their vigilance reflected their fear of the quarry they hunted. When they rounded the first corner, he emerged from his hiding place and hurried on.

But he had to depend on his disguise before he reached the prison. A squad of armed men rounded the corner ahead of him, and no concealment offered itself. At the sound of their footsteps he had slowed his pace to a stately stride. With his cloak folded close about him, his head slightly bent as if in somber meditation, he moved on, paying no heed to the soldiers. They shrank back, murmuring:

"Allah preserve us! It is Dhira Azrail—the Arm of the Angel of Death! An order has been given!"

They hurried on, without looking back. A few moments later Gordon had reached the lowering arch of the prison door. A dozen guardsmen stood alertly under the arch, their rifle barrels gleaming bluely in the glare of a torch thrust in a niche in the wall. These rifles were instantly leveled at the figure that moved out of the shadows. Then the men hesitated, staring wide-eyed at the somber black shape standing silently before them.

"Your pardon!" entreated the captain of the guard, saluting. "We could not recognize—in the shadow—we did not know an order had been given."

A ghostly hand, half muffled in the black cloak, gestured toward the door, and the guardsmen opened it in stumbling haste, salaaming deeply. As the black figure moved through, they closed the door and made fast the chain.

"The mob will see no show in the suk after all," muttered one.

Chapter 7

In The Prison

In the cell where Brent and his companions lay, time dragged on leaden feet. Hassan groaned with the pain of his broken arm. Suleiman cursed Ali Shah in a monotonous drone. Achmet was inclined to talk, but his comments cast no light of hope on their condition. Alafdal Khan sat like a man in a daze.

No food was given them, only scummy water that smelled. They used most of it to bathe their wounds. Brent suggested trying to set Hassan's arm, but the others showed no interest. Hassan had only another day to live. Why bother? Then there was nothing with which to make splints.

Brent mostly lay on his back, watching the little square of dry blue Himalayan sky through the barred window.

He watched the blue fade, turn pink with sunset and deep purple with twilight; it became a square of blue-black velvet, set with a cluster of white stars. Outside, in the corridor that ran between the cells, bronze lamps glowed, and he wondered vaguely how far, on the backs of groaning camels, had come the oil that filled them.

In their light a cloaked figure came down the corridor, and a scarred sardonic face was pressed to the bars. Achmet gasped, his eyes dilated.

"Do you know me, dog?" inquired the stranger.

Achmet nodded, moistening lips suddenly dry.

"Are we to die to-night, then?" he asked.

The head under the flowing headdress was shaken.

"Not unless you are fool enough to speak my name. Your companions do not know me. I have not come in my usual capacity, but to guard the prison to-night. Ali Shah fears El Borak might seek to aid you."

"Then El Borak lives!" ejaculated Brent, to whom everything else in the conversation had been unintelligible.

"He still lives." The stranger laughed. "But he will be found, if he is still in the city. If he has fled—well, the passes have been closed by heavy guards, and horsemen are combing the plain and the hills. If he comes

here tonight, he will be dealt with. Ali Shah chose to send me rather than a squad of riflemen. Not even the guards know who I am."

As he turned away toward the rear end of the corridor, Brent asked:

"Who is that man?"

But Achmet's flow of conversation had been dried up by the sight of that lean, sardonic face. He shuddered, and drew away from his companions, sitting cross-legged with bowed head. From time to time his shoulders twitched, as if he had seen a reptile or a ghoul.

Brent sighed and stretched himself on the straw. His battered limbs ached, and he was hungry.

Presently he heard the outer door clang. Voices came faintly to him, and the door closed again. Idly he wondered if they were changing the guard. Then he heard the soft rustle of cloth. A man was coming down the corridor. An instant later he came into the range of their vision, and his appearance clutched Brent with an icy dread. Clad in black from head to foot, a spired helmet gave him an appearance of unnatural height. He was enveloped in the folds of a black cloak. But the most sinister implication was in the black mask which fell in loose folds to his breast.

Brent's flesh crawled. Why was that silent, cowed figure coming to their dungeon in the blackness and stillness of the night hours?

The others glared wildly; even Alafdal was shaken out of his daze. Hassan whimpered:

"It is Dhira Azrail!"

But bewilderment mingled with the fear in Achmet's eyes.

The scar-faced stranger came suddenly from the depths of the corridor and confronted the masked man just before the door. The lamplight fell on his face, upon which played a faint, cynical smile.

"What do you wish? I am in charge here."

The masked man's voice was muffled. It sounded cavernous and ghostly, fitting his appearance.

"I am Dhira Azrail. An order has been given. Open the door."

The scarred one salaamed deeply, and murmured: "Hearkening and obedience, my lord!"

He produced a key, turned it in the lock, pulled open the heavy door, and bowed again, humbly indicating for the other to enter. The masked man was moving past him when Achmet came to life startingly.

"El Borak!" he screamed. "Beware! He is Dhira Azrail!"

The masked man wheeled like a flash, and the knife the other had aimed at his back glanced from his helmet as he turned. The real Dhira

Azrail snarled like a wild cat, but before he could strike again, El Borak's right fist met his jaw with a crushing impact. Flesh, and bone, and consciousness gave way together, and the executioner sagged senseless to the floor.

As Gordon sprang into the cell, the prisoners stumbled dazedly to their feet. Except Achmet, who, knowing that the scarred man was Dhira Azrail, had realized that the man in the mask must be El Borak—and had acted accordingly—they did not grasp the situation until Gordon threw his mask back.

"Can you all walk?" rapped Gordon. "Good! We'll have to pull out afoot. I couldn't arrange for horses."

Alafdal Khan looked at him dully.

"Why should I go?" he muttered. "Yesterday I had wealth and power. Now I am a penniless vagabond. If I leave Rub el Harami, the ameer will cut off my head. It was an ill day I met you, El Borak! You made a tool of me for your intrigues."

"So I did, Alafdal Khan." Gordon faced him squarely. "But I would have made you emir in good truth. The dice have fallen against us, but our lives remain. And a bold man can rebuild his fortune. I promise you that if we escape, the ameer will pardon you and these men."

"His word is not wind," urged Achmet, "He has come to aid us, when he might have escaped alone. Take heart, my lord!"

Gordon was stripping the weapons from the senseless executioner. The man wore two German automatics, a tulwar, and a curved knife. Gordon gave a pistol to Brent, and one to Alafdal; Achmet received the tulwar, and Suleiman the knife, and Gordon gave his own knife to Hassan. The executioner's garments were given to Brent, who was practically naked. The oriental garments felt strange, but he was grateful for their warmth.

The brief struggle had not produced any noise likely to be overheard by the guard beyond the arched door. Gordon led his band down the corridor, between rows of empty cells, until they came to the rear door. There was no guard outside, as it was deemed too strong to be forced by anything short of artillery. It was of massive metal, fastened by a huge bar set in gigantic iron brackets bolted powerfully into the stone. It took all Gordon's strength to lift it out of the brackets and lean it against the wall, but then the door swung silently open, revealing the blackness of a narrow alley into which they filed.

Gordon pulled the door to behind them. How much leeway they had he did not know. The guard would eventually get suspicious when the

supposed Dhira Azrail did not emerge, but he believed it would take them a good while to overcome their almost superstitious dread of the executioner enough to investigate. As for the real Dhira Azrail, he would not recover his senses for hours.

The prison was not far from the west wall. They met no one as they hurried through winding, ill-smelling alleys until they reached the wall at the place where a flight of narrow steps led up to the parapets. Men were patrolling the wall. They crouched in the shadows below the stair and heard the tread of two sentries who met on the firing ledge, exchange muffled greetings, and passed on. As the footsteps dwindled, they glided up the steps. Gordon had secured a rope from an unguarded camel stall. He made it fast by a loose loop to a merlon. One by one they slid swiftly down. Gordon was last, and he flipped the rope loose and coiled it. They might need it again.

They crouched an instant beneath the wall. A wind stole across the plain and stirred Brent's hair. They were free, armed, and outside the devil city. But they were afoot, and the passes were closed against them. Without a word they filed after Gordon across the shadowed plain.

At a safe distance their leader halted, and the men grouped around him, a vague cluster in the starlight.

"All the roads that lead from Rub el Harami are barred against us," he said abruptly. "They've filled the passes with soldiers. We'll have to make our way through the mountains the best way we can. And the only direction in which we can hope to eventually find safety is the east."

"The Great Range bars our path to the east," muttered Alafdal Khan. "Only through the Pass of Nadir Khan may we cross it."

"There is another way," answered Gordon. "It is a pass which lies far to the north of Nadir Khan. There isn't any road leading to it, and it hasn't been used for many generations. But it has a name—the Afridis call it the Pass of Swords and I've seen it from the east. I've never been west of it before, but maybe I can lead you to it. It lies many days' march from here, through wild mountains which none of us has ever traversed. But it's our only chance. We must have horses and food. Do any of you know where horses can be procured outside the city?"

"Yonder on the north side of the plain," said Achmet, "where a gorge opens from the hills, there dwells a peasant who owns seven horses—wretched, flea-bitten beasts they are, though."

"They must suffice. Lead us to them."

The going was not easy, for the plain was littered with rocks and cut with shallow gullies. All except Gordon were stiff and sore from their

beatings, and Hassan's broken arm was a knifing agony to him. It was after more than an hour and a half of tortuous travel that the low mud-and-rock pen loomed before them and they heard the beasts stamping and snorting within it, alarmed by the sounds of their approach. The cluster of buildings squatted in the widening mouth of a shallow canyon, with a shadowy background of bare hills.

Gordon went ahead of the rest, and when the peasant came yawning out of his hut, looking for the wolves he thought were frightening his property, he never saw the tigerish shadow behind him until Gordon's iron fingers shut off his wind. A threat hissed in his ear reduced him to quaking quiescence, though he ventured a wail of protest as he saw other shadowy figures saddling and leading out his beasts.

"Sahibs, I am a poor man! These beasts are not fit for great lords to ride, but they are all of my property! Allah be my witness!"

"Break his head," advised Hassan, whom pain made bloodthirsty.

But Gordon stilled their captive's weeping with a handful of gold which represented at least three times the value of his whole herd. Dazzled by this rich reward, the peasant ceased his complaints, cursed his whimpering wives and children into silence, and at Gordon's order brought forth all the food that was in his hut—leathery loaves of bread, jerked mutton, salt, and eggs. It was little enough with which to start a hard journey. Feed for the horses was slung in a bag behind each saddle, and loaded on the spare horse.

While the beasts were being saddled, Gordon, by the light of a torch held inside a shed by a disheveled woman, whittled splints, tore up a shirt for bandages, and set Hassan's arm—a sickening task, because of the swollen condition of the member. It left Hassan green-faced and gagging, yet he was able to mount with the others.

In the darkness of the small hours they rode up the pathless gorge which led into the trackless hills. Hassan was insistent on cutting the throats of the entire peasant family, but Gordon vetoed this.

"Yes, I know he'll head for the city to betray us, as soon as we, get out of sight. But he'll have to go on foot, and we'll lose ourselves in the hills before he gets there."

"There are men trained like bloodhounds in Rub el Harami," said Achmet. "They can track a wolf over bare rock."

Sunrise found them high up in the hills, out of sight of the plain, picking their way up treacherous shale-littered slopes, following dry water-courses, always careful to keep below the sky line as much as possible. Brent was already confused. They seemed lost in a labyrinth of bare hills,

in which he was able to recognize general directions only by glimpses of the snow-capped peaks of the Great Range ahead.

As they rode, he studied their leader. There was nothing in Gordon's manner by which he could recognize Shirkuh the Kurd. Gone was the Kurdish accent, the boyish, reckless merry—mad swagger, the peacock vanity of dress, even the wide-legged horseman's stride. The real Gordon was almost the direct antithesis of the role he had assumed. In place of the strutting, gaudily clad, braggart youth, there was a direct, hard-eyed man, who wasted no words and about whom there was no trace of egotism or braggadocio. There was nothing of the Oriental about his countenance now, and Brent knew that the mustache alone had not accounted for the perfection of his disguise. That disguise had not depended on any mechanical device; it had been a perfection of mimicry. By no artificial means, but by completely entering into the spirit of the role he had assumed, Gordon had altered the expression of his face, his bearing, his whole personality. He had so marvelously portrayed a personality so utterly different from his own, that it seemed impossible that the two were one. Only the eyes were unchanged—the gleaming, untamed black eyes, reflecting a barbarism of vitality and character.

But if not garrulous, Gordon did not prove taciturn, when Brent began to ask questions.

"I was on another trail when I left Kabul," he said. "No need to take up your time with that now. I knew the Black Tigers had a new emir, but didn't know it was Jakrovitch, of course. I'd never bothered to investigate the Black Tigers; didn't consider them important. I left Kabul alone and picked up half a dozen Afridi friends on the way. I became a Kurd after I was well on my road. That's why you lost my trail. None knew me except my Afridis.

"But before I completed my mission, word came through the hills that a Feringi with an escort of Kabuli was looking for me. News travels fast and far through the tribes. I rode back looking for you, and finally sighted you, as a prisoner. I didn't know who'd captured you, but I saw there were too many for us to fight, so I went down to parley. As soon as I saw Muhammad ez Zahir, I guessed who they were, and told them that lie about being lost in the hills and wanting to get to Rub el Harami. I signaled my men—you saw them. They were the men who fired on us as we were coming into the valley where the well was."

"But you shot one of them!"

"I shot over their heads. Just as they purposely missed us. My shots—one, pause, and then three in succession—were a signal that I was

going on with the troop, and for them to return to our rendezvous on Kalat el Jehungir and wait for me. When one fell forward on his horse, it was a signal that they understood. We have an elaborate code of signals, of all kinds.

"I intended trying to get you away that night, but when you gave me Stockton's message, it changed the situation. If the new emir was Jakrovitch, I knew what it meant. Imagine India under the rule of a swine like Jakrovitch!

"I knew that Jakrovitch was after the gold in Shaitan's Cave. It couldn't be anything else. Oh, yes, I knew the custom of offering gold each year to the Devil. Stockton and I had discussed the peril to the peace of Asia if a white adventurer ever got his hands on it.

"So I knew I'd have to go to Rub el Harami. I didn't dare tell you who I was—too many men spying around all the time. When we got to the city, Fate put Alafdal Khan in my hands. A true Moslem emir is no peril to the Indian Empire. A real Oriental wouldn't touch Shaitan's gold to save his life. I meant to make Alafdal emir. I had to tell him who I was before he'd believe I had a chance of doing it.

"I didn't premeditatedly precipitate that riot in the suk. I simply took advantage of it. I wanted to get you safely out of Jakrovitch's hands before I started anything, so I persuaded Alafdal Kahn that we needed you in our plot, and he put up the money to buy you. Then during the auction Jakrovitch lost his head and played into my hands. Everything would have worked out perfectly, if it hadn't been for Ali Shah and his man, that Shinwari! It was inevitable that somebody would recognize me sooner or later, but I hoped to destroy Jakrovitch, set Alafdal solidly in power, and have an avenue of escape open for you and me before that happened."

"At least Jakrovitch is dead," said Brent.

"We didn't fail there," agreed Gordon. "Ali Shah is no menace to the world. He won't touch the gold. The organization Jakrovitch built up will fall apart, leaving only the comparatively harmless core of the Black Tigers as it was before his coming. We've drawn their fangs, as far as the safety of India is concerned. All that's at stake now are our own lives—but I'll admit I'm selfish enough to want to preserve them."

The Pass of Swords

Brent beat his numbed hands together for warmth. For days they had been struggling through the trackless hills. The lean horses stumbled against the blast that roared between intervals of breathless sun blaze. The riders clung to the saddles when they could, or stumbled on afoot, leading their mounts, continually gnawed by hunger. At night they huddled together for warmth, men and beasts, in the lee of some rock or cliff, only occasionally finding wood enough to build a tiny fire.

Gordon's endurance was amazing. It was he who led the way, finding water, erasing their too obvious tracks, caring for the mounts when the others were too exhausted to move. He gave his cloak and robe to the ragged Waziris, himself seeming impervious to the chill winds as to the blazing sun.

The pack horse died. There was little food left for the horses, less for the men. They had left the hills now and were in the higher reaches, with the peaks of the Great Range looming through the mists ahead of them. Life became a pain-tinged dream to Brent in which one scene stood out vividly. They sat their gaunt horses at the head of a long valley and saw, far back, white dots moving in the morning mists.

"They have found our trail," muttered Alafdal Khan. "They will not quit it while we live. They have good horses and plenty of food."

And thereafter from time to time they glimpsed, far away and below and behind them, those sinister moving dots, that slowly, slowly cut down the long lead. Gordon ceased his attempts to hide their trail, and they headed straight for the backbone of the range which rose like a rampart before them—scarecrow men on phantom horses, following a grim-faced chief.

On a midday when the sky was as clear as chilled steel, they struggled over a lofty mountain shoulder and sighted a notch that broke the chain of snow-clad summits, and beyond it, the pinnacle of a lesser, more distant peak.

"The Pass of Swords," said Gordon. "The peak beyond it is Kalat el Jehungir, where my men are waiting for me. There will be a man sweeping the surrounding country all the time with powerful field glasses. I don't know whether they can see smoke this far or not, but I'm going to send up a signal for them to meet us at the pass."

Achmet climbed the mountainside with him. The others were too weak for the attempt. High up on the giddy slope they found enough green wood to make a fire that smoked. Presently, manipulated with ragged cloak, balls of thick black smoke rolled upward against the blue. It was the old Indian technique of Gordon's native plains, and Brent knew it was a thousand-to-one shot. Yet hillmen had eyes like hawks.

They descended the shoulder and lost sight of the pass. Then they started climbing once more, over slopes and crags and along the rims of gigantic precipices. It was on one of those ledges that Suleiman's horse stumbled and screamed and went over the edge, to smash to a pulp with its rider a thousand feet below, while the others stared helplessly.

It was at the foot of the long canyon that pitched upward toward the pass that the starving horses reached the limit of their endurance. The fugitives killed one and haggled off chunks of gristly flesh with their knives. They scorched the meat over a tiny fire, scarcely tasting it as they bolted it. Bodies and nerves were numb for rest and sleep. Brent clung to one thought—if the Afridis had seen the signal, they would be waiting at the pass, with fresh horses. On fresh horses they could escape, for the mounts of their pursuers must be nearly exhausted, too.

On foot they struggled up the steep canyon. Night fell while they struggled, but they did not halt. All through the night they drove their agonized bodies on, and at dawn they emerged from the mouth of the canyon to a broad slope that tilted up to the gap of clear sky cut in the mountain wall. It was empty. The Afridis were not there. Behind them white dots were moving inexorably up the canyon.

"We'll make our last stand at the mouth of the pass," said Gordon.

His eyes swept his phantom crew with a strange remorse. They looked like dead men. They reeled on their feet, their heads swimming with exhaustion and dizziness.

"Sorry about it all," he said. "Sorry, Brent."

"Stockton was my friend," said Brent, and then could have cursed himself, had he had the strength. It sounded so trite, so melodramatic.

"Alafdal, I'm sorry," said Gordon. "Sorry for all you men."

Alafdal lifted his head like a lion throwing back his mane.

"Nay, el Borak! You made a king of me. I was but a glutton and a sot, dreaming dreams I was too timid and too lazy to attempt. You gave me a moment of glory. It is worth all the rest of my life."

Painfully they struggled up to the head of the pass. Brent crawled the last few yards, till Gordon lifted him to his feet. There in the mouth of the great corridor that ran between echoing cliffs, their hair blowing in the icy wind, they looked back the way they had come and saw their pursuers, dots no longer, but men on horses. There was a group of them within a mile, a larger cluster far back down the canyon. The toughest and best-mounted riders had drawn away from the others.

The fugitives lay behind boulders in the mouth of the pass. They had three pistols, a saber, a tulwar, and a knife between them. The riders had seen their quarry turn at bay; their rifles glinted in the early-morning light as they flogged their reeling horses up the slope. Brent recognized Ali Shah himself, his arm in a sling; Muhammad ez Zahir; the black-bearded Yusufzai captain. A group of grim warriors were at their heels. All were gaunt-faced from the long grind. They came on recklessly, firing as they came. Yet the men at bay drew first blood.

Alafdal Khan, a poor shot and knowing it, had exchanged his pistol for Achmet's tulwar. Now Achmet sighted and fired and knocked a rider out of his saddle almost at the limit of pistol range. In his exultation he yelled and incautiously lifted his head above the boulder. A volley of rifle fire splattered the rock with splashes of hot lead, and one bullet hit Achmet between the eyes. Alafdal snatched the pistol as it fell and began firing. His eyes were bloodshot, his aim wild. But a horse fell, pinning its rider.

Above the crackling of the Luger came the doom-like crash of Gordon's Colt. Only the toss of his horse's head saved Ali Shah. The horse caught the bullet meant for him, and Ali Shah sprang clear as it fell, rolling to cover. The others abandoned their horses and followed suit. They came wriggling up the slope, firing as they came, keeping to cover.

Brent realized that he was firing the other German pistol only when he heard a man scream and saw him fall across a boulder. Vaguely, then, he realized that he had killed another man. Alafdal Khan had emptied his pistol without doing much harm. Brent fired and missed, scored a hit, and missed again. His hand shook with weakness, and his eyes played him tricks. But Gordon was not missing. It seemed to Brent that every time the Colt crashed a man screamed and fell. The slope was littered

with white-clad figures. They had not worn their black armor on that chase.

Perhaps the madness of the high places had entered Ali Shah's brain on that long pursuit. At any rate he would not wait for the rest of his men, plodding far behind him. Like a madman he drove his warriors to the assault. They came on, firing and dying in the teeth of Gordon's bullets till the slope was a shambles. But the survivors came grimly on, nearer and nearer, and then suddenly they had broken cover and were charging like a gust of hill wind.

Gordon missed Ali Shah with his last bullet and killed the man behind him, and then like ghosts rising from the ground on Judgment Day the fugitives rose and grappled with their pursuers.

Brent fired his last shot full into the face of a savage who rushed at him, clubbing a rifle. Death halted the man's charge, but the rifle stock fell, numbing Brent's shoulder and hurling him to the ground, and there, as he writhed vainly, he saw the brief madness of the fight that raged about him.

He saw the crippled Hassan, snarling like a wounded wolf, beaten down by a Ghilzai who stood with one foot on his neck and repeatedly drove a broken lance through his body. Squirring under the merciless heel, Hassan slashed blindly upward with El Borak's knife in his death agony, and the Ghilzai staggered drunkenly away, blood gushing from the great vein which had been severed behind his knee. He fell dying a few feet from his victim.

Brent saw Ali Shah shoot Alafdal Khan through the body as they came face to face, and Alafdal Khan, dying on his feet, split his enemy's head with one tremendous swing of his tulwar, so they fell together.

Brent saw Gordon cut down the black-bearded Yusufzai captain, and spring at Muhammad ez Zahir with a hate too primitive to accord his foe an honorable death. He parried Muhammad's tulwar and dashed his saber guard into the Afghan's face. Killing his man was not enough for his berserk rage; all his roused passion called for a dog's death for his enemy. And like a raging fury he battered the Afghan back and down with blows of the guard and hilt, refusing to honor him by striking with the blade, until Muhammad fell and lay with broken skull.

Gordon lurched about to face down the slope, the only man on his feet. He stood swaying on wide-braced feet among the dead, and shook the blood from his eyes. They were as red as flame burning on black water. He took a fresh grip on the bloody hilt of his saber, and glared at the horsemen spurring up the canyon—at bay at last, drunken with

slaughter, and conscious only of the blind lust to slay and slay before he himself sank in the red welter of his last, grim fight.

Then hoofs rang loud on the rock behind him, and he wheeled, blades lifted—to check suddenly, a wild, bloodstained figure against the sunrise.

"El Borak!"

The pass was filled with shouting. Dimly Brent saw half a dozen horsemen sweep into view: He heard Gordon yell:

"Yar Ali Khan! You saw my signal after all! Give them a volley!"

The banging of their rifles filled the pass with thunder. Brent, twisting his head painfully, saw the demoralization of the Black Tigers. He saw men falling from their saddles, others spurring back down the canyon. Wearied from the long chase, disheartened by the fall of their emir, fearful of a trap, the tired men on tired horses fell back out of range.

Brent was aware of Gordon bending over him, heard him tell the tall Afridi he called Yar Ali Khan to see to the others; heard Yar Ali Khan say they were all dead. Then, as in a dream, Brent felt himself lifted into a saddle, with a man behind to hold him on. Wind blew his hair, and he realized they were galloping. The walls gave back the ring of the flying hoofs, and then they were through the pass, and galloping down the long slope beyond. He saw Gordon riding near him, on the steed of an Afridi who had mounted before a comrade. And before Brent fainted from sheer exhaustion, he heard Gordon say:

"Let them follow us now if they will; they'll never catch us on their worn-out nags, not in a thousand years!"

And Brent sank into the grateful oblivion of senselessness with his laughter ringing in his ears—the iron, elemental, indomitable laughter of El Borak.

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