

# ARGOSY

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*Illustrating Seven Footprints to Satan*

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He told the old man: "It is better to sit on one's rug with wisdom than to stretch one's legs to the world's end"



## Allah's Infidel

By E. HOFFMAN PRICE

Author of "Rainbow's End"

Since the Queen of Sheba was a girl, cunning and peril have lived by the Red Sea; and so a man must be especially beloved of the gods to walk its shores safely with a priceless green pearl in his hand

**A** DOZEN bronzed Somalis squatted on the slippery deck of the little pearling boat which rolled lazily in the sun-beaten waters of Djumelay Bay. Lucky Knudsen watched their sharp faces lengthen, and heard them mutter, "Another day, and Allah has forgotten us."

With every other crew around the Dalalak Islands bringing in pearls, it seemed a mistake for him to be called "Lucky."

But Knudsen grinned, and kicked a big oyster that had slid away from the heap on the deck.

"Open this one," he ordered, voice big and hearty.

Saoud, the mate of the Suhail, looked up and dubiously eyed the red-haired Dane who had browbeaten and cajoled them into carrying on, despite short rations and no success. Knudsen flung back his square head, and folded his arms across his broad chest.

"Open it. Now, instead of waiting!"

"In the name of Allah!" Saoud muttered, and plied his heavy knife.

This was the usual *sadaf* oyster, two pounds or more. There was also a pear-shaped pearl, unusual in size as well as

shape. Its peculiar greenish luster made it a freak that would follow no rule of appraisal.

Knudsen did not try to explain why he had picked on that one stray *sadaf*. Because of such things which had happened in the past the Red Sea fishers called him lucky.

"*El hamdulilahi!*" It had happened, and that was enough for the men. "Allah loves him, and he sees what eyes cannot see."

The mate held the pearl between thumb and forefinger. It was magnificent in the slanting light. Knudsen spent a moment wondering what color eyes, what tint of skin, what hair the woman must have who could wear a solitaire which had stolen a ghost-green from the sea, a shadow from the Nile, a touch of jade's coolness in its changing shades.

Then he frowned. This was too much luck! Selling such a pearl was a problem. Only Petro Simonini had the money, and Petro was no oyster. Knudsen spat, and tried to think of some other buyer in Massawa.

"*Wellah,*" the mate said, "this is the Father of the Green!"

"Now that you've named it," said Knudsen, "get back to work!"

He pocketed the solitaire and forgot all but the tough problem of selling it. Saoud and his men plied their knives, and as they worked, they sang, "*Benat' al Bérbera . . . Benat' al Bérbera . . . Reh chamâlo . . . Reh chamâlo . . . Reh halbâr . . . Reh halbâr . . .*"

Something about a northwind, and a girl in Berbera; monotonous, and it made no sense, and thus it fitted the Red Sea where Knudsen had lost two fortunes, and was seeking a third.

Gun-runner, buyer of leopard skins, and now owner of a pearling boat; owner, and *nakhoda* also, with only his canvas pants to distinguish him from the Somali crew. His skin was tanned as dark as theirs, and a kerchief protected his head from the sun.

The next day brought other pearls. The *Suhail* headed north to Massawa,

where buyers from all the world try to get as cheaply as possible the treasure which brown men steal from the jealous water.

The crew needed food and tobacco and rest; a chance to let their coral-slashed feet recover, and to extract the poisonous spines of sea urchins. They were young, for no pearl diver grows old. He either retires, or his overstrained lungs and heart finish him.

Massawa is a crazy tangle of Arab's whitewashed houses wedged in ledges of volcanic rock. The town is on an island, connected by a causeway with the mainland; hotter than Djibouti, further south, because there is little wind.

**T**HERE is an ancient tradition which governs pearl selling, and nothing changes on the Red Sea. The *nakhoda* takes the booty to the traders; and two witnesses go with him, one to protect the fishers against his trickery, one to protect the owner in case of disputes with the crew, for all have a share in the proceeds.

Habeeb, a hook-nosed Arab, represented the crew. He had a heavy-bladed knife and an ancient revolver. Ali, similarly armed, was to testify that Knudsen, owner as well as skipper, had not short-changed the crew.

It was not that his men questioned Knudsen's honesty; his luck proved that Allah loved him. It was rather that every detail of pearl trading had been settled some years before the Queen of Sheba carried Red Sea treasures to King Solomon.

In the odorous town, now crowded with Italian soldiers and civilians waiting to go inland to Ethiopia, Knudsen found Petro Simonini, who claimed to be French. Actually, he was a Levantine whose white duck suit was faultless as his waxed moustache and carefully manicured nails.

Simonini wore perfume and a dozen diamond rings, but that did not fool Knudsen, any more than the round, boyish face.

"Ah . . . Mr. Knudsen! What a pleasure, that you look for me. Something exceptional you have found?"

The rumor of the green pearl had undoubtedly beaten him to the mainland, but Knudsen shrugged. "It's exceptional I found anything," he carelessly retorted. "Who's our *dallal*?"

"Mike Matar," the Levantine said, gesturing toward the whitewashed house next to the noisy and odorous bazaar. "Very experienced."

"No doubt," Knudsen admitted.

Between one *dallal* and another, there was not much choice. And after all, the man who acted as umpire and arbitrator in the haggling between buyer and seller was paid a percentage of the money that finally changed hands. The higher the price, the more rake-off for Matar. The only catch was, he might be bribed to favor the buyer.

Matar received his visitors in a barren room with a cleanly swept dirt floor. A servant brought in a bubble pipe with brass fittings, and small cups of steaming Keshir brewed from coffee leaves, ginger, and saffron. Simonini, in no way handicapped by his linen pants and snug coat, squatted on his rug and hoped that his dear friend Mike was well; that his father was well, that business was good, and that his days would be long.

They had already met that day, only a few hours previous, but that made no difference.

A servant brought out scales and a table not over a foot high. Knudsen took the several parcels of pearls from his belt; they were wrapped in scraps of red calico. All but one of these he opened.

Matar's face, which was the shape and color of seven pounds of liver, did not change, but his eyes sharpened. Simonini's smile was a fixture. He delicately stroked his moustaches. Both men meant. "Is this all you're showing us?"

Knudsen weighed the larger pearls, one by one. Baroques and seeds are sold in parcels. Simonini politely challenged a few specimens, finding imaginary flaws and lack of "orient". But before the haggling began, the big Dane exposed the green solitaire, then put it away.

"First," he said, "let's get these routine bits disposed of."

Simonini reproachfully eyed him. "How much?"

"Ten thousand *rupees*," said Knudsen. "A hundred is too much!"

Mike Matar stroked his third chin and said nothing.

A Levantine is a person of mixed race, originating between Stamboul and Cairo, who can buy from an Armenian and sell to a Scot, cheating both parties. Knudsen knew that, and was resigned to letting go for four thousand *rupees*. He was saving his stubbornness for the Father of the Green. The real fight would come then.

Simonini was saying, "Two thousand *rupees*, Monsieur Knood-song. They are junk, but I will take them. For American tourists, you know."

Lucky Knudsen rumbled. "Eight thousand. Do you think I find these in the sand?"

The *dallal* nodded. The two witnesses grinned and stroked their dirty beards, and made sucking sounds at the pipe stem they passed back and forth. This might go on for the rest of the day.

Simonini picked up his earthenware mug of *keshir*. Fortified, he made a womanish gesture of weakness, and sighed, "Three."

"Seventy-five, you thieving hound!" Knudsen added a few words too dirty for any language but Arabic.

"Four, and you are robbing me." the Levantine wailed.

Knudsen almost blinked. He had the fellow on the run. "Seven, and I hope the dogs eat your insides."

Simonini cast an appealing glance at the *dallal*. Mike Matar let a smile flow slowly over his liver-colored face. He purred, "Put out your hands, *effendim*."

"By heaven, I won't!" Knudsen snarled. Simonini groaned.

But both obeyed. They hitched their rugs closer to the *dallal's* right and to his left. Matar took a turban cloth and spread it over his knees, hiding them and the extended hands of buyer and seller. Under cover of the veil, he took Simonini's fingers

in one hand, and Knudsen's in the other.

THIS was done today as it had been done when Balkis, Queen of Sheba, was a girl, just over on the other coast of the narrow Red Sea. Nothing changes here except a man's luck, and that changes often—and sometimes, for the worse.

Matar had seven of Knudsen's big stump-fingers; he had seven of Simonini's; that meant, without any exchange of words, "seven thousand *rupees*."

"Son of a diseased camel!" Knudsen growled.

"Son of a loose mother!" Simonini wailed.

They turned deadly looks at Matar. The Syrian's chin sank to the breast of his greasy robe; he neither saw nor heard. He was pondering, sizing up buyer and seller and the gems. There was a readjustment of hands and fingers. Now Matar had six of Knudsen's and six of Simonini's.

Again, he gauged the protests, nodded.

He deliberately put the cloth aside. Then he commanded, "Join hands." The two obeyed. This done, he went on, "You, Khwaja Simonini, say 'I buy.' You, Khwaja Knudsen, say, 'I sell.'"

Each repeated the proper words, and Matar cut in, "For six thousand *rupees*, cash in hand."

Having put their hands under the veil, they had now to abide by the *dallal's* decision. That was the custom.

Six thousand *rupees* amounted to about two thousand American dollars; but from this would be deducted the expenses of all those fruitless cruises, food for the crew, and gear. Of the amount that remained, Knudsen, as owner of the *Suhail*, took a fifth; as *nakhoda*, he took a third; and the crew divided the remainder.

This left Knudsen out of debt; selling the Father of the Green would be the stake he had been seeking.

Simonini, almost at the door, suddenly remembered something, "Oh, of course. That funny green baroque. It's pretty—" He winked. "And I promised a girl in Cairo I'd bring her a pearl."

Cheapness for the cheap, he implied. Matar grinned appreciatively.

Knudsen yawned. "Two hundred thousand *rupees*."

Simonini giggled, pretending to relish a jest. "You're not serious, of course. But let me see it again."

Knudsen handed him the gem. Simonini frowned a little. "Himm . . . better than I thought. An odd trifle. I might give it to my wife, instead. She likes green." Then, engagingly frank, "I did beat you down on the deal we just finished, so I'll not wrangle about this. Two thousand *rupees*. Because you are my friend."

Knudsen recovered the green pearl. "I can always beg for a living."

"I guess you'll sell elsewhere."

"To Eichenbaum, Delacroix, or Potts," Knudsen said, nodding.

"Don't be a fool! They're not crazy, and they're bought up, this trip."

He was right. Later, when they had felt out the market, sized up the demand, and found out whether the Paris brokers had any prospects for such an unusual pearl, they would trade.

In the meanwhile, Knudsen would have to wait, and perhaps spend weeks guarding a precious piece of loot. But he said to Simonini, "All three together can swing it. And they will, Brother Petro!"

The Levantine took that smiling. And in the next few days, Knudsen learned that there was such a thing as being too lucky. Potts, the horse-faced Englishman who lived on whisky and the luster of pearls, said to him, "By Jove, old chap, it's not the amount. But this is a collector's specimen. Why don't you try old Shaykh Ahmad, back in Dahalak?"

"He's tough meat! Like any Arab. And I'm in a hurry. I can't be sailing around, when this town's full of buyers."

Eichenbaum was next in line. "Ach," said the old German, "it iss beautiful. The Raja of Pandar would love it, for his collection."

"Hell," Knudsen exploded, "I can't spend a lot of dough and six months time going to India!"

"The women," said Friedrich Eichenbaum, regretfully shaking his head as he lovingly eyed the gem, "cannot have an announcer to say, here iss something costlier than you have. It must be obvious, you understand. Me, how I would like it for keeping myself. Now let us have some beer. I buy it, yes?"

**K**NUDSEN was not surprised, the following night, when a Turk came to the *Suhail* and said, "Simonini Effendi sends me to ask you to call on an important matter."

Saoud and the crew, surly from the postponed drunk, brightened. "Allah be praised," they cried, childishly happy. "A customer at last."

Little time was lost in finding witnesses. And presently, Lucky Knudsen was stalking down the water front, where boats rolled lazily in the warm water. The odor of sheep dung blended with the tang of crude incense-gum and spices and leather. Simonini wanted the Father of the Green, and he also wanted to get out of Massawa's little hell and have a look at Paris.

Knudsen, though armed, was wary. Too many people knew of the treasure he carried. His safety lay in the difficulty a thief would have in disposing of it. Despite the sharp practices of the pearling trade, outright robbery was not countenanced. And the Italians had brought strict order—for the Red Sea coast, that is.

"In here," Habeeb whispered, gesturing toward the dark archway of one of the houses that loomed up white as dice set in a row by some giant gamester. "He has moved since you saw him."

"Yes, by Allah," Ali affirmed, "the dog lives in a better place."

A black servant answered Habeeb's knock at the iron-bound door. From somewhere beyond the small courtyard came the sound of a woman's laughter, and the plucked strings of an *oudh*.

Then something like Simonini's voice, gurgling and drunk. Knudsen frowned. The man could hardly be in any condition to bargain. Impatient, he strode forward, fol-

lowing the white-robed Negro, who paused at an inner door.

Ali and Habeeb hung back, respectfully, Knudsen assumed. But in another second a net dropped from overhead, its leaden weights pulling the meshes about his ankles. The knotted cords entangled his arms when he cursed and tried to free himself. And behind him, the street door slammed.

Barefooted men emerged from dark corners, bearing him to the ground. Taken by surprise, Knudsen could make no use of his strength and bulk. A rug flung over his head choked his wrathful roar. Staves whacked down on his shoulders, knocking him breathless. He rose to his knees, shook himself, lurched clear, but his assailants followed him, and pulled him down again.

Red lights danced before his eyes, and camel-scented dust from the stifling rug choked him. A loop about his throat further cut off his breath. With head and feet and hands weighted down, he could not use weapons or stop the deft fingers that reached through the net and probed his belt.

A man muttered, laughed softly, but did not bother to strike a light. Knudsen's assailants knew precisely what they sought: sense of touch sufficed. Then the ropes were pulled tighter, and the captive lifted off the ground. When the patter of bare feet ceased, the big Dane was suspended from an archway, wriggling and cursing into the rug.

The music and laughter in the house had ceased. It took Knudsen several hours to disentangle himself. He finally succeeded by sheer strength and fury, bursting some rotted meshes.

**I**T WAS not until he was back at the *Suhail* that Knudsen realized how thoroughly he had been settled. Saoud and the crew clamored for their cut of two hundred thousand *rupes*.

"Paid?" Knudsen growled. "Look at me! Do I look as if I got paid?"

"We beg pardon of Allah," the tall Somali said, sour and surly, "but Ali and

Habeeb came running to tell us of the sale."

The crew muttered, fingered heavy knives. For a moment, watching their tense brown bodies, greased and rippling in the moonlight, Knudsen felt very close to death.

"Have I ever robbed you?"

"Have you ever had such a pearl before?" the mate retorted.

A diver, crouching by a bulkhead, suddenly flashed to his feet, knife advanced. "O thou father of thieves! Allah curse thy religion!"

Knudsen's revolver stopped that rush; just one shot, drilling the fellow's shoulder, made him drop his knife. Knudsen, recoiling, covered the group. They were too close packed to risk a hostile move, and they knew it. He said, "This is mutiny, and I will have the Italian *askaris* take you all to the guardhouse."

Il Duce's soldiers were not popular with the Somalis. Saoud straightened, and quietly said, "Master, we have served you well, and you have cheated us. If you had kept a hundred thousand *rupees* and bribed the witnesses, we would not complain, since that has always been the way with a *nakhoda* and his crew. But this is too much."

"Get off this boat!"

"Allah curse us if ever we step on a boat of yours," Saoud muttered. "May he do more unto us if any other fisher does."

They took their pots and gear and went ashore.

With such a story circulating, Knudsen could not anywhere on the Red Sea get a crew. He had to recover the Father of the Green.

He took passage, the following day, on a *boutre* bound for the Dahalak Islands. All the way south to the fishing water, he felt staring eyes, and heard mutterings. And back again at Djumelay Bay, he found that the story had beaten him to the harbor. Knudsen had one hope left—the pearl collector, Shaykh Ahmad. Though no one ever equaled him in wily trading, he was honest.

He lost no time. Despite the fury of the sun, he strode along the dusty trail that led to the heart of the barren island. The air danced over the baking sand and rock. Coral reefs in the water, desert on the island, both guarded Shaykh Ahmad and his pearls. A retired trader, the old Arab had become something just short of a saint. When he died, there would be pilgrimages to his tomb.

The sun was low when he saw the green clump of palms of the only oasis on the island. An armed Negro accosted Knudsen a quarter of a mile from the edge of the palms; he had emerged from a lookout post on the shaded side of a rock. He said nothing, but the rifle with which he covered Knudsen was a hint.

Somewhat further to the left, a blob of white indicated another guardian. But for these blacks scattered about the rock dotted expanse, anyone could approach the oasis.

A young Arab courteously greeted Knudsen as he approached the stone-coped spring. He gestured toward the two-story house, white and cubical like all its kind. "Be pleased to enter, *sahib*. My father is at home."

**K**NUDSEN followed him to the *shaykh's* house. The reception room was sand-strewn and barren. Pipes and a brass coffee service gleamed in niches in the masonry wall. A white-bearded man sat on a stone dais which was covered with cushions and a rug. He inclined his head, acknowledging his visitor's salute.

Shaykh Ahmad's turban was white, and as plain as his robe. The carpet on the floor was good, but worn. The only outstanding articles in the room were books. The one lying beside the sharp-faced old man was perhaps a thousand years old, illuminated in red and blue and gilt which time could not dim.

This heartened Knudsen. He complimented the *shaykh* on the exquisite Kufic script. Then he said, "It is better to sit on one's rug with wisdom than to stretch one's legs to the world's end."

Shaykh Ahmad smiled, appreciatively. "Your legs are long."

"They have taken me nowhere." Knudsen already knew from the shrewd, kindly eyes that the *shaykh* had heard the story. "And Satan has blackened my face."

"It is not yet black before me," the *shaykh* said.

Finally Knudsen got to the point. "It is said that you are the father of pearls."

"Have you any to offer me?"

"Only a present." He took from his belt a matched pair he had bought with the proceeds of Simonini's purchase. "To keep my hands from being empty when I ask your advice."

The old man praised them, each according to its points, and then clapped his hands. Two armed Negroes came into the room.

Shaykh Ahmad beckoned and said, "Come this way and I will show you how pearls are kept safe against age and spoiling."

Knudsen followed him into an inner room, which was below the ground level. The old man opened a massive lock. The guards drew back the iron doors. Knudsen blinked and recoiled a pace.

The light that came through a grating in the ceiling reached slantingly into the closet. On the shelves were rows of glass jars with glass covers. Each vessel was filled with pearls, like peas in a can. One lot was full pink; another, pale rosy-white; and so on, through all the shades, and every parcel matched as to size and shape.

"The sea has been yielding them since Suleiman the Wise made Satan serve him," Shaykh Ahmad said, smiling. "And they do not spoil, or go dead. The liquid that covers them is rainwater. That is the secret."

"But I see none that are green."

"That is your fault," Shaykh Ahmad said, smiling strangely. "You were in such haste to sell that you ended by losing. And now you want me to tell you of collectors who wanted a green pearl, perhaps to match some they already had."

"Yes. I have to be right the first time I

try to recover my loss. There will not be a second chance. And I am sure that the Father of the Green has not left Massawa."

Shaykh Ahmad stroked his beard. "Wisdom is with Allah. But you could easily be right. Deserts and reefs guard the best. The infidel buyers get the rest."

He deliberately spoke the jingling Arabic that scholars use in clinching a point. Knudsen felt that his trip had not been wasted: but he was not prepared for what took place.

It happened at the head of the stairs. Instead of leading the way back to the reception room, Ahmad said, "It is not well for you to leave now. Haste is of Satan."

The old man gestured to another archway, and himself backed toward the reception room. The Negroes blocked Knudsen's way. Without asking, he knew that he was a prisoner; nor was there any use in protesting. Even if he broke from the house, he could not elude the guards that surrounded the oasis.

The old man bowed, and the Negroes gestured; respectfully, but with certain intent. And they remained at the door of the sand-paved room into which Knudsen had to go. There was a rug, a jug of water, and a pipe. On the wall was a gilt medallion of exquisite design.

After an hour of squatting and staring, Knudsen sighed and shook his head. He could not see any reason for captivity. He could hardly convince himself that the old saint had arranged for the theft of the pearl, and was not keeping him a prisoner for some grim and fatal future reference.

The sharks and the reefs guarded secrets as well as pearls. Knudsen wiped the sweat from his forehead and contemplated the impossibility of wedging his broad frame between the closely spaced bars of the single high window that pierced walls two feet thick. Not even after dark could he slip out.

THE sun's rays, now level, picked out the gilt medallion. In sheer weariness and perplexity, Knudsen began to concen-



trate on the interlaced strokes. Bit by bit, he recognized them as Arabic characters.

A proverb: *Haste is of Satan; contemplation is of God.*

He grimaced, and muttered, "I'm not hurrying anywhere!"

The text mocked Knudsen for three long days and three restless nights. The Negroes brought food and *keshi*: and tobacco. They never said a word to him or to each other. He began to suspect that their tongues were missing, so that they could not babble any secrets. This did not reassure him.

"Haste is of Satan . . ." At times he wanted to draw his revolver and blow the mocking motto from the wall.

He had been too hasty in trying to sell the pearl; too hasty in trying to get information as to the thief. But now he had time to think it out; think about his mutinous crew, Simonini, the perjured witnesses, the lying *dallal*. And finally, Shaykh Ahmad's cryptic jingling words: We keep the best, the infidels get the rest.

He remembered the collector who died, leaving five million dollars worth of matched pearls: an Indian maharaja had bought the lot. It all came back to Simonini. But who was the unknown who had egged the Levantine into trickery?

Fighting the sea was one thing. Battling with inaction was something else. Here, he had not a chance, except of making a fool of himself. Slugging or shooting a guard would get him just to the fringe of the oasis, no further.

At last Shaykh Ahmad came in, and greeted him as though there had not been any solitary confinement. Knudsen answered, voice level. The old man smiled and said, "You have my permission to leave. And you will forgive me for discourtesy. I am old, and I spend much time meditating."

"So do I!"

The *shaykh* ignored Knudsen's bitterness. "Then go to Massawa. Your men are waiting for you, and not with knives."

"Oh, they're not?"

"By Allah, they will be glad to see you. They will help you." The old man's long

fingers hid a twitching, short-lived smile. "And it is written, *He who steals a minaret should hide it in a well.*"

The Father of the Green was as conspicuous as a minaret. But Knudsen was puzzled by the old man's cryptic saying. "Maybe you're right, but where's the well?"

Shaykh Ahmad's great courtesy kept him from laughing. He gravely answered, "Let the thief lead you to the well. And I will buy when you wish to sell."

That ended it. Once he reached the bay, Knudsen boarded a northbound *dhow*. It was night when he landed in Massawa.

The *Suhail* was among the boats that wallowed lazily in the harbor. Men squatted about a fire on deck—brown men, with fuzzy heads and oiled bodies. Knudsen leaped aboard. He recognized Saoud and the crew, and they knew him before he spoke.

The mate knelt. "*Sahib*, we are fools and witless fellows, doubting you. If you forgive us, we will serve you."

Knudsen, bewildered, answered: "Allah forgives you."

Lucky again, he thought; but later, as he ate *dourra* bread and fish, the truth came out: "Verily, *sahib*, no *nakhoda* would let us sail with him. Soon we would starve, being outlawed for mutiny against you. The pious Shaykh Ahmad spoke, and Allah's face was hidden."

Knudsen now saw the reason behind the old man's strange conduct. He made a grand gesture. "We will find more pearls. But first, we will find the Father of the Green."

They believed him, and did not ask how. He listened to their chatter, and heard what they had learned as they vainly tried to enter the service of another skipper; and Knudsen began to see how Simonini might lead him to the well where the minaret was hidden. Shaykh Ahmad's riddles were not as cryptic as they had seemed.

**K**NUDSEN heard how Habeeb and Ali, the witnesses, had bought beer and red calico and extra wives. Simonini,

still in town, was buying pearls. Bigger purchases than he had ever made on any trip. These things meant little to thick-witted Somalis, but Knudsen saw how his disappearance had let the tricksters move easily.

Later that night, one of the crew took a note to Simonini. It was in flourishing Arabic, done by a bazaar letter writer; it said, *Come at once to buy privately, for the hidden shall be revealed and that which hath been concealed shall come forth.*

There was no signature. None was needed. If Simonini had sold the Father of the Green to a pearl hoarder, he must have seen the collector's treasures, and vainly tried to buy a choice specimen.

Knudsen and his crew lurked in dark corners, and behind heaps of rotting offal. Somewhere, a hasheesh smoker coughed a dry, racking cough, and a trader from the mainland yelled for more maize beer.

A man in European clothes presently came from Simonini's house. A Somali wearing a pistol and cutlass followed him. Whichever way they went, one of the crew was posted, and waiting.

The Somalis were stalking in pairs. Minutes later, one met Knudsen and whispered, "*Sahib*, he goes to the mainland."

"Get a dugout from the *Suhail*."

This was done, and they put out from the island, heading straight for the forbidding shore along which Simonini would soon be walking. Against the blackness of the volcanic crags Knudsen saw the dim white masses of houses that were almost fortresses—the strongholds of money lenders, smuggler captains, native pearl traders and fleet owners.

One of these was Simonini's destination; that much was certain. So Knudsen, having gained on the Levantine, waited to intercept him, while others trailed on his heels.

Saoud whispered, "He goes to Marouf's house." This was an easy guess, since the buildings were isolated, perched on shelves of rock. And that opinion fitted the facts; Marouf was a trader and collector.

Simonini was not far from the house when two shadows rose from behind

boulders. And men closed in from the rear while Saoud grappled with the Levantine's guard. Neither knife nor pistol came into play.

"Take what you want," Simonini said, with scarcely a quaver in his voice. "If you are *harami*, my pockets are yours."

"There's nothing in your pocket I'm interested in, except—" Knudsen probed for a moment, and found a sheet of paper. A single match identified it. "Except this. Bait, Simonini. You sold the Father of the Green. A number of people might have bought it. And this note made you think that your customer had relented. I figured that you'd try to swap for commercial pearls, and fail to get the choice of the fellow's collection. No one ever does, you know. So here we are!"

"I'm under Italian protection. I have a passport."

"Sure you have. You come out here alone because you didn't know I'd returned. And you didn't want too much publicity."

Simonini realized that he was on trial in a court where ordinary evidence was not needed. "What are you going to do?"

"You've named the buyer just by coming here. Now you're going to get in and try to dicker with him. I'm putting on your guard's clothes and going with you."

"I'll warn him, and his guards will finish you!"

"I'll risk that."

**K**NUDSEN made the change. The remainder of his crew had come up the zig-zag ascent. In a moment, they had their orders; and each had his heavy knife, and a heart filled with wrath.

"Don't forget your story," Knudsen warned. "You've come back for another chance at something that you saw in the same jar with the green pearls."

"What?" This shook Simonini. "How—"

"I know," was the grim answer. "Even if I don't leave the house, my Somalis will cut you open to see if you've swallowed the Father of the Green. They're childish and stubborn, eh?"

"Before God—" Simonini was trembling. "I can't get it back. I sold it, yes. But he won't return it."

"My Somalis won't return anything they cut off your frame."

"I'll pay you for it!"

"I'll never have you cornered again," Knudsen countered. "And you've not got enough cash in your pocket. If it's my funeral, it's surely yours, Brother Petro."

It was not far to Marouf's stronghold. Rock and thorns made the approach difficult. There was no challenge until Simonini reached for the brazen knocker, which was shaped like the sacred hand of Fathma, to bring good luck to the house. When an African voice answered from within, the Levantine said, "Tell Marouf that Simonini wishes to see him. On urgent business, and Allah pardon the hour."

Bolts clanked metallically, and chains rattled. The porter relayed the call. Inside, men muttered. There was no laughter. Knudsen stood straight, and somewhat to one side of the Levantine. Thus, a moment later, the flare of a *dammar* torch just missed his face, and revealed only his brown body, lean and corded, and gleaming with palm oil.

"Only two men," the porter shouted. "An infidel and his servant!"

In the courtyard, someone repeated the call. "Only two, by Allah!" And the message was echoed from somewhere in the house itself. In a moment, the answer came to the front; first muffled, then clearer: "In the name of Allah! Let both come in."

Much simpler than getting out. But Knudsen was pushing his luck until it cracked or won. He could not hear the *chunk* of the bolt sliding home behind him. But the hinge creaked a farewell.

At the door of the reception room, Knudsen halted and squatted in the shadow of the jamb, as befitted his assumed rank. Simonini went in to the smoky light of the *majlis*, where Marouf waited, thin lips compressed, and brows rising to arches under his big turban.

There was the usual grave ritual of greeting. From the corner of his eye, the big

Dane could see that the thin-faced Arab was puzzled by this unusual call. But Simonini was his slick self, cool and suave.

Minutes dragged interminably. Vague sounds in the court worried the outer silence. Bare feet padded and robes rustled in the shadowy hall behind Knudsen. The moment of discovery would be no better for being delayed.

They were talking about pearls now. Simonini was describing a lot, kept, like Ahmad's, in rain water. Marouf was stroking his henna-red beard, and making jingling plays on Arabic. Finally he clapped his hands, and guards appeared. He said to Simonini, "Let us not talk of buying. But since you love pearls, you may look again. At the finest I have, next to the green ones."

HE ROSE, and beckoned to the Levantine. Knudsen was on his feet in a flash. A long leap carried him half way across the *majlis*. Marouf turned. Simonini whirled. Neither spoke, for Knudsen's gun was leveled, and his third bound brought him within arm's reach of the two.

"Haste is of Satan," he said, smiling mirthlessly. "I have come for a reckoning, Marouf. There is a pear-shaped green pearl which belongs to me. A thief sold it to you. Give it to me, and I leave in peace."

"Leave?" Marouf's voice was level. "Arg your wits with Allah?"

"I found the Father of the Green, and my men require it of me," Knudsen explained. "Wherever I go, you go with me."

Marouf looked into the Dane's cold blue eyes, and knew that his guards could never get near enough to help. He said, "This man robbed you, *nakhoda*?"

"Yes, by your beard! And fear made him sell you into my hands. No man trusts me since I am unjustly accused, and it does not matter how I leave. I am the forgotten of Allah unless I have the Father of the Green."

Marouf burned Simonini with a glance, then looked at Knudsen and shrugged. "You would surely kill us both, madman. For a pearl."

"For that one which is mine, no matter what it cost you."

Marouf spoke to the servant who had not dared moved lest the invader's pistol cut down the master of the house. "Get it, Nuh."

Knudsen could not quite believe this; not even when Marouf added, at the servant's departure, "I buy. I do not steal. You are a madman, and it is well known that Allah loves you. So what this has cost me, I will require it of Simonini."

He could do just that, and the Levantine knew it.

Then Saoud cut in from the hallway. "That is well done, Marouf. So we do not have to slay your men!"

The mate of the *Suhail* had come in with the rest of the crew, taking the house guards by surprise; but counting on this was more than Knudsen had hoped for. Marouf exclaimed, "There is no might and no majesty save in Allah! How does this thing happen?"

When Knudsen saw a servant coming in with the Father of the Green, he explained, "I stuffed rags into the socket of the lock when it was opened for me and Simonini. So it was easy to surprise your men."

Marouf surrendered the pearl. "Take it and go."

The Levantine had not found his voice when Knudsen said, "Maybe you can square this with a refund, Brother Petro. Though that is no business of mine. No one in town knows where you went to-night. And if you live through this, try remembering what an old friend told me: '*He who steals a minaret should hide it in a well!*'"

Some days later, the *Suhail* was back in the fishing waters of the Dahalak Island; and Knudsen was in Shaykh Ahmad's house in the oasis. The old man was saying, "Verily, neither I nor my men could have opened the way. I drive a hard bargain, but it would have been better if you had seen me first."

"I had too much luck," Knudsen admitted. "So the Father of the Green is yours, for two hundred thousand *rupees*."

"You are robbing me!" Shaykh Ahmad groaned. "Allah bear witness—"

"That you are a poor man, living in the desert."

So they sent for a *dallal* and two witnesses, as custom demanded. For nothing has changed on the Red Sea since the Queen of Sheba was a girl.