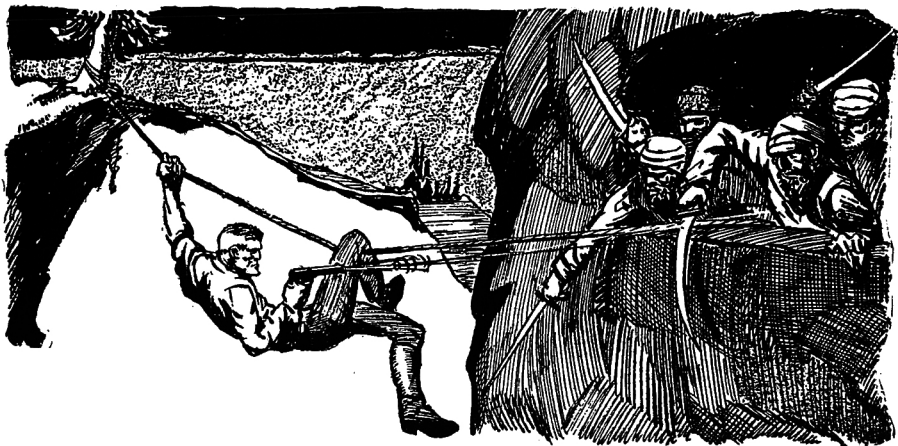


EMPEROR of the THREE



By JACK SMALLEY

Author of "The Laughing Skulls," "The Spy Road," etc.

Lawless spawn of the higher hills, they rode the crimson loot trails of Afghanistan. Then came Tim Elroy, rug merchant extraordinary, to seek weird fortune in the torture chamber of the Cursed Three.



OUR donkeys were no match in speed for the fleet-footed, shaggy ponies spurred on by the Shinwari tribesmen.

I counted eight horsemen when they rounded the lip of the canyon, leaning against the turn as their ponies pounded our trail in the sand. A loose end from my turban whipped across my face, and I turned my head away from the pursuit.

Flying heels kicking gravel in my face, the donkey straddled by Deborah Welch was doing its stubborn best. For the first time in Deb's reckless young life, I believe, she was thoroughly frightened. She rode low, bent over the saddle, her bare heels thumping the steaming flanks of the beast. Her slippers had been lost along with the maidenly manner that was part of her disguise. She had ripped away her veil, and the heavy, raven hair shook free in the wind.

We were in a pretty tight spot. If this arid, steep-walled canyon ended in a *cul de sac*, we were trapped. Even so, it was only a matter of minutes now before the Shinwari overhauled us.

I shouted to Deb, and she turned to look.

"Carry on, Deb—jump at the next turn and hide!"

Then I reined in. The canyon had narrowed, affording some chance of holding off the riders for a moment. Two great columns of grotesquely corroded rock towered on either side of the canyon like sentinels at a gate.

My heavy Colt's revolver held three unspent cartridges. I ran to the protection of one of the rocky columns. Mercy I didn't expect, for there is a saying in Afghanistan that a snake, a scorpion, and a Shinwari have never a heart to tame.

The first shot I fired whistled harmlessly past the leading Shinwari. Suddenly he halted. The pony pawed air,

foaming mouth gagging at the bit. The other riders milled around the leader.

That shot hadn't stopped them, certainly. But what had? I looked around, wonderingly. No one was behind me, for Deborah had disappeared around the bend. The sheer walls of the gorge offered no foothold, even for a goat.

Yet the eight tribesmen didn't move another step forward. I stood up; no rifle was aimed at me.

I was stumped. A moment ago those Shinwari had wanted our blood; now they refused to pursue another step. I sat down and tried to marshal my whirling thoughts into order.

WITH Deborah Welch, I, Timothy Elroy, had stayed the night peacefully enough in the Shinwari village, ten miles away. So far our little foray into Afghanistan had progressed successfully enough, although I felt in my old bones that instead of behaving like a shrewd dealer in Oriental rugs, I was acting the fool. Deb, however, had insisted on the trip, and having sold this high-handed, reckless young girl most of the treasures in her collection of antique rugs, I couldn't very well refuse.

She wanted a certain sacred rug, and knew where it was. To go and get it was the most logical step in the world for Deb, because she was that kind of a girl. True, she was paying me generously to accompany her as her father, dressed as natives. But as I sat in the shade of those rocks, the price didn't look so attractive.

Early that morning a woman had warned me to get out of the village. Our disguise, she said, was known to cover a pair of hated Christians from beyond Khyber Pass. Two miles back the pursuit had caught up with us, and here we were. What next?

I gazed at the Shinwari and scratched my ample stomach, trying to guess the answer. And then it came.

We were in the Gorge of the Devils—beyond the deadline that none dared pass!

Deb and I hadn't known it, but we had come at last to the boundaries of dreaded Kohan, inhabited by the wildest crew of savage outlaws in these mountains, and whose ruler owned the sacred rug that had brought us on this fool-hardy trip.

It was no wonder the Shinwari were content to let us go on. They considered us doomed anyway. They had dismounted and squatted in the shade, watching me. I walked over to the droop-eared donkey and caught up the reins. My joints fairly creaked after that jolting ride. Every leap of that animal had wracked my bones, torturing muscles grown soft in the rug bazaars of Peshawar.

Then I stumbled up through the gorge, feeling as if sixteen baleful eyes were boring into my back.

Around the turn, huddled in the sand, lay Deb. Her face was upturned, and the dark berry stain that covered her face was an ashen brown; her lips were bloodless. The girl had fainted and fallen from the saddle.

The choice words I had ready were forgotten. You can't bawl out a girl who's dead to the world. I picked her up and carried her to the shade. Suddenly her eyes opened wide. She struggled to sit up, looking wildly around.

"If you want to know where you are, you're in Kohan," I said wearily. "And I hope you're happier over it than I am."

"But those Shinwari—where did they go? Did you kill them all?"

I couldn't help laugh at that. Touched my vanity a bit, too, if the truth be known.

"They went home," I told her. "Figured we were as good as dead anyway, so why bother."

Deb stood up, a trifle shaky in the knees, and leaned against the rock. She gazed at the gorge as if seeing it for the first time.

"So this is Kohan," she smiled. "But Tim, what on earth did those Shinwari chase us for? How did they know you

weren't a good Moslem, and I your daughter?"

I explained to her patiently, trying hard not to swear at her:

"When I came back from breakfast, you were taking another cat-nap, with your feet toward Mecca," I said. "Somebody saw you commit this worst crime in the Moslem calendar, and if the woman there hadn't warned me, we'd never have left the village alive."

Deb sighed. "I never could make my feet behave," she said. "They're always wandering off into trouble. But Tim, don't be angry with me. It won't hurt to try to buy that rug, now we've got this far. Gosh, they can't kill us for that! And I promise—if they say no, we'll creep sweetly away and say nothin' to nobody. Cross my heart!"

I should be old enough not to listen to soft words from women, but I guess mankind will never learn. I relented.

"All right, Deb," I said. "But let me do the palavering, and don't you dare—"

I was saved the effort of another useless warning. Four horsemen, wearing tall peaked caps and carrying rifles in the crooks of their arms, were coming toward us, riding in the direction of the rock pillars.

Deb hastily drew her veil across her face and shrank back.

The four men drew rein and regarded us silently.

"We ride for the Emperor of the Three," said one. "Who are you?"

He spoke in Pushtu, language of the common people of Afghanistan. I answered him in kind, explaining that with my daughter we were going to Ispahan, in Persia. We had heard of the Emperor of the Three, and desired to visit his land.

"Those who enter Kohan must be brought before the Emperor," said the man. "Come."

With many misgivings I mounted the donkey. Deb seated herself sidewise on her own animal, and escorted front and rear, we continued through the gorge.

BY means of a little adroit maneuvering, I managed to drop back and ride beside one of the rear guards, and inveigle him into talking. The fellow was no dullard. He laughed when I told him that an escort of Shinwaris had refused to go beyond the stones at the narrowing.

"They have learned their lessons well," he said. "Sham, our Emperor, has a way of teaching those jackals."

He pointed to a crag, and I craned my neck to see a cage hanging over the gorge. Although it was already twilight in the deep canyon, I could make out a white pile of bones in the contraption, and a shiver chased up my back.

"He is not a man whose beard may be tweaked," smiled the guard.

Deborah had seen the grim object lesson and heard the guard. I wished for once that the girl had not been brought up on the Northwest Frontier, where she had learned Pushtu while still lisping baby English. Yet the dark eyes above the veil showed no fear.

The cavalcade halted. Up on a ledge, on which grew scrubby bushes, was a pile of round stones. The men dismounted and climbed up to the ledge, bowing their foreheads to the ground. One of them tore a bit of cloth from his shirt and tied it to a bush. It was the sort of shrine boasted by every tribe in Afghanistan.

For a moment we were alone together, Deb and I.

"That awful cage," she whispered. "It gives me the creeps. Do you suppose this Emperor Sham really puts men in cages to let them starve?"

"That's no new trick," I said shortly. I didn't like to dwell on the subject. Presently the four men mounted and we rode on again.

"That is the shrine of the Holy Hadji," my companion informed me proudly. "Before Sham came, we had not a single holy grave to pray beside. Mauzbillah, but our khan is a wise man! Since we had no shrine, he killed a hadji and made one!"

The man at my left laughed grimly. "Our enemies no longer scorn us because we have no holy spot," he said.

The last rays of the sun left the higher ramparts of the rocky gorge, and the cold wind of the snow capped peaks moaned through the rain-trees and scrubby mulberry bushes along the way. I no longer felt like talking, for these tales were no comfort. Deborah crowded close to me, and reached for my hand.

Her fingers were cold in mine.

"Tim, I'm scared," she whispered. "Let's go back."

"We were prisoners the minute we crossed the line back there," I told her. "It's too late now, Deb. Look, we've reached the place already."

A GRAY mass of mud buildings loomed against the dark wall of the gorge. Tier on tier the houses reached upward, windowless and bleak, staring at us with a thousand empty eyes.

Shadows moved about the base of the vertical city, and the wind bore the creaking of a windlass over a well. One of the windows blinked with yellow light, then another and another. Then, from some high perch on the sheer mountain came the deep clangor of a bell. The watcher on the summit had struck the hour of sunset.

We climbed from our mounts and faced toward Mecca. Dry palms rasped as we went through the pious gesture of washing, then we knelt. My prayers were for the wit and the power to bring Deb safely from this kingdom of hate and death.

On closer view, the city built on end looked less dismal and forbidding. Sham's men proved as domestic as any other tribes, for they sat about smoking their water pipes and gossiping while the women hauled water and wood and prepared the evening meal. Button-eyed children chased each other, yelling and laughing, or stared at Deb and me with open mouths.

None of these hill women wore veils,

and seeing this, Deb let her own fall. Our donkeys were led away, and we were taken inside, through the main door. Smoky grease lamps glowed inside, casting uncertain light on the many ladders leading to the second floor.

I groaned when I learned that the Emperor received his guests on the top floor, next the throne room. It was a climb to take the heart out of a mountain goat. Five flights of ladders we scaled, with the guards prodding impatiently at our lagging. Sweat streamed down over my face, and my hands grew slippery with it. My legs quivered, and I swear my girth had been reduced three inches by the time we reached the last level, and by that time I cared little if I ever saw Peshawar again.

But hot tea and bowls of pilaff worked magic. The tea was sickeningly sweet, spiced, and pallid with goat's milk, but I smacked my lips loudly over it with the rest of the company.

In the midst of the meal there was a thunderous roll of big drums. Fingers halted halfway to hungry mouths, and silence fell, heavy with foreboding.

"THE big door has been closed," some one whispered. "Ai, ai! Evil has befallen!"

Again and again the drums throbbed and pulsed, until the honeycombed building seemed to shake with the sound. Deb shrank close to me, and I felt for the gun concealed in the folds of my sash. About us men gripped rifles in greasy hands and stood about as if waiting. I surmised that the signal drums were not sounding a call to arms, but held some other meaning.

We soon learned, for a man came up the ladder and stared at his fellows, hands on hips.

"A comrade has been slain," he said slowly. "The murderer is within these walls, for no one has left and the door has been closed. The Emperor of the Three summons all to the *hujra*, now."

"A life for a life," grumbled a man. "Who was slain?"

"Sowar the Meek," he was answered.

The room buzzed with the gutturals of Pushtu. Sowar the Meek lived on the tier of dwellings below, with a pretty wife. Indeed, the wails of the widow could be plainly heard, rising and falling like a wind in leafless trees.

Jostling and pushing, the people began to move out of the room. Deb and I were swept along with the mob, along a passage and into the high ceilinged room that crowned the city.

Deb's small voice in my ear carried a question that had also puzzled me.

"What do they mean by 'Emperor of the Three'?"

The noises of the crowd died before I could answer. Whoever he was, the Emperor of the Three had entered the throne room.

AT the far end of the *hujra* was a sort of balcony. Stone steps led up to it, and from the appearance of the room, both ledge and steps had been cut into the very rock of the mountain on which the city was built.

On this ledge were three grotesque black idols, glistening in the lamp light, flashing red fire from rubies set in the eye pits. Before the largest of the idols was a chair, so that it was flanked by the other two ebony figures. These two were female effigies of some distorted god with four arms.

"The Three!" I whispered to Deb, "And there comes their Emperor."

The Khan of this lawless band answered none of my imagined descriptions. I had pictured a great, bearded fellow with a face as ugly as his reputation and as black as his soul.

I stared in wonder at the man who strode to the chair high over every one's heads, and seated himself. I saw a lithe, broad-shouldered young man with a face no browner than my own, wearing a peaked cap cocked over one ear, and baggy red trousers. The gold hilt of a knife protruded from the yellow sash around his waist.

A white man ruled Kohan, or my

name wasn't Timothy Elroy! It was astounding, beyond belief. Yet there was Sham, alert, confident, with the touch of the autocrat in his bearing that comes to those who rule.

Then I remembered a tale that had come to me, of a white man gone native, who had banded together roving hillmen into a tribe of marauders that was the terror of the mountain villages. An old Kaffir gave me the story, and I dismissed it as one of the fellow's fabulous lies. Could it be that the tale was true?

A curt command from the door, and a lane opened. On a stretcher was borne the body of the murdered man, leaving a trail of crimson drops. Following came the weeping relatives, to take their places beside the body. Sham stood up and looked down at them. Then he raised his hand.

"Sowan the Meek is dead," said Sham. His deep, vibrant voice filled the room, dominating the minds of his listening subjects. "His slayer is among ye. Let him come forward before the Black One speaks in wrath."

A sibilant, frightened sighing and muttering went through the mob. Yet no one stepped into the cleared space below the balcony. Deb clutched my arm, pointing toward the Emperor of the Three.

"There—the sacred rug—see?" she whispered.

Then I noticed for the first time, the blood red carpet on which rested the three black idols. I knew, and so did Deb, that nothing in the wide world short of a miracle would ever deliver that precious carpet to us.

Sham had seated himself, waiting. My fingers itched to feel that gorgeous antique on the stone shelf, and I almost forgot the object of the gathering as I ogled the rug.

A strange rumble, seeming to come from over the Emperor's head, startled me back to reality. A man next to me fell to his knees, moaning. The rumble died away, and abruptly came the clack-

ing, muffled syllables of a sentence in Pushtu.

The Black One was speaking!

In sepulchral tones that seemed to issue from the graven lips of the image, I heard:

"Thou murderer! ye cannot hide from the eyes of the Black One! I see thee cringing in fear, for the curse of Allah is upon thee. Ah, thy tongue cleaves in thy dry mouth. I see thy blood turning to water. Come—*come to thy punishment!*"

The hypnotic blaze of those stone eyes seemed to hold me in their baleful spell, like the eyes of a picture that follow you everywhere in a room. I forgot, for an instant, that each person in the room must feel, as I did, that those eyes were peering into my own, in a horrible, accusing gaze.

A scream split the silence. Into the open space stumbled a slaving, wild-eyed man.

"I killed him! I coveted his wife!"

The cry of the doomed man was no sooner uttered than the Black One spoke again. I looked upward, incredulous of that voice issuing from a lifeless idol. Then I glanced at Sham, sitting motionless before the image, and a solution so simple and yet so ludicrous flashed through my mind that I almost laughed. Sham was a ventriloquist, and the idol was his dummy!

I didn't hear the judgment pronounced on the murderer, but in a moment the poor fellow had been seized and his arms bound. A thick rope of twisted fibers was fastened to a ring set in a stone block. A score of men pulled until the block came away, exposing a square black hole.

In spite of the murderer's screams and pleas for mercy, he was thrust, squirming and kicking, toward the hole. A final shove and he disappeared feet first. Screams echoed from the pit, as the man fell. It seemed ages before a hollow boom welled up like a bubble of sound, to burst in the throne room.

I looked up at the stone shelf. The

Three occupied it alone. Sham, their Emperor, was disappearing through a small door at the end of the balcony, and already the crowd was shuffling back to their cold dinners.

DEB and I were in the shadow of the arched doorway when a man stopped us. He was tall, shaggy of beard, and as lean as a gray wolf. There was a harsh rasp to his voice when he spoke.

"Come, stranger," he said. "A welcome has been prepared for thee and thy daughter."

He led us back through the emptied throne room, and up the stone steps. The red winking eyes of the three gods watched us, it seemed, with a sardonic leer. On closer view the monstrous ugliness of the black idols gave me a sense of repulsion, and Deb turned her face away when she brushed close to the gross female figure at the left of the Black One.

"*Mauzbillah!* May God protect us from this heartless beast and his three masters!" Deb muttered in Pushtu. "But ah, Tim, what wouldn't I give for that rug," she added in whispered English.

It was not a large carpet, this sacred red rug worth a king's ransom in any market. But the deep, blood-red color that caught the sheen of the lamps, the mystic designs in the weave, made me want to linger beside it. The carpet covered the pedestal on which rested the three idols, and hung over the front to the floor of the ledge. Then our guide called impatiently, and we followed him through the narrow door at the end.

It shut behind us with a rasp as the door's hatch caught on a crude iron lock. The man dropped to his knees and touched his forehead to the floor.

I found myself looking up to meet the level gaze of Sham, the Emperor of the Three. His mouth was wide, the lips drawn thinly across white teeth, and there was cruelty in the pinched eyes regarding me and Deborah.

"Down, dog, and kiss the floor," he growled.

As fast as I could I scrambled to my knees and bent my all-too ample middle in obeisance. It wasn't fast enough to suit his majesty, and he fetched me a sharp kick in the ribs.

"Begone, Melik. I will question these strangers alone, and see if they be spies," said Sham.

Melik retreated backward toward the door, and I saw his unpleasant grin over my shoulder. At a command from Sham, Deb and I stepped forward. He seated himself on a cushion, and motioned us to do likewise. Next he did an unexpected thing; he got to his feet with panther silence and slipped to the door. Jerking it open, he looked out. Melik was not there, if that was what Sham suspected.

Sham turned to us, and I swear I thought at first it was another man. His lips were parted in a friendly grin, and his eyes, no longer squinted, fairly sparkled with the joy plainly written in his face.

"TIMOTHY ELROY, you're not after forgettin' your old friend Sam Hardy, are ye?" he demanded, clapping me on the shoulders with two brawny hands. Now his eyes, blue and twinkling with delight, showed tremendous enjoyment.

"Honest, Tim," he chuckled, "I couldn't resist the chance to poke you in the ribs. You've always been so high and mighty and dignified about your rug snatchin'!"

I gaped at him, and so did Deb. For a moment we were both too dumfounded to find our tongues.

"Sam Hardy!" I managed to say stupidly. "Not that spindly little wet-nosed kid that used to drive the Rajah's tin lizzie in Delhi?"

"Beggin' the lady's pardon for the description," grinned Sam, "'t's the very same."

I sank down on the cushions, feeling weak and let-down, as if all my buttons

had suddenly given way. But I had the wit to introduce him to Deborah Welch. The girl's brown stained face was a study. She looked Sam up and down, and the unconcealed disappointment in her expression was enough to make me suddenly uneasy.

"Why, you aren't hard-boiled a bit," she exclaimed.

"Well, don't whisper that discovery around here," laughed Sam. "I'm a lone wolf and rarin' to go when I deal with these cut-throats. They think I'm a regular he-lion."

We sat down, and Sam answered the questions that came from me so fast they stumbled over each other on the way out. I knew, of course, that he had arrived in India as a dishwasher on a boat, and had deserted ship in Calcutta, for I remembered this much of his tale from my acquaintance with him in Delhi. From there, he said, he had gone up into the frontier provinces. Knocking about for some years, he had finally taken it into his head to join a caravan through Afghanistan to Bokhara.

The caravan was waylaid by bandits, cut to bits, and Sam carried as a prisoner of war to this city.

"They hustled me up before those three ugly lookin' idols out there," Sam said, "because I looked like I was a white man and consequently a Christian. Their idea was to show how much they thought of their idols by lettin' 'em watch me die with their ruby eyes. Melik, who was the head man of the tribe, started talkin' to the Black One, sayin' here was another infidel to be rubbed out in his honor, and a funny thought struck me."

"Funny?" cried Deb. "At a time like that?"

"I know it, but I thought how it would startle those black-hearted rascals if the Black One answered 'em back. First thing I know, I bust right out laughin', and the whole crowd dropped jaws and stared at me. You see, I used to do a ventriloquist act with a carnival

back home in the States, and before the tribe could get over the surprise of me laughin', I started to spout Pushtu.

"Mind you, I was laid right there under the Black One and his two sinful lookin' wives, so it sounded all right. You can't *throw* your voice, savvy, the trick is in talkin' without moving your lips, in a voice different from your natural one.

"Well, that heathen idol and I carried on a regular confab in Pushtu, with everybody actin' like the second coming of Mohammed was at hand. Then I made the idol tell 'em I was destined by Allah to be their ruler and their prophet. And I've been workin' that graft ever since."

"Sham, they call you?" Deb asked. "It fits, doesn't it?"

A flush increased the dark tan of Sam's face.

"It's their way o' pronouncin' my name," he said. But I could see the jibe had hurt. Why in thunderation a girl acts that way, only Allah in his wisdom knows. Girls are just like cats, if you'll permit the allusion; growl at 'em, and they'll run, but they'll badger the life out of a helpless little mouse.

AND Sam refused to growl. He was so eager to talk to English-speaking people again, that he didn't know when to stop. And every word, of course, ripped a hole in the legend that surrounded him at Kohan, the legend that gave him the rep of being the hardest boiled egg in the hills of Afghanistan. The illusion torn away, in Deb's perverse and obstinate mind, he became just an ordinary man, condemned for his pretenses instead of praised for his cleverness.

Yes, the story of his killing a holy man in order to make a shrine was a fake, Sam said. His wide mouth opened in one of his infectious grins as he explained.

"These tough customers would sure rare up and throw a fit if they know they were doing homage to one of the

poor old cooks in the royal kitchens," laughed Sam. "But she died the same night a wandering Hadji arrived. I took his clothes, gave him hers, and told him to beat it before the Black One dug up the old gent's past. Next day I had the cook buried with all the ceremonies I could think up, and boy, they was plenty! She had the swellest funeral I ever see. I felt sorry for the poor old dame, she used to work so hard."

A faraway look that a man gets when he's feeling sentimental came over Sam. Deb stood up and yawned.

"And I suppose those bones in the cages out there in the gorge are fake, too?" she asked.

Sam was still thinking of the cook who'd gone to glory in a big way. "Yeah," he said absently, "I found a bunch of bones in the cellar."

Deborah gave him a scornful look.

"Mister Hardy," she said, "we've a proposition to make. We want that rug under the statuary out there. What'll you take for it?"

Sam looked up in alarm.

"The rug is sacred!" he exclaimed. "Impossible!"

"Well, maybe you can fake a substitute," Deb said. "You're good at that. Now, if you don't mind, Tim and I would like to get rooms."

"Certainly," Sam said, vastly troubled. He, innocent soul, couldn't see where he had offended Deb, and his humbly admiring gaze didn't serve to bring that haughty young lady off her high horse one little bit. He summoned Melik, and was too fussed to say good night.

STRIPPING the mask from Emperor Sham gave me a sense of comfort and security. I felt as if a yoke had been lifted from my shoulders when Deb and I were alone in the adjoining rooms assigned us. Instead of a depraved white man, crazed with absolute power and the lust to demonstrate his cruelty, I'd found a likable young American whose tongue retained the quirks of his Irish forefathers. Sam was a lamb in wolf's

clothing, but quick-quitted enough to survive the fangs of the pack.

But Deb fairly snorted her disgust. She flung off her head dress and plumped down on a cushion.

"The humbug," she exclaimed. "I hate a man who pretends to be what he isn't."

"What you wanted was a cave man," I accused her, not without resentment. "I actually believe you'd like it if he'd crushed you with a kiss and then thrown you down the stairs."

"I like men with spunk," Deb admitted coolly. "If he had any real nerve, he'd get that rug for me."

I gave up the argument as futile. You can't argue with a donkey or a woman. I spread my cushions, stretched out, with the revolver handy, and settled myself for sleep. Deb took the hint and retired to her room.

The noise made by Sham's people going about the business of a new day woke me early, refreshed and lighter in spirits than the whole time of our journey to Kohan. I dozed comfortably for a while, the sound of activity reminding me of the apartment house dwellers back home. Men and women called to each other up and down the ladders, babies squalled, and shrill-voiced old hags hounded their numerous progeny into doing the daily chores.

No raid was on, for this was a festival day, and feasts were being prepared. I could hear the reedy voice of the Sha-ir, rehearsing the songs he had devised as poet laureate. Tonight he would sing them through his nose before the Three, bragging of the misdeeds of his fellow rascals.

Sam didn't show up all day, but sent word to me by Melik that a seat of honor would be provided for me and my daughter at the ceremonies. Deb heard the message with indifference. She had a pre-occupied air that meant she was thinking, and didn't want to be interrupted in the painful process. I left her alone, and passed the time swapping yarns with the old warriors.

At the evening meal, Sam took his place quietly, and scowled as he ate. The men dined first, so I did not see Deborah, and when the procession began toward the throne room, I went to get her.

She wasn't in her room, and a few guarded inquiries among the women licking the pots and bowls for what their men had left, brought out no information. My estimable daughter had eaten and departed, but where, none knew. I was afraid of arousing suspicion by too much questioning, and searched alone. Finally I headed for the throne room, believing she must have gone ahead of me.

THE *hujra* was crowded with people squatting crosslegged on the floor, the men in front forming a semi-circle before the three black idols. The light cast by the oil cressets was dim, and it was impossible to recognize faces in that throng. Deb probably was sulking among the women, eying the scarlet rug shimmering on the altar. She would want it more than ever now that it was impossible to obtain.

I saw Melik, standing by the throne ledge, his head on a level with Sam's feet. He beckoned to me, and gave me a position near the stone steps, where I could see all that went on. Try as I would, I couldn't catch Sam's eye. The Emperor of the Three stared moodily out over the heads of his subjects, pulling his short black beard with thumb and forefinger.

The Sha-ir advanced, and three girls glided in his wake, carrying *rebabs*. When the tribal poet began his glory song, they plucked the strings of their instruments in a weird accompaniment. It was a beautiful brag that the old fellow got off his chest, for the tribesmen had chalked up a fine total of enemies slain and caravans raided. No doubt the idols would tell Allah to reserve the best seats in Paradise for such worthy scamps as these men of Kohan.

The song ended in a grand climax of

shouting. Then silence followed, while arms were raised toward the Three.

Suddenly a clear, feminine voice electrified the audience. It came from behind the Emperor Sham, where there was no one but the three red-eyed images, watching the throng with their black, graven faces.

One of the wives of the Black One was speaking!

"The curse of Allah will be upon ye, O my children, unless ye give thought to the Three! For look ye, we sit upon a rug that is old and unwashed! Are my children so poor they cannot provide a new one? At the hour of morning prayers, let a fresh carpet be laid for the Three lest we take away thy glory and power, and deliver ye to thine enemies I, the wife of the Black One, command thee!"

A startled murmuring swept through the crowd like wind through reeds.

"May God protect us," muttered the man beside me, "and may the Three forgive. It is true, the sacred rug is old and unworthy."

But a cold sweat broke out over my body. Melik, the head man, was leaping up the stairs, and from the end of the red rug, where it hung down from the pedestal, could be seen a bit of white cloth.

Amidst shrieks of anger and the cries of women, Deborah was dragged from her hiding place between the rug and the wall, and her arms pinioned by Melik's strong hands.

"Death to the defiler!" rose the shouts on every side.

And the echoing room flung back the word—death, death!

SAM had leaped from his throne, and now stood beside Melik. In the tumult, I couldn't hear what was said, but he tried to make the head man release his hold on Deb.

Instead, Melik yanked the girl toward the steps. Deb fought to get her hands free, and the cloth of her dress parted. Her smooth white skin and rounded

shoulder brought gasps of incredible horror, for the brown berry stain ended at her throat!

"*A ferenghi!* An infidel white woman! A Christian has defiled our gods!"

Where confusion had been before, tumult reigned now. Men dashed to the steps, knives drawn. But Sam stood at the top, a hand on the hilt of his dagger, the other upraised.

As everlasting proof of his dominance of these wild people, Sam stopped the rush. More, he made his voice heard in a thundering command for quiet.

"This insult is upon the heads of the Three!" he cried. "Let the Black One decide the punishment!"

Facing the crowd, Sam waited. Beside him, still grasped by Melik, Deborah held her chin up, her body tense. In a moment the Black One began to speak. In majestic phrases the idol demanded that the white girl be brought before him in the morning for judgment, and I realized that Sam had done the best he could. Delay was all that could save Deb now.

I saw Melik drop the girl's arms and look at Sam, then at the Black One. The head man, whom Sam had deposed when he took the throne, was plainly upset. Had he discovered Sam's secret? Had he detected the trick of ventriloquism that caused the grotesque idol to speak the words Sam wanted it to speak?

There was no way of knowing, for the next moment Deborah was surrounded by men who swarmed up the steps, and she was carried from the room. I followed the pack, and saw her thrust roughly into a cage on the floor below. Melik himself stood guard at the door of the room.

All night the tiered village seethed with excitement as preparations went forward for the torture and execution. The crime of sacrilege, the violation of the dieties these people worshiped, called for a punishment as cruel as their fiendish imaginations could contrive.

I listened to the sound of hammers

and the ringing of hot iron on anvils, every blow seeming to fall on a raw nerve. It was the more horrible because it was unseen, and what monstrous engines of destruction were being contrived, I could only guess at.

Sam and I could do nothing but wait. We went twice to the floor where Deb was held, but the mob of men and women prevented us from talking with her, and Sam couldn't risk ordering them away. Even his power wasn't sufficient for that, and he knew it.

"Sure, Tim, and it's a fine pickle you've got that girl into," he cried, when we were back in his room. His face was etched with deep lines in his cheeks, and his eyes were feverish.

"Never mind that," I said shortly. "We've got to get her out of this."

There was no use in striking while the iron was cold, as the Afghans say, and so we crouched in that room behind the throne, indifferent to the luxury of stolen silks that furnished it.

Strangely enough, no one thought to denounce me for bringing Deb into the village. In the excitement and hysteria that prevailed, I was forgotten. Sam and I were not disturbed in our council of war.

"The best plan," Sam declared, "is to have the idol command me to kill her. I'll have her brought up the steps and laid on the ledge under the Black One. Then I'll whisk her up and bring her to this room. See this swinging bridge? We can escape across it."

I looked through a window hidden by a rug, and saw that Sam had wisely prepared an exit against the day when the tribe might find out his deceptions. From the window, over to a jutting wall of the cliff, hung a narrow bridge. It was suspended by thick woven ropes fastened to the top of the building and anchored to rocks high on the cliff.

"And you, Tim, will be close to the stone steps leading to the altar ledge," Sam explained. "When I yell, you run up them as fast as you can manage that bulk of yours."

Under the circumstances, I allowed his allusion to my weight to pass unrebuked. Sam's plan was presented confidently enough, and some hope began to return. My eyes got heavier and heavier, and the last I remembered was Sam's frown as he thoughtfully rubbed his beard.

SUNLIGHT was streaming in the window when I awoke. I got up, and Sam stirred, reaching for a tobacco pouch. The floor around him was littered with the butts of cigars.

Melik appeared in the doorway, caught Sam's nod, and disappeared.

"All right, Tim, they'll be coming in with her soon," the Emperor of the Three said.

I looked at my Colt's. Six shots—there'd be no time for reloading. This was a job for wits, not force. That revolver couldn't stem a hundred men thirsting for the blood of an infidel.

I seated myself at the edge of the circle closest to the steps, and held my vantage point against the shoving, unruly mob that flowed into the room. Then a lane cleared, and Melik, with six brawny hillmen, carried Deb forward. Her guards fended away clawing women who tried to reach her, but most of the girl's clothes were in shreds after that fighting, swearing procession to the altar.

They set her down, and Deb slid weakly to her knees. Her black hair hung over her white shoulders, and through the cloud of it I could see ugly scratches from the nails of the old hags who had pawed through her guards.

Presently Melik drew a short sword and waved it aloft. Sam came slowly along the ledge, trying to make his entrance as effective as he could. The crucial test was at hand.

I saw Melik leer up at his Emperor, a half smile on his distorted face that promised nothing good for Sam. Then the head man broke into a wild speech of denunciation, and the crowd swayed

and growled as he repeated the story of Deb's offense.

He paused, and Sam cleared his throat.

Slowly, choosing his words with care, the Emperor Sham declared that the Black One would pronounce a fitting judgment, and cautioned his subjects to listen carefully to the words of Allah's stone mouthpiece.

Thus Sam craftily contrived to soothe and silence the mob, preparing their simple minds for the full majesty of a spoken message from the gods.

The moment came. Sam closed his lips, and his other voice, muffled and metallic, began the breathlessly awaited verdict. Only the slight motion of the cords in his throat betrayed Sam's physical connection with that voice of doom, for neither his lips nor his jaws moved.

"L*A haula wala kowata illa bi 'llah,"* spoke the Black One. "There is no majesty or power but in God; he only is great. Hear ye his command! Let the maid be brought to—"

The droning voice caught, choked. I looked at Sam, startled. His face was working and his eyes watered. And below him, Melik was tossing fine powdered pepper into the air, pepper that rose in a cloud!

Sam struggled to go on, and could not. He managed one more word, and then his throat contracted, and a strangling cough burst from his lips.

"Sham hath deceived us!" howled Melik in triumph. "It is Sham's voice we have obeyed, not the Black One's!"

Old and fat as I am, I acted before the rest of that throng could recover from the shock of Melik's revelation. I bowled over the nearest guard and saw Deb struggling to her feet.

Melik saw me, and made a dash for Deb, his sword upraised.

I fired, but that didn't stop him. And at that moment a great black object hurtled down and crashed full upon the fellow's back. Sam had hurled the Black One from the pedestal!

"Up the stairs," I yelled at Deb, and fired at the man trying to reach her. He stumbled and fell over the broken image. Fleet as a panther, Deb bounded up the stairs, and I followed.

"Into the room, quick," Sam ordered, and jumped forward to block the rush up the steps.

Nearing the door, I heard another crash and ear-splitting shrieks. I looked and saw that Sam had hurled another of the idols, this time into the yelling mass struggling for a foothold on the stairs to the ledge.

He was reaching for the last ebony statue when Deb and I turned in the door.

"Can you make it across the ladder?" I asked, yanking the curtain away and showing the window to her.

"Yes," she whispered faintly, and took one step. The long night of horror, the hours of waiting, had proved too much for her strength. She would have fallen, but I caught her up in time.

Sam had placed a rifle inside the door, and as I carried Deb through the window, he rushed in and picked it up.

"Go on, I'll hold 'em off!" he yelled.

I felt the little bridge give under our weight. Holding Deb like a sack of flour, I clung to the rope and managed to get across. Just as I reached the rock a rope parted. The bridge dropped, and from the cliff I watched it swing across the chasm and bang against the wall of the building. Sam's avenue of escape was gone!

HE appeared that moment in the window, leaping up to stand on the ledge. At a glance he saw what had happened. He whisked his knife from the sash, cut loose the hanging wood bridge, and seized the rope.

The upper end of the rope was fastened to a cornice of the roof that crowned the perpendicular city. Swinging out over space, Sam was able to kick the wall and increase the arc. It was a good ten feet across that chasm, but

Sam made it. He let go the rope, fell against the slanting rocks, and caught hold. A man reached the window and aimed a rifle. My last shot caught the fellow in the stomach, and he doubled over, pitching out of the window.

Deb crawled over the cliff and got behind the rocks, and in a moment I had Sam with her. It would take several hours for the villagers to climb this cliff, and by that time we would be down in the next valley.

"Deb, I got the rug for you," Sam said, when he could catch his breath. He was bleeding from many knife wounds, and his clothes were in tatters, but somehow he had managed to pick up the sacred carpet and escape with it under one arm.

"Hang the rug!" cried Deb. "Oh,

Sam, you're hurt! Here, let me tie up your arm."

"You don't want the rug?" Sam exclaimed incredulously, while Deb used the fluttering shreds of her dress to bind his cuts.

"That silly old rug isn't half as important as you," Deb retorted. "Gee, Sam, the way you rescued me was marvelous!" And she kissed him.

One moment more, and my tale is done. If you will visit the Long Island home of Mr. and Mrs. Sam Hardy, you will see the sacred red rug of Kohan, which I shipped to them as a wedding present. In spite of the fact that Deb swore she never wanted to see the thing again, I chose it as my most suitable gift. You see, I had learned that a woman never means what she says!

Look for the further adventures of Timothy Elroy in coming issues of ACTION STORIES. . . . All stories complete in each issue.

WHERE THE ROD'S NOT SPARED

IN Saigon, French Indo China, the French gendarmes and Annamite police have a most effective way of dealing with petty offenders not members of the Caucasian race. Instead of imposing a fine, the judge imposes a number of strokes with a rattan, laid on the buttocks of an offender by a strong hand.

At the outbreak of the World War in 1914, the military authorities in Manila fearing that commerce might be interrupted by German raiders, despatched the U. S. A. T. *Warren* to Saigon with funds for the purchase of rice for the Philippine Scouts. There was considerable delay in securing permission from the French government to purchase the commodity, and both the American pay guard and the Filipino crew of the transport found time hanging on their hands.

One evening the Filipinos staged a rough-house in a waterfront barroom, and ten were arrested by the gendarmes. In the morning the brown men were haled before the judge who assessed each one seven raps of the rattan. The brown men were horrified—they had expected a fine or imprisonment. With a smile the judge consented that the *Warren's* captain be sent for, and when he arrived the Frenchman explained the law. The captain grinned and nodded. The law must take its course, as the Filipinos, though members of the crew of a U. S. vessel, were clearly Asiatic.

Despite their pleading and cursing, the brown men were led out, laid across a log, and issued what was coming to them.