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Honor of a Horse-Thief

By S. B. H. HURST

A vivid action-adventure story of the Amir of Afghanistan, and the spectacular feat of a Durani clansman

"IN ALL Afghanistan you are the only man I can trust, Shir Ali!" said the Amir.

Shir Ali was a horse-thief.

It was nearing midnight in the palace of the Amir of Afghanistan in Kabul. Shir Ali was alone with the Amir in a little room. Midnight of that terrible winter. Terrible in its cold and in the revolt of the Afghan army.

The Amir was no longer Amir. The glow from a ruby-colored lamp showed his tired, strained face. The city was but a shadow, with a tinkle of music from heavy-walled houses and the scent of musk on frosty air, but about the palace was the noise and high confusion of an army that had set up one of its officers as king. In the isolated little room there still was privacy.

The Amir shrugged his shoulders.

"The throne and the army are one," he said bitterly. "The people are not interested. One Amir taxes them as does another! In a little while my head will rot on the Lahori gate. . . . More than glad I am that you came, Shir Ali. Strange how our lives have crossed and re-crossed! Like paths twisting across the plain. I was sitting in judgment when I first saw you. You made me laugh, so I let you go free. Later, you did me a special service—caught a rebel and likely saved my throne for me. You can not save it now—not for me. But—if God wills. . . . See!"

The Amir lifted a silk covering from a tiny bed. Asleep on the bed was a little boy of about a year old.

"My only son. Some day, if God wills

and you, Shir Ali, are not killed on your journey—well, some day you may look back and say that you saved my throne again—not for me but for my son!"

Shir Ali stood erect, squared his shoulders and gravely saluted the sleeping child.

"Nadir Shah, the new Amir, will cut off my head and stick it on the Lahori gate, according to custom—maybe tomorrow, maybe in a month: when he grows tired of keeping me in suspense. Nadir Shah, the new Amir, whom I favored and raised to Sirdar of the army! A big ugly devil of a man, marvelously like thee, Shir Ali! So like thee, indeed, that if you were garbed in his uniform, with his jewelled turban on that great head of thine, and he was put into your sheepskin coat—I would think you were him and he was you. . . . No matter. A man can die but once. . . . And my son must live!"

The Amir, Abdur Rahman, spoke with fierce affection, striding to and fro across the heavy rug.

"You came through the secret door, up the steps to this room. You and I are the only two men now alive who know of that door. You will take my son and escape with him—through that door. After that, you will stay with him and watch him grow, and guide his small feet, and be like another father to him—always keeping in his mind that he is the son of a king, and that some day he will be king himself. By the strength of his arm and the fickle favor of the army of Afghanistan!"

Shir Ali spoke for the first time.



*"The sentry stepped closer. Something flashed in the starlight.
The soul of the sentry went out in the cold."*

"To where shall I take thy son, lord Amir?"

"'Lord Amir?'" the Amir laughed bitterly. "Never mind. . . . Take him—but, oh, what a terrible ride for him and thee! Take him through the Lataband, the Khyber—to Peshawah. Take him to the English!"

"The English?"

"Yes! They have always kept faith with me. Had I allowed them to build a railway and put a telegraph in my country the English would have had an army here by now—or, at any rate, on the way. For I could have sent them the swift word. I have kept faith with the Queen-Empress, and not a foot has Russia dared to advance. The English will guard my son, and educate him and care for him as a prince should be cared for. So, Shir Ali, take my only son and ride for Peshawah. No other man in the world could make

that ride. And no other man would I trust! . . . I love thee, you damned old villain!"

And the Amir flung his arm across the horse-thief's shoulders.

Shir Ali raised his right arm gravely.

"I take oath," he said. "By Allah and His prophet Mohamet! I take the King's Oath! My blood for the King's blood—drop by drop as long as I have blood! My blood for the Son of the King—my Prince! To my King and his Son do I dedicate the last drop of my blood, and every drop! And this I swear by God and His prophet! May Allah blast me and Shaitan burn my soul if I fail in my trust! For this is the King's Oath, and I am a Durani!"

The Amir returned the salute. He took a letter from a pocket of his uniform.

"This—I will read it to thee, for I remember, many years ago, that you told

me you could not read—this letter to the general of the English, whom you will find at the post called Jamrud, just this side of Peshawah. This letter, so that the English will know the child is indeed my son. Listen!"

The Amir, Abdur Rahman, read:

"Excellency,

My army has rebelled and raised Nadir Shah to be Amir. I await his pleasure in the matter of when he will order my head to be taken from my body. I can not escape, even if life seemed worth the weariness of the effort. But the bearer of this, my dear and trusted friend Shir Ali, may be able to get away. He is a very clever, and very strong man. To him I am trusting my only son. Therefore, if Shir Ali is able safely to make the terrible ride through the passes choked with the snows of winter, and to present to thee this letter of mine, you will know that the babe he brings with him is my only son. To thee, Excellency, and to England do I send my son, knowing that England will treat him as my son and as a prince. For England never forgets! I can write no more. I can hear the rebels in my palace, and the time is short.

ABDUR RAHMAN."

Abdur Rahman gave the letter to Shir Ali.

"Go quickly!" he said.

"I have no money," said Shir Ali.

Abdur Rahman laughed.

"As of old! Always the same!" He pinched Shir Ali's ear. He became sad and grave again. "If I gave thee an order on the treasury the purse-keeper would laugh at thee. But—take this! If, when you sell it, the broker asks you where you got it, say you stole it. Don't risk a quarrel with him. Take this!"

Abdur Rahman gave Shir Ali a splendid diamond.

"I happened to have it with me. All I have to give thee—when but a little while ago I was a great king, and could have smothered thee in diamonds!"

Shir Ali blinked.

"The value of a horse I know, and can judge—it is my trade! But this—what is this worth, my lord?"

"It is worth what the buyer wills—if he desires it enough. But ten thousand

English sovereigns would not buy it in open market."

Shir Ali put the diamond in his belt.

"Go quickly," whispered Abdur Rahman. "They are coming—for me. Hurry! the secret door!" The Amir lifted the sleeping child from the bed, kissed him and placed him tenderly in Shir Ali's arms. "Go quickly, and God go with thee! I will open the door!"

Abdur Rahman fingered a sliding panel. It opened noiselessly. Shir Ali, the child in his arms, stepped through. A draft of cold air met him. He walked carefully down some steps. Abdur Rahman shut the door.

SHIR ALI walked over a tiny bridge. It was very dark, but waist-high walls prevented falling. Under the bridge ran a swift deep stream—a narrow tributary of the Logar river. What secrets that dark, underground river contained! . . . Across the bridge, still within the secret tunnel, Shir Ali reached another door. He laid down the child and opened the door cautiously. Then he picked up the child, stepped into the winter night and closed the door again.

Would the child remain quiet? It slept and snuggled contentedly against the old horse-thief's heart, warm under his sheepskin. Shir Ali had stolen horses and taken chances under all sorts of conditions, but this was a new experience. With a sleeping baby under his left arm he had to steal a horse from the palace of a de-throned Amir, with the palace filled by the rebellious army. And the night was too clear. Stars and not a cloud in the frosty sky.

He loafed slowly toward the stables. The noise about the palace had quieted somewhat. Shir Ali nodded. The soldiers were gambling. They had taken Abdur Rahman, and would now have no other

thought but their games. . . . Shir Ali reached the end of the long north wall of the palace. He began to whistle as he turned the corner toward the stables. At that moment he saw a fat Usbeg groom.

"Ho! Ho!" greeted the groom. "Who art thou? And the bundle under the arm, friend?"

"You must have lost all your money?" replied Shir Ali, continuing to walk toward the stable.

"I have, or I would not be here. But who are you, and what's that under your arm?"

"Can you keep your big mouth shut?" Shir Ali let his voice drop to a confidential whisper.

"Of course!" the groom whispered, avidly.

"Come quietly with me, then! I will show thee what I have. No doubt something for thee, also—if that mouth of thine does not make a noise!"

The groom nodded. He grinned as a confederate in crime should grin. The big man had evidently made a good haul, and was trying to avoid discovery by sharing it. That was good! The Usbeg would be able to gamble again.

"I don't want to divide with every groom in Afghanistan!" Shir Ali was whispering again. "Let us go where there isn't a crowd."

"You are going right—otherwise I would have told thee," chuckled the groom. "Would I want every groom to share with me? This is that part of the stables where Abdur Rahman kept his best horses!"

They were in the stable. Better than the groom did Shir Ali know where the best horses were kept.

"Now let me see what you have," whispered the Usbeg.

At that moment the whole world

seemed to fall on him. A minute later Shir Ali was leading out a splendid horse. Very lightly for so large a man, his arm balancing the prince as if in a cradle, Shir Ali mounted. He spoke quietly to the horse and it walked quietly. Then he swore rather loudly at the whims of the world and the hard lot of all grooms—to arouse the interest of the sentry as naturally as possible. The child whimpered softly. Shir Ali raised his voice to drown the little cry.

"Well?" asked the sentry, who also felt it hard that he had to stand in the cold while his comrades gambled in comfort. "Where are you going with that horse?"

"Hullo, *naik!*" laughed Shir Ali.

"Don't call me *naik*—if I was a corporal I would not be here. And answer my question."

The voice of Shir Ali became the voice of a man who tells a smutty story.

"I can not tell you, but you can guess. The officer merely ordered me to have a horse *there*—in case he needs it!"

"No doubt! But in that case you must have some sort of pass! And what is in that bundle under your arm? . . . You look like a thief to me. Show me the bundle!"

Shir Ali sighed. It was a deep, pitiful sigh, the sigh of a truthful and honest man who is hurt by unbelief.

"Very well! Look!"

The sentry stepped closer. Something flashed in the starlight. The soul of the sentry went out in the cold. Shir Ali urged the horse forward. He had stolen a horse from the stable of a deposed Amir, from among that Amir's enemies. No other horse-thief had ever done the like! He grinned with grim pride. And he had not violated the horse-thief's code of ethics. He had merely stunned the groom, not killed him. Sentries, of course, were different!

The little prince stirred and whimpered plaintively.

"Lie still, little sparrow," Shir Ali spoke tenderly. "I will guard thee. I have taken the king's oath to thy father, and I am, thank God, a Durani! Lie at ease, son of the king, for Shir Ali will protect thee—if he has to kill every man he meets to do it!"

THE horse was cantering. The palace is outside the city, but soon Shir Ali was riding through the narrow, crooked streets of Kabul.

In one very narrow street, merely an alley between the high, windowless walls of the houses of wealthy men, Shir Ali reined in the horse. It was very quiet. He looked up at a small, barred, square opening in the wall of the house. He whistled softly. There was no answer. He looked up again. Far above, as it were through a slit in the roof of the world, he saw the stars. Again he whistled. This time a voice answered quietly.

"Who?"

"Shir Ali! I pray you open the door of your yard so that I may bring in my horse!"

"I will open."

Shir Ali rode out of the narrow way and around to the front of the house. Here were high, wide walls, with a door through which a man and horse might just pass, if the man bent low over the horse's neck. Shir Ali heard the heavy bolts being drawn. The door opened.

"Come in, friend."

"The blessing of God upon thee, Ben Mohamet!" greeted Shir Ali, as he entered and Ben Mohamet closed the door. "Old friend, I have need of thee!" He dismounted carefully. The little prince did not cry. "Need of thee as in times past when in trouble. I need a saddle for this fine horse, for I have a long ride. But

first a good blanket to cover him from the frost of the night—for I must enter the house to show you something. To show you two wonderful things. And—which is unusual—I can pay for the saddle!"

"No pay," said Ben Mohamet, leading the way into the house. "I will never accept pay from thee, Shir Ali, as I have often told you. Do you always forget how you saved my life and all I have?" He stood aside politely. "Enter, I beg of you, my friend."

Shir Ali entered. The door was shut. They stood in a room of rugs and Oriental furnishings, under the glow from a silver lamp, in that sacred privacy of the East which is like the privacy of a tomb.

"May I ask you to call your wife?" said Shir Ali. "I need much advice from the lady."

"Maybe advice in the matter of gifts for some houri of earth?" smiled Ben Mohamet.

"Not so, friend. It happens that I am now the father of a little son of great value, and I need a woman to explain to me how to feed him and the like."

Shir Ali laid the baby gently on a table.

"See, friend! Behold the future Amir of Afghanistan!" he said quietly.

Ben Mohamet stared at him. Surprising it had been when Shir Ali needed the advice of a woman. The baby increased that surprize. But—the future Amir. . . . Ben Mohamet understood.

"So, he gave thee the child to raise and care for—hence your coming here so quietly in the night. Well, friend Shir Ali, there are still loyal hearts in Kabul. You did right to bring the baby here. We are, as you know, childless, and my wife and I will give the baby love and adoration."

Shir Ali bowed.

"I thank thee, loyal heart, but I may not leave the baby here. I have a long

way to ride with him. I will explain. And we must hasten. Here," he produced the diamond, "is money for the journey—give me a part of its value. Not all! Be my banker. Please call your wife!"

Ben Mohamet acted quickly. He called his wife. Then he went to get the saddle and the money.

"The precious princeling," cooed the woman. "See, Shir Ali, you must hold him this way. You do your best, but a child can not be carried like a goose! This way! . . . And now—oh, there is so much to tell thee! Did ever a woman before me have the task of instructing a big, rough man in the ways of mothers—and with only a few minutes for the teaching of all that women have learned since Eve suckled her first-born?"

THE morning was clear and cold, but the heavy clouds upon the crests of the Hindu Koosh presaged more snow. Through the passes of the worst country in the world—such was the ride Shir Ali faced with the baby. And in such weather!

"Oh, well," he muttered, "I won't have to swing my sword in one hand and cuddle the prince in the other—this weather will keep the brigands at home!"

He shivered, though, as he thought of something else. The ghosts and djinns of the mountain passes. Shir Ali was afraid of nothing—if it was flesh and blood. But a ghost! His racial superstitions crept along his spine. The tales he had heard since he was a child. The terrible dead men who haunted the Laraband. Worse than the Khyber. But all agreed that both were fearful! Ghosts. Armies of them! The tales of men, the eery stories of the women. Not all travelers killed in the passes were killed by robbers! . . . The very dust of the passes was the dust of the dead. Ghosts of the armies of Alexander the Great, Mahmud of Ghazni, Jenghis

Khan, Berber. . . . And Shir Ali had to ride through that country, in the dark of the dead of winter, with a babe to care for—to the British post of Jamrud. . . . He tried to fight down superstition with wit.

"Maybe the ghosts will ask me if I have ceased being a horse-thief and turned kidnapper!"

He camped at dusk—between four and five in the afternoon. The early stars watched him caring for the child in the snow.

"I am a clumsy thing," he growled when the baby cried. "I have let the cold wind bite the tenderling. Thank Allah he comes of stout stock! See, the little thoroughbred is blue with cold, but he grits his teeth and refuses to whimper."

But Shir Ali made very slow progress. The snow was deep and loose. Even if alone he could have only made short marches between camps. No horse could stand much of such traveling. And when he stopped to care for the child the eery, icy mountain winds seemed to howl uncanny suggestions. An occasional handful of *krut* was all the man ate. He kept grimly onward. Between Kismet and Allah he hoped to avoid the occult.

Came a time when his physical sufferings made him indifferent to superstition. These had grown worse hourly. And then disaster struck him. The horse stumbled and broke a leg.

Shir Ali looked up at the leaden sky and cursed.

"I have forgotten some few prayers, and at times shown slight respect for the *mullabs*, and I have never made the pilgrimage to Mecca. These be things in a man's life! If I have stolen horses—well, I had to live; and I am told that the Koran says nothing against the trade! Be that as it may, I am now on an errand of duty—and where is Thy protection? Has Satan risen from Hell to rule the world? Or is

this just Thy mock of me—all these miles from Jamrud with a child in my arms, and no horse? Surely Thou knowest that I never walk!"

The bitter wind answered him. His eyes watered at its sting. Then he laughed like the fighting man he was.

"No more camps, by God! The horse had to be rested now and then, but I am a man!"

He was! But, as of old, the Pass hated men. Down through the centuries men had disturbed its solitudes, and all that time the Pass had taken its toll of men. But this man! Never before had the Pass seen such a sight! A big, hairy Afghan, a man of a cruel race, struggling forward, slipping and falling—but always taking care that his precious burden was not harmed. A man with a baby.

"My blood for the king's blood, and for his son—as long as I have blood to give. By Allah and His Prophet! I am a Durani, and this is the King's Oath!"

In a delirium of fatigue which would have killed an ordinary man Shir Ali decided that Kismet had ordained him for this end—to give his life to bring the baby to the protection of the British. But what a strange end! Would the *houris* welcome him into Paradise if he died saving a baby? Did they not crave a man who died fighting? He fell again. Could he ever get up? He asked the cold stars. Well, if he could not walk he could crawl!

THE Khyber was in that weather no place through which to move an army, but a treaty is a treaty, and the British army had put Jamrud behind it. Abdur Rahman had done his part as regards Russia, and England must keep her promise and help him when he needed help. But the army could make only the slowest of progress.

Just how far the rebellion had gone the

English general did not know. Abdur Rahman had been unable to send word since the trouble began. A message had come through asking for help. That was all. Then the snow had blocked the passes.

The sentry wondered. What was that crawling toward him? Stopping, lying at full length, crawling again. Surely that could not be a man! What would a man be doing there—crawling that way? Was it a bear? The sentry was no naturalist, but he promptly reported that he saw something.

Thus it came about that Shir Ali woke to consciousness from a cruel dream that seemed to have lasted since Allah created the world. He heard voices. His eyes were a film, and his eyebrows were crusted with icicles. But, dimly, he saw men. . . . Maybe they were not real. The only real thing in all this misery was the baby. Even in the extremity of his suffering he had given the baby the tenderest care. . . . But, still, that was a voice—asking in *Pushtu*:

"Who are you?"

Shir Ali grunted and tried to get to his feet. Two soldiers helped him. They supported him, for he could not stand.

"I . . . seek the general . . . of the English . . . at Jamrud. . . . Take me to the . . . Sirdar . . . I . . . have a letter . . . a letter . . . from my Amir . . . for the Sirdar. . . . And here . . . be very careful of him . . . here is the Amir's only son!"

They were very careful, very kind. So kind that Shir Ali wondered how soldiers could be so kind. . . . Then he felt himself falling, falling into the bottomless Pit—concerning which, he remembered, the *mullah* who taught the boys of his district had given him a most accurate description. . . . But that did not matter, because he could sleep now.

He awoke after many hours, stared

about and was greatly puzzled. Some one had undressed him while he slept! Shir Ali could not remember having been undressed by any one before. When very young, his mother! . . . The word was a whip to memory. Who had cared for the baby while he was sleeping? Like a hog he had lain there, while the little prince . . . The English soldiers would know nothing about caring for babies! They lacked his experience! Perhaps they had tried and, in kindly ignorance, harmed the tenderling! . . . Shir Ali was rolling out of the blankets, shouting. He felt well but a trifle shaky. He shouted. Ah, here was a soldier! . . . Shir Ali gripped the field hospital orderly and shouted frantic questions in *Pushtu*. . . . Where was the prince? The baby? The little one! . . . Puggle, don't you understand? . . . The orderly did not understand a word. He decided that Shir Ali was suffering from the shock of his recent hardships, and was delirious.

"'Ere, 'erc, 'old hup, old feller! Don't go to gettin' hexited!"

Shir Ali almost screamed with rage. He wrestled with the orderly. The orderly, accustomed to holding writhing men, did very well against his heavier antagonist, but he shouted for help. Shir Ali heard other footsteps. He looked up and saw a woman. He stopped wrestling. As he stared at her he realized that the baby had been properly cared for. Here was a woman. But what was she doing here—in a camp of soldiers? . . . Women followed the armies of Afghanistan, but not such women as this! There was a quality about this one. And she was wearing a sort of uniform. . . .

She spoke with authority to the orderly. He obeyed her! Shir Ali relaxed with an astonishment that was akin to horror. A woman giving orders to a soldier, and, what was worse, the soldier obeyed her!

Ah, only a queen is obeyed. . . . But, he had heard, the queen of the English was old. This one was young and good to look at. What was that tiny glass tube she was shaking? She was coming toward him with it! Some sorcery here, surely! . . . He shrank away. The woman smiled and advanced. She was not a bit afraid of him when he scowled at her. So he shouted for help—in *Pushtu*! The woman was still bent upon doing something to him with that glass tube. This was terrible! Shir Ali roared again.

Into this excitement came the officer who had spoken to Shir Ali when they found him in the snow. He looked and laughed. The pretty nurse looked at him reproachfully. The officer laughed again. Then he spoke to Shir Ali.

"The general sends his compliments, sir, and hopes you are well!" The old horse-thief grinned.

"Well, yes, thank God! But, sahib, I am all mixed up. A woman here who orders men! Yet am I relieved in my mind at seeing her, for I know the small prince has been cared for. I was worried about him!"

The officer translated for the benefit of the nurse. She beamed upon Shir Ali and replaced the thermometer in its case.

"The poor man, and all that was the matter with him was that he was worried about the baby!"

She looked at the orderly, as if the orderly ought to have known. Shir Ali insisted upon seeing the prince before he either ate or saw the general. The joy of that grim old fighter was wonderful when the baby recognized him, crowed and held up a tiny hand in greeting.

"THE Amir had not been killed when you left Kabul, then?" said the general.

"No, Sirdar. Nadir Shah will amuse

himself by keeping Abdur Rahman in suspense—as is the custom. That is what I think. But, again, the head of Abdur Rahman may even now be staring sightless from the high top of the Lahori Gate."

"I see! My instructions are to take Kabul and to place on the throne another Amir than Nadir Shah—a man we can trust. The little prince will of course be taken to England, and reared as Abdur Rahman wished. You will go with him, since that was also Abdur Rahman's wish, and your own desire. It will be interesting to you. Hem!" the general grinned. "I understand you were horrified when the soldier obeyed the nurse. In England men often obey women. Don't allow that to disturb you. . . . By the way, the matter of your rank may become important. In this letter the Amir does not mention your rank."

Shir Ali grinned.

"I have served Abdur Rahman in confidential capacities. . . ."

"I see," said the general. "Chief of Intelligence, corresponding to rank of colonel in our army. Were you a cavalry officer?"

"Everybody in Afghanistan knows of my connection with horses," said Shir Ali gravely.

The general nodded.

"If Abdur Rahman is not yet dead—is there any way, think you, of delaying his execution until I can get to Kabul?"

For a moment Shir Ali stared tensely at the general. Then he jumped to his feet.

"By God, yes!" he exclaimed. "Why didn't I think of that before? If he still lives . . . if I can get to Kabul in time. . . . A horse, Sirdar! Get me a good horse quickly. I may be able to stop his execution."

"How?" asked the general.

"The horse, quickly. Never mind what I do. You English have queer ideas, and my plan might seem . . . never mind. The horse, quickly, your excellency. . . . If he is dead I can do nothing. But . . . take good care of the prince! And follow me with all speed, Burra Sahib. I will ride like hell, and I am a good rider!"

SHIR ALI had better luck going north, and, considering everything, made remarkable time. He had no baby to care for, and his mind was set and at rest upon the solution of a problem. If Abdur Rahman still lived. Quite simple. It was the law that only an Amir can set the date for the execution of an Amir. For centuries that had been the law. It was a sacred law and could not be broken. Only an Amir can say to another Amir, "Cut off his head today!" And the time of death was never set until an hour or so before execution. Very simple, then. All Shir Ali had to do was to kill Nadir Shah! With Nadir Shah dead Abdur Rahman would live until the army elected another Amir. The new Amir could, of course, order Abdur Rahman's head to be cut off. But by that time the English army would be at Kabul! Very simple. If Abdur Rahman was alive.

"The oath of the king's blood! Thank God I am a Durani! I may be able to do it quietly, without being seen, or I may have to do it with ten thousand men watching me—who will tear me to bits! It does not matter very much—that tearing! The prince is safe, and—my blood for the king!"

He reached Kabul in the darkening of late afternoon. The practise of a lifetime bade him get rid of the horse, and the only way to get rid of a horse was to sell it to somebody he could trust. Shir Ali rode to the *serai* of an old crook with whom he had had many dealings.

The approach to the stable was intricate. A groom held a lantern to Shir Ali's face.

"Put that damned thing away!" growled Shir Ali.

"I did not know it was you," the man apologized. "Let me lead in the horse. A fine horse!"

"Yes, I stole him from an English general down in Peshawah!" said Shir Ali.

The groom laughed delightedly. This was Shir Ali, indeed! The cleverest horse-thief and the cleverest liar in Afghanistan.

"A splendid lie," he chuckled flatteringly. "From Peshawah he brings a horse that he says he stole from an English general—with the passes full of snow!"

But Shir Ali was not flattered. Usually he enjoyed making up a story to explain his possession of a horse as much as he did stealing it. But this night he had no time for amusement.

"I will flatten your silly face if you doubt my word," he growled. "Tell me, fool, where is Coomer Ali?"

"Here!"

An old voice cracked gleefully.

"Don't hit me, Shir Ali! Tell any tale your heart desires, for, as you know, I believe them all! How much for the horse?"

Shir Ali dismounted. A boy brought coffee and tobacco. But Shir Ali did not sit down. He spoke hurriedly.

"The best horse I ever brought thee!" Habit framed the words. He went on with careless truth. "A little tired he is, maybe. I have come a long way with him, and the snow in the passes makes hard riding."

Coomer Ali laughed politely.

"As I said," Shir Ali spoke rapidly, "I have been away. What is the news here in Kabul? Does the head of Abdur Rahman look down from the Lahori Gate?"

Coomer Ali raised his shaggy eyebrows.

"You almost make me believe you—and your tale about where you got the horse. But why twit an old and discreet friend? You know very well that the head of Abdur Rahman is not yet an ornament, and that Nadir Shah torments him by sending him fine food every day—saying, 'Eat, friend Abdur Rahman, for I want thy head to look fat and sleek when I stick it on the Gate! All this you must know, for it is the talk of the town!'"

Shir Ali nodded.

"I will take your offer for the horse! I am reminded that I have an appointment."

Coomer Ali gasped with astonishment. What had happened to Shir Ali? Usually, always was he a good business man, who would bargain for hours. Now he was accepting an offer before it was made! Was he sick? God was good, and Coomer Ali would make a fine profit, but he couldn't understand it.

"Well?" growled Shir Ali. "Hurry! I do not want to be late!"

"Of course not! Of course not! One must not keep a lady waiting!" Coomer Ali was thrusting money into Shir Ali's hand. Shir Ali never even looked at it before putting it into his belt. Coomer Ali was glad he did not look, for Shir Ali had a terrible temper, and the amount of the money, for such a horse, was an insult. Coomer Ali had been ready with a joke had Shir Ali counted the money. He did not count. All was well, and God was good to old men! . . .

"Good-bye!" Shir Ali walked out of the stable quickly.

"By Allah," Coomer Ali laughed. "I believe the cleverest horse-thief in the world has fallen in love!"

SHIR ALI walked through the dark city. He possessed one big advantage—a way of attack unsuspected by the enemy.

Only Abdur Rahman and Shir Ali knew of the secret door. Torture could not have wrung that secret out of either of them. That secret door in the long north wall of the palace, which a man might stare at for a week and never see.

He avoided everybody, did not speak to a soul, walking cautiously. Several times he crept in the shadows when, outside the city, he reached the grounds of the palace. He bent his huge body through the secret entrance, closed the door and stood quietly in the dark. There was not a shiver in his marvelous nervous system.

The underground river that never froze. The little bridge that crossed it. The steps to the room in which Shir Ali had last seen Abdur Rahman. These were passed, and Shir Ali stood listening at the sliding panel. Voices in the room. Shir Ali did not recognize the voices, but the conversation made identification easy. Nadir Shah was talking with some other men. Shir Ali grinned nastily. And with satisfaction. He had deduced that Nadir Shah would take that room for his own, after the fashion of usurpers, aping the dignity of the fallen.

Shir Ali listened. He was willing to take any sort of chance to accomplish his end, but he did not intend to be foolish. Nadir Shah had taken over that room for his own and the time would come when Nadir Shah would be alone in it. All Shir Ali had to do was to wait. Then he would be able to kill Nadir Shah and escape; and no man would know who had done the deed. Why didn't they stop talking in there? Shir Ali was bored. Affairs of state—the buzzings of flies that come and go, pass foolish laws, do cruel and silly things. Shir Ali suppressed a yawn and thanked God he was a horse-thief! Would they never stop their chatter—Nadir Shah and the fawning sycophants of ministers? . . . New laws. Talking about them. . . . Shir Ali grinned. Nadir Shah would soon be interested in one law only. An old law, made by Allah. Dead men are dead men! . . . Laws! Chatter! And for the living the old law was good enough and sufficient: *pubkiunwali*, an eye for an eye, a head for a head. . . . Ah, thank God, the chatters were leaving. Nadir Shah was saying:

"Leave me. I will sleep for a while. We will continue this discussion on the morrow."

Shir Ali grinned.

"The talk is ended," he muttered. "Now for business!"

He listened again, carefully. He made certain that Nadir Shah was entirely alone.

"My blood for the king's blood!" he murmured, and softly slid the panel.

All followed very quickly. The same room, the same lamp, the same furniture. Nadir Shah on the divan. Shir Ali took all this in in one swift look. He made less noise than a cat, but a sense of danger roused Nadir Shah—too late. He saw the sudden apparition of Shir Ali. What else he saw in this world was a hideous jumble. The fingers of Shir Ali, in which was literally the strength of a vise, gripped the throat of Nadir Shah. Swiftly, silently.

As silently as possible. There would be guards near by.

"So," gasped Shir Ali when the thing was done. "My oath! And it will be some little time before another Amir struts in this room, and orders the head of my king to be stuck on the Lahori Gate!"

He turned away toward the secret panel. Then he looked back. The light was shining full on the dead face of Nadir Shah. Shir Ali stared at the face, and suddenly a wild and splendid idea pulsed through him.

"A big, ugly devil of a man, marvelously like thee, Shir Ali! So like thee that if you were garbed in his uniform——"

The words of Abdur Rahman. And the dead face proved those words true.

Shir Ali was on the floor, kneeling by the dead man, swiftly stripping him. He tore off his own clothes, and put on the uniform of Nadir Shah, the jewels, the royal aigrette on the turban. He picked up the dead body and his own discarded clothing, and carried all through the panel down the steps to the bridge. There was a splash in the underground river, and the body of Nadir Shah and the clothes of Shir Ali were borne from human sight forever. . . . Shir Ali calmly climbed the steps again, slid the panel shut and sat down contentedly on the divan.

"Now I am Amir of Afghanistan," he murmured. "All the Amirs have been robbers—of a sort—but I am certainly the first professional horse-thief to reach this eminence!"

THRE came a knock on the door. Shir Ali looked in the mirror. He could not expect to continue this impersonation very long. Who was this at the door? What would he do if it was one of those damned ministers? His was no brain to wrestle with such things! For a moment Shir Ali felt like a trapped tiger. He—no, he could not kill all those damned talkers! . . . Yes, he could. But to do that would not serve. Well, he would have to let the fellow come in, or else suspicion might start something. By his looks he was Nadir Shah, and who would think otherwise when Nadir Shah had been left alone in the room, and, apparently, Nadir Shah was found there, alone, again?

"Come in!" growled Shir Ali, in the gruff manner of Nadir Shah.

The palace Officer of the Day entered and saluted.

"The midnight report, your highness," he said.

"All right," yawned Shir Ali. "I have been sleeping, but now I will walk abroad. You may go. Leave the door open."

The officer saluted and obeyed.

Nadir Shah's habit of rough democracy with the soldiers had been the cause of his popularity. Shir Ali had no doubt of his ability to act the part of Nadir Shah in this regard. No man in Afghanistan could tell a story as well. Nadir Shah had been good, no doubt, but——

"I will beat him at his own game," thought Shir Ali gleefully, as he loafed carelessly from the little room into the splendid halls of the palace of the Amirs. "That will be amusing. . . . After that, may my right arm and Kismet help me—also my horse-thief wit!"

He mingled with the palace guard, and laughed with them. Then he went out into the winter night—alone, bidding no man follow him because he wanted to be alone so he could think! He thanked God the night was so cold. Few men would be about, perhaps none. A big question troubled him, a question which any man or officer about the palace could answer, but which Shir Ali dare not ask—because he was supposed to know the answer. To ask would seem queer.

"Where was Abdur Rahman confined?"

Somewhere in the palace, of course—handy for the tormenting Nadir Shah had enjoyed. But the palace was a vast place, with a hundred dungeons. And Shir Ali's knowledge was limited to a part of the stables and the secret door.

How quiet it was! Here was a passage. Dark in there. The habit of years bade Shir Ali walk cautiously. He

grinned, squared his shoulders and swaggered.

"I am still a horse-thief, but I must try to remember that I am now a king!"

The dark passage was undoubtedly filled with cells, but there was no light at all. Shir Ali understood. Nadir Shah, to enhance his popularity, had set all the prisoners free. Except Abdur Rahman. That explained the quiet. No guards, and the soldiers amusing themselves. But here was another passage. And this one was also empty.

"I may have to ask somebody. I could shut his mouth after he told me! Ah!"

Shir Ali had heard voices. Two men having an argument. One of the voices remonstrated.

"But the man can not escape! He is locked in, and we have the key!"

The other spoke more quietly.

"Yes, but you know the order. Nadir Shah is good-natured—because he knows that his throne rests on the shoulders of men like you and me—but he is quite capable of having our heads cut off if he comes here—as he is likely to do—and finds nobody on guard, and nobody to unlock the door for him. How do you know he is in bed? When he is forever prowling around! Stay here, then, in case he comes. It's my turn, but . . . I will be back in an hour."

Shir Ali crouched in the shadows against the wall, and waited until the last speaker had gone. Then he walked into the passage.

"You return quickly—why?" the voice of the guard greeted him.

"Your eyes are dull," growled Shir Ali in the manner of Nadir Shah. "I come for some little talk with that which thou hast in the cage! Unlock the door!"

"My lord Amir!" The guard squirmed in his eagerness to please. "Certainly, my lord. The thing in there sleeps. I will open the door of its cage."

Shir Ali stared into the dark little cell. He spoke loudly, sarcastically, insultingly.

"How fares my captive goat?"

Abdur Rahman did not answer, but the guard laughed flatteringly. Then he asked:

"Shall I make the surly swine answer my lord?"

Shir Ali clenched his fist.

"Speakest thou so of a king?" he asked quietly.

"Why, my lord! . . ."

But Shir Ali's fist met the wagging chin, and the guard pitched headlong and unconscious into the cell.

Shir Ali stepped quickly after him. He saw, dimly in a corner, the figure of the astonished Abdur Rahman.

"This is thy friend Shir Ali, now Amir of Afghanistan!" Shir Ali spoke rapidly, laughing with the thrill of it. "Quick, a piece of thy shirt, or something. I need a gag for this guard before he can shout."

"Shir Ali . . . Amir!" gasped Abdur Rahman.

"Thy shirt, quickly!"

Abdur Rahman acted rapidly. As they gagged and bound the guard he asked:

"How did you do it, worker of miracles? And—how is my son?"

"Well, and cared for by English women! I did but seek to prevent Nadir Shah from cutting off thy head. Then I saw his face, and did some thinking. For I had heard him talk with his ministers, and saw that they were likely to change all the old laws. Nadir Shah could no longer trouble thee, but those ministers might make a cook into an Amir. So I became determined to rescue thee. I saw the face of Nadir Shah. Like mine, as you said. The way then was easy. I saw that my job would not be complete until I saw your throne made safe for thee. So I decided to rule in thy stead until the English

army ends this petty revolution. I wanted to see what it felt like to be an Amir!"

"Where is Nadir Shah?"

Shir Ali chuckled.

"Let's hope he is in Paradise. But the last I saw of him he was going down a dark cold river into the bowels of the earth! Come now, and I will get horses!"

The guard struggled back to consciousness. He goggled. Shir Ali spoke with mock gentleness.

"Be not disturbed, little one. Thine Amir is merely amusing himself. But be not afraid, for Nadir Shah will never so much as harm a hair of thy head!"

Shir Ali took Abdur Rahman by the arm. They left the cell. Shir Ali locked the door. He put the key in his pocket. He laughed softly.

"One can never tell when the key of a jail may come in handy. I will keep this one!"

Abdur Rahman, physically and nervously worn by the cat-and-mouse torment he had endured, shivered as they came out of the passage into the bitter wind.

"What next?" his teeth chattered.

Shir Ali blew out his chest. His Afghan soul delighted in his answer.

"Now we will put you back on the throne again, and give those damned rebels such a lesson that you will never again be troubled by them. You shall ride into Kabul at the head of the English army, with all the people cheering your return! In the meanwhile—oh, but this is delicious!—I will get two horses merely by ordering a groom to saddle them

for me. I would dearly like to strut through the palace again, with men bowing to me, but why sacrifice victory to vanity? Wait here, my lord, in the shadow, lest some observant groom recognize thee. I go to order horses. What a holy situation for a horse-thief! Allah be praised, what a wonderful world this is!"

Shir Ali strode, as an Amir should stride, to the stable. He was living at the height of life, speaking not in *Pushtu* but in flowing Persian periods, acquired heaven knows where, drunk with the wine of delight but coldly cunning, as ever, in his actions.

The warm smell of the stables and a groom asleep. Shir Ali touched him with his foot, and the groom jumped blinking to his feet.

"Saddle two of the best horses," growled Shir Ali. "Not those, thickhead! Who ever made thee a groom? You should be tending camels! See, take that one, and that roan in the stall!"

The groom was amazed. For the Amir was working with him. And the groom had never seen a cleverer man with horses. And the Amir was saying:

"I will lead them out! It's cold out there, and I don't want my servants to be uncomfortable!"

"**N**ow, my lord, mount! The world turns and brings thy throne back to thee. The English outposts will not be far away by this time. Mount and ride, Abdur Rahman, my king—but be careful not to speak to the sentry. He will pass *me* as Amir of Afghanistan!"