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FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.



WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH



Spotted Satan

By OTIS ADELBERT KLINE & E. HOFFMANN PRICE

Weird death strikes in Burma, again and again—a gripping story about a leopard that was not a leopard, and a beautiful nautch girl who became one of its victims

HARRISON STEELE'S broad shoulders and rugged features usually got two glances from women: the first being one of approval, the second a query. They could never quite decide whether his tanned face was handsome, or merely interesting. But the Eurasian telephone operator in the outer

office of the Irrawaddy Teak Company upset the routine. Her black and faintly slanted eyes were saying, "Too bad!"

Then she caught Steele's pleasant gray glance, shook her sleek head, and brightened. He might have a chance in the jungle, after all, though none of the others had survived.

"Mr. Powell will see you at once," she said.

A Chinese clerk in white led the way down the hall and to Eldon Powell's spacious office. The room was paneled in teak, and the broad desk was made of that noble wood, dark, heavy, enduring. The big Englishman liked the solidity of the teak taken from the company's forests, but for the moment, Powell did not like Burma. Steele could see that at a glance.

"You lost little time packing. Awfully good of you to take it all so seriously. I rather feared you'd not be interested in anything as common as leopards."

"Why not?" Steele's smile became an amiable grin, and his face no longer seemed to have been hewn from knotty oak. He optimistically dragged his chair into what he thought was the spot where the lazily swaying *punkabs** stirred the humid air. "When a leopard gets you worried, that's news. But it was a lot cooler in Penang!"

"Beastly climate," Powell deplored. He did not waste any effort in mopping his ruddy face. Rangoon was steaming. "Now, this business of a reward for shooting the brute. I know jolly well you're not interested in that. We've offered the native *shikaris* a thousand rupees, and no takers. Er . . . not any more, I mean. They used to flock in, but——"

"Got the wind up, eh?"

Powell nodded. "Can't say that I blame them. So the directors authorized me to offer you five times that much." He made an apologetic gesture. "No offense, old man. But the only way to make a thing

look important to you American chaps is to—ah—put a cash appraisal on it, so to speak."

Steele smiled wryly. "Now, what's the catch? Leopard's aren't sport, ordinarily. But with the cash appraisal you British chaps put on everything, I knew this must be a two-fisted beast or you'd not be so extravagant."

Powell threw up his hands. "I say, now. You're ribbing me, eh?"

"I guess we're even," Steele chuckled. "What's the score?"

Powell stroked his straw-colored mustache. "None of the white hunters who went after the leopard had much luck. Two disappeared entirely. Another—really a promising chap—all we found of him was a belt buckle and a few other inedible bits. Quite too bad. I had to get in touch with poor Henderson's relatives and explain just why we couldn't ship the remains home."

"That would be awkward, telling them there just wasn't anything to ship," Steele agreed. "But I won't embarrass you. First, I may drill the brute, and second, I have no relatives—though there's an oversized Afghan who follows me around like a nurse-maid. Achmet will be a good gun-bearer."

During all this exchange of grim pleasantries, Steele was thinking of the pretty Eurasian girl's obvious concern and sympathy. He would have paid little attention to Powell, who was always inclined to pessimism. A servant brought in whisky and soda. Steele selected a cheroot, and watched Powell spend a few moments at indoor mustache chewing.

Finally the big Englishman squirmed in his chair, coughed, and looked very uncomfortable. "Ah—er—I say, Steele, I've not told you all of it. It makes me no end of an ass, but I simply must tell you. The natives at our teak camp in the Chin Hills insist the leopard isn't a leopard except at night. During the day he's sup-

* Fan.

posed to be a man or a demon or a *nat*."

"Huh?" Steele straightened. "What's that?"

"Now, see here, old chap. I don't believe that blasted rot. But if you don't kill the beggar pretty soon, our coolies will desert to the last man, and we won't get any logs down to the creek beds in time for the freshets. *That's* why there's a reward, you know. Important hunter gunning for thousands of rupees. Good for the native morale. Then you get him, and everything is peaceful and happy."

"And dear old Irrawady Teak pays dividends — provided I hunt down the spotted satan?"

"Exactly. And you'll go, of course?" Powell leaned forward in his chair. "I'd appreciate it, no end. As a personal favor."

"The devil wears spots by night." Steele frowned. Asia has her share of the inexplicable, but men sometimes pull the strings. "I've heard of such things. But I've also heard of jugglery by unscrupulous competitors. Tricks to demoralize laborers."

Powell had considered that angle. "I said as much to Kirby—he's our camp superintendent—but he assures me it's not that simple."

"Kirby——" Steele slowly pronounced the name. It suggested something unpleasant, but he did not quite know how to justify this feeling. "He's reliable, of course? Old employee, I mean?"

"Not old, no, but well recommended. A bit odd, but what teak-logger isn't! He's all broken up by the furore."

THE following morning, Steel and his Afghan servant set out by rail for Mandalay, and thence for Monywa. There they boarded a wheezing stern-wheeler, the *Shillong*, and headed up the river. At Hlai-bin-doung they disembarked. The remainder of the trip would be a day's march through jungle trails.

The headman of Hlai-bin-doung escorted Steele and Achmet to the *dāk bungalow** which the Government maintained for travelers. It stood on stilts which raised it from the steaming ground; a weather-beaten and uninviting house with a corrugated iron roof and a veranda canopied with similar material.

The long shadows of ruined pagodas marched across the compound which inclosed the bungalow. A Buddhist monk in the near-by monastery was beating a wooden bell; the hollow notes were mournful, and they blotted out the chatter of the village, which was a few hundred yards away. Other monks intoned a ritual in Pali, the sacred language. Someone, centuries ago, had acquired merit by endowing this monastery, and thus men with shaven heads and yellow robes praised the Buddha Gautama, quite as though the jungle had not remorselessly engulfed what once had been cleared ground.

Steele could not understand the chanting, but it made him shiver. Where slayers lurked in every thicket, where villages were surrounded by thorny hedges to keep out murderous *dacoits*, these monks praised the Buddha who had forsaken a throne to bring peace to all living things. All slaying was evil, and hunters were the most accursed of men: and this thought lived in a land where each ate until he was eaten.

The voices and the bells shook Steele. If monks could stay here and sing of peace to all living things, then anything was possible. Incredible Burma began speaking to him, and he was uneasy. This was not quite like sitting in Eldon Powell's office and saying that a leopard was a leopard; in the jungle, a man might become a spotted satan. . . .

When the sun dipped over the jungle and reddened the tops of crumbling pagodas, Achmet combed his hennaed beard and faced toward Mekka for evening

* inn.

prayer. "*El hamdulillah i rab'i il alameen!*" the big Afghan rumbled. "*Malik i yaum id-deen!*"

It was good to hear a man's deep voice call on One God, where every tree was guarded by a demon, and where many gods haunted every mountain. "Praise be to Allah, Lord of the Two Worlds! King of the Day of Judgment. . . ."

The sound was aggressive, deep-chested, confident: it fought the insidious cry of wooden bells. Gaudily dressed natives gathered at the open gate of Steele's compound. Averaging but a few inches over five feet, they marveled at the Afghan's height and his hooked nose and fierce eyes; though his henna-dyed beard was the greatest wonder.

They could no more understand his guttural speech than he could their sing-song Burmese; but Steele caught enough of their chatter to know that the news of his mission had preceded him. The natives were certain that in spite of the size of master and man, the leopard demon would dispose of them as readily as he had the other *shikaris*.*

ACHMET'S prayers were scarcely completed when the crowd parted to admit Panbyu, the headman's daughter. Balanced on her head was a wicker tray which contained half a dozen bowls of food. There was rice, chicken, curry, and small dried fish whose high fragrance convinced Steele that the Burmese must be immune to ptomaine poisoning.

She wore a scarlet jacket with purple sleeves. Her pink skirt was slit up the side so that despite her mincing, pigeon-toed gait, her legs were exposed well past the knee. "*Billabi*," said Achmet, eyeing the smiling girl, "these chattering apes have pretty women."

Neither could understand the other, but Steele caught the exchange, and Panbyu's

smile and the flash of her oblique eyes. He was certain that Achmet would not need an interpreter.

The tall Afghan wolfed his rice. He grinned broadly when he heard the sounds from the village. Musicians were tuning up their instruments. Panbyu said that a festival was about to start, and that the honored visitors were welcome.

"*Sahib*," Achmet began, when Steele translated the girl's remark, "it would be well if I mingled with the villagers. By Allah, I might learn some secrets about the Satan-leopard. With your honor's permission——"

The girl smiled, and came nearer, to get the empty dishes. Steele said to his servant, "Go ahead, but don't get into any fights."

That Achmet could not understand a word of Burmese did not for a moment make his request seem illogical to him. He was a master at devising reasons for following his stubborn fancies.

The villagers had little confidence in the hunters. Thus there was ample reason for music and dancing and the impromptu clowning of a *pwè*.* The festival was not in honor of Steele; his arrival had been merely an excuse for celebrating. Had he not been there, the full moon would have been ample reason.

And knowing that Burmese peculiarity, Steele lit a cheroot, and watched Achmet crossing the compound, to follow Panbyu.

And then night invaded the clearing. The chilly breeze stirred the bamboos to ghostly, inarticulate speech. A jackal howled from afar, and owls hooted from the jungle over which towered the spires of long-ruined pagodas. Laughter and strangely syncopated music filtered from the toddy palms and tamarinds and mangoes that half concealed the village. The *dāk bungalow* had become a dark island in a deceptive sea of moonlight. It was incredibly isolated. Some trick of the wind,

* Native hunters.

* Celebration.

perhaps, made the festive cacophony of the *pwé* as though it came from another world.

Steele was no longer conscious of the soporific drumbeats and xylophone notes; nevertheless he felt the incessant impact, and began to feel the concentration of the disturbing, vague whispers that had centered on him ever since he had entered Eldon Powell's office in Rangoon.

Steele kicked the dying fire, shivered in the penetrating chill, and told himself that he had listened to too many whispers concerning Thagya Min, King of Tawadeintha—the land of demons, *nats* who haunted every stream, every grove and forest, lurking by night to slip up on unwary Burmese. From afar he heard the excruciating *creak-creak* of a cart-wheel. The ungreased axle did not betoken laziness on the part of the driver; it was a studied effort to frighten away night-roving *nats* that contribute to terror of darkness.

He began to sense that the *pwé* itself was more than festivity: it was to discourage with light and noise and a concentration of humans the *nats* who must have followed Steele to the village.

The demon subjects of Thagya Min would have a hearty interest in anyone setting out to kill the ghost leopard of Kokogon.

"To hell with this!" he finally muttered, shaking off oppressive, errant fancies. Instead of heaping more fuel on the fire, Steele sought the warmth of his blankets. The wind, sifting up between the cracks in the floor, was peculiarly penetrating—as penetrating as the insidious, scarcely heard rhythm that filtered from the *zariba** that surrounded the village. A dizzying procession of Burmese girls statuesquely postured before Steele's closed eyes. They were now pacing and gesturing to demon music from the court of Thagya Min, and the hollow notes of cunningly tuned pieces of hardwood, vibrant

under dancing mallets, whispered to the ears of sleep.

A touch of fever . . . too many of those dried, reeking fish that no white man should eat . . . or trying to keep pace with Achmet's demolition of a heap of curry as tall as a pagoda . . . but finally the trenchant chill ceased lancing the blankets, and it no longer seemed cold in the *dāk bungalow*. . . .

It was now very warm and pleasant. Yet, though Steele was asleep, he was nevertheless aware of the moon-flooded clearing, and the gable-roofed monastery in the eastern wing of which sat the Buddha Gautama. Oddly enough, the walls of the bungalow did not keep Steele from perceiving the three-roofed *pyatbat* beneath which the Buddha sat in the posture he had prescribed for meditation.

One acquires merit through meditation. But it was much more spectacular to acquire merit by building pagodas. The ruined pagodas at the jungle's edge were the ghosts of merit forgotten save by the lords of Karma.

The clearing was dominated by the shadow of pious work, and the Buddha Gautama could scarcely help being pleased. His face was still obscured, although Steele could now perceive the gilded bulk that loomed in the darkness of the *hpaya ky-aung*. It no longer seemed odd to Steele that he could be aware of so many things at once.

And then a jarring thought intruded: something was urging him to open his eyes, which was absurd, since with his present clarity of vision the position of his eyelids was immaterial. Steele became intensely annoyed. It was Achmet who was urging him to open his eyes. Achmet, full of intoxicating *kaungye*, would be boisterous as well as bawdy. . . .

It was Steele's instinct that saved him: an indefinable shred of perception that had not been submerged by the glamor of the

* Thornbush fence.

nat-infested night. Even before he opened his eyes or ceased to resent the disturbing summons, he flung himself clear of blankets and cot. In the darkness he saw a flashing streak of frosty silver, and a blotch of shadow that moved with it. He felt the rake of steel, the passing contact of a wiry body, heard the roaring voice of Achmet, and the Afghan's feet pounding from the veranda to Steele's room.

Steele's foot lashed out as he hit the floor. There was a gasp of exhaled breath. The broad blade of a *kukeri* savagely probed the gloom. Steele's fist warded off the descending wrist—but before he could seize the wiry assassin, Achmet had cleared the threshold.

A wrathful yell—a crash—the splintering of wood—the tinkle of steel—a cry of dismay that ended in a gurgling groan—and Achmet, cursing in polished Bushtu, struck a match.

The intruder was dead: a wiry, grizzled Burmese with straggling wisps of gray beard. His brown skin was intricately tattooed, and his body gleamed from freshly applied palm oil. He was nude save for a breech-clout.

Steele assured Achmet that the fellow must be a *dacoit*.* The Afghan respectfully agreed: but Steele knew that his comrade at arms had a private and dissenting opinion.

2

“OUT with it, Achmet!” Steele finally demanded. “What makes you think he's not a *dacoit*?”

“*Billabi!* Since when does a *dacoit* sit in the darkness making music while his fellow seeks you with a knife? Nay, by Allah, that was not the music of the *pwé* which you heard—that was devil music. The *pwé* has been over these several hours—I? *Wallab*, I was otherwise engaged—

I had no thought—by Allah, it is a disgrace to my beard that this thing should have happened, but by your head, I had no thought——”

“Say no more about it,” chuckled Steele. “After all, there was doubtless certain unfinished business which required your attention after the *pwé*, but then what?”

“As my lord suggested, when that was done which was to be done, I returned and heard, and I liked not that sound which came from the shadows. So I smote the musician, and then I saw another—*Wallab*, I will here and now kill that son of a noseless mother!”

The Afghan's pious intent, however, was wasted. Neither musician nor instrument was lying where both had dropped.

“Get Maung Hkin—the headman of the village,” said Steele. “At once.”

The Afghan stalked cursing into the moonlight. He knew no Burmese—other than what he might have learned from Panbyu—but there was no doubt that he would arouse the entire village and thus, perforce, the headman as well. Steele had learned to put much trust in Afghan directness.

And within a very few minutes Maung Hkin entered the compound, followed by half the inhabitants of Hlai-bin-doung. They were trotting to keep up with Achmet's leg-stretching strides.

“May pigs befoul my grave if I destroy not all of this village!” growled Achmet as he stalked across the compound. “*Wallab*, I have here the father of all these apes! Shall I slay him now?”

Steele, however, was willing enough to dispense with further slayings; and he mustered up enough of the tricky Burmese language to make it clear to the headman that there had been odd doings in the *dāk bungalow*. But one glance at the deceased was sufficient for Maung Hkin.

“This man,” he explained, “is an apprentice wizard. Behold—he is tattooed

* Robber.

with *inns* to protect him against knives, bullets, poison, and lightning. Fortunately he wore no *inn* to protect him against a broken neck and a crushed skull.

"And as for that music: that was a charm to keep you from awakening. It seems that you were taken for a rival wizard. Or perhaps he wanted your head to use in preparing a spell. But it is most likely that he is a servant of the demon leopard, sent to protect the devouring *nat* against your skill."

That was the headman's story. He seemed to believe it, and it was obvious that nothing could change it. It was quite irrational, and thus entirely in keeping with the beliefs of devil-haunted Burma, where Indian, Mongolian, and indigenous fiends do their best to oppress the inhabitants of the mountains and forests. But Maung Hkin had one constructive hint: "Let no one know the hour of your birth. And there is a certain but dangerous way of defending yourself against *sobns*. Go up the Chindwin to Kalay-Thoung-Toht — the-Small-Town-at-the-Top-of-the-Sandbank. The inhabitants are supernaturally gifted. Appeal to the king of wizards who lives there. He will summon the *sobn* who is working against you, demand an explanation, and if he can show no just cause, he will be punished.

"But it is only fair to warn you that many bewitched people who have made that pilgrimage have disappeared."

"Thanks," acknowledged Steele. "But as long as wizards' heads are readily broken I don't think we'll bother to go to Kalay-Thoung-Toht."

In less than an hour breakfast would be served, the elephants loaded, and the ponies saddled in preparation for the last lap of the trip to the teak camp at the head of the Kyouk-mee-Choung. Steele sat down and drew up a brief report to be sent to Eldon Powell in Rangoon. He outlined the circumstances, and concluded:

"Your were-leopard has human allies. I am inclined to think that the degradations of the beast are directly designed to interfere with your floating teak logs down in the coming freshets. I suggest that you investigate your neighboring competitors while Achmet and I put a crimp into the local guild of wizards."

STEELE and Achmet cleared the compound at sunrise; but it was not until fourteen hours later that they reached their destination at the teak camp of the Irrawaddy Company. The corporation bungalow was in a grassy plain. Near it were storehouses, stables, and a cluster of huts for the native woodmen; and beyond was the expanse of dense forest, towering teak interspersed with pyingado, padauk, and other unreserved or "jungle" woods not subject to Government regulation.

The *kansammah*,* Sayo-myo, emerged to receive Steele and Achmet. Kirby, the camp manager, was out in the forest, hunting the man-eating leopard. And while Saya-Myo set about preparing supper, Steele made a round of the camp, watching the unloading of the baggage and the grooming of the shaggy Shan ponies. The day's work was done; the elephants had been fed. Some were bathing in the creek near by, others were crashing through the underbrush, foraging to supplement their evening meal.

The camp, Steele observed, had been demoralized by the leopard's raids. The loggers and mahouts squatted about their fires, furtively eyeing the darkness beyond; and while Steele could scarcely understand their low, sing-song conversation, scattering phrases told him of the fear that lurked. There was talk of *inns*, and amulets to ward off the destructive night demon; and there was more talk of desertion, and certain mutterings about a sacred grove. . . .

* Headman.

Kirby, it was obvious, was in charge of a simmering nightmare.

Supper was more than adequate, despite can-opener cookery. The camp commissary was well stocked, and the cook was competent; yet Kirby, oppressed by the inroads of the marauder, had at the first sign of dusk plunged alone into the forest, ignoring the meal that awaited him.

"He won't last very long at that rate," Steele reflected. "One white man, surrounded by superstitious natives, and for months out of contact with civilization—no damn wonder it gets his goat."

Ten o'clock, and still no sign of Kirby.

"Achmet," Steele finally said, "grab yourself some sleep. I'll wait until midnight, and then wake you for the next watch."

"No, by Allah! Last night my face was blackened. If there are any wandering wizards tonight——"

The Afghan loosened the pistol in his holster, and shifted the Khorassan tulwar whose silver hilt gleamed from his belt.

"Without doubt," he continued, "Kirby *Sabib* has been eaten by this *shaitan*-leopard. Do you therefore sleep, while I stand guard."

And seeing that Achmet would stubbornly insist upon redeeming himself for the previous night's distraction, Steele let him stand guard.

STEELE'S sleep was sound, but it was violently interrupted. An agonized yell brought him to his feet at a bound. Then savage growls, and a howling panic from the woodcutters' huts. Steele seized his loaded rifle. "God, by the very God, by the One True God!" roared Achmet as Steele followed him, clearing the veranda at a bound. "Hear the accursed beast!"

As he caught up with Achmet, Steele thrust a flashlight into the Afghan's hand.

"Pick him out while I plug him!"

They crossed the clearing in a matter

of seconds. The savage snarling of the marauder, and the gurgling, strangled cries of the victim guided them. Achmet turned the beam of the flashlight toward the sound and the phosphorescent eyes that gleamed in the gloom.

"In the great name of Allah I take refuge from Shaytan the Stoned!" exclaimed Achmet as the tongue of light picked the eater and the eaten. "The grandfather of leopards!"

The white glare confirmed the Afghan's words; but for the jet-black spots that dotted the sleek, tawny hide, Steele would have thought that it was a tiger that growled and bared fangs like ivory simitars. Its jaws dripped red, and its tail lashed in slow, menacing cadence as its muscles rippled beneath its silky hide. But more striking than its feline savagery and unusual size was the wrath and menace that it radiated. Steele felt the fury of the creature as though it emanated waves of tangible force.

The chilly breeze was laden with the feline odor of the beast—like the odor of a lion's den, but more intense.

Grandfather of leopards—in a flickering instant, Steele's impressions confirmed the Afghan's incredulous ejaculation. The mangled woodcutter still twitched, but he no longer groaned.

It was an easy shot, and the beast seemed dazzled by the blistering glare of the flashlight. Steele's rifle flashed into line. The fluent, long-practised gesture ended in a spurt of flame, a gust of nitrous fumes, and the ear-shattering blast of cordite. A streak of orange velvet—a wrathful, almost human yell—and before Steele could shift his line of fire, there was a scarcely perceptible rustling in the farther shadows.

The leopard was gone. He had seemingly timed the contraction of Steele's trigger finger, and flung himself aside as the front sight of the express rifle registered between his glowing eyes.

"Damn!" growled Steele; and Achmet muttered unmentionable things in Pushtu as he saw something he had never seen before: Steele *Sahib* missing an easy shot.

"But you must at least have wounded him," the Afghan insisted.

Steele shook his head.

"Can't tell. So much blood splattered about. Fact is, I'm sure I didn't. I'd swear the ——— evaporated just as I poured it to him."

"And now," was Achmet's optimistic prediction, "since we have interrupted his feeding, he will go out and hunt down Kirby *Sahib*—if he has not already done so."

Very likely, Steele reflected, if Kirby was not dead, or fatally wounded, he must be lost. No one in his right mind would be bushwhacking from sunset until well after midnight.

"But if Kirby has had much of this to contend with," Steele added, listening to the panicky chatter of the surviving woodcutters, "he can't be in his right mind. By Heaven, if I can't shoot any better than that I'm going to get a bayonet and charge the next time I see that spotted ———!"

And Achmet Nadir Khan of the Durani clan was somberly muttering to himself, "*To the Lord of the Daybreak I betake me for refuge against Satan the Damned, and against the evils of creation, and against the envy of the envier when he envieth, and against the wiles of women who murmur and blow on knots. . .*"

3

ACHMET, despite his mutterings, insisted on standing the remainder of the watch; but he built a fire just in front of the veranda steps, and walked his post with curved tulwar drawn and ready to strike. And Steele, despite the tragedy that had taken place, borrowed the fatalistic attitude of the Burmese woodcutters

who had composed themselves with the cheery thought that since the demon leopard had drunk blood he would not return until the following night.

"By Heaven," was Steele's last waking thought, "I couldn't miss that beast at that range and in that light. Something's cockeyed."

But the fault could certainly not have been with Steele's ammunition. The unexpanded cartridge in his rifle was sound in every respect, and the vigorous recoil of the shot he had fired precluded the possibility of its having been a blank. Nevertheless, he was convinced that human skullduggery was allied with the monstrous leopard. The attack by the apprentice wizard at Hlai-bin-doung was ample proof of that; although this time there had been no disturbed sleep nor music from the halls of the King of Demon-Land to bemaze Steele's wits. Aside from the size and unheard-of ferocity of the beast, there had been nothing out of the ordinary except his having missed an easy shot.

And a man suddenly roused from slumber could have a lingering kink in his trigger finger.

The stirring about of the mahouts, and the loggers preparing *chota hazri*, woke Steele before the dawn was even gray. Achmet shook the dew from his red beard, sheathed his curved tulwar, and muttered a devout "*al hamdu lilabi*."

And then the Afghan made uncommonly careful ablution in preparation for the sunrise prayer. But that prayer was delayed by the arrival of a white man from the fringe of the jungle. Achmet hailed Steele; and as the newcomer stalked across the grassy clearing, they knew that he must be Kirby, the manager. There would be no other white man attached to the camp.

Achmet's eyes flashed toward Steele's; and then they both regarded the haggard, bedraggled man in shorts. Even in that wan, gray light he was unusual. There

was no doubt that he was a white man: his skin, tanned as only that of a Nordic can be, and the high bridge of his nose, and the unprominent cheek-bones, testified to his race. Yet his hazel-flecked eyes were slanted like those of a Tartar or Mongol. His mustaches, sandy-colored and bristling, jutted straight out on both sides instead of being upturned at the ends, or decently drooping, or close cropped.

His eyes widened and assumed an odd expression that Steele found disturbing and unpleasant.

"I'm Harrison Steele—from Rangoon office," Steele greeted. "I fancy Powell wrote you I'd be up to give you a lift on this leopard mess?"

"Don Kirby," was the acknowledgment. "Managing this damned madhouse, and I'm mighty glad you arrived."

The perturbed, haggard look left his face as he spoke, and his voice was amiable enough; but Steele, without knowing why, was glad that Kirby did not extend his hand. And then Steele wanted to give Achmet a sound booting: the burly Afghan was eyeing Kirby from head to foot and muttering in a hoarse whisper that carried like a cavalry bugle, "*Astaghfir 'ullah min-ash-saytan. . .*"

"There are times," was Steele's unspoken thought, "for betaking one's self for refuge against Satan, but that red-bearded ruffian shows the damn'dest judgment in picking them."

He wondered if Kirby understood Arabic, and catching the sudden shift of the slanting, topaz eyes, Steele remarked, "Achmet's had a tough night of it—he thinks the place is bewitched because I missed letting moonlight through our friend the leopard."

"So you missed him too?"

Steele could not quite decide whether that one carried an edge or not. It might be Kirby's natural tone.

"Right enough," replied Steele. "The

brute turned tail and vanished like Satan in a puff of smoke—but not until another poor devil of a woodcutter was hopelessly mangled."

And then, for a man who for months has had no occasion to use English, Kirby was uncommonly fluent. His blasphemous wrath was impressive. Finally he concluded, "And I was bushwhacking all night long, getting torn to ribbons. I figured the brute might come down to the *jeel* to drink—that's a couple of miles to the east—and I'd get a crack at him."

THAT was sound enough. The great cats do usually drink; *after they have dined*. Kirby apparently had assumed that the leopard would not miss his nightly fare. Steele noted the mud that had copiously bespattered Kirby, and concluded that it had been rough going along the banks of the marshy *jeel*.

"Taking a long chance, aren't you, going it single-handed?"

Kirby shrugged, spat disgustedly, and said, "If this keeps up, I'll not have a logger left, and I won't be able to get any from the village. The freshets are almost here, and so far we've not taken out enough logs to notice. There'll be a new manager here to handle the problem if I don't put a stop to this." Then he hailed the *kansam-mah*, ordered breakfast, and stepped to his room in the corporation bungalow to clean up after his night's fruitless chase.

"Achmet," demanded Steele as the Afghan approached, "what the hell were you driving at with your '*astaghfir 'ullah*' and so forth a few minutes ago?"

"There is evil in this camp, *Sabib*," grumbled the Afghan. "And this Kirby *Sabib* is the forgotten of Allah. By Allah, in his eyes I saw the eyes of that *sbaitan*-leopard, and for a moment I was going to cut him down with my *tulwar*. But instead, I spoke as you heard, and I was no longer afraid."

"Since when," reproved Steele, "is one of the Durani clan afraid of anything?"

"Since when," came the crackling retort, "has a *sahib* the eyes of a leopard, and the curved nails of one? Do you now understand why he did not offer to grasp your hand as is the custom among these infidel dogs, saving your honor's presence? It was that you would not note that his nails curve more than any man's should."

And before Steele could think of a convincing answer, Achmet was stalking toward the huts of the woodcutters.

Steele joined Kirby at breakfast. The *kansammah*, serving the meal, walked as though he were treading on eggs. Despite his efforts to disguise his furtive moves, it was obvious that he was avoiding any unnecessary approach to Kirby. The fellow's manner had with the appearance of his chief changed from fatalistic resignation to wire-edged apprehension.

Kirby minced with his meal, grimaced wryly, cursed each dish in succession, then said, "This thing is getting under my skin. And the devil of it is, I dare not make a truthful report."

In response to Steele's trenchant glance, Kirby significantly tapped his forehead.

"I don't think I'm balmy yet, but I dare say I soon shall be. But if I told all that I know, Powell would order me to Rangoon and before I could say three words he'd have me in the booby-hatch—on the evidence of my own report."

Kirby was oppressively serious. And while Steele had been unable to conjure up the last trace of cordiality—beyond decent politeness—he was heartily sorry for the manager. The poor devil was in a blue funk; but his tacit admission that his reason was beginning to waver was a hopeful indication. If the man were mad, he would be the last to question his own sanity.

"The hell you say?" Steele's exclamation carried a distinct query. Kirby's hazel eyes

were disturbingly unwavering for several seconds, but he ignored the hint. Steele then persisted, "Don't write it, then. While I can scarcely demand your confidence, I'm in a way entitled to it. You needn't worry about my quoting you. I won't. And if I did—well, who'd believe me?"

Kirby nodded, declined a cigarette, and finally said, "Last year, just before the freshets, we had an unusual tangle of logs and little time, as usual, to get them to the creek. The roundabout road my predecessor had built seemed insufferably stupid, so I laid out a new route for the elephants.

"I jolly well had a mutiny on my hands, but I fairly booted the woodcutters into clearing a direct approach that skirted the village, just over the hill. That road, it seemed, passed directly through a sacred grove, or some such rot—and there was no end of muttering about the *nats*—"

Kirby gritted his teeth, snarled a compound oath, and continued, "And the long and short of it is they claim that this leopard is a devil sent to avenge my—our—violating the home of the forest *nats*—the blasted unspeakable country is filthy with *nats*! The natives count 'em off by the million—offer sacrifices to them—shiver when they think of 'em—and by the Lord, I'm getting that way myself!

"Damn it, Steele—I'm convinced this devil leopard is a *nat*!—that it's hounding me to death, killing my men—but can I report that story to Powell? Can I?"

Steele stroked his chin and exhaled a jet of smoke. He could not offer Kirby any assurance. You can't assure a grown white man against the wrath of wizards and evil spirits. And regardless of what alienists might say, Kirby was painfully sane. He elaborated on the apparent chain of cause and effect, and concluded, "Irrespective of my personal sanity, there is a leopard, and the camp is demoralized, and if I ask Powell to shift operations to the eastern sector, I'll have to offer him some

reason other than that this one is devil-haunted.

"The only thing I can tell him is that I'm not competent to handle these woodcutters. Just one whimper about native wizards, and——"

"Correct," agreed Steele. "But just between the two of us—how about giving me the address of this wizard?"

Kirby eyed him suspiciously. He seemed on the point of answering but instead, he abruptly rose and said, "I'm placing an elephant and a mahout at your disposal. Also come *shikaris*, though they'll no more beat the brush than they'll fly. After all, Powell sent you to hunt a leopard, not a wizard. And I'm not so sure that I appreciate your trying to humor my whims."

And that, Steele perceived, put an end to any chance of getting Kirby's confidence. His only resource was to look for the spoor of the killer: which should not be difficult, as it was improbable that there was more than one beast of such unusual size in the district.

One thought, however, gnawed at Steele's mind. The demon leopard had human allies, and native wizards were involved—unless the headman of Hlai-binding had been fabricating to deflect suspicion from his villagers. Yet he could as well, and much more logically, have asserted that the man Achmet had brained was a *dacoit*.

"Just a few more kinks like that," muttered Steele, "and I'll join Achmet's *astagfir 'ullah* chorus! I'll be as screwy as Kirby."

4

STEELE soon learned that tracking the demon leopard was a thankless job. Neither he nor Achmet could pick up the beast's trail; and while a native *shikari* would undoubtedly find some mark that survived the milling of many feet about the place where the leopard had last struck,

none could be bribed or browbeaten into the attempt. And as the result of their futile efforts, Steele and Achmet patrolled the logging-camp by night, hoping to catch the marauder as he made a raid. But again they reckoned without taking into account the diabolical cunning of the leopard; the beast avoided the huts of the woodcutters and, instead, struck at the neighboring village.

His victims were a native girl, and a mahout *en route* to the camp.

And then woodcutters began disappearing without a trace. No sign of struggle, no blood, no mangled remains indicated by the low-flying scavenger birds collecting about the scene of a slaying.

"They're deserting," said Kirby, alternating between inertia and high-pitched wrath. "By the Lord, Steele, you've not a chance. Neither have I—but I'll hunt the beast myself until one of us is accounted for."

And thus, at sunset, Kirby would slip into the forest for a night of bushwhacking as Steele and Achmet began their vigil at camp.

The manager had scarcely reached the edge of the forest when Saya-myo, the *kansammab*, accosted Steele. The fellow was obviously perturbed, and seemed to be mustering up his courage for some desperate step, but his remarks were scattered and irrelevant.

"Sound off," encouraged Steele. "What's on your mind, Saya-myo? Has that Afghan ruffian of mine been monopolizing all the ladies of the village?"

That, however, was not the trouble. It was something much more serious. And it in no wise concerned Achmet. Saya-myo glanced over one shoulder, then the other, and fingered the nine-jeweled amulet that hung from his neck. The amulet business had enjoyed a boom at the expense of teak logging.

"It is Kirby *Sabib*," the Burmese finally

said. "He is the leopard. At night the man disappears, and he becomes a beast. He——"

"Shaytan rip him open! I suspected as much!" boomed the voice of Achmet, as his red beard heralded his advance around the corner of the bungalow. "Es-Steele *Sahib*, I will kill this man. There be only these Burmese apes, who will dare not tell what I have done."

"Shut up, you jackass!" snapped Steele. "Allah gave you much valor and no brains. Who ever heard of a man becoming a leopard by night?"

Steele had heard all too much of such things, but this was no occasion to admit it.

"*Wallah*," grumbled the Afghan, "that at least is better than having neither brains nor valor. If that *shaitan*-leopard had killed even one of my kinsmen, I would have slit him crosswise as soon as he took back the shape of a man.

"Is it not plain as your nose that this man Kirby is the slayer? Does he not always walk by night? Is he ever seen near a slaying? Is he ever attacked by night by any beast? And mark you this: I found no footprints of a leopard near the body of the woodcutter who was killed before our eyes, but there were marks left by the boots of an infidel——"

"My own boots," interrupted Steele. "Before you could get a good look, there had been so much trampling about that all heel marks looked alike."

"The Red Beard is right," interposed Saya-myo. "And we are all dead men if he does not kill Kirby. If we stay, we die. If we run, he will hunt us down and kill us."

THE three-cornered debate was interrupted by a scarcely perceptible rustling at the edge of the clearing. Steele whirled, rifle at the ready. But it was no beast of prey that stepped from black shadow into light of the waning moon. It was Don

Kirby, and the feral gleam of his eyes showed that he had heard more than enough.

"I think, Steele," was his ironic remark, "that your red-bearded wild man is nearly as bad as the Burmese. Now if you think you can keep that Afghan within the limits of the clearing, I'll risk resuming the hunt. As you say, he has more nerve than brains, and unless you restrain him, he would venture into the bush to track me down."

"God, by God, by the One True God!" growled Achmet, "verily, I would not risk meeting you in the forest by night! But saving my lord's presence, I would throttle you at sunrise when you resume the form of a man."

Kirby shook his head, eyed Steele, then said, "You begin to see what a madhouse this has become. And you, Saya-myo, what manner of talk was this you made?"

Kirby's voice was low, but vibrant. The *kansammab's* brown face had become ghastly with fright. He licked his lips, made a false start at speech, then ran howling into the forest.

"The fool's going to the temple to get some more charms," explained Kirby.

"Temple?" queried Steele. "That's a bit odd, up here in the hills. Or is it that monastery up over the hill, and beyond the village?"

Kirby shook his head.

"Not a monastery. Ruined temple. Something like those square heaps in Pagan—you might have seen them on the way up."

"Didn't cross the river," replied Steele. "But speaking of temples—is that the nest of wizards that's put the jinx on this camp?"

"Suppose you figure that out," was Kirby's somber challenge. "I'm fairly addle-brained from guessing. And in the meanwhile, I'm taking a jaunt out to the *jeel* again. I saw his footprints there, last night."

So saying, Kirby turned toward the clearing. Steele frowned as he watched his lithe, cat-like tread.

"How that guy supervises a logging-camp and stalks game every night is something to think about," he muttered. "It's a blistering cinch he can't turn into a leopard at night, but Saya-myo's mortally afraid of him. Somebody's going to get hurt. And it's not a leopard that'll put period-quotes to Kirby."

Steele hailed Achmet.

"Thou blustering oaf," he said in Pushtu, "keep a sharp eye on this camp. I am walking by the *jeel* myself."

"By Allah, *Sabib*—it is death!" warned the Afghan. "Wait until morning to slay him."

"If I see him turn into a leopard," compromised Steele, "then will we kill him as you say. Not until then."

Steele headed for the path that led through the forest to the adjoining village, but he checked his stride at the stockade that had just been built around the huts of the native foresters and hailed his mahout in a low voice.

The mahout was a fellow of indeterminate race, and named Jang. Jang's mother had doubtless bestowed the name on him in memory of some wandering Gurka. At all events, his resemblance to the Nepalese mountaineers was striking.

"Shall I get my brother?" wondered Jang, referring to his elephant. "I hear his *kalouk* over there."

"No. Hunting that *pukka shaytan** from a howdah," said Steele, "is like trying to spear porpoises from a battleship. Bring your *kukri* and we will walk by moonlight—near the *jeel*."

Jang swallowed his aversion to walking, and in a moment reappeared with the short, heavy-bladed Kurka knife which served every purpose, from paring radishes to clipping the nose from an unfaithful wife.

* Out-and-out evil spirit.

And as they plunged into the forest, Steele whispered, "I have changed my mind about the *jeel*. Lead the way to the village, and especially toward that temple."

Jang's teeth flashed in the moonlight. The sooner the *sabib* showed some sense and made magic, the sooner the marauder would cease his depredations.

Steele's suspicions concerning Kirby were far more grave than he had dared to admit to the hot-headed Afghan or the morose woodcutters. Reviling Achmet's somber mutterings was no more than a move to put a damper on the Afghan's tendency to solve all difficulties by sudden violence; and while Steele was convinced that something was startlingly wrong with Kirby, he dared not make any admissions that might lead to the camp manager's summary and secret assassination.

Leopards can be trained to hunt. And Kirby's alternation of frankness and reticence hinted that he knew more than he admitted. It was conceivable that some enemy of the teak company was using a trained leopard of unusual size to demoralize the camp, and that Kirby dared not reveal his knowledge or suspicion. And Steele's real mission that night was to overtake Saya-myo, the *kansammah* whose fear of Kirby had driven him in a panic toward the temple beyond the village.

JANG bore a straight course among the teak trunks, with his *kukri* deftly chopping the underbrush that blocked his advance. And save for such interruptions, their progress was swift and silent. Presently, as they cleared the first range of hills, Steele saw the fires of the Burmese village flickering among the vegetation and huts within the *zariba* that enclosed it.

They descended the slope, crossed a clearing, skirted a small paddy field; and in a cleft that ran cross-wise of the range, Steele saw the squarish, quasi-pyramidal bulk of the temple.

"There is a shrine of Thagyâ Min, King of Demons, *sahib*," said Jang. "Give him gifts and perhaps he will recall his servant."

"Maybe," countered Steele with a wry grimace, "that's why Thagyâ Min sent him in the first place!"

And then Steele perceived a moving blot in the darkness ahead. It had charged from the shadows cast by the further side of the village stockade. Someone was heading for the ruined temple.

"Cut over, Jang," whispered Steele. "But don't let him know we're following him."

He had only Kirby's word for Saya-myo's destination, and in the darkness it was impossible to decide whether or not it was the *kansammah* who had slipped from the village to go to the temple; but whoever it was, it would be worth investigation. Eavesdropping would be more informative than any possible questioning of the frightened natives whose panic would inevitably intensify their distrust of any white man associated with Kirby.

As Jang beat a swift, silent course, the solitary pilgrim broke from shadow and into a moonlight clearing. It was Saya-myo, hurrying as though the devil pursued. Whether his object was a charm or counsel, it must be potent indeed to induce him to leave the *zariba*.

"Steady, there," cautioned Steele, as Jang pushed forward.

Jang halted. And then the moon patch exploded in a blaze of action. In an instant it became a contest between feline swiftness and the speed of a man whose moves short-circuited reason and perception. A snarling streak of spotted ferocity catapulted from the farther shadows. Saya-myo yelled, instinctively threw up a warding, futile arm; but the flying mass of whipcord sinews, raking claws and ivory fangs bore him to the ground as Steele's rifle-blast shook the clearing. He knew

that he would miss; no marksman could possibly hit that inhumanly swift streak of tawny doom. He bounded forward, heard the savage snarl, the half-stifled yell of the *kansammah*, and leveled his rifle as his leap gave him a line of fire quite clear of the leopard's victim.

Another tearing, crackling blast of cordite; the whine of a ricochet bullet, and then a second shot. They were closely spaced as blows of a riveting hammer. Only then did Steele realize that he had again missed a perfect target. The beast should have been torn in half by the expanding bullets aimed just in the back of his shoulder.

Steele ejected the spent shells and with trembling fingers thrust fresh ones into the breech. Saya-myo was thrashing and yelling. The leopard's head shifted from his victim, and his feral eyes blazed like monstrous topazes as he snarled and spat at Steele.

Smack-smack!

The leopard's head should be a tangle of shattered bone and brains. But as the concussion of Steele's rifle died, the leopard blurred in fluent flash of motion. One long, soaring leap, and it plunged into a thicket, and disappeared. Steele and Jang pulled Saya-myo to his feet. He was pawed, and bleeding, but his throat had not been torn.

"Can't find him by daylight, and can't hit him by moonlight!" Steele wrathfully growled.

"But you did hit him!" yelled Jang, thrusting the wounded *kansammah* aside. "Look at the blood——"

"Saya-myo's."

"No, *sahib!* Yonder—see the splash?"

Jang was right. The splashes were small, but unmistakably beyond where the *kansammah's* wounds had reddened the ground. Steele, however, shared neither Saya-myo's fear of the leopard's vengeance, nor Jang's triumph and confidence. In-

stead of scratching the beast, the expanding slugs should have torn it to a tangled heap of bones and fur. As he fired, Steele had "spotted" his shots, and knew that at the instant of concussion, his rifle had been alined on the leopard's shoulder. When a trained marksman cannot call his shots, something is entirely out of gear.

"Let's see the priest," was Steele's next remark.

Saya-myo led the way. Tapers were flickering in one of the four shrines of the temple. The priest listened to the story of the encounter. His comment was brief.

"This beast is Kirby *Sahib*. He is a leopard by night. His very name—*Kirba*—in the Kanarese language means leopard. You cannot kill him unless you learn from the King of Wizards what weapon can hurt him."

"Kalay-Thoung-Toht?" queried Steele.

"Yes. The-Small-Town-at-the-Top-of-the-Sandbank. And if you still doubt that this Kirby is a leopard, consider that he knew Saya-myo's destination, and followed him—even as you did. It is plain."

5

"BY Allah, *sahib!*" boomed a deep voice from the doorway. "That man speaks sense."

Achmet was at the threshold, nodding and stroking his red beard.

"I told you to stay and watch the camp," reproved Steele.

"*Wallab*, seeing that thou wert gone, there was nothing to watch, except these ape men. And I heard the sound of firing."

There was no arguing with the Afghan. True to type, he masked his breach of discipline by appealing to Steele's appreciation of loyalty. The worst of it was that Achmet had heard the old priest's ideas on Kirby. Something had to be done to keep the Afghan from setting out at

once to hunt Kirby; but before Steele could find words, his attention was distracted by the wailing of pipes and the mutter of drums from within the temple. And Steele had unpleasant memories of eery music by moonlight.

"What's that?" he demanded of the priest. Then he recognized the three-eight time of Indian music, utterly different from the tempo and five-note scale of Burmese musicians.

"A company of *nautch** girls on their way to the Shan states," he replied. His gesture invited him to witness the rehearsal; and Steele, though in no mood for *nautch* dances, decided it would be good policy to humor the old fellow.

They followed him to the inner courtyard, where the strolling players were performing.

"By Allah, *sahib!*" declared the Afghan, as he eyed the slender, golden brown bodies swaying in the moonlit court, "these be finer game than those village girls."

Achmet was true to form.

"Nilofal and Nur Mahal," commented the priest. "Kashmiri dancing-girls. Perhaps my lord would be interested in a—ah, one might say, a private performance, at the bungalow."

Steele gave him the Burmese equivalent of "hell, no!"

Achmet, however, had been thinking rapidly.

"*Sahib*," he interposed, "those lovely girls are in great peril from the *shaitan*-leopard. And those dogs from Hindustan"—his contemptuous gesture indicated the musicians—"would make no move to protect them. Nor the old priest either. They should be at camp where I could stand guard."

"Get out," ordered Steele.

"Or let me stay here and watch the temple for this excellent old priest," persisted the Afghan.

* East Indian professional dancing.

But Steele this time had a ready weapon: "While you were whispering sweet nothings to that Burmese girl, an assassin came near knifing me."

"*Billab!* My face is still blackened," the Afghan penitently admitted; but as he followed Steele, he cast covetous glances at Nilofal and Nur Mahal. Then he sighed and resigned himself to his master's uncommon whims.

As they headed back toward the teak camp, Steele noted the Afghan's thoughtful face, and wondered whether he was thinking of the King of Wizards or the unprotected Kashmiri girls.

"Kashmiri wins by a length," was his verdict as he seated himself at the table in his room.

He composed a letter to Powell, giving him a complete report. The situation was becoming tense, and Steele wanted further information as to Kirby. A skilful trainer of hunting-leopards, introduced into the camp by a rival teak company, and aided by native wizards, could completely demoralize the organization.

"Which is a damn sight more reasonable than *shaitan*-leopards," concluded Steele, as he added his signature to the letter that was to go to Rangoon in the morning. And Achmet, now more than ever determined to kill Kirby, would be just the man to act as runner. The following morning, however, Steele saw that his strategy had failed. Achmet was gone; and shortly after breakfast, Steele learned the cause of his desertion. One of the *mahouts* finally told him that the Afghan had set out on foot to seek the King of Wizards, determined to settle things, once for all.

WHEN Steele's wrath subsided, he philosophically decided that an Afghan is an Afghan, and sent a woodcutter with the message to Powell.

That afternoon brought a second upset,

though one that was more welcome. Powell himself, riding a shaggy Shan pony, came ambling into camp.

"Your first letter set me thinking," he explained. "Your being nearly knifed at the Burmese village convinced me that the forest devils had human allies. So I looked up Kirby's references, and found out that they were faked. He was on the payroll of the Kokogon Teak Company until I put him in charge here—which entirely contradicts his story about working in the Pahang gold belt.

"And our friend Kirby will be dismissed at once. I'll manage this camp myself until a new man can come from Rangoon. In the meanwhile, you can be killing the leopard."

"Flattering as hell, Powell—unless the natives happen to be right about Kirby."

Powell eyed him narrowly, shook his head, and twisted his drooping, straw-colored mustache.

"The first thing I know, Steele, you'll be following Achmet to the village of the King of Wizards."

"Anyhow," countered Steele, "don't fire Kirby. Let's look into this a bit further."

They argued it back and forth for half an hour, but finally Steele's counsel prevailed. He maintained that dismissing Kirby would at the best be begging the question, and that the only way to restore order in the camp was to kill the *shaitan*-leopard.

For a week there were no depredations. The morale of the camp improved, and when Kirby realized that Powell had not come to dismiss him, relations between the three white men were less strained. Yet for all his assurance that Steele had not been undermining him, Kirby was far from cordial toward the American. Steele often caught the camp manager fixedly regarding him with a strange, appraising stare. He wondered whether Kirby still feared that he would report to Powell their conver-

sation the evening of the American's arrival at camp.

"I'm beginning to think," observed Powell one evening after dinner, "that you must have seriously wounded the beast the last time you encountered it, and it crawled away to die."

Steele shook his head. "I think the natives have been so scared that they're keeping under cover, so it can't grab any of them. I know I had my rifle lined right at it, but I'm just as sure that I didn't touch the beast. My guess is that as soon as the natives become careless again, we'll hear plenty."

"Maybe," was Kirby's ironic comment, "it waylaid your Afghan playmate and died of indigestion."

Powell saw the wrathful flash in Steele's eyes, and tried to change the subject.

"You know, we really ought to see a performance by those *nautch* dancers before they go north," he remarked. "I hear they're uncommonly talented."

As he spoke, Powell's glance included the American and Kirby.

"Thanks, but I'm going out to do a bit of bushwhacking tonight," Kirby answered. "It's about time for the beast to show up again."

They watched Kirby shoulder his rifle and set out on foot toward the *jeel*.

"By Heaven," muttered Powell, "I don't half blame the natives for feeling funny about Kirby. Quite aside from the expression of his face, did you ever see anyone that reminded you more of a cat? Just look at that stride—he even moves like one."

"Suppose," countered Steele, as he struck light to a cigar, "that *you* take a jaunt to the village of wizards."

And when Steele's cigar was down to its final inch, they sent a *mahout* to tell the old priest that they would presently be on hand to witness a performance.

"By Allah, *sahib*," rumbled a deep voice

at the doorway, "now that I have returned, I will guard you and the manager *sahib* on the way to the temple."

Achmet, tattered, bedraggled, but triumphant, had returned. He wore his silver-hafted Khorassan tulwar; but as he spoke, he patted the butt of his service revolver. Before Steele could demand an accounting, the Afghan grinned amiably and explained, "As your honor doubtless knows, I went to see the King of Wizards, and got a charm to protect me against leopard *shaitans*. Furthermore, my revolver is loaded with silver bullets. And for good measure I have engraved on each one: '*I betake me to the Lord of the Daybreak for refuge against Shaitan, and against the evils of the night when it darkeneth*.'"

Steele, putting little trust in the hundred and thirteenth chapter of the Koran, even if engraved on a bullet, reached for his express rifle as he and Powell set out for the temple. But when they were only a little more than halfway to their destination, Steele knew that they would witness no performance that night. From the half-ruined heap came an agonized cry that was abruptly cut short. Then a confusion of yells, savage growls, and the wailing of a woman. And as they dashed toward the temple, Steele saw a monstrous leopard bounding from the terrace. It had seized one of the dancing-girls, and was dragging her into the jungle. He halted, fired a crackling volley at a streak of golden brown that was scarcely perceptible in the light of the waning moon; but it was a perilous shot as likely to kill the victim as the beast. There was a savage snarling, thrashing in the brush, then a blur of tawny, silken hide.

"You got him!" shouted Powell, as he followed.

"Then it's blind luck," panted Steele, as he approached the spot where the abandoned victim lay moaning. "I barely caught a flash of him."

The Kashmiri girl, mangled by the

beast's fangs, was beyond help. But as Steele knelt beside the pitiful remnant of loveliness, he heard a yell, and a rattle of pistol fire; then a crackling in the underbrush, and a wrathful, rasping volley of oaths. Steele leaped forward, rifle in hand. Powell and Achmet were at his heels. A dozen strides brought them through the thicket and into a small clearing. They saw Kirby emerging from its farther edge, pistol drawn in hand and stretching his long legs toward them. He was utterly out of breath, and it was not until they reached the body of the Kashmiri girl that he was able to explain.

"I was coming from the *jeel*, and I heard a shot. The first thing I knew the beast was on me, running as if the devil was after it. Knocked me end for end, but went on. It seemed as anxious to get away as I was, but I fired as it cleared me."

During Kirby's narrative, Achmet's sharp eyes covered him from head to foot. Kirby's shoulder was bleeding.

"*Billabi, sahib*," he whispered to Steele. "Verily, he is the *shaitan*-leopard. *Look where your shot grazed him!*"

"Shut up, you idiot," Steele growled; "that's a slash, not a bullet crease."

But he began pondering when the natives, mustering up enough courage to leave the temple, approached the group gathered about the body of the Kashmiri girl. One of them carried a spear, and its tip was dripping with blood. Someone, cornered and desperate, had struck at the marauder as he bounded out with his prey. And a lance-head would make a slash in passing!

6

STEELE and Achmet carried the remains of the Kashmiri girl back to the temple. There he learned that Nur Mahal, the other *nautch* dancer, had been badly clawed while trying to save her sister.

"*Sahib*," said the girl, whose dark eyes now blazed with wrath, "we were twins; born only an hour apart, and our destinies are closely interlaced. The beast will therefore return for me. There is no help for it, but before the evil stars of my horoscope reach the House of Death I will devise vengeance."

"What do you mean?" he demanded. Although Nur Mahal's argument was fairly sound astrology, it meant little to Steele; but she might suggest some device that had not thus far occurred to the hunters. The valley of Kashmir is infested with leopards, and the natives are unusually skilful in disposing of the beasts.

"It was ordained that the demon leopard would kill my sister," declared Nur Mahal, "and likewise, that he must kill me, since we were born so little apart. Therefore, he will seek me; and you may watch, and thus kill him. My fate is certain; so let me bait a trap, instead of using a young goat, as is the custom."

As she spoke, Nur Mahal's eyes shifted toward Kirby, who stood at the fringe of the crowd. Steele saw their eyes clash, and sensed the antagonism between the two. The girl was firmly convinced that Kirby was a leopard in human form; and he, in his turn, was wrathful because of the girl's unspoken accusation, and the muttering among the natives as they edged away from him.

"That's entirely too wild, Nur Mahal," countered Steele. "You're pretty badly scratched, and you'd better come to camp and get yourself doctored up a bit."

If infection set in, Nur Mahal's dire forebodings would be fulfilled without another attack by the leopard. The Kashmiri girl was being carried on by her nerve. Even as he spoke, she wavered on her feet. Steele caught her as she collapsed.

"You are right," asserted the old priest. "Take her, lest she die of those clawings."

His suggestion was eagerly echoed by

the natives. Nur Mahal's saying that her destiny was linked with that of her dead sister and that of the demon leopard made them eager to get her as far from them as possible.

They devised a rude litter. Powell and Achmet carried her to camp.

During the discussion, Kirby had wrathfully left the temple.

"My Heaven, Steele," muttered Powell, as they headed across the clearing, "it's all perfect rot, but Kirby has to leave here at once, or I won't have a logger or *mahout* left in camp."

"Better wait a while," temporized Steele. "This girl is in bad shape, but I think I can pull her through. That will prove that her astrology was all wrong, which will encourage the natives."

Powell conceded Steele's argument.

Halfway across the clearing, they saw Jang running toward them.

"*Sahiban*," he began, "you must not bring the girl to camp. The news has spread. All the woodcutters will leave at once. They are certain that she will draw an attack from the demon leopard."

Steele cursed heartily.

"What'll we do with her?" demanded Powell. "Jang is right. I didn't think of that."

"Build a shelter here near the edge of the clearing," suggested Achmet, "and I will run to camp and get the medicines and bandages for Steele *Sahib* to apply. I will help him guard this woman." Then he added, "Until Allah permits the *shaitan* leopard to eat her."

"Jang," demanded Steele as Achmet bounded across the clearing, "who the devil started this, anyhow?"

"Kirby *Sahib* heard the woodcutters' mutterings," answered Jang. "But as for me, I think that he gave them the thought, so that the girl would not be placed in a bungalow where he could not get her when he takes the shape of a leopard."

"You're crazy," growled Steele. "How can a man become a beast?"

"This is no true leopard," Jang stubbornly persisted. "In my native country there were many of them, but they were only nuisances, not a danger. We hunt them on foot—with a turban cloth wrapped around the left arm, to ward off their claws, while we take a *kukri* and slice them in half when they attack. Verily, this must be a demon, to be hunting men in such an unnatural manner."

That left Steele no argument. This beast was different from the vicious pests of Kashmir and Nepal.

While awaiting Achmet's return, Jang set to work with his *kukri*, chopping down bamboos and saplings to construct a shelter for the injured girl and her guardian. And presently Nur Mahal received first aid.

DESPITE Steele's efforts, infection set in. For three days and nights he was at his wits' end, trying to use his sketchy medical knowledge to save the Kashmiri girl. When she was not delirious, she stared at the matting wall of her shelter, fatalistically resigned to the beast's return.

Powell was in a high-grade funk. "If she dies, we're jolly well blown up. The camp depends on your proving that a first-aid kit can beat this devil leopard, even if a rifle can't."

Steele somberly shook his head. "She'd pull through if she weren't sold on the idea that her number is up. So she has absolutely no resistance, no will to hang on. For all the good it's done, my taking care of her, I might as well have been out bushwhacking. Better, perhaps. If I nailed the leopard, she'd be on her feet in an hour."

"*Sahib*," Achmet cut in, "if Nur Mahal dies, I will then and there kill Kirby, or may Allah do as much to me, and more."

The burly Afghan meant exactly what

he said. He was not blustering. He squatted on the ground, grimly fingering the hilt of his blade. That in no way lightened Steele's problem. Powell said, "You can't have that chap running around executing wizards. He's off his chump. I'm referring to Achmet, you understand. No doubt Kirby's a bit of a scoundrel, offering me forged credentials, but we can't have him butchered."

"Now, don't get tough with Achmet," Steele answered impatiently. "Not that I approve of his ideas any more than you do. But it wasn't so many years ago that fellows as smart as you are were burning witches—right in your home territory."

"Don't be absurd!" Powell snapped. "Couple of centuries ago, at least."

"Did you ever hear of the *Malleus Maleficarum*?" Steele persisted.

"No, and I'm sure I'd not want to. Who were they?"

"It was a book of instructions for detecting wizards, witches, and the like. Written in 1485——"

"Oh—of course. *Hammer of Evildoers*." Powell had unraveled the title. "Beastly stuff, Latin. Strike me dead, but I could do with such a hammer in this camp. What about the blasted book? Filthy superstition, for an educated person."

Steele rubbed his chin. He eyed the restless girl, the Afghan who crouched like a beast ready to spring, and the harassed manager. "Powell," he went on finally, "there is something filthy in this jungle, but I'm not so sure it's superstition. The authors of the *Malleus Maleficarum*——"

"Collaboration, eh?" Powell was gnawing his mustaches.

"Right. Two priests. Iacobus Sprenger and Heinrich Kramer. I remember hearing quite a bit of one of their chapters quoted. About human beings that could assume animal forms——"

"By Jove!" Powell snapped to his feet. He choked, blinked. "Now you give me

this blighted rot! I sent you out here to kill a leopard, not explain him. I—I—why——"

"What I meant was," Steele cut in, "that you mustn't be too impatient with Achmet—when people of our own race had similar notions, not so long ago, as history goes. Suppose you trot along and get some sleep, old fellow."

He took Powell's elbow, and edged him toward the door. At the threshold, he added in a whisper, "And keep an eye on Kirby. Don't tell him Achmet is making threats, but persuade him to quit his prowling around. It'd be awkward if this red-bearded ruffian did go off his chump!"

"Beastly awkward," Powell muttered as he stalked from the hut.

The tall Afghan moved from the foot of Nur Mahal's cot and toward the door. "*Sabib*," he said, "now that these sons of wild pigs are gone, I will tell thee something. Be of good cheer. As long as you watch here, I also watch, and I shall slay no one as long as you are busy attending to her wounds as you once did mine."

Steele sighed. He was considerably relieved. "That's fine, Achmet."

"Later, there will be enough time to do that which is to be done," the Afghan explained.

7

ANOTHER devil-haunted Burmese night, when every furtive stirring and twittering outside the hut frayed Steele's nerves. He was still watching beside the *nautch* girl's cot. A kerosene flare cast a flickering yellowish light on her immobile features. Every other resource having failed, Steele had administered opiates to blot out Nur Mahal's delirium.

Fear, rather than fever induced by infection, was the danger. If he could keep her from worrying herself to death, her natural vitality would have a chance. Her

sister's fate, much more than her own injuries, held Nur Mahal's life in the balance.

Steele was nodding from weariness. He had been guarding a secret from Powell, and most of all from Achmet, who still squatted in the doorway. Only the haggard American had gotten a close look at Nur Mahal. He was no longer entirely certain that leopard claws and fangs had caused her wounds. The other victim, beyond any help, had been turned over to those who laid out the dead; the *nautch* girl was the first one to receive close scrutiny.

Steele had long since forgotten the difference between being asleep and awake. Nur Mahal, unevenly divided between terror and opium, was beginning to make him wonder what difference there was between life and death. And thinking of those curious wounds had ended by making him doubt whether more than a hair divided man and beast.

He cursed that treacherous memory which had exhumed the sense if not the exact words of Iacobus Sprenger and Heinrich Kramer. His first verdict on the opinions of the two German priests had been, "Wretched superstition!" Bit by bit he modified that to, "Logical, but impossible." And now he not only admitted the logic, but failed to deny the possibility.

Burma had been getting under his skin. The uncounted millions of malignant *nats*, the sorcerers who peopled the forest, the tattooed symbols the natives wore to counteract the oppression of Thagyâ-Min, Lord of Demon-Land: these things became increasingly real to Steele during his long vigil beside Nur Mahal. He told himself that oft-repeated suggestions were poisoning his mind. Then he asked himself, "But what suggested these things to the natives?"

The answer was remorseless enough: Burma and her breathing soil.

He started, jerked violently, and sat up

right. Nur Mahal was stirring. As the opiate wore off, she murmured uneasily. Her thin hands, almost transparent in the light, rose in a clawing gesture. He could not understand what she said; he was not even sure that it was in Hindustani.

Steele fumbled for a cigarette. He had none. He glanced toward the door. The big Afghan no longer crouched at the entrance.

"Achmet!" He listened, heard no stirring outside, nor any reply. He raised his voice. "Achmet!"

The Afghan was beyond earshot, or he would have answered. His revolver lay on a packing-case near the door. It was loaded with the hand-cast silver bullets. He had apparently left his master a charmed weapon to take the place of the rifle which had so consistently failed.

And there was another inference: Achmet's pent-up wrath and fear had sent him out to settle Kirby.

The camp was beyond hailing distance. Steele could not abandon his patient for long enough to get in touch with Powell. He was trembling, not from any ordinary fear, but from a premonition. He began to feel that this eery drama was marching to a climax; that one careless move would undo all his work. But it would be almost as bad, if Achmet ran amuck and cut Kirby to pieces. Stolid, plodding British law would show the loyal fellow no consideration.

Steele reached for his rifle. He stepped out into the chilly mists of the jungle. The moon was clearing the treetops that fringed the clearing. The night had become a whirl of silver glamor and deception. No small animals made any disturbance, nor did any birds cry out or twitter. Strangely, the murmuring forest had become a tomb tenanted by a haggard man, and a girl who wavered between life and death.

Steele raised the heavy weapon to his

shoulder. He fired one barrel, and as the clearing's farther side threw back the blast, he cut loose with the second charge. That would arouse Powell and the whole camp, and interfere with Achmet's plans.

The spare cartridges were on the improvised table, near Nur Mahal's cot. This was hardly more than three strides, but Steele had no chance to reload. The matting wall of the hut parted, and the spotted slayer entered. The beast flowed through the breach, and into the room.

FOR an instant they faced each other. The leopard snarled, and its tail lashed slowly. Its silken hide rippled, and its phosphorescent eyes radiated malevolence beyond that of any animal. From long experience with hunters, the beast knew that the rifle was empty; thus it was no longer necessary to wait for the watcher to doze. The only problem now was to take the choice of victims.

Steele was far heavier than the undersized Burmese the brute had carried away, or the frail *nautch* girl. In that instant of appraisal, he sensed what the leopard's choice would be. As the great cat whirled toward the cot, Steele snatched Achmet's revolver. He had to move too fast for any chance of aim.

The blast shook the flimsy shelter. Steele moved as in a nightmare in which time had ceased. Only split seconds had passed since he emptied the express rifle. Powell and his men would scarcely be on the way. It would all be over before they arrived.

The leopard wheeled from Nur Mahal. Any other of its kind would have fled, since a way of retreat was open; but Satan in a spotted coat had come to Kokogon, and Steele's blazing weapon had not yet left his hip when the beast lunged. This would be hand to hand. Whether or not he riddled the beast, the long fangs and raking claws would finish him.

He flung himself aside and thrust out

the heavy revolver to ward off the attack. If that first leap missed, he had a chance.

The leopard shouldered Steele off balance, just as he jerked another shot. The barrel burst, half blinding him with flecks of burning powder. Achmet's hand-loaded cartridges had kicked back, leaving the gunner stunned and unarmed, the useless butt and warped breech mechanism in his bleeding hand.

The leopard, missing its victim, flashed in a silken arc through the doorway. Steele did not see it land and whirl, ready to close in again. He had snatched the rifle and was bounding toward the cartridges on the little table. Whether his trembling hands could shove them into the breech in time was an open question.

Then he heard a yell. Still fumbling with the shells, Steele sidestepped, facing the doorway. The crouching leopard's leap was checked before it fairly began. An arc of frosty metal blazed in the moonglow, and something dark dropped from the tree near the hut. It masked some of the beast's body.

There was a terrific snarling, a man's guttural voice, and the rise and fall of a blade. Achmet, dropping from overhead, had struck with his tulwar. As he hacked, he cried above the *chunk* of steel biting flesh, "I split him from end to end, *sabib!* Yea, the slayer and spoiler is slain!"

A huddle of fur twitched in a spreading pool of blood. Steele was dazed and trembling. In the distance, he heard shouting: Powell, and the chatter of natives aroused by the firing.

"Your silver bullets nearly finished me! The next time you load any cartridges, don't ram the slugs too tight. Not with smokeless powder, you big ape. That's a different matter from the kind you fellows use back home. But what were you doing up in that tree?"

The Afghan wiped his tulwar on his baggy trousers. "I hid there, *sabib*, know-

ing that you would presently call me. And when I did not answer, you would begin shouting 'damn,' after the fashion of the infidels, saving your honor's presence. Then the *shaitan*-leopard would know you were alone, and when he attacked——"

"Nice," said Steele, "except that he slipped from the rear, and nearly finished me before you got into action. But it worked, and——"

Then he saw Achmet's change of expression. His glance followed the Afghan's gesture. "Look—*ya chabar yar!* O Four Companions of the Holy Prophet! The demon leopard is becoming a man!"

STEELE stood there and watched it happen. He could not speak. He could only stare. The blood-splashed tawny body was becoming tenuous and misty. He could almost see through it. Its shape was altering, as though a figure of sea foam were slowly collapsing. When the dissolution was complete, he would know what was dark and solid beneath that thinning phantom shape.

Shrubbery crashed, torches flared. Powell and a dozen natives came on the run. "I say, what's all the shooting?" Then he saw Steele's face and Achmet's gesture, and the thing that lay on the red ground. Powell licked his lips and stutted. "By Jove! The leopard. But it's collapsing. Like a blasted omelette, if you know what I mean."

Achmet was saying, "I betake me to the Lord of the Daybreak for refuge against Satan the Stoned! It is not a leopard, but a man!"

He was right. Kirby, slashed and stabbed, was now plain. He groaned and twisted. His lips were curled back in a snarl that showed his white teeth. Some incredible vitality still kept him alive. But the illusion of tawny fur and spots still persisted. That was what sickened Steele; he did not know whether this was a beast

to be put out of its misery, or a human being who should get the last vain assistance which his own kind could render.

"Kirby!" Powell muttered, wiping the sweat from his forehead.

A snarl. A shudder. The phosphorescent eyes glazed. And as a match flame winking out, the last trace of illusion faded. The natives fled, screeching, now that their suspicions were confirmed. Dead or alive, a wizard is a fearsome thing. Achmet would have done the same, but if the *sahibs* could stand fast, so could he. But he muttered.

Finally Powell said, "Ghastly! Simply can't believe it, but there it was. Glad I saw it happen. If you'd told me this, I'd have been forced to conclude your man Achmet had made good his threat. That you were—ah—lying to save his hide."

Steele nodded and said nothing. Powell had to have reasons; what had happened upset all his convictions. He demanded, "How do you account for it? Why couldn't anyone kill it until now? Speak up, man! Blast it, you were telling me something about a chap named Sprenger, and another one, Kramer—here, the other night."

"So I was. Kirby himself dropped a hint the first day I arrived, though he probably wasn't aware of it. He told me that last season he aroused antagonism among some of the native wizards by felling a sacred tree which blocked a runway leading from the forest to the creek.

"But no one will ever know just how the wizards put a curse on Kirby, to make him prow around at night and become a leopard."

"Curse!" Powell had to deny himself any admissions that would confirm what he had seen. "A leopard's body and bones can't become those of a man, and then change back again."

Steele smiled and made a helpless gesture. "Possibly not. What I mean is that what we saw was not actually leopard form.

We saw Kirby, and his beast-personality was uppermost, so strongly that its impact made us for the moment visualize a leopard. Those priests, Iacobus Sprenger and Heinrich Kramer, as I was on the verge of telling you the other night, suggested that the transformation of human to animal is only apparent, because of a spell laid upon the eyes of all beholders."

"Ah—you mean, this poor devil's obsession was so strong that we joined him in believing? Like a bally hypnotist's suggestion?"

"That's as close to it as we can ever come," Steele answered. "And it likewise hints at the reason for my rotten shooting. A lot of it doubtless was nerves, the uncanniness of everything shaking me in spite of myself. Then again, Kirby might not have been on all fours. But with the leopard image so deeply burned into me, I thought I saw a crouching beast, and fired accordingly. So I drove the bullets between his knees, for instance."

Powell frowned, nodded, and muttered something about hypnotism. Having a definition put him more at ease. Then he looked up and demanded, "But this Afghan chap? Very successful."

"When he dropped from the tree, milling that tulwar, he covered more ground than any number of bullets. Regardless of posture or illusion, Kirby could not avoid

being slashed. And Kirby, I think, could not have been conscious of what he did by night. The poor devil was the most bewildered and harassed of us all, when he shook off the leopard obsession and became himself."

Powell tugged at his mustaches. "Those blasted Burmese wizards!" he muttered, uneasily.

Then he said, "Nice work, old chap. I mean, your man Achmet seems to have qualified for the reward. Frightfully embarrassing, putting it that way, but he was swinging the tulwar, you know."

Steele sighed. "I'm glad I didn't win. With the way it turned out, I couldn't accept it. Perhaps Kirby did have some underhanded reason for offering you forged credentials, but God knows, he didn't plan to become anything like that."

They turned to tell the tall Afghan that he had earned more rupees than any of his clan had seen in generations; but Achmet was no longer standing by. He was in the hut, kneeling beside the *nautch* girl.

"*El hamdulilabi!*" he was muttering. "Praise be to Allah, the fever is gone and Satan the Stoned has flown away."

She was still unconscious, but he would be there when the opiate lost its hold.

Powell said to Steele, "Lucky beggar, that chap. Seems as though he'll be collecting a double reward."