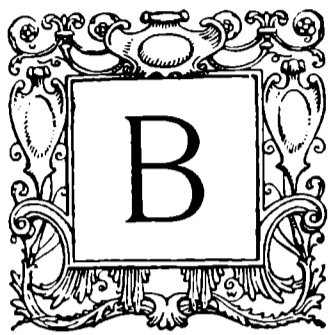


The Dance on the Hill

BY ACHMED ABDULLAH



BEHIND him the Koh Haji-Lal, the "Mountains of the Red Pilgrim," closed like a ragged tide. In front of him the snowy peaks of the Gul Koh pointed to the skies in an abandon of frozen, lacy spires, while ten miles the other side Ghuzni dipped to the green of the valley with an avalanche of flat, white roof-tops, huddled close together beneath the chill of the Himalayas. The English doctor lived there, mixing his drugs and scolding his patients in the little house at the end of the perfume-sellers' bazar, in the shadow of the great bronze Mogul gun which both Afghans and Lohani Sikhs called the Zubba-zung.

Mortazu Khan thought of him as he came down the mountain-side, his rough sheepskin coat folded across the small of his back to give free play to his lungs; his short, hairy arms, sleeves rolled to the elbows, moving up and down like propeller-blades. He walked with the suspicious step of the hill-bred who reckons with inequalities of ground, lifting his rope-soled sandals gingerly over timberfalls and crumbling granite slides, putting on extra speed when he crossed a wide spread of rust-brown bracken that covered the summer hue of the slope like a scarf, again warily slowing as he forded a swift little stream bordered with scented wild peppermint and chini stalks and gray, spiky wormwood.

But straight through he kept up a steady clip, averaging well over five miles an hour, up-hill or down.

There was peace with the Suni Pathans who squatted on the upland pastures and so he had left his rifle at home, carrying only a broad-bladed dagger. He was glad of it, for a rifle meant weight, weight in the hills meant lack of speed, and speed was essential. All last

night his wife had moaned terribly, and the village wise-woman, at the end of her remedies, had told him that he needed the English *hakim's* skill before the day was out if he wanted his wife to live: his wife, and the little son—he hoped it would be a son—whom she was bringing into the world with such anguish.

Three hours he figured to Ghuzni. Three back. Rather a little more, since the foreigner was not hill-bred. Thus he would safely reach his village before the sun had raced to the west; and by night his wife would hold another little son in her arms.

Of course there would be a wrangle with the *hakim*, Mortazu Khan thought—and smiled at the thought.

First was spoken the ceremonious Afghan greeting, cut short by the Englishman's impatient, "Why haven't you come sooner?" and his reply that his wife was a stout hill woman who had borne children before this; also that he had called in the wise-woman.

"What did she do?"

"She gave her fish sherbet to cool her blood. She put leeches on her chest. She wrote a Koran verse on a piece of paper, lit it, and held it smoking under Azeena's nose—"

And then the *hakim's* furious bellow: "Of all the damned—! Good God! man, let's hurry, or your wife 'll go out before we get there!"

At the end of the imagined scene Mortazu Khan's smile twisted to a lopsided frown. The doctor would be rightly angry. He should have gone to him yesterday. He should not have called in the wise-woman. He had given her five rupees— He shrugged his shoulders. To-morrow he would make her eat stick and force her to give back the money—

He increased his speed as he reached the edge of the slope where it flattened to

a rock-studded plateau, with here and there little gentians peeping from granite splits and opening their stiff, azure stars. He bent and picked one to put in his turban for good luck, and as he straightened up again he smelled a familiar odor and saw two small, reddish eyes glaring at him from a clump of thorny wild acacia.

He stood quite still. Instinctively he fingered across his left shoulder for the rifle—which was not there. Then he walked on. At this time of the year the blue-gray, bristly haired mountain bears were not dangerous. They were busy filling their sagging bellies with prangus leaves and mulberries against the lean season. He would leave the bear alone, he decided, and the bear would leave him alone.

But when a moment later he heard the animal give tongue—a low, flat rumble growing steadily into a sustained roar, then stabbing out in a squeaky high note that sounded ridiculously inadequate, given the brute's size—Mortazu Khan, without looking over his shoulder, jumped sideways like a cat, cleared a heap of dry twigs, and made straight for a stout fir-tree that towered in lanky loneliness a dozen yards away. He reached it and jumped behind it. His hands gripped the rough, warty bark.

"Some cursed fool of a foreigner must have burned her pelt with a bullet of pain." He spoke aloud, after the manner of hillmen. "And now Bibi Bear has a grouch—"

He completed the sentence just as the bear tore out of the acacia clump and made after him with a huge, plumping, clumsy, bound and a whickering, whinnying roar.

"Allah be thanked because He gave me nimble feet!" ejaculated Mortazu Khan. "And praise to Him furthermore because He made this tree and caused it to grow thick!" He finished his impromptu prayer as he slid rapidly to the west side of the fir while the bear lunged, big flat paws clawing, gaping mouth showing the crimson throat, the chalk-white teeth, the lolling, slobbering tongue, ears flat on the narrow head—like the head of a great snake.

The bear missed the hillman by half a yard and, carried away by his weight

and impetus, she landed, paws sprawling, head down, on a bed of ochre moss studded with needle-sharp granite splinters. Her pointed muzzle bumped smartly against the ground, was torn by the ragged stone edges, and plowed a painful furrow through the moss so that it rose to either side in a velvety cloud.

She bellowed her disappointment and fury, sat on her hunkers, slid back half a dozen yards, using her fat hams with the speed and precision of roller-skates, then returned to the attack, launching her blue-gray bulk straight for the west side of the tree.

"*Ahi!* Pig, and Parent of Piglings!" shouted Mortazu Khan, as he rapidly made the half-circle around the tree to the opposite side.

"*Waughrrrrr-yi-yi!*" said the bear, very low in her throat and with a certain hurt, childish intonation.

"Pig!" repeated the hillman, wiping the sweat from his forehead, while the bear, who had again landed head down on the ground, wrinkled her ugly, thin-skinned nose where the warm blood was trickling down into her open mouth.

Mortazu Khan watched carefully. He knew that he was safe as long as he kept the tree between himself and the brute, knew, too, that he was the more agile of the two.

Not that the bear was slow, but her body was longer, her bulk larger. She could not make short turns in a whizzing, flying half-circle like the hillman. She could charge—with a thousand pounds of bunched muscle and brutal meat—but when she missed, the best she could do was to use her nose and forepaws as brakes, bump back, twist in a sharp angle right or left, according to what side of the tree Mortazu Khan had slid—and return to the charge. And always the man, keeping tight to the fir, got ahead of her, while the bear, squealing like an angry boar, landed on the ground, hurting her delicate nose and clawing with her paws till the moss was shredded to rags and the sand beneath seemed to look up with scared, yellow eyes.

Little stones clattered mockingly. Twigs crackled and whined. Somewhere from the higher branches a noise trembled—a gurgling, throaty noise. Doubtless the cry of a *buwra kurra*, a

black tree grouse, thought the hillman, cursing the bird because of its place of security, cursing the bear because of her wickedness.

"Dog! Jew! Drunkard! Illegitimate cow!" he yelled as he danced around the tree, left and right and left again, his fingers scraping the bark and the bark scraping his fingers—"Away! away!"—Bibi Bear after him, roaring, fuming, and always missing her aim.

The bear's little, narrow-lidded eyes glowed like charcoal balls. The hair along her back was thick and taut, her ears flat. There was something ludicrous in her appearance, too—something which spoke of iron, sinister resolution.

Plump! Down on her nose, paws furrowing the ground! Twist and squat and twist.

She tried to learn from Mortazu Khan, tried to whiz her bulk in shorter circles, to charge straight at her foe. But always she missed. Always she had to brake with head and paws and make sharp angles while the man danced away.

"Infidel! Parent of naughty daughters!" shouted Mortazu Khan as the bear missed him by less than a foot.

His hands were hot and raw. His heart was cold with fear. For back across the hills was the mother of his sons—and then he cursed again the little bird which gurgled in the branches. He could not see it. But the gurgle was becoming loud, insistent, blending curiously and malignantly with the bear's wicked bellow.

Underneath his duffle shirt sweat rolled in little icy balls. His feet hurt. Moss had been around the base of the tree, but he had worn great holes in it, the long furrows and grooves. Now the whole cover of moss was trampled away, and he was dancing on the naked ground. One of his sandals had split the heel-rope and had flown away and out, while he had stepped through the other so that it was around his ankles. His toes were bleeding—

And Azeena waited!

But what could he do with his bare hands, without his rifle? The dagger? He could throw it—yes! And what then? One does not kill a mountain bear with a single thrust of steel. So

he kept whizzing around the tree, and his thoughts whizzed along, his fears, his hopes—and then, quite suddenly, the bear changed her tactics.

"*Airrrh—whoof—airrh!*" she said with low, rumbling dignity.

"*Wheet-wheet!*" came the echo from the branches of the tree where the cursed, feathery thing was roosting in safety.

And Bibi Bear rose on her hind feet, fir needles and moss sticking to her pelt, belly sagging loosely, perspiration rising from her nostrils in a gray flag of steam. Straight toward the tree she walked, forepaws wide extended as if to embrace the fir and the miserable being who was clinging to it for dear life.

Something like a slobbering grin curled the brute's black, leathery lips, and Mortazu Khan watched. His skin seemed to shrink. Blue wheels whirled in front of his eyes. A hammer beat at the base of his skull.

Ahi! There was Azeena—who would not live out the day unless. . . .

"Allah!" he said. "It is not I who shall be a widower to-night, but Azeena who shall be a widow!"—and his knife flashed free while the bear came on, slow, ponderous, thinking in her ugly, twisted brain that all would be over in two crimson minutes if she could only tear the man away from the protecting tree.

Mortazu Khan knew it, too. "Assassin!" he cried. "Base-born and lean bastard!"

"*Waughree!*" replied the bear.

She came on without haste, leaned smack against the tree, and tried to reach around it, right and left, with her murderous claws. But the tree was too stout, and for the moment the hillman was safe.

He smiled. Then he frowned. For the sun was rising higher, and he had to reach Ghuzni—the doctor—and back yonder Azeena was dying. . . .

"Unclean spawn of filth!" he cried. "Large and stinking devil!"—and quite suddenly, watching his chance, he flashed his dagger to the left. He brought down the point with speed and ferocity, straight into the brute's right eye.

Something warm and sticky squirted

up his arm. The bear, crazed with pain, jumped high in the air like a rubber ball, came down again, roaring, squealing, bellowing, slid lumberingly to the left, and again Mortazu Khan resumed his dance.

But this time it was another dance. This time the bear had no sharp angles to make. Both man and beast were close against the tree, circling, circling—

The sun rose and dipped. Far on the edge of the horizon the peaks of the Gul Koh flushed gold and lavender.

"*Waughrrr!*" snorted the bear, stamping her clumsy paws.

"*Wheet-wheet!*" chirped the echo from the uppermost branches of the fir, silly, mocking—and safe! And back beyond the bracken-clad slope, Azeena was dying hard, and his son was dying—dying before he was born—because Bibi Bear had broken the truce of the fat season.

Mortazu Khan trembled with rage and fear. But—away!—circling the tree, escaping the murderous claws!

He did not jump. No longer did he dance. He seemed to stream, to flow, like a liquid wave, his body scrunched into a curve while his lungs pumped the breath with staccato thumps. Only his hand was steady, taking crimson toll again and again, and the bear followed, roaring like forked mountain thunder. The blood on her huge body was caked with dirt and moss until the wounds looked like gray patches on a fur jacket.

A shimmering thread of sun-gold wove through the branches and dipped low to see what was happening. Far in the east a crane-pheasant called to its mate. The wind soared lonely and chilly.

They were out of breath, man and beast. Momentarily they stopped in their mad circling, the bear leaning against one side of the tree, a deep sob gurgling in her hairy throat, the blood coming through her wounds like black-red whips, while the man was huddled against the opposite side as tight and small as he could. He was tired and sleepy. His right hand felt paralyzed, but still it gripped the dagger. He knew that the end was near, knew that he himself must hasten it, that he must face Bibi Bear—face her in the open—

and kill or be killed. For back yonder was Azeena, and the minutes were slipping by like water.

He raked together the dying embers of his strength. "Allah!" he mumbled. "Do thou give me help!"—And then he heard again the cry of the cursed, feathery thing:

"*Wheet-wheet!*"

But it seemed less mocking than before, more insistent, as if the bird, too, had lost its sense of security, had begun to fear the shaggy murderer below.

Mortazu Khan looked up. Then he saw it. It had dropped to a branch lower down, and it was not a bird—It was round and toddling and fluffy and blue-gray. A little, fat bear cub it was; and then Mortazu Khan knew why Bibi Bear had broken the truce of the fat season, and a certain pity and understanding came to the hillman's simple heart.

Here he was fighting for his wife, his unborn son, and he said to himself that the bear, too, was fighting for the young of her body, for the thing which gave meaning to life. And it was without hatred—with respect, rather, and a feeling of comradeship—that Mortazu Khan stepped away from the protecting tree, deliberately to give battle in the open.

The bear followed, growling. And so the two stood there, confronting each other, both breathing hard, ready to leap, ready to finish the fight.

It was the man who leaped first. For the fraction of a second he balanced himself, his bleeding toes gripping the ground. Then he went straight into the bear's embrace, the point of his dagger ahead of him like a guidon. His lips were crinkly and pale, his tongue like dry saddle leather, his eyes cold and gleaming. But straight he jumped, and straight stabbed the knife, finding the brute's pumping, clamorous heart, while the claws met across his shoulder-blades and tore a furrow down his back.

Straight to the heart! With every ounce of bunched strength and despair, and as the bear, in mortal agony, realized her steely grip, he struck again and again and again. But there was no hatred in the blows.

"*Ahi!*" he sobbed, as the bear toppled sideways and fell, curling up like

a sleeping dog. “*Ahi!* Poor Bibi Bear! Brave Bibi Bear!”

His back bled and hurt. But he jerked the pain away with a shrug of his massive shoulder. The English *hakim* would have two patients instead of one, he told himself, and, dizzy, a little depressed, he turned to resume his walk across the plateau.

But something seemed to float down upon his consciousness, imperceptibly, like the shadow of a leaf through summer dusk, and he stopped and returned to the fir-tree. Standing on his toes, he reached up and caught the toddling,

fluffy cub which was trying hard to back up, to regain the security of the higher branches.

“Come, little Sheik Bear!” he crooned as he might to a frightened child. “Come! There is room for thee in the house of Mortazu Khan! Room and food and water—and soon, if Allah be willing and the *hakim*’s medicine strong, a little man-child to play with thee!”

And, the cub nuzzling his heaving chest with a little grunt of satisfaction, Mortazu Khan walked toward the flat roofs of Ghuzni, leaving behind him a thin trail of blood, but hurrying, hurrying.