

Weird Tales

REGISTERED IN U.S. PATENT OFFICE

A MAGAZINE of the



BIZARRE and UNUSUAL

VOLUME XII

NUMBER 4

Published monthly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 2457 E. Washington Street, Indianapolis, Ind. Entered as second-class matter March 20, 1923, at the post office at Indianapolis, Ind., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25 cents. Subscription, \$2.50 a year in the United States; \$3.00 a year in Canada. English office: Charles Lavell, 13, Serjeant's Inn, Fleet Street, E. C. 4, London. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts, although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession. The contents of this magazine are fully protected by copyright and must not be reproduced either wholly or in part without permission from the publishers.

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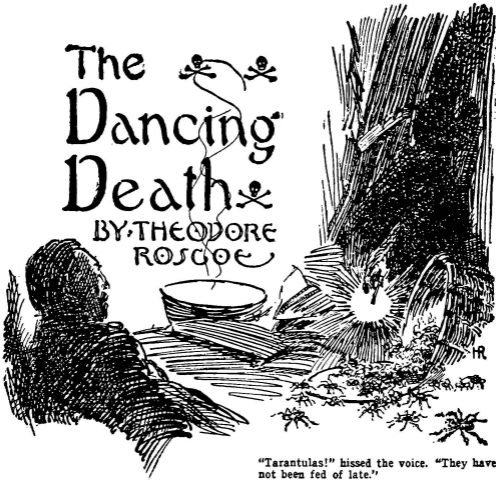
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The Dancing Death

BY THEODORE ROSCOE



"Tarantulas!" hissed the voice. "They have not been fed of late."

1. The Dwarf Rider

SILENCE, the intense, brooding silence of desolation, hung a somber cloak over the desert as mournful twilight stole down from the country of Khost. Silvered moon with a star at its crescent tip cruised from behind a feathery tumble of cloud to drift in boundless night sky; emblem of the Moslim world it watched, long-awaited signal to terminate the month of Ramadan and end the torturing daily fasts endured by Islam's fanatic sons. Moonlight straying on the sands was ghostly and unreal—ghostly as the distant Suleiman peaks; unreal as the fantasies in the minds of the *charas*-smoking

cameleers who puffed in soporific meditation beside their drowsy charges.

Captain Hague of the British Frontier Police watched a pool of moonbeams creep toward the tent door, and grunted.

"Was a time," he grumbled, "when a night like this would o' sent me off the deep end. Sighin', an' thinkin' of girls an' roses an' God. But no more!" He shot a beady glance at Sim Edwards, the American who squatted beside him. "I tell you, lad, this bleedin' land has burnt an' bit th' last parcel of romance outa my skin. Only thing I ever got outa Indian Service was fleas an' colic.

This ain't God's country, lad. He never made it. Any Moslim will tell you Allah had a grudge when this desert was built. Why a blighter comes out here beats me. Romance-huntin', I wager. Most folks that never smelt it think the East is romantic."

Sim Edwards watched a wisp of smoke spiral out of his cheery pipe-bowl.

"I didn't come out here huntin' romance," he confided grimly. "I came out here to get away from it."

"You've got away from it, all right," the captain murmured. "But take my advice, Sim. Your time is almost served. Sign out when we get back"—his smile was a bit wry—"that is, if we get back."

The American looked up in surprise. "If we get back," he returned. "Why shouldn't we get back?"

Captain Hague chuckled mirthlessly.

"A Yankee does beat hell. I just been tellin' you we gotta go through that rotten border town, run a gantlet of Wazir pot-shots—those natives will be wild as the devil durin' this Ramadan festival—and monkey with that mysterious castle up there. You're a shirty devil, Sim. Lucky, too. Way you got outa that riot on the Kurram River with four bullet-holes in your helmet was a crime. But you're gonna need all your nerve an' luck this trip. All of it. When th' commissioner in Dera Ismael Khan handed me this job, an' told me to take 'that Yankee sergant of yours, who's such a plucky bounder,' I asked him why he didn't murder us outright. Crossin' Waziristan an' goin' through a border town with a few bullets in our pants is plain monotony. But this castle business oughta rate a mystery-merchant from Scotland Yard, not a policeman. When I have to chase down Oriental hoodoos I get scared."

There was no fear, however, in the captain's speech. Fear was not in the

vocabulary of that sun-burnt handfule who battled to police the far-flung British outposts in the hottest corner of the Empire—a land where knives waited in every sash, where rifles lurked behind every mud-heap. Captain Hague could speak of death in the tone with which he might address a Peshawar egg-vender. There was irony in his tone, but no fear, as he continued:

"I got what Americans call a hunch. A premonition, Sim. There's plenty trouble up ahead. It isn't just a lot of scared tourists marooned in a haunted castle. It's a mighty queer affair. From th' first I've had a funny feelin' I won't pull through this time—"

Sim Edwards said nothing, but stared at the moonlit sands, at the tinted shadows, at the camels kneeling with their cameleers in the nearby wash. Removing his pith helmet he ran slim fingers through his bleached hair; his eyes, cobalt-blue against the bronze of desert-leathered cheeks, studied the horizon.

"Well," he inquired finally, "what's up, Captain? I had an idea from what you first told me that this was something different."

THE older man shifted his campstool and sighed smoke through his mustache. A febrile breath of heat whispered out of the night, dusting the men with fine white sand.

"You know that old ruined castle on the hill north of Jelaladore?" he began. "The castle of Addadud Khan? A hell of a place. Spooky as a graveyard. Of course there's a legend about it. Natives rig up legends about everything, but that's a jolly good place for one, believe me. It seems that this ancient blighter Addadud Khan was a bandit like these princes been ever since. He robbed the caravans on their way up to Gomal Pass, an' did a first-class business. An' he hid the treasures he looted in th' castle. Legend says this

Addadud was an ugly little dwarf, and a killer. Well, one night he was stagin' a wild party, an' during this hullabaloo a *peri* sent by Allah started dancin' with him. She kept him dancin' like the devil until the old boy just couldn't stop, an' he danced himself to death—disappeared dancin', see? That's the story. Then the legend goes on to say that the old dwarf haunts his castle, an' anybody who goes near there gets under the spell, an' dances himself to death. You can bet the natives around here hate that place like a sore eye."

"I've heard the yarn," Sim Edwards admitted.

"Sure. They all tell it. And nobody goes within a mile of that castle if they can help it. But last month a Yankee archeologist an' his party got permission to go camp up there lookin' for nomadic records or somethin'. The commissioner didn't want to let 'em through, but they insisted. A girl with 'em, too. So yesterday a Shinwari rides like a bat outa hell up to headquarters with a wild story an' a message that was mighty strange. The party is marooned up in that damned castle, an' some queer business called the 'dancing death' warned them away, an' then killed off three of 'em. The natives in the town are scared mad, thinkin' the *feringhis* are charmed, and won't let 'em out. What we gotta do is get 'em out of there—also find out what this 'dancing death' is all about. That Shinwari who brought the message was so scared he lied a blue streak. But listen, Sim. Three of that party were killed—murdered; the one who scribbled the note couldn't tell how. An' here's the best part of it. It said there was a *dwarf* hidin' in there. Now look"—the captain pointed into the night—"Jelaladore lies straight down that trail about six miles. I'd go on tonight if it wasn't for the festival riot in the town. Those Moslims are worked up fit to kill. Just let 'em catch a *feringhi* in there at midnight!

So I figure we'll best stay camped here until dawn. Then we'll bust through Jelaladore an' tear up to the castle an' get those folks out of there. There'll be lots of action, I'm thinkin', an' as for this mystery business, only God knows what it's about. How do you like that, Sim?"

It was characteristic of Sim Edwards' blue eyes and whittled jaw that he should answer: "I like it. And look there! Where you've been pointing. Isn't that a horseman on the desert out there? See? On the ridge there? Heading this way——"

"Sure enough." The captain rose to his feet. "Making for our camp, all right. Looks like he was coming from Jelaladore. Kick up that campfire, Sam. It may be word for us——"

Automatics in hand they waited the horseman's arrival. A fleeting shadow in the moonlight, the desert-rider approached, now lost to view in a wash, now flitting along a ridge. Captain Hague's surmise proved accurate, for the rider galloped straight toward their camp, pulling up his pony a short distance from the tent. The sweating animal reared to a halt. From the fluttering folds of his bur-noose the rider raised a hand.

"*Salaam aleikoum!*" he chanted.

Captain Hague returned the salutation.

"*Wa' aleikoum!*"

The rider wrenched his reins and pulled the pony closer to the tent. Hunched over the saddle, he peered at the two policemen, and the policemen stared in return. Captain Hague stared; and Sim Edwards stared. This desertman who had ridden out of the night was something to stare at, too. Crippled and bent as a stunted juniper he was, a veritable dwarf squatting like a grotesque toad astride the pony. Shielding his deformity, a sheepskin cloak hung from his stooped shoulders. From the bandages wound about his face, his eyes glittered like pools of ink in the moonlight. The in-

avoidable long-barreled Afghan rifle was slung from his waist, and a withered, twisty-fingered hand caressed the jeweled gun-stock. For a brief second the American thought the newcomer was going to shoot, and his hand sweat on his automatic. Then a sepulchral voice issued from the bandaged jaw in a torrent of Pushtu. Plunging the malformed hand beneath the sheepskin cloak, the rider withdrew a folded missive, and handed it to Captain Hague. Then sliding from saddle, he crouched beside the American. Captain Hague read the note.

"From the party in the castle," he informed Edwards. "This fellow was on his way for help. We're to follow him through Jelaladore at once. Go beat those cameleers awake, Sim. I'll give this bloke a spot of wine to fix him up. We'll move as soon as he's rested. Saddle the camels, an' I'll be with you in a moment."

Saluting, Edwards hurried for the wash. From the corner of his eye he saw the captain, followed by the hobbling cripple, duck into the tent. The young American shuddered despite himself. What a ghastly cripple the little rider was! Curious coincidence after all the captain's talk about dwarfs and haunted castles. This was the strangest commission Edwards had ever found himself on. He had never heard Captain Hague talk so uneasily. And all this "dancing death" and mysterious murder stuff sounded like drama he had seen in the old days back in the States. But if there was any scrapping to be done, Edwards, like Captain Hague, would have preferred to fight something tangible and out in the open. Well, he would soon find out what it was all about. A glance at his wrist-watch showed an hour lacking midnight. Bah, he snarled at himself, the moonlight had gotten on his nerves. He cursed at the cameleers, and kicked at the sniffing mounts. And he damned

himself for a nervous fool when his fingers fumbled at the camel-straps.

2. *The Haunted Castle*

JELALADORE is a huddle of hutches and wriggling lanes scribbled down the bottom of a narrow valley and blistered by the fiercest sun that ever bleached the bones of man. The commissioner in Dera Ismael Khan said of the town of Jelaladore that it boasted more villains per square foot than flees on a Pathan's goat. Not a wall in the town unpeppered with little bullet-holes. Not a man of its sun-scorched citizenry untutored in the delicate art of sinning. To stroll in the ovenlike mosque of Alam Gul with shoes on is heinous crime. To drop a cousin with a bullet in the eye is honorable accomplishment.

On the hot slope sweeping north of the town rise the crumbly walls of the ancient Castle of Addadud Khan, black against night sky, grim in sunlight, always forbidding. The natives who joy in gunfire and chuckle at knife-play will walk ten miles out of their way to avoid the castle. They know the legend of the "dancing death," and they believe. The East has faith.

On the evening of the Ramadan festival when Jelaladore prepared to discard religion and take on the happier mien of dopes and drinks, bullets and blood, four men and a girl stood frozen-still in a gloomy arcade of the castle behind the town. They stood frozen-still and waited, in murk made dismal by two fluttering lanterns, for death to enter the gloomy hall. They waited for death to enter and snatch the life flickering so horribly in the man spraddled on the cot before them. Marble-white, his good English countenance was screwed into the grin of a false-face. He was shivering in every limb, muscles jerking spasmodically. His fingers clawed. His lips curled. His boot-heels rattled together. Eyes

blank, he did not see the terror in the faces of those watching him.

"God!" cried the little man with the Cockney chin, dropping to the cot-side. "I say, Harry! What is it, old chap? I say!"

The eyes in the twitching face were expressionless as stone.

"Harry!" The little man's voice was a wail of despair. "Gawd! Can't none of us do nothin' for him?"

The girl, her cheeks like wet marble, buried her face in the shoulder of the gaunt man at her side. He patted her arm with a leathery hand, and dazedly brushed his droopy mustache.

"Come away, Laurie," he urged her. "I'm afraid he's going the way the others did."

The third man, tall, stooped, bearded with thick brown bush, coughed nervously and turned to the girl and her father.

"I tell you, Merrick Scott, there was no warning of this. None. Clark had gotten himself a drink of wine before going to search the lower passages with his brother, here."

"But Brown-Rogers!" the gaunt Merrick Scott protested. "You were a doctor. Haven't you any idea what's wrong?"

"None. It seems to be a fit. I've done all I can. He fell over and lost consciousness exactly as did the others. In a fit. Now he dies. My God! If we could only get out of here!"

The fourth man now bent over the cot to inspect the prone figure. He was a man of peculiarly long countenance and loose carriage. Dusky tinge to his cheek betrayed trace of native blood, Afghan perhaps, though he claimed himself Russian-Turkoman. Clad in the same trim drill as his companions, he might have been taken for a European but for the gleam of his teeth and the gloss of his black eyes. His voice was guilty of no accent, and as he talked he always gestured a lean, brown hand. This

was Stepan Stepanovitch, geologist from Samarkand.

"He dies," was his comment. "There seems no way of stopping it. This is dreadful, my friends. The fourth to die. Who will be next?"

Brown-Rogers, the tall English scientist, gave a baffled groan, and tugged his beard.

"We must get away. If we only had our rifles!"

Merrick Scott, the American, swore softly. "To think they were flched right out from under our noses!"

The Turkoman gave him a mystified smile. "Do not wonder at that, Dr. Scott. These Afghans steal the guns from the very belts of the Tommies. The Tommies are forced to chain them down at night. What I wonder at is the ghastly death of our comrade. He is dying. Who has done it? Who has sent those strange warnings? What does it all mean?"

Merrick Scott snarled. "No time to ponder, Stepanovitch. I've got to get my daughter away from here."

"But those two Moslims still guard thé outer gate. To try a dash through would be fatal," objected Brown-Rogers. "We must wait for the arrival of the police. It is our only hope." He glanced at his watch. "Eight o'clock, Merrick. If Mardo won his way through to Dera Ismaeel Khan and our rescuers set out at once they ought to reach Jelaladore late tonight."

"Do you think they will come tonight?" sobbed the girl.

"No," said Brown-Rogers bluntly. "They'd be shot to pieces in Jelaladore if they did. The festival will have the natives insane. Tomorrow they can get here."

"When you sent for help," interpolated the Turkoman, "why didn't you let me know? I could have aided with the message. It may not have gotten through. If they are not here tomorrow I will try myself. And come, my friends, let us not stand idle. For Clark we can do nothing. Let us

leave him with his brother. Perhaps if we search the passages further we can find some rear way of escape. There must be another exit from this place. Are the tribesmen still watching on the hill?"

Laurie nodded hopelessly. "I've kept an eye on them and they've been stationed there all day," she declared.

Leaving her father's side she darted to a narrow slit of window that opened on barren compound. The compound was overrun with weed, acacia, and ragged rhododendron, and shaded by a venerable peepul-tree brilliant with scarlet blossoms. "It's getting too dark to see," she called. "But I think they're still on watch."

"Better not go too close to the windows," warned the Turkoman. "These Afghans are the world's best shots, Miss Scott. Now as long as we stay in here, we're safe. They'll never dare come near here—"

"Safe from the natives," growled Brown-Rogers; "but how about this murderer that's on us?"

"We won't find out anything standing here," protested Stepanovitch. "I suggest that Miss Scott try to rest. We can leave Mr. Clark with his brother, and we can make a further survey of the cellars below. That is my humble advice, my friends. If you gentlemen will search the forward dungeons I will examine those in the rear. Let us conduct our hunt, then."

The geologist's quiet assurance calmed the panic about to descend on that shadowy chamber where death had stalked its fourth victim in as many days. Clark sat speechless beside his dying and now motionless brother. Laurie allowed herself led to the room where she had taken up her quarters and where she had spent her nights in exhaustive vigil with her father.

"Stay here," he enjoined her, "and try to rest, Laurie. Stepanovitch is right. We want to work fast and try to run down any way of escape. This place is honeycombed with passage-

ways, and there must be one leading outside. I hate to leave you here, little daughter, but Clark is near and we won't be long."

Terrifying prospect, waiting there in that shadow-hung, tomblike room darkening with the nightfall while a man died without and bats flitted across the ceiling. But Laurie Scott took her father's hand, and pressed it firmly.

"I'll be all right. The police will soon be here. I'll keep watch over the compound and perhaps the guards will leave. And—and—Father, please be careful."

He kissed her and hurried to join Brown-Rogers and Stepanovitch. Picking up a lantern, the tall Englishman led the way to a staircase that wound down to the dungeons deep in the fore-part of the castle. The Turkoman vanished in the shadows of a rear corridor.

Silvered moon with a star at its crescent tip cruised from behind a feathery tumble of cloud. A white pool of light fell across the stone floor of Laurie's room. In an agony of fear she sat alone and listened to the wind soughing through the casements high overhead, to the fluttering of bats, to the labored breathing of the man, alive and dying, in the darkened hall. She sat there, breathless, for half an hour before she realized that something was at her window. She shrieked when she saw.

A crippled, twiglike hand, a withered tangle of bony, twisted fingers reached up over the sill; rattled the stone grating; gestured. A brown sheet of paper dropped from the knotty talons and fell into the room.

Laurie's screams echoed and re-echoed in the cavernous corridors. Clark came bounding from the hall. Brown-Rogers and Merrick Scott raced up from the passageways beneath.

"A dried-up thing—an awful hand—dropped that paper through the window—"

The archeologist snatched it. Written in precise and clearly penned English it bore the words:

Again you are warned to replace the jewels one of you has taken, or tomorrow another will die. The police you expect will not arrive.

THE DANCING DEATH.

Laurie coughed and fainted.

Brown-Rogers sprang to the window. In the compound—nothing, save moonbeams sprinkling through the blossoming foliage of the peepul-tree.

3. *The Dancing Death*

THE two cameleers were prodded into activity; the three camels were saddled and loaded; Sim Edwards had inspected the water-bags, and sat on the sand going over his guns. From the wash where the camels had been hobbled the captain's tent could not be seen. The young American sergeant waited, impatient for the start. He looked at his watch. Eleven-thirty. Captain Hague was taking his time. Edwards was about to start for the tent when he was surprized to see the crippled desertman appear on the ridge, go hobbling over to his pony, mount and ride away. The pony swept past the camels. The desertman waved. Then pony and rider vanished among the moon-thrown shadows of the dunes.

"That's funny!" muttered Edwards. "I thought that bird was going to guide us through the town. Wonder why the captain sent him off. Hell of a looking guy, anyway."

Lighting a cigarette he sat down again. Captain Hague failed to come. Edwards barked at the cameleers to wait ready, and scrambled out of the wash.

Even as he sighted the little tent he knew something was wrong. Heaving shadows danced against the canvas walls; heaving shadows flung by the lantern on the table within; shadows that waved and ducked and bowed. With a curse on his lips Edwards ran to the tent and whipped aside the flap.

The sweat crawled down his face at what he saw.

Sprawling on his camp-stool, the big police captain was jerking and twitching and kicking like a giant marionette of which every string was being yanked at once. The captain's body writhed in the grip of spasm. His hands quivered and curled in his lap. His feet rapped the sand and tinkled the pieces of his dropped gin-glass. His face was white as paste, eyes staring, lips opening and shutting in voiceless oration.

Sim Edwards' cry clattered out in the night.

"Cap!" he shrieked, rushing into the tent and claspng the officer's shoulders. "Cap! What is it, Cap!"

The shuddering shoulders stilled under his grip. The twitching features chilled to a set grimace. The mouth snapped shut. The whole body seemed to quiet and collapse. Sim Edwards worked with the sweat streaming down his cheeks. He chafed the officer's cold hands. He snatched the gin-flask from the camp-table and forced a drink through the captain's teeth. He tore open the drill tunic and clapped a hand over the captain's heart. With a horrified start he let the body fall from his clasp. The captain's heart was not beating. The captain's hunch had proved correct.

"Dead! What in God's name will I do now? Died of a stroke—a fit—"

Nonplussed, the American rose from his knees, stared about him, strove to think. Incredible that Captain Hague was dead—had died in the twinkling of a moment—died in the ghastly throes of a convulsive fit. There were the fragments of his drinking-glass smashed from his shaking fingers. There was his flask on the camp-table. There was the empty cup drained by the little desertman. . . .

Edwards jumped. Pinned to the wall of the tent, just behind the lantern, a ragged sheet of paper was rustling in the breeze. Edwards tore

it from the canvas; held it in the light. Amazement, fear, rage, played successively over his face as he read the words scrawled in English:

Keep away from the forbidden castle. Do not push on. Beware the Dancing Death.

And that was all Sim Edwards, American sergeant of the British Frontier Police, needed to know. A human hand had dealt death to Captain Hague—a malignant human hand that struck in diabolic fashion and dropped its victim with horrible malady—the withered hand of that malformed dwarf who had fled in the night. Suddenly Edwards remembered the mission to Jelaladore, the legend of the haunted castle where the white party was imprisoned. That was where the dwarf was heading!

Darting from the tent, Edwards fled for the wash. Yelling at his cameleers to wait right there for him until he returned, and on pain of death to keep away from the captain sahib's tent, he snatched a halter and mounted one of the gaunt beasts. With a shout and a whack at his camel he was rocking off across the desert on the trail to Jelaladore.

4. Vanished!

SIM EDWARDS was no novice at camel-riding. Otherwise he could never have endured the pace he held, for it takes no little experience to stay aboard a fast-galloping camel. Fortunately no recent simoom had obliterated the desert trail, and the ungainly beast raced over the beaten path. Moreover, a moonlight revealed fresh pony-tracks in the sand. Clinging to his jutting saddle-horn, Edwards snarled with delight as he saw the betraying hoof-prints. Automatic in fist, he urged his mount to a frenzied gait.

Past looming sandbanks fantastic in shadow, down smooth slopes, across breeze-swept ridges the trail led. Topping a hilly dune, Edwards caught his first sight of Jelaladore, a twink-

ling huddle of lights clustered at the foot of a line of hills that stood like a motionless caravan against the night sky. And Edwards saw something else—a pony dashing down the trail far ahead.

At the same time the rider ahead sighted him. Edwards saw the flame of the gun stab out in the darkness, heard the moan of a bullet winging past his head and the crackle of the echoing shot. Walloping the shabby rump of his camel, he sent the animal bounding. Fire spouted from the automatic under his fingers. Flame-tongues streaked the night as, shooting from the saddle, Edwards chased the desertman toward the town. A wild race. The American was gaining slowly, but that creature on the pony could ride. He could shoot, too. Edwards could see him clearly in the moonlight, his sheepskin cloak flapping from his hunched shoulders, his turban streaming. He would swing in his saddle, there would be a flash, and a bullet would croon close to Edwards' helmet.

Over the sands the riders fled, the low walls of the town drawing ever nearer. Edwards' gun heated in his hand. But he could not hit the desertman, and the pony gained an archway in the town wall several rods ahead of the camel. Edwards did not halt his chase. Hard on the flying pony-hoofs he held his mount, straight into the seething town. Through a scuttering bazar the mad race wove its way. Natives yowled and scattered like leaves whirling in wind. The American fired with abandon, hoping to drop the fleet pony. The froglike desertman returned shot for shot. Up one lane and down another. Across a crowded marketplace.

A mighty racket rose in the town. Bullets hummed like darting bees. Rioting tribesmen joined battle. In brilliant patches of light and shadow Edwards glimpsed a rolling sea of ducking turbans, the glint of gun-barrels and knives. Squawks, shots,

howls rang in his ears. Dust eddied like smoke under scurrying sandals. Through the milling, frantic mobs Edwards charged his camel, never losing sight of the man he chased. How he ever followed that dwarf through the town was a miracle. Across a maze of alleyways evil with water-holes and stench, down lanes jammed with animals and men, dodging across the town and through the northern gate the dwarf rider fled. And Sim Edwards fled after him. Both had exhausted their ammunition.

The moon rode clear and its wan glow transformed the sandy slope behind the town to a silvered mound and cast strange shadows from the walls of the castle squatting on the hill. Drawing rein at the foot of the slope, the dwarf leapt from the saddle and ran fast as a deer, making for the ruin. Edwards cursed in surprize at the fleetness of the crippled fugitive; dropped from his camel, and followed, running hard. Sand flew from his heels and breath whined from his lungs as he pounded up the slope. The dwarf, bent in grotesque posture, was legging it along the castle wall. Edwards sprinted. He was just in time to see the stooped figure scoot around a corner of the wall, dart across a weedy compound, and plunge into a clump of rhododendrons at the base of a spreading peepul-tree. Recklessly the American followed, scrambling into the thicket. So great was his haste that he flopped headlong into a yawning tunnel-mouth that opened at the roots of the tree.

Sound of footsteps beating a retreat down the Stygian passageway that dropped into the earth brought Edwards leaping to his feet and jumping down a crumbled flight of stone steps to follow. The tunnel was very narrow, low, fusty and choked with dust. Edwards hurried along with outstretched hands blindly feeling over the walls. In the inky darkness he stumbled over roots and slipped on

loose stones. A blow on the head from a jutting point of rock tore off his helmet and warned him to go slowly. Twice he paused to listen. Each time he heard the fugitive just ahead of him, and ran on. It was no fun hustling down that winding, pitch-black hole, but Sim Edwards was driven by fierce desire to get his hands on the throat of the dwarf. Panting, he redoubled his speed. The dwarf could not be far away.

SUDDENLY the passage took a sharp turn and opened abruptly on a wide, rock-walled cavern mistily lighted by tallow burning in a dish suspended from the low ceiling. So abruptly did the passage end that Edwards crashed into the wall on the turn, and reeled blindly into the center of the cave. Rubbing his eyes and gasping, he stared about him. At one end of the cavern a deep, circular pit was scooped out of the floor, and in this pit a huge cauldron—a great iron kettle some five feet in diameter and four feet deep—simmered over fire-coals and emitted a bilious odor. At the side of the cauldron stood a little wicker basket. But it was not big enough to hold the dwarfed desertman. And the dwarf was nowhere to be seen.

Edwards swore, and rushed about the cavern. In a far corner he found a stack of rifles—two Enfields, a Winchester, an old LePage. Snatching up an Enfield, he continued his hunt—a useless search, for there was absolutely no place where the fugitive could have hidden. He was not in the pit. He was not in the bare cavern. With a cry of surprize Edwards discovered the sheepskin cloak the dwarf had worn lying against the wall in a shadowy nook.

“Thrown off his cloak. So he came in here after all! Where the——”

Stooping to pick up the cloak, Edwards discovered the crack in the floor.

"Trap-door! So here's where he escaped!"

A hand-niche was cut in the stone. Edwards tugged, pulled up a square flag and disclosed a steep flight of steps dropping into the abysmal darkness of a still deeper subterranean tunnel. And someone was down there. Wavering light revealed the approach of someone bearing a lantern.

Drawing away from the trap-door, Edwards crouched in shadow, gun ready, nerves taut. And then, to his complete bafflement, no hunchbacked, ragged dwarf, but a tall, drill-clad man clambered from the hole and stood, lantern in hand, blinking uncertainly in the dusk. When he saw Edwards his jaw dropped, and he sprang back in surprise.

"An Englishman!" he exclaimed.

"What? Who——?"

"Hands high!" snapped Edwards. "Put down that lantern, and stand over there against the wall. Where's the dwarf?"

"Dwarf! What the devil! Who are *you*?"

"Where's the dwarf who escaped down that tunnel? Come on! I followed him in here. That's the only place he could have gone. Where is he?"

"Why, this is all very astounding! Dwarf? I—why—it must be the same creature who has terrorized the natives and—you are of the police? Thank God! Thank Allah!" The man lapsed into Russian profanity.

Edwards lowered his gun.

"You! Are you one of the party marooned in this castle? Are you one of the men who sent for help?"

"But, yes! Stepan Stepanovitch is my name. The others are in the castle above. I—I have been wandering about in these underground passages for four hours, hunting means of escape. This ground is honeycombed. I—I found this passageway and was just searching it when I saw the light from this door you have opened. I came up the steps. Find this cavern.

Find you here." He looked about him. "Why! Name of Allah, but there are the guns stolen from us! In that distant corner, there! What is that pit, and that kettle? How did you get in here? Does that tunnel, there, lead from the town?"

"Listen to me!" interrupted Edwards. "I chased an old hunchback into this cavern. He *must* have gone down that door. Here's the cloak he dropped, right here."

"But no one was down there! I saw no one at all! I was just coming toward those steps as you opened the door——"

"Well, damn *me*!" Edwards snarled. "This is th' craziest affair!" He clenched his fist. "I tell you there's a crippled-up devil came in here, an' I chased him right on his heels. A murderin' little desertman all runted up like a demon. He came in here, an' I'm goin' to get him! There must be another door leadin' out of here!"

There was no other door. Search high and low, inspect floor, walls, ceiling, the pit where the cauldron simmered, search as they might, they could find nothing to betray means of escape.

"Someone keeps that fire alive under that stinkin' kettle," growled Edwards. "That devil is around here somewheres."

Lowering himself into the pit, he peered into the kettle. Nobody could have hidden in that steaming, bubbling brew. Edwards sickened at the smell of it. Reaching down, he unhooked the cover of the little wicker basket, and hastily shut it again. Spiders! The basket was filled with a writhing, moving mass of hairy legs, black, brown, nauseating. Swearing and ill, Edwards climbed from the pit, and faced the man holding the lantern. Suddenly he was hot, tired, suffocated by the thick air of the cavern.

"You say there are others in the castle above? All right. And those

guns in the corner belong to them? Good enough. I'll carry them. Everybody in this place is under arrest and going to help hunt for that dwarf. Lead me to your friends. Let's get out of here."

As he picked up the rifles and slung them under his arm, he gave a final glance about the cavern. And he had to admit himself utterly confounded. The malformed desertman whom he had chased from the camp south of Jelaladore, on whose heels he had clung through the night-black passage, had disappeared—vanished as easily as did the ghosts of legendry—vanished, and left behind nothing but a ragged sheepskin mantle. Edwards picked up the cloak, studied it. He would hardly have been surprized had it faded from sight. With a baffled oath he flung the cloak from him, and started after the tall man who called himself Stepan Stepanovitch. The ragged garment fell into the pit where the cauldron simmered—an incident worthy of mention; for among the startling events to follow, that ragged sheepskin cloak was to play an important part.

5. An Incredible Story

IN THE eery gloom of the castle arcade they stood, a strange company lined back to the wall. Wavering lantern-flame painted bizarre shadows down the floor. A shaft of moonlight filtered through a casement high in the tower overhead. From the purlieus of the town in the valley rose the banshee wail of wild dogs chorusing. Sim Edwards stood facing the others, talking. His first move, on being led up from the dungeon passages by the Turkoman, had been to call the party together.

"I want to talk with all of you at the same time," he began grimly, "and see where we start. I'm Sergeant Edwards, British Frontier Police. Which one of you is head of this party?"

The tall, elderly man at the end of

the line stepped forward, and spoke in a quavering voice.

"I am. Merrick Scott of Baltimore. This girl is my daughter Laurie. The gentleman next her is Professor Brown-Rogers of London. Then Curtis Clark, our excavating engineer, and Stepan Stepanovitch whom you have already met——"

"Good. If the young lady is tired she is free to go."

Laurie Scott shook her head. "I should like to stay."

Edwards nodded. "All right. Now listen. Two days ago your message reached Dera Ismaeel Khan. I did not see it. But Captain Hague, who ordered me out on this trip with him, told me about it." Edwards explained briefly how they had set out, deciding to camp that night outside of Jelaladore and push on to the castle in the morning. He told of the strange rider who had brought the spurious message for help; of the horrible and inexplicable death of Captain Hague; of the warning written in English and left by the dwarf; of the chase through Jelaladore, the pursuit into the tunnel, the disappearance of the dwarf, the meeting with Stepanovitch. "That the dwarf was responsible for my captain's awful death I know. And I know he is hiding somewhere within this castle." Edwards smacked a fist to a palm. "I'm going to get to the bottom of this murdering business, and you must help me. You're heading this party, Scott. Will you try to outline your experience here——"

"We have had a terrible time!" Merrick Scott's voice was strained with anxiety. Edwards noted that they all looked as if worn by fearful nervous tension. "We have had a frightful five days. Unable to get out of here; harassed and murdered by that—that ghastly *thing*; waiting here in the heat, in the awful quiet at night. . . ." The old scientist glared about nervously. "I'll tell you. We started from Baltimore,

Laurie and I, to meet Brown-Rogers in London. Our intention was to get up a party to explore this region, hunt records of the lost nomad Ouigur tribes. We knew this region was particularly rich in such lore, and desired mightily to explore this castle. I'm backed by a Baltimore society, and Brown-Rogers is of the *London Survey*. In London we acquired the services of Curtis Clark and his brother Harry as excavating engineers. Both had worked before in the Egyptian Sudan. In Bombay we were met by Austin Yard, Frank Rossiter, and Mark Van Lue——" Merrick Scott's voice broke. "They—they were to come with us. We journeyed across India into the Northwest Province, and obtained governmental permission to enter Afghan territory. We were in Dera Ismaeel Khan for several weeks, then set out for Jelaladore. We arrived at Jelaladore at night and put up at a *caravanserai*. We were warned by the innkeeper there that it was no time to be in the city, as the Moslims were stirred to fever heat by religious ceremonies. When he found out we were going to the Castle of Addadud Khan he was even more horrified. An old Mohammedan *mullah* warned us strenuously to go back. I—I thought it was all foolishness. This—Stepan Stepanovitch, here, happened to be in the *serai* that evening. Overhearing our discussions, he begged the liberty to urge us to depart at once. He told us the legend of the dancing death, and we laughed. Then he volunteered to come with us. As a geologist he would be of great value. We were glad he came."

"What were you doing in Jelaladore?" interrupted Edwards, turning on the Turkoman.

"I had been there for a month," Stepanovitch replied. "Came but recently from Samarkand. I know the country well, and the natives. I have been studying rock strata throughout the region."

"And you warned these people to stay away?"

"Indeed, I entreated them. The legend of the castle is on every tongue. Many natives swear to having seen the ghost of Addadud Khan, and the week before these people arrived at the *serai* the whole town was terrified by the story of an Afridi tribesman who claimed he had seen the dwarf in the castle compound that night—undoubtedly the same creature you pursued here. It is because of their fear of this place that the tribesmen in the town did not follow you. We have been safe from them as long as we remained within the castle."

"He warned us, and we thought it was just the usual Oriental voodoo stuff," admitted Brown-Rogers, wiping his face.

"Nor was I actually convinced," explained the Turkoman. "Would to Allah I had been! But then I offered to come with them, not a little interested in their project."

A bat fitted down from the whispering shadows of the tower, and they all started uneasily. Weird bay of the wild dogs chilled the turbid gloom. Clark sniffled audibly. Edwards brushed drops of sweat from his upper lip, and the rifles slung under his arm felt reassuring.

"We came into the castle next morning," Merrick Scott went on, "and found it a comfortable place to camp. Our native bearers refused to come with us, all except Brown-Rogers' Shinwari boy, Mardo. That day we spent exploring the old place. We found many things of interest. Clark and his brother were to excavate portions of the ruined dungeon. I spent the day with Laurie making notes. Brown-Rogers, Van Lue, Rossiter and Yard and Stepan were exploring the underground passages. Suddenly I discovered that our rifles had disappeared. I was about to step outside the arch opening on the compound when a bullet clipped past me,

and I saw a pair of riflemen on a hill shooting at me. Frightened, I called the party together. Nobody knew what had become of the guns, and we realized they had been stolen. We also realized that we were hemmed in, as there was no other means of exit from the castle than the one guarded. Thank God we had enough food and a supply of wine to drink. We decided to wait the night out, and in the morning try to find out the intention of the Moslim enemy.

"That night the—the first message came. It was almost ridiculous. We—we thought it was a joke. That's what we thought. Frank Rossiter, one of the students from Bombay, found it near our packs." The old scientist fumbled in a pocket, drew some crumpled papers, and held them in the lamplight. "There's the first warning that came."

Sim Edwards took the extended slip, and frowned as he read it:

Replace the jewels one of you has found, or tonight one of your party will die. Beware.

THE DANCING DEATH.

"That's the first warning that came, and we thought it was a prank. Each of us accused the other, and then because of Laurie I thought the joke had gone far enough. But nobody would admit it. And not an hour later Mark Van Lue died!" Merrick Scott's voice fell to a hoarse undertone. "Van Lue died a ghastly death—I swear to God he did. I happened to be at his side before the others. He was jiggling—seemed to have lost muscular control—eyes wide—he—it—it was like Saint Vitus' dance—a dance, I tell you. Horrible! Terrible!"

"I had once studied and practised a bit of medicine," declared Brown-Rogers, "and never in my experience had I encountered anything like it. Nor had the rest of us. Poor Van Lue was stricken down and dead inside of ten minutes."

"And in what manner we could not tell," Merrick Scott continued.

"That first night was a frightful night. We were all too much terrified to think. But we could do nothing except wait, and daylight showed the Moslims still watching on the hill. When we appeared in the archway they fired at us again. We were trapped. We—and then came another warning. Here it is. The same as the first. And it caught Frank Rossiter. Rossiter died that second afternoon; and that night, after a third warning, Austin Yard was killed. All in the same manner. You can imagine how terrible it has been! Just sitting here, waiting. The third afternoon I scribbled a message for help, and we prevailed on Brown-Rogers' boy to take it. Perhaps the Moslims would let a Shinwari through. The Shinwari made a dash for the gate, signaled, and his fellow tribesmen let him go. I knew the note would fetch police. Another night of waiting. Then this morning a fourth warning came, and about 7 o'clock this evening Harry Clark was struck by the—the dance. All day we have hunted in the underground passages, hoping to find means of escape or trace of the dwarf. Laurie saw the creature the second evening—a mere shadow crossing the compound. But, while we were in the forward dungeons searching—we have buried the victims there—we heard screams. Running up, we found Laurie with another warning. Not five hours ago! An awful hand had dropped it in her window. The last three hours have been frightful. We could not find Stepanovitch—it was necessary to place the last murdered beside the others—and—and thank God you have come! Thank God you found the rifles! Thank God——"

Exhausted by the long recital, Merrick Scott slipped to his knees. Laurie ran for a bottle of wine. Clark, Brown-Rogers and Stepanovitch crowded about the fainting man. Edwards grabbed up a lantern, and studied the paper slips the old scien-

tist had handed him. All five bore the same message, were scribbled in English by the same hand. Edwards gazed at Clark, the excavation engineer; at Brown-Rogers of the *London Survey*; at Stepanovitch, geologist from Samarkand; at the white face of Merriek Scott.

"My oath on it that someone is playing hand in glove with that old dwarf," he murmured to himself. "Someone who knows the inside dope. One of this gang found a treasure in here. The bird who's done all this is making a big play for it. And that dwarf——"

Laurie Scott was crying out. Edwards was at her side in a bound. She had been unpacking a fresh wine-bottle from the provision kit, and had found the message slipped under a strap. It had been scrawled in haste, and read:

Send the girl to the cavern and the rest of you can go unmolested. Send her at once, or it will mean death to all. Last warning.

THE DANCING DEATH.

A breath of oppressive heat sighed out of the desert. Bats streaked in crazy flight across the ceiling of the arcade. From the precincts of the town came the dismal lament of wild dogs mourning at the moon.

6. Ensnared!

L AURIE SCOTT spoke in a low voice. "I'll go."

Edwards could not clearly see her face, but he knew from her tone that she was terrified and that she would go.

"No you don't," he hushed her. "And don't let your father hear of this."

"I mean it," she insisted. "We haven't a chance against this—this death. For the sake of all the others—for the sake of my father I will follow the demand——"

"No!" Edwards dropped a hand on her wrist. It was like ice. "Of course we couldn't let you." He

swung around on Brown-Rogers. "That note was placed there while we were at the other end of the hall. It must have been. The dwarf must have crept out of this back passage. Quick! Do as I say and nothing can hurt you. You, Clark, and you, Brown-Rogers, take a rifle. Miss Scott, you take this one. I'll keep the LePage. Now you three stay up here with Miss Scott's father. Don't leave this hall. Stepanovitch, can you lead me back through those passages to the cavern? Good. I'll follow you. You take the lantern. We must hurry. We'll nab that devil this time!"

"Can't we come?" begged Clark, fingering the rifle.

"I want you two to stay with the girl and her father. He's done out, and they mustn't stay alone. If anything comes up, don't hesitate to shoot. We'll get out of here as soon as I come back. Come on, Stepanovitch. Make it quick!"

Ducking down the rear corridor, Edwards followed the Turkoman. Down twisty passageways, rank with foul air; along low tunnels where cobwebs hung in veils; through dank dungeons thick with mist and carpeted with century-lain dust. The Turkoman in the lead did not hesitate, and Edwards, trailing with rifle in taut fingers, urged his guide to greater speed.

"We'll catch that beggar, now. And if he isn't in the cavern it won't matter. I want to look into that pit, again."

Out of breath and sweating when the steps below the trap-door were finally reached, Edwards panted to Stepanovitch: "Wait. I'll go first. You follow with the lantern."

His heart was pounding as he slowly shoved up the stone flag. The cavern was dark as a whale-hole, for the tallow in the dish had apparently burned out. Streaks of light from the lantern dropped yellow strips on the cavern ceiling, misted the thick darkness. Edwards poked his rifle into the

gloom as he cautiously crept up the steps. Then he saw the cavern was empty, and he motioned the Turkoman to come up.

The air in the cavern was oppressive, and the lantern flame wavered. Edwards blinked and glared about uncertainly.

"Nothing here," muttered the Turkoman.

"Wait by the steps," commanded Edwards. "I want to take a look at what's in that pit."

The fire-coals were still burning beneath the big kettle, and as Edwards approached he could hear the gurgle of the bubbling brew, smell the evil aroma of the simmering mess. He was kneeling on the edge of that mysterious pit, bending down to see.

"Stepanovitch," he called. "Bring the light."

Crash! To the clinkle of shattering glass the cavern was plunged into night.

"Help! Allah!" The Turkoman's cry choked out in the blackness. Edwards heard the shuffle of scuffling boots, the whine of gasping breath. As the lantern smashed he had flung about and to one side. Now he crouched low in that infernal dark, groped his way to the wall, and started crawling toward the racket at the other end of the cave. His hand grew wet on his gun, and sweat wriggled down his cheeks. Something was bumping and banging along the wall. He dared not fire. Tense as strung wire, he waited.

Crack! Slugging out of the pitch-black murk an unseen missile caught Edwards on the forehead, and he crumpled.

A CHOKING gag bound his jaw, and thongs cut flesh where they lashed wrists and ankles. There was no light, and he could not see what he could hear and feel moving near him. For a minute he wondered whether he was blind. Desperately he tried to spit the gag from his teeth, and he was

squirming fiercely when a hand fastened a grip on his collar.

"Lie still," a whispery voice commanded; and the next minute he was being dragged across the floor.

The hand released him and he sank back on his shoulders. A dull ache surged across his forehead, but his reviving senses were keen. A faint bubbling sound reached his ears; a nauseating aroma drifted to his nostrils, told him he was lying on the edge of the pit. Pain seared his neck as he tried to raise his head, and he could only succeed in turning it to one side. He had guessed aright. He was lying on the rim of the pit. He could just see the coals smoldering beneath the great cauldron, a cluster of hot cinders glowing, throwing a faint, crimson phantom-light on the floor of the pit.

The hidden voice breathed out of the darkness. "So you are conscious."

Edwards spat in the gag and fought to loosen the thong binding his wrists.

"Do not struggle," the voice whispered. "Die peacefully, as befits a sergeant of the British Frontier Police." The tone was ironic. "Yes, die nicely. The Turkoman is already dead. The others will die. The dancing death claims all who come within the shadow of my castle. All except the girl."

A maniac, thought Edwards, working at his bonds. Or was it one of those he had left in the castle hall, disguising his voice?

The whispering continued: "I tell you this to make you suffer the more. What a fool you are—American no doubt—who so rashly defies the powers of the East! Ah—to defy the dancing death! The dancing death that hides in that cauldron below you!" A mocking laugh, chill as clinking metal, sent a shudder down Edwards' spine. "Oh ho! A drop, a single drop of that brew in one's drink—pah!—and that one is waltzing and dancing like a madman. Oh ho!" Edwards felt the hair prickle

on the nape of his neck. "That is the dancing death! Tarantula wine! You had guessed, eh? And now the others all will taste it—all except the girl—and *you*."

Edwards was jerked to a sitting posture, slung like a sack of meal over the edge of the pit, let fall to the bottom. Lying there groaning on his back, the bulging side of the hissing cauldron not a yard from his face, heat from the glowing coals smarting his eyes, he was assailed by a horrible thought. He could hear his unseen captor scrambling down beside him and chuckling as he did so. Was the monster going to boil him alive?

"I could drop you into the brew," the voice whispered on, "but that might spoil it. Might spoil my wine. But I have something better, and slower, than drowning."

Cold hands fumbled over Edwards' face, and he was tugged about so that he was farther from the cauldron.

"Good. The better you can see. And the better they can see you, my friend; the better *they* can see you."

There followed a curious rattling sound like the undoing of a hasp. And a hairy black spider scuttled across that square patch of stone lit by fire-glow, circled, darted back into shadow.

"Tarantulas!" hissed the voice. "A nice basket of them. They have not been fed of late. No doubt they will enjoy the company of the police as soon as they find it palatable. And now I go to take a flask of *my* wine and add it to the drinks of those above. Good-bye, my friend."

A match flickered, sheltered by a cupped hand. The shaded flame revealed the wicker basket tipped on its side, cover off, releasing a horde of venomous, black tarantulas. It was not at those lethal spiders that Edwards stared. He stared at the hand holding that flickering match. A gnarled, twisty-fingered, crippled hand it was—the withered hand of the dwarf!

The match glimmered out. Edwards could hear his captor clambering from the pit. An appalling silence, broken only by the insidious burbling of the steaming brew, settled in the cavern. Turning on his side, Edwards saw a score of the deadly spiders, like the scattered advance guard of an army, moving with measured, slow insistence toward him, crossing the strip of pit-bottom lit by the phantom-light of the coals glowing beneath the kettle.

7. *The Cloak*

FIGHT to the last, that was what he would do—what he had always done. Fight to the last! He stifled the wild grip of panic, the frigid terror that threatened to freeze reason. Instinctively he rolled as far as he could from the oncoming mass of spiders; rolled and writhed and shoved himself across pit-bottom until he brought up against the farther end. And lying there in the pitch-dark with a thousand deaths crawling toward him he started a terrific struggle to get loose. His shoulders ached; ankles and wrists went numb; sweat stung his eyes; the gag was choking. He fought until all but exhausted; then lay quiet, thinking. If he could only get near the cauldron and burn the thongs on the smoldering coals! But the floor between him and the dying fire was alive with tarantulas. For a moment he contemplated a wild lunge, an attempt to crush the horrid pack. Impossible—some would be certain to bite him. He shivered violently, and wrenched at his bonds. The swarming horde crept nearer; soon they would be crawling up his boots, over his legs. Edwards lurched to a sitting posture; kicked out with his bound feet. What was that his boots encountered? Flinging himself about, he groped as best he could with his trussed hands. Something soft and hairy touched his fingers. He shrieked in his throat as he jerked himself to one side. And then he could have

yelled. He knew what it was he had found. The sheepskin cloak! The ragged cape the dwarf had left behind, that he had found and thrown away.

With a lunge, he pitched himself on to the outspread garment, braced his back against the pit wall, and shoved himself to his knees. He could take his time now. He could take his time and push that cloak before him across the floor and kneel on that cloak as he burnt the thongs from his wrists. He knew. Every desertman on the border, every caravaneer from the plains of Turkestan to the reaches of Nepal knew. Every nomad knew that the loathsome, black tarantula, dreaded denizen of the steppes, would not come near a sheep or approach a sheepskin. Edwards was saved!

BROWN-ROGERS hurried to Merrick Scott's side. The old scientist was sitting on the floor, head on fists, gassy moans shuddering beneath his drooping mustache. The lantern-light falling on his face drew deep lines of misery down his cheeks. His hands gestured as he looked up; his voice echoed despair.

"Laurie! Laurie!" was his choked cry. "Laurie! My daughter! Laurie!"

The engineer Clark knelt at the old man's side. Clark's face was livid, terrified to mottled pallor.

"Easy," he groaned. "We'll find her! I promise it!"

"She's gone! Laurie's gone! Oh, my God!"

Brown-Rogers held a crumpled note to the light.

"Look! I just found this in Laurie's alcove! See! It had just been dropped through her window from the outside. She found it, and—and—"

Merrick Scott snatched the paper. Clark bent to see, and together they read the scrawl:

The policeman is dead, and so is the Turkoman. The dancing death has failed recovering its treasure, but it will not fail

now. Does the girl want to save her father and the lives of two others? Then she must follow the rear passages to the cavern.

Scott's bloodless face screwed up in agony. He could utter no word.

"She's gone," stammered Brown-Rogers. "She read it—and has gone—to save us—"

Clark snatched up his rifle.

"No, by God! She can't! Listen! I—my brother Harry found those jewels that first day. He hid them. My God! I was afraid to tell—and then—then he died, and—"

Groaning, Merrick Scott covered his face with his hands. Brown-Rogers turned a sweat-glazed countenance on the engineer, snarling: "You dog! You bloody cur! You knew what those warnings meant all the time—"

"No! I was afraid. Harry only told me he had found a treasure here. He did not say where he had hidden it. And after Van Lue was killed we didn't dare admit! Didn't dare!" Clark's voice was shrill.

"Shut up!" barked Brown-Rogers. "Here! Scott's passed in a faint. Run, you rotter, and fetch some of that wine."

Dropping his rifle, Clark darted away, returning with a half-filled flask of wine. Brown-Rogers grabbed the bottle, and held it to the colorless lips of the old scientist.

Pang! Smash! Roar of a shot tore the dusk of the arcade, and the bottle in Brown-Rogers' hand flew to pieces. Crying out, the Englishman whirled around. Framed in the archway that led to the rear corridor, a tall, stooped figure with yellow hair hanging over smoke-blackened face stood with rifle aimed. The rifle was slowly lowered.

"The policeman!" gasped Clark.

The apparition stepped aside, and a girl fled from the gloom; fled to clasp Merrick Scott in her arms.

"Father! Father!"

Edwards—a ghost of the man they had seen before—ran up, panting.

"I had to shoot! Had to! Another second and he'd have had some of that stuff in his mouth! Deadly poison! Tarantula wine! That's what the others were given. Quick! I was running up from the cavern and bumped into the girl in the passageway below. She was going to the cavern to meet the dwarf! Bring your guns! We're goin' back to that hole! We'll get him now!"

8. *The Dwarf*

IN THE impermeable blackness of the cavern they crouched waiting, hands itching on guns, senses alert. Black as coal-tar it was, the hot air fetid with the odor seeping from the pit. All had heard and stiffened to the sound of soft footfalls advancing in the tunnel that led from the compound into the cave. Scarcely daring to draw breath, they waited. The sly footfalls sounded nearer, and finally they knew this unseen visitor had reached the cavern.

"Is the girl here?" a voice hissed out of the dark.

Edwards nudged Laurie, and she spoke in low tone: "Yes."

A match flared and the tallow in the dish hung from the low ceiling sputtered. Dim light flooded the cavern, and the one who had ignited the tallow turned around. The light revealed four men and a girl crouching, guns leveled, in the corner near the trap-door. And the light glowed on the shocked countenance of Stepan Stepanovitch!

Sim Edwards was on the Turkoman with a bound.

"So!" he snarled, fastening a trap-like hold about Stepanovitch's wrist. "You! Hand in glove with the dwarf, eh? Where's the dwarf!"

Stepanovitch wrenched away. His black eyes flickered. His face turned the color of grass. Words rasped from his teeth.

"What lie is this, you——"

Dynamite might have driven Ed-

wards' fist. Whipping up from his hip, it caught that tall Turkoman squarely on the point of the jaw. That blow rang! Rang like a hatchet on wood. And an amazing thing happened. The Turkoman reeled back, sagged as if his knees had been cut from under him, staggered. A violent paroxysm sent his hands clawing at the air, face twitching to an incredible grimace. As if his mainspring of muscular control had been snapped by Edwards' furious blow he tottered backward, arms writhing, legs buckling strangely. Edwards, Laurie, Brown-Rogers, Clark and Scott watched aghast, as the lean Turkoman seemed to collapse and contract and fold up like a trick doll. A mad contortion bent his shoulders out of joint, drew his head down, snapped his arms to distortion, jerked his legs into crippled malformation. Struggling and weaving about he fell as if stricken by magic into the hideous posture of the dwarf. The next second he had lost balance, tottered to the edge of the pit, rocked on his heels and flopped from sight. His shocking cry was muffled by a splash.

Rushing to the edge of the pit, Sim Edwards was just in time to see the simmering brew in the cauldron close over the twiglike fingers of the contortionist's knotted hand.

9. *Sun Up*

TINTED glow of dawn bathed the dome of the mosque of Alam Gul with warm color, dissolved the evil shadows in the lanes near the Gate of Mohamet Yar Khan, glinted on the gun-barrels of the strange party of white men who had journeyed down from the hill at daybreak and crossed the town. Abdesalam Daood, the mangy dragoman who trailed the white party across town, vowed in truth that the *feringhis* and their woman would never have gotten that far at night, or had they not carried such powerful rifles. The dragoman also told how the white party had pur-

chased mounts to carry them at the *serai*, and how pale they were, and how silent: "Like a vision of corpses—Allah spit on their bones!"

They were pale and they were silent as they rode that morning out of Jelaladore, protected by the majesty of the British *Raj* as vested in the military khaki of Sim Edwards' tunic and the sheen of their guns. Clearly all suffered from the strain of their ghastly experience. Edwards thought Laurie Scott had held up marvelously well for a woman. He

had thought a lot about the girl as she rode along beside him; covertly watched her effort at self-possession, then noticed more banal things like the sunbeams sprinkling through her dark hair. Yes, Sim Edwards had thought a lot about the girl. And he had begun to think, as they turned their mounts to the south where, washed lapis lazuli by the sunrise, the Suleimans marched down the horizon, about how he had come to the Orient to escape romance, and what a fool he had been.
