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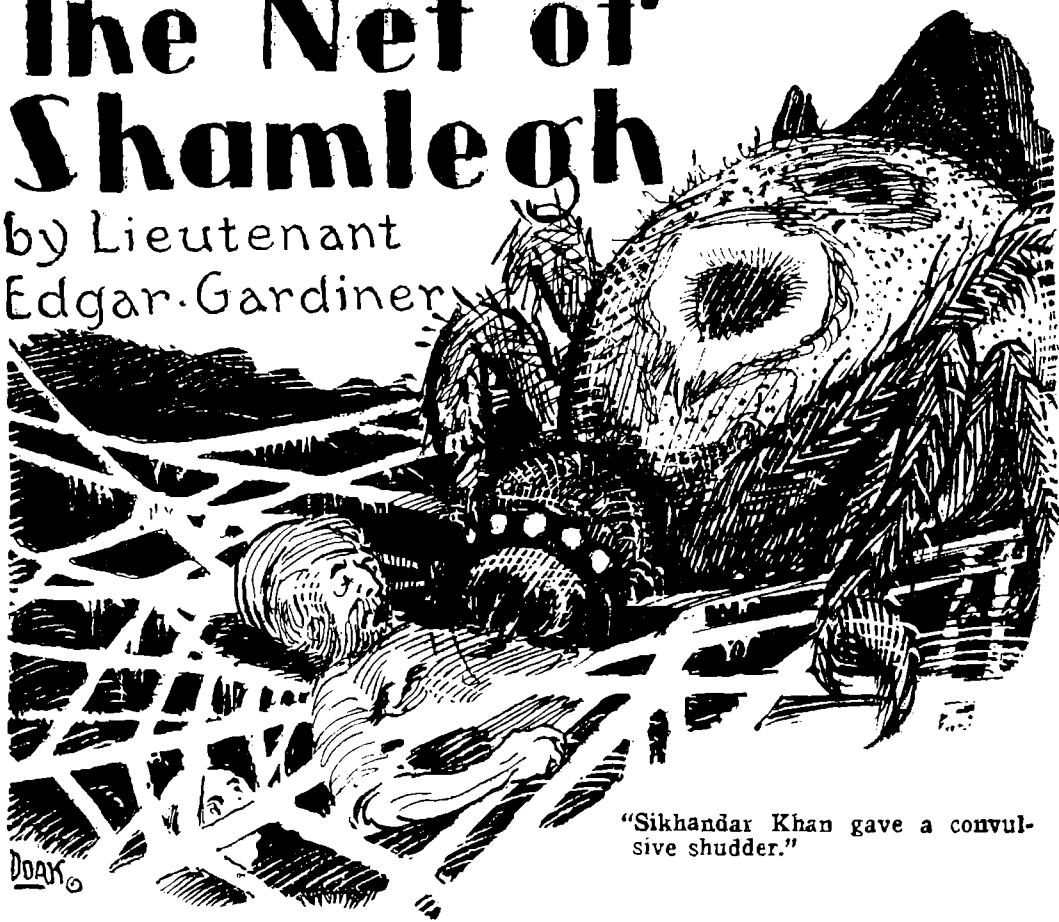
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# The Net of Shamleogh

by Lieutenant  
Edgar Gardiner



"Sikhandar Khan gave a convulsive shudder."

**B**ILLY SINGLETON stood just inside the high gate of the Kashmir Serai, and cursed—cursed as fluently and efficiently as any native, which is something that few of the ruling white race can do.

All his long trip up from the coast through the sweltering, enervating heat of the Punjab at summertime had been in vain; the time he could so ill spare and the expense account that would doubtless set the Kimball line's auditors about his ears again, all wasted—wasted because of the absence of one man. And because that man was a "black man" to boot—a native—well, that was the crowning insult.

A camel caravan creaked into the serai through the hot black night, coming almost magically under the blazing lights from out the velvety

darkness. Perhaps this was he at last; perhaps Mahbub Ali, the Afghan, had but been delayed.

Apathetically he watched the ill-tempered, snapping beasts loom up out of that furnace of the night, laden with bundles and bales; almost mechanically his eyes swept the shrieking, cursing Balti camel-drivers' faces, looking for that of the Pathan horse-trader.

The caravan passed and melted into the steaming, milling crowd that filled the serai with a riot of color and a pandemonium of sound, and Singleton cursed his ill luck again.

This was the romance and the glamor of the East; this was the wonder and the mystery of the Orient, that had so thrilled him when he was first offered that odd position with the mighty Kimball steamship lines! In

his ignorance he had thought that as their confidential agent he would enjoy a palatial suite of offices with a retinue of native clerks and servants, perhaps in Singapore, or maybe Calcutta. Instead, he had been rushed hither and yon, now to see an obscure Hill raja in some out-of-the-way part of India; now up some sluggish, stinking river in the F. M. S. to confer with an equally obscure princelet whose dignity was in inverse ratio to his importance; or, like the present occasion, when the man he sought was not even so important, but merely a wandering horse-trader. What possible cargo could accrue from such an one?

No wonder Billy Singleton stood just within the high gate of the Kashmir serai under the blazing lights and cursed the dilatory, careless Afghan, root and branch, with the thoroughness of the native, even unto the fifth and sixth generation. For Billy was that rarest of all men, the English-born European who thoroughly understood the native mind, who "when he was in Rome did as the Romans" with a vengeance, even thinking native. Some there are who will tell you that there is no such animal; they will shout that even the country-born European, brought up by native servants, playing with native children, can not do that. But Billy could and did.

A great and absorbing game, this, matching wits with the white men from competing steamship lines, matching them with the infinite varied traits and habits of yellow, brown and black, and winning, too, far more often than he lost.

Billy never knew the esteem in which he was held by his employers; he never knew the regard in which the natives held him—those who were his friends, and they were legion; but he did know the hatred engendered in his enemies. For he made these last, even as any other who does things, whether in the Orient or the Occident. It is

only the man who does nothing who makes no enemies in this world, and sometimes I am not so sure about even that.

Romance, mystery—bah! Dirt and delay, double-dealing and derision—that was the Orient, he thought, as he turned away for his hotel in the European quarter of Lahore.

He turned his back on the swarming, colorful hive that was the Kashmir Serai as evening passed into night, and threaded his way through the crowds of the narrow streets that reminded him of nothing so much as a heap of working maggots on a dung-hill; he pushed his way absent-mindedly through the hot, crowded Motee Bazar where every race in the Asiatic world rubbed elbows—screaming, cursing, chaffing, dickering; past the Lahore Museum, the "Agaib-Gher" of the natives—the "wonder-house"; past the brick platform opposite where stood the great gun "Zam Zammeh," the "fire-breathing dragon." Tradition has it that whoso holds that holds the Punjab, and the great obsolete green-bronze piece of ordnance has ever been the coveted bit of the conqueror's loot.

It was too hot to hurry; besides, why hurry in this land where even Time stands still? Billy passed from the crowded, garish way into a narrow, tortuous alley that made more directly for his ultimate destination than the better-lighted, thronging thoroughfares. A foolhardy thing for any white man to do, especially when he is alone; but Billy was never one to think of risks. He came and went as he pleased, took appalling risks with the utmost sang-froid, and turned up debonair and smiling at the end. Billy passed into the narrow, tortuous alley and met his Kismet.

**H**ALF-WAY down that dark way his inattentive ears heard the thud of blows on flesh, caught the whisper of a voice begging for mercy—a

child's voice—or a woman's. Billy stopped. A moment or two he listened in indecision; his reason told him not to interfere—no native would, even had that beating occurred in the open street instead of behind the high wall. Native or white, either knew better than to interfere openly with other's private affairs in this swarming land of vice and crime and intrigue.

"*Chûp*," ordered a gruff voice; "*Chûp*—be still—or I break thy head." Followed the soft whimpering of a child, then the sound of blows again.

A red mist swam before Billy's eyes. In a flash he leaped upward and grasped the coping of the wall, heedless of the broken glass that might be imbedded thickly along its top, drew himself lithely up and dropped softly into the blackness on the other side. A little way before him, in the yellow rectangle of light streaming from an open door, stood a turbaned, bearded figure with upraised bamboo cane above a crouching, whimpering child—a boy it was, a boy of twelve or thirteen, certainly not more, who raised a tear-stained, terrorized face at this incredible apparition from out the inky night.

"Let be," Billy growled in Urdu. The tall native made a swift move toward his deep embroidered Bokhariot belt, and like a flash Billy's hard brown fist flashed up to land square on the point of the bearded chin. The native dropped like a poleaxed Brahminee bull and his turban rolled to Billy's feet.

Mechanically Billy picked it up; just as automatically he lifted the shrieking *Kunjiri* child to his feet. He clapped the turban on the child's head, still more or less thoughtlessly.

"Come thou," he said in the vernacular, as he slipped back to the wall. Swiftly he swung the slight form to its top; quickly he hauled himself over. Both dropped lightly into the black alley and Billy strode

quickly to its farther end, the urchin at his heels.

Why under the sun had he acted so? What damnable impulse had prompted him to act in this quixotic fashion? Where would he take the lad—or what would he do with him when he got there? Mechanically he strode to his hotel and, still buried in thought, went up to his room, the lad hard at his heels.

"Thy name, *Kunjiri* (low caste)?" as the boy squatted on the floor.

"Chota Lal, oh Lion of the Helpless, Defender of the Weak."

"And he that beat thee?"

"Was Sikhandar Khan, oh, great Maharaja of the *Feringhi*."

Billy pondered. Doubtless the boy was lying; all natives do when a white man questions them—or any other for that matter.

"Why did he beat thee?" he asked suddenly.

"Because I saw that which he had done to Mahbub Ali, the horse-trader," whispered the little Hindoo, and in his eyes dawned a growing terror.

"What!" shouted Billy, thoroughly aroused.

"Oh, do not beat me, master," wailed the lad, throwing himself at Billy's feet while his hands fluttered at Billy's ankles.

"What talk is this of beating?" growled Billy. "*I do not beat beggar brats—if their talk is true. What talk is this of Mahbub the Afghan?*"

"Last night it was, ere the first cockerow, in the black night beside the train. Sikhandar Khan and one other"—the boy's face worked pitifully—"Sikhandar Khan and that other——" Wordlessly he pantomimed what he feared to tell.

"Dead?" whispered Billy.

The lad nodded solemnly.

So *this* explained Mahbub Ali's failure to appear! Dead! Waylaid beyond the railroad station that shouldered the Kashmir Serai at its other end. Waylaid and robbed, no doubt,

in the darkness of the railroad yards. Buy why? Why? Billy's dazed mind ran in circles. Something tremendously important it must be to force Sikhandar Khan and his confederate to such a step in Lahore, of all cities. On the road beyond the border—there dead men are a commonplace that excites little or no comment. But here, right under the nose of the police, under the long arm of the British Raj—A soundless whistle of amazement came from his lips. Meditatively he stared at the lad unrolling Sikhandar Khan's turban from about his head.

"But why, little Friend of All the Stars?" he asked.

The lad flashed him a smile at the endearment.

"I think because of this," and he held out what he had found secreted in the folds of the soiled cloth.

Billy took the foot-long silken rope and fingered it curiously. Silk? Yes—no—was it after all? More attentively he examined it. Silk-like the cord surely was, but no silk such as he had ever seen before. A solid rope, finger-thick, incredibly strong as he found out by tugging on the ends with might and main. But silk! In all the world there was no worm that could spin such a monster thread as this! Artificial? It must be. Yet no! Billy would stake all his knowledge of silk—and that was considerable—that this was no artificial substitute. His mind took another turn as he considered the importance of this thing. No wonder Mahbub Ali had bid him come in haste! No wonder that imperturbable Afghan had been wildly excited! A cordage such as this—why, it was priceless! A fortune for some lucky one, this stuff he held in his grasp! His mind raced on in a maze of speculation as he pictured the upheaval in the industrial world that this new material would produce. For it was new—never had he seen or heard of such a thing! If he could get it for

the Kimball lines—he was made! And so was Mahbub Ali!

His face clouded as he remembered. Mahbub Ali was dead. He had perished and the secret of this wonder had perished with him. Had it, indeed? Or had the dastardly Sikhandar Khan and his helper Thug forced from Mahbub the precious secret? Probably not; else they would not be still in Lahore. Had they known, they must assuredly have gone post-haste after it. Or, wait—perhaps they were hiding from the long arm of the police for that cowardly murder. What a way to die! By strangulation with the deadly silken coil thrown about the neck from behind! He died by the silken cord of Thuggee that another might possess his one treasure; another silken cord—but such a cord!

A long time Billy pondered, thinking of ways and means, weighing the evidence pro and con, sitting in rapt meditation, while the fittle Hindoo lad crouched at his feet like a graven image.

At last Billy saw his way clear, through those peculiar thought-processes that he employed so successfully. He rose to his feet.

"Come, my little Prince of Troubles, thou Son of Shaitan," he grinned good-humoredly at the lad. "It is our Kismet—thine and mine. And our star, it is the red one of War." He pointed out the open windows at red Mars lying low in the heavens. "Wilt thou come with me?" he asked banteringly in the vernacular.

"Thou art my father and my mother. Didst thou not save me from Sikhandar Khan when he would have slain me?" asked the *Kun jiri* lad.

Billy started. He had not expected such plain words as these; such devotion from a mere baby for the slight service he had rendered. As for Sikhandar Khan slaying the lad—nonsense! And yet—child though he was,

he knew far too much about that rascally rogue.

As he turned to go, Billy bethought himself of that precious thing, the silken cord, and as he tucked it within his bosom he slipped his flat automatic into his pocket as an afterthought. If these rogues had killed Mahbub Ali for this, surely they would do no less for him in their determination to repossess themselves of it.

HE STRODE back the way he had come, through the Motee Bazar to the still noisy Kashmir Serai, as active all night long as by daylight—more so, even—for the Oriental turns day into night or night into day, imperturbably. But it is noteworthy that he kept to the wide, well-lighted thoroughfares and avoided that short cut through the alleys as he would the plague. And his eyes roved incessantly about, never still a moment, while Chota Lal dogged his footsteps, a faithful little shadow.

Billy had decided on his course of action. He had determined to retrace Mahbub Ali's footsteps as best he might. Though he could ill spare the time, he would make the weary trip, for he was playing, he realized, for millions. That these millions would flow into the Kimball line's coffers were he successful troubled him not a whit. His was the joy of the game, the pitting of his wits against those others, the winning, all alone, against he knew not what, nor cared.

He remembered that Mahbub Ali had a partner who was a cousin of sorts, and that partner he found after a long weary search in that maggot-like Oriental crowd, but trying to make him talk was a more difficult thing; for he had all the native's aversion against truth-telling and there was, besides, such a pitiful bit to be found out.

From the few of Mahbub's caravan train that had not gone to seek employment elsewhere, he found out that

Mahbub Ali had come through Mussoorie Pahar from Rampur, and before that from Chini. Beyond that the trail was blank, nor would they talk overmuch of Chini, that valley in the High Hills. Was it not a place of Shaitans, where stalked Murrah and Awan, the Companion of Kings, and other devils and djinns without number? They were all *Jullalee*, those devils—all terrible; that much was certain.

That was the sum total of information that Billy carried back to his hotel in the early morning after cursing them all heartily as children of the devil Mushoot, the Lord of Liars. Nor was he surprised to find that during his absence the place had been searched and ransacked most thoroughly. He had expected that. But he had not expected them to *bukh* (bungle) the job as they had done. His opinion of Sikhandar Khan dropped distinctly as he surveyed the disorder. Small matter. There was nothing they could have found there that mattered.

He grinned at Chota Lal, who was stuffing himself with more delicacies than he had ever before eaten at one time, then winced as a movement of the young body showed the raised bamboo welts of the beating of the night before. Sikhandar Khan would have to pay through the nose for that night's work. In the fullness of time there would be a bitter bill for him to foot.

"As soon as may be," he said in the vernacular, "we go upon the road, thou and I. A long trail, a weary trail, perhaps even a trail of death, oh my son. What matter? Art thou minded even yet to follow me?"

"If I eat thy bread how shall I forget thee, oh Father of All the Friendless?"

"Well said, little one," and for the waif there welled a great affection in his heart, a friendship, a love that was to endure for longer than either of them realized. A thousand times we

have heard of love at first sight between the sexes. A thousand and one tales have been woven about it. Can that happen only between man and woman? Perhaps so; I do not know. But between the Englishman and the little half-starved, beaten, low-caste lad there sprang up then a bond that was to lead to—but that is another story.

Two days later found the pair at Simla, the summer capital of India, among the hills, where each house looks down upon the roof-pots of its neighbors on the terrace below; and that same week found the two attached to the hunting-party of one of Billy's English friends who was bound for the High Hills. Ostensibly Billy was going to hunt, a carefree adventurer with no thought in the world other than sport. And Chota Lal, resourceful little devil that he was, was one of the hangers-on who followed them, subsisting on the careless bounty of the sahibs.

But a very different Chota Lal this, from that one who had pattered through the Motee Bazar living on his wits and the charity of those minded to acquire merit. That one had been a beggar brat in soiled and ragged clothing; this one was an Afghan lad from the top of his clean blue turban to the tips of his long upcurled slippers; impudent, and likable withal, but a total stranger to Billy—a stranger lad who mingled with the shikaris and the syees—the hunters and the grooms—or the personal servants in the swarm that always attends the Anglesi on such a trip, but he mingled not with the lordly sahibs; though of a night, had he been watched, he might have been seen to wriggle as softly as a snake into Sahib Singleton's tent to retail to him the varied gossip of the day that he had picked up.

It was his strong young voice that roused the camp to ineffectual uproar one night when he found a greased

and slippery devotee of Thuggee bound for the same place. The Thug had vanished into the thin black night, easily evading the clutching hands and clumsy efforts of the sleepy servants, scarce roused from their first heavy slumber; he had gone from there, but he had left behind him that dread cord of his office: it lay in Billy Sahib's hand as Chota Lal whispered of the events of the day.

But by now their wandering road led no longer climbing, dipping, sweeping about the spurs and the stony hillsides where sounded the voices of a thousand and one water-courses, with the solemn deodars climbing one after the other with down-drooping branches. The vista of the far-rolled-out plains beneath them was done; the Sewaliks and the half-tropical Doon were behind them along with Mussoorie.

The deodars had given place to oak and birch, holly and pine, gay with rhododendrons and ferns; the bare hillsides were slippery with sunburnt grass, to merge again with the cool woodlands, while above them flamed Kedernath and Badjunath in the sunrise and sunset, true kings of the wilderness. And the gentle breezes that had blown cool in those early marches now bit deeply at heat-accustomed flesh and tugged with fierce clutching fingers at wholly inadequate garments.

Billy Singleton grinned cheerfully at these things and at the steep, breath-taking short cuts that the hillmen insisted on making, but it was no laughing matter to poor Chota Lal, who had never been so high in the diamond-clear air in all these, his twelve years. And too, Chota Lal had all the plainsman's love for a beaten trail though it wound its six-foot width as tortuously as any snake over all the country.

Along the track lay the occasional villages of the hill folk—rude huts of mud and earth and now and then a rare, crudely ax-carved timber, like



swallows' nests against the steep pitches, or huddled on tiny flats midway on a four-thousand-foot slide, or jammed, perhaps, into a tiny crevice of the cliffs that funneled and focused every wandering blast.

And the villagers! Greasy, sallow, duffle-clad; bare-legged, short, squat, yellow-faced—truly this was indeed a land of Shaitans and Djinns!

Here it was that Billy slipped away from the rest of the party after a short earnest chat with Foster Sahib the day that Chota Lal had retailed to him a bit of gossip he had picked up regarding a red-bearded stranger of two months gone who had come from Shamlegh Midden, where few men have trod, where even the Hillmen will not go. He had pushed away from this somber land as though all the sons of Eblis were indeed after him. Mahbub Ali beyond all reasonable doubt! Billy's heart sang within him as he followed the plain lead.

How he and Chota Lal ever got down those awe-inspiring cliffs only Allah the Merciful and the Compassionate knows—surely it was His hand that led them on.

How Sikhandar Khan and that other followed—truly that was the work of a *jumalee* (well-wishing) Shaitan—none other! For follow they did less than eight hours after the others.

And on those great boulder-strewn slopes, cut up by narrow abysses that yawned to unguessed depths, weird and horrible even under the bright sun that scarce burned the bitterest of the chill from the cold air, Billy came upon the rope again. Fifty feet long it must have been, stretching over the cliff edge to a projecting ledge below—and it was glued to the rocks! Billy's cheeks were blanched as he faced the terrified boy.

"It is truly the work of the djinns!" panted Chota Lal. "Let us go—and quickly."

"Hast thou fear for a djinn,"

teased Billy, "thou Babe of Small Courage?"

Chota flushed and wriggled uncomfortably but stood his ground.

"Then, too, oh my master, there is that matter of the two specks that I saw this morning behind us."

Billy's face grew grave. "Why didst thou not tell me ere this, little Prince of the Plains?"

Sikhandar Khan and his confederate that must be, following the plain trail they had left. Well, let them come. Billy felt himself more than a match for both of them as he looked at his Mannlicher and patted the flat automatic lovingly. If it came to a fight, he was more than willing, he and Chota Lal. If they two lost out—and then his thoughts turned to the faithful little bazar imp beside him. After what he had seen of Sikhandar Khan's treatment of Chota—he shut his teeth with a snap. He must not fail.

They ate from the canned provisions that they had brought; ate in a cranny of sheltering boulders with the declining sun scarce warming the chill air of these high places; then Billy half dozed against a solid rock as he watched and Chota Lal slept fitfully under his thin blanket until Billy wrapped his own about the sleeping child while the cold stars looked down on the unbroken solitude.

THE moon sank slowly to rest; dawn was not far off when they heard that first hoarse shout of terror. It was followed by another and another, until the hills echoed and re-echoed to the clamor.

Billy flashed to his feet. "Come," he said authoritatively to the wide-eyed boy as he played his flashlight about. Cautiously they moved through the gloom in the direction of the din, their flashlight picking out their path, while Billy's revolver swung free in his other hand.

What a sight met their eyes! Sikhandar Khan it was, indeed; a piti-

ful, terrorized wreck of that bearded ruffian, straining and struggling desperately against more of those odd ropes. Rayed from a common center these were, like the spokes of a wheel, and fastened tightly to the rocks at waist height, while across them in concentric circles that began at that common center was another.

As Sikhandar Khan saw them in the lightening dawn he stretched an imploring arm to them and struggled anew while the network of ropes shook under the fury of his struggles.

Gingerly Billy felt of the nearest strand of that odd net before he set his weight upon it. His hand stuck tenaciously to its glistening, viscous surface. So *that* was how Sikhandar Khan was being held, was it? And in his every struggle, whenever he touched it anew, that net but clung the tighter to the new hold.

What the devil was it, anyway? And whose the hand that had stretched it there? Billy dropped on all fours to crawl along under it after shouting to the frenzied man to cease struggling; but it was doubtful if that fear-maddened one even heard him.

Billy had no desire to have that sticky thing catch him helplessly by the back. He jammed his automatic into his pocket and brought out his knife, intending to cut the man free; then he crawled carefully inward, glancing ever and anon at the brightening sky. The false dawn was done; the day had come.

Again came Sikhandar's frenzied thrashing, though he was now almost helplessly fastened to that dreadful net. Billy lay flat on the stony ground while those viscous ropes vibrated dangerously close to his body. As the struggles ceased he crawled on again toward that helpless unfortunate. The first rays of the newly risen sun shone upon him and turned that net to gold, gilding that colorful human fly in this gigantic spiderweb.

*That* was what the damnable thing reminded him of: a monster spider-

web—admitting for the moment that such a thing could be. Billy had seen spiders in his travels that snared and killed small birds—with their webs a few feet across. Horrid, saucer-shaped things those spiders were, whose bite was poisonous, producing sickness that lasted for days, that might even cause death if not cared for; but this—no, this was something entirely beyond his knowledge. He was under Sikhandar Khan now, and he rolled over on his back.

"Be still, dog," he ordered as he raised his knife. At the sound of his voice Sikhandar Khan thrashed more wildly than ever and his hoarse voice called upon all the gods of Hind for succor.

"Be still, *bût-parast* (idol-worshiper)," growled Billy in disgust.

"Ohé Billee Sahib, beware! The djinn! Behold, it comes!" screamed Chota Lal in accents of such terror that Billy's upraised arm dropped paralyzed. The net above him vibrated with a curious trembling motion. Billy screwed his head around and lay stupefied with horror. Shades of all the Sons of Eblis! By the Thousand and One Shaitans of the deeper and nethermost Hells! What was this terrible monster? Was it in very truth one of those devils that the Hillmen swore inhabited these wilds?

Huge, leggy, bristly, it flashed toward them. Its legs covered a fifteen-foot circle; its body was a globular bag, gleaming iridescently with blues and greens and blacks, mottled with vivid red splotches the size of a man's head. In a sort of spiny plate on its front were set six gleaming black eyes that glinted redly in the golden haze. The plate and bag were borne on those huge spiky legs four feet or more above the net.

It flashed onto the helpless man above him swifter than the eye could follow and paused there an instant while a lancet-like arm flashed into Sikhandar Khan's upturned stomach.

Sikhandar Khan gave a convulsive

shudder and hung limply below the hellish monster, while Billy in a daze of horror lay just below it, so close that he could almost touch the damnable thing.

A spider! It *couldn't* be—but it was—a spider greater than any that the world had ever seen! And it stood there on its net above him sucking out the juices from that lifeless body that a moment before had been a man! He heard Chota Lal sobbing and screaming in terror where he had left him.

In a curious, detached sort of way Billy slowly and carefully drew his automatic, moving almost imperceptibly. To his dazed faculties it seemed as though his mind stood apart from his body and watched those actions which were his own as though they were those of a stranger. The gun flashed — once — twice — thrice — as Billy shot pointblank into that terrible thing just above him. The acrid fumes choked and blinded him, and when he could open his eyes again the Thing was gone, but Sikhandar Khan's body still sagged limply above him. The man was dead! Billy knew that from the drawn, pinched features. That hideous Thing had sucked every drop of blood from out the body. But the Thing was gone!

**I**T SEEMED ages before Billy retraced his slow, crawling way back to the shrinking, hysterical lad, and he himself was shaking as with nervous ague.

"Whence came the—the Shaitan?" Billy whispered. "And whither went it, oh my son?"

Chota Lal clung wildly to him and pressed his shaking little body tightly against him. Billy could feel the furious, frightened beating of his heart in the little breast that pressed so close against his own.

"Oh my master, let us fly. Quickly, ere it follow and leap upon us as it did upon that—that——"

"There, there, lad," Billy soothed, forcing himself to speak English. "It's only a spider—but the biggest

thing I ever saw or heard of. It's no devil, though it looks like one. Come, lad, where did it go?" He repeated the question in Urdu.

Chota Lal's only answer was to clutch him the tighter.

"No! No! Billee Sahib! Let us go! Do not seek the djinn! It will but take thee as it took that other," he wailed.

Gently Billy disengaged the lad's arms from about his neck and picked up his Mannlicher. "Fear not for me, little one. I shall slay this Thing. Tell me but whither it went."

Slowly he paced the wide circumference of the net, seeking the vanished monster. On the opposite side he paused. Was that not one of the Thing's legs projecting between those boulders?

"Heave thou a stone, my son," he whispered to Chota Lal, who kept tight by his side. The lad demurred. Billy insisted. At last Chota tossed a stone the size of a baseball in that direction.

There was no movement, but Billy was more convinced than ever that it was one of the creature's legs that he saw. He inched nearer and nearer until he had a glimpse of that brilliantly colored horrible body. Slowly the rifle raised, flashed, and the hills thundered to its sharp report. Still no movement.

"Seest thou? It is as I said. The Thing is dead."

He drew nearer until he could see the horrid Thing in its entirety. It was surely dead. When he had satisfied himself on that point he crawled under the net once more and succeeded in hacking down Sikhandar Khan's body and then in dragging it out.

"First we bury this," he said as Chota Lal begged him to leave.

A shallow grave was dug at last and stones heaped above the miserable wretch before Billy Singleton with a sigh set his face back along the way he had come.

He had won through, but at what

a cost! Had won through and reaped only a disappointment. "It's all in the game," he grunted to himself as he and Chota Lal were climbing back along that dizzy way they had come. He had hoped — with a start he realized that he had come wholly without hopes or plans. He had come for the love of the game alone.

A thousand feet they climbed in a little over a mile, and above them they could see the hillside where wound the path.

"Be brave, thou Little Lion of the Plains," Billy encouraged as they breasted that last steep boulder-strewn slope.

The noise of a rifle sounded above that of the wind; Chota Lal gave an agonized yelp, spun round, and would have slipped down that dizzy slope had Billy not caught him by the arm and dragged him to the shelter of some boulders close at hand.

"What the devil — why, you're hurt, kid," he exclaimed in surprize as he stared at his bloody hand. A flesh wound only, through the upper arm, he found out as he cut away the cloth. Luckily no bones had been broken and no artery severed; the wound, though it bled freely, and was painful, was not dangerous.

"There to the left, he is, behind those bushes, Billee Sahib," whispered Chota Lal, grimacing with pain as Billy tore his own shirt to strips for bandages. "I saw the smoke as I fell."

"Why, you nerry little beggar," grinned Billy in delighted surprize.

"Beggar will I never be again, Billee Sahib, lest I bring dishonor to thee," and Chota Lal smiled faintly.

"So be it. By the bullet that laid thee low, beggar shalt thou never be again, but mine own son forevermore, Chota Lal."

He picked up the rifle again and peered round the edge of the protecting boulder. Again the report and the angry scream of the bullet as it ricocheted from the stone.

"That devil can really shoot," Billy whispered softly to himself as he crawled swiftly downward to another boulder, keeping carefully out of sight of the unknown marksman.

Then ensued a tedious game of stalking between the two. An hour went by. Billy could see Chota Lal lying where he had left him, but glimpse that other he could not. He cursed softly as the sun dropped slowly toward the west. Something must be done. But what?

Chota Lal solved the problem by standing up suddenly with a shout. Billy caught the gleam of the other's rifle, saw him half rise, and then Billy shot swiftly in a panic of fear. Suppose that fellow got Chota Lal! The other's gun exploded, but the bullet went wild, for the brain behind it was done. Billy's steel-jacketed bullet had found its mark. The unknown rifleman half straightened, toppled over slowly and went slithering down the slope head foremost, to drop off that tremendous cliff, his rifle clattering after him as it dropped from his nerveless fingers.

"Hast thou lost thy little grain of sense, thou Son of Eblis?" Billy scolded as he helped Chota Lal up those last steep reaches. Chota Lal grinned — the impudent, carefree grin that had so endeared him to Billy.

"Thou art my father and my mother, oh Billee Sahib. I have eaten thy bread and thy salt. Shall I then forget it? I stood up in sight so that one might show himself to thee. What matter though I died, so thou wert freed?"

