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COWARDS ARE BRAVEST

By Perry Adams

WE SAT, the Wise Man of Peshawar and I, on a terrace so high above the street that sounds of late evening traffic scarcely reached us; what little we heard, drifted up like echoes of pigmies at play in another world. Depthless blue black, star dusted as a woman's gown with sequins, the heavens seemed to reach down to swing us out into space.

Through the massive uprights of a stone parapet, only the lower end of Manhattan was visible, now gleaming dully like the tip of a dusty boot. A confusion of tiny lights, some moving, marked the rivers and the harbor with its islands; beyond, coldly white and indistinct, other lights twinkled on more distant shores.

For a long time we hadn't spoken. I was full of the strangeness of having the Wise Man here beside me, so far from accustomed haunts, on the lip of this penthouse. With no conscious effort of will I could see him elsewhere, in a thousand postures, a lean, sandy-haired, hawklike figure, about him the indefinable air of authority which is the heritage of his sort of Englishman.

And suddenly the dry, good, dusty air of Northwest India was in my nostrils, and the fantastic sights and sounds of a fantastic land were all about me. Something gripped at my throat; I was filled with a huge nostalgia. The grand days, the lusty days, the days of high adventure, were spread behind us, one by one, the pattern worked out complete, irrevocable. The moving finger had written, ceased.

Peer where I might through the tracery of those unforgetable years, there came the Wise Man—in khaki, mostly, but, too, in mess kit, in mufti, in a dinner coat, in tails—sagacious, efficient, inscrutable. Long before my coming

they had given him that title—the Wise Man. You see, he was so much more than a colonel of Sikhs! In a world where men counted great knowledge of the Pathan and his ways as commonplace, the Wise Man was the authority of authorities.

He knew the tribal interzone—that barren, mountainous strip between India and Afghanistan—as you and I know our faces in a mirror. He understood the manners and customs of the strange people there as few white men have ever understood them. Alone, on countless occasions he had risked his life, with only his wits for shield, to garner some vital bit of otherwise unobtainable information for the Raj. In those cheerless hills, over many a camp-fire, I knew they must still talk of him. But there they called him *Shaitan*—the devil—for he had always been one too many for them.

They set traps; many a hook was baited, many an ambush laid. Through all he moved serene, perhaps the merest suggestion of a twinkle in his hard, understanding, gray-blue eyes.

A *pucka* sahib. A link of finest steel with the frontier of yesterday—a frontier that knew not the great ships with wings that drop eggs of death, nor tanks, nor armored cars, nor wireless. Oh yes, a survival of a romantic age, I admit—of a period gone forever—when by superiority alone, a small group of benevolent despots held Hindustan in the hollow of their hands.

Well I saw the transition from old to new; and I cannot count the gain. No matter.

So I had the Wise Man in New York with me for a long visit; he had landed yesterday. He had left London, it seemed, worried about some securities of his—British Consols—and today I had sent him to a cavern called Wall Street, where they practise rites stranger than in any cult of the East.

"How did you get on with my brokers?" I asked.

He reached to the small table between us, poured some Scotch into his glass and swizzled soda into the warm amber. "They did me proud; reassured me no end. I feel carefree as a child. With all that terrific efficiency at my beck, how could it be otherwise?"

"Perhaps, these days, they don't feel so efficient as they look."

He nodded. "One of the junior partners said as much. He and I stood, staring out of a window. Opposite us they were putting up a building; the steel workers had reached our level, thirty stories up. Fascinating. Made me dizzy to watch 'em."

"They have nerve, those boys who work in high places."

He sipped his drink. "Nerve. Of a kind, yes. But I wonder. I asked the broker chap what happened if one of them fell—if the rest merely went on working. He said they didn't; that they knocked off for the balance of the day."

He stared at his glass, idly clinking the ice in it.

"Why do they knock off?" he resumed. "Is it solely out of respect for a fallen comrade? I sensed there might be more to it than that. I got the picture of a group of unimaginative men, trained by degrees to work at great heights—those men suddenly made craven by a vivid appeal to their sluggish imaginations: a slip, a scream, perhaps—a body hurtling downward. So they quit. Brave?

"I don't know. Perhaps I'm unfair. And it really doesn't matter. But it started a train of thought that reaches far into the past. And all, mind you, wrapped about that perpetual, perhaps unsolvable riddle: What is a brave man?

"The trouble is, we perceive only the outward signs. Some dull-witted swashbuckler, who never in his life had an abstract thought, goes out and performs a perfectly incredible feat. A nation honors him; on his chest we pin a bronze cross, labeled 'For Valour'. He is, we say, a hero. Is he?

"Look here. Remember that electrified wire that stretched across the bit of frontier between Michni and Abazai —controlled from Peshawar? When the Afridis took a fancy to raid the blockhouses inside it, they'd drive bullocks against the wire, causing a short circuit. The unfortunate bullocks, of course, were electrocuted. Yet how many, do you suppose, could have been forced near that wire, had they been able to reason that death awaited them? Had they been gifted with the ability to think abstractly? A bad analogy, perhaps, but it will serve.

"I tell you, the truly brave of this world are the folk of imagination, of fine perception, who never can approach danger without funking it; who carry on, the task before them a crawling horror, their very souls shrinking in terror—dying a thousand deaths before doing their stint—yet who go on to triumph because in them is that God-given spark we call will-power!"

"Thanks," I said with disrespectful levity. "After all these years, a hero discovers himself. I never went under fire—not once—without practically having a hemorrhage. And as for going in with the steel—"

"Shut up," he growled. "You weren't so bad. Or if you were, you managed to fool us. Exactly my point. But I wasn't thinking of you. I was—did I ever tell you the story of Valpy?"

The name didn't mean a thing to me. I said so.

"No," he mused, "it wouldn't. He was before your time. Well, Valpy was C. O. of the regiment when I was second in command—the Honorable Basil d'Agincourt Fitzhugh Valpy—a great swell and a grand feller."

"Wise Man," I murmured, pushing the decanter toward him, "I think you must have made that name up as you went along. It stuns me."

He leaned forward and fixed me with a stern eye. "And how would you like to go to hell?"

Just then I didn't feel I'd care for the journey in the least; so without replying, I relaxed into my long, comfortable chair and half closed my eyes.

THE narrative covers a period of less than twenty-four hours (the Wise Man said), and like life itself, begins in the dark.

I can feel the night, sticky-hot, moist, oppressive—the tail of the monsoon lashing about somewhere near, with welcome rain that so often misses the frontier completely. There was no moon, the stars were dimmed by haze, and inside Fort Number Three it was as black as your hat. For in that farthest outpost beyond Thal there were adequate reasons, just then, why a display of lights would not have been healthy. Also, there probably wasn't a full pint of oil throughout the garrison.

The livestock inside the fort compound had long since been eaten; we were subsisting on flesh of a kind not deemed pleasant fare by epicures. Rats —and worse. All supplies were low or out entirely: for the men, such necessities as *dal, atta* and *ghee* had ceased to exist. It's the devil when you deprive Sikhs of their proper rations—they'd turned sullen and murmurous. Scurvy had raised its ugly head; worse, that day the M. O. had reported four cases of dysentery.

There remained about forty rounds of ammunition per man, and some fifty shells to serve our pair of little mountain battery guns. So, added to the fact that we were starving, we were ill equipped for the work in hand. Just what turn that "work" might take, at present no one knew. And therein lay the entire difficulty.

For weeks a certain gentleman had been knocking at our door—Shaikh Salim, turbulent chief of the Jowakis. Of

all the Adam Khel Afridis, this fellow was the most bigoted, bloodthirsty and troublesome. Thief by force of circumstance, murderer by choice, even among the neighboring clans he was without honor; if he possessed any single virtue, he had kept it well concealed. Just then he was at the height of his power, with ten thousand fiends driven *ghazi* by the *mullahs*, to work his sweet will. Sweet—hah! Salim and his horde were still outside the fort, to be sure, but there was some one inside he wanted—wanted more than anything on earth—Valpy.

And the whole frontier knew why. There had been another day, another field, when Salim and Valpy were younger. Valpy, a company commander at the time, had managed to maneuver Salim into a *cul-de-sac* in the hills. Salim, you see, was fighting over terrain then strange to him—Khyber country up near Ali Musjid—else neither Valpy nor the devil himself could ever have tricked one so wily into such a position.

As it was, the affair was simplicity itself. Valpy and his men took cover in the valley beneath the trapped Salim, while a battery of field artillery began slowly but surely plastering the Shaikh's followers against the unscalable face of rock behind them.

Presently, through his glasses, Valpy saw a man, with something that passed for a white flag, making his way down the valley. The guns ceased firing. Instead of coming with the expected plea for mercy, Salim's emissary bore a message laughable in its arrogant naïveté—a message since become famous.

"Send your artillery home," Salim said in effect, "then come out and meet us man to man. If you will do this, you may have choice of position and any further advantage you may name."

"Go back to your master," Valpy told the messenger, "and inform him that Allah is always on the side of the artillery. This is war."

The Jowaki departed; and in due course, the cannonading was resumed. That night, Salim and his remaining handful crept down the valley and escaped through the very position occupied by the British, pausing just long enough to cut the throats of a few outlying pickets.

This was mere routine. You may be sure that the Shaikh had never forgotten Valpy—nor forgiven him. He swore by the Nine Imams, by the Beard of the Prophet and by every oath sacred to a devout Mohammedan, that some day he would cut the heart from that filthy eater of swine's flesh who had taken the name of Allah in vain—that unspeakable dog, the white Unbeliever who, hiding behind his guns, had refused to come out and fight as true men had fought since time immemorial.

He had waited a long time for revenge, had Salim, for since the disastrous meeting in his youth, he and his people had never again faced the regiment. That he knew almost instantly when the unit was temporarily transferred from the First Peshawar Division to the Independent Brigade at Kohat, I haven't the slightest doubt. On the frontier, news of that sort travels with the speed of light. Yet even Salim himself could hardly have foreseen the curious twist of fate which decreed that our lot should take over from a Gurkha regiment garrisoned in Fort Three—in the very heart of Salim's country!

Until our arrival Salim had been quiet enough; with the other chiefs of the Adam Khel he had, more or less, been living up to a treaty recently made with the Raj, whereby for a small annual subsidy all clans of the tribe agreed to keep hands off British property.

But with Valpy's arrival, the situation changed instantly. The Shaikh served notice of his intentions by capturing a foraging party from the fort—a *naik* and six men. Sparing the naik, he tortured and finally killed the unhappy sepoys

with characteristic brutality. To the naik he said:

"Tell your colonel that Shaikh Salim never forgets an indignity to the True Faith, nor to his people. Allah, the All-Merciful, has seen fit to deliver the commander of Sikhs and his regiment into our hands. To every man within the fort we promise the fate of your six sepoys; but the colonel himself shall taste more refined, more splendid tortures: tongueless, legless, armless, without eyes or ears, writhing on his white belly like a bleeding snake, he shall know our contempt to the full; and after long agony, die."

The naik delivered the message. The siege began.

WITH Fort Number Two only thirty miles east, I know you have begun to wonder how it was that we hadn't long since been relieved. Minute by minute we'd wondered, ourselves. Wondered—and prayed. We reasoned that our long silence—the permanent telephone line had been cut—must bring the Brigade packing. Nothing happened; so far as the outside world was concerned, we might as well have been marooned on an uncharted island in the middle of the Pacific.

There was a near-by hill from which, normally, we could reach Fort Two by heliograph. But it was now utterly impossible to maintain a party on top of it long enough to open communication; trying it, we'd had twenty killed and twice as many wounded. By night, too, men had attempted to get up there to use the old flap-flap signaling lamps—remember them?—but the watchful Jowakis nullified every attempt.

Runners, you say—of course! We'd been sending them out under cover of darkness—thirty-eight of 'em—always to find bits of them thrown over our walls the next morning. What had happened to supply carts coming to us from Thal we could only guess. Salim had us trapped completely.

Things had reached a pass where we might hold out for three more days. And so, besides the oppressiveness of the night, realization of impending disaster lay heavily upon us all. Deep in the bowels of the fort was a small, square, windowless room—one of several such used as storehouses, when there was anything to store. It was here that Valpy had called a council of war.

The picture is photographed on my mind like something one remembers in a wax works—a group immobile, tense—Valpy seated on a camp stool before a rough native table, where fitfully sputtered a bit of dirty candle resurrected from somebody's haversack; and the officers of the regiment—the British officers, I mean—ranged about the whitewashed walls, staring at him. In that close, vaultlike atmosphere was a smell of dust and decay; a smell suggestive of death itself. Wavering shadows danced eerily on sunken, emaciated faces, highlighting them into odd planes, until one thought inevitably of so many upright cadavers, and wondered why they did not all collapse. Several were not far from it.

Valpy was fiddling aimlessly with a briar pipe, innocent of tobacco. None of us had had the luxury of a smoke for a long time. Using the stem like a pencil, he began tracing thoughtful patterns on the table. The faint rasp of amber on wood mingled with the restrained breathing of those desperate men.

At last Valpy looked up, brilliant black eyes sweeping around in an arc that included every one. Thick black hair, which he wore brushed straight back from a high, generous forehead, was shot with gray that hadn't been there a few weeks before. His scholarly, rather pointed face was deeply lined. He was suffering intensely, for the regiment had been his life; and he had seen it fading

away before his eyes, with worse portended.

Yet, studying him, I was all too well aware that behind his terrific anxiety for his command, another, and an even more personal matter, filled his every waking moment—his dreams, too.

For I shared a secret with him that no one else had ever suspected. Ever since his early days on the frontier, when he had seen the horrors wrought by tribal knives upon captives, Valpy had lived in dread of bodily mutilation. Death itself—a soldier's death—he feared not at all. But torture—some queer twist in his brain prevented his considering that sort of end—a possibility for all of us who soldiered on the frontier—with normal detachment. As time had gone on, I think the fear of showing fear, should the critical moment arrive, had become greater than the complex itself.

Well, despite his fine—his even brilliant—campaign record, never before had he been faced with the imminent probability of having to meet the one experience in life which he did not feel competent to endure with traditional stoicism.

Mentally sick? Not at all. He was a man among men, I tell you! For more than fifteen years I'd been with him almost constantly—don't you suppose I knew the stuff he was made of? Had I not been so completely in his confidence, by no faintest outward sign could I have guessed now, that already in his mind's eye he was facing the horror of seeing his body sliced slowly to pieces.

When he spoke, his voice was low and clear.

"A little while ago, the subahdar major handed me our present parade state," he said. "It shows that we're reduced to four hundred and fifty-seven effectives—all ranks. What with the usual night sniping and spreading disease, by morning that will be, say, four hundred. Were these so-called effectives at present physically capable of sustained action in open country, and on top of that, of a thirty-mile march, I'd say a sortie would be the thing to try. But the condition of the regiment is only too well known to you. Such a step is out of the question."

Jack North, a company commander, spoke up:

"Better to take a shot at winning clear, sir, than to wait until we're so weak we can't even resist further attack."

Feet shuffled uneasily; there was a murmur of approval. If they had to die anyway, they wanted a final gesture of defiance, these young men.

Patiently, Valpy shook his head.

"I mustn't consider what we'd like to do—only what's wisest. There's still a chance that relief will come in time. That's the gamble we're going to make, gentlemen."

A heavy silence followed his words. I could feel it was on the tip of more than one tongue to cry out that if we hadn't been relieved up to now, we never would be. The sand in the glass was running low.

Jack North spoke again: "Has all thought of getting a runner through been abandoned, sir?"

Some one laughed mirthlessly.

"I've sent about forty men to their deaths that way," Valpy replied quietly. "Last night, as you know, Subahdar Rangit Singh was captured—audibly, almost under our walls. This morning, when the men saw those—parts of him thrown into the compound—Rangit, the most popular Indian officer—the effect on the rank and file was—profound. But assuming some one might have better luck than all those others—might get through this tight cordon about the fort—I doubt whether there's a single Indian officer, N. C. O. or man strong enough to make the journey to Fort Two."

I said: "All those poor devils of Sikhs have been too patently what they are. Once seen, even in the dark, the Jowakis can't possibly mistake them for one of

themselves. In the past, I've been rather lucky with disguise. I'd like to make myself up as a mullah and have a try. At once."

Valpy looked at me quickly. "No, no. As second in command, I need you here."

"But I—"

"No," he said with stiff finality. He pushed the cold pipe into his pocket with a sigh. "Yet I feel a British officer should make the attempt. I'd been coming to that. I want a volunteer."

Every one volunteered. Of course. Anything short of that would have been unthinkable.

Valpy looked them over, one by one, until his critical eye at last singled out his young brother, Ralph. Have I mentioned Ralph? He'd come out to us the year before, fresh from Sandhurst—was the baby of the regiment. Valpy was more like a father to him than a brother; there was a good twenty-five years between them. Valpy studied Ralph, and I saw the spark of decision in the older man's eyes.

"How do you feel, Ralph?" Valpy asked him.

"Fit," Ralph said stoutly.

He was just a kid. Immaturity, the freshness of youth still clung to him; darkly handsome, a sort of juvenile portrait of his brother, there was some gamin-like quality about him as he stood there in his dirty uniform, a broad streak of dust across one cheek. A cherub in khaki, if you like—and so very, very eager! Hardened old crocodile that I was, I felt a sudden lump in my throat.

"Well," Valpy was saying, "by the look of you, you're in far better shape than any of the others." His eyes left Ralph's face. Staring at the table he added gruffly: "You're elected, young feller."

Then Jack North, who was Ralph's company commander, did a thing I can never forget. He said:

"Ralph won't stand a Chinaman's chance going out as the others have. Salim's people will nail him before he's gone a hundred yards. Let me go first. And while they're busy snaffling me, Ralph can slip out and perhaps get through."

A chunky North Country man, with the look of a man of great honesty, if no particular imagination, North spoke as calmly as though he were making a routine report. Any fool could see that his magnificent offer, if accepted, would, truly, swing the odds slightly more in Ralph's favor.

Thinking out loud, Valpy said:

"If Ralph doesn't get through, no one will. Sporting of you, Jack."

That was all, but those few words, accepting the sacrifice, were like an accolade.

There was a pause—one of those awkward, uncomfortable moments that on the stage would be called "bad theater." Valpy stood up.

"That's all," he said. "Somebody find the subahdar major and send him here. You two—come back in ten minutes."

They filed out quietly, almost on tiptoe, leaving Valpy and myself alone in the room. He left his place behind the table and, with a rare gesture, put his hand on my shoulder. A mask had slipped from his face; his lips twitched, he looked at me with furtive eyes.

"Better men than their colonel," he said harshly. "That man North—good God—suppose I were in his boots? Do you think I could face what he'll face?"

"I know you could," I said evenly, "and I know you would."

He removed his hand from my shoulder—made a wide gesture of contempt. "Bah—you know nothing of the sort! Torture—slow, horrible torture—to walk deliberately into it—no, not that; it simply isn't in me. I'm a bloody coward."

"Until you prove that," I told him, "I'll never believe it."

"And my own brother—that child—

deliberately sending him out like a lamb to slaughter—"

"An inevitable choice. I wanted to go —we all did—but Ralph *is* in better condition than we. Clearly. Knowing that, what else could you do?"

"I could have gone myself!"

I grasped his elbows, shook him.

"Stop it," I cried. "You couldn't cover thirty miles at present—and you know it. Besides, your place is here with the regiment. Pull yourself together!"

He started to reply, but we heard footsteps outside. The subahdar major came in, his grizzled, fine old head held proudly on competent shoulders—every inch of him a Singh, a Lion of the Faith.

There were Indian clothes to be procured, Valpy explained, for the sahibs who were about to attempt the thing at which so many had failed.

That would be no difficult matter, the old fellow replied. There were several civilian, non-Sikh followers in the fort. With a little ingenuity, a few changes—but the stain for the sahibs' skins—what of that?

"There must be a little coffee left," I suggested. It would do.

We left Valpy—the subahdar major to see about clothes, I to order a pot of coffee boiled.

AFTER what seemed an endless delay I returned with the coffee and a little camel's hair brush which the *bowarchi* had managed to dig up in the kitchen.

Ralph, Jack North and the subahdar major had rejoined Valpy. Ralph was already dressed. Save for his skin, already he made a passable young Jowaki.

Jack North refused to put on the native clothes.

"Why increase my chance of getting through?" he argued. "My object is to get caught." His grim logic was sound. He remained in uniform.

I began applying the hot coffee to Ralph's face, hands and ankles; several coats were necessary before he acquired the desired shade. Under the flowing garments he wore his Sam Browne, to which were attached the few things he'd need for the journey, if he won clear.

While I worked over Ralph, the room slowly filled with officers—British and Indian. They had come to say good-by to Jack North and to wish Ralph luck.

The simple plan was discussed. When caught, Jack was to cry out, if possible; otherwise, Ralph was to slip out a few moments after Jack's departure.

I left them all in the little room. With heavy heart, I went down into the compound, where I ordered a detail of the guard to remove the huge beams which secured the stockade-type gate. Although it was now nearing midnight, news of the attempt had filtered through the regiment.

Weak and dispirited as most of the men were, they had turned out, filling the compound, when Jack North and Ralph appeared. That two of their sahibs were about to make a last desperate attempt to bring help appealed vastly to our Sikhs. Everywhere I heard whispers of "Shabash!" as the pair neared the gate.

The moment had arrived for Jack North to go. He had taken leave of the others inside. Casually, he shook hands with me and lastly, with Ralph. Not a word was spoken.

Just as the gate was about to be swung open, some near-by sniper let drive. His bullet ricocheted off the top of the wall and whined away into the darkness. There was no connection whatever between the random shot and what was taking place inside, but it was a vivid reminder of the watchful nearness of Salim's people. Valpy had been holding up his hand to signal the opening of the gate, and I saw an involuntary shudder pass through him. His cursed imagination was at work.

At last he gave the signal by dropping

his hand. Noiselessly, the great gate swung open to a narrow crack. Jack North gave his helmet a funny little jaunty tap, as a man sometimes will a bowler hat to set it at an angle—stepped forward—and vanished.

Almost before we could draw breath, he shouted. We heard a few significant thuds, the purposeful patter of bare feet on the baked, stony ground—silence.

Ralph drifted nearer the gate. Up came Valpy's arm again; and in that minute I knew he felt like an executioner of his own flesh and blood. He saw beyond his brother's quiet departure; already Ralph was writhing under tribal knives. What Valpy saw in imagination, stayed his hand. Like a sleepwalker he started toward Ralph, and like a sleepwalker he permitted his arm to fall indecisively—in his absorption forgetting, I think, that it was the signal to reopen the gate.

Ralph's back was to him. Every nerve taut, he was watching that widening aperture—and was through it, with never a backward glance, leaving Valpy standing a pace behind the spot where he had been.

The towering gate closed with ponderous finality. Men sprang to replace the great retaining beams. I turned from the gate, to behold a sea of misty, upturned faces, Sikh and Englishman alike spellbound by the infinite somberness of the moment. We waited in an appalling silence. We waited forever—and nothing—absolutely nothing—no slightest sound—came to us from beyond the walls.

At last I became aware that the havildar of the guard was quietly collecting those of his men who had withdrawn and replaced the beams. They disappeared in the direction of the guard *godown*, set in a corner of the compound.

Presently tramping feet and hushed commands, in English "Sentries—pass!" the clicking of heels as the new sentries moved in and the old out, served notice that the routine of our small world must continue. And do you know—there was something positively cheerful about those familiar sounds; they were real, tangible, understandable—a man could tie to them. The tension was broken; the crowd commenced to disperse.

Hope! You could sense the dawn of it. The sepoys spoke with new animation: the *chota* sahib must have succeeded! There had been no sound of capture; surely, surely, he was through?

Since the closing of the gate Valpy had not moved. Arms hanging, chin sunk on breast, unseeing he stared at his boots. In spirit he was out there in the night with Ralph, feeling his way, step by step, through that tightly meshed, deadly ring.

"Come away," I said, touching his arm.

Like a man in a daze, he suffered me to lead him inside. We went into the long, echoing room used as an officers' mess. I fumbled at a sideboard, found a bottle—probably our last—and glasses; poured out two stiff pegs. "Drink this," I said.

He took the glass from my hand, drained it.

"Now for a few hours' sleep," I went on, putting down my empty glass.

"Sleep!" He fairly spat the word at me.

"He's clean away by now. By dawn he should be a third of the way."

"If he got through—if."

"Of course he did! And if he keeps clear of the cart track—as he will—there's no reason why he shouldn't make Fort Two by late afternoon, or evening."

"If he got through," Valpy muttered repetitiously.

"Lie down anyway," I suggested. We went out to his sleeping quarters, where I left him. In my own cubicle I undressed, felt my way in under the mosquito net and stretched out gratefully on the camp cot. I fell asleep almost at once.

A HAND was shaking my shoulder. Valpy said, "Wake up." In the gray half light just before dawn he was a shadowy figure through the tight mesh of the net.

I pulled the net from under the mattress and swung my feet to the floor. "What's happened?" I asked, still stupid with sleep.

He looked down at me with a hopeless expression in his dark eyes. "They got Ralph," he said dully.

I was on my feet in a flash. *How could he know?* How, save in one way! I remembered the remains of Rangit Singh—of all those others—thrown mockingly over the walls.

Valpy read my thoughts instantly. He always did. "Not what you're thinking, thank God. Jack North is back."

"Back? How—"

"Salim is holding Ralph. North was used as messenger."

"Holding him," I murmured uncomprehendingly. "What message did Salim send?"

"He knows Ralph is my brother," Valpy said shortly.

Still I didn't get it. "But what was the message?"

Valpy regarded me with a sort of frozen patience. "Ralph will be returned, unharmed, if I deliver myself up to Salim. I must leave the fort within an hour of sunrise and walk straight up the valley. Otherwise, they'll start doing to Ralph—what Salim has so long wanted to do to me."

He was gray under his tan, and some small part of the horror which filled him communicated itself to me.

"It's nothing but a trick," I blustered. "If you go, he'll have you both. What's Salim's word worth? What makes you believe he'll play square?"

"I've *got* to believe," he whispered. Suddenly he sat down, buried his face in his hands.

And then it came to me that had he said anything else, the enormous respect I had for him would have changed to contempt. Yes, slim though the chance was that Salim would live up to his bargain, Valpy must give Ralph this possible opportunity to return to the fort, where at the last moment he might be relieved with the rest of us. It was an obligation which transcended even Valpy's duty to the regiment as its commander. . . . He had to believe, to act accordingly. No man could do otherwise.

But my heart bled for him. I knew that no matter how unspeakable the tortures Salim had in store, they could be no worse than the agony Valpy already suffered.

We sat there in stark silence. What could I—could any one—say to help him in such a moment? No word—no outward force on earth could reach, could pluck out that ghastly complex of his, buried irrevocably in the unfathomable depths of his soul. If he were to find strength to sustain him, it must come from within.

An inarticulate lot, we English. I could not help him, but I wanted to cry out that his friendship had been the finest thing I'd known in the service. And he—when he raised his haggard face and looked at me with anguished, bloodshot eyes—I knew some similar phrase must be trembling on his lips. But how do you suppose we terminated what seemed destined to be our last private meeting in this life?

Valpy rose wearily to his feet and said:

"I'm going back to my room for a few minutes before I leave. I want to be alone."

And I said:

"Of course."

As he walked heavily away, my eyes followed him; and for the first time I observed an incredible thing which in my absorption had somehow previously escaped me. Valpy's graying hair had turned snow white. There was no doubt

of it: the light was growing stronger every instant, and a second quick glance, just as he disappeared, assured me that I was not mistaken. . . .

Of the next few minutes I retain no very clear impression. Vaguely, I remember my bearer bringing *chota hazri* —or what passed for it now—a cup of weak tea, perhaps—but I have no memory of pausing to drink it as I hurried into uniform. Then I was down in the compound, where the remains of the regiment had just been dismissed from the usual dawn "stand to". The men, sensing something unusual, loitered about curiously. Near the gate a group of officers surrounded Valpy.

The night's hint of rain had disappeared. It was cool and clear. Before I quite joined the group, Valpy stepped clear of it. And if his tunic was black with sweat—the sweat of paralyzing fear—his chin was up, his eyes steady.

The gate was opening.

In a voice hoarse with emotion I cried: "Parade—'shun!"

For a second he faced us—took my salute. Then he stepped close to me, grasped my hand. Almost gayly he said:

"So long—you dear old stickler for discipline."

And then he was away, marching out through the gate, shoulders back, head erect, as if he were leading the regiment on a route march.

We stood transfixed, the open gate forgotten. On he went, past the countless boulders which sheltered silent tribesmen, past all the *nullahs* and folds in the ground within which lurked still others, until presently he was clear of the shadow of the fort, out in the long rays of the early morning sun. Marching, marching—on his way to Calvary.

The well beloved figure dwindled—dwindled, until all I could see was the flash of his light Bedford cord breeches as his legs moved on and on. On and on.

And finally he rounded a rocky spur that jutted into the valley bed, and so I lost him.

THE Wise Man of Peshawar ceased speaking. It was only after a silence lasting several minutes that I realized he had thus abruptly ended his narrative.

"But you can't leave things like that!" I protested.

"Why not?" he growled. "This is Valpy's story. Isn't his victory complete—clear? What more need I say?"

"But—"

"Oh, relief came—dramatically enough—just as Salim advanced for what must surely have been the decisive attack. That was late the same afternoon."

"Yes, but—"

"Well—I owe you the rest, I suppose. Salim knew exactly how near the end of our rope we were in the fort. But the rapidity with which the relieving cavalry was advancing left his scouts no time to report their approach. Salim reasoned he had time enough for the final onslaught.

"I think he had feared from the beginning that Valpy might be killed outright when the fort was taken—and obviously, that didn't suit his book at all. So he delayed—as you've seen—until Valpy walked into his camp.

"Then, in order to wring the last ounce of ghoulish pleasure out of the situation, Salim took the time to send young Ralph back, so that we might know at first hand the kind of death which awaited any who survived the attack."

"You mean, Ralph was forced to witness—"

Slowly the Wise Man nodded, in his face a grief which the years could not soften. "I mean," he said, "just that."