



The guide was lowered over the fear-inspiring edge of the precipice.

The Ball of Fire

By S. B. H. HURST

Bugs Sinnat, ace of the Secret Service in India, trails a renegade English captain who turned thief and murderer—the story of the world's largest ruby

HE WAS known as Ben Mohamet, a powerful, fighting Afghan of the stern Durani Clan, and he swaggered, as night fell, along the bank of the river Ganges, sacred to the Hindoos, in the holy city of the Hindoo religion, Benares, which is the oldest city in the world.

He turned along a street leading from the river. With an oath he kicked a sacred cow out of his way, paying no more attention to the shrill cries of Hindoos than he would have paid to the same number of chattering monkeys. He was a tough person with a reputation to sustain, a Mohametan who worshipped one God, and who loudly proclaimed that the other creeds of India were offal. But he was more than this, and while his tough reputation was useful, the stain on his skin and the beard on his face were absolutely necessary—if he wished to live and continue in business. For underneath it all he was the famous Sinnat of the Indian Secret Service, known to a few intimates as “Bugs.”

It began to rain as he walked in the general direction of the Bisheswar. He turned to the left from this “central holiness,” and walked along

another street, of stone, six-story buildings, of riches. This ended among huts of the very poor. Near one of these huts he waited. He had an appointment.

The rain and the dark had driven the wretched population of the district into their crude shelters. There was no one in sight. Then Bugs heard footsteps, and turned, expecting to see Shir Ali, who, though a real Afghan, was Bugs’ friend and associate in the Service. Instead, he saw a fat man of criminal appearance, who approached cringingly and began to beg.

“Big man, I am hungry. *Bot garib*, very poor am I, and my poor wife is sick. Help me, I beg of you!”

“You are fat!” sneered Bugs.

The man came closer, his pawing hands waving as he pleaded. Bugs felt like hitting the fellow, who was apparently a professional beggar, but he was waiting for important news from Shir Ali, and he had no wish to start a row in that particular quarter, where Hindoos might pour out like rats to attack one lone Mohametan! So Bugs backed away toward the door of one of the huts, swearing profusely in *Pushtu*. He backed into a puddle of water, and slipped. As he slipped the fat man

jumped for him. At the same moment another man jumped out of the darkness of the hut. Bugs had no chance to use the gun under his arm. Before he could attempt to draw it he was struck in the face with a stone. He felt the blinding impact in a flash of agony. He fainted, for the first time in his life.

He recovered consciousness, lying on his back on the floor of the filthy hut, and tightly bound. Someone had just kicked him.

"Outwitted you, eh, Sinnat?" sneered an English voice. "You traced me all the way from Burma to Benares. Then you disguised yourself as an Afghan. But you are not so clever as you think you are! And now you are at the end of your rope!"

Bugs, gritting his teeth in pain, did not answer. The English voice continued, after another kick:

"You know who this is, don't you? The 'renegade Englishman,' eh? Once an officer and a gentleman in the army! Rather clever, what? To get you, I mean! It has not been done before! . . . You are in a hut owned by professional *thuggee*. The fat beggar and his pal! No god, no honor and no religion—and no pity (particularly that!) is their creed! As you know! Very amusing. They will deftly dispose of you, and by this time tomorrow your corpse will be floating gracefully down the Ganges. . . . I wonder how much you guessed about my activities in Burma. You were after me, I think, for the murder of two Buddhist monks. Did I do that or did I hire some of my friends among the wizards of Burma, who so hate the Buddhists? Guess, Sinnat! You have a few hours to lie here, and nothing to do but guess. You pride yourself on your knowledge of Burma. Perhaps I know it better! Now I can go back there. You are out of the way. And with the help of my wizard friends I shall get what I am after—which with all your fancied intelligence you know nothing about!"

Bugs said nothing. The Englishman, once Captain Armstrong, kicked him again, saying:

"I am going now, leaving you alone with the two thugs."

Armstrong turned away. As an afterthought he kicked Bugs again. This time his foot struck Bugs' head, and Bugs again lost his senses.

BUGS awoke to hands fumbling in his clothing, and the voices of the two thugs.

"There is no money on him," growled one. "Only this little gun under his arm."

"Better not keep that," answered the other. "If

we tried to sell it it might be traced to us. This man doubtless has many friends!"

"He has!" another voice shouted.

Into the hut another man literally threw himself, like an enraged grizzly—a grizzly armed with an Afghan knife, and skilled in its quick use. The thugs, taken utterly by surprise, had no chance against Shir Ali. Their lives left them. And Shir Ali, with the same knife, was carefully cutting the ropes that held Bugs.

"Hold steady, sahib! It is dark in here, although the dawn is on its way. . . . You have been here hours. And I waited hours, my soul in my mouth with anxiety. Into many huts did I go growling, seeking thee. But no trace of thee. My heart would beat and then stop. Many excellent husbands have thought I was after their wives this night! It was funny to hear them! . . . Steady, sahib. Just one more bit of rope. Ah, here it is. . . . Yes, I waited, wondering. But so often does our business make one late that for some time I did not worry. Then I began to seek. You had told me to meet you in this street of low people. At last, as I crept cautiously, I heard these dead things making talk concerning thee. Then I knew thee for near dead and helpless. So, I came, and attended to the business of sending two thugs to hell. Now, sahib, I will attend to thee."

Shir Ali lifted Bugs to his feet.

"Come! You are dizzy and sick. Lean on me. I will get thee to the hospital!" Bugs was able to walk, but he was terribly weak. He leaned on the big Afghan.

"Thanks, friend!" he murmured.

"Nay! Do not try to talk. See, let me lift you. . . . Here is the door of the damned place. And now, the street. See, the night is nearly done. The dawn is lifting. Let's hope we meet no police! Hindoo police in this part of town, thanks to the loving-kindness of the English. Why don't they leave us of Islam to settle with the kissers of sacred cows? . . . Ah, in luck! There comes a *ticka gharri*! We will ride!"

A one-horse hack of decrepit appearance, both as to animal and vehicle, dawdled out of the gloom. The driver slept comfortably. Shir Ali grabbed the horse. The driver woke up. He took one look at his prospective fares and reached for his whip. Shir Ali transferred his grabbing to the driver.

"Be good, heathen," said Shir Ali conversationally, "and drive us to the hospital."

"Na! Na," wept the driver. "I drive no Afghans."

Mine is a decent hack! I am a Hindoo!"

"And that," grunted Shir Ali, as Bugs managed to open the door and get inside, "is meant for an insult! A Hindoo, eh? Well, so is a monkey! They are all the same breed! But I won't hurt you!"

As he spoke, Shir Ali climbed to the driver's seat. With one hairy arm he encircled the driver's body, saying, "One little shout for help, monkey, and you will never shout again! Your ribs will be powder!" With his other hand Shir Ali took the reins. He shook them and the old horse ambled slowly forward.

"Sit steady, sahib—it will not be long!" he bent down and said to Bugs. "This diseased hack is no doubt Hindoo, also, though it seems like another insult to call even such a wreck a name like that. . . . Keep quiet, insulter of hacks," this to the driver again. "You said this was a Hindoo hack! Why revile thine only means of livelihood? Behave, and perhaps I will pay thee for the ride! Who knows?"

The dawn broke over Benares in flashes of splendid crimson. The first rays of the sun made a glittering crown for the minarets of the Mosque of Aurangzeb, which that Mohametan emperor had erected years before as "an insult to all Hindoos." Shir Ali called the outraged driver's attention to this fact.

"Look and weep, Hindoo. Ah, the muezzin calls to prayer! I regret that I am otherwise occupied, Caller of the Faithful! Also that I am in very bad company! Very low company! God help the morals of this poor horse! Corrupt association with a Hindoo has even deprived him of the use of his legs! He tries to trot, though, poor devil! . . . Sit still, driver, lest you fall off! . . . Ah, here is the hospital!"

The driver managed to laugh.

"This is a sahibs' hospital—not for horse thieves like thee!"

He had observed an English policeman standing at the corner.

"*Shabash!*" exclaimed Shir Ali. "This monkey has guts—when he sees help in uniform! Yet, Hindoo, since thou art poor and no Brahmin, I will pay thee for the ride. We have decided, my friend and I, to patronize the hospital of the sahibs. . . . The sun rises. Here, Hindoo of low caste, is eight annas for thee!"

"The fare is a rupee," wailed the driver, who had received double what he would have asked a co-religionist.

"The fare will be nothing and there will be nobody to drive thee to the dogs' hospital if you holler! One more word and I take back my money. I may even take the horse! And the hack, too—as payment for my outraged feelings which riding with thee has damaged. Drive away!"

The driver obeyed. . . . A young doctor stood at the door of the hospital watching the wonder of the sunrise.

"Ah," he saw Bugs' eye. "A nasty wound! I cannot keep you here, but I will do what I can to help you before sending you to the native hospital."

"Please tell Doctor Walters that Mr. Sinnat wishes to see him immediately," answered Bugs.

"Great Scott!" gasped the intern, startled to hear an educated English voice issuing from such an Afghan apparition.

BUGS came out from the anesthetic to find Doctor Walters smiling.

"You won't lose your eye, Bugs!"

"What! I thought it was gone!"

"So did I at first. But it's going to be all right now. It was a close call, though. Take it easy for a few days, and you'll be all right!"

"In my business," drawled Bugs, who was feeling somewhat like himself again, "one can never take it easy. Where is Shir Ali, that big Afghan who brought me here, and, incidentally, saved me from a nasty death?"

The doctor grinned.

"Just outside this room, and very suspicious of me! I think he wanted to superintend the operation. Had to be awfully diplomatic to get him out of the operating room. He has been growling ever since, like a big dog."

"Send him in!" laughed Bugs.

Shir Ali was admitted. He looked gravely at Bugs and raised a huge hand in salute. He spoke solemnly.

"Before God, sahib, this is a hell of a place! It's so damned clean! A man is afraid to breathe here, much less spit. But God is good! You will not lose your eye! And now we will go hunting again, you and I. That fellow!"

"As soon as the doctor lets me out of this," answered Bugs.

"*Shabash!* Rest you, sahib!"

Shir Ali left the room. Bugs closed his eyes and thought of Armstrong. Armstrong who had personally captured Thibaw, the last king of

Burma, at Mandalay. Who was with Thibaw when he died. Who then, to the surprise of his friends, resigned from the army and disappeared in the mysterious maze of Burma. A series of murders of Buddhist priests had followed. Bugs had got on Armstrong's trail, had chased him across Burma and to Benares. Then Armstrong had outwitted Bugs, as Bugs had never been outwitted before. Armstrong had bragged that the wizards of Burma—who hate the Buddhist priests—were helping him; and he had said that Bugs did not know what he was after. Bugs did know. Armstrong was trying to get the Ball of Fire, known also as "Thibaw's Pet," the greatest ruby in the world. But the wizards? Were they helping Armstrong? There were thousands of them, and at their head was the Devil of the Chin Hills. Bugs had visited this mysterious and powerful person. He was the only white man who had ever done so. He would visit him again, as soon as he could get to him. Five years before he had made a treaty with this black pope of wizardry. Yes, he would use Armstrong's bragging to defeat him.

"A HELL of a country," commented Shir Ali some weeks later. "You say we came here to visit the biggest wizard of them all." Shir Ali shivered slightly. Like all Afghans he was desperately afraid of the occult. "Well, sahib, this is the sort of country that only devils would inhabit!"

"You will go no farther," answered Bugs. "Wait here for me till I return."

"But, sahib?"

"Wait at this camp till I return," repeated Bugs. Shir Ali saluted.

Bugs went on alone. He had had no word or trace of Armstrong, who of course believed Bugs was dead. No longer disguised as an Afghan, Bugs traveled in the guise of a "gone native," a poor white hobo. . . . It was a long trail. No more steamy jungles, thronged by parrots and monkeys, but a desolate region which even the monkeys had abandoned. Rocks that lay scattered as if by the hand of some playful god. Towering hills crested with eternal snow.

It was night and Bugs was very tired when he began to climb out of a defile so narrow and cruel that a horse could not have passed through it. There was no sound but that of the little stones falling and the uncanny, ghost-like whining of the mountain wind. He climbed the walls of a gorge that rose a

thousand feet on either side. A few stars showed through the top of the gorge, making it seem like a thin slit cut in the roof of the world.

About two-thirds of the way up this precipice he came to an opening—a tunnel worn by a small river millions of years ago. Bugs entered the tunnel. He rested to regain his breath. Below him the gorge lay black and silent and awful as the bottomless Pit.

Bugs got to his feet, sniffing the smell of smoke. He walked along the tunnel. Presently it showed the dim red glow of a weird inferno. Bugs followed its twisting way until he came to a fire, over which crouched a very old woman, who took no apparent heed of him. Her withered fingers poked at the fire, and she mumbled and muttered to herself. She might have been one of the witches of Macbeth, flung into this far place from the tip of the poet's pen.

"I have come again, Mother," said Bugs in the Shan dialect.

She pretended to see him for the first time. Her face was the face of a mummy, but it cracked in a smile.

"So I see!" she answered. "It was the day before yesterday when you were here last, wasn't it?"

"It was five years ago!" answered Bugs.

"Was it?" she cackled. "Well, and what are five years to one who has seen more than two hundred—as I have?"

"Just a day and a night, Mother! Just a day and a night! I have come again, Old Wisdom, for a talk with the Devil of the Chin and the Arakan," replied Bugs.

The old woman suddenly "pointed," like a dog scenting game. She was not looking at Bugs, but in the direction he had come. Bugs, startled, could see nothing. Then he heard what the old woman had heard first. The sound was something like that made by a water buffalo—a buffalo climbing a cliff! A grunting, heavy breathing. Dislodged rocks falling into the chasm. An oath in *Pushtu*, half suppressed. And the face of Shir Ali peering round a corner.

"Who is this?" demanded the old witch.

"My man," answered Bugs, who was half laughing, half angry.

"Sahib," grunted Shir Ali, saluting. "I know you will give me hell for this, because it almost amounts to disobeying orders!"

"Almost?" interrogated Bugs.

"Well!" Shir Ali threw back his head. "I have

disobeyed thee, then—because, by Allah, I love thee! Could I sit and wait while you went alone into hell? And hell it is—this place and the trail I have followed behind thee! And with the big devil waiting for us. However,” Shir Ali coughed to hide his emotion, “however, what matters it so you don’t have to die alone. Damn it! Leave it to me, sahib, for I will swiftly investigate the entrails of that big devil. Have I not kept my knife sharp?”

Bugs slapped him on the shoulder.

“Good man!” he said. “But take thy tongue between thy fingers. Come along! . . . Fare thee well, Mother of Many. When I grow old maybe I will come here again to talk with thee. Then we will sit by the fire together, and tell of what we have seen during our journey down the years!”

“Farewell, King’s man,” she nodded gravely. Then she laughed shrilly. “And farewell, big dog that follows his master, even when told to stay in the kennel. Good dog! Fine dog! Ha, ha!”

THEY went deeper into the tunnel. It twisted and turned, as the ancient river had worn it. Everywhere was the pungent smoke. As the tunnel became almost too dark for progress another fire gleamed. At the second fire crouched an old man. As they drew near to him, Bugs saw him draw in his head like a turtle and crouch closer to the fire. When they reached the fire he neither looked up nor moved. Shir Ali made no comment, much as he was tempted to shout the stimulating war cry of Islam. For Shir Ali had never been so scared in his life.

Presently they saw a larger fire. Bent figures of men shuffled away into the shadows, until only one crouched by the fire. The firelight flickered on his hideous mask. It was the High Priest of all the wizards of Burma, the Devil of the Chin Hills.

“You know me?” asked Bugs.

The mask nodded. It was not lawful for anyone to see the Devil’s face.

A smell of unpleasant age permeated the cavern, about which huge bats flickered as if domesticated.

“I made a treaty with you!” said Bugs sternly. “Have you kept it?”

“Yes, King’s man!”

“Have your wizards killed any *pongyis*?”

“No, King’s man!”

“Have they given aid to a white man who is killing them?”

“No, King’s man!”

“You know about this white man, and what he is doing. Your words have told me you know. And I know you know all that happens in Burma. Where is this white man?”

“I am glad you came,” answered the Devil of the Chin quietly. “I sit here like a spider in his web, and all news comes to me. My wizards have sent me word that this white man is you; using your name and rank! White men look much alike to careless eyes. I was puzzled, because I know you, and know you would not seek my wizards’ help to kill *pongyis*. The word has just come in that this white man who is impersonating you is at Powingdaug!”

“Thanks, great Devil,” said Bugs quickly. “I must get to Powingdaug at once. You have a secret way out of here which is nearer to Powingdaug than through the chasm. Show me that way. It will remain secret!”

The mask nodded. Out of it came a weird, high-pitched shout. A powerful young hill man, a servant, appeared.

“You will guide my friend and his man,” the Devil of the Chin Hills said to the young hill man.

The Devil of the Chin Hills got to his feet.

“Come,” he said to Bugs. “I have been troubled. For the Buddhist priests, who have been at war with *us* for centuries, are saying my wizards did the murders. I have kept my treaty with you, King’s man, and given you all the information I have. Now I help you with the secret way out of here, and a guide. Be swift, friend, lest the Buddhists persuade the government to make war on my wizards. Be swift, and capture this murderer who is impersonating thee!”

Bugs and Shir Ali followed the Devil of the Chin Hills and the guide up an incline that led to a ledge on the edge of another precipice, where there was nothing but the dark and the stars. The Devil of the Chin Hills shouted again, and more servants appeared. Shir Ali, who had been growing more and more uncomfortable, raised his hand. The battle cry of Islam was on his lips, but Bugs pulled down the hand.

“Be silent!” he admonished.

“But, sahib, I did not understand a word of thy talk with that Devil. And here is the jumping-off place of the world. Here! And the whimper of a little wind, which may be the breath of the dead! It is better to fight and die like men than to—”

“Be silent!”

The men brought a large basket and a long coil of stout rope. The guide jumped into the basket and was lowered over the fear-inspiring edge of the precipice. Bugs looked out and down. He stepped back hastily, a dizziness assailing him. The wind began to blow cold. It was a dreadful place. Shir Ali could contain himself no longer. His voice rose in the familiar shout. He stood there like a giant of some distant age, a faint starlight glittering on his waving knife. The Devil of the Chin Hills laughed. Shir Ali took a step toward him, but Bugs interposed.

"If he laughs like that again," roared Shir Ali, in *Pushtu*, "God will have one devil less to think about!"

"My man does not understand," said Bugs urbanely to the High Priest of wizardry. "Get into the basket," he ordered Shir Ali, as the men pulled the empty basket on to the ledge again.

"But, sahib, who remains to guard thee!"

And again Shir Ali, in the throes of an uncontrollable fear of the unseen, sent his voice pealing toward the stars.

"Get in!" said Bugs.

Shir Ali obeyed.

"There is but one God, and here on the brink of hell I proclaim Him!" he shouted as he disappeared in the basket.

The basket came back. Bugs said farewell to the Devil of the Chin Hills, and got into it. It was lowered evenly, but it was a weird sensation. Shir Ali and the young hill man waited at the bottom of the precipice.

"Come on," said Bugs. "We run as we have never run before!"

Powingdaug was two hundred miles away. The secret route would save two days' travel.

THE servant of the Devil of the Chin Hills was young and powerful, and accustomed to heavy travel through a country generally considered impassable, while Shir Ali was also a man of the hills—but Bugs gave them a taste of real going. He allowed hardly a pause through the secret trails. Only four hours' sleep.

Shir Ali kept up gallantly, but when the rocks and barren places gave way to forest and valley the Devil's servant lagged behind. He had no interest in this curiously mad white man, and wanted to leave him.

"Go back to thy devil of a boss, weakling,"

panted Shir Ali, "and tell him what real men are like. And learn to worship one God, and not to quit as long as your heart beats!"

The Burmese, who did not understand one word of Shir Ali's speech, lagged further behind. Bugs waved him away, and he turned back gladly.

"Come on!" Bugs shouted to the Afghan. "We have neither time nor breath for talk."

They plunged into the mazes of animal trails of the jungle which Bugs knew so well. . . . Bugs was raging. Armstrong impersonating him!

"Quicker! Quicker!"

"At thy heels, sahib! At thy heels! I understand thy haste! You crave *Pukhtunwali*!"

Bugs let out another link of his stride, and the gallant Afghan took it up.

"Faster! Faster! Good man, keep it up!"

"*Atcha*, sahib!"

On and on. The trail seemed endless.

"We make Powingdaug tonight. We do not rest till we get there!"

The monkeys chattered above their heads, the parrots screamed at them. Shafts of torrid sunlight, filtering through the trees, blinded them as does sunlight thrown from a mirror. A touch of jungle fever in Bugs' veins. A picture that grew into a mirage. Wavering and burning. The Ball of Fire.

Armstrong. Cruel, callous. In some way Armstrong had coaxed the dying King Thibaw into telling him that he had entrusted the Ball of Fire to one of his ten attendant Buddhist priests, when the looting British soldiers got out of control of their officers and raged through Mandalay. And now Armstrong, trying to find the one priest among the ten who had the ruby—that priceless gem!—was torturing them one by one to make them give it up; and when he realized that a tortured priest did not have the stone he killed him to prevent him telling those of the other ten who still lived. Thibaw had told him the names of the ten priests, but not the name of the one who had the gem. That was all clear now.

And the Ball of Fire, Thibaw's Pet, seemed to burn and lead the way through the forest before Bugs' feverish eyes.

"Faster! Faster! Good man! Keep it up!"

They panted forward. Their blood seemed boiling with the terrific strain and heat.

NIGHT fell as they plunged among the village paths—that ancient village of wooden houses,

on stilts, with its queer school against the marvelous rock temple where the *pongyis* have taught the children for two thousand years!

Very quiet it was among the fireflies. Bugs and Shir Ali labored like spent horses. They reached the temple in which are five hundred thousand images of Buddha, carved out of solid teak.

At the west entrance the aged head priest was praying—alone. He looked up, staring with feeble old eyes, as Bugs and Shir Ali came up to him. He saw them, he scrambled upright and screamed like an old woman gone mad.

Fear and anger in his screaming. Then a horde of priests, streaming like hornets out of the temple, and the yells of the excited villagers of Powingdaug. . . .

“What the hell?”

Shir Ali, dizzy and worn out, his fighting heart holding beyond his strength, asked the question through parched lips hoarsely, as he gripped his long knife.

Bugs understood. And he knew he faced death. “Shin-byu-sin!” he shouted as loudly as he could. “Shin-byu-sin!”

With a vast effort he scrambled to a ledge in the rock, and helped Shir Ali to his side. His revolver showed in the faint light.

“Shin-byu-sin!” he shouted again.

The villagers, men and women, encouraged by the priests, rushed to the attack. Bugs, who did not want to hurt anyone, fired over their heads.

Silence followed the shot. Bugs shouted again.

“Shin-byu-sin! Shin-byu-sin!”

A huge man who had lost his ears pushed roughly through the mob. His name was Shin-byu-sin. Once a highway robber, pardoned for service by the British through the instrumentality of Bugs, he had, as he said, sought surer profits and easier work, and—become a priest of Buddha. He saw Bugs on the ledge, and roared.

“What in the name . . . Oh, yes! . . . They say you tortured a priest—he who is dying in the temple. I told them you didn’t. . . . Get back, fools!” Thus rudely to the villagers. “Stand aside, brothers in God!” This to the priests. “This man is my friend. I vouch for him!”

Shin-byu-sin put his arms about Bugs and Shir Ali.

“A dying priest, you said?” gasped Bugs. “Take me to him at once!” He addressed the priests. “Priests of the Blessed One, your dying brother

shall look into my eyes, and tell you whether I am the man who harmed him. Lead me to him!”

“Yes, brothers, I know and trust this man!” growled Shin-byu-sin.

The head priest nodded gravely.

“It is just!” he said.

Into the innermost recesses of the rock temple—a huge cave, enlarged and shaped by thousands of long-dead priests and monks—lined, as it were a library, with five hundred thousand images of Buddha carved in teak black with age. Three novices lighted the way with ancient lamps, and the procession proceeded in silence along the dim and winding passages, to where the old priest, hideously mangled, waited for death.

He lay in a small chamber, his glazing eyes fixed upon a tiny shrine from where the benevolent features of the Blessed One smiled at him.

Bugs stepped forward quickly and knelt by the priest’s side.

“Look at me carefully! In my eyes, friend! And tell all men that it was *not* I who did this to thee!”

The dying priest obeyed. He was in no pain, for Burma has known opium since before the dawn of history. Bugs took one of his frail old hands in his. The priest smiled.

“No,” he said. “It was not this man. This man has no guile! He did not do this to me!”

Bugs turned.

“Leave me—every one of you,” he commanded. “I have important words for this good man.”

The priests withdrew into the gallery, Shin-byu-sin and Shir Ali with them.

“The man who killed thee,” Bugs said gently to the dying priest, “what did you tell him? Why did he kill thee?”

The priest tried to smile.

“Thou, also!”

“Nay!” answered Bugs. “I crave not the Pet, but to arrest and punish this creature who killed thee and others!”

The priest looked at the shrine. His entire being yearned toward it. He answered softly.

“In no spirit of revenge do I tell thee, but because my heart leans to thine. That other Englishman wanted to know . . . about the Ball of Fire. He knew a priest had it . . . at Mandalay. He had tortured and killed other priests . . . who did not know. . . . For a long time . . . I did not tell. But I am old and weak. . . . So I told this Englishman. For I am the priest to whom Thibaw entrusted the

ruby!"

The dying man paused from weakness.

"Yes," said Bugs gently.

"I almost gloated. That is bad. One might lose Nirvana. But I was thinking of that Englishman . . . trying to bully the Boh Ma-gong!"

Bugs felt a thrill run along his spine.

"Mandalay," murmured the dying priest. "And the king giving me the ruby to care for. He loved it more than life. But I gave it to Ma-gong, a strong man, and one of the king's generals. He turned his regiment into *dacoits*, and they harried the English until the English sent no more soldiers against him—he killed so many. Ma-gong laughed, and sent a challenge to the English. The English sent one man to Ma-gong. Up that narrow river went this lone, brave Englishman. Oh, a brave man! And he talked to Ma-gong until Ma-gong 'came in,' as they say, and ate the bread of the English king, and took pardon. Ma-gong has the Pet. . . . I can . . . talk no more. . . . Take my blessing. . . . I turn my face to the wall."

WAIT here at Powingdaug," said Bugs to Shir Ali. "I go on alone."

"But, sahib?"

"I go alone," answered Bugs. "A matter of *Pukhtunwali*, a head for a head, as the Rajputs say. Being a Durani, you will understand!"

Shir Ali bowed.

"God go with thee!"

BUGS traveled at top speed, and in five days came to the well-remembered creek. He had been the "brave man" spoken of by the dying priest, who had penetrated through that steamy jungle, run the gauntlet of the robber sentries, and taken the "king's bread" to Ma-gong. The hectic dacoit days.

On the right bank, among the thorns, the ruins of the palisade that had baffled a regiment. And the great teak tree from which a keen-eyed dacoit had kept watch. Bugs hurried. His present mission urged him from the memories. Morning had broken. The parrots and the monkeys waged their eternal quarrel. From the dense treetop came the cry of an old ape that had made its home in the sentry's crow's-nest.

The best trail was the center of the creek, bending and twisting. Myriads of little yellow water-snakes, harmless as minnows. Leeches.

Bugs went on cautiously, his gun ready. At the next bend was the village of Ma-gong, raised above the creek on stilts. At any moment Bugs might see Armstrong. And Armstrong was also a quick shot, and a dangerous and desperate man.

But at the bend Bugs saw only a naked ten-year-old girl who was giving her baby brother a washing, while he bitterly resented the bath. The girl saw Bugs and laughed.

"Were you as hard to keep clean when you were young?" she asked.

Bugs, tense and expecting trouble any moment, smiled.

"I have heard so! . . . Tell me, little lady, is there not another white man, who looks like me, here at the village of Ma-gong?"

She laughed.

"You are pleased to joke with me. Why have *you* come back so soon? Was it at twilight you left us the day before yesterday?"

Bugs, panting, ran into the village.

Too late! Too late! Was it too late? Armstrong had the Ball of Fire! All Asia was his in which to escape. No use to try to guard the ports of Burma—Armstrong was too clever to use them. . . .

The lazy, smiling people, the familiar chickens, the drifting smell of teak smoke on the pungent morning.

"Ma-gong! Where is Ma-gong?"

The old general—all three hundred pounds of him—laughed from the platform of his house.

"What's wrong?" he asked huskily. "You haven't had time to see old Pagan!" Bugs clambered up on the platform.

"You have been tricked and fooled," he said quietly. "Behold me closely, Ma-gong, and learn that you have not seen me since that day, years ago, when I came through your outposts, and we talked and became brothers of the Raj. An impostor has fooled you!"

Ma-gong seized Bugs' face and stared into his eyes. He shouted with rage. He seized a club, to strike a gong to rouse his men.

"Fool! I was a fool! An easy fool—to mistake that swine for thee! But Ma-gong is still Ma-gong, and he still has his men. I will get that swine who fooled me. Then I will crucify him to a tree, as we used to do. . . . Rest here, man I honor. Forgive me. I will not be old and fat and careless any longer. I will go out on the trail again with my men, and that liar and impersonator shall scream and bleed from a

tree, and—”

“Stay thy hand,” exclaimed Bugs. “This is my affair!”

“Thine?”

“Mine! Again has my king sent me! What did you mean by ‘old Pagan’?”

Ma-gong laid down the club reluctantly, answering.

“Old Pagan is the other general who stayed with Thibaw until Thibaw bade us save ourselves! I became a dacoit, and feared to lose the Pet, so I gave it to Pagan to keep, until our king should send for it. . . . The king Thibaw died. Two days ago came that thief who impersonated thee, saying that Thibaw had willed the Pet to the King of England, as a gift from one king to another. Believing the tale the swine told me, thinking he was you, I sent him to Pagan!”

“And Pagan is where?” asked Bugs.

“He has lived for many years among the dead and the ghosts and the ruins in the City of the Immortals,” replied Ma-gong. That ancient place of ruins. Somewhere between the creek of Ma-gong and the City of the Immortals was Armstrong. Bugs felt he held the winning hand at last. Hurrying through the forest on Armstrong’s trail—Armstrong who believed Bugs dead and drifted down the Ganges.

A MARAPURA, the City of the Immortals, built by Bodawpaya-Mentrangi, the great conqueror, a place of dead glory where, among the holy men and madmen, lived the old general Pagan, dreaming of other days and heaven. . . . In his care the greatest ruby in the world, for which a ruthless murderer lusted.

Bugs pressed on. No white man could make time through the trackless jungles as he could make it. Armstrong, after years in Burma, was good, but Bugs calculated to catch him before he reached the City of the Immortals.

Day after day, night and little sleep and on again—yet there was no sign of Armstrong. He might have taken a different trail, but Bugs did not think so—for Armstrong, the ex-army officer, would be traveling by compass and map. But there were several trails. No villages. The way was dangerous, beset by wild beasts, but after eight days Bugs had not seen a human being since leaving Ma-gong.

Not until the eighth night when, three hours

after the sudden nightfall, Bugs sought a place to camp. Then, suddenly, he smelled smoke. The smoke of a wood fire, perhaps half a mile away.

It was very dark under the trees. Bugs took out his revolver and felt it over carefully. Then he went forward toward the fire, with the stealth and velvet quietness of a tiger.

A change came in the sound of the whispering of the forest. Bugs, standing stock-still, listened. Yes, the change in the sound was . . . or was it a flock of restless monkeys moving their habitation in the night? Bugs went closer. He listened again. A pang of keen disappointment shot through him. The change in the sound was made by human voices—men talking. Armstrong would hardly be likely to be there—among some Burmese in camp. Yet he might be. Bugs went on again, not a whit of his caution and readiness relaxed. He made no noise with his careful steps. Closer and closer to the voices. Then, from behind a large tree, he saw the fire and the camp. A dozen Burmese men, and, tied to a tree—Armstrong!

Bugs stepped quietly into the clearing. The Burmese leaped to their feet.

“Who are you people?” asked Bugs.

“The men of Ma-gong!” they shouted.

“I see,” said Bugs. “And I understand now why Ma-gong took so long to find what he called my ‘password’—so you men could get a start on me!”

The leader bowed and laughed.

“Yes, chief! We came through ahead of you!”

Armstrong broke in. He did not recognize Bugs through the smoke of the fire.

“This man is deceiving you! I am the friend of Ma-gong!”

The Burmese took no notice of Armstrong. Bugs showed something that glittered in the firelight. The Burmese saluted. It was the insignia of a general in King Thibaw’s army.

“So that Pagan will know me!” said Bugs. “The ‘password’ of Ma-gong.”

The Burmese bowed again.

“What were your orders?” asked Bugs.

“To obey you, chief! . . . If you did not come in ten days we were to nail that thing over there to a tree until he died!”

Bugs nodded.

“Loose him now. He must die according to law. I am on my way to Mandalay. I will take him there. Since the City of the Immortals lies between here and Fort Dufferin I will pass through the City of the

Immortals. Loose him, so that he may get some rest and be able to travel to where he will die according to Law!"

Then Bugs walked across the clearing to the tree where Armstrong writhed.

"We are quite a way from a *thuggee* hut in Benares and the dead drifting down the Ganges!" he said quietly.

Armstrong stiffened with the shock, like a man struck by electricity. His swollen eyelids opened so he could see.

"Sinnat!" he gasped.

Bugs turned away.

"Make him comfortable, but guard him closely," he ordered.

BUGS woke in the night. Armstrong was calling across the clearing.

"Sinnat! Sinnat, these chaps don't understand English! I've tried them. Listen! Take the ruby, and let me go! Not a soul will ever know. And I daren't talk! Take it, and lose me. You can get half a million dollars for it in New York. It belongs to nobody. Take it! It's not even stealing—for the army looted Mandalay and thought nothing of it!"

Bugs did not answer. Armstrong began again. Bugs called to the leader of the Burmese.

"Give that fellow some more opium—he's keeping me awake with his crying. If the opium doesn't quiet him, knock him on the head!"

Armstrong, who had not given up hoping to escape, or, if that failed, getting clear at his trial, said no more.

"I won't walk," said Armstrong next morning. "These men must carry me!"

Bugs turned to the Burmese leader.

"I am going on alone," he said. "Take your men back to Ma-gong. But before you go nail this white man to a tree—any tree will do so you nail him so he cannot wriggle off!"

The Burmese saluted. Bugs walked away. Armstrong shrieked.

"Sinnat! Sinnat! You can't do that. Could you watch and see another Englishman crucified?"

Then Bugs spoke to the man for the second time.

"I have no time to waste watching! For the rest—I have been called 'Bugs' because I am too easy on such as you. But there is another Sinnat, who is not 'Bugs.' . . . Take your choice. Walk like a man with me to Mandalay and your trial, or stay

here and die on the tree!"

Bugs turned away again. Armstrong made no further objection to walking.

GREEN lizards glittering in the sun, mina birds shrieking at the snakes among the ruins of a fallen palace; and a madman who gibbered.

"I seek Pagan, an old man and a general, who lives in this place! Do you know him?" asked Bugs.

The madman laughed. Then he spoke confidentially.

"Yes!" He pointed. "That way. But, remember, Pagan is mad! Be careful. He talks with ghosts and refuses to associate with intelligent people like me!"

Bugs found Pagan sitting on a pile of fallen bricks.

"Ah, good day," greeted the old general. "You see me on fallen bricks. Bricks are like peoples, nations. They stand proudly for years, then fall. All must fall in the end. Some day a conqueror will kick the bricks called England, and they will fall. What can I do for you?"

Bugs showed him the insignia of Ma-gong.

"Ma-gong sent this to vouch for me. He told me that you are the guardian of the Ball of Fire. May I see it?"

The old general looked strangely at Bugs. Then he scrambled down from the heap of bricks.

"I will show you where it is," he said quietly.

Bugs followed him through the mystery city of the dead, along ways blocked with ruins, through narrow places between fallen palaces, until they reached that inlet of the Irrawaddy River which was once the bathing place of Bodawpaya-Mentragi and his ladies. But that was long ago. Now it was a snake-infested swamp, overgrown with torturous vegetation, a morass of deep slime and mud. General Pagan stooped and picked up a stone. He raised his weak old arm and threw the stone into the swamp. He shook his head, dissatisfied.

"I was younger and stronger then!" he exclaimed.

"When?" asked Bugs, understanding.

"When I threw the Pet to where never again will the eye of man behold it! They told me my king was dead. I said that no other hand should caress the Ball of Fire. So, with reverence, I threw it into the depths of the swamp. I cannot throw so far now!"