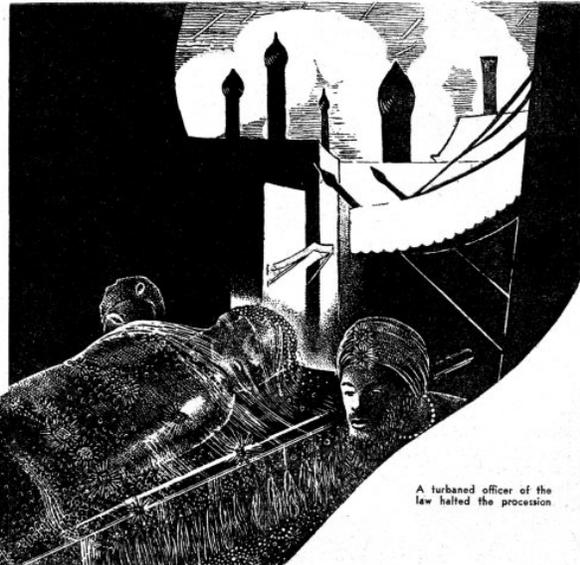


# MURDER HAIRCUT and SHAVE

Hussein knew how to make a deal even if  
all he had to bargain with was a corpse

by  
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A turbaned officer of the law halted the procession

**M**IRZA HUSSEIN came to Isfahan in the cool of afternoon. He was on ass-back; Coral, his man slave, walked. Hussein's mount had started at Shiraz as a tolerable cob, and had undergone certain metamorphoses on the way. At Surmeh Hussein had sold the cob and bought a pony. The difference in price had kept the party of three in bread and fodder as far as Yezdikhast. At Yezdikhast the pony was exchanged for a little ass and the price of food for the three to Isfahan. Hussein sat far back on the ass. When he sat forward his toes scraped the ground. But at least he escaped the lowest depth of Persian degradation, which is walking. Hussein and his slave-man, you must understand, made a living out of the art of keeping up appearances.

Coral wore a decent livery, but not the cutlass that a Persian servant should sport on

the road. That was because he was so great a drinker of blood that it was unsafe to trust him with edged tools. So Hussein declared. Coral was a kind of Abyssinian, of the color of stewed tea with a dash of milk in it. Mirza Hussein was Persian, handsome, dreamy-eyed and athletic. His attire was rich. The brown shawling of his frock-coat was a little worn, but no sensible man sports his best when traveling. The patches on his baggy red breeches were marvels of art, creditable to the industry of Coral. His boots were the weak spot, but the ingenious plan of splashing them judiciously with mud at the start of each day's journey kept the shabbier spots in the background. The saddle-bags before him were fat.

At the caravanserai they made such a fuss about securing the best room that nobody would have dreamed of asking them for cash

payment for anything at the inn shop. In the best room, a cubby-hole opening on the common court, Coral arranged the baggage to make the best possible show from outside. He spread out Hussein's only carpet, and the Mirza laid himself along the middle of it to conceal the scrap of unswept floor revealed by the central hole. Then Coral massaged his owner, smacking and punching him and cracking his joints.

Said Hussein: "Fazl Ali, the only friend of my youth with whom we have not lately lived for a month or two or borrowed something from, is an Isfahani, and a merchant at that. I have spoken."

Said Coral: "It is well said, Hazret, that beside an Isfahan! merchant an Erzeroumi is as open-handed as Hatim Tai's self."

Said Hussein: "There spoke Asaf! Now, *boutcha*, let us consider how to approach an Isfahani who is also a merchant. Were one to approach with open hand and say: 'O friend, lend to one who approaches with the steps of supplication in the shoes of necessity,' what is likely, please Allah, to be the answer?"

"Hazret, it is likely to be: '*Allah Kerim!*'" Coral used the intonation sacred to choking off a beggar.

"Even so, Coral. One must approach with a long nose and a careless air. To him who hath, or appeareth to have, is always given. So hath Allah decreed: He is merciful and compassionate! Now, Coral, I have ascertained that my friend Fazl Ali is absent from the city and will not return for several days. In the meanwhile we must eat. Is there aught in the treasury?"

"Hazret, my shirt-pockets are full of gold."

Thus, humorously, replied Coral, who did not possess the garment in question.

"Then, Coral, we must sell something."

"The ass, Hazret?"

"Sell the ass! What would my friend Fazl Ali think of a man who has to walk? That was a cold speech, Coral. Have we no spare gear?"

"Hazret, we have a sufficiency of clothes to hide our nakedness. Otherwise—" Coral put two fingers in his mouth, sucked noisily, and held them up. They were understood to represent the state of his master and himself if it were necessary to change their raiment. "The bags are full of stones and leaves, Hazret," he concluded.

HUSSEIN, past master in the art of keeping up appearances, at once decided against selling the saddle-bags. "We must arrive as though fresh from a journey," he said, "otherwise there will be no excuse for travel stains. And to arrive from a journey without saddle-bags—implying, O shameful slander! that we possess not so much as a change of raiment—*Penah be Khuda*, it will not do! What about selling thee, Coral?"

Coral went green. "*Kourbanut-i-shuma!*" he gasped. "I am your sacrifice, Hazret, but selling me would take time. And, Hazret, where would you find such another slave as your poor Coral?"

He kissed Hussein's feet. Hussein laughed. "Be content, Coral. The skin is nearer than the shirt, and between the two cometh the slave. I have yet a shirt. Take it to the nearest broker."

He picked up the garment. "Wash it first, Coral," he added prudently.

All hinged on that little sentence. Coral proceeded to wash the shirt in the ten-by-ten tank in the common-court, where all the inn guests cleansed their clothes and their children and themselves and their animals, besides drawing water for drinking and religious ablutions. And as he rinsed and wrung, an acquaintance passed through the court. The acquaintance was confidential slave to an Isfahan grandee: he had only looked in with a

message to his master's banker and would not have seen Coral but for the washing. He invited Coral to a party that night. There would be a few old cronies, the place was an empty house neighbored by empty houses, formality would be absent. When Coral had sold the shirt he bought a square yard of bread, a skewer of meat and a string of dried apricots for Hussein's supper, and asked leave to go and get drunk. Hussein gave leave and a benison.

Coral repaired to the empty house, the neighbor of empty houses, soon after dusk. He was the first to arrive and the first to leave. And he was sober; a man with so much on his mind that nothing could make him drunk.

NEXT forenoon, about the time the congregations were pouring out of the mosques after *Namez-i-Chast*, a funeral cortege trotted past the Mosque of Lutfulah, at the north-east side of Isfahan's main square.

It consisted of a bier and a rabble. The bier was borne by four: a long-faced Shirazi cameleer at one corner, at the others a Hindu Mollah, a greasy Turkoman chief, and a smart footman of the Prince-Governor's household. They ran as hard as they could; that was from pure kindheartedness and to acquire merit in the next world.

Carrying a corpse is the one thing over which no Persian dawdles. No respectable funeral travels slower than a canter. The reason is that the two angels who wait to cross-examine the deceased about his religious tenets directly he is in the grave get impatient if they are kept waiting. Naturally they take it out on the deceased.

Several of the congregation from the Lutfulah Mosque slipped their shoulders under the bier and helped it on a little way, thus doing a virtuous act. At a corner of the square the Hindu grew tired and surrendered his corner to one of the Chief Executioner's underlings. A little further on the Turkoman

and the Shirazi cameleer were replaced by a brace of Kurdish chieftains. At the entrance of the avenue leading to the Shah Abbass Bazaar a beautifully dressed fop rushed in and relieved the footman. The Turkoman joined the crowd behind, the other three went their way. The procession galloped down the avenue.

It was hard going, with the sky above unshaded by clouds and culminating in a sun nearly white with heat. The dust churned up, head-high. A little way along the avenue the fop was smitten with an idea.

"Where, please Allah, be we bound, Brother?" He asked the Kurd under the other aft corner.

The Kurd opened his eyes. "Why, please Allah, to the corpse-washing-house of the parish, I suppose," he returned.

"Thou supposest, Brother?" repeated the fop.

"Please Allah, we be strangers in Isfahan, my brother and I. We have no knowledge of the lay of its several quarters."

"Verily, Isfahan is half the world, saving Lahore," the fop agreed. "But, brother, I took thee for the kin of the dead."

"My brother and I but seek to acquire merit by helping along the dead. From the Percussion of the Grave and the Questioning of the Grave may Allah Almighty deliver him!"

"Amin!" responded the fop. "But who is directing this?" He hailed the assistant-executioner: "Where be we bound, Brother?"

The little official twisted his head to answer back. "By Allah, I know not. I was at point of asking thee, Brother. Art thou not kin of the dead?"

"By thy salt, no!"

The assistant-executioner bawled to the crowd: "Who is kin of the dead among ye? Let him stand forth!"

There was no response. Only the cry: "Kin of the dead, stand forth!" passed from

rank to rank.

The four bearers stopped and eyed one another around the corners of the bier. "I take refuge with Allah from Satan the Everlastingly Stoned!" said the fop uneasily.

THEY put the burden down. The assistant-executioner instituted an inquiry. Nobody knew anything about the corpse, but somebody suggested its instant conveyance before the Ketkhoda of the ward. It was, therefore, taken up again by the four bearers, deposited before the Ketkhoda's gate, and the Ketkhoda summoned. The result of his investigation was clinching. The body was that of a coarse-faced, oldish man. In the side of the chest was a stab, neatly washed and hidden by the shroud, which explained his death. Everyone turned eyes of suspicion on the four bearers.

"By Al Aziz, I am guiltless!" cried the four in chorus.

It was perfectly plain. The murderers had borne the bier forth a little way, and had sneaked off, one by one, as new bearers had taken their places. How far it had come and when, Allah alone knew. The Kurds and the fop were straightaway arrested by the assistant-executioner; and the crowd, corpse and suspects were marched in search of the nearest police officials.

ALL the officialdom of Isfahan tried its teeth on the case in vain. The one certain fact was that the fop and the Kurds were put in jail. There was no clue to the perpetrators of the crime; the victim could not be identified, though half the city came to try. The progress of the funeral could be traced back to the southeast side of the main square, and no further. The somewhat tactless move of imprisoning the last set of bearers discouraged others who had assisted in the carrying from giving evidence. By evening prayer-time the officials gave it up. The best thing, they said,

was to bury the body and cease worrying about the affair.

On them descended lightning out of a clear sky. The Prince-Governor of Isfahan would have the investigation pursued to the end. If those murderers were not found within a reasonable time every official concerned would lose his billet and eat sticks. Too many unsolved mysteries had happened in Isfahan lately, said the Prince-Governor. He did not add that he was curious to learn the facts of it.

Now search commenced vigorously. Spies and busybodies dragooned the city. The three suspects remained in jail, and the Chief of Police took on himself the task of fixing the guilt on them if they did not bribe heavily enough.

That evening Hussein remarked to Coral: "My heart is tightened and mine eyes are yellow with regret, Coral. To think that so fine an orange should be placed in our hands and we should fear to squeeze it."

"Belike, Hazret," agreed Coral, "the juice might prove too sour."

"Who so seeks to guide the feet of Justice has to be careful lest he planteth one on his own neck," said Hussein. "I see no chance of a profit anywhere, so it is well to keep aside."

And he groaned. There should have been a commission in the business that had been placed in his hands, but he saw more likelihood of jail unless he kept strictly out of it.

"The prisoners, Hazret?" said Coral.

"They would promise, but how to make them pay?"

EARLY the next morning Hussein went for a stroll in the Shah Abbass Bazaar. He spoke with an acquaintance, and directly after betook himself to the jail in a manner that just escaped hurry. He was allowed to interview all three prisoners. The Kurds offered five hundred tomauns between them, the fop two

hundred. The understanding was that the sums would be paid to the discoverer of the real culprits when the victims were let loose. Hussein was satisfied with a plain written agreement from the fop, who was a local man, but from the Kurds he extracted a Cursing Letter after this fashion:

“. . . If we fail to keep this promise, may Allah curse our mother and father, our sisters and our children. And may He smite us with sickness.”

Which arrangement, on the face of it, was foolish. The local man could easily refuse to pay a mere stranger; the Kurds would pay, but had not promised not to take their money back later.

Then Hussein went back to the inn and demanded from Coral what money remained from the sale of the shirt. He counted the coppers. “Enough to buy us both a good midday meal, *boutcha*,” he said.

“I have arranged it to buy us meals for three days, until your rich friend is home, Hazret,” Coral replied, a little worried by an unusual glint in his master’s eyes.

“Thou wilt expend it on a belt-stretching meal for us both, I. No need for doling when by Night Prayer we shall own a hundred tomauns. A hundred tomauns, Coral, furnished by one Sohreb Khan, the Chief of Police.”

“Allah’s with you, Hazret! Whoever got money from a chief of police?”

“Allah is great, Coral.”

“If He can make you wring money from a chief of police, Hazret, truly He is.”

Thus Coral, piously but dubiously.

THE police chief of Isfahan was a sorry man that day. The Prince-Governor sent more than once to ascertain what progress had been made. The chief always replied that he had a clue. And he had most of his underlings fed with sticks on the soles of their feet because they could find no way of fixing the crime on

anyone.

At noon a spy came around to report Hussein’s transactions in the jail. It looked joyfully suspicious. The chief sent a messenger at once to Hussein’s inn.

A nervous man was Coral as he saddled the ass and received orders to stay and mind his master’s gear. Hussein went on his way cheerfully, and was received in private audience by the great man.

Sohreb Khan was a huge man, with the fat face of a vicious child behind a man’s beard, the pig-eyes of cunning cruelty, and the swelled forehead vein of implacable temper.

“Dost imagine, friend, that a sparrow drops a feather in Isfahan and I know it not?” he asked. “It is not so, Mas’llah! What thou didst in the jail but two hours ago is known to me. It seems, friend, that thy knowledge of this crime is extensive.”

“I take refuge with Allah from Satan the Stoned!” returned Hussein. “Do you imply, Saheb, that I had something to do with the crime? Not I, by Al-Aziz! Though, to be sure, I know of three of the burned-feathered ones who committed it.”

“How canst thou know of the criminals if thou hadst nothing to do with the crime?” asked Sohreb Khan.

“Why, please Allah, I learned of them by inspecting the corpse this morning. When, with others, I went to ascertain if the deceased was known to me, a careful look at it informed me who three of the murderers were.”

“And who were they?”

“I know not their names, nor, to the best of my knowledge, have I ever set eyes on them. Still, please Allah, it should be easy from my description to find them.”

“Then, by thy salt, friend, why didst thou not at once bring this information to me?”

“Why, Saheb, if I have, please Allah, more wit than all Isfahan put together, should I not make my commission out of it? Behold,

the townsman prisoner is to pay me two hundred tomauns when I clear him, and the Kurds five hundred. I have the written promise of the one, a Cursing Letter from the others.”

Sohreb Khan roared with laughter. “The Kurds will respect their word, but will slay thee and recover their tomauns later. The townsman will not keep faith with thee.”

“But he will with you,” said Hussein.

“Pour the oil of information into the flask of attention.”

“The sums are payable not to me by name but to whoever shall fix the guilt on the true culprits. Will you purchase the documents from me for one hundred and fifty tomauns?”

Sohreb Khan opened his pig-eyes. “How would that profit me?”

“Do not pretend, Saheb-Jam, that your penetrating intelligence does not perceive the benefit. You will extract two hundred tomauns from the townsman, thus making fifty for yourself. And by forgiving the Kurds their promise you will bind them to you with cords of gratitude. At present you dare not either keep them in jail or loose them. Behold, you shall go to them, and with a great laugh say: ‘The youth, my agent, who secured the Cursing Letter from you, did it at my bidding. Behold, I jested with you: here is the letter, I have no desire to rob you.’ Kurds, Saheb, are Sons of Gratitude—they will trouble you no further.”

AT LAST the official intelligence was enlightened. “*Barak’llah!*” Sohreb exclaimed, “I will find the murderers.”

“Even so, please Allah. By your salt, Saheb, your name will resound to Fars. I will tell you the way, for one hundred and fifty tomauns.”

“Ten, to be paid when I have the men in hand,” said Sohreb.

“One hundred and fifty,” said Hussein. “Paid now.”

“I will pay nothing, but will make thee eat stick until thou tellest me all.”

“In one hour a friend of whose identity you know nothing will go to the Prince-Governor and give the information unless I come to tell him all is arranged.”

Sohreb snorted, nicely trapped. “Twenty, thou bankrupt!” he offered.

They bargained, and compromised at one hundred. When Hussein had it in his hands in good silver he carefully coached Sohreb.

“Saheb,” he said, “a caravan of pilgrims bound for Kerbela rested at a certain inn in this city. They went on their way about the time the corpse we know all too well was making the circuit of the square. The company included a left-handed man, one with a badly scratched face, and one skilled in the barber’s craft. Send swift officers after the caravan, and if those three be with it still, let them be arrested, in Allah’s name. Let us now go to inspect the corpse and I will explain.”

SOHREB KHAN presented himself very cheerfully at the Prince-Governor’s levee the next day but one.

“Well,” quoth the Prince in no good humor, “what report dost thou bring, O bankrupt one? Do murderers still walk freely to and fro in Isfahan in spite of Our orders?”

Sohreb made up the facial expression of one amazed. “*Subhan’llah!* Did not the Prince order the arrest of the murderers of the Greek perfumer? And when the Prince orders, is it not done? Please Allah, the four murderers wait without, having been arrested at Maier.”

“*Afrin!* What is this mention of a Greek?” demanded the Prince.

“This slave of the Prince referreth to the dead Greek who, by mistake, was borne about on good Moslem shoulders two noons ago. This least of the Prince’s servants said to his men: ‘Go, overtake the Kerbela caravan

that left Isfahan at the time this accursed Christian corpse was sullyng the shoulders of Believers. If in the company ye find a left-handed man, one with a scratched face, one with some barbering skill, and a fourth their familiar friend, arrest them. If they be not with the company, then let Iran be scoured until they be found.' And the four men were with the caravan, and so greatly were they amazed at their detection that each began to accuse the other three of betraying all."

"*Afrin!*" exclaimed the Prince. "How didst thou find this out?"

"I am the Prince's sacrifice! Inspection of the corpse showed what manner of men three of the murderers were, beside what manner of man the corpse was in life."

"Explain," said the Prince. "If the explanation is good, why, by Allah, we of the Kajar house know how to bestow rewards."

"One glance of approval from the Prince's eyes is enough pay for a lifetime of toil! To begin, the corpse had been prepared with care in a way, the wound being washed so that no blood might show. The beard had been shaved off, obviously to disguise the features, and, although no trouble had been taken to cleanse the body generally, the head also was fresh shaved. Why, reflected the Prince's slave, all this trouble over shaving? Then the reason was plain. The skin of the head was not that of one who habitually goes shorn, it was like the skin whence the beard had been freshly removed after death. The man had worn hair all over his head: he was no follower of the Prophet (on whom be peace!)—shaving it was a disguise."

"*Afrin!*" said the Prince again.

"The Prince's servant lives a thousand years in one moment of the Royal approbation!" smirked Sohreb. "The next point was a curious perfume about the corpse and its wrappings. For a test part of the wrappings were washed until the death reek was eliminated, yet the other scent remained.

It was attar of roses."

"*Afrin!*" said the Prince, and all of his courtiers after him.

"Would this Prince's slave could die now and hear no other earthly sound after the Prince's word of commendation! Now, the man's feet were callous with walking: he was not one who could afford attar of roses for his own use. Therefore he must have traded in the scent. In a word, this was no follower of the Prophet (bliss attend his beard!), but an infidel perfumer. Now came the question of the slayers. Four must have been concerned: it would need four to carry the bier. Now, this Greek had been stabbed in the left side, one and effectually. Yet there were bruises on the throat, marks of two hands. One throttled him in front while another stabbed from behind."

"How?" asked the Prince. "One could throttle and stab, too."

"*Kourbanut-i-shuma, Hazret-i-Ali!* Both thumbs made prints. And the victim was strongly built. One held, one stabbed, and he stabbed from behind to avoid the risk of stabbing his friend. And he used his left hand; and used it dexterously, by token of the way the wound slanted. Now, the nails of the corpse had been cut and cleaned. It might be he left nail-marks of his struggle, and that his nails had suffered in the struggle. So the nails were trimmed lest the scratches they inflicted should be specially noted if the slayers came under suspicion. And since the scratches had to be considered, they must be in some spot where they could be noticed. Hence I inferred one with a scratched face—and well he is scratched indeed! Then the barber as third was guessed at because all barbering was well done. The fourth might be taken for granted. Find Scratched Face, Left Hand, and one with some barbering skill, and any fourth man who frequented their company might be the fourth in guilt."

"And how didst thou connect all this with the caravan?"

“Simply enough. No perfumer was missing from the Bazaar of the At-tarin. Hence the deceased must have been a traveler. Inquiry at the different inns elicited that a Greek pedler had been traveling with the Kerbela train, but had not joined it when it left Isfahan. And I found that a left-handed rogue had sold an ass before the caravan left the city—the perfumer’s ass. A little application of the willow wands to the soles of the fellows’ feet made them confess where they had hidden the victim’s stock, as too incriminating. Now will justice be done, for the rogues are, please the Prince, well known to my officers—men who have earned death a hundred times.”

“That is as well, for I would not have had Moslems slain for an infidel,” decreed the Prince. “Now, whose dog was Asaf, who was deemed fit to be Vizier to Suleiman the All-Wise, compared to Sohreb Khan? Let the mouth of Sohreb be filled with gold and sweetmeats, as well as it has filled Our ears with words of good sense. We have spoken.”

MIRZA HUSSEIN, his purse plethoric, did

not await his rich friends’ return, but left Isfahan at once, prudently reserving Fazl Ali as an untapped source of supply against another period of need.

He rode a horse again; Coral, the ass. “Master,” whispered Coral, “one matter alone is not patent to my intelligence. The smell of attar. I’ll swear there was none about the corpse.”

“It was necessary to connect the corpse with its trade, *boutcha*.”

“But Sohreb Khan smelled it, and so did all he called to witness it.”

“He smelled it, Coral, when I assured him I had smelled it. And the others smelled it on his assurance.”

“*Afrin!*” chuckled Coral. “Master, it was an ingenious thought of yours to find the clues to the murderers—after I told you how I heard the three actual perpetrators describing the crime to the fourth man, and arranging the funeral as well, in the empty house next to that in which I waited for my friends—*Mas’llah!*”

“All comes from Allah. To Him be the praise, Coral,” Hussein replied modestly.