

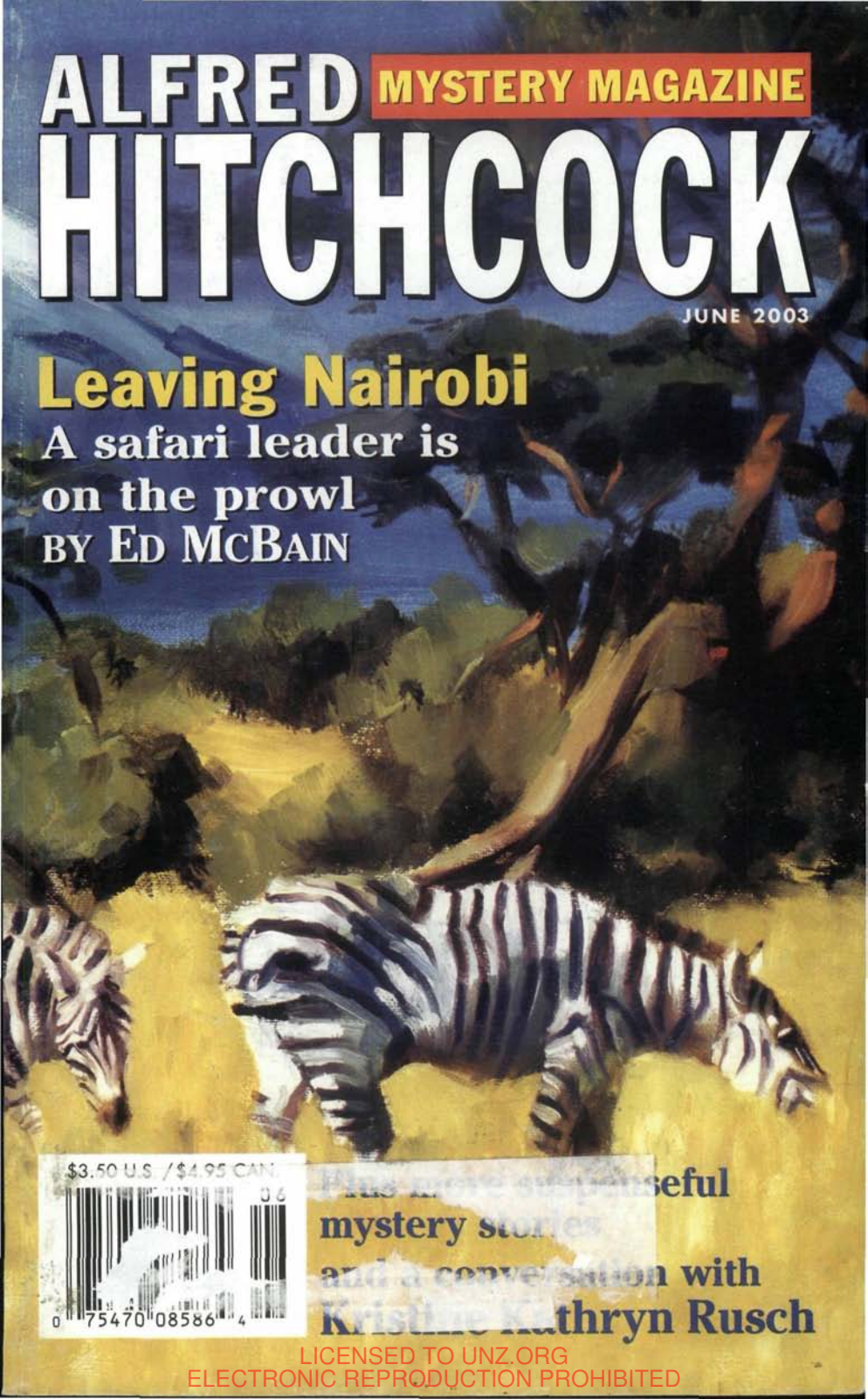
ALFRED **MYSTERY MAGAZINE** HITCHCOCK

JUNE 2003

Leaving Nairobi

A safari leader is
on the prowl

BY ED MCBAIN



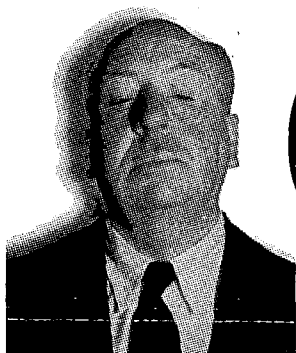
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MYSTERY CLASSIC

CHARLES B. CHILD

ALL THE BIRDS OF THE AIR

They found Hadji Hussain huddled on a chair in the summer room of his house on the banks of the Tigris. He had a bruise above the forehead and died from a brain hemorrhage shortly after they carried him out.

The room was actually a deep windowless cellar with a single entrance at the foot of an outside flight of steps. An air shaft led to the roof and trapped the river breezes, making the *surdab* a pleasant retreat from the excessive heat.

Inspector Chafik of the Criminal Investigations Department of the Baghdad police appreciated the coolness. Outside, the white light of noon glared on the tiles of the courtyard. The Inspector's shirt stuck to his thin body and disturbed him; he was fastidious about his clothes. Wiping his swarthy face with a handkerchief sprinkled with orange water, he announced, "I consider it unreasonable for people to die on such a hot day."

His assistant, a tall unemotional sergeant, understood why the Inspector was worried about Hussain's death. The Hadji, who was loved and venerated in Baghdad, was head of the courts where ecclesiastical matters such as divorce, questions of Moslem theology, and disputes concerning religious institutions were brought for settlement.

Recently the old man had handed down a decision that concerned a property willed to the Shafiite shrine at Zagros. He had favored the relatives who had brought a complaint of coercion against the shrine. In consequence, the Shafiites, a small but fanatic sect, had threatened reprisals, and a police guard had been placed at the Hadji's house.

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This affected Sergeant Abdullah personally because the detail had been in his charge, so he began anxiously, "Permit me to report—"

Chafik said, "Later. I have not digested the medical report. It is always an unappetizing dish. They tell me the violence of the blow might have killed a younger man. The Hadji was old, frail. If he fell and struck something—"

"Sir, there is nothing to indicate it," said the sergeant. "And what was he doing in the chair?"

"It is possible that after the first impact of the blow he recovered sufficiently to find his feet and stumble to the chair. He may have retained consciousness until the clot formed."

The Inspector had strange dun-colored eyes, flat and expressionless except when he was worried. He looked around trying to visualize what had happened. The room was very simply furnished. There were a cot, a few chairs, straw mats on the tiled floor, a bedside lamp; near the lamp was an open copy of the Koran, which had been put down so hurriedly the edges of the pages were folded. A light blanket was flung back from the foot of the bed.

Chafik said, "There is the impression of a head on the pillow; the Hadji was reposed. And the position of the Koran, the blanket, tells us he was rudely disturbed. The interruption occurred shortly after he came to rest, otherwise he would not have been reading. The aged do not have to woo sleep."

He folded his slender hands and glanced at the sergeant, who knew what was expected and immediately began to quote from memorized notes, "Sir, the Hadji entered the *surdab* after the noon prayer. He was escorted by a retainer named Murad, who closed the door behind his master and then proceeded to other duties. Murad is the house watchman."

"Where were you stationed, Abdullah?"

"I was in the courtyard, sir, where I could observe all the people of the house. I now list them. First, there is Mr. Romani, the deceased's nephew, visiting from Amara—"

"A lawyer. I know of him," Chafik said.

"Then there is Mr. Sadir, a young man who lives here."

"His father died two months ago and was a close friend of the Hadji, who was appointed guardian to the youth. I find it strange," Chafik added, "that an adult should require a guardian, but there are rumors Sadir preferred Cairo to Baghdad. Life there is gay."

"A sinful city," said the sergeant.

"The mole," remarked Chafik, thinking of his own city of the

dusty plains, "without a doubt calls the lark sinful. But continue."

"Sir, Mr. Sadir and Mr. Romani also retired because of the heat. Their rooms are on the second floor. The servants, too, were in their quarters. Only the watchman Murad remained active. He stood at the main gate within my view." The sergeant cleared his throat, then stood rigidly at attention and said without inflection, "It is now necessary to make confession—"

"You slept?"

"Because of the heat, I dozed, sir. Briefly, only a few minutes, but I deserve reprimand. When I opened my eyes I saw Murad running toward the *surdab*. I halted him. He said he had heard the door open and thought his master had called out. We both proceeded to the spot. The door was indeed open and we saw the Hadji collapsed on the chair. I sent Murad for Mr. Romani, who came at once. Over my protests, he carried his uncle to an upper room."

"It was unwise to move a dying man, but in this case, it probably made little difference. You searched the room after the Hadji was taken out?"

"Diligently. There was nothing that resembled a weapon here."

"And where was Mr. Sadir?"

"In his room, sir. He is a heavy sleeper and had to be roused."

The Inspector looked at the bare walls of the *surdab*. The only break in the smooth brickwork was the air shaft; it resembled a narrow chimney and ended about six feet above the floor in an open vent. Chafik could see a small square of sunlight far above. The twittering of many birds echoed down the shaft and reminded him that the old man had loved birds and given them sanctuary in his garden.

"This place may be cool," the Inspector said, "but I do not find it restful. The birds are noisy."

Sergeant Abdullah interrupted, "Now what a knucklehead I am! I forgot to tell you about the bird."

"A bird?"

"Dead, sir—"

"Here in the *surdab*. It lay on the Hadji's lap, in his hand. I have labeled it as an exhibit."

He produced a pathetic bundle of black and white feathers. The bird had a forked tail and rakish wings; there was a chick's down on the breast.

Chafik said, "A swift." He touched the dangling head. "The neck is broken, it has not been dead long. A lazy fledgling that refused to fly until it was pushed from the nest. Possibly it tumbled down

the air shaft, a not uncommon occurrence. Or perhaps it fell against the door. The thud might have disturbed the Hadji, made him leave his cot and open the door—"

He stopped and gave Abdullah a sharp look; the sergeant's rare expressions were easy to read and Chafik said with sudden wrath, "So you think somebody was waiting outside the door?"

"Sir, it did enter my mind."

"Was this person invisible that he wasn't seen by the watchman at the gate? Was he foolhardy enough to stand there while you were briefly dozing a few yards away? What fiction have you been reading?"

As he left the room, the Inspector added indignantly, "Must everybody die murdered to please you, Abdullah?"

The house was a relic of old Baghdad. Rooms opened on an inner courtyard tiled with honey-colored brick. An archway led to a terrace that faced the river. There was a garden bright with flowers and shaded by ancient trees, all enclosed within a high wall.

Chafik joined two men who were waiting on the terrace. One was the Hadji's nephew, a middle-aged man with the sallow hungry look of a sufferer from a stomach ailment. Romani, who practiced law in the southern town of Amara, came to Baghdad several times a year to visit his uncle.

His companion was much younger, little more than a youth, and had a downy mustache. He looked bored. The cut of his clothes and the way he wore them gave Chafik a twinge of envy and he hoped that one day he, too, might visit a Cairo tailor. Reluctantly, he looked away from the dapper Sadir and waited for the older man to speak.

Romani asked, "Have you formed a conclusion?"

"I let facts form their own conclusions."

The Hadji's nephew nodded approval. "It is a definite fact," he said in his thin clear voice, "that my uncle was threatened. The Shafites are a lawless people."

"In the past they have not stopped at assassination," the Inspector said.

"On the other hand," Romani said, "it is wrong to use the history of yesterday as evidence of violence done today."

Chafik made a little bow. "How justly you correct me! But I can say what I think about them because you alone took serious view of their threats. Your uncle did not."

"In point of fact I agreed with him. But I advised him to ask for police protection as a precautionary measure, and when he refused, I took the step myself. Naturally."

Chafik thought he knew why Romani's law practice was small. The man was too cautious. He had a good reputation, always refused doubtful cases, but such legal ethics did not appeal to minds nurtured by the labyrinth of bazaars where business was conducted in Iraq.

The Inspector turned for relief to Sadir. "What did you think of the threats?" he asked the young man.

Sadir was polishing his manicured nails. He looked up languidly and said, "I am used to the civilized life in Egypt. I confess I paid little attention to this talk of threats and violence." He mopped his face with a handkerchief. "Such heat!" he complained.

"You miss Cairo?" Chafik asked.

Surprised and pleased that somebody should understand him, Sadir became confidential. "This place destroys me," he said. "There is no beauty here. Life is so crude, so lacking in urbanity—"

Romani interrupted, "Do not take our time with your foolish problems, Sadir. I know you wish to return to Cairo. It matters little to me personally, but the legal aspect of your case must be carefully considered. You were made my uncle's ward for two years. But we will discuss this later."

The young man flushed and moved away up the terrace. Romani shook his head and said sternly, "He has no sense of responsibility. Have you any more questions, Inspector?"

"I was going to ask if you entirely rule out the possibility of an intruder."

The Hadji's nephew looked down at the river, at a fisherman who stood in the shallows, his brown arm lifted to throw a weighted casting net. "I rule out nothing," he said finally. "But how could an intruder pass the police guard? Observe, for example, the height of the wall on the river side. The Tigris is at its lowest, there is a drop of thirty feet to where that fisherman stands. The door at the top of the steps that lead down the water is always locked."

Chafik interrupted, "What do you know about Murad, your uncle's watchman?"

"I believe he is able and trustworthy."

"He has a Kurdish name. The Shafiites are a Kurdish sect—"

Romani said, "I close my ears. What you say is slanderous, even defaming, and as a lawyer I advise you to be more cautious."

The Inspector permitted himself the thought that this man probably tested the temperature of his bath water before he put a

toe in it. Venturing another question, he asked, "Did you know your uncle was nursing a dead bird when he was found?"

Romani was startled. "A dead bird? No."

"It may have fallen down the air shaft or against the door. Your uncle loved birds. Something disturbed him in the *surdab*. If it was the bird he would have jumped up to succor it, and then—"

"In his haste he slipped, struck something—"

"Conjecture," Chafik said, smiling at his mild triumph. "But you may be right." He stopped, almost deafened by a shrill outcry from the many birds perched on the roof. "How noisy they are!" the Inspector said.

"I do not share my uncle's affection for birds. He would not allow a single nest to be destroyed." The thin voice trailed and Chafik looked at the man curiously.

Meeting the Inspector's eyes, the lawyer explained, "I had a thought. I reprimanded you for an unjust suspicion; now I find I have one myself."

"Concerning whom?"

"Murad. On previous visits I noted his sober habits. He rarely left my uncle's side. But lately I have seen him in cafés frequented by people of his class. I thought it odd because he is careful with money."

"What do you suggest?"

"I suggest nothing. I merely present facts." The lawyer turned away as a solemn procession began to file through the house gate. "The corpse washers and mourners are here," he said. "Excuse me, Inspector, I have my sad duties."

He went away, carefully choosing the middle of the tiles that flagged the terrace. The Inspector shrugged and turned to Sergeant Abdullah, who stood at his elbow.

"You wish to interrogate the watchman, sir?" asked Abdullah.

He indicated Murad, who stood in the background at attention and holding a heavy brassbound staff at his side in the position of a grounded rifle. The man had a soldier's straight carriage. His hair and mustache were grizzled; he was quite old.

Chafik said, "Sometimes discreet inquiries are more fruitful than interrogation. I am told this man has changed his habits and become a frequenter of cafés. You will check this information."

"At once, sir."

When Abdullah left, Chafik completed his inspection of the house. He climbed high steps to the gallery surrounding the upper floor. Here had been the quarters of the harem women, but it was

many years since bright eyes had peeped through the iron lattice-work of the windows.

One door was open. The Inspector glanced inside and nodded approval of the neatness. This must be Romani's room, he thought.

More steps led to the flat roof which had served as a promenade for the women in the cool of the day. At this hour it was exposed to the glare of the sun, and Chafik covered the nape of his neck before venturing out.

He was greeted by a scolding chorus from the gathering of birds and was puzzled by their behavior until he looked up and saw a hawk poised in the sky. The birds were swifts, a gregarious species that banded together against an enemy. They commonly nested in old buildings.

Chafik loitered to watch a pair perched on an air shaft. The cock picked up a wisp of straw and offered it to the hen, who chirped plaintively and ruffled her feathers. Such obvious dejection roused the Inspector's sympathy and he said, "The fledgling that fell, was it yours?" He heard himself and was embarrassed because it was an old habit, this talking to himself.

Briefly he looked at the air shaft which rose a few feet above the parapet of the roof. The small vent in the side faced upriver to catch the prevailing summer breeze. Possibly this was the shaft which fed the *surdab*. There were traces of a nest in the vent, and Chafik wondered who had destroyed it. The Hadji would not have sanctioned it, but a servant might have taken unauthorized action.

"Was it your nest?" Chafik asked the unhappy pair, who had made shrill complaint at his approach.

He was again embarrassed by the sound of his voice making foolish conversation with birds. Walking to the far side of the roof, which overlooked the river, he glanced over the parapet. The fisherman he had noticed earlier was still standing motionless in the shallows.

The Inspector watched idly and then called down, "What fortune?"

The man looked up. "Fortune will come if Allah wills," he answered.

"Do you expect fish to rise in this heat?"

"Who can be certain of the ways of fish and men?" the man said, shrugging. "But I know there is a fish. It jumped and roused me when I was sleeping after the noon prayer. A very big fish, it made a big splash. I will get half a dinar for it in the bazaar."

"You are patient. It is three hours since the noon prayer."

The man said stubbornly, "He will rise when the sun goes down."

"May you be rewarded," said Chafik.

He went down the steps and passed the ground-floor room where the Hadji lay on the funeral bier, surrounded by chanting mourners. In the garden Chafik found Abdullah, who announced, "Sir, I have made the inquiries you requested. It is true about Murad."

"He frequents cafés?"

"Yes, sir. And I am informed he chooses places that have a Kurdish clientele. The Shafiites are a Kurdish—"

"Yes," said Chafik, twisting the signet ring on the little finger of his left hand. "I trust you made your inquiries discreetly?"

"I am your disciple, sir. I picked one of the lesser servants as a likely informant. When he talked, I arrested him on suspicion of theft so that no gossip of what I asked might reach Murad."

"You are as cautious as Mr. Romani. And now it would be tactful to remove ourselves from this house of mourning," the Inspector said. "My head whirls and I am going home to rest."

Entering his home on the Street of the Scatterer of Blessings, Inspector Chafik removed his jacket, loosened his tie, and announced to Leila, his wife, "I shall forgo food. Food causes a body to perspire. A perspiring body is as unpleasant as a dead one." He dropped into a chair under the ceiling fan.

There was an illusion of coolness; shutters had been closed at an early hour and the tiled floor was sprinkled with water to sweeten the air. The fan, rapidly drying Chafik's dank hair, chilled him, and he said irritably, "Wife, cover my head. You know I am susceptible to colds." He looked at the small boy who waited to greet him and added on a severe note, "A son should help his mother. Remove my shoes, Faisal."

The boy squatted on his heels. Then, looking up at the tired man in the chair, he asked, "Was it a very bloody murder? Was his throat cut?"

Chafik forgot the heat. He said, "Such words from such tender lips! But the error is mine; I forgot you had ears."

The ears of the eight-year-old boy who had been a waif in the bazaars of Baghdad, and adopted as the son of a childless marriage, were small and pointed, and he had enormous eyes. The father tweaked an ear and smiled, then looked at his wife who took Faisal away.

She returned to cover her husband's head with a shawl and when he took her hand and held it to his cheek, she knew he was troubled. "Let me share the burden," she said softly.

"Did I speak? Voice a thought? It is such a disturbing habit, this talking to myself."

"You were silent, but a wife reads her man's thoughts," said the small dark woman.

Chafik sat up and lighted a cigarette. "Yes, I am troubled," he admitted, and told her of the death of Hadji Hussain.

Leila exclaimed, "Oh, the poor old man! He was so saintly, so beloved."

"His death is a reflection upon my department."

"So it was murder?"

"An accident," Chafik said shortly.

"Then, my man, there can be no blame!"

"Women and ostriches," said her husband, "both seek sand piles for their heads when faced by an unwelcome fact. The Hadji died surrounded by men. Therefore I am responsible, accident or not."

"But it was an accident," Leila insisted.

He said impatiently, "Yes, yes, an accident. It could not be otherwise since the house was so carefully guarded. I do not believe an enemy entered invisibly, struck him and vanished. But—" Chafik looked for an ashtray for his cigarette and Leila hurried to bring him one, "The watchman, Murad, changed his habits," he finished.

"That worries you?" She did not understand but let him talk to ease his mind.

"Everything would seem to indicate that Hadji Hussain's death was accidental. But the behavior of Murad is not clear. And then there is the dead bird. Did it fall inside or outside the *surdab*? And the open door. Did the Hadji open it? Before or after his fatal fall? I must satisfy myself on these points before I make my report," Chafik added as he settled back to rest.

Leila left him and presently he was lulled by the swish of the ceiling fan. He slept for perhaps half an hour, restlessly, muttering to himself. Then something disturbed him and he was abruptly wide awake.

A rhythmic tapping came from the hall adjoining the room, and a voice timed to it changed in a whisper, "Wunna two, abbookel my shoe, three, four, shutter door—"

Inspector Chafik rose and drew back the bead curtain from the doorway. His small son was bouncing a hard ball against the floor; the ball was attached to an elastic looped to Faisal's finger, which made it snap back into his hand.

"Fwife six, piccup six—"

Chafik said, "Macbeth murdered sleep; you murder sleep and the English language. They do not teach you well at school. Say, 'Five, six, pick up sticks.' " The father instructed with the precision that characterized his second tongue. "Six is a numeral. Sticks are instruments of chastisement. I am tempted to use one on you."

He took the ball, looped the elastic over a finger, and idly bounced it. "When you can clearly say, 'One, two, buckle my shoe,' you may have this back," he told Faisal.

Chafik turned away so that he should not see the tears in the boy's eyes; the man who had brought punishment to so many found it hard to punish his own child.

"But, my father, already I speak English well," Faisal pleaded for approval. "Today I learned, 'Hookilt cockerobbin.' "

"You learned what?"

"Hookilt—"

Chafik put his hand to his ears. "The word is neither Arabic nor English. Surely you mean, 'Who killed—' and it goes on about a bird. A pity I cannot remember the rhyme exactly, to school you in it. I believe there is something about a sparrow."

The boy interrupted eagerly, "I sedder sparrow wit' my bowen narrow."

"Then," said Chafik, still trying to remember, "there was a fly. And Cock Robin's funeral was quite a social affair. All the birds of the air gathered—"

He stopped and looked blankly at his son and repeated, "All the birds gathered because one died. Yes, they do. Particularly gregarious birds such as swifts and sparrows." He opened his hands in a groping gesture and Faisal's ball fell and dangled unnoticed on its elastic. "I had assumed the hawk had alarmed them," Chafik went on. "A wrong assumption; they gathered to keen the end of the fledgling. And the dead bird in the Hadji's lap, when was it killed, how long before?"

Faisal was bewildered, angry and tearful. "A bird, father? Who has murdered a bird?"

"Who has murdered, and how?" Chafik repeated softly. Absently he began pulling the dangling ball by its elastic, then suddenly let it fall and once more pulled it up, watching with growing excitement.

He announced, "There was a fish. It jumped. And a fisherman; a fisherman with his net."

"A net, father?" Faisal repeated.

"The threads weave a pattern. But who was Death? Who—"

Chafik ran from the house, hatless, into the sun of late afternoon. He was halfway up the road when the wail of his son's voice penetrated the fog of his thoughts.

"Father, my father, you have forgotten your shoes!"

The Inspector hired a boat at the top of his street and dropped downstream to the river house of Hadji Hussain. He urged the boatman to make speed; he was afraid the fisherman might have gone away.

But the man was still there and looked up reproachfully as the boat floated under the high wall. "You scare my fish," he grumbled.

Chafik said, "It has not risen? Then cast your net. Here is a dinar; let me see your skill. Cast where you saw the splash."

The fisherman whirled the circular net and released it. Opening in mid-air, skimming the water like a giant bat, it struck the spot where he had seen the splash five hours earlier. Weights carried it down and with a leap the man was on it, feeling with his toes for what he had caught.

"There is something, but not a fish," he said with disappointment.

He ducked under and gathered the net around his prize. Shaking out the sand and gravel, he untangled an object from the mesh and brought it to the boat.

"A stone wrapped in cloth," he said with disgust. "My fish!"

Chafik silence him and examined the catch. Double folds of cloth were fashioned into a small stout bag. Inside was a smooth rock or lump of metal; the weight was about three kilos, the Inspector judged. The neck of the bag was tied by strong twine which had been cut short and left a dangling end.

When Chafik looked up he had the face of a hanging judge and he said to the fisherman, "This day you have netted a man's head." Then he ordered his boat to the shore.

He was admitted to the Hadji's house by the watchman.

Chafik said, "Oh, man of the hills, why did you change your habits and go to cafés? To places frequented by Shafiiites?"

Murad answered directly, "I have eaten my master's salt these many years. I went to look for his enemies among those who had threatened him. I would have killed them. Was that not proper?"

The Inspector looked at the man and saw tears in his eyes. He patted Murad's arm and said, "Forgive me, my mind follows tortuous paths. I did not perceive such a simple explanation. Go with God, faithful servant."

He ran up the steps to the roof. Swifts were darting to and fro

in the golden light of early evening, but the disconsolate pair he had noticed on his previous visit were still perched on the *surdab* air shaft.

Chafik said, "Be comforted, you who witnessed this thing. Your evidence is now very clear."

He put the weighted bag by the shaft and went down to the gallery on the second floor. The mourners were still chanting below and there was an odor of incense.

The Inspector entered Romani's room and made a careful search of closets and drawers. His task was simplified by the lawyer's tidiness and he was soon finished. Empty-handed and troubled, Chafik announced in a flat voice, "Of course, one so cautious might have destroyed it."

He went out and tried several of the other rooms. Left of the steps leading to the roof he found another that was tenanted and when he saw the clothing scattered around, the cluttered drawers, he had censorious thoughts for youth. But he searched methodically and disregarded the impulse to tidy the shambles.

With long, sensitive fingers he probed the confusion in the drawers of the dressing table. Then, from the jumble of odds and ends, he took out a tangled ball of strong cord. He put it in his pocket and continued the search.

There were letters with Cairo postmarks. He skimmed through them unaware that the chanting below had stopped, that the ceremony of preparing the corpse of Hadji Hussain was over. He was still reading, oblivious to his surroundings, when instinct warned him and he looked up.

Sadir stood in the doorway, and behind him was the gaunt figure of Romani. Sadir said petulantly, "What are you doing in my room reading my letters?"

"You will explain, Inspector," interposed Romani sternly. "I strongly disapprove of this irregular action. As a lawyer—"

"The hyena," said Chafik, "normally follows in the wake of the lion. I have not yet made the kill."

"I shall complain—"

"Complainants, some of them, await on the roof. Let us join them." The Inspector made his little bow.

He escorted the two men from the room and up the steps. Sadir had a dazed look and he stumbled. Romani's thin body was stooped. No one spoke.

When they were on the roof, Chafik said, "The open door of the *surdab* led me astray, but now I know who opened it. The Hadji received a fatal blow, and when he was able, he stumbled to the

door for help, but already it was too late, and he collapsed after he opened it."

"An accident," insisted Romani. "My uncle tripped and fell."

"It was murder."

"He was alone in the room."

"Yes," said Chafik. "He was alone, yet he was attacked. I will show you how it was done. But we lack a dead bird, a fledgling. There was one in a nest here." The Inspector pointed to the vent of the air shaft. "Your uncle did not permit nests to be destroyed, but it was necessary to remove this one to clear the shaft. The marks on the stone prove it was done recently. Even more conclusive is the agitation of the birds. Have you noticed how many swifts have gathered, a whole community rallying to a bereaved family?"

Romani said, "Come to the point. I know nothing about birds."

Chafik said, "Fortunately I have a son who remembered an English nursery rhyme. But to continue. The nest was destroyed, the neck of the fledgling was twisted, and as bait for the old man who loved birds it was dropped down the shaft."

He looked from one man to the other. The lawyer was tense, his forehead furrowed as though he concentrated on a difficult brief. Sadir's dazed eyes stared and he chewed his underlip.

"The Hadji was reading," continued Inspector Chafik. "He was disturbed by the fall of the bird and rose to succor it. He picked it up, wondered what had caused the fatality, and naturally looked up the air shaft. Then this happened."

Chafik produced the weighted bag found in the river and knotted to the neck the ball of twine from Sadir's drawer. He said conversationally, "This is how a man was killed," and dropped the weight down the shaft, retaining the end of the line in one hand.

Nothing in forty feet of smooth brickwork impeded the fall. When the bag struck the floor of the *surdab* the sound echoed back.

"Not a perfect test," Chafik apologized. "It was not so noisy when it struck the Hadji's head. The force of a three-kilo weight falling forty feet can be calculated. It was not necessary to practice marksmanship—the opening is small and the target was large. Even a glancing blow would have been fatal to a frail old man."

He stopped and for the first time looked directly at Sadir. The young man's mouth opened, but no sound came from it.

"And then," the Inspector said pitilessly, "you hauled up your weapon, cut the line short and threw the bag into the river. Did you fear the line would float? But how careless of you to leave it in your room! Otherwise you planned well, took nice advantage of foolish threats made against your victim by quite harmless

people. You reasoned that with a police guard around the house the death of a man in a closed room would be considered an accident. And you would have been right if parent birds had not keened the cruel death of a fledgling, if my son had not played with a toy which I found very suggestive. And if there had not been a patient fisherman in the shallows."

Romani shook his head and said in his thin voice, "This case has a weakness. What was the motive for the alleged crime?"

"You yourself told us this wretched young decadent preferred Cairo to Baghdad. Also there are letters from a woman which suggest a powerful motive. Sadir was desperate to get back to her, but the Hadji had been appointed his guardian and controlled his money and his freedom. Young, spoiled, ruthless—I trust you are convinced, Mr. Romani?"

Lulled by the cadence of his own voice, the Inspector was unprepared when the lawyer turned with unexpected speed and caught Sadir by the throat. "You killed my uncle! You killed my uncle!" he screamed as he forced the young man to his knees.

Chafik broke the death grip. "Restrain yourself!" he said sharply, and then with a smile he added, "Such depth of emotion, Mr. Romani! How admirable—and how unexpected in one so cautious!"

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