

The Ambassador of Poker

BY ACHMED ABDULLAH

*Captain Abdullah is perhaps the best man with cards among present-day writers. He also is one of the best with a typewriter, so far as that goes, but at poker he is a Dickens. A colorist in his work, he is as well no design in lavender and old lace in his living, as anyone knows who reads his *The Cat Had Nine Lives*. In it, like most autobiographies, I suppose the author gave himself the edge; but it's the other fellow who needs the edge when the monocle of Syyed Shaykh Achmed Abdullah Nadir Khan el-Iddris-eyieh el-Durani gleams above the baize. I should have enjoyed seeing him tangle with Bill Mizner. Meanwhile, here's "The Ambassador of Poker."*

HE STRUCK the Hongkong waterfront with the enthusiasm and speed of a typhoon, disguised in cordovan brogues shined to a mirrorlike glossiness, white linen knickerbockers of an audacious, hip-flaring cut, golf-stockings of light-brown camel's wool with turned down tops of Royal Stuart tartan, a waist-fitting norfolk of an intensely hairy County Sligo tweed, a tub-silk shirt in bold stripes of rose and magenta, a four-in-hand of rich scarlet, and a silver-grey Stetson hat with a puggree band in a chaste electric-blue!

Beneath all this exuberant finery was a healthy body of twenty-five, well muscled, sparsely fleshed, supple and strong and straight as a lance, topped by a ruddy young face with uptilted, slightly inquisitive nose, a strong jaw, violet-blue eyes, a honey-colored, embryonic moustache. Too, somewhere inside of this sartorial splendor were three things: a flat purse containing seventeen dollars and sixty-four cents, a much thumbed poker deck, and a six-shooter; and be it mentioned right here

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that Randolph C. Fairbairn, lately of Charlottesville, Va., and more recently of San Francisco, Cal., while he could riffle the cards so as to make a native-born Montanan pale with envy, carried the revolver mainly for show.

For he was not a good marksman, and had only slipped the weapon into his pocket on the advice—perhaps sardonic, since one can never tell about the Scots—of Donald M'Eachran, the chief engineer of the *Malabar Castle*, aboard which floating, Lloyd-suspected, ten-thousand-tons monstrosity Randolph Fairbairn had taken passage out of San Francisco, Westward Ho! a few weeks earlier.

Acting distinctly against his dour Free-Kirk judgment, Donald M'Eachran had taken a liking to the younger man.

"Why are you going to China?" he had asked one night, watching him play solitaire.

"I don't know. Just drifting, I reckon."

"Drifting—? What do you mean, lad?"

"What I said. Just—oh—well—drifting," the other had repeated. "Following the sun."

"The sun goes down at times—away down and out," had come the bitter comment.

"Sure enough—but rises again the next morning, sir, all warm and golden and full of hope." Fairbairn had placed the deuce of spades on the ace. "I'll be able to earn some sort of a living in China. There ought to be chances over yonder, don't you think?"

"What about your chances back home, in America?"

"I reckon I used them up."

"Every last one of them?"

"Yes, sir. As far as I know." Fairbairn had shuffled the deck with agile fingers.

"Hm—What can you do—?"

"You mean—?"

"To earn a living."

"I can play poker."

"Great heavens above!" The Scot had stared, not believing his ears. "What?"

"Poker!" Fairbairn had reiterated. "I don't mean to blow my own horn. But honesty compels me to admit that I'm one of those rare human beings who can split a tall pair without moving a muscle and fill an inside straight—and get away with it—yes, sir! That's how I

earned my passage money—playing poker on the Barbary Coast with a couple of limejuicers."

"And you're going to try and repeat the experiment on the Hongkong waterfront?"

"Yes—until I get me a job or perhaps—" smiling reminiscently—"until a job steps up and gets me."

"Well, my lad—" the Scot had risen in obedience to a clamoring bell from the engine-room—"take my tip. If you play—and if you insist on winning—"

"I can't help winning!"

"All right—you look out for yourself in Hongkong. Slip a gun in your pocket—next to your rabbit's foot."

"I will. Thank you, sir," had come the courtly rejoinder, though secretly Fairbairn had not liked the thought.

For he was an indifferent marksman, and too, he did not believe in fighting. Not that he was a coward. But he said of himself that he was a very nervous man, and there was a tale floating about his native Virginian hills, how, quite against his will, he had been forced into a fight by three rough mountain-whites who, very unjustly, had accused him of cheating, and how—out of sheer nervousness, his lawyer had told the court—he had badly beaten up the same three mountain-whites, a sheriff, a deputy sheriff, and a couple of unclassified Negroes.

"Out of sheer nervousness, gentlemen of the jury!"—and, oddly, his lawyer had spoken the truth.

He found his poker game in the back parlor of the Grand Hotel, owned by Leopoldo de Sousa, a Macao Portuguese half-breed whose presence on the waterfront was a continuous thorn in the side of all respectable Chinese of the neighborhood.

Four men were playing: the usual driftwood of the seven seas, the sort which European progress chucks to the limits of a duly appreciative Asiatic world, tucked snugly in the same cargo hold with whiskey and disease. There was a British ex-skipper who had piled and lost his ship on a reef no Admiralty chart had ever heard of; a bearded Frenchman from Cochin-China who did a thriving trade in pitiful, nameless, living wares; a Yankee mate wanted for murder in Palermo, for gun-running in Port Said, and for barratry in Vladivostok; and a huge, beefy Hollander, over six feet in height, with a beet-red complexion, round, baby-blue eyes, a drooping moustache, hands like hams, and feet like

those of an aurochs, who—as he said of himself—followed bullying as a vocation.

For a few minutes Randolph Fairbairn watched the game. Then he asked politely for permission to sit in.

"Sure," the Yankee mate replied; and in a whisper to the ex-skipper: "He's my meat. I seen him first. Just pipe his scenery, will you?"

"How many chips do you want?" asked Van Alkemaade, the Hollander.

"Seventeen dollars and sixty-four cents as a starter," replied Fairbairn, emptying his purse on the table. "Maybe I won't need any more."

"Maybe the moon is made of green cheese," said the Yankee mate.

"Me—" commented the Frenchman—"I am a sentimentalist. If I love one thing it is the innocence of the very young. Deal, mon petit!"

But poker is a psychological, not a logical game; a psychological game, moreover, of which Randolph Fairbairn had made a profound study, both practical and academic, and the four gamblers in de Sousa's back parlor discovered this presently.

Fairbairn's face, when he picked up his hand, showed less emotion than that of a mummy; his voice, when he asked for cards, was as void of human emotion as an ossified bagpipe played by a Presbyterian Highlander in prohibition time; his elocution when he said, "I play these!" was a pure product of art, a soft, gentle purr blended with a steely threat. His strategy was never twice alike; and when once in a while the others abandoned a pot to him without calling his hand and afterwards, with the spirit and voices of early Christian martyrs, inquired what he had had, he could lie like a stockbroker with a Greek mother.

He centered his attacks on Van Alkemaade's steadily diminishing pile, and it was the latter who rose suddenly and said:

"Clear out. We don't want you here."

"All right, sir," Fairbairn smiled sweetly. "I hate to stick around where people don't like me. Here—cash my chips—and I'll toddle along, gentlemen."

"Cash your chips—nom de Dieu?" echoed the Frenchman.

"My sainted grand-aunt Priscilla!" laughed the British ex-skipper. "Cash your blinking chips, did you say, young fellow-my-lad?"

"Yes, sir," came the courteous reply.

"Cash your chips like merry hell!" remarked Van Alkemaade. He waved a huge hand. "Beat it while the beating is good!" And when the Virginian insisted on being paid, he turned on him with a roar, with a flood of foul language, with insults to the other's race and nation and maternal ancestry.

Fairbairn turned pale. But he shrugged his shoulders.

"I am a nervous man," he said, half to himself. "I do not care for fighting." He picked up his hat. "Very well, gentlemen. Just give me back my seventeen dollars and sixty-four cents."

"This, mon petit," smiled the Frenchman who was banker, "is what you will leave here for the privilege of having played with us."

"I won't."

"Yes, you will!" said the Hollander, and suddenly faced the younger man, his huge, hairy fists clenched, berserker rage glistening in his round, blue eyes.

Fairbairn shook his head.

"Honestly," he said to himself, "if I don't get out of here double-quick, there'll be trouble. I am such a nervous man—and I do hate fighting—"

So he turned to go away. But his foot caught in the grass mat, precipitating him forward. He reeled directly against Van Alkemaade. His hand went up automatically, clutching for something solid to hold on to; and not knowing, never imagining what he was doing, he gripped the Hollander's nose firmly with his right hand, tweaking it with the despair of a body which feels itself falling.

The latter jumped back with a bellow of rage.

"*Goed en Bloed!*" he thundered.

He let drive from the shoulder, caught Fairbairn in the chest, and threw him half a dozen feet. The younger man reeled again. Again he clutched for support—found none. His right hip bumped smartly against the corner of the table. Instinctively he put his hand in his pocket to rub the hurt place—and encountered the six-shooter.

"Heavens!" he said to himself, while he clutched the weapon and while he saw the Hollander advance, slowly, crushingly, like a Jagan-nath of vengeance. "I knew it! I just knew there'd be trouble, and I'm a nervous man—so nervous! Dear, dear—" as Van Alkemaade raised both his enormous fists—"I wish I hadn't taken this fool gun. Now I have it, I simply will have to use it, I reckon. And I never could shoot straight! Very well—if I must, I must!"

These thoughts passed through his mind in the fraction of a second. Then, all at once, there was a terrific explosion, a bullet burying itself in the ceiling, thick, acrid smoke—a yell and a flop—and there was the bully before him on his knees, howling for mercy.

Within the next half-minute it appeared that a new king, a red-handed warrior and mighty-thewed chief, had arisen in Israel. A chief by the name of Randolph C. Fairbairn, yet one gently spoken who turned quietly to the gamblers and said:

"And now, gentlemen—I hate to incommode you—but if you will be good enough to cash my chips I shall toddle along to my little bed."

They paid him and, the six-shooter in his right hand, he was pocketing the money with his left when, at the sound of soft, gliding laughter from the door behind him, he turned and saw, on the threshold, accompanied by the frightened and obsequious Leopoldo de Sousa, a tall, obese, butter-yellow Manchu. His immense body was dressed in a rather extravagant and foppishly Pekinese manner—a long robe of orange-colored, satin-lined grenadine silk embroidered profusely with black bats in sign of good luck, and on his round mutton-pie cap a button of transparent red, the emblem of a mandarin of the first class, worn in calm defiance of the fact that the Chinese republican administration had forbidden the wearing of imperial insignia.

It was quite evident that he was a power in the rowdy land of Hongkong's waterfront.

For, at a low word, at a wave of his right hand—a wondrously white hand with long finger nails encased in gold and lapis lazuli—the four gamblers and de Sousa disappeared without any argument.

"Good evening," he said to Fairbairn, stepping fully into the room and closing the door. His words were well modulated, his fat face suffused with a patient kindness.

Fairbairn was proud of the fact that, himself a gentleman, he could spot another gentleman regardless if his complexion was white, green, or purple, regardless if he was a Buddhist, a Jew, a High Church Episcopalian, or a Theosophist.

"Good evening, sir," he returned the greeting with a bow distinctly reminiscent of magnolia blossoms, high satin stocks, and corn pones.

"I watched the little scene you enacted just now," the Manchu continued in perfect English, "Mr.—ah——?"

"Fairbairn, sir. Randolph C. Fairbairn, of Charlottesville, Virginia, sir."

"Charmed, I am sure. A Virginian, are you?"

"Yes, sir. An unworthy son of that great and noble commonwealth."

"I am delighted. You see—my partner is a Virginian—" the Manchu smiled—"very much of a Virginian."

Fairbairn was astonished. "Your partner is—what?" he demanded incredulously.

"A Virginian. I am Sheng Pao—of Jones & Sheng Pao," returned the Oriental.

"Oh!"

Fairbairn was impressed. For he had been long enough around the San Francisco waterfront whence men go down to the sea in ships and where they tell the gossip of the four climes, he had heard enough tales aboard the *Malabar Castle* to realize that the house of Jones & Sheng Pao was a household word throughout the Far East and the Pacific, a household word even in international banking and Oriental trading circles in New York, Paris, London, Berlin, and Brussels.

"A cigarette?" inquired Sheng Pao, offering his tortoise-shell case.

"Thank you, sir."

For a couple of minutes they smoked in silence, smiling upon each other with mutual, instinctive liking, until at last Sheng Pao turned to Randolph Fairbairn with a question:

"Pardon my inquisitiveness—but you came here to—?"

"To play poker, sir."

"If you will permit me to give you a card for the Hongkong Club, you will find milieu as well as company there much more to your liking, Mr. Fairbairn."

"Doubtless. Thank you, sir. But I couldn't afford their stakes."

"Oh—" the Manchu looked up, interested, studying the younger man intensely, a glint in his narrow-lidded, purple-black eyes, "you are—ah . . . ?"

"Broke. Stony-broke, except—" laughing, "for my original pile and what I won here."

"Pardon me a second time. But I wonder if you would care to work."

"Gladly," came Fairbairn's hearty reply.

"Good. I believe in work and its shining rewards. Did not the blessed Confucius say that if you give a man a golden pile the devil of his disease will depart in a trice?" He lit another cigarette. "My partner is away on a visit to Japan. But I know he will be as delighted as I am to have you with our firm."

"I am not a businessman," said Randolph Fairbairn, "and I do not speak a single word of Chinese."

"But you are a gentleman—and a fighting man. You see—" the Manchu dropped his voice to a purring whisper—"we need somebody just like you. In business I obey instinct and impulse. Permit me to tell you that I trust you implicitly."

"And—just because you honor me with your trust—" interrupted Fairbairn, "permit *me* to tell you that you are mistaken in me."

"I know a gentleman when I see one."

"Possibly. But I am not a fighting man."

"I saw the flash of your pistol. I watched you subdue the biggest bully in Hongkong."

"You misinterpreted the scene. I always avoid fighting, chiefly with firearms. I am a bad shot, and I am a nervous and peaceful man. I am much more familiar with cards—with the psychology of cards and of gamblers."

But in spite of everything which Fairbairn could say, the Manchu attributed his disclaimer of warlike prowess to "charming, youthful modesty"; and so an hour later, in Jones & Sheng Pao's Hongkong branch office, he found himself engaged as: "let me call it special messenger," said the Manchu; and he proceeded to explain to the other what was wanted of him.

"There is," he related, "an interior trade route, an overland caravan trail cutting through Southern Manchuria, through the heart of Asia. Whoever controls this controls—ah—many things. It is the most direct connecting link, commercially, between Eastern and Western Asia. It has been used for hundreds—no—for thousands of years. It is a monument to the dead centuries of barter and trade and imperial enterprise!"

Sheng Pao looked up, a high light eddying in his eyes, his fingers stabbing dramatically into the coiling shadows.

For, Mongol to the core in his lust for money and power, he was Mongol, too, in his love of ancient traditions, ancient culture, and ancient glories; and he gave to the young American a quick-moving, fantastic, motley history of this trade route that made his listener gasp; speaking of all those who had gone down the long Central Asian trail, into Bokhara and Khiva and Tashkent and yellow Samarkand, into mysterious Tibet and Afghanistan, into Persia and India and the Caucasus and beyond; Jews and Phoenicians and Arabs, Turks and

Tartars and Chinese; the men of Greece and Macedonia during Alexander the Great's magnificent fling at dominions; careless, swaggering Romans; the red-faced Kirgiz and Kalmicks of the Silver Horde smuggling their tea and ginseng and soy beans under the noses of Gengiz Khan's captains; the emissaries of Nadir Shah, the Turkoman brigand and conqueror, trading opium for gunpowder with some purring vulpine Chinese from Shensi in the shadow of a Khokand wayside shrine; the fur-capped, felt-booted ambassadors of Tamerlane galloping up and down the length of the trail, levying the tribute of the farther lands; the camp-followers of Yakoob Beg's Yarkand legions reaping gold amongst the carrion of the battlefields; the princes of Mohammed el-Ghazna's entourage bartering the honor of their scimitars for a Hindu banker's minted silver—memories all—a panorama—a clanking, immense epic of Oriental commerce!

For centuries control of this road had belonged to the princely Tartar clan of Seng-ko-lin-chin, the direct descendants of Gengiz Khan, though under Chinese suzerainty; and the last of this line, Prince Chang-kentso-fang, had recently sold an option on his ancestral overlordship of the trail to Jones & Sheng Pao.

"It means to us," added the Manchu, "what ownership of a trans-continental American trunk-line would mean to the United Steel Trust—without anti-trust laws. It will decrease our costs of transportation to the West, while increasing those of our competitors."

"Why did Prince Hickamadoodle sell out to you?"

"He is a profligate young man who lives in Peking and who needs large sums of ready cash."

"Seems to me you did very well by yourselves."

"Yes. But—how do you say in America—something about a colored gentleman in a lumber-yard—?"

"A nigger in the woodpile!" laughed Fairbairn.

"Same thing. You see, our most dangerous rival, the Central Chinese Chartered Company, also wants this trail, and they are hand in glove with the Chinese republican government. We are willing to take up our option any time, but the deal won't be binding until the seal of the princely dynasty has been affixed to the contract." And he went on to relate that this seal was in Lid-zu, the ancient Manchurian capital, in the safekeeping of a certain Gup-to, an old Lamaist priest who was the land's hereditary prime minister.

"What's the matter with His Princely Nibs taking a run home and fetching that precious seal of his?"

"The Chinese authorities won't let him leave Peking. They are keeping him there under trumped-up political charges."

"Well—can't he send for the seal?"

"That's where the rub comes in. Before the Prince left Lid-zu he told Gup-to that he might sell his overlordship of the trail and arranged with him for a certain code phrase, by word of mouth or by letter, on hearing or reading which Gup-to would forward the seal to his master."

"Well—?"

"How *can* he, or we, send for it? We can't write, since the Chinese are sure to supervise all our mail going to Lid-zu; and, too, they would be able to spot and intercept any confidential messenger we might send—all except you. That's why I want you, Mr. Fairbairn."

"Why especially me, sir?"

"I've been looking for somebody just like you. You are exactly the type I want. You see, you are the only one they would not possibly suspect!"

"I reckon," laughed the Virginian, "that last remark of yours was not exactly in the nature of a compliment, in fact I might say it was rather a dirty crack. Do I really look as big a jackass as all that?"

"No, no, no!" protested Sheng Pao. "But you do look—oh—a green-horn you call it in America, eh? They would never dream that you are our trusted messenger. Also, I repeat, if it should come to a showdown you are a fighting man, unafraid—"

"If it comes to a showdown in poker—yes—I am a good bluffer and a good psychologist—if that's what you mean!"

"Have it your own way. But I want you to go North, to Lid-zu. You can give out you are a rich young American on a big-game hunting trip—I'll see to that. Arrived at Lid-zu, you will call on prime minister Gup-to and whisper in his ear the coded phrase which he and the Prince have arranged for."

"He'll give me the seal, I reckon?"

"No. Too dangerous. But he'll manage to send it somehow, most likely by the hand of some high Buddhist priest, and not even the Chartered Company or the Peking authorities will dare to interfere with the free movements of a priest, given the fanaticism of the Manchus and the Tartars. But—you must hurry. Our option runs out

inside of seven weeks. I came to Hongkong, trying to make a deal with the British government, and I failed. You must be in Lid-zu by the end of this month. Otherwise—" he shrugged his shoulders—"the Prince will sell out to the Chartered Company as soon as our option runs out. They will offer him a large sum of ready money, more than we can afford. Here—" he gave to Fairbairn a thick roll of banknotes—"buy yourself a gun, anything you need to pass as a big-game hunter. I cannot get you a guide. It would look suspicious to the spies of the Chartered Company. But the people at the hotel will help you. And now—listen—" instinctively lowering his voice, "here is the coded message for the prime minister: '*Fa-hor-qwan-na-chi!*' "

"Write it down, please!"

"No—by the Buddha! Somebody might find the paper on you and put two and two together. You must learn it by heart."

"All right, sir," sighed Randolph Fairbairn, "if I must, I reckon I must!"

And "*Fa-hor-qwan-na-chi!*" he mumbled to himself the next afternoon as, accompanied by Kung, a giant, red-faced Tartar guide and interpreter strongly recommended by the hotel, he crossed to the Chinese mainland and took train to Peking; and again a few days later, as the train pulled through the breach in Peking's outer wall—the wall the beginnings of which date back to the twelfth century before Christ, when Peking was still known as Ki, when the Ming emperors were still Tartar barbarians near the shores of Lake Baikal who ate raw horseflesh, quaffed curdled milk out of bleached human skulls, and took no interest in the delicately tinted and ornamented porcelain with which their name is associated in American museums and auction-sales.

They left Peking on camel back, traveling West and Northwest, the silent Tartar jogging ahead, crouched on his mount's hairy hump like some great, malevolent ape. Fairbairn did not like the man, tried to combat the feeling as unfair since Kung was in every way an excellent servant; tried to tell himself that it was simply the result of racial loneliness and homesickness here in the yellow heart of Asia where, down the broad highways, half the Far East seemed to be passing—flat-featured Mongolians with raucous voices, their hair burnt red by the sun; coppery Kansuh braves swaggering along with a crackle of naked steel, plum-colored coats tossed dandyishly over supple shoulders; drovers from far Si-chuen, speaking an uncouth dialect and fighting with each

other and all they encountered; stately Manchus riding in gorgeously lacquered litters and surrounded by mounted servants; black-turbaned Moslems and Solon Tartars from Turkestan; furtive-eyed Honan traders, their waist-bands bulging with gold; government couriers, carrying dispatches from one provincial capital to another, riding at a gallop no matter how rough or steep the road . . . they passed on, all cold, practical, bartering, with hardly a look at Fairbairn.

Just a foreigner—said the expression in their narrow slit-eyes—just a *fan-kwai*—another one of those mad, coarse-haired barbarians! And Randolph Fairbairn told himself with a laugh that when it came to racial prejudice China could give lessons even to Virginia.

Near the frontier the country grew deserted. Civil war had passed there recently, blighting, burning, killing. For days they traveled over a plain, thinly dotted with desert vegetation; then, at the end of the week, they passed a basaltic ridge and descended into a steaming valley.

"Manchuria!" said Kung, laconically, pointing a bony finger.

Three days later they pulled up their camels on a small hill shadowed by enormous, gnarled thorn trees.

Kung pointed.

"Look, master," he said. "We are nearly at our place of destination. To-morrow morning early we shall be there."

"Why not make Lid-zu to-night?" asked the Virginian.

"Impossible." Kung shook his head. "They close the city gates at sundown, and there is no good camping place near the walls. Here we have fuel and shelter and—" pointing vaguely—"over there a spring."

"All right. You're the doctor."

So they unsaddled, hobbled their camels, and Kung, picking up the canteen, said that he was going down the hill to get water for their supper.

"The spring is easily twenty minutes from here, so I'll be gone quite a while," he said. "If you want to rest in the meantime—?"

"Bully idea!" replied Fairbairn and, using his saddle for a pillow, was asleep at once.

But it was not long before he found himself suddenly awakened by a sharp voice that boomed out of the trooping, blotched shadows in back of him where a narrow trail twisted up through the jungle of gnarled pines and thorn trees and toward a sweep of rugged, fantastic basalt hills.

"Hullo, there, young fellow-my-lad!" said the voice.

Fairbairn rose and turned. He was startled to hear words, English words, without the Mongol singsong, here in the clogging, silent loneliness of Manchuria. Then, as he stared into the shadows, as issuing from them he saw the British ex-skipper followed by the other three gamblers with whom he had played in de Sousa's waterfront dive, he reached for the high-power rifle which he had bought in Hongkong on the morning of his departure to lend color to his tale that he was going on a big-game hunting expedition. But he obeyed immediately when Van Alkemaade bellowed at him to raise his hands above his head and to keep them there until further orders.

A few seconds later the Yankee mate—whom the others addressed as "Elliott"—had searched the Virginian's pocket and had found and confiscated the six-shooter.

"Good," said the Hollander, waving his red fist beneath Fairbairn's nose. "Now your fangs are drawn, you infernal little murderer!"

"You may drop your mitts!" chimed in Elliott.

"Thank you, sir," Fairbairn replied politely, and, suddenly, shouting with all the strength of his lungs: "Kung! Oh, Kung!"

Elliott laughed.

"Save your breath," he advised. "Kung has been well paid to bring you to this particular spot—well paid even before you left Hongkong." He picked up the high-power rifle and played with it. "A peach of a weapon," he remarked, "and, incidentally, it's this weapon which gave your game away. I happened to see you buy it over at Smith & Utrecht's store."

"And—?"

"I got curious. A fellow who gambles at a low shebang and doesn't own a red except seventeen bucks and the little he won from us, can't afford to invest three hundred beans in a shooting iron. So I inquire some more—and I find out about the Tartar guide and the big-game trip—all on seventeen smackers! Then I recall that Sheng Pao talked to you down at the waterfront. Fishy—says I to myself—and I talk it over with my pals, and we go and make a deal with a party who aint exactly twin-brothers to old Sheng Pao in loving affection—"

"Oh—" Randolph Fairbairn remembered what the Manchu had told him—"you're in the employ of the Central Chartered Company, I reckon?"

"We work for anybody who kicks through with the kale. We aint

snobs. Money don't smell, is our motto! And just now our job is to see to it that you don't set foot in that little burg over yonder before the end of the month, five days from to-day. That's why we followed you all the way, until we got you into a good and lonely place. That's what we are paid for, and we're honest crooks, aint we, Frenchy?"—with a wink at the Frenchman.

"Mon ami," agreed the latter, "you have pronounced there—comment dire?—an entire noseful!"

"Your nose may be full," commented Van Alkemaade, "but my stomach isn't. Which reminds me—who is going to cook? I am sick of it."

So, it appeared, were the others, and when the British ex-skipper suggested Kung, Elliott told him that the latter was by this time doubtless well on his way to his black-felt tent in the heart of Tartary.

"All right," said Van Alkemaade, turning to Fairbairn, "I guess it's up to you."

"What do you mean?"

"You are appointed chef!"

"I won't do it!" exclaimed Fairbairn. "I hate to mention such an obvious fact. But permit me to remind you that I am a gentleman from Virginia—not a hash-slinger."

The Hollander grew an angry red.

"As fresh as ever, aren't you, you damned little pimple on the nose of humanity?" he demanded thickly. "You're going to do exactly as you are told."

"And no blinking back-talk," added the ex-skipper.

"I won't do it!"

"Oh, yes, you will!" laughed the Yankee mate. "You are going to cook for the lot of us—and I warn you, Dutchy and I are mighty fussy about our eats!"

"Right!" joined in Van Alkemaade. He took Fairbairn by the shoulder and twirled him around. "Look—over there—see my pack? Open it and take out the raw materials and fix up a lot of food and see to it that the bacon is crisp! Remember you've lost your gun, you murderous little wretch! Get busy!"

"And that aint all!" came the Yankee's afterthought. "You're going to be our maid-of-all-work until the end of the month. And we aint going to take no chances with you either. At night, when we turn in,

we're going to hog-tie you, and during the day—well—” he patted his revolver—“we got our little persuaders all cocked and primed. We aint going to bump you off and I hope it won't be necessary to cripple you for life. But if ever you attempt to skip the landscape we'll pump you so full o' holes the guys in back of you'll complain of the draft. Now fix up supper!”

During the next twenty-four hours Randolph C. Fairbairn worked as he had never worked before. Between spreading and airing blankets, cleaning up, oiling boots, and cooking for four husky men as well as himself, he had hardly enough time to call his soul his own. Too, there were the camels, his own and those of the gamblers, to be taken care of. He made no attempt to run away, and it would have been useless. For the men were in grim earnest. All day he was watched by one or two of them, or the whole four, and at night he was trussed up. They bullied and abused and dragooned him, but he never complained. He rarely spoke. He just attended to his manifold duties. Yet, deep in the back cells of his brain, the germs of a plan were slowly evolving—a plan, though, which demanded a certain conjunction of circumstances. Could he force these circumstances—? He wondered; fretted a little.

Then, late on the evening of the second day, he smiled suddenly to himself—a maddening, rather supercilious smile—when he heard Van Alkemaade complain that it was all very well, that “sure enough we're earning our pay. But—God—I was never more bored in my life!”

“Same here!” agreed the ex-skipper. “If there's one thing I hate it's scenery in the raw!”

“But what can we do?” demanded the Frenchman.

“Not a doggone thing,” sighed the Yankee, “except take off our shoes and stockings and count our toes, or maybe make mud pies, or . . .” He interrupted himself as he saw the Virginian, whose back was to the company, bending busily over a flat, low tree stump. “Hey!” he cried, “What are you doing there, runt?”

“Nothing much,” drawled Fairbairn. “Just playing solitaire.”

“What? You got cards with you?”

“Never without them, sir.”

“Well—you're going to be without them right here and now. Pass them over.” He took the deck from Fairbairn and turned to his friends with a whoop of joy. “The country is saved, fellows! Come on in.”

"*Mon petit*," said the Frenchman to Fairbairn, "I feel like kissing you—from sheer gratitude!" and Fairbairn smiled, as he told himself that his thought germs had sprouted.

During most of that night and all the following morning—the third day, Fairbairn considered, and only two more before he had to be in Lid-zu—the four played poker, draw and stud, deuces wild and seven-card-peak, while the Virginian, whom they had put between them so that they could watch him, looked on, thinking quietly, sharply, all his mental faculties centered on his plan for escape—a plan built on his intense understanding of the psychology of poker and poker-players. It was in the early afternoon that, squinting at Van Alkemaade's hand and seeing him exercise very poor judgment in drawing to his cards, then lose the pot, the Virginian decided that the moment had come. He broke into withering, sardonic laughter.

"What are you laughing at?" demanded the Hollander, glaring at him.

"At you, sir."

"Oh—you are, are you?"

"Absolutely!"

"And why—? Hey—answer me—why?"

"Your holding that ace for a kicker when Elliott raised before the draw! Why—I knew better than that in high-school!"

"Yes—" sneered Van Alkemaade—"you're a hell of a fine poker-player! Think a whole lot of yourself, just because you beat us that one time. You were lucky that day—and you couldn't do it again!"

"Couldn't I?"

"Indeed you couldn't!"

"I could, too!" insisted Fairbairn.

"Oh—I'll teach you a lesson, you little wart. Got any money with you?"

"Yes. Quite a roll. From Sheng Pao. You forgot to pinch it when you searched me."

"Never mind," said the Hollander, "we're going to get it honest. How many chips do you want?"

And so the four-handed game changed into a fivesome, and all afternoon they shuffled and dealt and drew, and, as on that day in Hongkong, Randolph Fairbairn won from the very first.

Never in his life had he played a better game. Every once in a while he let one or another of the four bluff him on purpose and walk away

with the pot. And then, the very next deal, the man who had bluffed him successfully would rise to the bait with the alacrity of folly and greed. He would even rise to the naked hook, and Fairbairn would be there with "the goods," playing for blood, merciless, iron-visaged, like a god of destruction. At other times he would play a slow, waiting game, for a long time, half asleep, until the others would have a conception of him as a man who was sick of bad luck dogging him; and then, all at once, magnificently, he would shatter these conceptions of his opponents with a fact of thumping force; a big full, or four of a kind, or some such trifle.

"God—what luck!" exclaimed Van Alkemaade as Fairbairn topped his three nines with three tens.

"Your deal!"

"How many?"

"I reckon I play these!"

"Of course you would!"

"Damn!"

But if poker is a psychological and not a logical game, it is also psychological and not logical in the atmosphere which it creates; and so gradually, as they dealt round after round, the four gamblers forgot where they were and why. They forgot the trees, the jungle, the wilderness, the whole yellow Continent. For them there existed only the game, the soft thud of the cards, the clink of the dry beans which they used for chips, and their luck, good or bad, until finally Van Alkemaade rose, just as he had done on that day in de Sousa's waterfront dive, and told Fairbairn that he was not wanted any longer in the game.

But this time Fairbairn protested.

"I appeal to you, gentlemen, I did not ask to sit in. Van Alkemaade asked *me*!"

"Right-oh!" said the ex-skipper; and they overruled the Hollander, who sat down again, glaring at Fairbairn out of round, baby-blue eyes.

He glared yet more intensely when, shortly afterwards, he saw Fairbairn glide his right hand over the discards. The Virginian did it rather clumsily—naturally so, since never before in his life had he done such a thing.

Once more the Hollander rose. This time his voice was cold as ice. He was less furious than indignant. For a gambler, as were the others, he took a keen pride in being an honest gambler as he saw honesty. He

might refuse to pay his losses. He might bully the winner or even black-jack him. But—cheat at cards—? Never!

He stammered forth that two seconds earlier he had discarded the queen of spades, and that:

"Look! Fairbairn won that last pot on a full house—three queens and a pair of deuces! And—look! Damn it all—look!" he pointed at the Virginian's cards, which lay face up. "The queen of hearts—the queen of diamonds—and the queen of spades! You—you—cheat—you—"

Suddenly his cold rage left him and he became incoherent. He took Fairbairn by the neck, shook him, then sent him sprawling into the thick undergrowth that surrounded the camp.

"Get out and keep away!" he shouted. "We don't want anything to do with people who cheat at cards!"

He picked up his rifle, threateningly drew a bead; and Randolph C. Fairbairn ran down the trail as fast as he could, unhobbled his camel in the twinkling of a moment and was off toward Lid-zu at a thundering gallop.

And, five weeks later, in Hongkong, Sheng Pao introduced Randolph C. Fairbairn to his partner Blennerhassett Jones, who had just returned from Japan.

The two Virginians bowed to each other with exquisite politeness.

"Delighted to meet you, Mr. Fairbairn."

"Charmed, I'm sure, Mr. Jones."

"From Charlottesville, Mr. Fairbairn?"

"Yes, sir."

"Any relation to Mr. Jefferson Fairbairn?"

"Mr. Jefferson Fairbairn was my father's uncle, sir."

"Didn't Mr. Jefferson Fairbairn marry one of the Barton girls from Richmond?"

"Yes, sir."

"I am delighted. Miss Barton was second cousin once removed to my father on his mother's side, Mr. Fairbairn!"

"I am charmed, Mr. Jones!"

They bowed again; again shook hands while the Manchu looked on with never a smile.

"I understand," continued Blennerhassett Jones, "that during my absence my partner engaged your valuable services, Mr. Fairbairn?"

"Yes, sir."

"I am very glad. By the way, knowing China and the temptations which China holds out to the young Americans, we always insist on one condition with our younger employees."

"Yes, sir?"

"They must give us their word of honor not to touch a card as long as they are with our firm." Blennerhassett Jones smiled fleetingly at Randolph Fairbairn, who smiled back. "But we have decided to make an exception to this rule in your case. You may play all you want to. And now—if you care to have lunch with me, I shall mix you a real mint-julep."

"Do you mash the mint with a spoon, sir?"

"Always, sir!"

And both Virginians bowed ceremoniously to Sheng Pao and left the room arm in arm.