

The Man  
from Poonch

Talbot Mundy

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# The Man from Poonch

By TALBOT MUNDY

*Nine conspirators were perched high above India like  
hawks  
ready to swoop—and just as ready to pounce on the  
man they suspected as a spy*

IT was chilly and dark at the back of Daldeen Lal's place. The distant lights of Simla, glimpsed now and then through a fluke in the mist, served to emphasize the loneliness and darkness. Nine men, scarcely visible to one another, squatted on the creaking balcony.

Yussuf Aroun raised a floor-board, using his toe for the purpose, and spat into eight hundred feet of dark nothing beneath him; it was less trouble than raising his head above the sheet of corrugated iron which broke the cold wind from the Himalayas. He spat with the emphasis of a Pathan who had made up his mind.

"By Allah and by my beard, all men from Poonch," he said, "are sons of impudently unchaste mothers."

But the man from Poonch said nothing. He was at the end of the balcony, with his back toward Simla and his face toward eight suspicious, hostile men. The solitary lantern cast a red glow on as much of his face as was not hidden in the horse-blanket that draped his head and shoulders. It touched, too, the silvery hilt of his long knife.

His eyes held the smouldering wrath of a panther's. When he rolled himself a cigarette his tongue licked the edges of the paper as if tasting in advance difficulties that he knew how to enjoy. The most exciting challenge in the world is silence, and the man from Poonch seemed made of the intolerable stuff.

Seven shadows, that were Hillmen of seven unrelated blood-strains but with a language, a creed and some hatreds in common, stirred a little as their host rose. Water splashed in the darkness beneath. The wooden balcony squeaked as it swayed to the wind and the weight of Daldeen Lal's cat-like footsteps, careful not to touch men as he passed them. He opened his house-door, entered, and shut it behind him swiftly; the light from it shone on some of the faces, for a moment. They were hook-nosed men in stinking sheep-skin jackets—black-bearded, with oily love-locks.

One laughed with a nervous high pitch:

"By Allah, men from Poonch can take a dive into the mist beneath us, just as easily as men from better places! What

say you, brothers?"

Yussuf Aroun answered, deep-throated, deliberate:

"Nay! If he is false, a spy for the British, I slay him, because it is I who first suspected him and said so. By my beard, he shall die as many deaths in that case as he can draw breaths between a midnight and a midnight. He shall beg for the edge of a knife to cut him free from torment."

But the man from Poonch continued to say nothing. The door opened again and Daldeen Lal squirmed himself through like a cat:

"A fool wanted the loan of a bicycle pump," he said. "I told him he could push his bicycle." He sat down. "Now about this man from Poonch—"

WHEN Daldeen Lal spoke Pushtu he abominably mispronounced it, and he knew the mispronunciation irritated those intolerant Hillmen, who despised him and his Hindu religion. That he made a point of not being religious merely increased their contempt. It was much more difficult for them to treat him civilly, than for him to endure their arrogance. But they shared his secret; and the secret gave him an authority that he did not choose to hazard by talking more than necessary. So he paused in his speech.

"Who believes such a tale as he tells?" asked Yussuf Aroun. "Taught him to fly in Ameliki, did they—he having

made the Amelikins think he was one of themselves? Eh? Allah! I saw an Amelikin; he wore spectacles: he had a fat wife who found fault. He was less like this man than a horse is like a camel. Saucy and abominable are the men from Poonch, and I say this one is a liar. How do we know he can fly an air-ee-o-per-lane? Why won't he tell us his name?"

The moon rose, revealing the tops of deodars in the ghostly white mist that streamed in the valley beneath. It silvered a wet crag that projected from the side of the ravine a hundred yards away.

"But somebody must fly for us," said Daldeen Lal. "His is a probable story. Many besides he have been imprisoned for being suspected persons possessing pistol and no license. While he was in prison his family died of neglect and want, because the money-lender foreclosed. Is there anything unlikely about that? Why should he not seek vengeance on the British?"

"Allah! I doubt him," said Yussuf Aroun.

The man from Poonch spoke then, rather gutturally, in a strong voice that suggested self-imposed calm, rising slowly to his feet and revealing contempt with unexaggerated gesture:

"I have heard women who talked more manfully." He took a stride toward the door. "Whoever craves a fight with me may have it." He met each gaze in turn. None flinched. His eyes lingered on Yussuf Aroun's, and he touched his knife-hilt, but not even Yussuf Aroun made an answering move.

With a sideways jerk of his head he indicated the moon-lit crag that glistened over the ravine. "I will sit yonder and think thoughts while ye belch fears."

He opened the door slowly, stood framed in the glow from within—a rather tall man with the loose-limbed stance and insolently careless poise of an experienced fighter—and then stepped suddenly into the passage, shut the door firmly, and listened, with his hand on the latch.

Not a man on the balcony spoke, but he felt pressure on the latch. He removed his hand. As the latch yielded he kicked the door. It slammed in Daldeen Lal's face, hurling him backward. The teeth of the other men gleamed in the sudden light like wolves' fangs, but no word was spoken. The man from Poonch shut the door again and strode along the lamp-lit passage, tossing two pice slipper-money to the lame Kashmiri at the outer door.

OUTSIDE in the garden he listened again, but no sound followed him. There were dense streams of blown mist, but the moonlight shone in broken streams of silver that revealed the pathway leading from the ramshackle house. He followed it through a gate amid shadowy trees, and where it forked toward the road that leads to Simla he took the right-hand track and squatted, in the full light of the moon, on the wet crag that overhung the ravine.

Torn shreds of fluffy mist blew past him, but he could see and be seen from Daldeen Lal's balcony; and he could see the shadowy road to Simla, where it curved to avoid the rising ground, some fifty feet away, and a shadowy man with an upturned bicycle appeared to be examining a punctured tire. The man with the bicycle called to him in Hindustanee:

"Oh you! Where can I borrow a pump to put air in my leaking tire?"

"I don't know," said the man from Poonch.

"Also my lamp has gone out. Where can I get oil and matches?"

"I don't know."

"Will you watch my bicycle, if I leave it while I go to find a pump?"

"No."

"I would come back quickly."

He from Poonch turned away and stared at the ravine, not answering. So the man with the bicycle set his machine upright and began pushing it along the road toward Simla. But very soon the sound of his footsteps ceased. He appeared to be riding the thing. His bell, rang—*one, two—one, two, three—one, two*, as if it might be a signal. The man from Poonch appeared not to notice that. He sat still, staring downward at the mist that flowed like frosted cotton through the tops of deodars, until at last the lame Kashmiri came

from the house and said hoarsely that Daldeen Lal would like to speak to him.

"Tell him I sicken of too much speech," he answered.

Ten minutes later Daldeen Lal, in a thick shawl and a belted khaki overcoat, came, carefully avoiding moonlight, and stood waist-deep in mist in the shadow beneath the crag between it and the road.

"Is it true then that all the men from Poonch are mules?" he demanded. "Pray be reasonable. Who would admit you to such a secret as ours without proof of your trustworthiness? They are ready to kill you now unless you give proof, since you already know too much. Had it not been for me, Yussuf Aroun would already have shot you as you sit here. You offended him. His finger itches for the trigger."

The man from Poonch smiled. "It is I who lack proof," he retorted. "A life is not much. But shall I risk mine for perched hens who scratch lice and cackle?"

"Tell me truly who you are," said Daldeen Lal. "If you will give me references—"

"God knows who I am. God knows who you are. And that is enough."

"If I thought you were a spy," said Daldeen Lal, "there would already be no flesh on your bones. Your skeleton would be rotting among rats in a dark hole."

The man from Poonch answered with an air of indifference: "I am a spy. I spy for deeds, and a chance to do them. Therefore I will get hence. When I die, it shall not be of too much talking."

"IT is true," said Daldeen Lal, "that speech is sometimes valueless. And you impress me as a man of strong resolution. But I have to convince those others. They will not consent to telling you our secret unless you first give a pledge."

"I have nothing."

"Your life?"

"It is worth nothing."

"Put it then into our hands, and we will tell you our secret. We will not trust you otherwise. At the moment, Yussuf Aroun has you covered with his rifle, and if I should signal to him—"

The man from Poonch dropped as if shot, and as he fell near Daldeen Lal's feet, there came the sharp, dead smack of a rifle in mist. A bullet whizzed overhead, but there was so much spacious silence that the sound died swallowed in a moment. The man from Poonch stood up with his back to the rock and spoke calmly:

"I saw you make that signal. Now I will kill you as well as Yussuf Aroun! Or will you tell me your secret?"

"In the others' presence I will tell it." Daldeen Lal turned up the path to the house in a hurry, plainly disliking that talk about death. The man from Poonch removed an iron bracelet from his wrist and tossed it to the road. It fell in dust in moonlight. The man on a bicycle, pedalling back from the direction of Simla, got off his machine and called out:

"Have you seen my spanner? I believe I dropped it where I tried to mend a puncture just now. Ah! Ah! I see it!" He picked up something, mounted and returned by the way he had come.

"May your luck be as flat as your tire, you voice out of a sepulchre!" Daldeen Lal called after him, hurrying toward the dim lamplight at the front door.

The man from Poonch followed him into the house and through it, out on to the balcony, where he met the gaze of Yussuf Aroun.

"If you can't shoot any straighter than that," remarked the man from Poonch, "your women must be anybody's. Or are they too ill-favored to tempt your betters?"

"I will eat your liver," Yussuf Aroun answered, showing splendid yellow teeth.

"No spy would dare to speak as he does," said Daldeen Lal. "Would a spy return here, after being shot at? I intend to tell him our secret in the presence of you all. But you are not to trust him. Mind that. Two of you—better yet, three must watch him day and night, one sleeping and two waking."

"Let him give us his knife," said Yussuf Aroun.

The man from Poonch looked calmly at him. "You may have it in your belly," he answered.

"Allah!" Yussuf Aroun's hand went to his own knife.

"Peace!" exclaimed Daldeen Lal. "Of what use would a coward be to us? He is good. Shall I tell him now?"

The man from Poonch laughed curtly: "I will say what I know already. There is haste, and you need an airman, but there is none, unless you accept me. You are afraid. And now what?"

"That proves it. He has spied on us," said Yussuf Aroun.

The man from Poonch looked sideways at him: "I mistook this," he said, "for a women's *jirga*, not believing men could be such chatterers. Allah! Who needs more than one eye to read fear on a Pathan's face?"

"Tell him," said Yussuf Aroun. "Let him learn what fear is. If he fails us or betrays us, I will answer for it. He shall not be out of my sight until all is finished. And then he and I; *insh'allah*, will decide the matter of our honor!"

THE man from Poonch went and sat beside Yussuf Aroun insolently. Hands on knives, they eyed each other sideways:

Daldeen Lal shifted the lantern and sat with his back to the mountains. He cleared his throat importantly.

"This is no hysterical conspiracy of students," he began. "We intend to break the English this time, all or nothing. A major calamity at this opportune moment ought to stagger them and stiffen revolutionists of all types. But it must be astonishing—staggering. It must be the impossible thing, that nevertheless happens. Otherwise the English will rally as usual and in some way survive it because of their organization. We must destroy the English system, as the Bolsheviki first destroyed the system of the Czar. And in the anarchy that follows we will reap our harvest."

"There will be loot," said Yussuf Aroun. "*Wallahi!*"

A cloud of mist shut down on them, so dense that it shut off the moonlight and blanketed sound. It was like being at sea on a swaying deck. The lantern in the midst only made a dim blur. Daldeen Lal coughed and raised his voice:

"The viceroy and all the members of his council are to meet at Delhi, three days from now. The governors of five provinces will be there, along with eleven ruling princes, to say nothing of innumerable subordinates. A bomb—"

"A poison-gas bomb!" Yussuf Aroun interrupted. "Allah!"

"Such a bomb," said Daldeen Lal, "as will infallibly kill all of them!" He rubbed the palms of his hands together.

"As infallibly, by God, as I will kill you if you fail!" said Yussuf Aroun. All the other men on the balcony moved like

vultures on a ledge that smell blood on the wind.

Daldeen Lal's face, as he leaned forward, glowed in the lantern-light. His breath steamed like a devil's in a Tibetan painting.

"Cruelty," he said, "is waste of energy, and it is too unfortunate we could not make a poison-gas to kill them instantly. The ingredients for that were not obtainable. We had to use a gas of the corrosive type that burns the membrane. It is so potent, that one part of it to ten thousand parts of air produce death; and so corrosive, that we dare not mix it in readiness. There are three principal ingredients. For the sake of secrecy those have been produced in places very far apart, by experts trained in European laboratories. Each ingredient is sealed in a gas-tight but fragile container; and the three containers are enclosed in one bomb. When the bomb falls, it will smash the containers. The resulting mixture will escape, assisted by a little nitroglycerine to crack the casing. And whoever breathes any of that—however little of it—will be dead within ten or fifteen minutes—I regret to add, painfully."

"Pain," said Yussuf Aroun, "is all that kaffirs will ever know of Allah's mercy!"

The man from Poonch rolled a cigarette and licked the paper thoughtfully. "Fire!" he demanded. Yussuf Aroun, startled, struck a match for him and grinned spitefully across the flame that they sheltered together between cupped hands. The man from Poonch blew out the match. "You stink," he remarked. "Keep your distance."

"You must believe in your lucky star," said Yussuf Aroun.

THE chill of the mist was penetrating. Daldeen Lal shuddered as he cleared his throat again. "The essential thing," he said, "is timing—to drop the bomb in the right place at the proper moment. The difficulty is, to do that in spite of a cordon of troops and scores of special policemen. You see, there have been so many acts of terrorism lately that the viceroy and his council will be guarded like golden money. We foresaw that. That is why you were selected and encouraged to approach us."

A bearded face beneath a gunnysack thrust itself into the lamp-light. "*Bismillah!* Hear the fool boast! It was I—I tell you, I who lay under the air-bombs when Bulteel *sahib* brought his 'planes across the Indus and wrecked our village, slaying eighteen including my son—it was I, Mahommed Sayyid, I who thought of it. I said, by Allah, said I—"

"Thou art like a cock that has laid an egg," remarked Yussuf Aroun. "It were better to slit thy throat than listen to the crowing."

Daldeen Lal resumed his discourse: "We are not suspected. The C.I.D. doesn't know us. None of us has ever been connected with a crime. Our finger-prints are unrecorded—unless yours are?" He stared hard at the man from Poonch, but drew no answer.

He continued: "Even so, however, it would be impossible, even for us, who are not suspected, to carry a bomb weighing over a thousand pounds, through the crowd and through the viceroy's, guard—although we did think of dressing the bomb to resemble a man bleeding to death in an ambulance. But if that had succeeded, its explosion would have meant our own death:" He paused dramatically. "But an airplane—"

The man from Poonch extinguished the butt of his cigarette against the damp floor-board. Daldeen Lal continued:

"One of us—no matter who—owns a repair shop—buys second-hand automobiles—is a good mechanic—studied aeronautics in Germany—possesses copies of all the airplane specifications that are constantly published by various governments. He has had two years in which to build a monoplane, secretly, using four second-hand automobile engines, which he adapted. We needed speed, not radius. The plane can rise easily and swiftly with the weight of the bomb and one man. It carries fuel for only fifty miles, but that is plenty. In minutest detail the machine is theoretically perfect for its task. There is a secret and perfectly level runway of two hundred yards between high walls. The machine can be in the air in a moment, and in Delhi in another moment. There will be havoc—panic—death."

"And after that?" the man from Poonch asked.

"We of the North will have our innings then," said Yussuf Aroun. "By Allah, we will sweep India as a storm sweeps orchards!"

Daldeen Lal smiled in the glow of the lantern. "At first, there will be a little anarchy," he conceded. "That is perhaps not a bad thing, to make men welcome a new government. A little slaughter—a little frightfulness—and then peace."

"Such is the way of God," said some one, looming through the mist near Yussuf Aroun.

"AFTER the bomb is dropped, then what next?" the man from Poonch demanded.

Daldeen Lal stared. "Come to earth and escape, of course. There will be such panic and confusion that escape should be simple enough. But burn the plane, if possible, because of finger-marks."

"And has this plane been flown yet?" asked the man from Poonch.

"No. Of course not. How could it be? It is a great enough marvel to have built it undetected. It is tuned, as I think they call it. It has taxied along the runway once quite recently, but that made too much noise to be risked a second time. It has never been up in the air, but it is theoretically—"

"It is written that it shall not fail," said Yussuf Aroun. "It is also written, thou from Poonch, that thou art to fly the thing. Thereafter, if all goes well, I will take back all I said about our honor and we shall be good friends. But fail, and thy

lucky star will have set forever, as a star that falls dead in the sky."

"All of us will trust you afterwards, when the great deed is done," said Daldeen Lal. "He has a knife," he added.

Yussuf Aroun drove a sudden elbow against the jaw of the man from Poonch, forcing his head back with a jerk: He snatched the knife, laughing with a sort of high-pitched yelp of triumph as he sent it spinning, into the mist. "Now sit still, or I will gut thee ere thy time comes!"

So the man from Poonch sat glaring but extremely still while the Pathan's hands searched him for hidden weapons. After that, three of the other Hillmen tied him hand and foot. They threw a blanket over him. They left him. Daldeen Lal lingered and whispered:

"Trust me and never mind them! Do your part well. After that, if you wish, you shall die of drink and women! Don't fear that dog of a Pathan."

There was no answer. The man from Poonch lay still beneath the blanket. "Perhaps you would like some friend to know where you are?" Daldeen Lal asked. "Tell me his name. I will send the message. That will give you greater confidence in me."

But there was no answer—no movement. The creak of the balcony, wind and the splash of water down in the ravine were the only sounds.

"There will be five thousand rupees for you afterwards," said Daldeen Lal. "Suppose you crash? If you are killed, who is to have your money?"

Suddenly he screamed. He smothered the scream in his shawl, but it was too late; a Hillman hurried out through the door with a lantern.

"He bit me! He bit me! Krishna!" Daldeen Lal wrung his right hand and kicked at the blanket savagely, but the man from Poonch ducked his head and sat upright, snarling, his eyes like embers in the darkness:

"Curse your black soul and your money!" he said deliberately. "May the one eat the other and corrupt you into worms in the belly of endless time!"

He lay down again. The Hillman re-spread the blanket, nodding:

"He is good. He will make us no trouble at all. His kind have the courage of Allah in them." He grinned at the blood on Daldeen Lal's finger and then led the way into the house.

FOR a long time after that the man from Poonch lay very still beneath the blanket, while within the house there was a conference, extremely difficult to overhear because of the creaking of wood in the wind and the hollow noises that came upward out of the ravine.

Yussuf Aroun, followed by two other men, came out at last. He kicked the blanket.

"Awake! By Allah, now we test thy star and thy honor! Loose him, brothers. If he craves my knife-edge, let him tempt me!"

But the man from Poonch seemed dazed, or perhaps indifferent. He let himself be raised to his feet, offering no protest when Yussuf Aroun and another man put arms behind his back and held hands. They pressed him close, pinning his arms to his sides; and the third man followed, almost equally close.

"There is no escape," said Yussuf Aroun. "Fail, and the devil gets thee! Do well, and I am thy friend forever! Hey-yeh! As a mother-bird teaches the fledgeling, thou shalt teach me to fly—afterwards—afterwards—me! But Allah is Lord of Afterwards!"

Out into the darkness, then, Daldeen Lal and the rest of the group following at cautious intervals, one at a time.

Across the shadowy road, then downward into a sea of dark tree-tops, in which the mist hung like snow and, when they reached it, changed into wet gems twinkling in moonlight. Ferns and their smell. The feel of the floor of a forest spread with moss, pine-trash, rotting twigs!

On downward, and forever downward, hour after hour, by paths such as cats and pheasants know, crossing and re-crossing a winding post-road, drenched by the shoulder-high

rhododendrons, out through the mist into silvery moonlight and the warm air stealing upward tainted by lowland dust.

At last the railway junction. It swarmed even before daylight with dark-skinned and bright-turbaned oddments from a hundred unrelated human breeds, to whom a train is an adventure, and time nothing.

There was a smell of steam, oil, sweat, spices. The cries of sweetmeat vendors. The drone of ten languages spoken at once, like the laughter of water on gravel.

Extremely obvious policemen pretending not to notice well-known faces in the lamplight. The scream of a frightened woman separated from her man.

Near the booking-office entrance, a man with a bicycle, tired and even sleepy but volubly indignant with a railway police *naik* for refusing to hold the machine while he bought himself a ticket.

"A Bahinchute, am I?" he shouted, as the man from Poonch went by shoving through the crowd between two heavy-shouldered Hillmen. "I will not rest until I have made you eat that word! I will follow you with my hatred until you shall swear the world is nothing but eyes that scorch your soul!"

"Out of the way!" said Yussuf Aroun, shoving him. That brought him face to face with Daldeen Lal, who almost fell over the bicycle, barking his shins and maliciously siding with the *naik*.

"Kick him! He hunts women all night long. His trick is to ask for a bicycle pump, that he may rob the fool who lends it to him!"

THEN the train, and the surge, in half-darkness, for seats in third-class carriages already crammed to bursting. Squatting on the floor between two Hillmen, the man from Poonch traced patterns with his heels in the mud that his slippers had collected on wet hillsides.

"I have a knife, remember," Yussuf Aroun whispered, "It can reach thy liver as a woman's glance reaches a lover's manhood. So beware of tricks. Sit still. Say nothing. Let me see where thy hands are at all times!"

So the man from Poonch sat in the stifling heat, seeing nothing but legs and fruit-peel, except when the compartment door opened at stations. Then, with the draught of fresher air there would be a glimpse, between coppery legs, of the station *bhisti* with his sharp cry and clattering brass cups. Then a policeman would come and stare in.

Twenty times before Delhi was reached the man from Poonch looked straight into a policeman's eyes—sometimes into the eyes of an English police officer. But he never moved or made any sign; he could feel the point of Yussuf Arbutun's knife at his shoulder-blades. The policemen seemed uninterested. They stared, slammed the door shut and passed on along the train to continue inspection.

All the talk among the passengers was of the great affair in Delhi, two days hence now: the opening of the great assembly, with the known risk of a clash between Hindu and Moslem. No two opinions were alike, but there was only one expectation—of trouble, red, reckless. When the train reached Delhi it was a rather silent crowd that poured forth to the platform. Anticipation held men by the throats and excitement smothered natural emotions, for the moment.

Yussuf Aroun shepherded the man from Poonch along the teeming platform, observant but not noticeably nervous until a man behind him, shoving a bicycle, rang to invite him to make way—*one, two—one, two, three—one, two.*

"*Haie*, you Pathan! You are not in your hills! When bells ring, that means 'Be quick!'"

Yussuf Aroun swore like a startled bear then. The man with the bicycle laughed. His little round embroidered cap made him look monkey-impudent. "Take care. You are not in your hills. I will summon my friends to teach you what to do when bells ring!"

Yussuf Aroun made a swipe at him with a hairy fist, but he ducked and hurried until he was presently lost in the crowd. Then, presently, a swarming, clanging tramcar and the delirious heat and movement of city streets in lamplit darkness—stink, din, tumult and an ever deepening feel of tension, on the way toward teeming suburbs, past groups of special police and military posts at the throats of dark streets plunging into unguessable slums.

"By Allah, this city was built to be plundered!" said Yussuf Aroun. "Do thy task, thou of Poonch! Thou of Poonch, be sure and sudden! We others will not fail. Allah!"

*One, two—one, two, three—one, two.* A bicycle bell rang when they left the tramcar to plunge on foot down zigzag alleys. But there were scores of bicycles; they flitted like bats in all directions. On through a shadowy, stinking maze, whose darkness felt like one vast eye, whose silence whispered. Stars seen against sheeted harems on flat roofs. They threaded a devious course too swift for legs cramped by the long railway journey, but when the man from Poonch lagged he was threatened:

"Allah! Is it a spur thou needest?"

DALDEEN LAL was leading. There were glimpses of him, at moments, at corners. The other men followed at careless intervals, one by one, independently, until at last Daldeen Lal fumbled at a gate in a wall and passed through. The man from Poonch was thrust through after him, into an ebony shadow beneath a parallelogram that was a purple street of stars—the roof of a pair of apparently endless high walls.

"Lo, the runway!" said Yussuf Aroun. He stretched out his left arm. "Day after to-morrow, that way lies thy road to hell or heaven!"

The remainder of the party filed in, one after another, some invisible watchman taking word and sign, countersign, and some other mysterious signal.

"Allah! It is true that good thieves sleep in gun-rooms," said Yussuf Aroun. "There is a police *khana* half a stone's throw yonder, and beyond that stands a prison! Nevertheless, lo and behold, the runway; and who knows of it save God and we ourselves! It is now three months since the air-ee-o-per-lane was ready. But a man to ride it— We have slain three. It was I who slew them. Three vain boasters who were offered a chance to fly to hell or heaven failed us for one reason or another. Poonchling, it is thy turn! Let me see thee examine this wonder."

Daldeen Lal—a voice, a vague sensation in the dark—spoke urgently: "Thou from Poonch, now listen. I will show you."

Yussuf Aroun shoved him. "Lead on, and turn on a light! Let me watch him take hold. By Allah, as a woman knows a man by his eye, I know a horseman by the way he looks at a horse from a mile off. And a bird-man is as easy. Lead on!"

Pavement, between walls. An iron roof. A sliding corrugated-iron door, opening silently—shut again with a thud. Metal on metal. A man stumbling amid tin cans, cursed for a clumsy rat by Yussuf Aroun. The Pathan was excited; he gripped the arm of the man from Poonch with fingers like a trap's jaws. Sudden electric light and—

"Is it good, thou Poonchling? It is good, by Allah! Is it not good?"

It looked perfect, even to the paint—new-born like a dragon-fly, beneath a makeshift crane, amid shadows etched on white walls. Four engines—a stream-line pattern that should make a falcon jealous—gold-and-aluminum, with black walnut propellers—white tires on gold-and-aluminum wheels—stainless steel wiring—a bomb, torpedo-shaped, snug as a roe in a herring—

*Ting-ting—ting-ting-ting—ting-ting!* It was the bicycle bell.

*Crack!* The left fist of the man from Poonch shot a half-hook upward at the peak of Yussuf Aroun's jaw. The Pathan reeled on his heels; his hand went to his knife. The fist struck him again—again. A right went to his solar plexus. The roof split, like a packing-case coming apart, and the light went out. The man from Poonch felt a head in the dark and punched it—found another head—cracked both together—fell, he and two others, on top of Yussuf Aroun. There was a sudden spitting-cracker-cat-fight of teeth, oaths, knives—in the dark—in a din. Then star-light—flash-light—a command in English:

"Grab him! Don't be afraid to kill him! That's the style! Light, somebody! Light here! Two more men here! Come on, two more!"

SOMEBODY found the switch. The full light went on. Thirty-two policemen, bearded, beautiful with sweat and malice and the gun-crew grin that viewed a shot square on the target.

The bicyclist of the round embroidered cap, mud spattered on his loose white loin-cloth, let himself be pulled from under Daldeen Lal, fingering his ear; there was blood on it from Daldeen Lal's teeth.

"Pip, pip!" he remarked as he felt himself for injuries.

The man from Poonch, rubbing a raw knee, laughed at him. "All right, Moti? Not hurt? That was neat work. Timed it beautifully. Where's Charley?"

Almost casually, from the outer darkness, bleeding a little and bruised in places, a smiling Englishman in shorts and shirt, made his way through the police to the man who might have been from Poonch.

"Got 'em all!" the newcomer remarked. "Got each last one of 'em!" He passed a flask. "I thought you might need a spot of this."

There were gurgles. "Thanks. You always were thoughtful." Somehow that man no longer looked as if he came from Poonch. He glanced at the wings of the plane that loomed above him. "This ought to cause a sensation. What?"

Charley's eyes met his in silent laughter. "Might have been serious, Grayson, mightn't it? I'll have to get the high

explosives section of the C.I.D. to come and draw the teeth of that egg.

"You're tired, old man. Hungry? How about a tub, then the club and some dinner? We can make out reports together after dinner."

Yussuf Aroun, handcuffed and snarling between dark-eyed Sikh constables, spat some blood from his teeth and swore a streak of Northwest frontier blasphemy:

"I knew that Poonch tale was a lie! Another second and thy liver should have lain like—"

He who, it now appeared, undoubtedly was not from Poonch, looked at his barked knuckles. Then his eye sought the flask.

"Give my friend Yussuf a drink," he suggested. "He's quite a character, I hit him a bit harder than was necessary. Yes, then I'm ready when you are. Dinner? I've forgotten what good food tastes like."

THE END.

[The end of *The Man from Poonch* by Talbot Mundy]