



I don't remember what the party was about, but like most diplomatic affairs it was getting to be a real wing-dinger as the evening wore on. I was doing my share of the wing-dinging, too.

Little had I realized, as a struggling graduate student at Stanford University some years before, that the innocent-looking little notice on the bulletin board offering teaching positions in Afghanistan was to lead me to Habibia College, in Kabul, where I would teach geography. Or that my professional status would provide entree into the pleasant whirl of diplomatic social life in the small and remote capital—such as this party at the home of one of the American Embassy people.

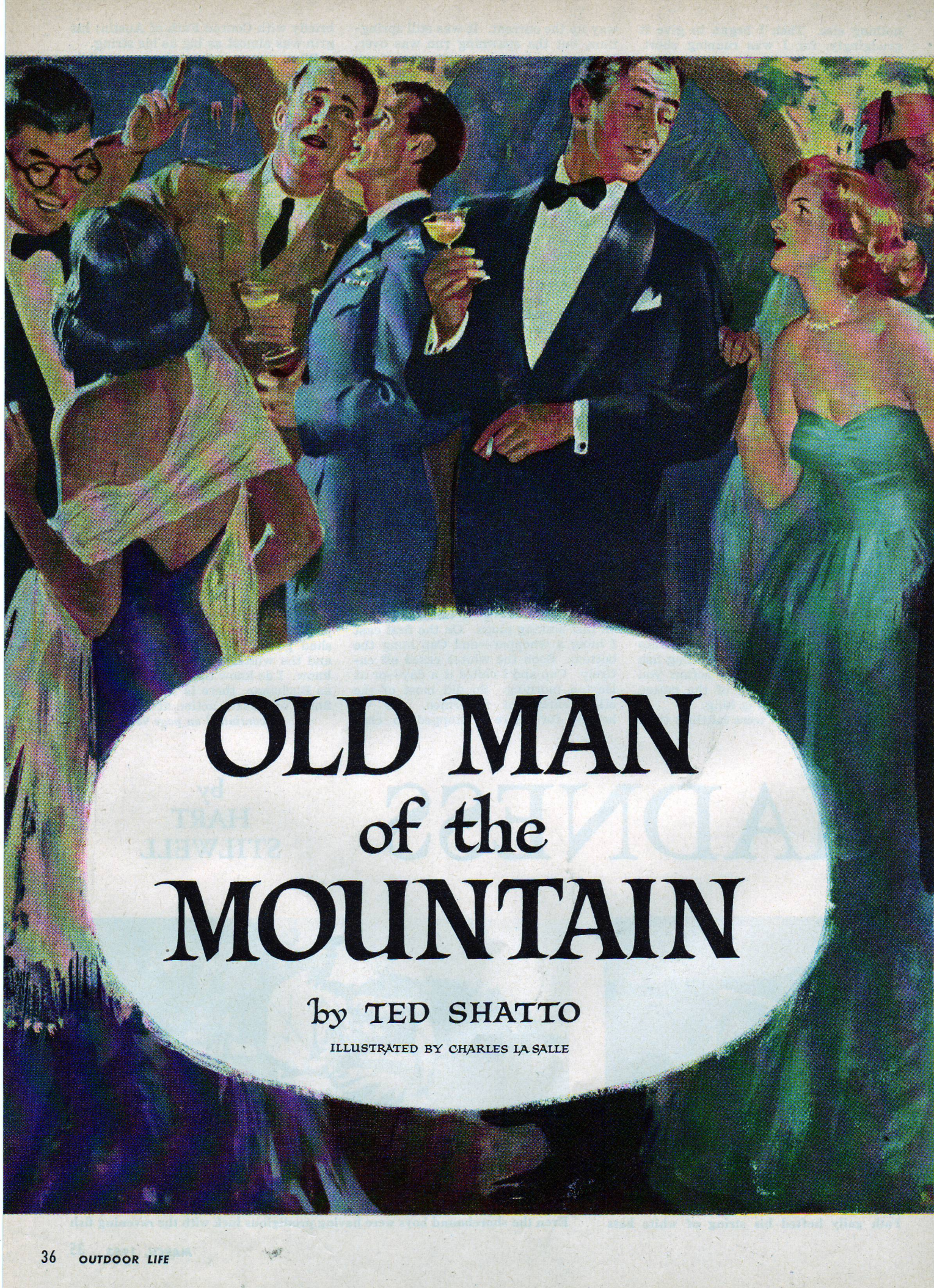
Mary suddenly materialized out of the fog that had been following me around and laid a restraining hand on my arm. "Remember," she said in a low voice, "Rudolph is waiting for you to pick him up."

I remembered, and I also remembered that within the hour I was scheduled to start for the Hindu Kush mountain country of northern Afghanistan. Somehow I made the proper rounds of adieus and then Mary got me outside, where our servant nodded stoically as he guarded our jeep.

At home, I insisted I needed some sleep before starting on such a journey. Ignoring the waiting field gear, I tossed the soup-and-fish expertly into a shapeless pile on the floor and dived into bed. My faithful spouse shook her head sadly, set the alarm clock, and came to bed herself. Exactly eight minutes later the timepiece sounded its burring call.

I pounced out of bed, slid into my hunting clothes, gathered *(continued on page 104)*

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OLD MAN of the MOUNTAIN

by TED SHATTO

ILLUSTRATED BY CHARLES LA SALLE

OLD MAN OF MOUNTAIN

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the last armful of paraphernalia, and headed for the jeep. On the way I somehow managed to kiss the sleeping kids good-by, hanging each one in the face with my dangling binoculars, and I jabbed Mary lovingly in the ribs with the .270 rifle as I bade her farewell. For the moment, the mists of earlier evening were dispelled and I was overflowing with vibrant energy. I was going hunting.

Baron Rudolph von Dückelmann is a man of many parts: Austrian army officer, tobacco plantation manager, painter, sculptor, writer, naturalist, sportsman, and incumbent chief of such forests as found a foothold in Afghanistan's rocky mountain fastnesses. That night he was also an expert driver—fortunately for me. For once I slept while the jeep bounced and lurched through the darkness over the stony camel trails that the good citizens of Afghanistan like to think of as roads.

Occasionally I'd jolt into semiconsciousness and dwell for a while on the fact that I might, within a few days, have a big ibex ram to add to the collection of fine horned trophies I had taken in Afghanistan and India during the previous year. The small-town boy who had never shot anything more picturesque than a three-year-old mule deer had been suddenly allowed to live the kind of adventures that exist for most shooters only in books and dreams.

By noon next day Rudolph had negotiated 150 miles of the country's worst trails and had navigated us successfully through the pass of the famed Darya-i-Shikar, or River of Hunting, to Doab, proud village of nearly 100 souls.

We were met by an envoy of the local governor, whose guests we were to be, and he told us that a new road had just been completed so that we might drive our jeep to the provincial capital. And drive we did. If I'd only had sense enough to take movies of that trip, I could have made a fortune selling them to the jeep manufacturer as a testimonial.

Our envoy proudly told us how he'd supervised construction of that road. To survey its route, he had ridden horseback twenty-five miles down the Hajer River to Doab and there waited patiently for several days until a jeep came along. He stopped the jeep and solemnly measured its width with a stick. Then he went back uptrail carrying the stick across his saddle. Any place the stick wouldn't go through, he stopped, and got local free labor to clear, dig, or fill the "road."

At that, we were only stuck once—at a point where the stick had readily made a 90-degree climbing turn, with no clearance, onto a pole bridge that spanned a ten-foot canal. Unfortunately our jeep couldn't match the stick's performance. So our envoy-guide summoned about forty men from a near-by village. They promptly dammed up the canal, tore out the bridge, and filled the muddy bottom with stones until we could get across.

We were most graciously received at

the governor's quarters. Somehow I always felt ashamed of our western concepts of hospitality when partaking of the whole-hearted Afghan brand, such as was dispensed by our worthy host. The following day we continued on up the Hajer River on horseback. Rudolph, who had been an Austrian cavalry officer when I was still sporting diapers, was in his element. I hung grimly to the .270 with one hand and to the pommel with the other, trusting to God and the horse.

Our headquarters were in a house provided for us at the village of Hajer, some twenty-five miles upriver. This fertile area, surrounded by stark, towering ramparts of colorful limestone, was a veritable Shangri-la. Here we found a contentment and way of life that had long been lost in the hurrying drive of the outer world. Major-domo of our party was one Mohammed Mirza Khan, a handsome and worthy gentleman who was responsible to his chief for our well-being and safety and to us for finding some big ibex.

Ibex are true goats, and love the rocky fastnesses of the highest mountains that will support forage. I have found that they tend to dwell in the vicinity of limestone cliffs, somehow finding their way about on sheer precipices, using paths that are known only to them and the wheeling eagles. The herds are always led by yearlings; the other ibex follow in a sort of reverse order of precedence, with the mature rams bringing up the rear. The granddaddies live apart from the herd, usually with a companion or two. The very largest trust no others and live alone.

When threatened, ibex always run downhill, and if possible cross a canyon or high valley and climb the opposite ridge. I have asked many Afghan hunters if these things are true, and the invariable answer has been yes. When I asked why, I was always given the special look of pity that the East holds for overinquisitive Americans: "It is God's will."

Mirza introduced us to the local ibex by staging a great drive. We rode our horses up the mountain until they could go no farther; then we climbed afoot until we dropped from exhaustion. By then we were about 10,000 or 11,000 feet up, and somewhere near the middle of the talus slides that fell away from the tremendous limestone cliffs.

Earlier, about fifty men had gone to the top of the plateau to drive ibex down the cliffs. Only they didn't come down very far. They'd mill around awhile beneath the rock walls and finally work their way along the top of the talus to the next lizard highway; then they'd reascend to the heights.

Whether Mirza was overoptimistic about our shooting abilities or whether we just gave out too soon while climbing, we weren't sure. At any rate, we always were about 600 yards from the ibex. Not that it made much difference, except that the Afghans were disappointed about the meat. In two drives we saw dozens of ibex, but none were large rams. We figured, rightfully, that the big boys were a little leery of this

driving business and had eluded the men atop the plateau.

We invited Mirza to join us for dinner the night after the second drive. Ever so politely we expressed appreciation of the efforts being made on our behalf. It was too bad, we said, that we had not yet provided much meat for the party, but that would soon be forthcoming. And we were lucky, very lucky, we added, to have a fine house to live in while we hunted. But perhaps, we suggested, it would be better for our host, the governor, if we were to put our camping gear on horses and work our way up to the top of the plateau and stay there. We would take along a cook and two skinners, thus enabling most of the village males to return to their normal pursuits.

Mirza was scandalized. How could he explain to his boss that he had permitted the honored foreigners to live out in the open like sheep herders when there was this poor guest house available for true gentlemen? And suppose the sahiba, while sleeping out, were killed and devoured by leopards? No. He did not want to seem ungracious or adamant, but the whole project was impossible.

We passed up our drive the next day and caught trout in the clear Hajar River. Or rather, Rudolph caught trout. I fished. Mirza must have given serious thought to our suggestion, for he appeared at our house after dinner that night. On the morrow, he announced, we would take only a small group and trek to the pass at the head of the river canyon. There we could camp until our hunting desires were satisfied.

Our small group consisted only of ourselves, Mirza, the village headman, the chief of police, the mullah or priest, our cook, five assistant hunters, a visiting tax collector from Kabul, and about thirty other men whose main function, it appeared, was to see how much noise they could make.

Only a few miles above Hajar the canyon closed to a floor only a few yards wide between sheer rock walls 1,000 feet and more high. Rudolph and I had hoped to move along quietly ahead of the mob and maybe see something good. What a sad idea! We coaxed our horses into a trot—and ten other mounted men galloped along, delighted at the chance to race. We gave orders that the army would halt and give us fifteen minutes' head start. They let us get around the first bend and then charged after us en masse, all yelling. Great fun.

The expedition was getting to be less and less of a success when we reached a point where the Hajar River springs forth in full bloom from a series of holes under the cliffs. Here, in the cave formed by the exit of the main source of the stream, a shrine had been built to commemorate some long-departed holy man, and here our Moslem hosts stopped to pray.

Singly or in small groups, they approached the shrine and stood in a minute's meditation, stroking their beards. Mirza invited us to join them but we declined on the grounds that we

were not Mohammedans and might give offense. He said that this was a special hunting prayer and that the dead holy man would welcome prayers from even infidels if they were true hunters.

So Rudolph and I stood silently amid our Moslem companions, and stroked our chins, and asked for good hunting. Then we saw that the mullah was taking up a collection to insure proper delivery of the prayers. Each mountaineer gladly contributed a tiny amount that probably meant a great deal to him. Impulsively I reached into my pocket and donated a sum equal to a month's wages for a poor man. Even the mullah gasped.

"God will surely hear your prayer," said Mirza, "and reward you with the finest of ibex."

We made camp against a low overhanging cliff at the 10,000-foot level. Toward evening Rudolph and I attempted to wander off alone. An assistant hunter stuck with each of us. I got ahead of mine by throwing rocks at him, then slid behind a boulder and crawled Indian fashion up a steep ravine to the cliff top without being caught again. What a wild feeling of relief to be free! It was too late in the day to do any serious hunting, so I sat and canvassed the terrain with my binoculars. There was nothing to be seen except one lone gray cow, high on the mountain a couple of miles above our camp.

At dinner I told Rudolph and the indignant Mirza of my small venture, and wondered at a cow living at such a height. "That was not a cow you saw," said Mirza. "That was the oldest ibex of the hills, one who was born in the time of Genghis Khan. He is called Baba-i-Koh and no hunter is mighty enough to slay him." The Old Man of the Mountain! Why hadn't I seen him at dawn instead of at sunset?

That night we slept contentedly under the stars and at daylight we were

astir and climbing to the real high country. It was a nightmare of effort. At 10,000 feet we'd climb for maybe 100 feet and then rest for several minutes while our overexerted lungs gasped for oxygen. Four hours later we were at 12,000 feet and beginning to see the vast extent of the rolling plateau country. At 13,000 feet, by Rudolph's pocket aneroid, I tossed in the towel. Rudolph, in his middle fifties, and conceding me twenty years, was the better mountain man. Mirza stayed with me while two other hunters went along with Rudolph, who worked his way slowly up and up until he disappeared from sight.

While resting, I idly removed my cartridges from my pocket and started to play with them. All were Peters 130-grain Inner-Belted hollow-points, purchased in India, except for one last remaining Western 130-grain hollow-point that I had acquired with the rifle. Maybe, I thought idly, the single cartridge would bring me good luck. I loaded it into the chamber of the Winchester and lighted up a pipe. And just by raising my head in the right direction at the right time, for the simple matter of starting a smoke, I caught a glimpse of the great ibex ram. The Old Man of the Mountain!

He was high above us, two ridges away, and descending. If he continued on his course he'd pass in safety behind the intervening ridge. The canyons between us were carved from precipitous bare rock. A man might cross them safely, given enough time and a choice of routes. A man might slip and break his fool neck, too.

The gods were smiling my way, perhaps in answer to the prayer at the shrine. My own weakness in climbing had forced me to stay here below while Rudolph toiled on above and put up this gray giant, probably unknowingly.

The rest had done me good, and I



The head of the biggest ibex ever taken in Afghanistan—the Old Man of the Mountain—rates a distinguished guard of honor. Kneeling is the author's chief shikari, or hunter. Lined up, left to right, are Shatto's host, the local rich man; the mullah, or priest; the village headman; the chief of police; and the party's cook

arose with a joyful sensation of lightness. It was like going to bat in the last of the ninth inning. This was it. I smirked at Mirza and cautioned him to remain still, then set out across that awful canyon.

A dozen times I should have fallen, and once I teetered crazily on a loose boulder after a leap that a sheep might have balked at. The idea of falling simply didn't occur to me. I had to reach that next ridge and reach it I did, my pipe still puffing merrily. If my breath was short I didn't notice it, although I rested a minute on the crest of the ridge just from force of habit. I had done my part; now it was up to the rifle. Slowly I crossed the ridge, then sat down suddenly as I saw the ram.

What a specimen! Those I had shot a year earlier had been only babies, and even the mature ram that Mary had taken would look like a skinny goat compared to this colossus of the heights. He resembled a corn-fed young Hereford bull—sleek, heavy, and powerful. His coat was dark gray, fading to almost black around the head and shoulders, and a foot-long black beard jutted from his chin. As he moved unconcernedly down the ridge, I could see that he was old—a real granddaddy.

I could hardly take my eyes off his horns—great, saber-curved, serrated weapons. Never had I even dreamed of ibex horns that long. While I watched, open-mouthed, he stopped and easily scratched his ramp with the tip of one horn simply by raising his head a few inches. He moved on, came abreast of me on a narrow ledge some 200 or 250 yards away, and suddenly I realized I had to shoot.

Never had my scope framed a more splendid target. For a few seconds longer I let my eye devour his massive splendor, and then I gently squeezed the trigger.

Although I heard the bullet strike flesh, the ram only staggered slightly. Dazed, I slowly worked the bolt of the rifle but did not raise it again. The ibex continued to walk along as though nothing had happened. I was hypnotized; he could have walked right off the ridge and I would still have sat there, unbelieving. Then he paused, started to turn, hesitated, slowly collapsed, and somersaulted down into the canyon between us.

Mirza's hand on my shoulder awakened me from a silent reverie. We descended to where the fallen mountain monarch lay. The good old Western bullet had left an exit hole in his chest the size of a teacup. Yet—with no heart and practically no lungs—he had continued on his way until his blood and tissue failed him. How had his 250-pound bulk withstood the initial shock of the bullet?

They grow ibex with longer horns in Kashmir, and the world-record heads come from the Tien Shan Mountains of western China. But if I were to collect 100 greater ibex trophies, none could possibly provide such matchless moments as when I shot the largest ibex ever taken in Afghanistan—the Old Man of the Mountain.