

The Incredible Mr Kismet

by David Wright O'Brien, 1918-1944

Published: 1942
in »Fantastic Adventures«



Illustration:

Joe Corby hurled the chair against the window and it
smashed into fragmets—but the glass remained whole, untouched.

Mr. Kismet was a kindly, likeable fellow, and he knew things ordinary people didn't know. He did favors—but he also did terrible things!

THE flag had been in Joe Corby's window for more than five months, and the sign had been there only a week. The flag was a small, simple affair on which there was a service star, indicating that Joe's oldest son, Ralph, was serving in the fighting ranks of his country as a soldier. The sign was a small white placard which said:

ROOM FOR RENT

Signs such as the one above were not uncommon those days in the small American village of Barkerville. Even though Barkerville was a quiet little town consisting mostly of homes and a business district proudly referred to as "downtown," and even though most of its citizens were working for good money in the munitions plant which had risen on the outskirts of the village since the war, homes of patriotic fellows like Joe Corby were all feeling the pinch of the national emergency.

As Joe Corby said to Helen, his wife, when they decided to rent Ralph's unused room, "We'll be able to use the extra income, honey. Lord knows, even though my weekly check is near twice what it used to be, you can't keep buying defense bonds and giving to the Red Cross and other necessary outfits without tightening your belt a little and getting along as best you can."

Barkerville, for its size, had bought more defense bonds and had a larger Red Cross chest than any other such hamlet in the United States. Its citizens were very proud of that record and very determined to keep it up.

And so when Joe Corby came home at six o'clock that night from his bench in the munitions factory, turned up the white flagstoned walk that led to his modest frame home, and saw the ROOM FOR RENT sign gone, he was pleased.

His wife, Helen, met him at the door and said: "The room is rented, Joe. Isn't that grand?"

And at dinner, between efforts to silence little Jimmy, aged ten, Helen told her husband all about their new boarder.

"His name is Mr. Kismet," Helen said. "He seems like such a nice mannered man. Soft spoken, courteous. I'd say he's middle aged. Any rate, his hair is graying. He's tall, sort of, dresses very quietly, and has a nice, honest face."

"What does he do?" Joe Corby asked.

Helen shook her head. "I don't know. But I suspect he's here for kind of a vacation, to rest and relax. He said he didn't know how long he'd be staying."

"No time to rest," Joe Corby observed. "There's no rest for our Ralph and the boys on the fighting front. There shouldn't be for those of us on the home front."

"Now, Joe," Helen observed, "there's no sense in judging a man we don't know anything about. Maybe he's been working hard and has to have this vacation to keep from a breakdown."

"You're right," Joe admitted. "Maybe he has been."

"When can I join the army like Ralph, Pop?" little Jimmy chimed in, taking up his favorite theme.

"I hope it's over by the time you're old enough, son," Helen said quietly. There was mist in her eyes and Joe Corby didn't say anything because he knew she was thinking of Ralph...

DINNER was over and it was a little after eight when Mr. Kismet, the new boarder, arrived with his luggage. Helen went to the door, and when she had introduced him to Joe, Mr. Kismet took his grips up to Ralph's old room while Jimmy, chatteringly friendly, followed him upstairs.

When Mr. Kismet came down into the living room, Joe had a better chance to observe him and make up his mind about him.

Like Helen had said, Mr. Kismet was a tall, soft spoken, courteous fellow with graying hair and an honest, friendly face. The clothes he wore were neat and unpretentious.

"I like your little town a great deal, Mr. Corby," the new boarder observed when he and Joe got to talking.

"We're all kind of proud of Barkerville," Joe admitted. "Of course there are a lot of new people moved here since the munitions plant was started. But I imagine lots of them will want to stay here after it's all over."

Mr. Kismet nodded soberly. "Ah, yes," he said, "after it's all over." There was the faintest weariness in his voice.

Joe Corby noticed this, and remembered what Helen had supposed about how Mr. Kismet might be here for a needed rest.

"It's a tough haul for all of us," Joe said. "The end doesn't seem in sight yet. Our military reverses aren't quite at an end, I guess. But we're building, and we're getting tougher, and when we really have the power to slug out at those international rats—"

Mr. Kismet nodded, as Joe let the implication trail. "I hope you're right," he said.

"Hope?" Joe snorted. "I know I'm right. No fight is ever over till the last round. No ball game is finished until that ninth inning comes up. Have you ever seen Minnesota come out in the second half of a football game on the short end of a score? Have you ever seen 'em unleash hell almighty until their opponents wished they'd never seen a goal post? That's the American way, Mr. Kismet. When we won't be beaten, we can't be beaten!"

Mr. Kismet considered this. But his reply seemed to Joe to have no connection.

"If the future could be foreseen by man, I wonder what effect it would have on his determination?" Mr. Kismet said.

Joe shrugged. "Who knows. But there's no man living who can tell me something is bound to be."

"A commendable spirit," Mr. Kismet declared. There was something about his cool, gray eyes, Joe thought suddenly, that seemed to look right into a person.

Helen came back into the room. "It's nine, Joe," she said. "You'll be getting up early tomorrow morning, you know. Five o'clock."

Mr. Kismet looked surprised.

"Some days," Helen explained, "Mr. Corby works a double shift at the plant. Then he has to get up at the break of dawn."

Joe Corby rose. He shook hands with Mr. Kismet.

"Good-night," Joe said. "It will be nice having you with us. Helen is a peach of a cook. You'll find that out starting tomorrow morning. Make yourself at home as far as anything you want to read or use is concerned."

"Thank you," Mr. Kismet said. "Thank you very much."

His handshake was firm, solid. His cool gray eyes were clean. Joe decided that he liked the new boarder very well...

THREE days passed, during which time Mr. Kismet became more and more an accepted part of the household. His genuine friendliness and quiet

honesty increased Joe Corby's liking for him, and his sincerely laudatory comments about Helen's cooking—especially her apple pie—completely won her over.

Even little Jimmy, who had taken instantly to the new boarder, now looked on Mr. Kismet as a real pal and buddy. When Jimmy came home from school he generally found Mr. Kismet sitting in the sunlight on the front porch, whittling a top for him, or knotting a fishing line.

The Corby's neighbors all observed what a nice man Mr. Kismet was, and on the several occasions when he strolled "downtown" the clerks in the stores were won by his friendly chats.

But on the evening of the fourth day, Helen Corby met her husband at the door with a worried frown.

"What's wrong?" Joe Corby asked.

"I, I want to talk to you, Joe," Helen said. "Come into the kitchen."

"Where's Mr. Kismet?" Joe wondered.

"Out in the back yard, with Jimmy," Helen said. "I want to talk to you about Mr. Kismet."

Frowning, Joe followed Helen into the kitchen.

"What's up? What's he done? What's happened?" Joe demanded.

Helen shook her head bewilderedly. "He hasn't done anything, Joe, and nothing has happened. But this morning," she hesitated, "this morning I ran into something that's been puzzling me all day. I can't quite make it out."

"Good Lord," Joe said, "get on with it."

"It's Mr. Kismet's bed," Helen declared.

"His bed?"

"Yes," said Joe's wife. "I went up to Ral—, to Mr. Kismet's room this morning to change the sheets on his bed. It's the first time I've been in there, other than to tidy up, since he's been with us. Well, Joe, Mr. Kismet's bed hasn't been slept in since he's been here!"

Joe considered this. Then he said: "You must be mistaken, Helen. We've always seen him go into his bedroom every night. Our bedroom is right next to his. We'd hear him if he got up and went out. It's two floors down to the lawn from his window. He'd bang himself up pretty if he tried to sneak out at night that way."

"But I'm not mistaken, Joe," Helen Corby declared. "His bed has not been slept in since he's been here. He told me he'd make his own bed every morning, and so I didn't have occasion to notice it until this morning. The sheets, pillow cases, and all were just as smooth and fresh as when I put them on the day he got here."

Joe Corby considered this more thoughtfully.

"I'll ask him about it at dinner, Helen," he said.

Helen shook her head. "I wouldn't right away, Joe. I, I mean he *is* such a nice man, and there might be some reasonable explanation."

"I like him too," Joe admitted. "But dammit, Helen. We've got a right to an explanation of something as strange as that."

Helen looked worried.

"Wait, just one more day, Joe," she begged. "I'll look again, tomorrow morning. And if it's the same story, you can demand an explanation tomorrow night."

Joe frowned. "I ought to ask him right now. I ought to go out into the back yard and ask him, but," he paused, "we'll let it ride just one more day. I'll fix the doors and the windows tonight so we'll be able to tell if he sneaks out."

Helen went to the back door and called.

"Dinner ready," she said.

Jimmy and Mr. Kismet came into the kitchen together. They'd been playing baseball, and both had dirt on their shoes. Jimmy was laughing, and so was Mr. Kismet. It was the first time that Joe had ever seen Mr. Kismet do more than smile.

"Wipe your feet, both of you," Helen commanded. "Then get upstairs and wash."

Mr. Kismet and Jimmy were upstairs when Helen turned to Joe.

"One thing he's done, Joe," she said, "has been to take the place of Ralph a bit for Jimmy. I think it would break Jimmy's heart if his pal, Mr. Kismet were to leave."

Joe nodded soberly, thoughtfully.

"Nevertheless, I'll fix those doors and window's tonight. I'm not working double shift tomorrow, so I'll only get up at eight. I'll look at the doors and windows then," he promised.

AND at exactly a quarter past eight on the following morning, Joe Corby came into the kitchen where Helen was cooking breakfast amid the savory odors of bacon and eggs and burbling coffee. The expression on Joe's face was puzzledly troubled.

"Mr. Kismet didn't leave the house last night," Joe said immediately. "I'm certain of that."

Helen smiled in sudden relief.

"That's good to hear, Joe. I could hardly sleep last night worrying about it. That means, then, that there is probably a logical explanation for those sheets being unmussed."

"I checked the doors and windows," Joe said, as if still arguing with himself. "I put a tiny pit of wax in the cracks of every one of them. The wax would have been knocked loose had they been opened."

Helen smiled again, reassuringly. "Now, Joe," she ordered, "don't fret yourself. Just like I said, it probably means there's a logical explanation for it all."

"But he could have been out those other nights," Joe said. "And if he didn't sleep here, where did he sleep?"

"We don't know that he didn't sleep here, Joe," Helen declared. "I wouldn't worry about it any more."

Joe frowned. "Well, you take a look in his room again today, just for good measure."

Jimmy came down for breakfast then, followed, five minutes later, by Mr. Kismet. Throughout the meal Helen kept up a pleasant chatter of conversation, as if her rekindled warmth toward Mr. Kismet would salve the mental injustice she'd decided she had had toward him. Jimmy, of course, was equally voluble.

Joe Corby was glad of this. For even though he still couldn't help liking the boarder, his suspicions were not completely allayed, and he was forced to hide them in silence and a concentrated attack on his bacon and eggs.

Joe finished eating before the rest. He pushed back his chair and rose.

"Have to get started," he said. "Don't want to be late."

"What time are you due at the plant, Mr. Corby?" Mr. Kismet asked courteously.

"Nine o'clock," said Joe. Then, to Helen: "What time is it now?"

Helen started to rise. "I'll look," she said.

Mr. Kismet raised his hand in protest. "No need," he said. "My watch says it's only eight thirty."

"Bus goes by to the plant at twenty to nine," Joe said. "I'll have time for a cigarette." He walked into the living room.

"I've your lunch ready," Helen called after him. "I'll pack it in your lunchbox in just a minute, Joe."

"Were you ever in the army, Mr. Kismet?" asked Jimmy, with typical ten year old irrelevancy.

Mr. Kismet smiled. "Not exactly, Jimmy. I've seen lots of armies, though. All over the world."

"Really?" said Jimmy, pop-eyed. "Tell me, huh?"

"You wouldn't have time to listen," Mr. Kismet said. "You've got to start for school pretty quickly."

"Some other time, Jimmy," Helen broke in. "Sometime when you and Mr. Kismet have more time."

"Awwwww," Jimmy said, returning to his orange juice.

SEVERAL minutes later, Helen rose and went into the kitchen. Rattling Joe's lunchbox, and noisily rinsing his thermos in the sink, she busily assembled and packed his noonday meal. In the dining room, Mr. Kismet was still leisurely finishing his breakfast. Jimmy had finally left the table and was dashing frantically about the living room in search of his books.

Joe Corby heard Helen's sudden cry of alarm even in the living room.

"Good heavens!" Helen wailed. "It's a quarter to nine, Joe!"

Shocked, red-faced, Joe Corby stormed into the kitchen to glare at the clock above the stove.

"I've missed the twenty to nine bus!" he roared. "This will be the first time I've ever been late on the job!"

From the dining room Mr. Kismet, who had finished his breakfast and was now rising, observed softly, "If it's the first time there's no harm, is there Mr. Corby? When's the next bus?"

"Not until five to nine," Joe Corby said angrily.

"Being fifteen minutes late won't be so bad," Mr. Kismet ventured.

Joe Corby suddenly swung on his new boarder. The steam he let forth was outlet for the suspicions he'd nourished, rather than for any antagonism.

"Fifteen minutes in a munitions factory means just so many less shell caps run through my production line today. It could mean fifteen boys dead, or one torpedo delayed and unfired. Or hasty and faulty workmanship that might jam ten machine guns. Fifteen minutes lost from my bench could lose a battle on the fighting front!" Joe Corby was blazing mad.

Mr. Kismet was courteously apologetic. "I'm sorry, Mr. Corby. I was certain that my watch was correct when I told you it was only eight thirty, five minutes ago. It's usually incredibly accurate. I can't understand how it lost five minutes."

Joe Corby flushed. "Forget it," he snapped.

"Joe!" Helen's tone was reprimanding.

But Joe Corby made no further apology. He swept up his lunchbox, grabbed up his coat, and stormed out of the house to make certain he caught the next bus. He was still fuming as he paid his fare.

Four minutes later, when the bus in which Joe was riding turned off the Old Shale road onto highway fourteen—along which the plant was situated—his anger drained from him like water from a sieve. For there in a ditch by the highway, crumpled by an equally horribly mangled freight truck, lay the smouldering remains of the twenty to nine bus he had missed!

One of the state troopers, who was directing traffic around the blocked off scene of the wreckage, paused long enough to stick his head in the window of Joe's bus and make a brief explanation to the driver.

"Truck went out of control," said the Trooper. "Hit the bus head—on. Twenty men, the bus driver and all his passengers, were either killed instantly or burned to death inside. Truck driver got it, too."

Joe's bus circled the blocked section of the highway and continued on toward the plant. Joe was sick and shaken for the rest of the day...

AT dinner that night, Helen could talk only of the dreadful catastrophe that would have ended her husband's life had not Mr. Kismet's watch been five minutes slow.

"I needn't tell you," Joe said to Mr. Kismet, "that I owe you much more than the rotten show of temper I made this morning."

Mr. Kismet gracefully brushed the incident aside with a smile.

"It's just the old fable of misfortune sometime being a blessing in disguise, Mr. Corby. I've seen it happen many, many times."

"It was a miracle," said Helen for at least the tenth time. "A positive miracle; don't you think so, Mr. Kismet?"

"It proves," said Mr. Kismet, "that life is founded on trivial circumstances, and that the things people label as mere details are the very essence of life itself."

Neither Joe nor Helen realized at the time that Mr. Kismet hadn't answered her question.

The rest of the dinner passed swiftly, with conversation concerning the friends and relatives of the men who had died in the wreck. Joe knew many of them, from association at the plant, and talked rapidly about them, as if to bury his own shock as quickly as he could.

At eight thirty, knowing that he would be long in getting to sleep, Joe Corby excused himself and went upstairs to bed. Mr. Kismet announced that he was going for a walk, and departed asking Helen to wake him at seven o'clock, which was the hour Joe was rising the following day.

In the emotional turbulence of the day, both Joe and Helen had completely forgotten the mystery of Mr. Kismet's sleeping habits.

THE following morning, Joe Corby was first to the breakfast table, and in the kitchen Helen was busy whipping a batch of batter for the wheatcakes she was preparing.

Upstairs, Jimmy was still asleep, with another hour of dreaming left before rising for school. Helen had knocked on Mr. Kismet's door before coming downstairs, and he had answered that he was awake and would be down very shortly.

Joe's nervous state, though greatly diminished, still held from the near tragedy of the previous day. In the kitchen, Helen could hear his impatient fingertip tattoo drumming on the breakfast table, and a worried frown creased her forehead as she prayed mentally that his state of agitation would not be great enough to cause him to make a slip that might injure him at the bench that day.

A little later Helen heard Mr. Kismet's light tread as the boarder descended the stairs from the second floor. But she was not prepared for Joe's exclamation of surprise when Mr. Kismet came to the table.

"Well," she heard Joe's voice raised in genuine astonishment, "this is a surprise, Mr. Kismet!"

"I thought it would be, Mr. Corby," Mr. Kismet's voice replied.

Helen left her skillet long enough to step to the door that joined the kitchen and the dining room. Her eyes widened as she saw the boarder sitting down for breakfast. He was dressed in a faded pair of clean, well worn blue denim overalls—the kind Joe wore to his job at the plant!

Unconscious of the fact that she was staring rudely, jaw agape, Helen stood there in the doorway staring at Mr. Kismet. He looked up, saw her, and nodded somberly.

"I have taken a job in the same munitions plant as your husband, Mrs. Corby," the boarder declared gravely. His expression seemed, for the first time since she had known him, to be deeply troubled.

"That's fine," Helen stammered in sincere confusion. "I mean, I really think it's wonderful that you'll be employed at the same plant as Joe. That means you'll be staying on here, doesn't it?"

"That's swell, Mr. Kismet," Joe added. "What branch will you be in?"

"Your department, Joe," Mr. Kismet said, using Joe's front name for the first time.

Joe smiled his surprise. "Then you're one of the three new men that're coming into my line today, eh?"

"That's right, Joe," Kismet declared unsmilingly.

"That's really great," Joe declared enthusiastically. "Don't you think so?" He had suddenly noticed the gravity of Mr. Kismet's expression, the solemnity of his tone.

Mr. Kismet didn't reply directly to this. Instead he cleared his throat and said unexpectedly:

"I'd like to ask you a favor this morning, Joe."

Joe Corby smiled affably. "Go ahead, shoot."

Mr. Kismet looked first at Helen, then at Joe, and finally said earnestly, "Yesterday's near death seems to have made your nerves pretty ragged, Joe. I could hear you tossing all last night. You've been putting in a lot of time on double

shifts, working extra overtime hours. Your body is tired, and you've just had a jarring mental shock after yesterday's bus wreck."

"I, I don't get it," Joe interrupted.

"You have a job that is slightly dangerous in the plant, Joe. A job that would end in disaster if you became too weary, too mentally fatigued and ragged, and bungled any of the dangerous parts of it."

"I'll be all right," Joe said with sudden defensiveness.

"I wish you'd do me a favor, and I'm sure your wife would like it too, by taking the day off. Just this day, Joe." Mr. Kismet said hastily. "Sit in the sun. Snooze, or walk down to the village square and take it easy. You'd be doing yourself and your work a favor."

Joe Corby was bewilderedly indignant. "I couldn't do that," he snapped. "Sure I'm tired, but so are most of the rest of the men in the plant. We're tired plenty, every day. But it doesn't bother us. We're tired for as just a reason as man has ever been tired in the history of the world. But we don't let it interfere with the job we've got to do. Take a day off? I'd sooner cut my arm off!"

Helen swiftly interceded. "Maybe there's some truth in what Mr. Kismet says, Joe," she said.

Mr. Kismet gave her a grateful glance. "I know I'm a stranger, Joe, and that what you do is none of my business, but I wish you'd heed what I say."

JOE CORBY rose and slammed his fist on the table. "Of course I will not!" he said loudly. "And if you can't understand why I won't quit, you aren't an American, Mr. Kismet!"

Mr. Kismet's face was still grave, and his quiet voice even more somber than before.

"Of course I'm not an American, Joe. I'm not really any nationality. And since I can't make you see reason, I'll have to refuse to permit you to go to the plant today."

The boarder's words, quietly spoken, had the explosive effect of a bombshell on Joe and Helen Corby. They both stared at him in horror, as if he had suddenly lost his mind. It was Joe who regained his voice first.

"You aren't an American?" he bellowed. "And you think you are going to keep me from my job?"

There was pain in Mr. Kismet's gray eyes, regret on his honest features.

"You are right on both counts, Joe," he said softly.

Joe Corby started toward Mr. Kismet. Joe's fists were balled tight in rage, his eyes blazing.

"You lousy fifth-columnist," Joe spat, "you crept into our home and even into the heart of our kid, and now you think you're going to sabotage the plant!"

"Correct again, Joe," said Mr. Kismet, "except for certain minor alterations. I am not a fifth-columnist, and neither am I going personally to sabotage the plant, although a certain trivial action I will perform will lead to its destruction today."

"Damn your stinking hide!" Joe Corby grated. He started a round house punch in the direction of his boarder's chin.

But the punch never landed on Mr. Kismet's chin. It was halted some two feet from it, as Joe Corby cried out in alarm while an unseen force stopped his arm in mid arc.

Sudden sweat beaded Joe Corby's features.

"You can't hurt me, Joe," Mr. Kismet said softly.

"Who are you?" Joe whispered shakenly.

"The name I gave Helen," Mr. Kismet paused to glance at the terror stricken Mrs. Corby, "should be sufficient. However, aside from Kismet, I sometimes am called Fate, Chance, Fortune, or, if you like, Destiny."

"Kismet," Joe said half aloud. "My God, I never connected it!"

"I am really none of those," Mr. Kismet said softly. "I am just a servant of those forces, Fate, Destiny. But it has long been my job to serve Destiny wherever I am sent. There are others like myself, in various other parts of the world."

"But why are you here?" Joe said shakenly.

"Barkerville has the munitions plant," Mr. Kismet replied. "In the planning of Destiny, today's explosion of the Barkerville plant will set off a series of circumstances in your nation which will lead to the collapse of the United States of America. The destruction of the plant will so spark internal dissension, that an inexorable chain of events will follow. A chain of events that will lead to a staggering defeat on your nation's home front, which, in turn, will mean the rout of your great armies on the fighting front, and the end of your country in the annals of history."

"You're crazy," Joe Corby said quietly.

"What happened yesterday morning, Joe?" Mr. Kismet asked.

Joe paled. "You mean—"

"I mean the incident of the mistake I made in giving you the incorrect time. A mistake which prevented your taking the twenty to nine bus, and thus saved your life," Mr. Kismet said.

"You, you knew?" It was Helen who spoke now. Her eyes were wide in a terror of wonder.

"Yes," said Mr. Kismet softly. "I was aware that Joe's catching his regular bus would have meant his death."

"But why," Joe Corby began.

"Fate had not ordained that you die that way," Mr. Kismet answered simply. "It was my duty to see that you were delayed."

Joe Corby licked lips that were suddenly dry.

"It would never have occurred to you mortals that Fate lays plans," Mr. Kismet was speaking slowly, quietly. "When you hear of a friend who is saved from a falling building brick, merely because a stranger stopped him on the street long enough to ask him for a match, you call it good fortune, coincidence. It doesn't occur to you that the stranger wanting the match is a servant of Destiny, like myself, carrying out the plans of Fate."

"There are others like you?" Helen asked in a choked half whisper.

MR. KISMET nodded. "We work among you mortals, looking, acting, seeming the same as you, pausing only long enough to carry out our missions, whatever they may be, as they are ordained. The street corner bootblack who stops

you on the sidewalk long enough to shine your shoes and leave the lace of one trailing—a tiny factor that will result in a headlong fall into the path of a truck—may very well be one of us."

Joe's fear was leaving him, anger flushing his previously blanched cheeks.

"You may be what you say you are," he grated, "and you may be able to do the things you say you can—but no matter what you do this morning at the plant, you won't change the destiny of the United States of America!"

Mr. Kismet nodded. "You are quite right, Joe. I won't change it. We never change things. We merely see to it that the plans of Destiny do not fail. In our plans, your nation is destined for disaster, defeat, and oblivion. What I do today will set forth the chain of circumstances that will insure that disaster and final oblivion."

"What do you have against us?" Helen cried suddenly, the words torn from her lips in desperation.

Mr. Kismet shook his head. "As far as Joe and you are concerned, Helen, I have nothing but fondness. That is why, for the first time in many years, I permitted myself to be swayed in a minor mission. That is why, in other words, I begged Joe to stay at home today. That is why, in spite of himself, I will not let him go to the plant. For you see, in the scheme of Fate, Joe would be killed in the plant explosion today!"

"If I am slated to die in that blast today," Joe Corby said with sudden, choking fierceness, "let me go there. Let me die for my country, side by side with the boys at my bench!"

Mr. Kismet shook his head. "No, Joe. I permitted myself to have too much fondness for Jimmy. I don't want him fatherless. You will stay here."

"But, the, the chain of circumstances you spoke of," Helen declared raggedly, "cannot reach the foundation of our government through a destructive explosion in a munitions factory. It would be inconceivable!"

"There is an old proverb," Mr. Kismet said quietly, "that goes something like this. 'For want of the nail, the shoe was lost; for want of the shoe the horse was lost; for want of the horse, the rider was lost; for want of the rider, the battle was lost.' That, Helen, is a thumbnail description of the workings of Fate. In my trivial action today, I will, so to speak, 'lose the nail.' The rest will follow inevitably."

"You lousy dog!" Joe Corby spat.

Mr. Kismet sighed. There was a sharper etching of the pain in his honest face.

"I had feared you would react this way," he said wearily. "That is why I tried a ruse to keep you from the factory. That is why I so dreaded that you should both learn the truth. I knew you would be unable to understand. And yet, I wanted you never to know, always to remember me kindly."

Joe Corby suddenly rose and dashed for the living room. Mr. Kismet didn't move, as the sounds of Joe's effort to open the front door came to them. Then they heard him tugging at the windows, cursing wildly under his breath.

Joe stormed back into the living room, picking up a small chair. Viciously he hurled it at the largest living room window pane. The chair struck the window, fell to the floor, shattered. The window pane remained, miraculously, unbroken.

MR. KISMET said wearily. "It is no use, Joe. I could have told you that you will not be permitted to leave your house until I have accomplished my mission."

"Damn you!" Joe Corby croaked. He stumbled toward the hall telephone. The sound of his feverishly unsuccessful efforts to reach the operator came to the dining room. Then Joe Corby reappeared. His face was flushed, beaded with sweat. His eyes were wild.

"You can't do this!" he said hoarsely. "You can't do this!" He pressed his fists to his forehead, and then, unexpectedly, his arms dropped limply to his sides.

"It's not for me, Mr. Kismet," Joe said softly. "It's not for Jimmy, or for Helen that I beg you. It's for democracy, for decency, for the millions of kids like our Ralph. Kids out there in the mud and malaria and slime of the jungles; kids freezing to death behind an anti-aircraft gun on the ice-caked deck of an Arctic patrol boat. Kids fighting and dying and bleaching their bones on the scorched sands of the Sahara.

"Kids who were just like little Jimmy less than ten years back. Kids who believed that the other guys oughtta have a chance to smell the same fresh free air—the chance to lie on their backs in the same rolling green meadows while the clean, free, blue sky, white clouds and honest sun beams down on 'em. Kids offering their arms and their legs and their futures on an altar of blood, so that the cancer of tyranny can never eat into the land they love.

"They're kids who'd gladly die before they'd relinquish their god—given right to speak as they please, to love as they please, and to laugh as they please. They're kids with pride, and guts, and a to-hell-with-you grin for that thing you call Destiny. The only destiny they know is the destiny that gives a man two hands and a brain and a fighting chance to pound the scheme of things into the shape he wants it.

"They're the same kind of kids that lined up hungry and ragged and cold at Valley Forge, while the blood from their feet changed the white snow to red, and the fires in their souls changed dark pages of history to a blazing new light. They said to hell with Destiny's plans, and they licked you then, Mr. Kismet. They beat you bad!

"They're the same sort of kids who hacked their way in prairie schooners through heat and thirst and red-man's terror to the West; kids who fought beside the Crockets and the Boones and the Custers."

Joe Corby walked slowly over to his proudest possession, a replica of the Constitution, framed and hanging beside the entrance from the kitchen to the dining room.

"They fought to make those wonderful words," Joe pointed, "something more than brave phrases. They licked the thing you call Destiny at every turn. They were fighting for something more than a vast, fertile land divided into forty-eight sections. They weren't fighting for something geographical. Just like these kids today aren't dying for a map. They're dying for something you can't buy or sell, or touch or weigh. They're fighting for something called the United States. It's not something lying between the Atlantic and the Pacific; it's something lying between the heart and soul of every decent man who ever loved liberty. You can't destroy it. Destiny can't destroy it!"

Joe Corby was flushed, breathless. His eyes were filled with wordless pleading. He looked at Helen, who was staring with hopeful supplication at Mr. Kismet.

The silence hung like heavy smoke for fully a minute. And when Mr. Kismet finally answered, his voice was weary, kindly, but determined.

"You can't be expected to understand, Joe. My mission must be performed. At nine twenty—one this morning, on the inside of the plant, I will set the wheels of Fate into action through my apparently trivial gesture. You see, Fate is like that. Nine twenty—one. Even the fraction of the hour at which I go through with my trifling action is important." Mr. Kismet rose. "I shall have to leave for the plant now," he said.

JOE CORBY shuffled listlessly, defeatedly, into the living room. Helen was wordless, moist eyed.

"I'll need a lunch pail," said Mr. Kismet. "Helen, I'll have to ask you to pack me Joe's. I don't want to create suspicion passing through the gates."

Helen nodded dully, turned and entered the kitchen. Mr. Kismet sighed and walked slowly into the living room. Joe sat in his favorite armchair, his head buried in his hands. He didn't look up as Mr. Kismet took a seat on the sofa.

From the kitchen came the noises of Helen's packing of the lunchbox. Perhaps five minutes passed, during which time Mr. Kismet stared at the forlorn spectacle of Joe Corby. Several times Mr. Kismet opened his mouth to speak, then thinking better of it, shut his jaws hard once more.

Finally Helen came into the living room, bearing Joe's lunchbox. She handed it to Mr. Kismet.

"Thank you, Helen," Mr. Kismet said, rising. He turned to face Joe. "I guess this is farewell. I hope that sometime, someday, we'll meet again under circumstances which Fate has more pleasantly preordained. Don't think too ill of me, if you can help it."

Mr. Kismet started toward the door. With his hand on the knob he paused.

"It would be foolish to try to get out of the house or use the telephone until after nine twenty-one. Then, of course, you'll find yourself able to do so." He hesitated. "Goodbye, Helen," Mr. Kismet said.

"Goodbye, Mr. Kismet," Helen answered.

"Goodbye, Joe," Mr. Kismet raised his voice.

Joe Corby didn't take his head from his hands. Neither did he answer. Mr. Kismet sighed deeply.

"Say goodbye to Jimmy for me," Mr. Kismet asked Helen. Then he opened the door and was gone.

Helen walked slowly back from the door into the living room. Joe had his head still buried in his hands. Eyes misty, Helen put her hand on Joe's head, roughing his hair gently.

"Joe," Helen said with soft weariness. "He's gone, Joe. He's gone, and it's going to be all right, Joe. Mr. Kismet will never get into the munitions plant."

Those were the only words that could have brought Joe's head up from his hands. And now he stared at his wife with pleading incredulity.

"Helen," he said hoarsely, rising to his feet and taking her arms roughly in his grasp. "Helen," he repeated, "don't kid me. For the love of God, don't lie to me!"

"I'm not, Joe," Helen said. "They'll stop him the instant they inspect his lunchbox. The idea came to me all at once, and I couldn't tell you."

"How, Helen? How?" Joe demanded almost hysterically. "We've nothing you could have planted in the box. No guns, or papers."

"I covered the bottom of the lunchbox with your replica of the Constitution, Joe, where it'll get greasy and defamed," Helen said. "Then I wrapped four pork chop sandwiches and a piece of apple pie in Jimmy's small American flag that he kept tucked away in a kitchen drawer. Wait until they inspect Mr. Kismet's lunchbox and discover that! They'll do more than stop him, Joe," she promised.

And then Joe Corby was hugging his wife harder than in Lord knows how long, and his cheeks were wet with tears as he babbled again and again: "Even Destiny can't lick the Constitution and the Stars and Stripes!"

"Not when they're combined with apple pie and pork chop sandwiches," Helen agreed smilingly...

THE news item Joe Corby read on the bus taking him to work at the munitions plant the following morning, was buried in the lower right hand corner of the second page of the Barkerville Bugle:



* Although what we, the editors, have to say here may have nothing to do with Mr. Kismet, there is an interesting parallel we would like to bring to your attention.

Some centuries ago there was a "Mr. Kismet" who was a real personage. He was so real that we are inclined to feel a little bit disturbed by this story—because it may not be fiction! True, we've presented it as such, but really, author David Wright O'Brien was extremely agitated and anxious that we publish this story, for a reason he would not divulge. This other "Kismet" wrote a strange series of books, one of which was called "The Centuries," and which has caused so much wonder and comment in these modern days. This ancient Mr. Kismet also knew things he shouldn't know—of the future—and they are coming true! His name is one you all will recognize: Michel de Nostradamus. Has Nostradamus visited us again?—Ed.

