

Paul E.
Erdman
THE
\$ILVER
BEAR\$

A novel by the author of
THE BILLION DOLLAR SURE THING

The Silver Bears

Paul E. Erdman

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Prologue

The southwestern corner of Persia is for the most part a desert. Today it goes under the name of Khuzistan. The region's best known town is Abadan, where Iran's tremendous output of crude oil is refined, and then sent on its way to the world's filling stations.

Three thousand years ago Abadan was just an uninhabited swamp at the mouth of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. The petroleum resources of the area immediately to the north, instead of fueling car engines, fed superstition, particularly Zoroastrianism. In that religion fire, which magically jetted from the bowels of the earth, was the central feature of worship. This fire was, of course, derived from the gases discharged by underground petroleum deposits. At that time, the province was known as Elam, and its capital was a place called Shushan, or Zusa, or Susa. It was not only the largest town in Persia, but one of the most important cities of the ancient world. It was already inhabited in 4000 B.C., and reached its pinnacle between 600 and 350 B.C., when it served as the capital of a series of empires—under Nebuchadnezzar, Cyrus, Darius, Xerxes, and Artaxerxes. Shushan went into eclipse around 326 B.C. when Alexander the Great captured it. It is recorded by Plutarch that he made a tremendous windfall gain in the process, cleaning up the equivalent of hundreds of millions of dollars worth of

treasure, in the form of precious metals, as the spoils of victory. But Alexander did not live to spend it. Just a short time later he got knocked off in Babylon, a few hundred miles to the west.

The Bible keeps fairly close track of Elam, and its capital Shushan. Already in Genesis, chapter 10, it is written that one of Noah's great-grandchildren settled there. A few chapters later, in Genesis 14, it is said that the King of Elam got together with a few of his buddies and made war on Sodom and Gomorrah. Which goes to show that the people of Shushan and surroundings did not go for excessive lasciviousness, false idols, or any other such liberal nonsense. Daniel found this out the hard way. When the Elamite King Nebuchadnezzar discovered Daniel kneeling by a palace window, praying to some god called Jahweh instead of toeing the local Zoroastrian line—whambo, right into Shushan's lion's den. Still, the Book of Esther shows that the rulers of Shushan were not completely adverse to a bit of fun and games, especially with the girls. The king involved this time—with the rather heavy name of Ashasuerus—decided that his wife Vashti had to go. To choose a successor he staged what must have been the first Miss World contest, with the interesting twist that the judging was based on a series of one night stands in the king's nocturnal chambers. Twelve months later, perhaps more attributable to sheer exhaustion than true love, the king decided on the dark-eyed Jewess Esther, who promptly inherited Vashti's crown and a permanent place in Ashasuerus's bed.

But enough of queens, beauty contests, and lion's dens. What is interesting is that bed. For according to Esther, chapter 2, verse 6, in the palace at Shushan “the beds were of gold and silver.” Moving along to chapter 5, it is recorded that this same king, Ashasuerus, paid out 10,000 talents of

silver to a chap called Hamman, as if the amount involved was just pocket money. Now in those days, a talent of silver equalled 60 minas, a mina equalled 60 shekels, and a shekel equalled $252 \frac{2}{3}$ fine grains of silver. Multiplied out, this means that Hamman carted away 18,840,000 troy ounces of silver. Today that silver would be worth well over \$100. million! Which brings one to the conclusion that the province of Elam, and its capital Shushan, not only sat on top of a lot of oil, but was also positively loaded with silver.

But there seemed to be a thing about that silver. While Elam's oil was obviously a gift of the gods, Shushan's silver had the nasty tendency of bringing rather bad luck. Like Alexander, Hamman was given little time to live it up with his new-found riches. The Bible describes it thus: "So they hanged Hamman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai." His alleged crime: conspiracy. Connoisseurs of that fine art of execution may be interested to note that the structure employed was "50 cubits high," which works out to about 75 feet. One cannot help but stop to ponder on how the hell they got him up there. By rope?

Today Shushan, or Susa, is just four huge mounds of earth, barely visible a couple of miles west of the main road—if you can call it a road—leading from Abadan, on the Persian Gulf, to Dizful, at the foot of the Zagros Mountains in central Iran. Knowledge of Shushan's fabulous silver source died with the city. It was not until the late 1960's that this age-old secret surfaced anew. The consequences were severely felt by tens of thousands of commodity speculators in the United States, in Europe, and throughout the world, who lost their shirts in the biggest market manipulation engineered in the 20th century. Others—a few others—made a fortune. Behind it all was yet another Shushan conspiracy. But to this day, nobody appears to know what really hap-

pened. Because the secret of Shushan is still locked up, this time in the vaults of a Swiss bank, and in the heads of the surviving members of that conspiracy.

A few of those people are Americans. Their involvement began in the desert. Not in the desert of southwestern Persia, but rather in the wastelands of the southwestern part of the United States. The time: late March of 1967, A.D.

Part 1

(1967)

The Grand Canyon in late March was a bleak place. Even the rustic lobby of the Big Lodge, on the edge of the southern rim, usually bustling with hordes of tourists and their subhordes of screaming brats, was totally deserted. For it was not only March; it was also a Sunday morning, a time when the God-fearing people of Arizona were either in church or still in bed with a bad conscience.

The total peace was broken around 10:45 when a black Cadillac pulled up. The grey-haired man who emerged was also in black. He pushed through the revolving doors, a strangely incongruous mechanism in this Wild West setting, and approached the reception desk. There was not a soul in sight. But there was a bell. So the man in black banged on it, three times, hard. It was a rather small bell, but it produced one hell of a loud noise, or at least it seemed that way in contrast to the silence which had prevailed prior to the entrance of this intruder. The audible result of the bell-banging was soon replaced by a visible one, in the form of a clerk clad in levis and plaid shirt. After a few words had been exchanged, the clerk handed over a key, in fact, two keys. One of them was for the hotel lounge, just in back of the lobby. It was closed to the general public at this time of year, since there was very little general public requiring its use. The man in black, followed rather meekly by the clerk, unlocked the

door, gave the lounge a quick once-over, nodded his O.K., and closed up again. He then disappeared up the staircase, led by the hotelkeeper carrying his only luggage, a small black leather satchel.

Within a few minutes the clerk was back in his lobby, just in time to meet another incoming guest. It was again a single gentleman, also middle-aged, this time in dark blue serge, pink shirt, red tie, and brown cigar. He was without luggage. In fact, it seemed that he was just trying to locate the coffee shop; it was off the lobby to the left, opposite the staircase, and likewise deserted, except for a floozy-looking blonde waitress who took five minutes before she managed to produce the desired cup of coffee. During the next half hour there was a steady uptrend in activity: five more somberly clad men, all but one with cigars, and all wanting a morning coffee. The lone non-smoker was a gum-chewer. The six of them, lined up at the coffee bar, strongly resembled old crows perched on a fence. At least this was the thought of the waitress as she surveyed her silent guests. At 11:45 as if by magic, her flock suddenly deperched, and disappeared into the lobby, leaving behind a cloud of tobacco fumes, six empty cups, a faint touch of juicy fruit in the air, and five tips totalling seventy cents. The man in the black suit with the key was there to greet them. Again without a word he just motioned with his head toward the lounge door. They all entered, the door closed, the lock clicked, and silence returned to the lobby of the Big Lodge on this cold, but sunny, Sunday morning in March.

Inside a murmur of conversation suddenly developed. One by one the men took chairs and grouped them around a low massive table, built from raw timber which had been hacked up and then nailed together by the local purveyor of genuine western lodge furnishings. The man in charge, Joe Fiore, plunked his massive body into the biggest armchair

available, and also plunked his highly polished shoes onto the surface of the table, adding another nick to the formidable collection already visible.

"Perfect, ain't it?" he asked.

"Yeah," was the collective and unanimous answer.

"Anybody tailed?" was Joe's next question.

No. Nobody had been tailed. The man from New York had flown into Phoenix and, after a night's sleep, driven up in an Avis. The representative from Chicago had come by way of Albuquerque airport, where he had picked up a Hertz. The Miami man had used Reno as his transfer point. And so it was with the men from Boston, Los Angeles and St. Louis. All had come the prior evening into separate western airports, and then driven themselves hundreds of miles along almost completely deserted high-speed roads to this meeting place on the edge of the Grand Canyon. Except for Joe Fiore; he had come directly from Las Vegas with his own long black Caddie.

"I'm sorry about any inconvenience you might have had getting here. But I think we all agree that one can't be too careful these days."

Everybody agreed that, indeed, one could not be too careful these days, or any other days. Then the man from New York spoke up.

"So all right. We're here. Now what's the big deal?"

"The big deal, Tony, is that I can get us out of our mutual financial predicament. You all know how difficult things have become since the banks have to photostat all evidence of financial transactions over ten thousand dollars. We're hamstrung. All we can do is sit on cash. But no longer. I finally found a foolproof way to put our money to work in legitimate investments without the Feds or anybody else being able to trace it back to us."

"Yeah, how?"

“Gentlemen, through a Swiss bank!”

The muteness which met this revelation was total, except for a disgusted, unidentified, faint, yet distinct, “Jeezus!”

Then the man from Chicago spoke up.

“Ah come on now, Joe, what’s so fuckin’ great about that? For Chrissake since years everybody claims we’ve been using Swiss banks to hide our money. Where’ve you been all that time, for crying out loud?”

“Now hold on one damn minute,” interrupted Fiore. “Sure I know everybody’s been saying that. But do you know anybody at a Swiss bank?” He pointed his finger at Chicago.

“Or you?” This time the finger swung toward New York. Then Miami.

They all looked at each other. No, nobody had ever dealt with a Swiss bank. Joe Fiore beamed.

“You see,” he said triumphantly, “everybody yaks about it, but nobody’s ever done it.”

“But Joe,” said Los Angeles, “after all the phoney propaganda in almost every newspaper in the world about us using Swiss banks, I’m sure no respectable bank in Switzerland would touch our business with a ten foot pole. I mean, they could get into trouble, and then we would get into trouble.”

“You are right,” replied Fiore. “And I know, gentlemen, I have been to Switzerland. I even opened up a numbered account with a big bank in Zurich. Until, somehow, they must have heard something. Then I got a letter requesting me to transfer my funds elsewhere, and within seven days.”

“So then why drag us all the way out to this godforsaken hole in the ground?” asked Boston.

“Because I’ve found the perfect solution. I bought us a Swiss bank, lock, stock, and barrel. This way we won’t need those Swiss jerks, or anybody else. We run our own show, with our own boys, and our own money.”

"And when somebody over there finds out who controls it? Then what?" It was Boston again.

"I've fixed that. I found the perfect front man. A prince. A real one. Him and me got to be real, you know, simpatico. But he also understands our system. So he'll keep his mouth shut. Forever."

Skepticism reigned in the lounge of the Big Lodge. The man from St. Louis, who was known as a very kind and decent man, restricting his activities to gambling and prostitution, adamantly refusing to have anything to do with any of the rougher, though more lucrative lines of business, then interceded.

"Come on, you guys, let's hear Joe out. Maybe he does have something." He turned to Fiore. "How would it work, Joe."

Joe Fiore looked hurt, deeply hurt, but he continued. "I'll set up a courier service. My boys will pick up your excess cash on a regular basis, and then take it over to our bank in Switzerland via Mexico. It will disappear just like that." He snapped his fingers with a loud crack. "Then we invest it, like the Rothschilds and all those other big guys do over there. The whole world will be open to us. Gentlemen, this could mean the big chance for us to start our sons on sound careers. As we grow, there will be lots of room for our boys to move into the operations over there. I tell you, it's time to think and plan ahead. Sure, we've all done great in our own way. But maybe our way won't be that of our kids. Here's a chance to put both our money and our kids to work, in a high-class legitimate way."

The plea was a passionate one. It would have won admiration especially in the elite financial circles of New York. For as many of the more historically inclined men on Wall Street knew only too well, some of the nation's strongest financial institutions had been built on a heritage no less simple, or

shady, than the group of men gathered together on this winter morning in Arizona. Sure, it had been accomplished in many ways. But the quickest and surest method of gaining a foothold in the Establishment was by founding that ultimate symbol of the Establishment: a bank!

Such subtleties of Joe Fiore's vision were beyond the comprehension of his colleagues, as was soon evidenced by the response from New York.

"Yeah," he said, "but although my son is a damn smart kid, he's only thirteen right now. So who's going to run the bank until junior is ready to become senior vice president?" New York had obviously married late.

Joe decided to overlook both New York's sarcasm and the laughter it produced.

"I have put together a small team of men from my organization. They will be leaving this evening for Switzerland to take over operations. Believe me, they're the best I've got. All I'm asking of you is to indicate whether or not you're interested. If so, I'll let you each have a piece of the action, like eight percent of the shares of the bank each. And at my original cost. The only thing I ask in return is that you come through with regular deposits for the bank."

Silence.

"So who wants in?" asked Joe.

Still silence.

Then Tony Regazzoni of New York spoke up. "Listen, Joe. I think we all need some time to think this over. Why don't you go ahead over there in Switzerland, and then let us know how things are working out. I'm sure, after we can see some kind of track record, all of us would like very much to come in. But later, not now."

Everybody else in the room nodded agreement.

So New York continued. "All right. So that's settled. Now as long as we're here, I'd like you all to know that somebody

has been running heroin into my territory during the past month and has wrecked the market. I hear it's coming from Montreal. Once something like this gets started, it can spread to . . ."

With a feeling of great relief, the men in the room got down to a discussion of day-to-day business problems. Joe Fiore listened for a short while, and then slipped out of the room. He went straight to the pay phone box in the lobby.

He had the connection with Vegas immediately.

"This is Joe. Gimme Doc."

A short pause.

"Doc? Right. We're going ahead. I want you to get over to L.A. this afternoon and take that flight as planned. And listen, Doc. Either you guys make a go of that goddammed bank over there, or I'll get you. Personally. And now another thing. If I hear of you trying to pull any funny business—and I mean any—you are going to be in deep deep trouble. Understand? This deal is going to be done 100% straight from the word go. Understand?"

The phone squawked full understanding.

"And take good care of Albert. You hear?"

At 9 P.M. Alitalia flight 967 left the Los Angeles International airport bound for Milano, Malpense. Mathew “Doc” Smythe, Marvin Skinner, and Albert Fiore went directly to the cocktail lounge in the front of the D.C. 8 after the big plane had climbed to cruising height. Smythe ordered beer for everybody. After the drinks had arrived, Marvin took a tentative sip, looked around, and then asked:

“Doc, are you sure we’re on the right plane?”

“Look, Marvin,” replied Doc Smythe, “if I told you once, I’ve told you a hundred times: just do what I do, and you’ll be fine.”

“I know you said that, Doc. But this plane is going to Italy, not Switzerland.”

Smythe sighed. “Marvin, I know. But for the very last time, let me explain that Lugano, though in Switzerland, is in the Italian part of Switzerland. They speak Italian there. And why? Because it’s right on the border of Italy where, as you may have heard, they also speak Italian.”

“What’s that got to do with it?”

“Nothing.”

“Ah come on, Doc. Don’t get sore.”

“I’m not sore, and to prove it I will finish. Lugano does not have an airport. Milano does. So, we are . . .”

“I know. You explained that before. But it still doesn’t