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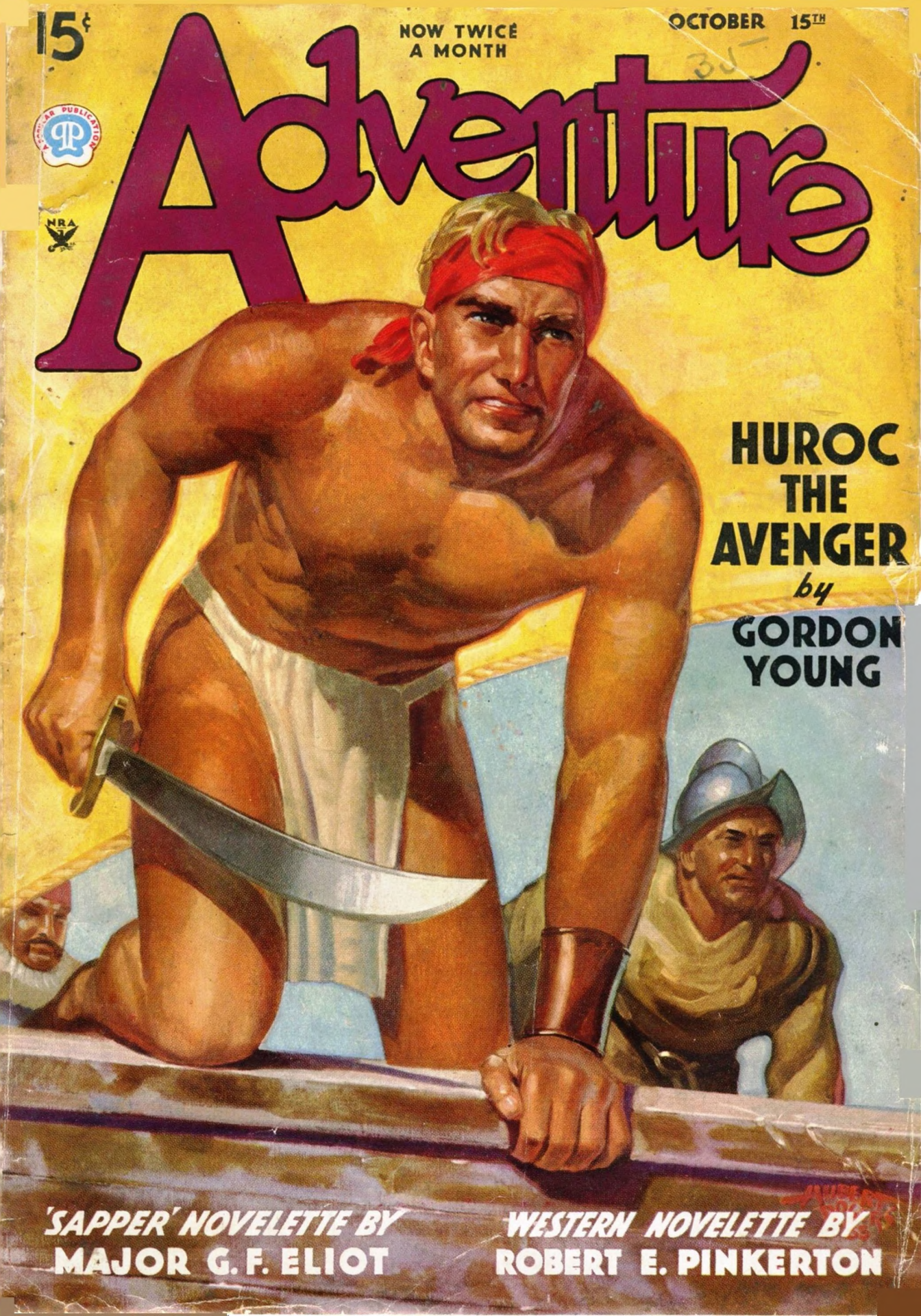

HUROC THE AVENGER

by GORDON YOUNG

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HUROC THE AVENGER

CHAPTER I

"DEAD? NO, PIOMBO. BUT YOU ARE!"

SIDI HAMET was bringing his war galleys home again, deeply laden with sea-spoil.

There was great welcoming commotion through all Tripoli. The galleys were coming into the harbor with banners flying and bow guns booming black smoke. Oars surged with even stroke at furious speed. Guns of the old fortress smokily thundered an answering salute. Merchants and beggars, the old and young, lame and brass-thewed, joggled and ran through the sandy streets with much shouting, all gleeful; and great praise of Allah. Such Christian slaves and workmen as had the freedom of the city were in the press. Even the fierce desert Bedouins that camped outside the old walls of the city pushed their horses through the gates, defying townsmen, and rode seaward to have an awed glimpse of a greater thief than ever roved their sands.

The Turk Bashaw, from the old castle by the western wall where he lived with his numerous family, sent his sly fat son and sly fat Turk companions to welcome the *Renegado* whom they hated—and feared.

By Gordon Young

SIDI HAMET, known to his Moors as the Scourge of the Sea, to Christians as the accursed *Renegado*, stood arrayed in regal splendor under the canopied poop of his war galley.

Forward in the open waist stood some three hundred toiling, naked galley slaves, five to each of the heavy fifty-foot oars, a bank of thirty oars to each side. As the backs of the slaves rose and heaved in rapid stroke, chains clanked.

Two gaily-bedecked boatswains, whips in hand, strode barefoot up and down the narrow gangway, or walk, that ran amidships from poop to forecastle. They cracked their whips with dexterous flourishes but did not aim at any man's back. There was no need. The slaves, Christians to a man, heaved willingly; the sooner ashore the sooner they could rest in their *bagnio* from the dreadful labor, and eat something better than wine-soaked bread, a handful of rice and meat. Sidi Hamet fattened his galley slaves on shore, took back their sweat at sea.

Sidi Hamet, a tall man, seemed the taller because of the up-coiled turban, plumed with a feathery spray of gold-set pearls and diamonds that appeared to

grow like a flower of jewels from the diamond crescent below.

Not even the Grand Seignior's own petted viceroy, the vain and jealous Bashaw of Tripoli, went bedecked in the splendor of the *Renegado.* The reason was excellent: he did not have the *Renegado's* wealth; and few men, whatever their wealth, had the *Renegado's* courage to flaunt treasure before the Sultan's thievish tax collectors. Moors and Turks, for all their common religion, had no more mutual love than divers Christian nations that worshiped at the foot of the same cross.

Some twenty-odd years before, Sidi Hamet, then a Scot of lordly birth who had taken to seafaring ventures, had for the one and only time in his turbulent life fled an enemy.

But that enemy was a woman, a queen, her name Elizabeth; and his crime was unpardonable, being an oath half in jest after many empty bottles, that Mary of Scotland's beauty, from head to foot, made her unfearful of marriage—whereas, he said, naught but the shame of a bad-shaped body kept even queens virgin!

Thereupon he had to prick the throat of a humorless courtier who tried to maintain the beauty of a body he had never seen, and kept his own head out of the red queen's grasping hand by speedily carrying it to the Mediterranean.

He laid aside his fathers' religion with the ease of discarding a frayed garment, took the name Hamet, acknowledged Mahomet as the prophet of God. 'Twas an easy shift for one who believed in neither prophets nor gods.

He made himself powerful in Tripoli, where the people loved him for the wealth he brought into the city. He was feared by all nations who sent their ships into the Mediterranean. The Sultan, weaving webs of cunning craft at Constantinople, needed Sidi Hamet's valor and tribute, but squirmed under his insolence; and many were the wiles and plots to get a ring through the great corsair's nose and make him humble.

The galleys came to anchor with a swarming of small short craft about them that made a noisy welcome.

The rowers cast their heavy oars into the water, where they were gathered together at ropes' ends and towed shoreward, then carried up and put away in strong shelters, so that if there happened to be an outbreak of slaves they could not readily make off with a galley.

Wretched, seasick captives were herded up out of the stifling hold and taken ashore, to be kept in a huddle on the beach until segregated and marched off, some to slave markets, some to *bagnios.* Fine ladies and rich gentlemen would be put into homes and held for ransom.

Disconsolate women wept and called upon God. Many stood agape in fearful curiosity, staring back at the staring faces of the town's rabble. All were travel-mussed and disheveled. All had suffered in the cramped space and gasped for air.

Most of them glowered in sullen silence. There was no one in the world to pay ransom for them; they were slaves for life unless they could escape.

Some few disclosed their worldly worth by the costly, even if now befouled, garments they wore. These were the precious ones; they had already been questioned about family and friends and the price they would pay.

Sidi Hamet, with the young *reis* of his galley and the officers and captains of other galleys, came ashore in the midst of joyful clamor. The Bashaw's slyly evil son, surrounded by companions in holiday array, welcomed them. Merchants pressed close, praised Allah, and with soft whispering from the sides of bearded mouths inquired what merchandise was taken.

ON BOARD the galleys irons clinked and clattered from oarsmen. They were being freed from the benches and

sent ashore, a few at a time in small groups, watched by contemptuous soldiers.

It was remembered in Tripoli that some three hundred unarmed galleymen, all crowded together on the beach, had once suddenly gone mad and fought barehandedly until they seized swords from throttled soldiers. The sand turned red and when the outbreak ended some scores of valuable slaves were dead or maimed. Good oarsmen could not be made out of Christians by a dozen lashes of the boatswain's whip. It took time and fierce training. They were as valuable to the galley master as oxen to the farmer—these human cattle that ploughed the sea with a galley prow and reaped a greater harvest than corn. So slaves were sent ashore in small groups.

Some in even these small groups were dangerous enough to be manacled.

The boatswain of Sidi Hamet's own galley flung up his whip. The lash uncurled like a thrown snake, turned in the air, came down with a hiss and bit the broad shoulders of a clip-headed, naked bow oarsman. A wanton blow, without any purpose but malice.

The clip-headed bowman threw up his head, snarled in Arabic, jeered the boatswain. It was an old feud between them. The boatswain hated the best oarsman in his galley because the oarsman was not afraid, would not flinch from the lash, jeered when struck.

"Up, you accursed Christian dog. We take you to your kennel!"

The slave stood up. His shoulders were swollen with powerful, smooth-moving muscles. His back was scarred by the whip-lash. He was bronzed from clipped head to breechclout, from breechclout to toes. His face was unlike any other man's among the slaves. The features were not marred as if clumsily made by a drunken potter. Behind the dogged sullenness that set his face like a mask was a burning look of intelligence. Something inside of him could not be tamed by lash or chains or the terrible oar labor. He had been beaten until his back was sliced to rawness; he could be killed but he could not be tamed. Therefore the boatswain hated him murderously.

The slave stood and let the boatswain's boy unlock his chains, slip a manacle cuff upon his wrist and carry the links to the wrist of a squat, pock-marked slave on the bench beside him; all without seeming to notice.

Standing, he could see the length of the galley, as if from a high place. He watched the captives being hustled over the side into the boats. The slave's eyes rested upon and followed a purple cloak wrapped about a pig-shaped body that moved with disconsolate sluggishness. Even as he watched, the slave's lips twitched, became a smile, shaped noiseless words as if somehow pleased.

The boatswain tossed the whip again, did not strike. The lash exploded in the air. "Wake, dogs! March!"

The men, chained together, stirred, clanking their irons. They were the strongest, the most dangerous of the galley. The best oarsmen, the worst men.

In the boat the slave spoke in toneless whispers, without moving his lips, to the pock-marked man. "Ashore I am going to break these links and kill a devil."

"I'll help." The pock-marked man's beady eyes narrowed on the gaily dressed boatswain, who stood in the boat and gazed shoreward at the welcoming crowd. "Best have some pleasure—then die."

"He's naught but a wasp. Some joy to feel him squash under a hand's slap. But yon purple cloak has a man under it that must go to hell, though I go with him."

"Why, that's Piombo of Zara."

"Aye."

The pock-marked man jiggled the iron that ran from the manacles to the slave's wrist-cuff. "You can't break these. And

if you try they'll slice you to cat meat!"

"Ashore, when I give word, you set your wrist hard against your belly. Hold firm. I'll twist till I am free. What they do to me after I reach him, I care not."

They climbed from the boat, strode through shallow water into the sand. The herder boatswain cracked his whip, shouted. He wanted the crowd's notice, made believe that these were dangerous men whom he had tamed. Now they looked almost too tame for the boatswain's pleasure as they marched with stoop-shouldered shambling through the deep sand, dragging their bare feet, eyes sullenly down.

"Make ready," said the slave into the pock-marked one's ear. "A link parts or your wrist breaks!"

"I'll not weep to rest from the sea. Break it!"

The tall, broad slave was at the head of the manacled line. He stopped, spun about until he had twisted a kink into the chain; then he leaped back. He jerked with all his strength and weight. The pock-marked man had braced himself but was pulled from his feet, fell face down in the sand. The jerk that pulled him down drew other men off-balance, so that all staggered and some fell. Pock-mark lay with his wrist under his belly, held it with the other hand.

The slave jerked again and again and again like a tiger on a rope, hurling all his weight against the kink in the chain. No link snapped. The iron was not brittle; but a link parted, opened. The slave fell back as if knocked down, touched the sand and sprang up as if thrown. A length of dangling chain swung at his wrist. He gripped it and had an iron flail.

The boatswain, with never a thought that any man, however strong, could break the chain, had run up, tossing his whip expertly. He would show the crowd how he could make a lash bite bone-deep. The freed slave jumped forward at him with chain lifted. The boatswain pitched away his whip, stumbled, fell before he was struck, rolled over and over in the sand, crying, "Allah! Allah!"

The slave's look was scarcely on the boatswain as he swooped, slashed down, not pausing. It was a hurried, chance-struck blow and caught the boatswain's thigh. The chain links bruised their way deep into the boatswain's flesh, left him howling and crippled for life.

Moorish soldiers yelped through their beards, pulled at curved swords. The fierce young *reis* leaped from the side of Sidi Hamet with jeweled scimitar up in a flame-like flash. The chain flailed criss-crosswise at Moorish men of arms, and a sword blade snapped. A second blow and a second soldier had a broken arm. Startled soldiers fell back; by his look this slave meant to be killed killing them, and his strength and fury made brave men cautious.

That was not at all his purpose. He went by them, through them. The crowd scattered, stumbled in the sand. "Allah! Allah!" The slave had no fury toward them. He jumped the fallen body of a bearded merchant as if careful not to hurt him, then broke with a bull-like rush in upon the huddled captives. The impact of his body knocked them aside, men and even women. He came before a full-faced man whose big-bellied body and purple cloak, even though filth-splattered, told of money somewhere in the world and a lifetime of easy living.

The pork-bellied man gave one gasping look at the galley slave's face, lately shaven, now faintly colored with a reddish stubble. It was a face that once closely observed would never be forgotten, as superior to the common faces of slaves and men in general as Greek sculpture to pottery masks.

The man in the purple cloak shrank back and sucked in his breath, gasped, "Y-you are not dead!"

"No, Piombo! But you are!"

When the words were spoken the

truth had been told. The iron links fell in a whip-like stroke on the head of the man in the purple cloak. He dropped, a shapeless lump, to folded knees, as if in death groveling abjectly before the feet of the man who had killed him.

THE clamorous outcry increased. The galley slave did not look about for a way of escape from the swelling circle that jostled and shoved.

Soldiers roughly pushed in, jerking and knocking people aside. They seized the slave, who made no resistance at all, but with contented glower looked down at the dead man.

The young *reis* pushed and struck, swore at the soldiers, got through, swung up the curved sword.

"Hold!" said the *Renegado* at the *reis'* heels. The *reis* lowered his arm and began a storm of oaths to tell what a devil this slave was and had been.

"And now—here!" The *reis* poked the dirty purple robe of the dead man with a foot. "Ten thousand good Venetian ducats gone! A carcass remains! The fattest fish of the net! A Piombo of Zara! Uncle to Piombo the Magnificent of Venice! And this dog breaks chains as if they were whipcord and slays him!"

Sidi Hamet, regally tall among the crowd, stroked his great spread of fiery beard and fixed deep-set gray eyes on the galley slave.

The slave stood erect in the nakedness of a breechclout. He was nearly as tall as Sidi Hamet, had the same wide shoulders, the same gray eyes. Even the sprouting hair on his lately clipped head and shaven face was red. His skin had been burned to a dark bronze by the glare of the sun. His forehead was broad, the nose straight, his jaws were rounded with strong muscles.

He looked into the piercing eyes of Sidi Hamet, smiled with wry insolence.

"Oh, Master of the Sea!" cried the fuming young *reis*. "Let me cool my sword in his guts! Ten thousand ducats! There's no taming this dog but with a sword's edge!"

Sidi Hamet took a long time with his thoughts, fingered the beard, asked:

"How long has he been in our galley?"

"Seven months, Master," the *reis* said. "A bow oarsman but a troublesome dog! You have heard his shouted taunts under the lash!"

"Ah, so this is he?" Sidi Hamet looked hard at the slave's face. "But was it also not he who called for us to quicken the stroke five days ago, when we pursued that Venetian!"

"A noble oarsman, Master!" the angered *reis* admitted. "But a devil! Look now here!" The *reis* fingered the broken link dangling from the slave's wrist. "Twisted as if brass!"

"Find the smith that forged them," said Sidi Hamet, "and lash him. No man breaks chains unless the iron is flawed!"

The slave laughed. "Whipcord or cable, 'twould have been the same!" He kicked the body. "Glad now you took what Turks pay for a woman's body, Piombo?"

Sidi Hamet pondered, lowered his eyes in thought, raised them, spoke:

"Piombo has a brother and a—"

"Aye," the slave snarled, "and a blood-kin of Venice called Magnificent! Let this shabby peacock take off my head. I'll gladly wait their coming in hell!"

"Big words and a small mouth," said Sidi Hamet.

"Hell at its worst is better than an accursed galley!"

"You talk like a priest! When we chased that Venetian five days ago, did you know it was Piombo's ship?"

"Aye, but had no hope a Piombo was on it!"

"No love for Piombos, eh?"

"No!" The slave's voice rang like the clang of a sword blade on a shield. "And hate, too, for all Turks and Moors and *renegadoes!*"

Sidi Hamet slowly stroked his great silken spread of fiery beard. The smile on his mouth showed through the beard and the triumph-look in his eyes was such as a chessman has when about to say, "Mate!" His deep voice was as gently soft as if he questioned a little child. "Hatred of Piombos. Of Moors, Turks, *renegadoes*. And *Venice?*"

The slave flinched with a startled look. His mouth closed, the muscled jaws set tight, and there was no answer.

A pleased look danced in Sidi Hamet's eyes. He turned to the young *reis*. "No loss in this carcass for any man but myself. I'll pay the ransom price from my own purse. As for this slave, let him be put into the dungeon of my house. When leisure comes, I'll visit him. *Hada yassa!* It is settled!"

The *reis* slapped the slave with the flat of his sword. "Ha, from this night you will be tame as a fat house cat—skinned alive! Ha ha!"

There was a twinkle in Sidi Hamet's eyes when he strode back to the gay company where the Bashaw's son, a fat Turk with swollen eyes and bulbous cheeks, smiled greasily and spoke:

"A day of honor, oh Scourge of the Sea! Of great honor! I have news befitting the triumph of your return! The King of Kings, Lord of Earth, Commander of the Faithful—"

"Ah," said Sidi Hamet, deep voiced, veiling contempt ironically — for the Grand Turk's florid titles sickened him —"you speak of Allah!"

"Of Allah's chosen on earth! Our glorious Sultan has heard report of your daughter's beauty and . . ."

The fat Bey knew his words hurt like a knife a-twist in Sidi Hamet's heart and he smiled greasily into the glower of the great *Renegado*.

CHAPTER II

A PIRATE'S OATH

LATE that night Sidi Hamet hurried down black stairs underneath the house, pushing an old eunuch before him. The slave carried a lighted torch in one hand, unlighted candles in the other.

A heavy door creaked open like the jaw of a huge black mouth. Sidi Hamet stumbled and swore. He had been swearing all day, striding about in a glower, smashing fist to palm, cursing as he had not cursed since long ago when his beautiful young Moor wife died of the plague.

The slave lay chained on a wooden bench in the center of the stone-walled room. Sidi Hamet took the torch and held it above the man's face.

"Have dreamed sweetly, slave?"

"Easier than you on cushions, *Renegado!*"

For the first time since the fat Bey had spoken to him Sidi Hamet smiled, then he stared with brooding scrutiny at the slave's face.

The eunuch touched the flaming torch with wicks of two great wax candles, molded for pious burning at a Christian saint's shrine, and set them in niches. He went out noiselessly on bare feet.

Sidi Hamet beat out the torch against the wall, cast it down, brushed his palms together.

"The *bagnio* roster shows you are a Dalmatian, slave. You speak English well. Also Arabic!"

"Italian and French, too, *Renegado!*"

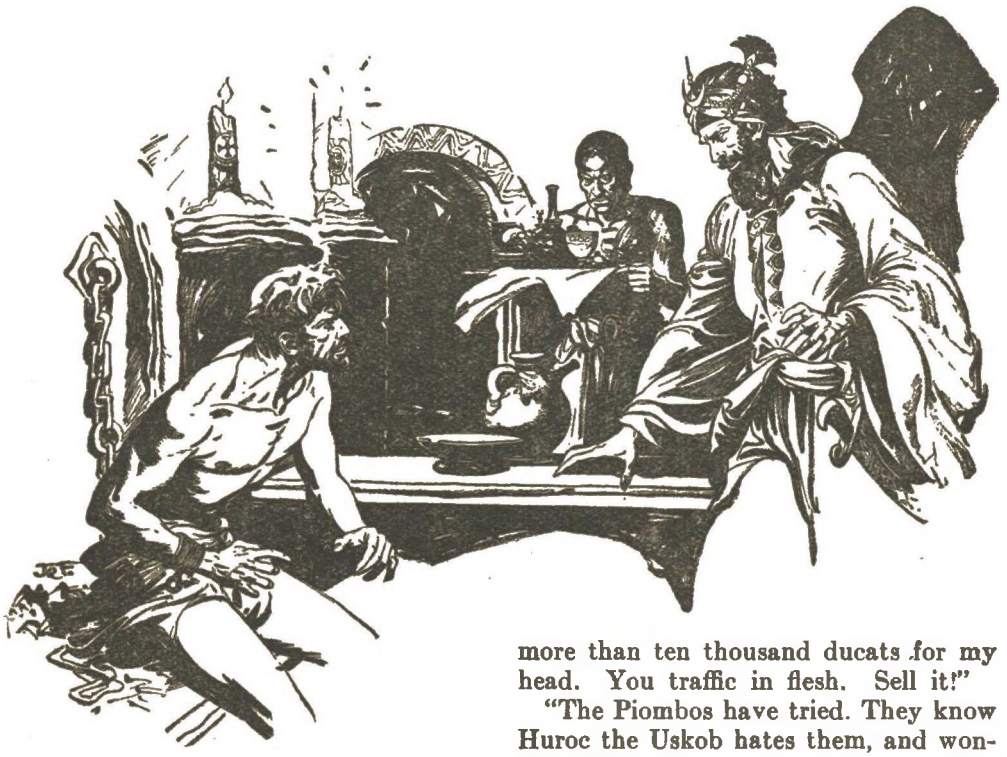
"A learned slave, eh? Perhaps you think I could use a many-tongued man? My agents are in every city that has a seacoast. And but few of them wear turbans! Or do you choose to go back to the oar banks?"

The slave lay chained on his back, his head on a raised piece of wood, his arms at his side and legs spread. There must have been an ache in every bone

and all the muscles. But he laughed.

Sidi Hamet growled, "Why laugh?"

"Because, *Renegado,* I have no hope of heaven and no love of Christians. I like fat food and often go athirst rather than drink poor wine. I love women if they are bad and beautiful and take baths, but few do! All the ease and richness of soft living delights



me as much as any man. But I'll sit on the oar bank in chains and drink water soured with vinegar to dull its stink before I'll serve Moor or Turk or you, *Renegado!* So may not a fool laugh at his own folly!"

Sidi Hamet had stooped, loosening the chain bolts.

"Sit up."

The slave sat up.

Sidi Hamet drew a key, unlocked the ankle clasps, then those of the man's wrists. The slave rubbed at his wrists. . .

"You speak many tongues but cannot say, 'Thank you' in any?"

"Asselmic."

Sidi Hamet pushed forward a stool, pointed, then sat himself on another.

"Ha!" said Sidi Hamet, grimly amused. "You hate all Turks and Moors. The Piombo family. And *Venice,* eh?"

"Somehow you guessed. And are a clever merchant. Venice will pay many more than ten thousand ducats for my head. You traffic in flesh. Sell it!"

"The Piombos have tried. They know Huroc the Uskob hates them, and wonder why."

"Your agents serve you well, *Renegado,*" said the slave with approval. "Mine do not. But then, I am a mere pirate. You, a great corsair."

"The Piombos and I use the same agent in Genoa. I pay him better and he fears me more. They greatly dread that Uskob pirate, one Huroc, said to be an Englishman. And he has played havoc with the pride and merchants of Venice. How came you in my galley?"

The slave smiled. "Fortune of the sea. I was prowling the streets of Venice in search of a chance to cut the Magnificent Piombo's throat, was

clapped into prison for being armed, taken out and put on a galleass. You captured the galleass! And here I am."

"And are that Huroc?"

"And if so?"

"All reports say you are a savage old man. And I find you a boy, a youth, at most a very young man of good birth—"

"You know nothing of my birth, *Renegado.*"

"Your father's name?"

"The same as my own," said the slave coolly.

"The bastinado, slave, might touch a spring to loosen your tongue!" Sidi Hamet suggested.

"Try it!"

"No trouble, slave. Two hand claps and a shout! There'll be strong men come who take pleasure in doing their work well."

At that moment the eunuch returned with a damask-covered tray bearing food and wine, a napkin and perfumed water. He placed it near the head of the bench where the slave had been chained, bowed low, at a gesture went away.

The slave laughed. "I have cursed your galley and you, never your seamanship. As a host, too, you may have my blessings!"

"I want to know how it can be that a man like you led the Uskobs, who are the most lawless and ferocious of all men on earth?"

The slave frowned, spoke slowly. . . . "From the look of *you, Renegado,* and what I have seen of your courage at sea, I will say *you* would be ferocious if Turks burned your home, ravished wife and daughters, bore them off to slavery and—"

Sidi Hamet's breast heaved and a glaring look came into his eyes. He struggled for control of his temper, thrust out an arm, commanded in an angry voice:

"Hold your tongue! And eat!"

The slave regarded him in some wonder. "If it puts you in a rage to hear of what is done, what of those to whom 'tis done?"

He dipped into the warm water, wiped his fingers on the napkin, poured a little wine, smelt of it, said, "I thank you." He drank slowly. He took up bread and meat, showed no greed, even paused to say:

"You spoke of Uskobs. They and they alone of all people on earth have made no peace with Turks, and will not. Will have no trade with them. And being mere savages"—he stopped to chew and swallow—"who think more of honor than of money, will have no dealings otherwise than by sword blows with holy Christian peoples, such as Venetians, who traffic with the Turks!"

HISTORY but faintly mumbles the name of the Uskobs, or *Usccochi,* as Venetians called them. Venetians themselves were the only scribes of Adriatic history in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries and they found only humiliation in recording the exploits of those Balkan mountaineers whom the Turks had harried seaward until they took refuge in the craggy islands of the Northeastern Adriatic, where they became the most ferocious and unpunishable of all pirates. Few in numbers, they still carried on a fierce land feud with Turks and ruinously plundered Venetian commerce at sea. They acknowledged sly Austria—who hated both Turks and Venice — as their overlord and sold their plunder to Vienna. They were without mercy and without fear; they could not be bribed into peace and could not be exterminated. In the end it was Austria who was bribed to coax the Uskobs from the islands and return to far inland mountains. They soon forgot Venice, but hatred of Turks remains among their children's children. "As God hears me," said Sidi Hamet,

deep-voiced and angered, "there's no man on earth has more hatred of the Grand Turk than I!"

The slave slowly put down the wine glass, laid aside his bread, turned more squarely on the stool:

"So? You ease me of chains and give me food. You saved me from the sword of that devil-clawing young *reis*. I think I begin to understand. You have too great wealth to need what even Venice will pay for my head. Perhaps you stand in need of a man who hates not only the Grand Turk but all Turks? . . . I fight well, *Renegado!* And when I get drunk 'tis among friends, always. So you may trust me."

Sidi Hamet peered hard and asked with doubtful, half taunting tone, "But what of women?"

The slave laid open his palms with twitch of wrists, raised a shoulder, smiled with twisted mouth. He took up the wine cup, sipped. . . .

"I haven't your spread of beard, am not as wise in all worldly ways. But I have learned this: I fight not well with a burden in my arms, though it be one of silks and precious spice or even jewels. In her person, woman is perfumed silk and spiced flesh, but a heavy burden! Perhaps you think because I'm young I'm also fool? Mark it well, *Renegado*. No woman yet has thought so!"

As the slave poured more wine, Sidi Hamet, without glancing toward the dark doorway, made a sign. The watchful eunuch lurking there moved off, noiseless, on the stone steps.

"Huroc, what if I tell you that I stand in peril and must stand?" Sidi Hamet spoke simply. "Can neither run, hide nor fight—as yet!"

Huroc raised his eyebrows, noted the sincerity of tone, listened attentively.

"What if I entrust to you a great treasure, much of my wealth, to carry for me to some other land and store it there against my coming when I can come? Would you steal merely half or all of it?"

"Ho! If I steal at all it will be all!"

"And will give an oath not to steal?"

Huroc had eaten. He dipped his fingers into the perfumed water, again wiped them carefully, laid the napkin on the tray, spoke off-hand and mocking:

"A pirate's oath? Ho! The *Renegado* of Tripoli is famed for knowing men and making bargains! An Uskob pirate's oath! But *you*, in peril?"

"Peril! I am about to defy the Sultan, arouse Tripoli to revolt, and await war!"

Huroc fingered his chin stubble, pursed his lips, murmured:

"So a great spread of beard does not keep a man from being fool?"

"Were you any one other than whom you are," Sidi Hamet growled, "I'd have you flayed! Can't you understand how I am caught like a lion in a net, that I must plot with a slave from my own oar bank?"

"You sold your soul to the devil, *Renegado!* Did you think he would never ask for it?"

"That"—there was a sharp snap of thumb and finger—"for a soul, mine or yours! In the pretense of doing me honor, the accursed dog of a Turk demands my daughter as a wife!" . . .

"Ah, you spurn the honor?"

"I know why he wants her, God curse him! The bare-rumped truth about me is enough to anger him, and liars have told it!"

"Father-in-law to the Grand Seignior!" Huroc murmured ironically.

"He needs the tribute I pay, but watches me as if I were an enemy. If I but twitch and toss on my bed, cough twice, spit once in the night, spies run to tell it. And so he knows, that dog-born Turk, that I love this child above all things on earth or in heaven! With her in his seraglio—do you not see the chains I'd wear? Ha! 'Twould be, 'Sidi

Hamet, to show your love of your dear son by marriage, make a worthy present now, tomorrow, and yet again on the next morrow! Let it be of jewels and weighty gold!' "

"As fleas suck a dog's blood, he'd bleed you," said Huroc, not with sympathy.

"He would say to me, 'Sidi Hamet, our adored father, go there, come here, do this and also that! Your daughter's health, Sidi Hamet, is poor but may grow better if your obedience is prompt!' "

"And such gentle reproaches as that dog would make when displeased, if he has your daughter in his harem! If not greatly angered he'll send you a rare casket with a joint of her finger in it; but a nose if you are obstinate! Better a dagger in her breast this night as she lies asleep!"

HUROC arose from the stool, spoke like a ready man of action:

"Put yourself and daughter on a galley, take your wealth and go to sea! Let the slaves break from their oars, throw the Moors overboard! Put me back in the *bagnio* for two nights and I'll muster a crew that will do the work!"

Sidi Hamet studied, as if to weigh it fairly. "I believe I could trust you, but not any two hundred or more other men."

"Let me pick ten men. I'll sweep the deck of Moors! Put them in chains! Be your boatswain and galley master!"

"No." Sidi Hamet regarded him with a favoring tolerance. "Not if I knew the plan must be successful. Sidi Hamet, admiral of his fleet, is one man. Sidi Hamet, a fugitive seeking refuge, would be another. A galley must make port. No port in Christendom but would seize the *Renegado*, if for no more of a reason than to have his wealth. No. I am resolved. I'll stir up revolt—"

"And lose wealth, daughter and your head!"

"Then," said Sidi Hamet with laughter that came from a grimly set face, "you may keep as your own the wealth I give you to carry into England!"

"To England? Whom in all England do you trust with a chest of gold? And can I swim and carry it? Moreover, in such a hazard there is much else than a man's bad faith that breaks promises. But if I fail, you will swear I was a thief."

"Most likely, yes. But I will risk the trust if you will take it. Will you?"

The eunuch returned, bearing rich garments. They filled his arms.

"Yours," said Sidi Hamet. "Spies will report that you have confessed yourself the son of a noble Englishman who will pay ransom. You will not be the first I've honored as a guest."

Huroc made a cautious gesture of inquiry toward the eunuch:

"You trust him then?"

"No man more!" Sidi Hamet laughed a little. "He is deaf, a mute, and unlettered!"

"Was all this craft to feed and clothe and use me in your mind this morning when you sent me here?"

"No. The Sultan's cursed message came after that. All this day I have paced to and fro, calling up desperate plans. I have more wealth than even the greedy Turks think. I can afford to risk much treasure. Just now at nearly midnight it came to me that the man whom the Uskob savages had sent with gold and jewels to Vienna—all his for the stealing!—might be trusted to carry some of my own wealth into England."

"You have long ears to hear of that!"

"You had a king's ransom in your pouch. An open road across Europe. Yet returned! The Uskob women must be beautiful to make a man come back to them!"

"Their maids are tall and straight,

broad-hipped, but too fierce for beauty. I've seen young mothers gash their arms and teach their babes to suck blood so they'll grow strong and fearless, kill Turks and hunt Venetians!"

The eunuch was helping him to dress.

"Where did you learn to row and get those muscles?"

"Among the Uskobs freemen sit on the oar benches. And each year we must go farther to sea to find Venetians!"

"Why so much hate of Venice?"

Huroc's eyes glittered, but the words dropped slowly from lips half a-smile:

"In Venice there is a stone that marks my sister's grave. A noble stone. Piombo the Magnificent ordered it. Oh, a great carved stone, beautiful, most worthy of Piombo!"

"Why hate a city, a whole people?"

" 'Twas the city and its people produced the man! Through his uncle-merchants of Zara he sold my sister to a Turk!"

"An Englishwoman?" Sidi Hamet exclaimed. "How hide the crime?"

"With the cunning that has made Piombo, befopped coward and braggart, a great man of Venice!" Huroc's fierceness gave Sidi Hamet understanding of how he could arouse and lead the furious Uskobs. "He had a physician and servants to swear my sister died. For all I know or care the physician and servants never knew they lied. They saw some woman die, some English girl. Most likely a harlot Piombo poisoned and buried under my sister's name. But I know he sold her to Turks to teach her how much happier she had been to love him!"

"You have proof?"

"Once I had a letter. 'Twas tossed from a window in Constantinople to the feet of English seamen who strolled through the street. On the seal was a jewel and was written, 'Keep this jewel, but as you hope for mercy of God bear this letter to my brother.' There was my name and where to find me. Nearly a year later the letter was brought to me. I, a mere youngling prig and sure of justice, came to Venice, showed my letter and never got it back. I was taken to the physician and servants, was shown my sister's grave. When I persisted, I was frowned upon, told I suffered from madness; told the climate of the lagoons was unhealthful for young Englishmen!

"I saw by chance five Uskobs gibbeted for plundering a storm-wrecked boat! Learned how they fought the Turks and hated Venice. I went to the Uskobs!"

"Your sister lives?"

"No. She wrote that she lived only until such a time as God sent means to let me hear the truth. Invoked me not to torture our parents with her fate. I had been to sea and at war, also at school in Paris, had traveled in Italy, thought myself a fine gentleman. Oh I could toss ruffles back from my wrist with such French grace, twitch my lip's fuzz knowingly, and dazzle eyes with a rapier's point! Ho! Now I go naked, shave clean, and drive a sword as if to hew wood! Some day I'll have Piombo by the throat. Then I'll go

home as if returned by God to reward a mother's prayers. I'll have my old father's blessings, live idle, pick quarrels with mincing lords, make love to the fairest ladies, grow sluggish, fat, drink much wine before the fire on cold nights, and so await the end of life!"

Sidi Hamet leaned forward with fist thrust up through his beard to rest his cheek, stared at the firm, bronze-molded face of Huroc and nodded with slight quiver of head as if confirming hidden thoughts.

Silence came. The big candles spluttered faintly. The deaf mute drew aside into shadows, stood watchful for any gesture of command.

Sidi Hamet began to speak with slow and thoughtful tone, then quickened his words:

"I think most likely that I owe you much. 'Tis true Moors will stand to the revolt only so long as my money holds out. The Sultan has the greater wealth. He demands my child at once. But if she dies—" A sound like a chuckle came through the red beard.

Huroc half turned his head, the better to listen; he knew this great-bodied *Renegado* would not chuckle over his daughter's death.

Sidi Hamet fell to brooding, but his mouth was half a-smile, and he nodded again. "With a little time for letters, bribes and gifts, it may be I can make my peace with even old Elizabeth, since she long ago punished Mary of Scotland for being more beautiful than ever Tudor was! Time, a little time, is what I need. I have the wealth. I, too, may yet grow fat by my own fireside, drink much wine on cold nights." He slapped his palms together with sharp report, arose and a roar of laughter burst from Sidi Hamet's mouth: "I heard today there had been deaths of the plague in Tripoli! More are feared. So be it! Let the King of Kings rip open a bullock to stick his feet in hot blood and warm them! He'll have no daughter of mine in his chill bed! Ha! How the dog will gnaw his nails and curse Allah!"

CHAPTER III

THE DEATH WATCH

IN THE streets and about the gates of the *Renegado's* palace the beggars wailed and shrieked *wool-liah-woo! wool-liah-woo!* knowing that Sidi Hamet, Scourge of the Sea, would toss largess and feed them well after the funeral of his daughter.

The household of Sidi Hamet howled and shuddered in fear that the plague would drag them after the fair girl, but more fearful that their master, a terrible man in anger, would beat them for not making loud enough sounds of grief.

Among the rabble, a beggar poet, aware that beauty of speech, unheard, has no more praise than an unseen pearl, squawked with cock-crowing voice that jealous Death had ravished the golden-haired virgin who within the new moon's waxing had become the pledged bride of the Grand Seignior.

In the grief-stricken household whispers passed from lips to ears that the girl Mariuma knew far more than was ever in this world learned by a virgin, and that Allah must love the Grand Seignior well to have sent death to her, an unhallowed enchantress devil who had the power to curse! She had not even a proper human look. Among a dark people her hair was silken and tawny, reflecting the copperish red of Sidi Hamet's fiery beard. Her eyes had the tawny darkness of her Moorish mother, but were alertly evil with a look of unmaidenly wisdom; her temper was like a windblown flame.

In a darkened room where the jalousies were curtained by gold-wrought velvet drapes, weeping Negresses

marched slowly about. They held censers a-swing by silver chains and diffused the smoky fragrance of burning amber and cloves. The room was banked with flowers, odorous and wilting.

Mariuma lay in a golden coffin on a raised bier. Over her body was the weight of silk and velvet shrouds, heavy with silver and gold fringe. Soft mats were on the floor about the bier, rugs and embroidered cushions, where mourners might sit in comfort and weep.

None loitered there. Since it was against the faith of a Moslem to try to avoid the plague sent by Allah, it was, of course, merely a too great sorrow that caused the visiting mourners to avoid the bier and quickly leave the room. Even the Negresses swung their censers at the far side of the wall.

Sidi Hamet stood near the bier. He had been there for hours, weeping with great roars and from time to time throwing himself across the coffin. That was the only way he could guard against the Negresses hearing the sighs, the giggles, the hasty, breath-tossed petulance of his daughter, who played at being dead in the perilous hope of escaping the Sultan's bridal couch.

Mariuma felt smothered by the smoke of the burnt perfume in the hot room. All over her slim body was an itching and tickling like creeping flies.

Better the few hours' itching than the bowstring's knot at her throat and a sack for a shroud, all of which would soon follow the marriage; for she had sworn by all the oaths of her father, by the multitude of saints in which she, unbelieving, had been tutored by a French girl, that she would go to the bed of the Grand Seignior with an unsheathed dagger under her robe and use it on his throat.

She was one to keep rash oaths. She had the Tripolitan hatred of Turks and knew that the unwelcome honor of the marriage bed was but a trap to make her father humble.

"It is well," she whispered through the falling spray of her father's thick beard, "that the plague-stricken are buried hurriedly, else I could not live to see my own funeral! I almost smother!"

Suddenly soldiers and sailors of Sidi Hamet that crowded the courtyard began to fight. Guns were discharged. The sound grew to a riot.

Mourners forgot their sorrow and gasped. Negresses and such wives of officials as were in the room ran to push and pull with jeweled hands at the hangings and peer down through jalousies.

Sidi Hamet looked quickly about the room to make sure none were inattentive to the riot. He stepped on the dais, bent forward. His great arms heaved up his slender daughter from out the coffin. With one arm he held her to his breast and with the other hand re-spread the shrouds.

His long, soft-footed stride quickly reached a near-by curtained wall. He pushed the curtain aside, pushed with his foot at a seldom used door, and set his daughter's feet in the dark passage where a waiting hand, blacker than the unlighted shadows, touched her, and the old black nurse who had welcomed Mariuma into the world whispered, "Oh heart of my heart, may you be safe forever!"

The clamor increased in the courtyard, but Sidi Hamet, sternest of commanders, grinned in his beard. He pulled the heavy door to, listened for the faint scraping of the bolt within the passage, then returned to the dais.

Since Mariuma was to be buried as the Grand Seignior's bride, her coffin, royally, had a lid. He put down the lid and spread the pall of black and colored silk.

Sidi Hamet then strode with robes a-swing to a double door that opened

in the courtyard. His voice rose in a bellow and silence followed. He threatened furiously.

Possibly the distraction of grief made him afterward forget the promised punishments.

THE old Negress hurried the girl along the passage to a darkened secret room of her father's apartment.

In the dimness Mariuma stroked and kissed the aged face that had hovered over her, mumbling charms.

"Allah restore your dear wrinkled cheeks to the purple ripeness of a plum and give you lovers all anew!"

"Oh-oy," the Negress grumbled. "Why pray troubles upon me! Lovers and the rack! In spite of shielding prayers, you, my darling, will some day learn there is no choice between such torment except that the pain of the rack is more easily healed!"

"Oh, no! You feel the creak of age in your bones and think love did it. 'Tis nothing but having slept uncovered where the dew fell!"

The Negress clucked and shook her head. "Woeful are the ways of Allah! Only the hurt of love is uncurable."

"Pah!" Mariuma exclaimed in angered fretting. "No man in the world can make my heart ache so much as it does now because all my beautiful garments must go to the grave! I shall have them stolen back and let it be said Turks robbed the tomb! How terrible really to die, when even to seem to die is so painful!"

Her gold-laced *baracans, jilecks* of velvet and gold tissue buttoned with pearl and coral, the silken trousers threaded with pure gold, and all the finest of her prettiest clothes must be heaped wastefully on the coffin, to show the street crowds that, being dead, she no longer had need of dainty trifles.

"Yet it is something," Mariuma exclaimed gleefully, "that I live to wear the bridal clothes in which I was to have been buried!" Her fingers stroked her arms and flowed caressingly down her sides. "But here is no mirror, and only the ghost's eye of a lamp. Must I stand naked to admire what I now love best about myself?"

She made as if to pull off her garments and hold them at arms' length that they might be seen.

"No, no!" the haggard Negress wailed. "Your father comes soon and brings with him an infidel slave!"

"Who?"

"The Englishman he loves."

"Oh, that Mister Herrack? Teach me charms that he may be unhappy if he fails to love me!"

"Your mother taught you such charms as you lay unborn!"

There arose in the street the funeral wail from a great chorus of hireling women mourners, who howled the service of an unwedded girl's burial: *Lloo-oo-loo-loo — Lloo-oo-loo-loo!* Mariuma knew that her coffin had passed through the doorway into the street.

The Bashaw's foppish son honored himself by meeting the coffin at the door and laying his tribute of flowers upon the great heap already placed there.

The procession set off for the tombs in a tumult of sorrow, wailing *Allah, Allah ursul el Allah.* Those who marched wore shabby garments and howled as if the death of Lilla Mariuma had put them in beggary.

It was quite as costly to have a daughter die as marry. A score of Sidi Hamet's slaves bore paper in cleft wands to show that since they could no longer serve their mistress they were free.

Some of Sidi Hamet's grim soldiers followed. When the funeral was over they made camp by the chapel-tomb lest the Turkish *collogees*—a thievish pack!—break into the tomb to pilfer jewels and clothes, and so discover that

the joy of being a Sultan's bride had not killed Lilla Mariuma.

Sidi Hamet would withdraw the guard some nights later, secretly removing coffin and all, then cry for justice against the thievish Turks.

That night all the beggars from seafront to the Bedouin camps came to feast in honor of the *Renegado's* dead daughter and groaned with overloaded bellies, calling it sorrow for the dead.

Mariuma and nurse had but a slender wick's thread of light as they sat in the room's dimness, waiting, wondering what was to come. Both knew that Sidi Hamet was a man of cunning and audacity.

Mariuma was impatiently idle, and so whiled the time praying Allah and also Christ to drop curses on the Sultan's head, since by her death she could no longer be with friends nor walk in the moonlit gardens. Death was, she said, better far than to be mewed up like a blind nightingale in a cage.

"Sidi Hamet is wise and bold," said the old Negress. "Have no fear—"

"Fear? Poh! Fear! I can hate and scratch and bite, make threats, weave curses, and can kill, but fear? Never!"

THE door of the apartment opened under the surge of Sidi Hamet's strong arm. He swore at the dimness, spoke over his shoulder and came striding in, followed by the Englishman.

Mariuma had often peered through guarded lattices at this mysteriously favored captive, whose name, she had heard, was Herrack.

The Negress hurriedly brought more lights, then hovered at Mariuma's side with much murmuring of *Ali barrick* to ward off the evil that might be in the stranger's eye.

Mariuma raised a veil. Sidi Hamet pulled hand and veil aside with affectionate roughness:

"Have done with mummery! Henceforth your face must be scorched by the eyes of men. No more hiding behind the shadow of loose-woven silk or iron-bound jalousies!"

Mariuma gasped, delighted.

"And make ready to go! Janizaries may search this house, or try it! That dog of a physician has sent word that he so sorely repents him of his part that nothing less than his full weight—and he's a fat dog!—in jewels and gold can make him forget the duty of telling the Turk Bashaw the truth! Pah! The earth will get his full weight in broken bones and pricked flesh. But spies may somehow smell the truth and sell it!"

The maid Mariuma stood unveiled in the death-worn bridal habit, resplendent with jewels and the shimmer of gold. She knew that she was beautiful.

The English stranger—slave at that! —gave her scarcely more of a lingering glance than he gave the withered, breast-sagged Negress.

Mariuma was thrilled to be unveiled before the man, angered that he ignored her. She ached for the hour when he must crouch at her feet, beg for smiles, get frowns and the spurning of a toe.

"My greatest treasure, man! You have sworn to guard it!"

"Why, you faithless Turk, *Renegado!*" Herrack grinned bitterly. "You wrenched the promise from me out of my spite for the Sultan. Said naught to me of a woman! I told you I hated the burden of silk and spiced flesh! You've wealth to lose without being much the poorer. Can afford the risk of bad luck or my betrayal. But I thought this was a well-loved only daughter, and you would trust her to *me?* You've gone mad, *Renegado!*"

Sidi Hamet was stern, not angered. "In the many perils of a hazardous life, I have never yet mischosen a man! Now you are he. And no refusal now. She's dead and buried! Must be away, out of the house!"

"Gold and jewels, they are something

to make a fight worthwhile. Moreover, you can kick them into a corner and they'll stay silent." Herrack stared with sour disdain at Mariuma. She half lowered her eyes and seemed not to understand English.

"If I could," said Sidi Hamet with feeling, "I would give you my heart to bear and keep her by me! But she must go. And there will be jewels and gold—enough for twenty men, for your reward!"

Herrack eyed the girl. "By her pampered look I can tell she'll be troublesome, want her way, fret and sulk, think I am sent as servant to fetch and carry for her."

Sidi Hamet half laughed. "She is a girl who swore to cut the Sultan's gullet —and would! She's daughter of a Moorish princess and a Highland Scot who turned seaman. A devil for mischief! She's had half the town a-tremble with her pretense of magic, which is nothing but a woman's ready wit and gift of lying!"

"I mistrust the whole scheme!"

"I'll foresee every precaution. You two, in rough garb the better to be unremarked, will go in the grain ship to Genoa. In Genoa, take my letter to Pistario. After that, sit down in luxury and wait. There'll be a ship for England. Your own! By devious arrangements, to avoid spies' tattling, I'll get the liberty of English seamen from our galleys, send them on to Genoese hostelries, from which they are to board the ship."

"It is something to take English sailors out of Moorish slavery," Herrack agreed, still reluctant.

"Now child, we part!" Sidi Hamet clutched her fondly, swept her against him in a way that set gauze silk a-flutter and squeezed out her breath. "She has the red of her father's beard in her temper, the daring of her enchantress mother. Year after year now her arms have been what I most wanted at home-coming from the sea. Her kiss and her laughter. Though there'll be little laughter, do you hear, *Benetee?* 'twixt now and the next time your rough-handed father breaks your bones with a hug!"

He shook her, hiding deep stir of feeling in rough fondness.

Mariuma threw up her arms to his neck, buried her face in his beard, pleaded against leaving him.

"None of that! Had I sent you to Constantinople we'd never have met again. This is the better choice. In time I may follow or you may return. But you can't fly through the streets of Tripoli in the bridal garments of the Sultan's newest wife! Out of these!" He ripped, tearing. "There's a bundle of boy's rags outside the door. Into them!

"Now I must hasten a messenger to that dog of a physician and bid him hurry to the Bashaw to cure a belly pain. What a fool for a wise man! On the way he will be seized in the street and never seen again—this side of hell!"

They went out of the room.

Herrack faced him with the glimmer of a taunt:

"So you have never mischosen a man? Yet this physician—"

"No man, but eunuch, lad! And I had no choice. No other liar would do so well as the Bashaw's own physician!"

CHAPTER IV

"HE WILL NOT BETRAY ME!"

MARIUMA'S fair body showed too much the golden-hued mingling of Scot and Moorish blood for a vagrant, sunburned street boy. She was stained from forehead to pink toe-nails with the darkening juice of pomegranates. Her boy's clothes were partly rags. Her flaming hair was twisted into a tight coil under the turban.

Bare of face, bare-armed, and bare of

legs, she felt half naked and was shamelessly half pleased.

Her story was that she had been picked from street beggary by Sidi Hamet's steward and was going to Genoa as houseboy for Signior Pistario.

Edward Herrack's story was that he, having been ransomed by his English family through Signior Pistario, who served as agent between Christians and infidels, was now making his way home through Genoa. On the passage the boy would act as servant.

A scarred old Moor, who had fought beside Sidi Hamet on many a blood-washed deck, was sent to guide the Englishman and servant past city guards and loafers in the night streets.

The old Moor, no doubt thinking to please Allah, abused the Christian dog with vivid insults and curses. Herrack paid no more attention than if it had been a cricket squeaking, but Mariuma grew tired of the old Mahometan's abuse.

She turned on him shrilly: "Swallow your tongue—or by the angel of death, I'll back to Sidi Hamet and out-face you with lies! Swear you robbed us of passage money! May your bones rot! You smell like a Turk, you. Your mother was strangled for the bearing of you!"

"Silence, you dog of a boy!" the old warrior roared.

"My eyes have the gift of prophecy and I see plague-stains at the roots of your beard! Before sunrise you'll

lie howling! A beggar's dog will eat your corpse, unburied of the plague! A mangy dog, that limps with one white spot at the black tail's tip and bones like the ribs of a sea-rotted ship! I see him plain. His red-rasped tongue licks your dead face—"

"Peace, you dog of a boy!" The old soldier clapped hands to ears. "The devil gag you! Not since my wife's mother died have I heard such a tongue!"

Herrack glowered at her. "So that's your witchery and witchcraft, eh? Mere noise and shrillness. The Sultan's bowstring would have taught you silence! From now on remember this: Keep your mouth shut. Where and when there is need for talk, I talk!"

ON BOARD the grain ship Mariuma and Herrack, as servant and master, were taken into a dirty dark cabin. The nubbin of a squat candle cast a yellowish glow. Here was a bunk of slats and on the deck a heap of rags for a pallet.

Mariuma crouched cross-legged on the pallet and eyed her master in moody silence. He felt pleased that she was now a sadly frightened girl and humbled.

He sniffed the unclean smell of the ship and cursed the laziness that allowed such stink; spoke shortly:

"Make yourself at ease on the bunk. There's more stink than honest bilge smell here. I'll stay outside."

She bowed submissively but with watchful eyes.

The dark stain on her face, the tatters of a street boy, her gilt hair secreted under the tight rolls of a turban, and no twinkling of finery about her, made Mariuma feel as bedraggled as a plucked peafowl.

Confused thoughts fluttered like the shadow of crippled birds across her face as she watched him with furtive steadiness, and wondered how best to make him unhappy.

The grain ship no sooner stirred from its anchor than Mariuma herself became unhappy with the vilest of seasickness. She groaned dizzily and was too blear-eyed to care whether Herrack or the devil hovered near. Herrack scarcely looked toward her through the doorway. He was content that, after all, she would be an untroublesome companion. The grain ship made port after dark.

Genoa, the glorious, sat on the tall hills with a twinkle of lights at her windows. She overshadowed the harbor like a serene mistress peering from afar through the dusk at the hurrying work of her servants.

This being Italy and nightfall, seamen out on the black water sang for no more of a reason than birds, as they nestle in hedges, twitter evensong.

There was the day's final bustle and stir about the wharves, the creak of burdens, splattering of bare feet, babble of strange tongues, tinkle of donkeys' bells and click of hoofs on cobbles; from time to time came the quick high laughter of women who lurked in the shadows where seamen passed.

Mariuma, for all of her stained face, was a wan little Moor when she came off the grain ship, with the filth stench in her nose and sore belly muscles that had labored hard to empty her emptied stomach.

In the street's jostle and press Herrack took her hand so that she would stay beside him, but he dropped the hand when they passed through the light of a tavern entrance. She was sea-weary and ill but flushed angrily.

He pushed through an inn door and found swarthy men with white smiling teeth, dark eyes, and the smell of sweat and salt spray about them. They sat at tables, and a crippled man limped among them with an earthen bottle, pouring wine. Their talk was loud with much laughter. All were gaudied by

some bright colors, sash or tasseled cap or jacket, unclean from toil and sweat-grease; but the worn garb of each had its gay splotch.

Their voices stopped as they turned to stare at the strangers, the broad-shouldered Englishman and frail Moor boy.

A fat little old woman, whose bundle of keys jingled from a dangling girdle's end, moved with bulky stir of many petticoats and came up with a humbly welcoming air. She had a steady uplift of eyes, as if she could count the coins in a man's purse by peering into his face.

"A room for myself and servant?" Herrack asked in English, not wanting it known he knew Italian.

The hostess blinked and cocked her head, very like a fat little hen.

A round-bellied sailor called in a deep voice:

"Freend Engleeshman, our hones' mother here, who steal but ver' leetle more 'an the wors' teef of a tavern woman in all Genoa, has na-var before the chance to rob Engleeshman an' so na-var make the trouble for herself to learn your tongue!"

He arose, swaggered near, retold the hostess what he had just said. The sailors laughed and clattered cups at his teasing abuse of their favorite hostess. He put his thumbs in a broad red sash and swayed back, laughing as she scolded him.

"She say," the sailor chuckled, "that so ver' few hones' men come here that you are to have the bes' at no more cos' than to a weeked fellow lak me!"

Herrack and Mariuma were taken up twisted stairs and shown into a room where a sagging roof came sharply to the eaves. A bare floor, a stool, a bed, a table with a candle, and the virgin's image on the wall.

Mariuma leaned weakly against the wall. She looked pathetic and, he thought, timid. Asked if she wanted food, Mariuma shook her head.

"I'll leave you here and take my letter to this Pistario. We are to be long in Genoa. 'Tis your father's wish that you have a house and comfort. When I go out, bolt the door. Do not open it till morning, when you hear my voice. Understand?"

Mariuma looked as if she did not understand English easily. She let him show her how to bolt the door and put the stool against the door's cross brace, making it firm.

In the tavern below he sat near the friendly sailor, ate supper, then inquired directions. A small ragged boy was found to serve as guide.

HERRACK knocked at a massive door and a black face peered through the grating.

"Signior Pistario. On business from Tripoli!"

The porter opened the door barely wide enough to admit a fat man. It could not be forced wider because of a chain.

Herrack came into a stone-paved court. On one side of the doorway and near the stairs was the guard room, where in former days soldiers had lounged and diced while waiting to attend their lord. Evil days had found the lord, and the moneyed Pistario had found the house. Now the porter and a scrubby fat boy in soiled velvets used the guard room. Here they ate, snored, lived, and would probably die of overeating.

Herrack sat on a bench, while the fat boy waddled up the stairs and returned, beckoning.

It was on the second floor that the luxury of Signior Pistario's home was shown in rugs, carved tables, great pictures, fine glassware, much shimmering gilt.

Herrack, in rough sailor garb, entered a room ablaze with candles that glistened among crystals and multiplied their light in mirrors.

A red-lipped, yellow-headed woman

in deep blue satin that rustled like a furtive whisper when she stirred, lounged on a broad divan and eyed the sailor. Hers was a languid appraisal, mildly curious. This bronze-bearded sailor, for all his poor clothes, had a cool proud look and eyed Signior Pistario as if there were the smell of bad fish about him.

Signior Pistario was a fat little man, greasy with much good living.

"From Tripoli?" His tone was cautiously polite.

Herrack held out a letter.

Pistario broke the seal, read quickly; reread carefully. His small eyebrows rose in amazed inquiry.

"You know the contents?"

"Yes."

Pistario oozed graciousness. "You are high in favor with our friend! Come. Sit down. Some wine and let us talk." A pudgy, gem-studded hand pointed to a chair.

Herrack looked down into Signior Pistario's bulbous face, dotted with Oriental eyes:

"There is naught to talk of if you choose to do as the letter bids!"

Signior Pistario knew no more of straight words than a serpent knows of movement without wriggling. His hands exploded into a flurry of gestures.

"Faith of my fathers! Have I ever refused? Do I not lie sleepless, the better to keep promptly the hour for attending to his affairs! But here in this letter is much that is strange and needs consultation, so—"

"How so? 'Tis set down in plain words that you are to secure at once for my use a furnished private house and to give me what gold I ask. Shall we then huddle our heads together like dull schoolboys at Latin and muss a wordbook to learn what means *furnished*, what *private* and what *house*? Or quibble to define *gold*?"

Signior Pistario groaned like one unjustly accused. Sweaty gooseflesh came out all over his fat-layered body. He feared Sidi Hamet; the *Renegado* had a long and terrible arm. Pistario rubbed his puffy hands together, begged unctuously, "But pray, dear sir, how large a house? And how furnished? And for how long? Are not these things to be known, if you please?"

"Then write the *Renegado* that his words are vague, not plain speech, and say you do not know how to obey! Would he order any but a fine house, well furnished? Do you lease a fine house by the day, week, or even month? Come to the mark, Pistario; or say 'No!' "

Chill sweat moistened Signior Pistario's fat body and trickled on his cheeks. He dreaded what might follow if Sidi Hamet was told that he had hemmed and psaltered with instructions.

"Tomorrow then, a furnished house. The best for hire in Genoa! Servants! And what gold you will, though it empty my strong room's coffers."

"I thank you. Till tomorrow, good night!"

"Tell me where you stay that I may send word when all is ready."

"A sailor's inn, chance-chosen. I do not know its name or street. I'll come to you again, tomorrow. Good night."

Signior Pistario graciously accompanied Herrack to the top of the stairs, offered himself in any service whatever, pledged dearest friendship, bowed and bobbed. Then, hot and itchy with haste, he returned to the room, abruptly bade the blonde lady think on her sins and so have plenty to do until he returned.

He went to another room and hurriedly wrote a letter to Sidi Hamet to be sent off instantly in the way of secret correspondence between them.

In this letter Signior Pistario strained his cleverness to Italianate finesse in saying that a faithful agent must remember always the possibility of forgery both in script and seal. "Any amount of gold asked for" was an appalling order. Besides, this Herrack person, though

seeming to enjoy Sidi Hamet's unbounded favor, was so insulting as to speak of the "damned *Renegado*."

"God is my witness that the words are his own, and I set them down only that my Lord and Patron may know the truth!"

Also (wrote Pistario) the Herrack person was outrageously demandatory, used the arrogance of a beggar on horseback.

IN DUE time the letter came into the hands of Sidi Hamet. He read it in a secret closet with a brazier burning near his feet. Chuckling, he smote his thigh:

"Calls me '*Renegado*,' eh? And 'damned', you say? To my face he's said as much. Ho ho, my weasel Pistario. You tie puppet strings to shrewd men and pipe their dancing, but a plain, downright fellow leaves you dazed. Pah, Pistario. If you but knew! I have staked my daughter, half my wealth, a secret that would take off my own head, on the hazard that the greatest pirate of the Adriatic is an honest man!"

PISTARIO

Sidi Hamet stooped and burned the letter in his brazier, poked the char into ash flecks, and with an oath bade spies piece it together if they could.

Then he fell into somber brooding. Doubts rose up. This Huroc, as the fierce Uskobs miscalled his name, might be at heart an English gentleman but he was also a desperate man.

Sidi Hamet gripped his beard, frowned down at the brazier.

"I chose him, knowing that he returned unransomed and unharmed all captured Venetian ladies—and none in the world are more beautiful or willing! He scorned to steal a donkey's burden of pure jewels in Vienna. He kept faith with barbarous Uskobs. My life and soul on it! He will not betray me!"

CHAPTER V

"AWAY, GALLEY SLAVE!"

SIGNIOR PISTARIO chose, Herrack inspected and accepted, a tall old stone house reached by crooked streets on a hillside.

Herrack made sure that he did not accept any servants that might be foisted off on him by the meddlesome Pistario; then he settled down to await the ship and men Sidi Hamet promised for the passage of his daughter and treasure into England.

Mariuma was no sooner in the house and out of boy's garb than she showed herself the sort of devil that makes good Christian men choke wives and mistresses.

She began by pacing through the rooms with eyes a-flash, nose in the air, lips drawn down at the corners. She was not pleased and said so:

"A hovel! Do you steal Sidi Hamet's gold and say 'tis spent on me?"

"But most likely I'll break your neck and say you fell from a window!"

She overturned a chair in petulant disdain. "What have I to do with chairs? Tables half way to the ceiling? And a bed that's set on legs? But one old Negress for a servant!"

She swept a scornful gesture at the withered old crone Herrack had been at much trouble to find.

"Am I a prisoner?" she cried, her hands moving in flame-like flickers of agitation. "These cold hard walls and

stone floors! I'll die of chill and bruises! I will have rugs and velvets! You want me dead! Whose money do you spend? Your own or Sidi Hamet's? And if Sidi Hamet's, why not the comfort he would wish for his daughter?"

Herrack turned from the room and slammed the door.

Mariuma straightened, looked at the closed door, asked sweetly:

"Halla, do you think I have made him unhappy?"

"Oh breath of heaven, a man is always unhappy when he loves. Make him love you *if* you would torture him!"

"If ever I thought he loved me I would die of shame! Infidel dog! Bring me servants, Halla!" Mariuma beat a small fist against her palm and stamped.

The next morning, at an hour when Herrack was away, Halla marched into the house with three Negresses of her own choosing.

Mariuma examined and questioned them as if at a slave market. One being a dusky, lemon-colored maiden and not ugly, was dismissed forthwith.

Mariuma was much out of temper that pomegranate stain must wear away and could not be washed off, though her lithe body was scrubbed with lemon juice and ground almonds. She had let the stain be put on without protest and worn it without complaining, but when its need was past she fretfully wanted it off, and peered mirrorward at the fading splotches quite as if she felt disfigured for life.

Herrack surprised her by accepting the two new Negresses when she was set and ready to make a scene. He simply made them prisoners within the house to keep their tongues from wagging outside.

Mariuma found herself with nothing better to do than flirt from an upper window with beruffled men on the narrow steep stone-cobbled street.

These audacious gallants thought themselves encouraged to help deceive a jealous husband and tossed up notes wrapped about pebbles. She could read no Italian but to trouble Herrack, gave the notes to him.

One of the gallants who tried the door at midnight to see if it had been left unlocked, as he instructed, found himself seized in the dark, disarmed, stripped of every garment with a fierce quickness as if ten devils helped, then tossed out naked into the street. Pieces of his broken sword clattered on the stones beside him. A strong voice with roistering jeer invited him to come again, any time, and find the same welcome.

Herrack went to the door of Mariuma's apartment in the morning and opened it without knocking.

The Negresses squealed and flung veiling garments about Mariuma. She struck at their hands and stood more than half unclothed, erect, haughty.

Her tawny eyes were a-gleam on Herrack, but she spoke to the Negresses:

"You black stupids, dare think my father would surrender me to one unfitted for the trust! Fools, eunuchs are not men!"

Herrack roared with laughter but his face flushed. "Breath of God! If your woman's tongue were a sword, I'd drip blood from that *passado!* Here!" He flung the bundle of gallant's clothing at her feet. "This fleece is off a fool that has no doubts as to whether it was a man's hand that throttled him!"

AT TIMES he thought oar, bench and galley irons an easier life than the anxieties of Genoa. He found Mariuma had more moods than a princess has gowns, and sometimes thought she would listen to reason; but it even did no good to speak of the jeopardy of her father if it should be discovered through her recklessness that she was the daughter of Sidi Hamet.

Mariuma could not be alarmed. She had no fears, and pride in her father made her scornful of his dangers.

One morning when Herrack came for money, the pudgy Pistario winked, smirked, and tapped his nose, murmuring:

"Ah ha! So the secret is out, eh? A dove cote, eh? You sly lad!"

"The devil knows of what you talk. I do not!"

" 'Tis the news of the town!"

"Then tell it!" The words hit Pistario like a box on the ears.

"Do you not know," he asked humbly, "that at last the name of the mysterious woman you shelter is known?"

Herrack's glower would have unnerved a strong man. Pistario was not strong. He trembled before Herrack spoke:

"Let me hear the name. After that, Signior Pistario, close your mouth tight as if Death held your throat. Else Death will!"

"W-why-er—ah—w-what can be the h-harm of having it known that you escaped from T-Tripoli with the daughter of Ibn el Toiffel?"

Herrack fingered his short rough beard, a vague, dazed look came into the glower, and he said nothing.

"This Ibn el Toiffel is a wicked Moslem and his daughter's soul will be saved by love of you! Genoa is a Christian city and all Christians bless the embarrassment of heathens!"

"Let me hear more!"

Pistario used a delicate, oozy tone and bobbed in confidential assurance:

" 'Tis said you carried off daughter and treasure. But we know, you and I, whence the treasure. Yet trust me! Never a word will I whisper to Sidi Hamet. We apply all expenditures to the ship, eh? Good! See, am I not your friend?"

Pistario hastened to write Sidi Hamet what rumor said, and added—calling God to bear witness!—that Herrack had made admission and coaxed at him to keep the affair from Sidi Hamet.

Herrack returned to the house, knocked at Mariuma's door. She was dressing and promised to hurry.

One Negress combed her silken flame-colored hair, lifting it up against her own black breast. Another annointed and rubbed Mariuma's body with perfumed oil. The third burned perfume, polished her nails and dyed them black.

Long waiting made Herrack impatient. He called through the door to ask if she had ever heard of one Ibn el Toiffel.

Mariuma gleefully beat her pillows and poked cloth in her mouth to smother laughter.

Ibn el Toiffel was a fat, blabbering old fellow with a fat, blabbering daughter. Mariuma had appeased the curiosity of the merchants by confiding as a great secret that she was the daughter of Ibn el Toiffel; that the English sailor, with great daring, had carried her off, together with her father's treasure.

Herrack got no satisfactory answer and waited until Mariuma leaned to her Venetian mirror and decided that she was properly dressed. She sobered her face and received him with a submissive air. The room was smoky from the burning of fragrant gums. She wore diaphanous, veil-like garments and was pleased to appear humble, since she knew that she was beautiful.

Herrack did not notice. He told what he had heard, then:

"How would such a story get abroad?"

If his glance had lingered for a moment, just one, with a look of admiration, Mariuma would have told him. Instead, her submissive air went away as if she laid a robe aside.

"Ah! No doubt over the top of some high garden wall you once beheld the unveiled beauty of Ibn el Toiffel's daughter and have chanted her praise in a Genoese tavern! Her body has the shape of a swollen wine skin! But the world, after your praise in the tavern, hearing of me whom you keep like a prisoner, thinks of her!"

"God blast you for a mad-woman!"

"It is you," said Mariuma coolly, "who must be mad, since she has the face of a fish. Her nose is no longer. Her eyes stand out so from the head. Her mouth is a lipless hole, gaping for food! But love makes all men see what features please them!"

"I'll swear she must be beautiful, since you abuse her so!"

He looked about, scowled. The room stank of perfume. The gauze-like film of burning gum swayed in the still air. The walls were hung with Florentine drapes, crimson as sin. Herrack said, "Bah!" and started to leave.

Mariuma drew a full breath. "I shall at once go abroad in the city to show the world I am not the fat, flat-faced girl you have praised." She clapped her hands and the oldest Negress came. "We go to walk in the streets, Halla!"

"And cry out that you are the dead daughter of Sidi Hamet?"

"My father dines and fattens on perils! I go now into the city. I need the air."

Herrack taunted, "In that garb?"

"Or in none if this displeases you! Come, Halla!"

Herrack stood in the doorway and his weight was propped against an extended arm. He had a wry smile. "I promised my best care of you. What seems best is what you'll have, and soon, if you persist in needing it!"

"Out of my way, galley slave!" She pushed at his arm. "Let me pass!" She pressed her body against it. "Do you not hear?"

He did not move and that was like insult, for it would have taken but very little for his arm to enfold her. She stepped back, stamped her slippered foot, swore at him, and once more swayed against him:

"Out of my way! Whose house is this that you—"

"My house!" said Herrack. The flat of his palm smacked her face.

The shock and pain spun her about.

"Oh!" she cried.

The Negresses cried, "Oh, oh!"

Mariuma flung up a hand to her cheek that burned and was reddened. "Allah help me curse you!" she screamed. "I'll kill you! I will send word to Sidi Hamet that you have struck me! I will say—"

" 'Twill be truthful to send word too that I've used the whip, if you don't stop being fool enough to think you can make one of me!"

Herrack stepped back, still smiling, and closed the door.

Mariuma flung herself on cushions, struck at the solicitous hands of the babying Negresses and would not speak. When they stood away from her in anxious patience, she lay moodily with chin on palm and stared toward the closed door.

CHAPTER VI

"MAKE READY FOR A FIGHT!"

THE ship was equipped and manned, the hour for departure fixed. The name of the ship was *Alexander*; English seamen called her *'Xander*.

At the final meeting Signior Pistario gave Herrack a plain sealed casket, as big as a small babe's crib.

Herrack carried the casket to the ship and into Mariuma's cabin. She had transferred much of her Genoese luxury and two of her Negresses. The casket was opened; it was filled with loosely thrown together jewels and jewelry. On top lay a letter.

Mariuma sat on the cushioned deck and dipped idle hands among the jewelry, letting gems shimmer and fall between her fingers. From childhood she had been loaded with such things.

She smiled up at Herrack, as if tempted to offer these trifles for something worthwhile that he, unsuspecting, might have given her in exchange.

The letter was brief. Sidi Hamet wrote

that affairs were troublous in Tripoli but his own health was good; yet one could never foretell when Life, a tricksome hussy, would leave a man; therefore, not wanting his maid to be a burdensome expense, here was something toward board, raiment and perhaps in time a dowry.

"God bless you both," wrote the *Renegado*.

THE *Alexander* was no sooner out of the Ligurian Sea than two far-roving galleys of Tunis appeared in the dawn-haze.

The men of the *'Xander* were glad of this early chance to tell the Moors what they thought of past ill-treatment. They set about joyously as devils to welcome the fight, though the Moors were clustered over the galley decks as thick as flies on a gutter carcass.

The *'Xander's* crew were gnarled men and half pirates themselves, as were all good seamen of that day, although the only one among them for whom Herrack had any downright liking was a grizzly old gunner.

The *'Xander* fled with blundering haste, drew the Moors into a speedy approach, yawed. The faster galley came alongside to board and the packed Moors yelled as if the fight were already won; but the ports opened, guns thrust out iron necks, and lowered mouths spoke with shattering bellows.

Each of the English seamen had a galley boatswain's lash-scar on his back and all fought like devils in a cloudy smoke-haze. The shattered galley fell back, veered away, all aleak and smeared with dead. Chained slaves howled and struggled amid the broken oar banks. The galley swayed into a lopsided sag and *Moriscos* skittered and leaped into the water.

The other galley shied away. The *'Xander's* two twenty-four-pounders lifted their mouths and spat iron balls at it.

Near about the water was churned by the struggles of drowning men. The oar slaves, fettered, sank; swimming, Moors swarmed to the lines that had been tossed from the *'Xander's* side for Christians to cling to. Mocking sailors joyously shot and shook off the Moors.

That small affair seemed an auspicious beginning; but the *'Xander* soon fell in with a Christian rover who was not easily beaten off. She had long guns and left the *'Xander's* upper works in a tangle. Then some sort of fever broke out; men were sickened and dragged themselves about the deck as if merely staying alive was weary work; and the *'Xander* began to leak. The sickness passed more quickly than the leaks after four or five good men were given sea burial.

Herrack held well in toward the Spanish shore, partly to evade the African Coast, largely with the hope of falling in with some wicked Spaniard from whom needy Englishmen of the day made a practice—with God's help!—of taking stores and gold. There was nothing like a taste of loot to cheer weary seamen; and Spaniards were fair prey for Englishmen who, the Dutch excepted, alone of all Europe worshiped God properly.

But the devil, having great love of Spaniards, looked out for his own. Such ships as the now sluggish *'Xander* sighted stood away and would not be lured within range of her hidden guns, even though the *'Xander* flew Spanish colors.

The *'Xander* approached the ancient gates of Hercules and in the darkness ran the Straits of Gibraltar. The crew was greatly heartened; home, now, seemed near.

ONE morning the *'Xander* saw a stalwart ship clouded with sail change course and bear toward her.

The old gunner came from the crosstrees with a stare in his eyes and spoke in a low voice:

"She's pirate, lad. The God-cursed Ripaudi's *Maddalena!*" He called her

"*Maudlun.*" "Carries a wench for a figurehead. I seen her at Zara. The ship an' wench too. Her name is Magda an'—"

Herrack scowled grimly. "Ripaudi, eh? Piombo's jackal!"

"A pack o' Turks 'ud be more human-like 'an him! She's Piombo's privateer 'gainst Turks an' pirates. Any ship be pirate if she can take it!"

"Ho, gunner, this *Maddalena* is far a-sea to look for pirates, when Uskobs hover in the very merchant lanes of Venice!"

"Uh, Uskobs! 'Tis an Englishman, lad, as leads 'em!" The old gunner spoke proudly. "Huroc. You've heard o' him?"

"The name."

"They make too hard a fight, Uskobs do, for any gold you get. They're wary, bein' few in number. But once they make attack, 'tis said they ne'er are beaten off. It suits Ripaudi better, an' them Piombos too, to cruise out here where Dutch an' Dons come home full laden from the Indies, East and West. That crew's skimmed off the scum of hell. She's near upon us. What's to do, lad?"

Herrack looked away to windward, where the ship came with the swooping flight of a hawk. He looked aloft and saw the sluggish straining of the *'Xander.*

"We cannot run."

The grizzled gunner nodded gravely.

"Our powder is near gone."

Again the gunner's grave nod.

"That is a fine ship, the *Maddalena!*"

"Aye, Master Herrack."

"There's no better way that I know of to get her for our own than laying alongside and boarding!"

"Eh? Eh! Why, she's three men—aye, five or maybe ten men to our one!"

"And is that any reason to stand like a stall-fatted ox and let your throat be cut?"

"Nay. But these men of ours won't fight, Master!"

"Won't? You'll see! They'll board and fight or stay and burn! Now not a word to any man. But in secrecy get ready tow and pitch below!"

The gunner hesitated gravely, then nodded. "Aye, aye, Master!"

When it was known the *'Xander* would fight, the crew murmured at the odds and set up a furtive humming talk of parley. Many had been freebooters themselves and knew the way of the sea. Ripaudi was no Moor or Spaniard. If not angered he might merely plunder the *'Xander's* useless stores, curse the empty prize, strike off a head or two by way of sport, and sail away.

Herrack knew Ripaudi would also take Mariuma. As a woman-prize she would be pleasing. As flesh for ransom, if he learned her name, she would be worth any princess in Europe. Besides, there was a great casket of jewels to lose.

He told the crew, "I make no parley unless on his own deck. They have a better ship than ours, which is reason enough to welcome them! Would you, for lack of spirit, refuse then the sea-gift God sends? 'Tis not the English way! Take arms. Make ready for a fight!"

(*To be continued*)

CROSS FIRE

A novelette by Robert E. Pinkerton

CHAPTER I

MEN FROM THE MALPASO

JUST JONES expected fellow wayfarers at Sime's Spring. It was the last water for thirty miles and any one crossing the dread Malpaso, east or west, would pause to gather strength.

He had been warned of the character of such trail companions. It was tough country beyond the Malpaso, the home of tough men.

Yet Jones made camp alone. While he cooked supper a riderless horse topped the last rise beyond the spring, black against the red sky, limping. Just Jones frowned. An empty saddle coming out of the Malpaso could mean only another victim of the arid waste.

As the horse formed a momentary silhouette against the sunset blaze, Jones believed something was the matter with its legs. They seemed swollen, misplaced. He had only a glimpse before the horse disappeared in thick brush.

When it came out to the right a minute later, the sunset glare no longer blinded Jones. Ahead of the animal, leading it, trudging slowly, was a small boy.

Wonder held Jones dumb. Pity flooded up to choke him. He laid aside the fry pan of bacon.

The boy came on. Steady eyes

searched from beneath the floppy brim of an old hat much too large. A red kerchief, knotted at the back, hung far beneath his little round chin. Legs of saddle-worn overalls were folded high. Beneath them were tiny boots, hand made, heels tall and spiked. Low on his right thigh hung a holstered gun. Jones saw it was a .32, but on the boy it looked like a gigantic .45.

As an indeliberate token of respect, Just Jones bowed.

"Howdy, Bud," he said gravely.

The boy's eyes were startled wide but quickly resumed their guarded scrutiny. He nodded.

"Headin' east, you've come far and dry," Jones said. "Will you use this cup?"

"I've drunk," the boy answered shortly as he indicated a canteen hanging from the saddle. "Hold back, Tex!"

His horse was straining at the reins, desperate for water. The boy dug in his heels but could not restrain him.

"I'll see he don't get too much at first," Just Jones offered. "Sit till I slice more bacon."

"Tex can't boss me!" the boy exclaimed gruffly. "Hold back, you old fool! Want to founder yerself?"

He ducked, snubbed the reins on a rock, jerked his mount up short.

"Aw, Tex! Take it easy."

He knew the tricks but did not have the weight. Just Jones injected himself into the situation as unobtrusively as possible. Star, his own horse, ceased grazing nearby and watched with bright interest.

"That'll satisfy him for a bit," Jones said after Tex had plunged half his head into the pool below the spring. "The Malpaso would *ga'nt* a camel, I guess."

Jones put a hint of a question in that. The boy could have come from nowhere except across the grim desert. Yet he did not reply, did not acknowledge a journey which hardened men dread.

After Tex was cared for and unsaddled, they returned to the fire. Just Jones added more water for coffee, cut more bacon. The boy sat on a boulder, silent, watchful, his child's face unnatural in striving to mask emotion.

Jones took the cue. He assumed that his guest was a man, grown, hardened by a hard life, and he respected scrupulously the West's precept that information from a stranger must come voluntarily.

The boy, Jones estimated, was about ten years old, yet he had none of the manners or attitude of his age. It was not that he aped adult ways. His actions were natural, as if he had lived always with men, never with boys. He was, as Jones recognized with mingled pity and admiration, a grave little old man.

They ate. The boy was famished. After the meal he rolled a cigarette, neatly but with strained deftness.

"Thanks, mister," he said. "I didn't have time to put up a snack."

"We'll fill up again in the morning," Jones offered.

"I'll be movin' on soon's Tex feeds a bit."

Jones suppressed his astonishment in a long silence. The boy was exhausted. His little body sagged despite resolute effort to sit upright. His reserve could not mask the drag of fatigue. And it was rough country to the east. No moon and little water. A child to dare it after the ruthless Malpaso!

Jones rolled a cigarette slowly. "Tex is lame."

"Off front shoe's loose. Stone under it. Broke my knife tryin' to get it out."

"Walk far?"

"'Bout four miles," the boy said. "Never could stand to ride a lame horse."

Jones nodded grave accord with the sentiment while he thought of four miles in desert heat on high heels.

"I'll fix the shoe for you, Bud," he said. "In the morning."

The boy looked up with swift suspicion.

"How'd you know my name?" he demanded.

"Didn't. Just naturally called you that."

"The Bud part all you know?"

"Yep."

"And you never been acrost the Malpaso?"

"Never was in this country before."

"Then why you tryin' to hold me overnight?" Bud demanded with savage insistence.

" 'Cause you and your horse are all in, son," Jones answered gently.

Bud found proof of that gentleness in Just Jones' steady gaze. A sob rose in his throat but he choked it back. Jones' eyes were misty when he read the firm courage.

"You help me get that stone out," Bud said, and suddenly he was pleading. "I got to go! Tonight!"

"Bud, all this is none o' my business. I haven't asked questions, and I ain't now. But I can tell you something. I've got nowhere in particular to go. Sort o' wanderin' around loose. A feller don't travel day and night unless there's trouble. So if there's anything I can do, you ask me."

Jones could see the boy waver. Fatigue, and possibly fear, pressed remorselessly. But Bud squared his round little jaw, even as his eyes misted over.

"Thanks, mister," he said gruffly. "But I can do this."

Just Jones warmed to that spirit, though he made one more effort.

"All right, but it's pretty dark to fix Tex's shoe."

"He'll stand by a fire," Bud said as he jumped up. "If I hadn't broke my knife—"

He froze. After an instant his right hand moved toward his gun with a gesture far from instinctive.

"Easy," Jones whispered. "Let me handle this."

"They're after me! Thought they had me corralled. If I don't get to—"

He tugged at the gun. Jones had heard the same click of steel on rock that had startled the boy to action. Now he thrust Bud behind him and backed around the fire.

"Steady, son," he cautioned. "How many'll there be?"

"They sent four after Leach."

"Duck into the brush."

Just Jones shoved the boy, glanced around to make certain he had gone. Then he stood, ready, away from the blaze, listening, waiting.

TWO men rode spent horses into the outer firelight. They nodded when they saw Just Jones and went on to the spring. There one took the reins and the other strode back. Two guns hung from his waist.

"Where's the kid?" he demanded savagely.

"You mislaid one?" Jones drawled.

"I mean business, feller."

"Business," Jones said, "is what I'm best at—if it's my own."

"This ain't. That brat o' Leach Lewis' is bent on mischief. Which can't be any affair of yourn."

Just Jones felt the tension ebb. He had guessed from the first that these men could not be connected with Bud. Too obviously they were crooks, bullies at least. The boy's fine courage could be based only on decency.

"Stranger, did you ever hear of a coincidence?" Jones asked.

"Yeah!" the man sneered. "I tossed one up once and got it with both guns before it lit."

Just Jones laughed. "You might try this. And it sure is a coincidence. I ain't seen Leach Lewis for twelve years."

The second horseman had come up in time to hear. Both stood in startled silence.

Apparently Jones was at ease. He

smiled. Every muscle was relaxed. Yet he was aware he had lit a fuse. How long that fuse might be, and how much dynamite was attached, he had no means of knowing. The second man also wore two guns.

"You mean you know Leach Lewis?" the newcomer asked.

He was small, with a weasel face and motionless reptilian eyes.

"Leach's mother and mine were sisters," Just Jones chanced.

If these men believed him, they would know Bud had told what the trouble was. They would take for granted Jones' understanding of who they were and what they wanted. That left the next move up to them, a bit of strategy Just Jones had often adopted to his great advantage.

The pair stood across the fire, silent, tense. Jones smiled when he saw that tenseness, and rolled a cigarette.

"Hell!" the larger man exploded. "Watch me wreck another coincidence."

Both hands dropped swiftly. The other's similar movement was only a second behind.

Just Jones' right hand flashed. No eye could have followed it in the dim firelight. Only a high speed camera could have caught it in bright sun.

Jones' gun roared, leaped. Red flame shot upward as the bigger man fell. His bullet bored the black sky.

The little man had started later. His left gun caught. A chunk of lead drove flesh into the wooden grip of the right. He jerked his mangled hand free and stared at the dripping blood.

"Some coincidences move faster'n others," Just Jones remarked. "Watch that left flipper or you'll have to learn to shave with your toes."

The little man's snake eyes blazed.

"I saw a feller do it in a circus," Jones added, "so you've got some odds. Or do you want to play safe?"

The man reached, and high.

"Come out, Bud," Just Jones called, "and help me with this pair o' horned toads."

CHAPTER II

FURNACE TRAIL

AN hour later the wounded strangers were again mounted. Jones had bound up the big man's smashed shoulder as best he could, and the other's hand.

"You'll find water ten miles east," Jones said. "Stop the night if you want to, but don't head back west. No doctor—and I'll be waiting."

The pair cursed and rode away. Just Jones grinned as he turned to the fire.

No longer was his companion a weary little old man. Bud Lewis was staring with the fascinated admiration of a small boy.

"You have your gun hid behind you all the time?" he demanded excitedly.

"They'd 'a' seen that."

"Then you *drew!* Why, mister, you could slap a rattlesnake's face, as Leach says, and not be bit."

"I don't like to practice at bein' a fool," Jones laughed.

"But Dan Keefe! The big one you hit in the shoulder. He's supposed to be the fastest man west o' the Malpaso. And you gave him a start!"

"He just thought he had a start, son. He was all stiffened up. Can't move fast when you're too tight."

"It was one gun against four!" the boy insisted with mounting excitement.

"Which was another break for me. Even on the fingers of a love-sick sawmill worker, you could count the men that shoot as well with the left as the right. A second gun only gives you something to use after the first is empty, unless you're wanting to make a noise on the Fourth of July."

"Can you shoot with your left hand?" Bud asked breathlessly.

"Some," Jones admitted, "but there's

this side of it. Fast drawin' takes everything you got. Speed, nerves, muscles and swing of the shoulder—all jammed into one fifth-second idea. See? Split the idea in two and you're four times as slow, 'cording to my arithmetic."

Bud nodded in grave understanding, then became all boy again.

"Wish Leach could 'a' seen it!" he exclaimed. "I had my gun on 'em, but it was all over before I could pull."

Just Jones started. "Listen, son. You leave gun-play alone for a year more anyhow. Or until I give you some lessons."

"Will you?" Bud demanded excitedly. "And on shootin', too?"

"That comes first. No use to get a gun out fast if you can't use it. Now tell me about Leach Lewis."

Bud sobered at once. That reticence which is so much a part of life where safety hangs low on the thigh again flooded up to mask his smooth brown face. Then a tear broke through. He dashed a grimy fist at it angrily, choked back a sob.

"Leach is my dad," he quavered. "They came and got him. Last night."

"They?"

"Singer Randall's bunch."

"What they come chasin' after you for?"

"I'd gone to bed. In the loft. I didn't know what all the rumpus was at first. Been ridin' all day and I hit the hay early and hard."

"Riding?"

"Sure! Leach and me run our ranch alone. Leach was asleep, too. They must 'a' caught him in bed. They knew where I slept. One of 'em clumb the ladder and peeked at me with a lantern. Then he locked the trapdoor."

"Where they take Leach?"

"I don't know."

"So you high-tailed it out o' there?" Jones asked.

"Not right away. I know those *hombres*. They might 'a' been watchin'. I waited until most daylight and then busted the window and clumb down."

Just Jones did not speak. He was staring at a picture of a small, scared boy lying alone through the dark night, trying so desperately to be brave.

"Besides," Bud said judicially, "a .32 ain't much good agin a .45."

The man turned away, an ache stabbing his throat.

"So I lit out acrost the Malpaso for Bowman," Bud continued. "Leach's got friends there."

Suddenly he darted to Just Jones' side.

"Say!" he exclaimed. "You Leach's cousin?"

"No, son. I was tryin' to work those *hombres* into a hole, is all. I never heard of Leach Lewis before, but you can count on me as being as good a friend as he's got. Now what you need most is a bit of sleep."

The boy rebelled, but he was dead on his feet. By the time Jones had built up the fire, Bud was sound asleep on his saddle blanket.

Tex was led into the light. Jones took tools from a saddle-bag and, after a brief examination, ripped off the loose shoe. The other was in good shape.

"You ain't exactly balanced," Jones commented, "but we won't be ridin' hard tomorrow. Go fill up some more."

He sat beside the little blaze, smoking. His ears by-passed sounds of the feeding horses but were keenly alive to all others. The fire was permitted to die. Occasionally Jones put out a hand and felt of the sleeping boy. Always he grinned, with a tender twist of his straight mouth, and sometimes with a slight catch in his throat.

"Damned little gamecock!" he whispered huskily. "Wouldn't take a chance on me. Goin' on alone. For his dad."

Jones slept, but before signs of dawn he had rebuilt the fire. When breakfast was ready he shook Bud. The boy continued to sleep even as he was lifted to his feet.

"Can't help it, old-timer," the man said gently. "We got to cross the Malpaso before it's too hot."

They were away in the first dim light. Bud nodded in the saddle, and Jones rode close. The youngster gradually got himself awake.

"Hey, mister!" he exclaimed. "We're goin' the wrong way."

"Leach is over there, ain't he?"

"Yes, only—"

"And you don't know what it's all about."

"But the Singer's bunch! We got to get help to set Leach loose."

The boy was sobbing now, though rage and determination shone through the moisture in his eyes.

"Steady, Bud," Jones said. "Ain't you got some idea what they want o' Leach? Could you hear 'em talk to him?"

"Not much. Dan Keefe always bellers, as Leach says. 'We got a little job for you,' he tells Leach. 'Not much work to it, but the pay'll sure surprise you.' "

"Huh!" Jones grunted. "What's this Singer Randall's bunch do mostly?"

"Leach says they run cattle acrost the Malpaso, work 'em through the mountains and sell 'em acrost the border."

"Leach ever have trouble with 'em before?"

"The Singer comes around sometimes, and they talk. Leach always tells it's about buyin' cows, but afterwards he throws rocks at the bunkhouse door. Leach has to be good and mad when he does that."

They rode in silence for a while, trotting steadily in the morning cool. Jones turned often to look back, and to sweep the rolling, broken valley that lay so still and sinister between the bleak mountain ranges.

AT the first strip of deep sand he stopped and turned aside. The four belts and guns he and Bud had taken from their foes at the spring were hanging from the saddle-horns. Jones scooped out a shallow pit and laid the weapons in it.

"Give me that pearl handled one o' Dan Keefe's!" Bud cried. "I never had a real gun."

"But you couldn't even pack it," Jones grinned.

"In a year I can. I'll sling it on the saddle horn."

Jones handed over the weapon and belt and smoothed sand over the cache.

"A bit o' wind will hide the sign," he said.

They rode on. Bud examined his treasure critically and in ecstasy. His little fist could scarcely enclose the grip.

"How many cows you and Leach run?" Just Jones asked.

"Six hundred. We got the only water in the upper end o' the range, and most the grass."

Bud was a little old man again, talking man's talk. Jones' eyes twinkled.

"Where's the Singer hole up?" he asked.

"Fifteen miles south of us on Dying River. Only it never gets really live enough to die, as Leach says. Singer's behind that square top peak. We're right under Gunsight Mountain." He pointed. "Leach says it was put there to guard us."

They trotted on. Jones' gaze swept the valley.

"Trail of them two that followed you is gettin' thin," he commented.

"Never is any trail in the Malpaso. Wind blows every night and most days. Sand drifts quick. You got to ride by the peaks."

Jones looked back, studying the skyline. He could not find a distinguishing mark that would serve at night, and he had been told that Sime's spring was the

only water on the eastern rim within ten miles in either direction.

Bud saw him studying the valley. "Leach says that's why it's so tough for anybody followin' rustled stock," he explained. "Strangers got to travel in the daytime or miss water, which gives the Singer all the breaks."

Jones nodded understanding.

The trail disappeared entirely. The sun rose, and a furnace door opened. Bud drooped in his saddle. Just Jones frowned, then asked more questions. He got descriptions and approximate location of water holes across the Malpaso, of trails and patches of grass land in the mountains beyond, of the few inhabitants in that wide, formidable fastness.

Bud answered with a boy's pride and a man's knowledge. Between the words, Jones read close association with his father on a lonely ranch, complete submersion in an adult world, and an impregnable faith in Leach Lewis.

"Don't you worry, son!" Just Jones exclaimed impulsively. "We'll find Leach for you—somehow."

"Singer's got eight men in his gang," Bud said with a touch of doubt. "I was goin' to get a bunch o' Leach's friends in Bowman."

"Bowman's a long way. Maybe time'll count most. And there's only six left, you know. Let's hit the canteens."

Jones pretended to swallow. The boy was worn out by lack of sleep and his previous day's crossing of the Malpaso. Only courage could carry him in the last miles. Star might have an extra burden when the horse himself was near exhaustion.

The trot became a walk when the sun climbed and the heat increased. Jones kept an eye on Bud and studied the Malpaso. It was not a flat desert floor but a succession of rolling, sandy wastes and miniature mountain ranges of jagged rock. Occasionally there were stretches of sagebrush and isolated clusters of Joshua trees.

A breeze came, like air from an oven door, and with it was a faint hissing as the sand began to move. After a gust, Just Jones looked back to find their trail quickly filling.

Bud sagged lower. He was silent. His boy's mouth was warped cruelly by firm resolve. Sometimes a hand reached out to grasp the horn, only to be jerked back with a guilty movement, and a glance to note if Just Jones had seen.

Jones was careful never to see. He did not suffer from the heat, for the boy's suffering was too acutely his. Eight hours for the crossing. Four more to go. And Tex was limping again.

Just Jones told stories, humorous at first, then grim tales of men who had endured great privations and won through on sheer grit. He halted often to tap the canteens, though he barely wet his own lips and throat.

They stopped once, in a canyon, where a straight wall gave protection from the forenoon sun. Bud slept. Star and Tex stood motionless, heads low. After an hour, Jones opened a can of sardines and broke off chunks of dry bread.

Food revived the boy. The horses were rested. They went on. Bud pointed out changing landmarks in the range they were approaching.

But soon he sagged again. Frankly now he clutched the horn to hold himself in the saddle. Pity opened Just Jones' parched lips for a string of silent curses. He believed he knew exactly how Singer Randall looked.

"It's most two days since they took Leach," Bud whispered.

A few minutes later he slipped slowly to one side. Jones caught the limp body and drew it into his arms. He took off Tex's bridle, lashed it to the horn. They went on.

An hour to go. More than ever, Just Jones searched the shimmering waste of the Malpaso. He saw a huge dust cloud far to the north. Gunsight Mountain

was above him now. Ahead lay the canyon that led to water.

Tex lagged. It was his second day. Star plodded bravely beneath the added burden.

Bud lay in Jones' arms, small and soft and fragile. Jones wet the boys lips occasionally. His own throat was dry. Tex stopped, came on, stopped again. The horse was now far behind. Exhaustion dimmed even Star's eager courage. A mile from the canyon mouth, he, too, halted.

The dust cloud to the north was moving westward, Jones believed. After Star had rested a bit, they went on.

The canyon was not quite so hot. A cooler breeze sucked down. It brought a scent of water and Star's ears went up.

The spring, Bud had said, was a mile up the canyon. The gorge narrowed. After half a mile it turned abruptly.

"Wait!" a hard voice said as Jones rounded the rock corner.

Just Jones looked. A man stood against the cliff. He was tall and lean, poised, thumbs in belt. A gun hung along each thigh. His eyes searched coldly and cruelly and promised only one other expression, rage.

"What you got there?" the stranger demanded.

Mounted, the boy in his arms, Just Jones was defenseless.

"Help me down with him," he said. "Poor little shaver is most dead."

The man did not move from the cliff.

"How come you've got that brat?" he demanded savagely.

"I found him about ten miles back. Lyin' beside a rock. Canteen empty. I brought him to for a bit."

The stranger considered. "Tell you his name?"

Just Jones nodded.

"Better go on to the spring with him. Ain't far. Serves him right, running away. Been huntin' for him for two days, but I never thought he'd chance the Malpaso. He's my brat."

CHAPTER III

"GRAB YOURSELF SOME STARS!"

STAR went on at a word from Just Jones. Leach Lewis was afoot. Jones could hear his heels on the rocks. Lewis did not speak again.

Just Jones was weary. His arms ached from their long burden. His throat was like sandpaper, his lips cracking. But more than all else he was conscious of a deathly, sickening feeling within. A game little kid like Bud to have such a father!

Star smelled water and his pace quickened. The spring was not far. The horse plunged his head into the pool below.

"Take him down," Just Jones said as he held out the unconscious boy.

"You do it."

Leach Lewis stood twenty feet away, thumbs again hooked loosely in his belt. His voice was as hard as the canyon walls, his eyes as merciless as the desert heat. Just Jones stared with cold appraisal.

"This is a good country for you," he said dispassionately. "Even the Malpaso couldn't warm your blood."

"Never mind oratin', feller. Get down, and do it right."

Jones draped Bud across Star's withers and slid stiffly to the ground. He attended strictly to the job. He was too lame and cramped to risk anything else, even were Lewis an unwary man.

A dash of water left drops on the boy's hot, dry face. Some trickled into his open mouth. Just Jones was as tender as a woman.

"Open 'em, Bud!" he whispered.

"Let him lie," Lewis broke in harshly. "Stand up and keep your back to me. Unbuckle your belt and lay it down."

Just Jones obeyed with due care. He understood words, and voices, and men. He comprehended the theory of a spinning buzz saw and a careless finger.

Free of his gun, he lifted Bud and carried him to the shade of the cliff. He brought more water, soaked the boy's hair and shirt, started another trickle down his throat. He gave no heed whatever to Leach Lewis.

Lewis watched for a moment and then went to the spring for a drink. As he stooped to fill the can, Jones made a swift movement.

"Pop gun!" he muttered. "But maybe it'll sting some."

Bud moaned, moved slightly. The tan of his cheeks was becoming a more healthy shade. The boy, Jones knew, had not dried out. Lack of sleep and long exertion rather than the desert had drained his slender body. Lewis came over to watch.

"Bud," Just Jones said gently, "if you want any luck in this world, never open your eyes again. I can't wish you more than that you never see the rat who claims to be your father."

"Claims to be!" Lewis snarled. "What you mean?"

"Nobody else but you ever told me of it," Jones answered evenly. "That makes it a claim. As for the rat part, any man who ain't as square and decent and fine as his own son ought to swallow the business end of a Colt and pull the trigger."

"Who are you and what you doin' this side o' the Malpaso?" Lewis demanded.

"The United States," Jones said dispassionately, "extends from the Atlantic to the Pacific and from Canada to Mexico. The Constitution gives every man the right to go and come where and when he pleases, so long as he don't interfere with the rights and privileges of others."

"You sure can chew language," the other sneered. "But on this side o' the Malpaso there are only six clauses in the Constitution, and I've got 'em all in one gun. *Now* what you doing here?"

"I'll leave that to your Constitution to find out."

It was not all bluff. Just Jones knew this man would not kill merely to get rid of him. Lewis' eyes showed too much intelligence for that. Jones might be the vanguard of another party. Only a fool shoots a casual stranger except in self-defense.

"All right," Lewis said. "The court rules. Get on your horse and go back where you came from."

Just Jones considered.

"I've just crossed the Malpaso. My horse is all in. I couldn't make Sime's spring even if I knew the trail."

"That's your hard luck."

Just Jones studied the man. Lewis meant it. He was wholly alert, too, and seemed amply competent. The little .32 in Jones' overalls pocket was not a factor in this situation.

And Jones knew that if he started out across the Malpaso with Star spent and himself already dried out, he would never live to reach the other side.

"You seem to think God put the Malpaso here just to save you gunpowder, feller. I could stay and make you use up some of your Constitution, which might not be so good tomorrow."

If Lewis caught the suggestion of a threat in that, he ignored it.

"Take your choice," he said.

Jones stiffened, and suddenly he turned away. For the first time he remembered Tex, and what hung from the saddle.

"All right," he said. "A million to one chance out there. None here. I'll gamble."

He walked to Star and filled his canteen. He himself drank long and slowly. When he was about to mount he heard a sound down the canyon.

Leach Lewis also heard it and whirled.

"If you've got a pardner, I'll drill you first, then him," the man snarled.

Tex came around the bend, shuffling into a trot as the scent of water grew.

JUST JONES waited. As always when in a tight situation, he relaxed. Every muscle went slack and flabby. He rolled a cigarette, lit it with deliberate movements.

Lewis turned in disgust when he saw the empty saddle.

"Get going," he said to Jones.

Jones considered. He stood near the pool below the spring. Tex was drinking. Bud's recently acquired gun hung on the off side. Lewis evidently had not seen the loop of the belt, studded with cartridges, over the horn.

But it was ten feet away. And there were other considerations. There must be no fireworks. Bud might revive at any moment. Bud worshiped his father. This man had to keep on living, if for no other reason than a son's faith.

"I'll take the saddle off him," Just Jones said casually as he started toward Tex.

Lewis did not object. But Tex did. The horse remembered how Jones had rationed him at Sime's spring and whirled away. Sun glistened on the pearl-handled six-gun. Jones froze. Behind him, he could feel Lewis do the same.

"Kind to dumb animals, eh?" Lewis sneered. "Wanted to take the saddle off the poor critter. Stand back!"

Just Jones obeyed, and rolled another cigarette.

"You knew this horse was coming," Lewis accused.

"If I'd known a horse was to be had, I wouldn't 'a' carried the kid ten miles," Jones said.

"Yeah. But you knew it was his horse."

"Sure! Stirrups told that."

A flicker marred the steady gaze of Leach Lewis. Jones wondered what it meant.

"The horse left the kid and started for water on his own, I guess," Jones suggested.

"And you knew that gun was there," Lewis pursued relentlessly.

"Not exactly. It was hanging on the off side, so I couldn't see it. But I did see the belt—and did some figurin'."

Just Jones spoke calmly. For the first time, Lewis was uncertain. Tex had slaked his immediate thirst. Lewis walked up to the horse and unhooked the gun belt. He kept an eye on Jones but suddenly he jerked out the pearl handled revolver and examined the grip.

"Dan Keefe's gun!" he exclaimed in astonishment. "How'd it get on that brat's horse?"

His rage was great, but mingled with it was uncertainty and suspicion.

Jones remained unruffled. Physically he was still relaxed, but his wits raced to meet this new danger.

"Since I never saw the horse, I can't tell you," he said. "I never knew a horse to pick up a gun, and it don't seem like a kid dyin' o' thirst could take it away from—what you say that feller's name is?"

"You camp at Sime's spring last night?" Lewis countered.

"Sure. Left at first light."

"Alone?"

"Yep."

"See a couple o' men pass?"

"Ain't seen anybody since I left Bowman, till I found the kid."

Lewis' glanced flicked up the canyon.

"There's the Malpaso," he said with sudden decision. "She's yours."

"Thanks," Jones said. "I'll be movin'."

He walked toward Star, and closer to Lewis, stopped.

"You'll look after the kid," he faltered. "Or can I give him more water?"

"I'll take care of him."

"He's in bad shape and—"

Lewis' alertness had ebbed. Clearly he was troubled, and he had two guns against an unarmed man.

Just Jones hesitated. He seemed embarrassed.

"The kid was holdin' something in his hand," he said. "Gripped tight. Must 'a' thought a lot of it. I kept it. Here!"

Lewis watched with contempt. Embarrassed, head bent, Jones stepped closer as he fumbled in his overalls pocket. He could see the other's hands, and they hung low.

"Not much, maybe," Jones faltered. "But a kid—might want it."

He tugged to free his hand, stumbled. The hand jerked out of the pocket.

The movement was like light. Metal flashed in the sun. The muzzle of the little .32 was within two feet of the other's midriff.

"Grab yourself some stars, feller!" came from between Just Jones' clenched teeth.

CHAPTER IV

RUSTLERS' ROOST

LEWIS did not move. Surprise and anger stunned him. A swift step, and Jones had thrust the little gun into the man's ribs.

"Reach!" he snarled.

Lewis obeyed. Jones took his two guns, commanded him to unbuckle the belts.

"But it's a fair trade," Jones said. "Now *you* can have the Malpaso."

The man's horse was grazing above the spring, saddled, fresh. They went for it together.

Just Jones made certain. He kept a gun in his right hand. His face was hard, his voice uncompromising. He had already seen the rifle on the other's saddle and now removed it. He permitted Lewis to fill his canteen.

Bud, lying in the shade of the canyon wall, moaned and threw out an arm.

"Hurry it!" Just Jones commanded harshly. "I don't want that kid ever to see you again. Ever! Understand?"

"What right—?"

"I've talked to Bud. He's more of a man at ten than you could be at a thousand. He thinks you're great—now. He can keep on thinkin' that—if he never sees you again. And I like Bud so well I'm going to stick around and see that you keep away."

The man sneered.

"I never spoke a promise to myself," Jones said. "So get goin'. The Malpaso will be tough, but keep thinkin' that you're never goin' to cross it again."

Lewis rode away. Just Jones walked to the bend in the canyon and watched him. It was straight from there, straight out into the dancing heat of the inferno.

The man might circle among the dunes and ridges, beyond the mirages. Undoubtedly he knew the Malpaso intimately. But, weaponless, he would not return to the canyon. Jones felt secure on that point.

Bud was sitting up when Just Jones returned. The boy grinned sheepishly.

"Feel well enough to travel?" Jones asked. "We ought to be getting on."

Bud stood up. "I'm jake," he said. "But how'd I get here?"

"Rode. Here's your new gun. Is there any way to your ranch except up this canyon?"

"There's a fork just beyond, the way me and Leach always go."

"And this trail?"

"Turns south to Singer Randall's."

"Fine! We'll eat when we get you home."

Jones caught up the horses. Bud felt much better, though he swayed a bit in the saddle. They had reached the fork before the boy saw that Jones now carried a rifle and that two more belts and guns hung from his saddle-horn.

"Where'd you get 'em?" he demanded in astonishment.

"Your Malpaso is a queer country, son," Jones answered with a touch of mystery. "This arsenal was cached on a rock shelf above where you was sleepin'."

Bud's stare was incredulous. "Who'd leave their shootin' irons around like that?"

"Knowin' the people around here, your guess is better'n mine. Bud, ain't you got some idea what Singer Randall wanted of your dad?"

"Leach'd never tell me. He just got mad when the Singer came around, is all."

"You ever go down Randall's way?"

"Once, when Leach and me was after some strays. We never did find 'em."

"Leach ride there often?"

"We always go together. Keeps us pretty busy lookin' after our stock. We got a two-man ranch, as Leach says."

Just Jones puzzled over this. Bud was the little old man again, considering his father a pal and a partner. It did not make sense.

"Besides, as Leach says, it ain't any too healthy around the Singer's," Bud continued. "If he happened to be runnin' something acrost the Malpaso, or if the owners of stolen stock wandered along lookin' for it, some people might get wrong ideas."

"That's got sense. How long's Leach been on your ranch?"

"Grand-dad homesteaded the water when Leach was a kid."

The boy was drooping in the saddle. White was once more spreading beneath the tan. But Just Jones had to know more.

"And this Singer Randall, he a newcomer?"

"Three years ago. As Leach says, he turned heaven into hell quicker'n a sunfisher can swap ends."

"He hold stolen stock at his place?"

"Till they get over bein' ga'nted by the Malpaso. He ain't got much feed there, and there's little beyond to the south."

"I noticed some sign of cows crossing where we did," Jones said.

Bud blinked, straightened, made an effort to concentrate.

"Yeah, but mostly he runs 'em farther south to hit his own place on Dyin' River."

Jones remembered the big dust cloud he had seen to the north. Bud, swaying in the saddle, lurched the other way. For the first time he saw that his tiny holster was empty.

"I lost my gun!" he cried in consternation.

"I forgot, son," Just Jones said. "It slipped out when you were asleep."

Jones took the weapon from his overalls pocket. This was his first chance to examine it. He threw out the cylinder.

"You've got only one shell!" he exclaimed in real astonishment, and with a reflash to a scene where he had depended on numbers supplanting weight of lead.

"We ain't been to Bowman for a long time," Bud said. "Runnin' short o' shells. But I always keep one."

In stunned silence, Just Jones handed the weapon to its owner. If Bud had only a single cartridge, his father must have known it. And the man in the canyon looked like one who would take a chance on one small bullet.

"Even a sheepherder'd have known!" Jones muttered after a long silence.

Bud did not hear. They had topped a ridge and a broad valley lay before them, green along a water course.

"That's ours!" the boy cried proudly.

A sweeping glance gave Jones the layout. It was ideal for a few hundred head of cattle. The valley stretched to a low, wide pass at the north. It would catch all water between the ranges and cattle would never stray far into dry wastes.

Far below them, close to the thick pines, lay the ranch-house and corrals. Trees swept up a gentle slope to the right.

"We don't know what's been happening here," Just Jones said. "Your trail heads down through the open. We'll take the timber."

Bud nodded his understanding and led the way to the right. Sight of the ranch

seemed to have revived him. Tex, too, knew he had left the desert and was returning home. He broke into a trot.

"Not having even a sneakin' idea o' what's goin' on, we can't take a chance on anything," Jones said, and his voice gave the impression he was discussing their problem with a strategist of equal experience. "Maybe the Singer left a man at your place to keep watch in case you or Leach came back. Maybe for something else. Anyhow, they couldn't 'a' seen us so far up here and behind this brush."

"And they won't see us," Bud announced.

He turned into a draw, urged Tex on.

"Cows is funny," he said. "All that green grass and water down there, and they always want to cross to where it's dry. Me and Leach ride up here a lot."

But it was hot when they reached the shelter of the pines an hour later and again Bud drooped. He tried manfully to ride as cowmen ride, but his hands sought the horn. He revived slightly when they reached a spring in a little flat.

"Only half a mile to the ranch," he said.

Just Jones nodded. "You ain't had much sleep in the last two days," he suggested. "Better take a snooze while I have a look-see."

He unsaddled the horses and staked them out, for Tex would go home.

"And Bud! On the chance I'd run into him, how'd I know the Singer?"

"He'll fool you," the boy said in his old man way. "Darned good looking *hombre,* until you get to see his eyes close. Then you'll know, like Leach says, that he'd shoe a horse with his fists and bite off the nails with his teeth."

"Sounds pleasant. Tall?"

" 'Bout your height. Sort o' thin, but like a wagon tongue. He wouldn't break easy."

"That's as good as a photograph," Jones chuckled. "And Leach, now?"

"Like Leach says, he's got a double in every county. Just ordinary except for a scar on his chin where he got throwed into a pile of rocks."

"Thanks, Bud."

"Let me come along," the boy pleaded. "I know this spread."

"Listen, pardner," Jones said. "I'm none too fresh myself and I'll need sleep tonight. You get some now so you can stand watch after dark."

BUD nodded comprehension and, with two belt guns and a rifle, Just Jones slipped down the gentle slope through the timber. He grinned confidently at Bud when he left, but that grin quickly became a scowl.

"I ain't fit to be let run loose," he muttered. "Ought to 'a' spotted the Singer soon's I saw him down in the canyon. Now that feller'll circle back on the Malpaso and be here before daylight. If I'd taken proper care o' him, this scheme o' his, whatever it is, would 'a' been busted wide open."

Just Jones' self-censure was genuine. First, he knew, he should never have accepted Singer Randall's statement that he was Leach Lewis. Bud served as a living refutation. And then the man's astonishment and suspicion when he recognized Dan Keefe's pearl-handled gun.

Perhaps it was the very cruelty of Randall's attitude toward the unconscious boy that had dulled Jones' perception, but he took the blame. The Singer was still at large, now a twofold menace, and Just Jones' face was grim as he walked on beneath the pines.

The ranch house was closer to timber than he had thought. Small growth gave shelter. He crawled forward to a windfall that screened and protected, and found the doorway a hundred yards beyond.

Three horses stood in the corral, sleepily switching flies. Three saddles hung in a shed near the corral gate. But the house seemed deserted. A low bunkhouse

beyond lacked window glass and clearly had been abandoned.

Jones waited an hour before a man came to the door of the house. Two guns hung from his waist. At that distance, Jones could not read his features, but he did not like the swagger. The man looked up the long slope to the north, toward the pass, for a few moments, then disappeared.

The sun was setting behind the range to the west and long shadows reached across the valley. Jones was hungry, but he waited. He felt certain two other men were in the house.

Shadows began to climb the eastern slope. The swaggerer again came to the door, looked toward the north. Jones heard his voice, and two companions joined him. One also carried two guns. The third was without weapons.

All three looked up the valley, and the watcher behind the windfall turned.

Cattle were coming over the crest of the pass. They came slowly, wearily, and in numbers. Jones caught glimpses of riders urging them on. Then the leaders smelled water. Their pace quickened. Soon the herd was in a stampede to the nearest creek.

"I thought that big cloud o' dust to the north in the Malpaso meant something," Just Jones said aloud. "Singer Randall don't always run stolen stock to the south. Or is this a new stunt he's tryin'?"

Their first thirst quenched, the cattle stood still along the creek banks. Three riders left them and trotted the two miles to the ranch house.

"After crossin' the Malpaso, those critters won't move far tonight," Jones muttered. "Now what?"

The newcomers unsaddled weary mounts and turned them into the corral. Hay from the shed was thrown inside and the men walked to the house. Smoke was rising from the chimney now. Evidently the unarmed man was the cook. The others gathered outside. All wore two belt guns. The three latest arrivals carried rifles.

Just Jones believed he was beginning to understand. Singer Randall was trying a new rustling scheme that required Leach Lewis' richer range. That was why Leach had been taken away, and why Bud had been pursued. Perhaps Randall had not counted on a child daring the Malpaso. Perhaps, too, Leach Lewis had a brand near enough like that of the stolen stock to permit altering, and the Singer was planning to make Leach the goat.

In the first dark, Just Jones went back to the spring. Bud still slept. The spring was in a draw and there was no danger of a small fire being seen. Jones fried bacon, opened a can of beans, boiled coffee, lifted the boy to his feet.

"Ain't much, son, but we got to eat," he said when Bud was awake.

"Been to the ranch house?" Bud demanded excitedly.

"Not so close. Six seemed like too many."

"The Singer's bunch there?"

"What I figured."

"See Leach?"

"They wouldn't have him there now, Bud."

They ate in silence. Bud was famished and, because there was so little, Jones helped himself sparingly. The boy needed food.

And it revived Bud quickly. After eating, he rolled one of his painstakingly careless cigarettes.

"Six men at the ranch," he said. "That leaves three of the Singer's bunch. We sent Dan Keefe and another feller to Bowman. They're out. See what that comes to, mister? They're holdin' Leach at Dyin' River with only one man to watch him."

A grave nod screened Just Jones' warm appreciation of this reasoning.

"So what we want to do is go down to Dyin' River tonight and get Leach," Bud continued excitedly.

"Listen, feller!" Jones protested. "You been sleepin'. I'm a bit tuckered, and Tex and Star are in no fit shape."

"Then we can go in the morning?"

"Maybe so. We'll do a bit o' scoutin' at daybreak. I ain't so fond o' ridin' around strange mountains in the dark with the Singer's bunch loose."

The Singer himself was what Jones feared. The man would circle, probably to Dying River, where he would get a fresh mount and firearms. Some time in the night he would arrive at the Lewis ranch, and always he would be on the lookout for his new and unknown foe. Jones gave the man credit for being a worthy adversary.

"We'll move our camp back a ways," he said. "Springs sort o' draw people in a dry country."

"Why can't I go have a look myself?" Bud demanded. "I know that place like my own pocket, as Leach says. I could sneak up in the dark and hear what's goin' on."

"No!" Jones vetoed that promptly. "We'll get some sleep, Bud, and I'll call you later. 'Bout daylight we'll get busy."

They moved horses, saddles and the meager equipment into thick woods two hundred yards from the spring and laid down to rest. Bud protested that he could go any place around the ranch in the darkness and not be caught, yet he failed to move Just Jones. And the boy was still tired. His had been a hard two days and nights even for a man. After a while he fell asleep.

For a time Jones sat in the darkness smoking. Bud had sized up the situation well. If Singer Randall had eight men in his bunch, all were now accounted for, assuming that one had been left at Dying River to guard Leach Lewis.

But this business of rescuing Lewis was not so good. Bud had no knowledge of the encounter with the Singer in the canyon, and the Singer would expect just such an attempt. Further, Bud must be kept out of it somehow. This troubled Just Jones more than any other factor. He grinned when he thought of the boy's insistence that he scout the ranch in the darkness. Bud had courage aplenty, but this was a man's game, deadly, pitiless. Dan Keefe and the Singer himself had clearly indicated the boy's fate.

For a time Jones considered ways and means of evading Bud in the morning, of getting him to a safe place while he handled this affair alone. He must have a free hand.

But Jones, too, was tired, and soon he spread a blanket and lay down. He could hear Star and Tex feeding. The night was very still. He did not know when he slept.

Once he wakened. For a time he lay listening. Star was rubbing against a tree. Perhaps that was it. Jones slept again.

The stars were fading when next he sat up. Like all outdoor men, he was instantly in possession of his faculties. He heard the horses. He turned to where Bud was sleeping. Bud was gone.

CHAPTER V

"ALL I DO IS PACK AN ARSENAL!"

THE first dim light revealed the boy's tiny heel-prints in the dust. They led toward the ranch house.

"Gone to have a look-see anyhow," Just Jones grinned. "The damned little gamecock!"

He walked swiftly through the timber. Shadows were still heavy, but Jones knew the way, a matter of down hill and keeping in the woods. His feet made no sound on the thick carpet of pine needles.

Once he picked up Bud's tracks in a dusty open space. The boy had gone straight toward the ranch. Jones smiled at the thought of the little fellow hurrying on in the darkness, intent on learn-

ing what Singer Randall's bunch was doing.

The smile froze. Just Jones halted. Two horses had crossed the opening at right angles to Bud's course, were headed north. And one hoofprint partly covered a track made by a tiny high heeled boot. Jones knew what had wakened him in the night.

He wheeled to the right. Loose saddle stock would not come here to graze. And the tracks were side by side, in a straight line. Jones followed, dodging from tree to tree, keeping a sharp watch ahead and on the sides.

He wanted to find Bud, to make certain the boy did not do something foolish, but this could not be overlooked. A foe in the rear is dangerous in any situation, and Singer Randall should have arrived by now.

After two hundred yards, Just Jones saw the tops of small trees ahead and knew he approached a barranca. As he crept up he heard the snap of a match being lighted, then the jingle of bridle chains. Inching forward, he looked down through brush to find two men and two horses beneath him.

One was the man he had sent out across the Malpaso. Neither horse nor the second man had been at the ranch the previous night. A coffee pot sat on a tiny blaze.

"Getting lighter," Singer Randall said. "Any time now."

Just Jones waited only an instant. He saw his way clear down the steep side.

"Lift 'em high!" he called softly.

Both men turned involuntarily, but their hands went up.

"Keep your backs to me!"

Jones slid down, rifle in one hand, six gun in the other. He laid the rifle on the ground, lifted a revolver from the holster at each man's side.

"Until I hook up with my pardner a little later, I'll be playin' a lone hand," Just Jones said casually. "So I can't take any chances a-tall. Lie down!"

The last two words exploded, and brought instant obedience. Three minutes later both horses had been unsaddled and turned loose, the two men lay with hands bound tightly across their backs and ankles tied, and Jones was departing with three rifles and four revolvers.

"Seems like all I do is pack an arsenal around," he muttered when he was free of the barranca.

Wind had drifted pine needles against a big windfall a little way beyond and careful scraping quickly provided a safe hiding place for the captured weapons. Jones went on, running now.

But he approached his hiding-place of the previous evening with extreme caution. He had told Bud of it and confidently expected to find the boy behind the log.

The place was empty. Jones lay down, peeked through toward the ranch.

Only three horses stood in the corral, and they were the mounts of the men who had brought in the stolen stock. Jones looked up at the head of the broad valley. Cattle still clung to the creek banks but no riders were to be seen.

Ordinarily, Just Jones could solve a problem with an accuracy that was startling, but this affair presented too many puzzling phases. Why had the three men waiting in the ranch house departed in the night? Why had Singer Randall and a companion hidden in the timber instead of joining their fellows? And they had been simply waiting in the barranca, not even keeping a watch. The three Jones had first seen at the ranch evidently had gone elsewhere, but where, and why, he could not deduce.

"Hell!" he exclaimed in exasperation. "What's the difference where they went? I've collected myself four of 'em. Maybe I can get the rest."

He devoted his attention to the ranch, and almost at once his roving gaze caught the first sign of life. It was in the saddle shed, by the corral gate. At

first Jones believed a cat or dog was leaving its bed in the loose hay.

But a human head appeared, then shoulders. After a long wait, Bud Lewis stood up, crept to the corner and looked at the house.

CHAPTER VI

RANGELAND LAW

JUST JONES could only stare. Astonishment vied with fear for Bud's safety. He was only a child against hardened cattle rustlers.

Anger that Bud had disobeyed orders did not come, only admiration for the boy's pluck. And immediately Jones began to plan an escape for the youngster.

The chimney was still smokeless.

"They're rode out after crossin' the Malpaso," Jones muttered. "When they do get up, I can keep 'em penned in while the kid makes a break. And if they should be foolish enough to get funny, I can add three to my four and make seven."

He shifted the rifle to have it ready. Bud crawled back into the hay. He still carried his new six-gun in his right hand. Jones frowned, and grinned.

"Little gamecock'll use it, too—and it'll jump up and hit him in the face."

Bud hid himself carefully. Again the ranch was lifeless. Full daylight had come, though the sun had not touched the western peaks. Fifteen minutes passed. At any moment the men in the ranch house might waken. Action must begin soon.

It did. A man rode out of the timber fifty yards to Jones' left and stopped. A rifle lay across his thighs. His hair was brightly white against a mahogany skin and he sat his horse like a field marshal, alert, competent, assured.

The stranger's gaze searched the landscape a long moment. Then his right hand went up, his hat was lifted, waved once. Again he became motionless.

Just Jones glanced down the slope, and the scene was no longer lifeless. In every direction mounted men appeared, out of draws, from behind brush, from the creek bed. All converged upon the ranch house, riding at a walk.

When they were about two hundred and fifty yards from the house, the hat again left the white hair, was waved. Each of the dozen horsemen stopped.

The leader drew a Colt from his thigh with a sure, smooth motion, lifted the weapon and fired into the air, twice.

Echoes had not died before the door was thrown open.

"Come out!" the leader shouted. "Lay down your guns and there'll be no trouble. Refuse, and we'll burn you out and cut you to pieces. That's the last word."

He made a gesture, indicating the circle of horsemen.

One man ran out of the door. He looked quickly around, threw both hands high. Jones recognized him as the one who had done the cooking the previous night.

The two remaining in the house drew back from the door. After a moment one emerged, finally the other. The hat waved again, and the horsemen came in at a trot from all sides. Soon they were in a circle around the three prisoners, the same men who had been in the house before the coming of the stolen stock.

"Now *that's* the way to do something!" Just Jones exclaimed with whole-hearted admiration. "The old boy with the snow cap sure knows how."

Jones could not hear what was being said within the circle of horsemen near the ranch house. It had moved away, toward the shed by the corral. There it stopped. The white-haired field marshal was in the center, talking to the three prisoners.

"And that old boy won't waste any time," Just Jones chuckled.

His opinion was confirmed. A horseman wheeled, uncoiled his rope and tossed an end over the projecting ridge pole of the shed.

A man was led forward. Hands and feet were bound by deftly tied lines. The noose was slipped over his head and drawn snug. A rider took a turn on the saddle horn with the other end of the rope and walked his horse away. He sat waiting, spurs ready.

"To a rustler's heaven," Just Jones whispered.

He grinned. This affair was going the way he liked. No confusion. A voice raised in protest, of course, but everything orderly—and certain.

A horseman's hat snapped off, and he was too startled to clutch for it. The roar of a .45 in the saddle shed came to Jones an instant later. Spurs raked. Horses leaped, whirled. Guns slid from holsters. Only the white-haired field marshal remained motionless.

The circle had spread with thundering hoofs, and into it darted Bud Lewis. He ran straight to the one whose neck was adorned with a rope.

Men impatient to kill after that first startling shot swept their guns on down. One hair trigger slipped under the pressure of astonishment.

Bud still held his pearl-handled treasure. His little thumb strained at the hammer and was not strong enough. He laid the weapon across his knee and used the heel of his hand to force the hammer down. As he succeeded, a great paw settled over both of his.

The boy leaped away. He stood with his back to the bound prisoner. The horseman with a turn of the rope around his saddle-horn had dropped it in the excitement caused by that first astounding shot, and now Bud frantically drew the line to him.

"You can't!" His piercing shriek came clearly up the slope to Just Jones. "You can't! Leach never done nothing. He never was hooked up with the Singer's bunch. He never stole a calf, let alone a cow. You can't hang him! They can't, can they, Leach?"

He retreated against the man who still had a noose about his neck, threw his little arms back and grasped the legs.

Just Jones was stunned. Leach Lewis was the last person he had expected to find at his own home ranch. Jones recognized him now as the weaponless man he had seen the previous evening.

But Leach Lewis merely flashed through Jones' mind. Jones could think only that a child was defying a dozen hard men, that the courage of little Bud Lewis had risen to new heights.

To his own vast surprise, Just Jones found himself walking down the slope.

And yet he was not surprised. Or excited. Suddenly he had become very cool. He was fully aware that this was perhaps the last walk he would ever take, for he knew too well the temper of the dozen men who surrounded Bud. He walked on.

Just Jones walked steadily, without hurry or evidence of stress. Two guns hung from his waist. The rifle was cradled in his left arm.

"Hey, mister!" Bud shrieked frantically when he saw his friend. "You won't let 'em hang Leach, will you?"

The horsemen looked, and a new tension gripped them. The white-haired man stared a moment, spoke a few low words. The group opened, forming two lines. Jones walked in between.

He did not look at the horsemen. He looked only at Bud and the bound man behind him. He had not even a glance for the white-haired leader. He walked straight through until he faced the boy.

"Bud," he asked quietly, "is this your father?"

"Sure it's Leach! I told you the Singer's bunch got him two nights ago. And these *hombres* want to hang him. Why don't they hang the Singer if they want to do some good?"

Just Jones looked at Leach Lewis and

smiled, for at once he knew why Bud was—Bud. Then Jones turned and looked into the eyes of the white-haired man.

"I'll pass that question on to you," he said.

"We'll get the Singer," was the curt reply. "But we're moppin' up as we go along."

"You heard what Bud said."

"Sure. And what his father said. Lewis admits he owns this ranch. See those stolen cows toward the pass? They were run in last night. We tracked the three men who run 'em right to here. We find three men sleepin' in the house, three rode-out horses in the corral. What more you want?"

"Nothing more—if Singer Randall wasn't in the deal."

"Huh! This is a plain job o' rustlin'."

The horsemen stirred impatiently. A menacing growl came.

"Get on with it, Lafe!" one muttered to the white-haired leader.

JUST JONES looked about the circle, which now had enclosed him. He did not find viciousness but grim faces and remorseless eyes of men resolved to do their duty as they saw it. For three years Singer Randall had defied them. The Malpaso had balked them. Their stock had been stolen. Now they were determined to make the ranges safe. The very fact that right was on their side, and that they hated this killing in cold blood, only rendered them the more dangerous and inexorable. And Just Jones had known all this before he left the timber.

The circle contracted. Hands moved closer to weapons.

"Mister!" Bud cried, and the faith in his plea was like a blow to Jones. "Don't let 'em hang Leach!"

A man laughed.

"Don't worry, Bud," Jones answered gently.

"Stranger," the white-haired Lafe said, "I'm askin' you to leave—*pronto*—while you can."

Just Jones read the quality in Lafe's voice with complete accuracy. He had already read the temper of the posse. And they were twelve to one.

A horseman reached down and jerked the coiled rope from Bud's hand. The boy exploded in raging action. He beat at men's legs with his little fists, struck their mounts. The very fury of his onslaught widened the circle as horses backed from his darting attack.

"Bud!" Jones said sharply. "Come here!"

Though the boy obeyed, the damage had been done. These men believed they killed justly, but the very necessity to kill was hardening and driving them.

They closed in. A noose jerked out, swirled about Just Jones' shoulders and bound his elbows to his sides. A long arm drew Bud, kicking and striking, to a saddle. Other hands grasped Jones' weapons. Throughout, he made no movement.

"Stranger," Lafe spoke coldly. "You know too much about what's goin' on here. You're protectin' rustlers."

His questioning gaze swept the circle. Heads nodded.

"Judge and jury have decided—"

"Nothing!" Just Jones broke in harshly. "You think you've done a good job, but you're only playing into Singer Randall's hands. You're giving him use of this ranch by hanging the owner, and you're wiping out a couple of his bunch that he wanted to get rid of. You're turning the Singer loose with his best men to run more cattle across the border. And, worst of all, you're killing the makings of a finer man than any of you. By which I'm meaning that kid."

Force and conviction, not desperation, impelled every word. Surprise held the posse, and a touch of uncertainty.

"Now, Leach Lewis," and Jones whirled upon the man who still stood with a noose about his neck, "when the Singer sent four of his men after you three nights ago, did you know what he wanted?"

"No, only he'd been threatenin' me for a month to play along with him."

"And these other two—why'd he leave the three of you here last night? Why did those other three who ran in the stolen cattle take your fresh horses and leave?"

"I couldn't figure that," Lewis said. "The Singer came about midnight and told those three to come along. Said they all had to go to Dyin' River."

"But they didn't all go!" Bud broke in excitedly. "Two of 'em went into the timber up there. I saw 'em!"

Even Jones was startled. But he was the first to recover.

"And you two!" he barked at the rustlers standing behind Leach Lewis. "You know now the Singer was double-crossin' you. He figured if a posse followed this stolen stock, and there was a good chance of that because he was runnin' it across the north end of the Malpaso for the first time, that you'd be caught and hung. Savin' himself powder, wasn't he?"

A string of curses came from one of the men.

"That's the Singer's way," the other said bitterly.

Just Jones turned back. A phrase had recurred to him, Bud's story of what Dan Keefe had said. "A little job—the pay'll sure surprise you." Just Jones grinned.

"I'm a stranger in the Malpaso country," he said, "but I've learned a lot about it in twenty-four hours. This

whole thing had me seein' four answers to every question, only now I've got the right ones. The Singer thought you might find the way across the north end of the Malpaso. Maybe he helped you find it. So he fixed it up for Lewis and this pair to take the blame. You'd think you'd done a gcod job and go home, leavin' the Singer free to rustle more stock and with a nice little ranch and six hundred head o' cattle to use for himself."

"I'm tired o' *talk!*" an angry cowman exclaimed.

Tension again gripped the posse. Jones could feel it.

"Stranger," Lafe, their leader, said sternly, "what right you think you got buttin' in on our play?"

"Twice the right you have," Jones retorted instantly. "You caught a pair the Singer planted for you. I've shot two of his men, Dan Keefe and a little rat whose name I didn't stop to get. Tied up the wounds and sent 'em on to Bowman, where you'll most likely find 'em."

"On which we've got the word of a stranger."

"I prove what I say. Ask those rustlers whose gun the kid had. And a half hour ago, while you was paradin' your army around this flat, I was tyin' up the Singer himself and another one. They was plannin' on gettin' a laugh out o' your show."

"You *will* prove that!" Lafe snarled.

"Send two men. Straight up through the timber a quarter of a mile and then due north. Find 'em in a barranca."

Lafe hesitated, then nodded to a pair of punchers. They wheeled away.

Taut silence held even the horses. Scarcely a bit chain rattled. Jones returned the hostile stare of the cattlemen. Old Lafe was watching him intently.

"You've got an honest look," he said after a while. "But too handy a tongue. We'll probably hang you along with the rest. Want to leave a name?"

"Jones."

A man laughed. "Sam or Tom?" he sneered.

"No. Just Jones. Just Another Jones."

Others laughed, but old Lafe started. He climbed stiffly down and stood close to his latest prisoner.

"Ever in Satan's Pit?" he asked harshly.

"Once, a year ago," Jones answered.

Lafe stared a long moment, his hard eyes boring into Jones'.

"And you'll guarantee this Leach Lewis?"

"Absolutely!"

"Turn him and Lewis loose, boys," Lafe commanded. "If I'd 'a' known he was after Singer Randall, we'd 'a' saved ourselves a hard trip. We made a mistake, and I'm sorry, sir."

"Don't apologize to me," Jones said. "But you might to the finest man this side o' the Malpaso. He's got it comin' to him. Bud!"

But Bud was sobbing as he tore at his father's bonds. And when he stood up and brushed angrily at the tears, rapture suddenly flooded his brown little face.

"There, you bunch o' sheepherders!" he shouted as he pointed to the timber. "Now you got somebody fit to hang. Here comes Singer Randall."

FLIGHT LEADER

By Bourke Lee

IN K FLIGHT'S hut the sullen muttering of the distant guns was an undertone to the growls of four veteran flyers.

Phil Hinnaland angrily rumbled, "We bomb on all the bright moonlight nights but can we go lay our eggs on a beautiful foul black night like tonight? No, says the brigade commander."

"And orders the skipper to headquarters," amended Harry Rush. "For what?"

"Something dirty," said Duke Waugh. "Something dizzy."

"I think the general does not like us," Baciagalupi suggested. "Maybe we have to pay for all the ships we've lost."

Three lieutenants and a captain made their lament to a silent audience of one. Alex Gabel, eighteen, eager-eyed, sat quietly pretending to read *La Rire*. He had joined K Flight just three hours before; and the veterans were making it plain that K Flight's troubles were none of his. Alex Gabel was immersed in personal woes. Bright had been his visions of the deeds he would do as a pursuit pilot. And here he was condemned to night bombing duty.

Harry Rush, the tall lieutenant, turned his long back at the stove and snarled:

"That bulldozin', belittlin' brigade

commander! Always riding the skipper's tail."

Alex Gabel had the cheerless thought that within twenty-four hours he would know how it felt to have a Jerry ride his tail. Until tonight he had always felt confident that his natural skill would bring him many aerial victories, but now he found himself overwhelmed by a deep feeling of personal defeat. Who, he asked himself bitterly, ever heard of any bombing pilots? They were cold turkey in the sky; pursuit aces fattened upon them.

Duke Waugh's mocking voice announced that the art of war was most profound, and Alex Gabel glanced toward the dark, thick-chested captain moodily playing Canfield on the table near by. The captain's glumness, Alex Gabel told himself, was very easy to understand; all of these night bombers were living on borrowed time.

Duke Waugh slapped a card on the table and continued:

"If you're a general with an outfit that's always getting smacked down you have to get hostile toward it yourself. See the book of rules by Caesar, Napoleon, and the brigade commander. Put some wood on the fire, Harry."

"What's the use?" said Harry. "This shack don't get warm. I've seen a dozen stand around this stove and heave wood into it and you still froze."

A nervous chill struck Alex Gabel as he recalled that the pilots of K Flight were now six—six where there had been eighteen; and it was these same terrific losses that had brought him here when he should have gone to some pursuit outfit. With an envy so keen it stabbed him he thought of the pursuit aces who were writing their names boldly in the sky for all the world to acclaim. Ball! Guynemer! Bishop! Fonck! But K Flight's pilots bombed and died unsung.

Walking with heavy tread, Lieutenant Phil Hinnaland came over to sit on the table beside Duke Waugh's game. Phil was a large-headed, sad-eyed pilot who could make a piano cry. Alex Gabel looked up from his copy of *La Rire*.

And then, just outside the hut, with an abrupt and shattering clatter, a machine-gun shredded the night with a long burst of fire. Alex Gabel's nervous leap almost ruptured his skin and he found himself rigid, and staring starkly into big Phil's sad eyes.

"Test pit," said Phil distinctly, and half smiled. "What's the matter, youngster? Ain't that magazine funny?"

Alex Gabel manufactured a smile that felt tight on his face; he dropped his eyes. His nervousness settled in his stomach, a forlorn sickness there. With a suffocating sense of disappointment he decided that K Flight did not even offer him the camaraderie he had expected of a flying fighting unit. These four veterans offered him no companionship; and it was bad enough to be denied pursuit duty without finding yourself an outcast among night bombers. Alex Gabel found himself wondering how he could break through the hard shell of these veterans.

Again the machine-gun chattered loudly. And at the end of its burst, Lieutenant Baciagalupi, whose round person occupied the sagging couch, cheerfully offered odds in a soft, creamy voice:

"I'll lay twenty to one I never get that good gun in my ship."

No one spoke. A bombing pilot, Alex Gabel reflected, was no free-lance warrior. You had to depend upon your gunners to keep Jerry off. And when your rear gun stopped—Alex Gabel's mind recoiled from the picture of a hunting Fokker riding his cumbersome bomber's unprotected tail.

Baciagalupi said:

"Nothing works in this army. You can't even get a bet down. I think I go home."

The couch creaked dismally as he rolled over.

K Flight's pilots, Alex Gabel told himself, were an unwholesome, cheerless lot. He lifted his head and encountered Phil Hinnaland's scrutiny—a candid, contemplative, questioning scrutiny. He looked past it to Duke Waugh.

"Captain," he said, "before I make my first jump, would you tell me about the doctrine of the flight?"

Duke did not lift his dark face from his cards. "It's simple, Gabel. We follow the flight leader."

Alex Gabel frowned. At first glance he decided that K Flight's doctrine was inadequate. K Flight's leader was Major Paul Carson—the skipper who was on the carpet at Brigade. If Paul Carson was shot down, was there no provision for the preservation of the chain of responsibility in the flight?

He looked toward Captain Waugh, intending to ask, and again he met Phil Hinnaland's gaze, now one of rather belittling amusement. Stubbornness congealed within Alex Gabel. He looked away, decided to ask no further questions of these bombers who looked at him so curiously, who seemingly begrudged him a word. He would follow Major Paul Carson and see what happened.

Duke Waugh said:

"I wonder if Hank Forrester got his leave."

"Of course he didn't get his leave," said Harry Rush. "He needs a leave, bad."

"Teach him a lesson, maybe," Phil Hinnaland said. "Maybe next time he'll stay in the hospital until he heals up instead of rushing back here as though the skipper couldn't run the flight without him."

"But he might get his leave," said Duke. "He flew the skipper over to Brigade, you know."

"Ha!" said Baciagalupi from the couch. "That's a hot one! Any time anybody flies Oom Paul any place!"

From a distant hum deep in the night, the sound of an engine grew to a thud and sped so thunderously near that it left a hole in the silence when it stopped. Then the world sighed; airplane wires whined hurriedly and the plane rumbled upon turf.

"Skipper's back," said Baciagalupi.

"With Hank Forrester flying him!" Duke Waugh insisted. He held a card poised. "It was like the skipper saying, 'Hell, Hank, you're all right; I'll ride with you!' "

Duke slammed the card to the table.

In a momentary silence, Baciagalupi rolled upright on the couch; and then K Flight's chorus of approval broke unexpectedly in Alex Gabel's ears.

Phil Hinnaland enthused.

"If that ain't Oom Paul up and down and sideways!"

Baciagalupi said:

"After Hank washes out two ships and puts four gunners in the hospital 'cause he don't know where the ground is! Whee!"

"On a black night like tonight!" Harry Rush applauded. "Oom Paul rides with him to help Hank with his confidence!"

Alex Gabel saw that the veterans about him had brightened; they were obviously very fond of their Oom Paul. They sprang to their feet as their skipper came in.

SANDY, spare, and more than partly bald, Paul Carson had played polo and had never lost that look of leaning forward into things and following through. His gray eyes were flattened and oblong and they laughed openly at K Flight. He spoke at once, gravely, and his deep tones hummed like an amused wire:

"*Bon soir,* my little camels."

Something whirred within Alex Gabel. For the first time that evening he forgot his lost dream of being a pursuit pilot matched man for man in gallant aerial duels. Standing with K Flight before the big wall-map of the sector, Alex

Gabel studied Paul Carson's face. It narrowed downward from the broad brow; experience had not saddened the wise, gray eyes or bent the thin, straight lips. Paul Carson's tanned skull made baldness a virtue revealing a strength unadorned. Alex Gabel found himself waiting with an impatient intensity for the major's next words.

Paul Carson pointed to the map.

"Brigade wants an ammunition dump behind Chiezy removed, my little donkeys. We'll be over the dump at daylight to assist a little push that's on. We are assured of the usual pursuit protection." He paused, mockery in his eyes.

Alex Gabel controlled his astonishment. Far behind the lines at a time when he had expected to be a pursuit pilot himself he had heard the oft repeated plaint of bombers and observers about the usual absence of pursuit protection.

The report that the only friendly pursuit ships you ever saw were dim in the sky and swiftly going someplace else hadn't bothered him then. But now, as he contemplated following Paul Carson on his first bombing mission, the danger of the situation moved him to panicky mental protest.

Oom Paul's gray eyes laughed.

"Any questions?"

K Flight had no questions. It was monstrous, Alex Gabel thought; pursuit pilots should forget their personal scores when helpless bombers needed protection. He frowned and gazed about him. K Flight looked very tranquil; seemed to have no worries about this raid.

Oom Paul asked:

"Any comments?"

K Flight had no comments. Alex Gabel was astounded that these pilots who had groused through the hours before should now have no questions, no comments. They were night bombers because their planes were junk, unfit for daylight skies, but in the coming dawn their cumbersome crates would be out there without darkness to shield them from Jerry's *jadgstaffels;* and with artillery and infantry advertising a push, Jerry's planes would be there in clouds!

Paul Carson said, "Rest well, my little blue donkeys," and left them.

Watching him go, Alex Gabel's mind began to stutter. The presence of K Flight's leader helped clarify the simplicity of the flight's doctrine. Paul Carson was effortlessly taking the war in his stride: he was the sort of leader one might follow without comment, without question. Alex Gabel began to be disturbed by the warmth of his thoughts, the warmth of his insides.

Hank Forrester came in and the other veterans exchanged knowing, sidelong glances.

Duke Waugh said:

"Tough about your leave, Hank."

Hank's mouth twisted.

"I got my leave."

K Flight stared at him. He did not look like a man who had his happy leave. His blue eyes were haunted by frightened shadows as his wasted fingers shuffled dim air-photos of the ammunition dump behind Chiezy.

"The suspense was awful, Hank," said Baciagalupi. "We didn't know what Brigade was cooking up, but it turns out to be just another raid. Cheer up, Hank."

Hank was vastly distressed.

"I see the skipper didn't give you the news. He wouldn't. Brigade thinks we're ragtime. Losing too many ships. Too many missions incomplete. The general's aide slipped me the word we got to snap out of it or lose the skipper. The general's going to relieve Oom Paul of his command."

Even to Alex Gabel the idea was fantastic. The veterans produced language to match Brigade's madness.

"Listen," Hank's sick voice pleaded. "In the morning don't go out to the flying line with just your pajamas under your flying suits. Get into uniform. Be

regulation. Don't be friendly with the enlisted men. Salute each other. Look worried. Act regular army."

They looked at Hank as though he'd lost his mind.

"Staff officer coming over from Brigade to look us over," Hank explained wearily. "And listen: We've got to get this Chiezy dump! We'll lose the skipper if we don't."

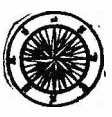
With deep scorn Duke Waugh said: "I suppose this brass hat will fly over with us to make sure we get the dump or find out for himself why we don't."

"Yes," gulped Hank, "he will."

They roared their disbelief; and their unholy glee intensified Alex Gabel's resentment at his rôle of an untried outsider, denied the confidence of the flight. Even in their shoutings, in their jubilant anticipation of the joys of introducing a brass hat to Archies and Fokkers, they still found time to turn their probing eyes upon Alex Gabel. Again he was aware of their curious, analytical starings. For the first time in his life, Alex Gabel's thoughts were savage. His earlier distress and resentment at his exclusion from the problems and joys of the flight now became a smoldering hatred of these smug veterans.

He tensely vowed that he would force them to respect him. He would follow Oom Paul hard and fast, all the way through. It would not be his fault if K Flight did not get the Chiezy dump.

He thought again of the amazing fitness of K Flight's skipper and the thought stiffened his spine and his resolve as he vainly strove to restrain his mounting impatience for the dawn.



RANG! Rang! Rang! Er-rang! sang the bomber's churning engines as they bored on through the night.

Paul Carson watched his compass, held his ship in horizontal flight into the black dampness that poured into his face. Night still hid the earth, but day was coming up here where K Flight bunched closely in the sky. The cloud layer through which the bomb-laden flight had toiled upward blanketed all the little fitful fires of the war's front five thousand meters below.

Paul Carson wondered how the colonel from Brigade liked this blind void where only the sound of the engines was alive; and he smiled a little at recollection of the colonel's refusal to ride with him.

"No," the colonel said flatly, back at the field. "Can't put all our eggs in one basket, Major."

So the staff colonel was riding in the nose of young Gabel's ship. The colonel didn't know that young Gabel, despite his eagle eyes and the debonaire silk stocking he'd pulled over his curly hair, was just a run-of-the-war shavetail making his first jump over the lines.

There'd have been no point in telling that to the colonel; it might have made it difficult to convince the colonel that young Gabel's ship was the safest place for him this morning. K Flight would take especial care of Gabel.

Er-rang! Rang-rang-rang-rang! The engines ran down-hill on a bump in the murky air. The bomber jarred under Paul Carson. In the nose Sergeant Hart moved alertly, searching the lighted streaks above them; hostile hornets were certain to be cruising there. Day came on fast; K Flight had not far to go. The bowl of ink in which they flew expanded into gray depth as day hastened to keep its appointment with them.

Paul Carson found himself hoping that day would bring them a little luck so that they might get this Chiezy dump the brigade commander wanted. Paul Carson saw the general banging the desk and demanding the dump.

"K Flight gets the Chiezy dump or a new C. O.!" the general said. Irascible, the general was, since he'd lost his son.

To have a splendid command like

K Flight hang in the balance of a single morning's luck was scarcely just, Paul Carson told himself. K Flight was the finest command he'd ever had; to lose it would be a fearful wrench. Flying had brought something new to the army. It was as though a lot of polo teams had sprouted wings.

Air-fighting tempered men, drew them fine, made them single-minded like Hank Forrester, who got his leave and then appeared on the flying line and climbed into your rear gunner's cockpit for a last morning's shooting before he went away to rest his spent brain and body. The thought that he faced separation from the hard-flying fools of K Flight made Paul Carson feel a little sick.

And then Sergeant Hart leaped into action, tugging at his gun, bringing it to bear above and behind. Paul Carson looked over a shoulder as the cold guns in the ships behind him burst out in stabs of fire and a dull, slow chatter. Paul Carson saw the gray two-seater swoop at him like a massive phantom and it came so fast and loomed so large that his brain burst with an inaudible cry:

"Great God, this is it!"

And it was. The attacking Albatros hauled from its dive too late. Its tail crashed into the bomber and down went the right wing of the bomber, driven down by impact, and rending noises tore the sky. Splatter of wood and roar of engines. Two planes tore at each other to be free. Then the Albatros fell clear—its tail broken off—spun—down—spinning down, spinning—and the broken-winged bomber plunged to follow the whirling Albatros down. Crumpled wing down—down through gray night—down with a rush—out of control—insentient engines churning.

Paul Carson sat encased in steel. The shaking bomber pounded down. And then Paul's manacled spirit heaved and his volition broke free of the icy grip crushing his body and his brain. Not all the right wing was gone, but the controls were jammed. He fought for control while the bomber plunged him down through dark morning. His stomach dropped a hundred feet at a time; his groin was vacant; but his strong hands and legs fought; back muscles creaked, writhing shoulder muscles sobbed on those jammed controls. And still he plunged down, blind in wet clouds.

Paul slammed the throttles shut and the bomber swerved, wallowed heavily, fell, swerved again with a rushing sound. The ground was coming up, speeding up at a fearful pace.

Paul Carson's body crashed against the fuselage as the controls broke free. Slowly, he lifted the shattered wing and eased the engines on. He looked at the right wing and it shocked him.

He said to himself:

"Take this crock down out of the air before that wing comes off!"

He glanced at Sergeant Hart and the sergeant's face was green, staring at the crumpled right wing.

Paul Carson told himself: "If we had parachutes like the Germans I wouldn't have to land her now."

He had a swift vision of a military prison and then he shut his mind to all thought of landing. He would ride her and do what he could until that right wing came off. He couldn't make the Chiezy dump—not with this wreck. Captain Waugh would have to lead the flight to the Chiezy dump, and afterward, as well.

Grimly, Paul Carson admitted that K Flight was certain to get a new skipper now for the old one would be gone. This was undeniably it. His luck was out. This was it for him, for Sergeant Hart, for Hank Forrester. And it might be slow, long-drawn. Paul Carson felt suddenly old and shrunken.

Gloom began to compress his brain and he reared a bright thought there to carry him on. K Flight might get the Chiezy dump without him; and that

might help the old school general realize that once a flying outfit took the air its commanding officer was merely another hand.

A shape in the corner of his eye extinguished his bright thought, for when he snapped his head around he saw, just beyond Hank Forrester's white face, a K Flight ship with the colonel from Brigade waving like a lunatic in its nose. Disaster still rode with K Flight.

Paul Carson groaned.

"Another mission incomplete."

Young Gabel had abandoned the flight. Three ships were not enough to bomb the Chiezy dump. Paul Carson's mind shouted that it was all beyond his control now. Nothing remained for him but to do what he could before his luck ran all the way out. Tensely hurried, begrudging the passage of each speeding second, he searched the ground for the railroad he knew was near.

The decrepit bomber waddled along in growing daylight, a thousand feet in the air and deep in enemy territory. It wasn't decent. The broken-winged bomber was like a bleary old apple-seller hawking her wares in No Man's Land. The engines churned with a noise all Germany must hear.

Minute by minute, as he feverishly sought that railroad, Paul Carson felt the weight of the heavens' potential threat grow and grow until he longed to lift his eyes and search the air aloft to see what menace it launched at him. For this peaceful passage over quiet fields had already lasted overlong.

DAY lighted the sky and then, over the edge of the cloud layer behind them, Sergeant Hart pointed, first with his finger and then with his gun. The Fokkers were little black lozenges at first, high and far, and arranged in echelons. Then they came down, the dawn patrol plunging to a kill; the long-drawn howl of their onslaught drowned the churn of bomber engines, set the air shuddering under the crescendo, as the Fokkers arrived and the Fokker guns called:

Bert! Ber-r-t! Ber-r-t!

Zoo-om! boomed the Fokkers, shooting skyward.

They dove and rose; they swung and dove. Their fast guns demanded:

Ber-r-t! Bert! Bert! Ber-r-t!

Tut-tut-tut! said the slow guns of the bleary bomber. *Tut-tut-tut!* "Let me sell my apples."

The compass before Paul Carson's face went away in a blast of lead and alcohol splashed coldly on his cheeks. He put his head over the rim of the cockpit; he found the railroad; he saw what he did not believe; and he turned the crippled bomber while Fokkers dived and gunned him and zoomed, alert black terriers worrying an old apple woman.

Paul saw and heard the Fokkers and felt their guns lashing the bomber, but he watched the incredible scene beneath him. Either Jerry had gone stark mad or his line had suffered complete breakdown in the night. A train and engine, numbers of lorries and many men—it all slid into place less than a thousand feet below Paul Carson's amazed eyes. His teeth came bare while the Fokkers' fast guns harried him.

He said:

"Paul, you can't bomb without altitude. It isn't safe!"

He roared exultant laughter into the air stream; he reached for his bomb toggles; he emptied his bomb racks upon the ammunition train. And then, like a man on a powder keg, he waited for what would come. As he held his breath the first blast came and he wrestled with the bomber as the second bomb lifted it and threw it sidewise and the third kicked it high on the tip of its good wing.

Then major concussion bent his neck; sound rolled and rolled, over and over, in a vast tin tub. The bomber rolled

with it and Paul Carson braced himself for the end.

The bomber flipped and flopped into a quiet calm where it staggered along and Paul Carson, scarcely crediting his senses, could see the quiet leaves of quiet trees, as he flew past them. And then the Fokkers were back overhead and all was as before.

Ber-r-t! Ber-r-t! yelled a Fokker. *Zoo-om!*

It was, Paul Carson knew, just a matter of minutes now—slow endless minutes of long time. He had done what he could and now the Fokkers would persist and do what they could. He looked over a shoulder, avoiding the sight of that frightful right wing. Hank Forrester was keeping his machine-gun in almost constant fire, swinging it to meet the rushing Fokkers. Gabel's ship was still there; and the colonel from Brigade was riding the jumping machine-gun as he fought for his life.

Far behind the two bombers, the railroad bloomed smoke and fire in towering red-and-black mushrooms. The smell of powder from Sergeant Hart's gun drove into Paul Carson's nostrils. He wiped powder carbon from his goggles as a Fokker lunged at him from the right.

The Fokker snarled *Ber-r-t!* and the sergeant's gun answered that call and winged that Fokker fair. That Fokker reared on its tail and mounted up, up, up; and momentarily hung there, a bold black cross, before it plunged.

Hank Forrester's gun stopped firing and Paul Carson looked back. Hank had a jam and his shoulders were frantic as he worked to clear the gun. Gabel's ship came closer. Paul saw Hank stop work on his gun; Hank sagged; his body folded down out of sight in the cockpit. The Fokkers had found Hank. Gabel brought his ship closer and the colonel assumed the defense of Paul's tail where Hank's gun swung unmanned.

Sergeant Hart's gun said: *Tut-tut-tut!* "We're going home now. Our apples are gone." *Tut-tut-tut!*

Far ahead, the front came out of the ground. Paul Carson began to hope they'd make it; and his hope grew as he saw the high bursts of German Archie shells and knew they were reaching for an Allied patrol. Some one else also saw those warning bursts; a Fokker rushed down to cavort ahead of the two bombers, and, almost at once, the terriers were done with the old apple woman. The attacking Fokkers withdrew, for no pursuit squadron wanted to be caught so close to the ground with no air to move about in. Hope definitely came back to Paul Carson. Life would now last unless that right wing fell off.

Now that he had time to think, he gave thanks that he was still alive. And then reaction smote him and he almost discarded hope and thanks in his depression over the complete disaster of the morning's mission. K Flight had failed again. The general demanded the Chiezy dump and K Flight did not even arrive there.

Gabel divided the force of the flight and followed a casualty down. The colonel from Brigade saw it all in all its sinfulness. Paul Carson's thoughts were dismal as he gently tooled the vibrating bomber homeward.

Er-rang! Rang! Rang! "We're going home now!"

The bomber churned low across Jerry's enraged back area, through missiles hurled by support and front line trenches, across turmoil and welter and wire to trenches where troops waved and did not throw things. Paul was skimming shell-torn country behind his own lines when the crumpled right wing at last tired of its task. It groaned deeply and then it folded back as Paul Carson frantically sought the ground. The drag of the folding wing turned the bomber in the air but he thought he had her landed anyway. He was so close.

The ground flashed up and snatched the bomber from the air; with a vast shaking noise the bomber tumbled. A bombardment of ash cans battered Paul Carson with loud, empty sounds. A flood of blackness splashed about him in sheets that roared and turned red and were hot—hot—hot—

"FIRST shots I've fired in anger since the Philippines." The colonel from Brigade hooked his thumbs in his beautiful belt; rocked back and forth in his gleaming boots. Critically pleased, judiciously calm, he faced the pilots of K Flight in their hut. They were still tense with the high-keyed vigilance of air-conflict; they looked upon the colonel as though he were not there.

"Tenacious, those Jerries," the colonel said. "Got splendid equipment. Can handle it too."

Paul Carson commanded his knees to stay under him. His spirit seemed lashed down by the bandages that muffled his head and torso. His pilots, he saw, were packed tight within themselves by the compression of conflict; but the colonel's expression and stance told him that the colonel's head was bursting.

The colonel looked as though he might still be in the nose of Gabel's bomber with Fokkers still darting in streaking flashes. Paul Carson waited for the colonel to open his mouth and let out the pressure of his thoughts.

The colonel said:

"I've had Brigade on the wire. Reported what I saw this morning. Recommended some changes. The general concurs."

Paul Carson smiled warily. So the general already knew of K Flight's latest fiasco. Paul Carson readied himself to roll with the blow that was certain to come.

"You'll see big changes, gentlemen," the colonel said, and nodded darkly in a pregnant pause. "K Flight will be disbanded!"

Paul Carson flinched; it was so much worse than he had expected. A blow at his own pride and record he could have absorbed, but to smash the flight, abandon so seasoned a weapon, was grossly unfair, unwise. Why couldn't the general satisfy his spleen by giving the flight a new C.O.? Through his blind fatigue and smothering regrets, Paul Carson heard the colonel's voice run on:

"K Flight was an experiment, of course. But Brigade never understood you. We gave you missions and that was the end of them. You didn't even produce alibis. Not until this morning did Brigade know how badly Jerry had you over-matched. Brigade now plans night bombing squadrons. New planes. Better guns. I congratulate you! You'll all be flight leaders! Splendid! The general is very pleased!"

In the strained quiet of the hut the colonel's dazzling surprise for K Flight fizzed slightly—a dud. The tired pilots smiled mechanically; and Paul Carson watched the colonel frown, obviously disturbed by the anticlimax he had created. Paul could feel the colonel's silent demand for some appreciative comment; and his own great gratitude that K Flight was not lost to him forced him to speak.

"Colonel, the flight finds Brigade's confidence very gratifying."

Even as he spoke, sudden, involuntary laughter rose within Paul Carson as he realized that the colonel's favorable report to Brigade could never have been made if the colonel hadn't been completely befuddled, drunk on the glory he had found in a single brush with Jerry in the air. A fight, no more than routine to K Flight, had blinded the colonel to young Gabel's error in abandoning his mission to subject the colonel himself to hazards that might well have been his last.

The colonel's part in the combat with

the Fokkers would probably remain the crowning saga of the colonel's personal career. Paul Carson suddenly decided that he didn't give a damn about the colonel. He turned to K Flight.

"My little blue donkeys, you have heard. The general is pleased. Hence our morning mission is a complete success. Wash your dirty faces and go to bed."

Paul Carson smiled, bowed to the colonel; led the colonel from the hut.

OOM PAUL was gone but Alex Gabel saw him still standing there in stained bandages, every line of his lean body sardonic. Alex Gabel's ears still rang to Oom Paul's voice as it twanged with that taunting quality like a tight wire's hum. Alex Gabel drew a deep, proud breath: he alone had followed Oom Paul all the way through!

And then harsh profanity blasted his rosy mood. He turned, incredulously, to face Phil Hinnaland's anger.

"And the next time you leave the flight to follow a ship down I'm going to spank you personal! In this outfit you follow the flight leader!"

Amazed, Alex Gabel blurted:

"Exactly what I did!"

In spite of his bewilderment he saw that his statement shocked his companions. Duke Waugh and Harry Rush looked pained; Baciagalupi shook his head; Phil Hinnaland roared:

"I thought last night you had that Joan-of-Arc look in your eye! You think this war's being fought so you can grab some Frog medals and snatch some silk stockings to wear on your curly locks! You get this: In this outfit you bomb! You fight when you have to, and you don't fight then if you can run away and bomb!"

Alex Gabel's mind whirled. He looked to the others seeking some support.

Duke Waugh said:

"The flight leader is always in the ship that's leading the flight."

"Always!" said Baciagalupi, bobbing his round head.

"He's never in the ship that's just been knocked down," said Harry Rush. His voice was labored. "Understand?"

Unbidden muscles jerked in Alex Gabel's throat as he at last caught their meaning: the flight leader could not die!

He said, "Of course," abjectly, aware that his unreasoning admiration of Oom Paul had betrayed him into the military crime of abandoning his mission to assist a casualty. Alex Gabel smiled a sad and broken smile.

Duke Waugh changed the subject. "Sergeant Hart got another Fokker this morning. That's four. And he pulled Oom Paul and Hank out of the bonfire. That ought to count for something."

Timidly, Alex Gabel asked:

"Hank going to be all right?"

"For the next war," growled Phil Hinnaland.

Alex Gabel sensed that the flight was through strafing him. Hard-boiled veterans these, who relentlessly followed the flight leader; and yet Alex Gabel knew that deep in the ostensibly calloused heart of every one of them there was a prayer that the flight leader might always be Oom Paul.

Alex Gabel felt that he'd never overcome his regrets at having forced these veterans to make it clear in spoken words that Oom Paul was their leader only until he fell; when said aloud it sounded like nothing but personal treachery to the man who was K Flight's brain and heart.

Alex Gabel shook his head.

"I don't see how I could have been so dumb," he said.

"Dumb?" Duke Waugh's smile was friendly. "Of course you were wrong officially. And you'll never be able to do it again. But don't forget that we're all damn glad you were there to be dumb

this morning. We know the skipper would never have got through without you."

Alex Gabel felt himself quicken to an elation that was as heady and powerful as it was unexpected. He made himself be calm before the friendly recognition he saw in the eyes of the veterans.

Harry Rush said:

"That Santa Claus colonel is bound to get a medal out of this morning's brawl and he'll almost have to give you one, Gabel. Time somebody in this outfit got some gewgaws."

Alex Gabel heard himself saying something about beginner's luck and found himself looking back with disdain upon the figure he must have cut the night before—an untried youth groping in a fog of hero worship, envious of the fame of pursuit pilots. Pursuit pilots, indeed, he thought, scornfully. Bombing was the harder task. Alex Gabel felt his sense of solid security increase; from now on he would be a proven unit in a tempered fighting machine that had its own fine splendor.

Phil Hinnaland asked:

"Any one see the general's push this morning? And the pursuit protection—where in hell was the pursuit protection!"

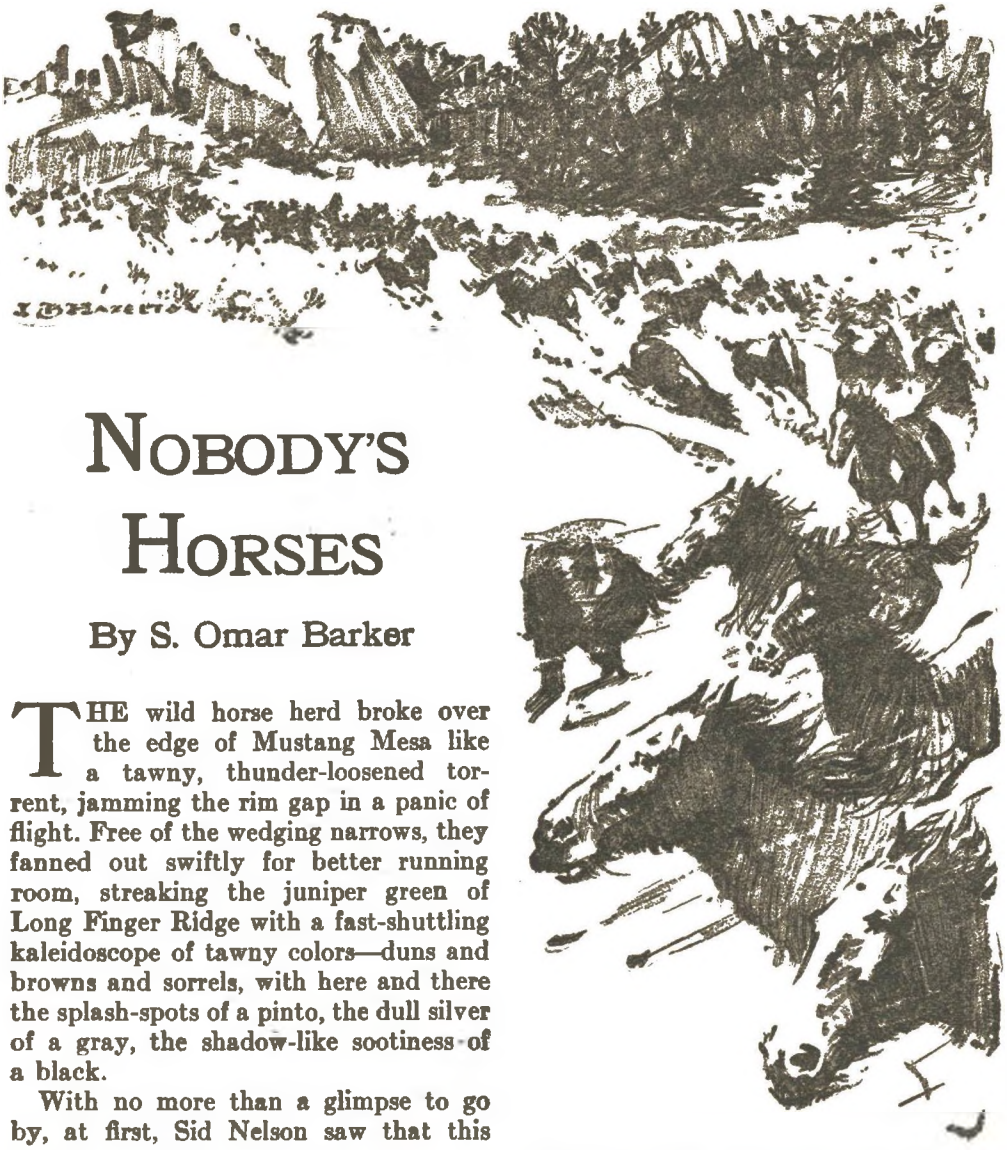
"I saw him," said Baciagalupi. "Just after I knocked a corner off that Chiezy dump I saw the pursuit protection. He was hurrying toward Italy."

Harry Rush said:

"Imagine that obscene, interferin', brigade commander! He thinks he's a magician now. He's going to pull whole squadrons out of his brass hat and we'll all be flight leaders."

"Sort of making silk purses," Alex Gabel suggested.

From a long way off came the grinding pound of the guns. In K Flight's hut the growl of the guns was an undertone to the grousings of K Flight's veterans. Alex Gabel smiled upon his wingmates with a comfortable feeling of finely tuned accord; he understood that what they said was quite without literal meaning. Through all the long day K Flight would bray and buck. Until the night that was their element came down and they were again in the air, impelled onward by that mysterious force which wins all wars and keeps nations alive, Alex Gabel knew that he and the rest of Oom Paul's little blue donkeys would be fretful.



NOBODY'S HORSES

By S. Omar Barker

THE wild horse herd broke over the edge of Mustang Mesa like a tawny, thunder-loosened torrent, jamming the rim gap in a panic of flight. Free of the wedging narrows, they fanned out swiftly for better running room, streaking the juniper green of Long Finger Ridge with a fast-shuttling kaleidoscope of tawny colors—duns and browns and sorrels, with here and there the splash-spots of a pinto, the dull silver of a gray, the shadow-like sootiness of a black.

With no more than a glimpse to go by, at first, Sid Nelson saw that this was no mere heel-flinging play at stampede, no daily dash down to water. They had spread out quickly across the scant breadth of Long Finger's scrub-timbered back, but they did not scatter. They ran earnestly, reckless of footing, long tails slanting out from their heels with the wind of their speed, thumping the ridge with a rumble of many hard-struck hoofs.

They ran together, for they were under command—a competent, dual command, to be trusted and obeyed without question. For whereas in many mustang bands the stallion who has won to kingship by sheer strength and courage in battle becomes also sole leader, and himself leads and directs every flight, sometimes the proud he-lord encounters a rival for leadership that battle cannot eliminate. Then sometimes his monarchy is shared, not with another king, but with a queen.

Some headstrong, wilful mare, often older than he, persists in running when and where she pleases, and the wise

stud, as well as his herd, learn that it is wisdom to follow her. In such case, if the mare is a wise and wily one, there results a system of swift strategy in flight that is compact and sure, all but unbeatable—the mare ahead, the stallion ranging the rear, keeping them together.

The shag-maned dun mare that this herd followed owned neither queenly grace nor beauty. By tame horse standards, she was a runt—stocky, thick-breasted, more than a little pot-bellied. But she was old, and wise in the ways of a wild and rough-ridged country.

The deep-barreled gray stallion that brought up the rear, hazing the laggard flanks, was younger, but he was wise too. Together he and the little dun mare had commanded many a "spook" of the band over which he was lord. Many a headlong retreat, by speed and cunning, they had turned into a flaunt of freedom in the faces of their pursuers.

For many months now, they had free-ranged undisturbed. Horses were cheap, mustangs worthless.

But under the chafe of drouth, men's harassed minds had turned again to the wild horse bands, cropping, cropping, forever cropping the grass that cattle should be converting into beef—and profit. A Government Plan reached out its efficient fingers across the mustang mesas.

Up on the mesa's rim riders showed against the dusty sky.

Swift, disciplined, compact under its dual command of old dun mare and young gray stallion, the wild horse herd of Mustang Mesa swept down Long Finger Ridge.

It was their last flight to be thus generaled.

Up from the juniper steeps that narrowed the ridge rose the sudden sharp talk of ambushed rifles.

The gray stallion's forelock flashed high, like a silver flag, as he threw up his head, snorting windily. A brown yearling turned sharply and headed back, slanting along the ridge in a wobbly, loose kneed trot. The gray master whirled with flat-down ears to cut him back to the herd, but the shrill of his warning command rattled strangely. It died to a whistling grunt, and that in turn to silence as the stallion faltered, stumbled and fell on the rocky slope.

FROM the trail well down below Sid Nelson heard the death scream of the colt. Sudden spurs put his pony on up to the ridge top in a dozen straining jumps. A hundred yards up-ridge from the trail crossing he saw the dun mare swerve, stop and come on again, the point of the band V-ing in to follow her.

Sid Nelson knew the little dun. In a dozen ways she reminded him of another dun mare that had been one of the first horses he had over owned. That one had been a little pot-bellied too, but tough, swift of foot and high of spirit; and with it all a one-man mount, saddle-wise and loyal. Too loyal, in fact, to go entirely wild when Sid had turned her out, her days of saddle service done, to live out her years in the ease of liberty.

But she had run with the wild bunch long enough to leave the mark of her blood upon them. She had been, Sid surmised, the dam of this little old mustang mare whose spirited leadership he had so often watched and approved for its combination of dash and sagacity.

But this mare was handicapped now. Crowded from his place at her heels, her leggy gray colt whinnied. The mare swung out, low-headed to dodge the whip of juniper branches, and stopped again. She nickered anxiously. Sid saw her heel-long tail flick with angry impatience.

Suddenly, quietly, not a dozen steps from the trail where Sid Nelson had jerked rein, a kneeling man edged the barrel of a .30-30 around the thick trunk of a scrub piñon, squinting the sights.

"Hey, you!" Sid Nelson's spurs struck hard to his pony's ribs.

The jughead sorrel leaped like a deer. Weaponless, Sid Nelson flung his hat in the rifleman's face—too late to stop the shot. The gray colt's whinny as he high-tailed up along his mother's side broke abruptly in the middle, as if chopped off with a keen ax. He sprawled, kicking.

An instant the dun mare stood, wide nostriled. Then, as on a pivot, she whirled. She threw her juggy head high. The whinny that quivered every muscle in her sagging belly was shrill and loud. It was not for her colt, now. It was a leader's command, but it awaited no answer. As she ran to plunge goat-footed down the precarious slide-rock steep that sides Long Finger Ridge on the east, she limped a little. The spent bullet that had crashed through her colt lay lodged just under the skin of her upper foreleg.

Sid Nelson had not stopped to think, to reason, nor to question. The yank of his long arms jerked the .30-30 from the ambushed horse-hunter's grip almost as quick as his own feet hit the ground. His shove set the surprised man back on his haunches.

He stared up at Sid Nelson's long, broad-chinned face in amazed recognition.

"Christ, Sid!" he gulped. "What you want to act thataway for?"

In the twenty years that had brought him soberly up the slow rough trail from an eleven-year-old runaway kid, roustabouting the Double Diamond wagon, to his present status as a small ranch owner, able to borrow land-lease cash to widen his spread into the big ranch class, words had never been a gift to Sid Nelson.

They did not come easy now. He set the seized rifle against a tree, stooped for his hat, stood brushing it off with the butt of his calloused palm.

The horse herd was gone, now. Lacking the efficient hazing of their sharp-toothed gray master, they had scattered two ways from the ridge top, escaping down steep slide-rock where never an unsplit hoof had found footing before—sliding, falling, some of them, to stagger up rock-bruised and flee again. Now down the ridge through the faint dust came a young mare, whinnying in shrill panic. She was heavy with foal, and one foreleg hung crookedly by the ligaments a bone-shattering bullet had not cut.

The other man reached for the rifle, but Sid Nelson's hand was on it first. His first shot was quick and sure, and the young mare's torture of pain and fright was over and done for. Sid Nelson's face wore a sickish look as he levered out the empty shell. The hoof clatter of coming riders sounded somewhere up Long Finger Ridge.

"Damn it, Curly," said Sid Nelson, his voice far milder than the surge of feeling behind it, "I'd ought to use the next ca'tridge on you, slaughterin' them poor mustangs thisaway! What you mean by it?"

Curly Hughes shrugged.

"Ain't nobody's horses, are they?" he flared, masking a certain shame with sullen belligerence. "I'll thank you for my gun!"

When Sid made no move to give it to him, exasperation barbed his tongue.

"You're askin' me what we're doin'? Where the hell you been the past month, anyhow?"

Nelson's face flushed a little, but he met Curly's belligerence quietly.

"I been fencin'," he said matter-of-factly. "Closin' them gaps back yonder." He waved a hand westward where rose the stony ramparts, gapped and gashed by narrow dry canyons, of the Mesas Perdidas—lost Mesa—country.

"Fencin' an' dammin' an' diggin' an' windmill-tankin' for water. Right smart of grass in there, Curly. Got me a lease from the state—the Perdidas, No-Water, Hell Mountain, Starve-Out, —all that country—forty odd sections.

Git water in there, it'll raise me right smart beef. Well, what I mean is, I ain't see nobody but my gang of *peones* fer a a month—so naturally I ain't heard how times has got so hard that—that cowboys has got to eat wild horse meat. What's to it, Curly?"

Curly's belligerence lulled a little before the other man's quiet talk, but at the reference to horse meat it flared up again.

"Horse meat hell! It's Guv'mint. Yonder comes ol' Ludlow. He's bossin' the job. He'll relieve your damn ignurence! An' here—gimme back that gun!"

In sober silence Sid Nelson handed him the .30-30. Then he stepped onto his horse and reined him up the ridge, detouring the blood-oozing carcasses of colt and mare, to meet the coming riders. There was a heaviness of wrath in his heart that was deeper, fiercer, than mere personal anger. These horse hunters were range men, most of them men he knew, friends. But there was little friendliness in the weathered lines of his face now as he greeted them.

LIKE Nelson, Butch Ludlow was a man of few words, but his brief speech was always prompt and sure. So, it was said, was his gun.

He drew up, side-resting a long, thick leg across the saddle, cowman style. The two had never been close friends, but they were not enemies, either. Ludlow's blond-browed eyes appraised the set, grim tightness on the other man's face.

"Howdy, Sid. What's eatin' yuh? Somebody shoot your gran'ma?"

What Sid Nelson wanted to say welled up in him unsaid, a feeling, a hurt, a wrath born of a life-long, unspoken love of horses. Not merely of his own horses, not of any horses in particular. Something race-old, stronger than reason, coursing every red drop in his veins since first he had straddled a wrangler's pony to follow the *remuda*. And with it a sympathy, a nameless bond of fellowship with these untamed mustangs who had survived all hardship and harassment by virtue of the tough fiber that was in them—guts, maybe it was. Whatever else, they were horseflesh—and these were horseback men.

Sid waved his long arm in a gesture that served to name the subject of his protest.

"This—this-all ain't no doin's for a white man, Butch!"

"It'll clear white men's public cattle range of some hundreds of worthless grass-eaters, time we git through. An' it's payin' white man's wages, Sid. Want a job?"

For once Sid Nelson answered quickly.

"I'd hire out to do murder first! Why—why, damn it—you ain't—"

"Oh, we ain't aimin' to shoot 'em all thisaway," Butch broke in, rolling a smoke. "Jest the leaders—like the gray stud we got this mornin'—an' enough more to kinder bust up their organization, see. Then, quick as we can, we round up the balance an' drive 'em out."

"Drive 'em out? Where to?"

"Cabezón, mostly. Settin' up a reducin' plant there. Y'know, slaughter house an' cannery. Canned red-horse to ship to them wops and frogs over in Europe. An' cat feed, chicken feed, fertilizer an' so on. Guv'mint payin' so much a head for ever' one we rid the range of, anyhow, but we git more for them delivered at the works. Smells kinder nasty to you, eh? So's hangin' a rustler, but it saves the cow business. Well, we better git on after 'em, boys. You down the dun mare, Curly?"

Curly Hughes looked at Sid Nelson uncertainly, hesitating before he answered.

"Nope," he said. "I missed her."

"Why, damn your no-account hide," Butch began. "I told you to—"

"I made him miss the dun mare," Sid Nelson broke in, "same as I will ever'

horse-shooter I come up on! If you don't like it, Butch, you talk to me!"

It was a quiet speech. But it was thin-lipped, too, and hard. Butch Ludlow blew the smoke from his narrowing eyes and stared a second, open mouthed. His hand dropped to his six-shooter.

"Wup, here! Hold it, Butch!" one of his men spurred up alongside. "Sid ain't got no gun!"

Nelson's broad chin worked visibly. He addressed the other cowboys without taking his eyes from Butch's face:

"Somebody lend me one!" he said.

It was a stooped, lag-lipped oldster named Hump Wicks that answered for them. Hardly a man among them but had ridden round-up and trail with him —and with Sid Nelson.

"Let's jest keep all our britches on, here," drawled old Hump. "I never see a dead cowboy yit that was worth a damn. Too tough fer steak an' too stinkin' fer soup."

He spat a brown sluice humorously between Ludlow and Nelson.

"What say, boys, shall we ride? My underpants itches me, settin' around in the sun thisaway. 'Minds me o' the time Stutterin' Aleck taken to the hills on his honeymoon. Seems like they made camp after dark, an' old Stutterin', kinder flustered like he was, he throwed the bedroll on a anthill. Well—"

Half a dozen grinning cowboys kept their guns in their holsters, and, taking his cue from old Hump, one of them jammed the story-teller's flop hat down over his face, then with a yowling yodel put spurs to his horse and sped off down the ridge. Whooping, the others followed.

Curly Hughes reined close to Ludlow and spoke quietly.

"Come on, Butch, we're ridin'. So long, Sid. Don't swell up an' bust a bellyband."

Thus suddenly, in a breeze of salty hurra-ing, gunfight anger had been made ridiculous. With a shrug big Butch Ludlow loped down the ridge after his men.

Sid Nelson watched them joggle into the trail, taking the longer, easier way down.

Down to the left, from the juniper-green mazes of Plenty Forks Canyon, rose a thin, far sound, a shrill, anxious whinny. From hither and from yon sounded the brief nickers of the scattered mustangs, answering the little dun mare's summons. Answering—but fearfully, doubtfully. Sid Nelson, up on the ridge, knew why: hearken or call as they might, the ears of these wild ones could wheedle forth from the dust-sifty air no hint of the trumpet tone of the stout gray stallion they had known as master. They had followed the little dun mare; probably they would follow her still, vaguely sensing her sagacity. But their wild hearts had need of the king, the flash of his silver mane for guidon, the defiance of his windy, snorting nostrils for their assurance of freedom.

Briefly Sid Nelson listened. Then abruptly he spurred his reluctant jughead off the ridge, heading him dangerously down the slide rock steep. It would be the quickest way down into the Plenty Forks—if he could make it.

WHEN he had run into the wild horse drive on Long Finger Ridge, Sid Nelson was on his way to Cabezón, the nearest town eastward. Business. The vital business of closing a deal with old man "All-Over-Hell" Lee for cattle to stock the new range he had labored and sweated and spent almost the last of his savings to develop. Sid Nelson, roustabout, wrangler, cowhand, straw-boss, small homesteader ranchman, was now to become Sid Nelson, cattleman. His "wagon was loaded," his gamble made for a prosperous and consequential future.

Forty-odd virgin sections under lease, stock water developed at strategic points over most of its hitherto unused area, and All-Over-Hell Lee ready to share-

partner him with good cattle to run on it until, in time, he could go it wholly on his own. Saddle-throned, then, he would be master over his own little empire. Not that the wealth mattered particularly—but it would be a good and satisfying life building it up, as cattle king pioneers had done before him.

In Sid Nelson's mind moved no such parade of wordage. Once or twice, at round-up fires he had spoken quietly, prideful of his plans:

"Aimin' to be a sure-enough cattleman some day if I can make it."

Almost the last of his slow-earned savings were in the pot, now, and a little more in I O U's against the lease in the bank at Cabezón. But Sid Nelson had appraised his cards and judged them carefully. Both he and his prospective backer counted it an ace that he "had never been afraid of work, worry nor wickedness in any form."

It looked like a pat hand. But there was old man Lee to close with—today. All-Over-Hell had set the date, and he was not one to hold over a deal for anybody.

Thus the importance of this day's trip to Cabezón.

But that night the little dun mustang mare and sixty odd wildies found an hour's respite to graze the sloggy swales of good cow range, well southward from the swelling carcasses on Long Finger Ridge, a dozen miles farther from the slaughter pens of Cabezón than Mustang Mesa, where Ludlow had first jumped them that morning. They did not know, of course, that the lone cowboy who had spooked them out of the Plenty Forks, cut them off from circling back toward the mesa and wolfed their zigzag trail all day had not been trying to catch them.

Dry-camped for the night, Butch Ludlow cursed a wasted day of hard riding. The wide-flung circles of his riders, timed to close in like trap jaws on the mustang herd and crowd them out to the flats, had closed in empty. Old Hump Wicks was a veteran mustanger. Ludlow had left it to him to lay out the lines of the drive.

"Thought you knowed mustangs, Hump," he growled now in disgust. "Could figger where they'd run, an' all that. Hell!"

"Could," grunted old Hump, "if'n it was jest a flaunty ol' stud-hoss leadin' 'em, like it oughta be. But you take it when these wildies takes to follerin' a mare—well, the she-stuff is mighty dodgy, Butch, hoss, hawg or human. Besides—"

Old Hump stopped suddenly with a shrug.

"Besides what?"

Hump spat into the fire.

"Man cain't see a bee on his own nose, I ain't no hand to p'int it out to him. You cain't read track sign, I reckon?"

"Nelson's?"

Hump Wicks only shrugged again.

"What we better do," he went on, "we better quit this bunch awhiles. There's mustangs uses them coves headin' Fifth Fork Canyon. Some broke mares amongst 'em. Ain't quite so wild. Might save you some trouble to run them out first—fer practise."

"Right," said Ludlow, hard-jawed all at once. "Tomorrow—only don't go soft on me. I won't be with you for a while."

IT WAS well after midnight that same night that Sid Nelson's jughead sorrel drag-footed into the home corral at Nelson's little homestead ranch. Worn out as they both were, Sid ran in a fresh horse before he unsaddled the sorrel.

The dawn was still only a gray promise when Sid Nelson hit the saddle seat again.

He saw sunrise from a juniper clump on the top of Tetilla Peak while shadows still shrouded the lower mesas and can-

yons. Through field glasses he spotted the hoof dust of Ludlow's riders already on their way up Fifth Fork Canyon. A canyon cliff-box shouldered them out over a bare side-bench where Nelson could catch a count on them. Six. Ludlow was not there.

Eastward the glasses picked up a one-rider dust on the trail to Cabezón: Butch Ludlow, riding fast for town.

Sid Nelson cased the glasses and hurried down to his horse. Like the jughead sorrel, this roan was tough horseflesh, thewed with mustang muscle. Sid Nelson would neither own nor ride any other kind. The roan's toughness stood him in good stead now, for his rider followed neither trail, canyon nor ridge in his swift short-cut to the head coves of Fifth Fork Canyon; and once he had spooked this smaller mustang herd, he spurred hard after them for more than a mile before he turned back. Nor did he slow up then, but circled wide to miss Ludlow's men as they scouted, well spread out, for the mustang band.

The sound of their shouts came faintly down to him as he slanted a timbered back-slope toward the Cabezón trail. Words he could not make out. Some cursing, he surmised, as they shouted the track-news to each other that this mustang herd had already been spooked and run off before they got there.

Sid Nelson felt a little ashamed. It was not his way to be skulking the hills thus, like a wolf, sneaking hither and yon to defeat the efforts of honest men, working at what they considered an honest job, for honest wages. Honest enough, he reckoned it was, but cruel—to him too cruel to be endured in peace.

"Only I'd ought to have told ol' Butch right out that I was aimin' to act thataway," he reflected as he rode again down, and down and down.

Once on the Cabezón trail, he stopped to breathe the roan a while and roll a smoke. He wondered if the little dun mare's wound would have stiffened her by now so she couldn't run.

When he mounted again, it was to hit a long lope toward Cabezón. Business to attend to. An important deal to close. Tomorrow might be too late.

But the business waited.

There had been other mustang drives more successful than Ludlow's. On the outskirts of Cabezón the unpainted pine of a hastily built reducing plant stood yellowish in the midst of its dusty corrals. Half a mile from it Sid Nelson came up on a quartet of grimy, sweaty cowboys hazing in about fifty horses, all colors, ages, sizes.

Some of them wore brands and saddle marks. Some were wildies.

They had been wildies, at least, a few days ago. They were wild-eyed still, but that was all. The mark of thirst and hunger was on their shrunken flanks, their long tails dragged their heels with a whipped, hopeless tiredness. Now and then a head would go up, staring hard at the far, dim blue of the free hills, and the old fires would quicken gaunted sinews into a sudden dash out of the dragging, strung-out herd. Maybe two or three others would follow.

But the spurts were brief. Their hungry muscles were no match for the fresh mounts of the drivers. Quickly the cowboys turned them back into the hoof-dusty track that ended yonder at the slaughter house corrals.

The sight gave Sid Nelson a weakish feeling in his middle. He had seen mustangs ridden down, starved, driven in thus before. But then it had been to capture them for use, with feed, good pasture, kindly handling ahead, once they had been tamed to the saddle. His own jughead sorrel had been such a wildy.

But for these now—death, unfed, in a dusty corral.

"Purty business, ain't it?" One of the drivers greeted Sid's approach with a gesture of disgust. "Deliver these, an'

I'm through horse-huntin', damn if I ain't."

Sid Nelson nodded.

"You boss o' this drive, Mitchell? All right, how much they net you, a head?"

"Oh, 'bout three-fifty, maybe four dollars. Y'see—"

"Two hundred," said Sid Nelson abruptly, unpocketing his wallet, "for the bunch. Here, take it, and turn 'em loose!"

"But man, you're crazy as hell! Why—"

"Maybe I am, but my money ain't. You goin' to take it or—"

"Son," grinned the cowboy with something like relief. "You bought you some horse meat!"

Sid was already loping to the point, turning them out of the road southwestward. In a few miles they would hit foothills, with grass and water. Whose grass and water Sid Nelson did not give a damn at the moment. With quick good will the drivers helped him get them started. Then, except for the boss, they headed on into town, paid off.

Presently Sid and the other man drew up, resting sidelegged in their saddles. There was a gleam in Nelson's slaty eyes.

"You wantin' a job, Mitchell, that'll probably land you in jail?" Sid waved a hand widely toward the hills.

Mitchell's grin of understanding broke wide across his dried-apple face.

"Why not?" he said. "Jail or hell, it's all one to me—jest so the work ain't rally-wampusin' mustang like I been doin'."

Heading together into town, Mitchell and Sid Nelson came face to face with Butch Ludlow. There was a new deputy sheriff's star on his vest. He reined up crosswise in front of them. As usual he spoke directly, briefly, and to the point.

"I've got a warrant for your arrest, Nelson, for criminally and unlawfully interferin' with Guv'mint business, namely, my mustang drivin'. You comin' peaceable?"

"I'd been liable to kill you yesterday, Ludlow, if I'd had a gun. That's how come me not to wear one today. But next time—"

"Next time," broke in Ludlow bluntly, "you won't be meddlin'. You'll be in jail. This time you're comin' with me!"

The man named Mitchell had reined to one side, out of it. Now, without warning or word or look, his gun stood out in his hand. Too late, Ludlow stared at it, his own still in the holster.

"Wup, here! I don't want you gittin' into trouble on my account, Mitchell," Sid began. "I'll—"

"You ride," the man broke in dryly. "Hands high, Butch, while I grab your hardware!"

A hundred yards up the out-road they left Butch Ludlow's empty gun and belt hanging on a fence post.

"He might've bought that star at a tin shop," grinned Mitchell, "an' again he mightn't. We better ride, boss! I think I'm goin' to kinder enjoy workin' for you!"

As usual, Sid Nelson couldn't find the right words. But his spurs touched horsehide firmly. Together they galloped toward the hills. After a mile they eased off a little.

"I never aimed to drag you into anything like this," Nelson began, but Mitchell only grinned his dry grin.

"Where to now, boss?"

There was the sharpness of final decision in Sid Nelson's tone as he answered.

"We better hit for my place first," he said. "There's grub there—an' a couple of guns."

A THIN, gray-brown haze of dust had stood for days over the hilly range country west of Cabezón. It ribboned faintly around the peak of La Tetilla. It spread thin and vanished on Mustang and a

dozen other breezy mesas. It settled heavily into coves and hollows. All over the maze of the Plenty Forks country it rose thickly in the canyons, to thread out into mere wisps on the ridges. Or it fogged suddenly alive along a ridge-top to settle thinly into the canyons. Daily, nightly, it moved, shifted, cleared—and rose again.

It was the hoof dust of many running mustangs, and the riders who harried them hard by day and night. Two or three times it reached a long arm out across the flats to the reducing plant at Cabezón; but not often. Butch Ludlow's contracted wild horse drives were having trouble. It doesn't take much interference, jumped in at the right moment, to spook a mustang herd and spoil a drive.

Every day there was scattered rifle talk in the hills; and one rifle, at least, was aimed not merely at mustangs, but at men, when the chance offered. But the chances were not good enough. Riding Nelson's tough-thewed horses, Mitchell and his silent boss were hard to sight, much less to hit. They swooped and dodged through the hills like a pair of wary wolves.

Gradually long arms of hoof-dust began to reach out farther and farther westward. Scattered puffs rose from the cliffy gaps that open the arid ramparts of Las Mesas Perdidas. Hounded, hunted, guarded away from their water holes, starving for lack of respite in which to graze, the wildies were turning for last refuge to a range they had always shunned for its lack of waterholes.

But the little old dun mare was "sot in her ways." Mustang Mesa and the Plenty Forks was home. She stayed. And with the help of a high-necked sorrel stallion that had broken free from his own band not a dozen miles from the slaughter house, she kept a herd at her heels. With every dodge its numbers varied, but with every lull they grew. Now, with the soreness of her wound to hamper her, it was the sorrel stallion as often as not that streaked out ahead. It was the sorrel that Sid Nelson had headed and turned, half a dozen times, from flight down Second Fork Canyon.

"If little ol' Lady Pot-Belly was leadin', she'd ketch on," Sid Nelson told Mitchell. "Only sure trap ol' Ludlow's got is down this canyon. That ol' sorrel, he don't seem to sense it."

"Give him time," grinned Mitchell through a thatch of blackish whiskers. "Lemme see, this ain't but the third year we been playin' this ring-around-a-rosy? Or is it all my life?"

IN THE glare of a hot midday the wild herd swept to the steep west rim of Mustang Mesa in a fog of dust a half mile wide. They V-ed into the sixty-foot break in the rim, gaunt shoulder crowding gaunter flank, jamming the gap, for they numbered well nigh a hundred. Ludlow had eased up a little, waited, and jumped in now at the right moment with a double crew for a big drive into the pole-corral trap down in the narrows of Second Fork Canyon. Once penned in it, Ludlow's men could clog, or hobble or sideline enough of the wildies to handle them. The dun mare—it might be wise to shoot her, and be rid of her for good.

From a side ridge-saddle well below, Sid Nelson trained his glasses upon their tawny torrent bobbling down the rocky steep. His eyes searched anxiously for the little dun mare. Her juggy head moved jerkily with her limp, but she was there, well to the front, neck and neck with the sorrel stallion.

"Good gal!" Sid Nelson said aloud.

He levered a cartridge into his .30-30.

Over yonder where the upper steeps begin to wing out into side canyons and ridges, a man lurked in a juniper clump. Through the glasses Sid Nelson had made out that it was ol' Hump Wicks,

and that he had something like a rag flag on a stick beside him. A few flourishes of that, at the right moment, would turn the mustang avalanche down a natural funnel V-ing into Second Fork Canyon—where the big trap-pens had been laid.

"He better be easy to spook," grinned Mitchell.

Sid leveled the rifle, held steady on a juniper branch.

"I'd sure hate to hit him," he said.

The rifle crack lashed out. Bullet dust smoked from a rock twenty feet in front of old Hump. The old man could not have failed to hear the *ping* and know what it was. But he made no move to clear out. Calmly, he turned his head and spat.

"Lemme try it," said Mitchell, "I'll—"

The wallop of a biggish juniper club descending on his head cut off the speech. Knee-sag set him down ungently on the slope.

Nelson whirled around. A big cowboy, one of Ludlow's men, stood almost over him with the club swung high.

"Y'ain't turnin' no wildies today, Sid," he said. "Butch told me to use m'gun on yuh, but I figgered—"

It was Sid Nelson, dodging the club, landing on him like a panther, that closed his remark. It was the force of Sid's fist that set him down beside Mitchell on the hillside. But he was up in a jiffy. And he could fight.

By the time Sid Nelson got him handled, old Hump, across yonder, was up on his feet, getting ready with his flag. Soon the vanguard of the driven mustangs would swing around a bench in sight of it and spook eastward into the Second Fork Funnel. Once down it, they could not escape.

Mitchell stood up, groggily, rubbing his head.

"You'll have to shoot that old fool, Sid, if you aim to beat ol' Ludlow outa this load of hoss meat. Gosh, what a wallop!"

For once Sid Nelson spoke quickly.

"I couldn't shoot ol' Hump, an' he knows it, damn him! You stick here to turn 'em west again if they swing out this way! I'm going up yonder!"

He was gone in the junipers to his horse, and in the saddle before Mitchell could answer.

"Damn fool, ain't he?" Mitchell remarked, quite casually.

The fist-dazed cowboy wiped blood from his nose and grunted agreement.

What they saw, then, made them hold their breath: Sid Nelson, spurring a jughead sorrel at an upslant across a field of slide rock; the jughead falling, getting up a g a i n, clambering on; the rider swinging off to lead him around a narrow ledge from which the hoof-struck rocks flew fifty feet down into empty air. They saw him make it to a side-ridge crest, well above the man with the flag. They saw him strike out around the elbowed ridge and disappear toward the zigzag torrent of frightened mustangs clattering down the mountain, slanting now athwart a bench.

Then they heard a shot—another—another—rifle talk from far up toward the Mesa Rim. Through the glasses Mitchell made out the kneeling figure of Butch Ludlow and the gleam of a gun barrel.

WHEN Curly Hughes saw Butch Ludlow step from his horse and begin shooting at the man risking his neck across the slide rock below to reach a narrow ridge where he could turn the mustang herd to westward—and to freedom—to use his own words, he "jest sickened on mustangin' an' taken out wild." The first thing he did was to yank Ludlow's rifle away from him and throw it over the cliff. The second was to unscabbard his own and start shooting.

The side ridges and canyons fanning crookedly out from the steeps of Mus-

tang Mesa are like a compound puzzle of the maze variety—or like a man's life. A turn here, a few yards swerve there, and the whole subsequent route of descent is irrevocably changed.

It was the spat of Curly's bullets on the rocks ahead of them as much as Sid Nelson's sudden panting arrival to wave his hat in the east fork of an old water trail that turned the mustang herd into a long westering canyon instead of funneling down to the trap-closed Second Fork. Or maybe it was the jughead wisdom of the little dun mare, for the dumb sorrel stud would have charged past both rather than risk the unfamiliar route, barren of all timber cover.

But turn she did, and the clattering roar of rocky hoofs that followed her was music in Sid Nelson's ears. He got to his horse and followed. Whether the blood smear on his saddle-horn came from a bruise from falling or the graze of a near bullet he neither knew nor cared. The little dun mare and her herd were headed west!

He was hazing the last of them through Dry Canyon gap, miles farther westward, when Mitchell and Curly Hughes overtook him. It was a gap that opened the way into Las Mesas Perdidas, Hell Mountain, No-Water, Starve-Out—all that forty section country he had spent his savings to lease and supply with watering places; the cattle empire he had dreamed of building. The way the little dun mare was leading, he wondered if she already sensed the water he had labored to provide.

Mitchell and Curly Hughes rolled smokes and grinned at him sweatily. But they made no comment as all three flopped to "shade" awhile in the shadow of a sandy cliff.

New hoof-dust rolled up eastward, dissolving into riding men: Butch Ludlow and half a score, old Hump Wicks among them.

To the "shading" trio's surprise Ludlow did not approach them. Instead he started on past, heading his cavalcade into the canyon gap, in the thinning dust of the mustangs' wake.

Sid Nelson stepped out quickly ahead of them. There was a gleam in his eyes that belied the unsteadiness of his broad chin.

"Your trail ends here, Ludlow," he said, hoarsely. "Now an' always!"

"Nelson," Ludlow's voice was steady, as always, and it lacked nothing in deadly anger. "I'm goin' after them mustangs. Step outa my way, or I'll kill you!"

"I'll protect my own range," said Sid Nelson quietly, and his gun leaped out.

There were two shots, like one in sound. Two misses. It was old Hump Wick's horse bumping suddenly into Butch Ludlow's that spoiled his shot. Maybe it was that same sudden shifting of Ludlow's bulk that made Sid Nelson's miss, too. Or maybe Sid wasn't a good enough hater, when it came to killing.

With his bare fists, however, it was different, and even Ludlow's men granted him the right.

"Boys," said old Hump Wicks, when it was over, with Ludlow sporting two swelling eyes to Nelson's one, "I reckon school's dismissed. Who's fer town?"

It looked as if they all were, except Sid Nelson.

Old Hump loitered a moment to splash brown juice on a few choice rocks.

"Side us in, Sid," he invited, "an I'll let you borry me a drink before you go to jail."

Sid Nelson waved a bloody-knuckled hand westward toward the domain he had now surrendered, temporarily, to almost valueless mustangs.

"I'll stay a few days," he said, "an' see that they don't drift out. These horses was here first, before cattle—or the Guv'mint, either. I reckon the Guv'mint —nor Butch Ludlow—can't complain as long as they're on my range. If they do

—well, I aim to face whatever music the law plays when the time comes."

"Mister," Hump Wicks pointed out, "they ain't no cattle-kind future in wild hoss ranchin'. Jest tellin' you, case you hadn't thought of it your ownself."

A shadow of regret sobered Sid Nelson's long face, but only for an instant. He had chosen his trail.

"Right now," he said, "I don't give a damn. I've missed out on my deal with ol' All-Over-Hell for cattle, but them wildies won't have nobody doggin' their tails for a while anyhow. This mustang huntin' business won't last forever."

"No," agreed old Hump, grinning. "I reckon it won't. Time you're outa jail for buckin' old Butch, chances is it'll be plumb fergot. Ain't ary one of us liked it much, Sid. An' seem like the way you stepped right in a-switchin' your tail against it has got the boys to thinkin'. I'm quit on it, anyhow, an' I've heard more'n one of 'em sayin' 'to hell with it' private. Doubt if ol' Butch could even raise him a jury that'd jail you—an' even if he does, time you're out, these wildies'll be hauntin' their old range agin an' nobody botherin' 'em. Ol' All-Over-Hell will allus have some more cattle he'll want to share out—even with an unlegal ol' jughead like you. Chaw?"

Faint and far away, from the midst of the Lost Mesa, sounded the little dun mare's shrill whinny as her thirst-dry nostrils scented first water on this new range that had, to her and hers, so miraculously offered refuge.

Sid Nelson, postponing the commencement of his dreams of cattle empire another year—maybe even longer—grinned as he hearkened. For this delay of his slow-built plans he was not sorry. Old Hump was right. There would be another day for cattle deals, and he could wait. Right now it was enough that the fogging dust of harried and harassed wild horses had ceased to rise, like a smoke of misery, over these scattered hills.

NO HELP NEEDED

"WINDS down this way are sure hell," said Lefty, the tenderfoot.

"That's the way it is," said Red. "Some winds is good and some winds is bad, but I'd rather have sandstorms and risk a cyclone once in a while than to have mud in the rainy season like they have on the Black Land divide."

"We found lots of mud when we drove through last fall," said Lanky.

"You jist thought you found mud," replied Red. "You ought to have seen them flats before they begun makin' roads. When I first hit that country, they was jist fencin' off the lanes, and when I got a job, the boss put me to ridin' fence.

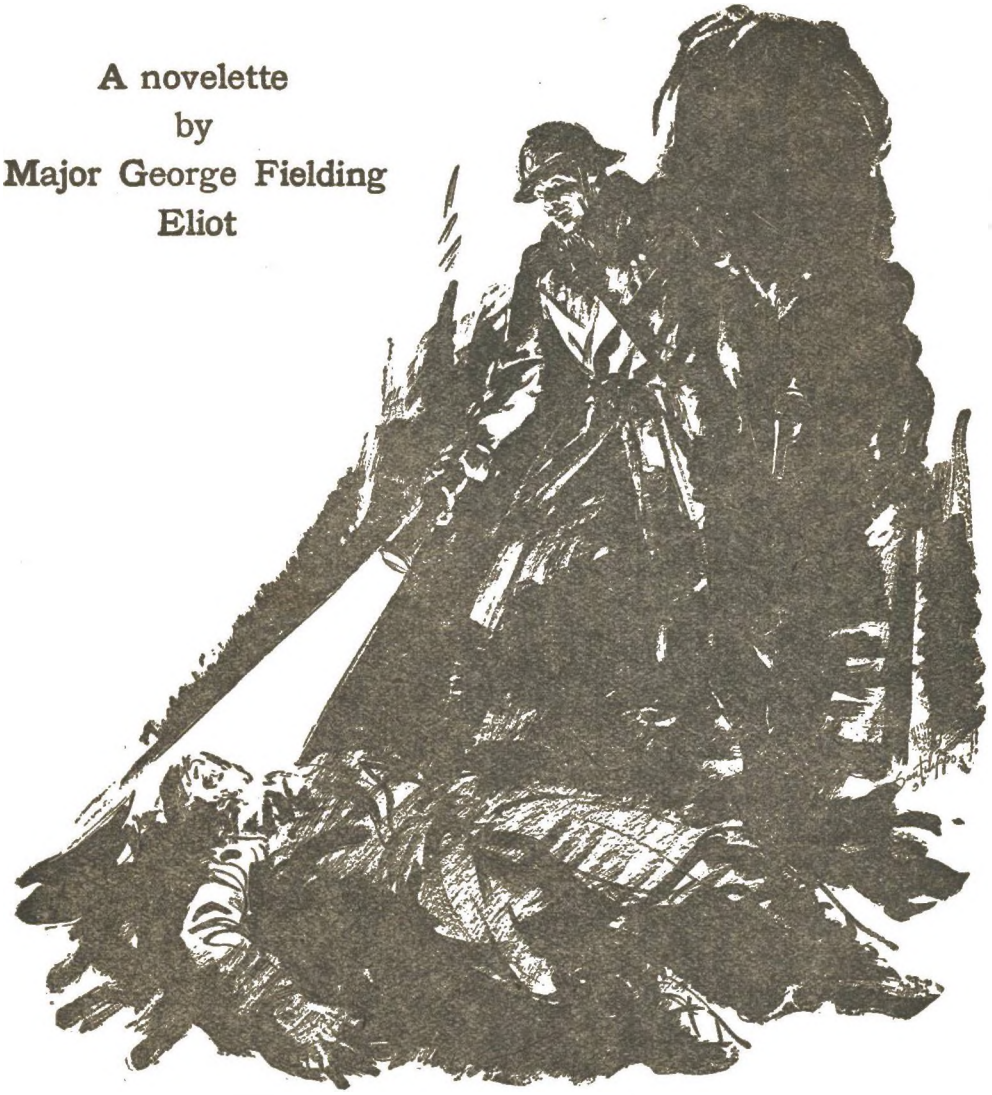
"One day I was ridin' along by the lane, and I looked over and there was a good, brand-new Stetson hat layin' on the top of a mud-hole. I thinks to myself, 'That's a good hat, and I might as well have it as the next feller.' So I got down and got a-holt of a fence-post to steady myself, and reached out to git it.

"Jist as I teched the crown a feller yelled out: 'Hey, what you doin' there?' he says. Then I noticed for the first time that there was a man's head stickin' out of the mud.

"I asked the feller if he needed any help, but he said he was ridin' a mighty good hoss, and he guessed he'd make it through all right. He afterwards got to be a mighty good friend of mine. Pete Jackson was his name."

—From "Tall Tales From Texas Cow Camps," by Mody C. Boatright.

A novelette
by
Major George Fielding
Eliot



THE SPIDER

CHAPTER I

UNDER THE LINES

"*GARDE à vous!*"

A sergeant had seen the erect, soldierly figure of Lieutenant Jim Paige coming through the dark aisles of the shell-ravaged forest.

The groups of muttering, slant-eyed, dirt-stained little Annamite miners stiffened into attention.

Paige swept them with the eyes of a soldier, probing for their secret—the secret of their hidden fear. He found nothing—nothing save the blank wall that ever interposes between the soul of the East and Western comprehension. Wearily he returned the sergeant's salute.

"*Repos!*" he snapped.

The little yellow men sank back to their eternal crouch; their mutterings be-

gan again. Paige caught a word or two, he had some smattering of the language.

"Dishonorable burial—the black water—the Great Earth Spirit—"

And ever, through the murmur of frightened voices, one recurring word:

"The spider—the spider—"

Paige's foremost thought was a malediction on the red tape which infests the French Army from top to bottom. He knew the primary cause of his men's disaffection: it was the fact that their dead were being buried here, in France, instead of being sent back for interment in their homeland. To an Annamese, this is the final horror—to be buried in a strange country, beyond "the black water," denied those family funeral rites, hallowed by custom immemorial, without which the soul must wander homeless throughout the ages.

Paige, who had served in Indo-China, had submitted a vigorous recommendation on the subject as soon as he'd discovered what was happening. The red tape machine had graciously absorbed his recommendation whole, swathed it about with crimson strands, smothered and buried it.

That was one thing. But this business of the spider was another—perhaps related, perhaps not. It was a name of terror among the Annamites. There were whispers of a great spider which infested the mine, which sprang upon men from the darkness of the galleries, which—

Paige shook his head, as though to clear his brain of cobwebs.

Nodding to the sentry, he swung himself down into the open mouth of the shaft, descending the ladder until he stood on the shaft-bottom beside the wheezing ventilator-blower. Ahead of him opened the electric-lighted lengths of the two main attacking galleries.

Paige spoke briefly to the man on telephone duty, then strode into the left hand gallery, ducking his six-foot body at each timber "frame" and cursing the luck that brought a lieutenant of the Legion to such mole's work as burrowing forty feet under the surface of the earth to plant sixty-four thousand pounds of melinite beneath the Rheinpfalz Redoubt.

The gallery was dimly lighted by dirty incandescent bulbs, placed at infrequent intervals.

Paige, watching the wooden sheathing of the right hand wall, came presently to a sign in white paint: "G.T.—5 m."

"*Galerie Transversale*—5 meters," he translated to himself. Five meters farther on, beneath a dim bulb, a little slant-eyed Annamite sentry stiffened to attention and saluted, his Oriental face a stolid mask in which only his eyes, mere slits of dark fire, seemed alive.

"Everything all right?" Paige demanded.

"*Tout va bien, mon lieutenant!*" came the answer in queer singsong French.

"No signs of the old earth-spirit, or any minor devils, eh?"

The sentry shuddered; fear glistened in his eyes. His hands trembled so that he almost dropped his carbine.

"Not to speak so—if my lieutenant pleases—" he stammered. Paige nodded and passed on, turning to the right into the black darkness of the narrow "transverse gallery," which connected the two main mine-galleries. He was sorry he'd kidded the little soldier; that wasn't the right approach. Legionnaires could be joshed out of their worries, but not these sturdy little yellow soldiers from France's far-off outpost of empire in Indo-China. Their whole world was peopled with gods and devils, some kindly, but more malign. And this spider-spirit had them really upset.

Paige forced a scornful New England laugh at the queer ideas of these little Annamites; he had a bigger worry on his mind. And yet, down here in the dark silence of the mine galleries, their ideas

didn't seem quite so ridiculous as up above in the sunshine.

There were queer things that *did* happen—

An unearthly scream rang through the gallery; the scream of a human being in mortal agony or fear.

It came from ahead. Paige stopped short, his hand going to his gun. He heard the clattering footsteps of a running man, coming straight toward him. His hand shifted to the powerful flashlight in his hip-pocket. The white ray stabbed into the blackness, fairly into the face of a man who was plunging along the gallery at a staggering run, lurching from side to side, bruising himself cruelly against the timber uprights, but never pausing, never checking the pace.

His features were twisted with horror, his eyes wide and staring as the light caught them. He was the very man Paige was looking for: Lebrun, Captain of Engineers. But he was far removed now from the self-possessed, rather haughty engineer-officer with his *Ecole Polytechnique* mannerisms and his faintly concealed contempt for Legionnaires. He was a hunted creature, fleeing for his life—a man possessed by panic, who screamed again as the light smote his eyes and flung up one arm to cover them.

Paige grabbed him by the shoulder, spun him round, shook him violently—Lebrun striking out in blind terror and yelling all the time.

"Lebrun—Captain! Stop it!" roared Paige. The French words seemed to reach some comprehending part of Lebrun's brain. His arms dropped to his side; he stood there swaying a little, his eyes staring, staring—

"Paige, *mon capitaine!* This is Paige!" repeated the Legion officer. "What's happened? Tell me—quick!"

He had visions of disaster—an underground river tapped, or a surprise counter-mine fired by the enemy.

"Tell me!" he repeated, shaking Lebrun again with a fine disregard for rank.

In the dark reaches of the gallery beyond, *something* moved—Paige heard it—a queer, scrabbling, pattering sound—

Lebrun heard it too; tore free, and fled, screaming:

"*L'araignée*—the spider!" Paige whirled to flash his torch after the fleeing captain.

ALREADY the man was almost out of sight, a mere shadow vanishing along the narrow gallery. The pattering sound was nearer; Paige was aware of a fetid odor. He forced himself to turn again, to unbuckle his holster flap—

As he turned, he was borne backward by the impact of a heavy body against his chest and shoulder; his torch flew from his hand, leaving him in darkness. A hot sickening breath beat upon his face; a hairy body was swarming over him, clawing at his arm and shoulder. He fought madly, kicking, striking with his left arm, while with his right he strove to get out his Browning.

By a desperate effort he got the fingers of his right hand around the butt of his gun; he bore down, twisting the weapon from the holster, and fired three shots from the hip. The *thing* fell away from him with a horrible squashy thud. He fired again; he felt rather than saw that his assailant was retreating—the pattering sound was in his ears again. Weak and sick from reaction, he leaned for an instant against an upright, then lurched forward in pursuit. His foot struck against a hard object; he stooped and picked it up. His torch—its ray swept along the gallery too late to pick anything out of the darkness.

Paige slipped the spring-clip of his torch over his belt and ran on in pursuit, reloading his Browning as he went.

Ahead a spot of dull light appeared,

grew larger; the opening into the second main or attacking gallery, where there would be another sentinel.

"Sentry!" shouted Paige as he ran. "Sentry!"

A distant voice answered:

"Alerte!"

"Guard your rear! Watch the transversal gallery!"

"Compris!" came the answer; a shadow moved across the yellow rectangle. Or were there two shadows? Did they mingle for a moment?

"Sentry!" gasped Paige breathlessly.

No answer. He tried to run faster, stumbling along over the rough floor of the gallery, avoiding the sill-pieces more by instinct than anything else.

Closer and closer came the lighted exit; now he could see the gallery floor, the smoother floor of the main gallery—nothing else, save bare walls and ceiling. The monster had fled into the main gallery; there was no place in the narrow transversal where it could have hidden to let Paige pass it. And now the sentry—

Paige, gun ready, charged out into the better light of the main gallery; his glance swept right and left. Nothing moved beneath the diminishing succession of incandescents in either direction.

At his left stood a little Annamite soldier, as like the sentry in the other gallery as a twin. He was standing with carbine at the ready, watching the exit of the transversal.

"Where did it go? Which way? demanded Paige.

"Who—what?"—The sentry gaped at him. "I don't understand, *mon lieutenant!*"

"You mean to tell me you haven't seen anything come out of that gallery?"

"Nothing, *mon lieutenant.* Nothing at all."

"You know *le capitaine* Lebrun?"

"Oui, mon lieutenant."

"Have you seen him lately?"

"Non, mon lieutenant!"

"Haven't seen him entering that transversal within the past half-hour?"

"Non, mon lieutenant!" Then as an artless addition— "I've only been on duty maybe ten minutes, *mon lieutenant.*"

Paige swore angrily. He was certain the man was lying; Lebrun had come in, pursued by the thing; the thing had come out—*must* have come out—

Unless, as these yellow rascals claimed, it was a spectral monster, able to vanish at will—

Nonsense! There had been nothing spectral about the thing that had attacked Paige. He had only to look at his torn tunic, or to remember that terrific struggle in the darkness. But Paige had his duties to think of—

Paige spoke a word of stern admonition to the sentry and turned toward the main entrance, which was at the bottom of a shaft far behind the French support line.

HE walked swiftly along. Once he passed a little iron-wheeled truck, coming back empty after carrying out loosened earth.

"Go slower!" he said sharply to the Annamite who was pushing the truck. *"Tonnerre de Dieu!"* Can't you people learn not to make so much noise?"

The Annamite cringed, his slanting eyes glittering with fear or some other emotion.

"Pardon, mon lieutenant," he whined; his blackened teeth showed between his betel-stained lips.

"Get on with you!" snapped Paige impatiently.

He wondered if he'd ever really get to know these little yellow men. They were good soldiers, he'd been told; he knew that the *Tirailleurs Annamites"* had won distinction in their own country in many a hard-fought battle. But here in France, working at this grim business of mining—he wasn't so sure. As he walked on, he forced his thoughts

away from speculation to the work in hand.

Two mine-galleries were being run forward, with the idea of placing sufficient charges of melinite beneath the great German center of resistance called the "Rheinpfalz Redoubt" to blow it into the sky. After which the French infantry, who had lost a good many hundred men trying to storm that virgin fortress, would sweep forward over the smoking mine-crater and establish themselves on the Berronvilliers Ridge at last.

The gallery along which Paige walked was one of the two main galleries—a "*galerie movenne*," two meters high and a little more than two meters wide. It was sheathed, floored and roofed with planks supported by timber frames; it was ventilated by air forced through a long canvas tube from a blower at the entrance, and lighted by little bulbs which got their current from a portable dynamo situated in a dugout back in the third line of the French trenches. The Annamite soldiers worked in reliefs at the "working faces" or heads of the galleries; steadily they drove them forward at the rate of about a meter every three hours. Over two hundred meters they had advanced, and now all was done—or almost done. They were enlarging the ends of the galleries to make the mine-chambers; the explosive for charging the mines had come up from the base.

In the meantime, the utmost care was necessary, lest the Germans be warned in time. From both main galleries, listening galleries had been driven right and left and well ahead; geophones in these were connected to a main switchboard, where a keen-eared officer was ever on duty, listening for the sounds of German counter-mining. Several times the *tap-tap* of picks—audible at one hundred and fifty feet in this compact, chalky soil—had been heard; and the French knew that the Germans must have heard their miners, too. That was why there were such strict orders against unnecessary noise in the galleries. The most careful calculations led the French engineers to believe that the German counter-mines were very close; if the Germans managed to load their mines and fire before the French were ready they would destroy the French galleries, ruining the work of weeks and entombing the miners. It was an underground race against time—and death.

Sardonically Paige permitted himself to wonder whether the grim possibilities of the situation had led to the employment of Annamites for the mining work, instead of Frenchmen. But the little men were proving capable enough as workmen, and their stature enabled them to work with less cramping in the confined spaces of galleries and shafts. Paige's own transfer to this work had been born of his unlucky observation in the presence of a staff officer that he had, in pre-Legion days, gained a degree in mining engineering back in the States.

That, and the fact that he had served in Indo-China. . . .

Six years in the Legion had brought Jim Paige to a lot of out-of-the-way places and up against a good many ghastly situations: but this spider business—

He'd been trying not to think about that. His service in the East had taught him that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in Western philosophies. Thank God, they were almost ready to fire the mine. Then he could hope to get back to his old company. No spiders to fight there. Just Huns. No cursed listening at geophone transmitters for the *tick-tick-tick* that might mean, five minutes later, the muffled roar of a *camouflet** and the caving in of half a world on your neck. If a

*Camouflet:—A mine charged with sufficient explosive to destroy adjacent enemy galleries, but which does not break the surface of the earth to make a crater.

man died, he died like a man and not like a weasel in a burrow.

He had become so absorbed in his thoughts that he didn't hear approaching footsteps, until in the gloom between two lights he barged right into a portly paunch and was greeted with a barrage of Gallic curses.

He stepped back, lifting his eyes from their contemplation of the floor-boards and their tricky timber sills.

The light gleamed faintly on five gold stripes adorning a horizon-blue kepi, with spectacled eyes and a snarling, mustachioed mouth below. Colonel Juveral, the engineer-in-chief.

PAIGE saluted. This was a lucky meeting.

"A thousand pardons, *mon colonel!* I was—er—watching these damned sills and did not see you coming."

"Bah!" sputtered the colonel, adding some remarks concerning *"ces sacrés Légionnaires."*

Paige stood stiffly at attention.

"Where's Captain Lebrun?" snapped the Colonel.

"I saw him in the other gallery, *mon colonel.* I think he—uh—went toward the exit. *Mon colonel,* I have to make a report—"

"Ah, *Dieu de Dieu!*" interrupted the colonel. "Never at hand when he is wanted, that Lebrun! You command below ground in his absence, eh?"

"*Oui, mon colonel!* But—"

"And I think I placed you in personal charge of the explosives?"

"You did, *mon colonel.* Just a word, if—"

"Hrrrmph! The master minds on the Corps staff have changed the orders," the colonel went on, ignoring Paige's efforts to cut in. "Can you load and fire Gallery Two immediately?"

"With about two-thirds of the full charge, sir. There is not room in the mine chamber for more at the present stage of excavation."

The answer, precise and prompt as it was, merely covered Paige's sudden excitement.

"Your opinion, Lieutenant," demanded the colonel. "Will a two-thirds charge give us a good crater?"

"Yes, sir. I've already calculated what would happen if we had to fire with half, two-thirds and three-fourths charges. It will give us about a line-and-a-half crater."

"My calculations exactly, Lieutenant." The colonel's tone showed sudden approval. "You have displayed—er—commendable forethought. Take charge, load Number Two, and report to me when you are ready to tamp. Be as quick as you can about it; there's not much time. The infantry assaulting units are moving up now; they're going to attack the minute we're ready. The staff had a brain-storm, thought the Germans were getting suspicious; we've got to attack at once, before they can concentrate men and guns to meet us."

"But, Colonel, we *can't* fire now!" cried Paige desperately.

The colonel stared.

"Why not?" he snapped.

"Because, sir," answered Paige, measuring each word with emphatic deliberation, "the mine chambers are not under the German lines! An error has been made in the underground survey; insufficient allowance for the slope of the inclined portion of the approach galleries. The mine chambers are at least fifty feet short of the position shown on the plan."

"The devil you say!" exclaimed the colonel. "It is Lebrun who is responsible for that plan, for the survey. How could he have made such an error? He is a dependable officer and a good engineer."

"I fear, sir, that I am somewhat to blame," Paige answered. "Captain Lebrun had not been informed, when I reported to him for duty, that I possess

an engineering degree. I discovered the error in the slope three days ago—a matter of small importance then, since it was easily adjusted by driving the galleries a little farther before starting the mine chambers. I believed then, and believe now, that the trouble arose from Captain Lebrun's lack of familiarity with the use of surveying instruments underground; a target light can be very deceiving, as you know, sir, and Lebrun, though an experienced engineer, has not been in charge of driving a mine gallery before. I told him of my discovery with more haste than tact, and he assured me that it was quite impossible that a graduate of the Polytechnique should make such an error, that when he required engineering advice from Legion lieutenants he would make his wishes known."

The colonel nodded grimly; a Polytechnique man himself, he could appreciate the wounded professional pride which had motivated Lebrun.

"Why didn't you come to me?" he asked.

"I have been in the army too long, sir, to start going over the head of my immediate superior unless absolutely necessary," Paige answered. "I hoped I could persuade Captain Lebrun to reconsider. Of course I didn't know the attack was so imminent. I have just finished a complete recheck of my figures, sir. Here is the corrected plan—you see the location of the mine chambers."

Paige produced the plan from inside his tunic; the colonel glanced at it, shrugged, swore.

"If you are correct about the slope, Lieutenant, there is no more to be said," he admitted. "The attack will have to be called off at once. I'll go out and 'phone corps—"

"The telephone at the mine chamber is nearer, my colonel," Page put in anxiously.

"True. But I must check that slope myself first, which I will do on my way out; there will be instruments at the shaft bottom. You go to the mine chamber at the end of Gallery Two and await orders. I will telephone you my decision promptly, and if I find you are wrong you will proceed with the loading. *Compris?*"

"As ordered, Colonel." Paige saluted; the colonel nodded, turned on his heel and strode away down the gallery.

CHAPTER II

DEATH IN THE DARK

PAIGE moved off toward the mine chamber, reflecting that he hadn't told the colonel about the spider. Just as well. The old man might get the idea that Paige was crazy—which would be just too bad.

He hoped the colonel would make it snappy. He could imagine the infantry up above, crowding into their jump-off trenches, ready to go over; cold meat for the Boche artillery if the Germans got wise. As he remembered the orders, the French artillery preparation was to be very brief, scarcely more than wire-cutting, and the usual rolling barrage when the infantry went over. The firing of the mine was to be the signal for the attack, which could only succeed if both mine and infantry assault took the Germans completely by surprise.

Give Fritz a couple of hours' warning, or even one hour, and bloody repulse was all that could result. And—Paige's own battalion, the Third of the First *Régiment de Marche*, was leading the way. He wished very heartily that he was up there with the gang—

But he meant to see that the old outfit wasn't massacred uselessly, if he could.

The mine chamber, at the end of the gallery, was a busy place. Intended to be a cubical chamber ten feet on a side,

it was rapidly approaching those dimensions. Within, two Annamite miners, stripped to the waist, labored vigorously with push-picks, while two more shoveled the loosened earth into a truck. Above, a cluster of electric lights gave an unearthly glare, shining on the yellow, sweat-shiny skin of the laborers, glinting on the steel of their tools; while at one side the end of the canvas ventilation pipe coughed and wheezed as it drove fresh air into the heading. Beside the truck a bull-necked, thick-bodied man in a stained khaki uniform stood watching the miners, his lip lifted from his yellowing teeth in a perpetual growl. This was Sergeant-Major Meunier, "top-kick" of Paige's company. He was acting as N.C.O. in charge of the working party, and it was plain to see that he was an old-timer, who didn't believe in pampering natives.

The Annamites jumped when he spoke —or cowered, their eyes eloquent of a hatred they dared not voice. They knew Sergeant-Major Meunier too well.

The *sous-officer*, though apparently intent on the work of his detail, swung round just as Paige reached the regulation distance, saluted stiffly, spoke:

"*Mon lieutenant!*"

He had eyes in the back of his head, like many a veteran non-com. Or so the Annamites thought.

"We may have to load and fire right away, Sergeant-Major," Paige told him. "Fall in the relief details."

Meunier made it a point to be surprised at nothing. He blew his whistle. From a shelter-heading near by, a number of Annamites came running to fall in, forming a single rank along the wall of the main gallery. There were twelve of them—three reliefs for the working party; with a *doi* or native sergeant in charge. Paige, running a careful eye along the line, observed that the men were watching him narrowly; again he had that sense of something hidden, of some obscure force at work among them, something which his Western mind could not understand. He knew that they all hated Meunier. But it was not that. It was—something else. Something that he would have to conquer before he could really understand them and gain their confidence, before he could be their accepted leader. He knew how to win Legionnaires, but these little yellow men with their opaque eyes—

It worried Paige. He was a soldier born, and a leader of men. He hated to acknowledge, even to himself, that here was a problem in leadership he could not solve. It was a reflection on his efficiency as an officer, a stain on his soldierly pride.

Paige inspected the men, spoke briefly to them in their own tongue, praising their work and telling them he might soon have to call on them for special exertions.

As he finished, he became aware of a queer rumbling overhead. He listened, glanced at Meunier.

"Shell-fire!" he muttered.

"Yes, lieutenant. Light stuff; seventy-fives. The big ones shake the whole earth," Meunier answered.

Seventy-fives—they must be cutting the wire already. Then he'd been right; the German wire, not the trenches, was right overhead, the galleries *were* too short. And time was short as well—

Here was confirmation for the colonel, a final answer to his doubts.

Paige jumped to the 'phone, twisted the crank vigorously. The switchboard operator, under his shelter at the shaft mouth, answered.

"Has Colonel Juveral come out of the mine?" Paige demanded.

"No, sir."

"Send an orderly, then, to bring him to the 'phone. He'll be in the shaft, or in Number Two approach gallery."

Paige swore. What the devil was the old fool doing, wasting all this precious time? He ought to be ringing Corps Headquarters this very minute.

"I've got to find the colonel *tout de suite,*" said Paige. "I—"

Before he could finish, the phone buzzed again.

"'Allo! 'Allo! Gallery Two?"

"Right," said Paige.

"Geophone officer speaking. Sounds of German working party were very loud, near and apparently above your gallery, but have suddenly stopped. Look out for a *camouflet.*"

"Understood," Paige replied. He hung up, repeated the warning to Meunier in low tones. He saw the Annamites stir restlessly. They could not hear what their white overlords were saying, but they sensed something wrong."

"I'll be right back, Meunier!" concluded Paige. "Hold everything!"

FLASHLIGHT in hand again, Paige set off along the gallery without giving the *sous-officier* a chance to reply. He walked swiftly—each second was golden now. He passed the black narrow mouth of a disused listening gallery; nameless fear was growing in his heart.

Suddenly, horribly, that sickening odor again assailed his nostrils. He stopped in his tracks, grabbed for his gun, peering ahead.

The lights went out. Nebulous sounds came from the utter darkness. The odor grew stronger.

Paige took a cautious step forward, eyes searching the gloom. Step by step he moved, as silently as he could, stopping between each step to listen, ready to fire at the first suspicious sign.

His toe struck something soft yet firm. He was a soldier; he knew the unmistakable feel of a body underfoot.

Paige stood quite still, ears straining. He heard nothing, now, save the distant rumble of shells, no sound even of breathing.

Paige switched on his torch, directing the ray downward.

"God!" he exclaimed, stepping back.

A face twisted as by the spasm of untrollable agony—bulging eyes, distended, bleeding nostrils, slack jaw—in the throat below, a puncture from which dark blood trickled slowly. The body lay sprawled on its back, arms outflung, one knee drawn up as though trying pitifully to ward off a horror that had sprung from the darkness. Near by, a five-striped *kepi* lay on the gallery floor.

"The colonel!" choked out Paige.

He dropped on one knee, felt for the heart. Colonel Juveral was dead.

Paige got to his feet, turned—will power fighting against the mad whisperings of fear—and flashed his torch along the way he had come. There was nothing in sight. He turned again. Far along the gallery he could hear the excited calls of the Annamite sentries, anxious because the lights were off. His torch stabbed into the gloom of the path ahead. Again nothing.

Paige, releasing the safety catch of his Browning, started resolutely forward.

Spider or no spider, he must get to the shaft, to the telephone, and try to stop this attack. If only Headquarters would believe him—before it was too late. Before the Germans, warned by the wire-cutting shells, had time to organize their defense, to concentrate their artillery fire on those crowded forward trenches, where the French infantry waited for the roar of a mine that could not be fired.

He flashed his torch about as he went; right, left, up and down.

And suddenly he stopped once more, halted by the instinct that all good mining engineers acquire.

That crack between the roof-planks—it was too black. There was a hollow there, above. The roof had caved in before the sheathing was in place, no doubt; but there should be special shoring now, lest there be a fall of earth that would cave in sheathing, supporting frames and all with one blow.

Hell, he was wasting time.

He had taken one step forward when he realized that there was something else. Through that black crack, a burning eye was regarding him balefully!

There was an earth-shaking thud, sounding much like a distant blow on a very large bass drum. *That* was a shell —a heavy shell. Probably the first German reply to the French wire-cutting. Loosened earth rattled down through the cracks.

Paige stood quite still, staring at the hateful eye.

Then he realized that the plank was moving, the gap was widening. Something resembling bright steel glinted in the rays of his torch.

Another thud—the earth shook once more—then there was an ominous rumble and roar. Paige leaped backward, his muscles suddenly responding to his will. He had one glimpse of the collapsing roof, in his ears was the crash of splintering timbers, but through it all rang a howl of bestial pain and terror.

Paige flung himself clear of a falling frame; coughing in the dust of the cave-in, he turned to run. His foot caught on a sill, he fell headlong, his torch spinning from his hand. He picked himself up—staggered on through the thundering darkness, back toward his trapped men, while the noise of breaking frames and falling earth gradually died away behind him.

That hollow above the roof had done its work; the shells had shaken down a few tons of earth and the price of some sergeant's carelessness had been paid—

Some one was coming toward him, stumbling along in the utter darkness. Softly Paige challenged.

"Qui va la?"

"Meunier, *mon lieutenant!*" came instant answer. "What has happened?"

"Cave-in," Paige said grimly. "Gallery's blocked. Come on; I've got to get to the 'phone. If only the damn' wire isn't broken—"

The sergeant-major was close beside him, now, breathing heavily in the dust-laden air. They moved carefully through the gloom.

"There's something wrong with the yellow monkeys," he muttered. "They're in a bad state, Lieutenant. They put out the lights on purpose."

"They did?"

"I'm sure of it," Meunier insisted. "These lights, as you know, are connected in series. If one falls, the current is broken. No sooner were you well away, and my back turned, than smash! goes a bulb, and out go the lights. Profuse apologies from a yellow rascal who'd *accidentally* swung a pick that way. I told the *doi* to get a spare bulb and put it in place, and came to see if anything had happened to you. I—*Dieu!*"

"What's that, Sergeant-Major?"

"Something—something brushed by me in the dark," growled the *sous-officier.* "This damn mine and these yellow pigs give me the creeps."

The dust was still thick. Paige thought he detected that terrible odor again, but could not be sure.

On they went toward the mine-chamber. Paige wanted to hurry, to run, but in the darkness he did not dare. If he fell and was hurt, the last hope of saving the infantry was gone.

Now he saw a faint gleam of light ahead. Somebody had lighted a candle.

"Air's all right, eh, Sergeant-Major?"

"Yes, Lieutenant. Good thing that air-duct is boxed in. It's working fine; listen to it wheeze."

They were very near the end of the gallery.

"Doi!" called Meunier. "What's wrong with you? Why haven't you fixed those lights?"

A moan answered—a moan of pure terror.

Meunier growled something inarticulate; there was a rattling noise as his foot struck a loose object on the plank flooring.

"There's the bulb," he said. "Now

let's see—over here—all right, I've got it."

An instant later the lights flashed on.

THE Annamites were all crowded into the mine chamber and the end of the gallery. They were crouched on the floor, every man of them, heads hidden in folded arms, rocking slowly on their haunches. Meunier yanked the *doi* to his feet, barking a savage question.

But Paige's interest, for the moment, was with the 'phone.

The light wires were unbroken; maybe the 'phone wire—No. The receiver was lifeless. No answer could he get to his furious cranking.

"Get the men up, Meunier. Tools. We'll try to dig out," Paige ordered. He knew well that he wouldn't be in time; but he must keep trying while there was even a ghost of a chance.

However, getting the men up was apparently beyond Meunier's power. The native sergeant would not help; he collapsed on the floor again as soon as Meunier released him, wailing something about "the spider—dragging men's bodies down into the bowels of the earth —to hell—"

Dragged to his feet again and shaken until his black teeth rattled, he finally pointed a trembling arm at the door of the magazine.

This was a chamber dug out at one side of the gallery, in which the explosive, brought up from the base during the previous night, had been temporarily stored. Its entrance was secured by a stout timber door, spiked to the gallery framing and fastened by a big padlock, of which the key had been entrusted to Meunier.

Now the padlock was open; the hasp hung loose.

Meunier reddened under Paige's searching look.

"I lost the key, sir," he confessed. "Or else one of these monkeys swiped it."

It was hardly the moment for recriminations. Paige shook some of the loose dirt out of his tunic collar and walked toward the magazine.

Funny. The dirt—some of it was crumbly, the chalk they were driving the tunnel in. But there was undoubtedly clay, too. Paige remembered that in sinking the shaft and driving the downslanting approach galleries, a stratum of clay had been passed through, overlying the deeper stratum of chalk as was so frequently the case in that part of France. At various points the respective thicknesses of these strata might vary; evidently at the point where the gallery had caved in, the clay was close above the roof of the gallery.

What was it the geophone officer had said about sounds of enemy activities "near and above" the mine chamber?

Of course, in clay, mining operations can be carried on much more quietly than in chalk—

With these disturbing thoughts still in mind, Paige opened the heavy door of the magazine. Within he saw what he expected to see—the little wooden boxes of high explosive, each some eighteen inches long and a foot wide, stacked from floor to roof and close against the door, leaving hardly room for a rat to conceal itself.

The magazine had been built just large enough for its purpose; in military mining it is a criminal waste of time and labor to excavate one unnecessary cubic foot of earth.

"Nothing here," Meunier growled. "What's the matter with the *doi*, anyway?"

Paige was staring down at the sill of the magazine door. On the stout timber lay some scattered bits of earth—grayish-white chalk mingled with darker fragments. Paige bent and picked up one of these; it was soft and cohesive. Clay.

The Annamites, muttering, moaning, had jammed themselves into the farthest corners of the mine chamber; but their

heads were not hidden now. Their glittering eyes were watching the two white men in fascinated horror, as though waiting for some dreadful fate to strike their leaders dead.

"Give me a hand, Meunier," ordered Paige suddenly. "Get out some of these boxes."

The boxes were stacked end outward, so that they could be easily removed by means of the rope handles with which each was provided.

Paige took hold of a box on the top row and pulled; the box slid outward, and he passed it to Meunier, who set it gently on the floor of the gallery. Paige pulled out another box before he realized that, behind the gap he had made, there were no more boxes, no second tier.

Just a gap—blackness, empty space.

He whirled to Meunier.

"The melinite!" he snapped. "It's gone—all but this one tier. The magazine's almost empty! What's become of it?"

Meunier's face was expressionless.

"I don't know, Lieutenant," he said slowly. "It never came out that door. I'll swear to that."

From the floor the moaning *doi* muttered a phrase or two.

"The earth-spirit, the spider-spirit!" he wailed. "The fiend has taken the little boxes!"

"Haul down the rest of those boxes!" ordered Paige.

There was a sound behind the one remaining tier of boxes, left as camouflage by whoever had taken the others.

A scrambling sound, a thud—and then a scream of agony and fear!

CHAPTER III

THE RACE OF THE MOLES

PAIGE and Meunier flung themselves on the boxes, hurling them out into the gallery with small regard for the sensitive nature of their contents.

As the gap widened and deepened, Paige could see moving shadows in the darkness behind.

The scream had not been repeated. It had died away into a sort of gurgling sound which was, strangely enough, even more horrible.

The Annamites, without, were silent now. As if they held their breaths—waiting—

The boxes were clear of the entrance.

"Pistol ready, Meunier!" ordered Paige, and stood aside a little to let the electric light shine into the dark hole.

It shone on the coal-scuttle helmet, the gray uniform, the staring blue eyes of a German soldier—a soldier who, jammed into one corner of the magazine, still struggled feebly, with clawing, maddened hands at his throat and made odd little whining noises, horribly like those of a terrier worrying a rat. Bright metal gleamed toward that straining throat—

Meunier and Paige fired almost at the same instant.

Writhing, chattering frightfully, the spider-thing fell to the ground. The German collapsed, a heap of green-gray rags.

Upon the kicking horror on the ground Meunier turned the blaze of a reflector-lamp.

Paige saw a face—a human face, a wrinkled, intelligent, savage face. Its red eyes, with a beast-like trick of reflecting the light, slanted upwards at their outer corners. Instinctively Paige spoke in Annamese:

"Be still! Or I'll shoot again—"

"The Great Spirit of the Earth will preserve me, white man," came a croaking answer. But this man-beast had prudence as well, for he—or it—lay motionless, bleeding beside his victim.

"Who, in God's name, are you?" Paige choked out.

"Cha, the sorcerer, of Luang Prabang," was the prompt reply.

"*Dieu!*" breathed Meunier, while the Annamites resumed their keening. Paige

looked the sorcerer over, marveling.

He was a small man, but very lithe and muscular, with abnormally long arms and legs for his diminutive body. His body and limbs were covered with thick, matted hair, which had probably never been washed; he exuded a bestial odor.

The "fang," which was still fixed in the throat of the dead German, was no more than a thin-bladed dagger.

The sorcerer, wounded but still very much alive, watched Paige with his wicked little eyes.

Into the confusion of Paige's excited thoughts came the grim realization that he had other enemies to deal with.

This dead man was a German—clay on the doorsill—

Paige looked up at the roof of the magazine.

He saw a gaping hole—a hole through which the Germans, working unheard in the soft clay, had burrowed downward toward the sound of French picks, struck by great good fortune his magazine, and had, doubtless, with guttural German chuckles, removed his explosives box by box.

And now—

He leaped suddenly upon a dangling pair of wires, snatched them apart from the detonating cap to which they were attached.

This soldier had descended to make the final play in the grim game of underground warfare. The Germans had intended to detonate that last tier of melinite, thus blowing in the French gallery and burying the working party alive in their own mine chamber.

Only, in the meanwhile, the spider—fleeing from the cave-in which had destroyed his lair—had taken refuge in the magazine, hiding behind the boxes, which had, in Meunier's absence, been stacked up for him again by the Annamites, his slaves. Had they known of the stealing of the melinite? Probably—their ears were sharp, their instincts sharper. But they thought it was some familiar demon of Cha's who was stealing it; it would never occur to them that the Germans were to blame.

Paige was very close to despair.

ABOVE, the wire cutting shells burst no longer. The path was clear, the infantry ready—waiting for the mine. And the Germans must know, now. Already their heavy guns had commenced firing; as soon as orders could issue, as quickly as word could be sent from battery to battery and fire registered on the new and tempting target, a hail of death would shriek down upon those crowded trenches—

While Paige crouched here in the bowels of the earth, helpless.

Slowly his thoughts were ordering themselves, under the lash of his will, the iron clamp of discipline.

He reflected that the Germans, in their gallery up above, must be wondering what had become of their comrade. Had they heard his shriek? Possibly not; acoustics, underground, are capricious.

Or possibly they had and were at that very moment creeping forward, grenades in hand—

"Cha!" snapped Paige. "You murdered Colonel Juveral. For that you must hang, you understand?"

The sorcerer blinked at him.

Very earnestly Paige spoke again. "Listen, Cha. It is better to live, even in the penal colony of Pulo Condore, than to swing from a gallows by the neck. You played a game—for what stakes?"

"Your chiefs refuse to my people even honorable burial—nay, that cannot be. Therefore I kill, so that at last my people will be taken from this place and sent home again. Or perhaps to the fire-wagons—"

Paige nodded grimly. He saw the point. The Annamite chauffeurs attached to the motor-transport corps

were having no trouble about getting their dead sent home. Somebody who understood was in command of the M.T.

"Well, you've done yourself no good by murdering Colonel Juveral," Paige growled. "He was the one man who could have helped you. I understand how you feel about your funerals; and I just had the colonel where he'd listen to my recommendations—when you killed him."

Cha lifted himself on one elbow. His eyes glittered with some unfathomable emotion.

"Is that so?" he demanded in a hissing whisper. "*Ai.* That is bad. I can read your soul, white man. You are no liar. *Ai!* For my error there must be atonement."

Into that opening Paige struck instantly.

"I go now to attack the enemies of France!" he snapped. "I need these soldiers. Command them to follow me, to obey, to fight like men instead of cowering like whipped curs. Many will die, but if the victory is ours I swear on my honor as an officer that the bodies of those who fall in battle shall be recovered at any cost and sent to their homeland for burial!"

Meunier, the veteran, nodded approval of these words.

Cha, eyes averted, made no answer.

"Come, Cha! What do you say?" Paige insisted. A shudder passed through the body of the man; no words came.

Meunier bent lower.

"He's fainted," he muttered. "Or pretended to, anyhow."

"And those yellow scoundrels won't budge an inch without him," Meunier added. Which was true enough, apparently.

"All right," growled Paige. "Then we'll go it alone, Meunier. Got any grenades? Give me a couple. Where's that locker?"

He opened a steel locker, hanging across the gallery from the magazine door, and took out a coil of fuse, a pocket lighter, and four copper detonating caps, which last he handled with great respect, stowing them in the breast pockets of his tunic. Throwing the fuse over his shoulder, he re-entered the magazine, stepping over the unconscious Cha and the dead German, and reaching upward, caught hold of a displaced roof plank and drew himself up and into the German hole. There, as he had expected, he found a knotted rope hanging down from above. Meunier put out the lights below and stood ready to follow.

In the fetid darkness Paige listened. He could hear a sort of murmuring above, voices at a little distance perhaps. But nothing nearer, no sound of menace.

Gripping the rope, bracing himself against the crumbling sides of the hole, he worked his way upward several feet until his hand encountered wood again. A floor-sill of the German gallery.

Carefully lifting his head above the level of the floor, he peered along the gallery.

It was well made, that mine. Floors, sides and roof were lined with solid timber frames set right together, after the thorough German fashion which scorned such hasty expedients as plank sheathing.

There was no light close at hand; perhaps a hundred feet away, however, the first of a series of incandescents swung from the ceiling, and beneath it stood two German soldiers who seemed to be peering toward the hole. Wondering what was keeping their pal so long, probably. Something was on the floor at their feet—a box-like affair, with a handle. A firing-magneto.

They were waiting to blow in the French gallery and they were standing well back to avoid the gases of the explosion, surging up through the hole.

How many were behind then, Paige could not tell. Nor could he wait to

find out. He crawled up out of the hole; Meunier followed.

"Stay here," muttered Paige, "cover my advance with your pistol. If they get me, carry on. The job is to find the rest of our melinite, if it's still in this gallery, and—"

"I know," cut in Meunier. *"Allez, mon lieutenant."*

PAIGE walked boldly ahead. The Germans would be expecting their comrade's return; they would not be suspicious.

"Bereit?" asked one as Paige approached.

"Bereit," confirmed Paige, took another step and shot the inquirer through the head. Before the other soldier could open his mouth, Paige had shot him down also.

"Yes—ready," muttered Paige, and went forward on the run.

Just before he had fired, he had seen what he was looking for—a melinite box, several of them in fact, on the gallery floor. To right and left were openings—the mouths of listening galleries, driven out stealthily through the clay by the Germans to check up on the workings of the French below.

Leaping over the fallen Germans, Paige reached the listeners. They were both choked with melinite cases, hastily piled in there by German soldiers who lacked the means of taking them out of the mine until they could assemble enough small trucks to handle the job.

"This," muttered Paige, "is the first bit of luck I've had today."

Meunier came running up.

"You've found it, *mon lieutenant?*"

"Yes. I guessed right for once; they hadn't had a chance to get all that stuff out through their single gallery. And—it's just about in the right place! Talk about the irony of war—the Germans have corrected Captain Lebrun's error for him! Grab that pick, Meunier, and tear down the ceiling—get some earth down, lively, for tamping while I open a couple of boxes."

Paige seized a shovel and applied its steel point with more vigor than caution to the strap-iron binding of the nearest box. As he worked, in frantic haste, he could hear guttural voices shouting, far along the gallery, and the blare of a Klaxon horn giving the alarm.

He remembered the words of the portly *"Reglement pour le service des troupes du génie en campagne,"* the cautious words which directed that melinite, being a picric acid derivative, must not be handled roughly nor its containers opened with metal tools. A wooden wedge and light taps with a mallet were recommended. Paige wished he had the author of those instructions down in that German mine-gallery—

A bullet whined along the gallery, grazing the timbers above Paige's head. Meunier, sweating and puffing, was tearing at the roof frames with a miner's pick.

The shovel point drove in; with one heave Paige ripped cover and binding from the box, revealing the close-packed yellow crystalline blocks of high explosive within, each wrapped in its cover of oiled paper.

Paige caught up one end of his coil of fuse and violated another safety regulation by crimping a detonating cap on the end of the fuse with his teeth.

If the cap had gone off—and fulminate of mercury is the most treacherous of explosives—it would have taken off the top of Paige's head in the process. But he had no time to worry over such details. He was too busy unwrapping a box of melinite, inserting the fused cap in the hole left in the block for that purpose, and replacing the block in its case.

Cursing the sturdiness of the German framing, Meunier had at last torn free one cap-piece and was battering at another. Clay was falling in chunks, but not nearly enough yet to tamp the ends

of those listeners. It would be futile to fire the explosive untamped; the force of the explosion would take the line of least resistance and spend itself largely in the open galleries.

And Paige wanted the blast to drive upward—upward beneath, as he calculated, the Rheinpfalz Redoubt!

Another bullet and another—

"Lousy shooting," panted Meunier. "Just like all engineer troops—neglecting their pistol practice till they can't even hit two guys in a mine-gallery."

He smashed down another roof-timber as he spoke.

A sharp order in German echoed along the gallery—an order which included the word *"maschinengewehr."*

"Hurry, Meunier," muttered Paige. "They're getting a machine-gun."

Didn't dare use grenades, of course. Afraid they'd set off the melinite and blow up their own redoubt. But a machine-gun would make short work of the two Legionnaires.

"Here they come!" barked Meunier suddenly.

Hob-nailed boots thudded on the floor of the gallery. Dark figures leaped forward beneath the glare of the incandescents.

Well, Paige wasn't under any restrictions about grenades.

He pulled a pin and threw—there was a bright flash, a wicked report that echoed like mad thunder in the gallery, the whistle of scattering fragments, broken by the sharp voice of Meunier's pistol, once, again, again—

"That's stopped 'em, for the minute," Paige choked out, coughing as the fumes of the grenade drifted back. The echoes died away into silence, save for distant, excited shouts as before, where some unseen officer was urging unseen soldiers to be quick with that *verdammt* machine-gun.

"They won't try another rush," opined Meunier, as his pick tore at the stubborn roof-timbers again.

Paige was at work on another case of melinite. One "booster" for each side would be enough. He must work fast—he had little time. His biggest worry was the tamping. The Germans were reaping an advantage they'd never expected from their stout timber framing.

Now the second case was primed and fused. In place, now, nestling, ready, among its companions in the right-hand listener.

Paige led the two fuses back a little way, caught up the shovel and jumped to help Meunier.

The shouts of the Germans had given place again to running feet. Beneath a distant light he saw men struggling with a burden—a three-legged, awkward burden—a Maxim. They were setting it down—well out of grenade reach, out of reach of anything but a chance pistol bullet—

Pick and shovel tore at the framing, at the exposed clay surface behind, small as it was. Clay was coming down, piling on the floor of the gallery; but not enough, not enough. They must get another frame down. And that would need two—maybe three minutes more.

Minutes that they could not have; the Germans had set up their Maxim, were dropping behind it to fire. Their bullets would sweep the gallery with a hail of death which, in that narrow space, no living thing could escape.

It was the end—Paige had made his last throw and lost—

A yell from Meunier, an answering shrill howl behind them.

Paige whirled.

Scuttling toward him along the gallery floor came the crazed Annamite.

Paige grabbed for his holstered gun—then to his ears came the voice of Cha:

"I come as a friend, white man. I will atone for my error. Better to die like a warrior than hang like a dog—aye, or rot in a white man's prison. I lead my people to the end!"

Sure enough, swarming up out of the

hole and along the gallery behind him came the Annamites of Meunier's squad, their yellow faces set and grim, their slanting eyes mere slits of fire as the light struck them.

And each man carried his carbine, with its long needle-like bayonet fixed.

CHA, half-raised on his legs to speak to Paige, dropped back into his spider rôle.

For years to come," the spider man chanted, "they will tell by the banks of the Mekong how Cha the Sorcerer died! Follow me, sons of Annam! Honorable burial shall be yours! White man, remember your promise!"

He flung himself forward—his wounds had weakened him perceptibly, but now he ran swiftly down the gallery on all fours, screaming his battle cry through teeth clenched on his dagger-blade.

Behind him rushed the Annamites, just as the German machine-gun began its deadly chatter.

Bullets thudded into yellow bodies—but there were other yellow bodies behind, passing Paige and Meunier, jamming the gallery from side to side, a human shield for the white men.

And the hand of the German gunner must have faltered as he saw that terrible apparition bounding toward him, for the firing ceased, howls of Teutonic terror rang through the gallery; somewhere a grenade burst, carbines cracked, the yells of the Annamites mingled with the furious orders of a German officer—

All the while Paige and Meunier battered and tore at that last frame. It was splintering—it yielded—down it came, and great lumps of clay with it. Meunier, precariously perched on the pile of clay already fallen, tore down more with mighty swings of his pick; Paige, on the floor, shoveled the stuff madly into the ends of the narrow listening galleries, on top of the waiting fuses. Once he stopped, seized one of the dead Germans and threw his body in against the piled-up cases of melinite. Then the other into the opposite tunnel. They'd make bulk; they'd fill in. It was no time for the niceties of civilized warfare.

The infantry was waiting up there—thousands of 'em, his old outfit—and any minute might see the end, the German guns firing in real earnest. Many was the time that Paige, out in a front line trench harassed by German 77's which the French heavies had not yet silenced, had cursed the length of time it takes to concentrate the fire of heavy artillery on a given point. Now he was profoundly thankful for that same feature of modern gunnery—

Suddenly he was done. The listeners were blocked with clay. Behind the clay seals, the melinite waited.

Under the dim lights along the gallery, men still fought above the silent machine-gun, fought with bestial howls and the clash of steel and the crack of pistols.

"Back, Meunier!" called Paige, and ran for his fuse-ends.

The sergeant-major dropped his pick, darted past Paige, running for the hole and safety. For Paige, there was no safety. Time-fuse he had not dared to bring, lest it cheat him of a precious minute.

Kneeling on the floor, he picked up the ends of the twin fuses—red fuse, instantaneous fuse along which the fire would flash at the rate of one hundred twenty feet a second.

Holding the two ends together in a steady hand, he touched them with the flame of his pocket lighter and dropped instantly on his face.

The fuses flared, hissed—

Then the earth reeled, a great gust of wind tore and shrieked along the gallery, the world seemed to shake like an orange in a giant's hand.

The thunder of the gods beat at Paige's ears; a mighty force pressed him down, down into the earth.

The light went out.

The last sound in Paige's ears was a steady drumming overhead. The barrage—the attack was going forward! He smiled in the darkness . . .

After a long time, Paige became aware that a light was shining in his eyes, and that water was running over his face.

He sputtered, blinked at a flickering candle, tried to sit up.

"*Dieu, mon lieutenant!*" growled a voice. "I thought you were done for! Those German timbers we cursed so saved your neck in the end."

Above him Paige saw the grim, dark face of Sergeant-Major Meunier.

"I thought *you* were safe in our own gallery, Meunier!" said Paige, becoming aware that his whole body was one vast ache.

"I was," answered the sergeant-major frankly, "but I came back after the blast to look for you. The 'phone's working again—wire wasn't broken, after all, just some switchboard trouble. They'll dig us out presently. And the operator says you blew the Rheinpfalz Redoubt clear off the map!"

"With your help, Meunier — and Cha's!" grinned Paige, suddenly very happy and light-hearted. "We'll take care to spread the news of how he died to the other Annamites. It's his due."

"His heirs and successors will be big-time sorcerers 'round Luang Prabang for a century on the strength of it," Meunier remarked. "*Zut!* A queer people, those yellow rascals. I'll never understand 'em."

Paige got shakily to his feet. The candle light shone on a gallery blocked by fallen clay interlaced by a tangle of timbers. But where Paige stood, the gallery was clear; the sturdy German framing had held, had saved Paige's life.

Beyond, beneath that mass of earth somewhere, lay Cha and his comrades. It would be a job to dig them out, but they had earned their "honorable burial."

Paige saluted them stiffly, in the name of France.

Then he turned, aided by Meunier, and limped toward the hole that led to his own workings, to freedom and the honors that awaited him.

BROTHER OF LIONS

A fact story by WYNANT DAVIS HUBBARD

THE Namwala district of Northern Rhodesia embraces the upper end of the great Kafue river flats region, which is one of the most densely stocked of the cattle regions of Rhodesia. Thousands upon thousands of cattle wander these flats, attended by only a native or two. Cover, in the form of dense patches of thick bush, stretches of reeds by the river or clumps of eight and ten foot grass, is abundant. With such a setting, it is not surprising that the Namwala district is, as we say in Africa, stiff with lions. Being an honest man, I would not say that there are lions behind every bush. Judging from the weekly reports brought to us by visiting natives, however, there is no question but that there are several hundred lions living more or less permanently in the Namwala district.

Ibamba Ranch, which lies in the heart of the Namwala district, consists of about thirteen square miles of land, half of which is open, treeless grass country which floods during the rainy season with overflow water from the Kafue river. The dry half of the ranch is a sandy rise, covered with large thorn and fig trees. Along the northwestern edge of this rise runs a long, narrow strip of brush, small trees, vines and grass, so dense that a man can only enter it by crawling. We call this type of bush *'saka* and it is a favorite resting and breeding place for lions.

Although the Namwala district is the most famous in Northern Rhodesia for lions, the district's reputation pales into insignificance beside that boasted by Ibamba. From the fifteenth of May until the beginning of December, lions are so numerous in Ibamba that a traveler is apt to meet them on the paths at any time. Lions breed in the long *'saka*. Game and cattle are plentiful. Water is

abundant and good. There is safe cover.

Dale, one of Namwala's early magistrates and the original owner of Ibamba, was a bachelor and a careful man. He had saved money. He had a nice pension. Yet, with all the world to pick from, he chose Ibamba as the spot on which to start a cattle ranch. The lions just loved him for it.

Lions swarmed over the ranch. They attacked the cattle in the daytime and stampeded them out of the *kraals* at night. Dugan, a South African and one of the first whites to enter the country, managed the ranch for Dale. He told me that he seldom saw just one or two. Five, eight, a dozen, fourteen lions were the rule. He shot and killed a few. He poisoned many more, getting six in one night. But the lions got more cattle than Dugan got lions.

His natives were terrified and the herders went about armed. In spite of all the dogs which Dugan collected, lions came about the house. One reared up against a window. Putting his huge forepaws on the stone sill, he dragged his claws over the stone and left marks which can be seen today. Lions even walked up on the veranda of the house.

This could not go on forever. The ranch folded up and the few remaining cattle were driven down to the railway and sold. For a time Ibamba lay vacant. Then a syndicate purchased it and sent a young man named Smith up to take it over. It was something of an occasion for Smith and he made a party of it.

The evening of the day preceding that upon which they were to reach Ibamba, Smith and the man accompanying him went out to look for an antelope to shoot for meat. They bumped into three lions and wounded a big male. Darkness came down before they could find the lion and kill him, and the finish of the hunt had to be put off until the morrow. That night about the campfire there was talk of nothing else, stories of Ibamba's reputation were told and Smith was subjected to much friendly chiding about his new possession.

Perhaps it was the scoffing of his friends which started Smith off alone early the next morning. No one will ever know. When the other members of the party awoke and prepared for the hunt they found Smith had gone. The natives told them that he had left very early, taking one gun-bearer with him. Not knowing how to follow him, the others sat down to have breakfast and to wait for the hunter's return.

Within an hour they saw him coming. He was alone, and he was staggering and wavering like a man grievously hurt. His friends rushed to him. Smith was covered with dirt and blood. His clothes were torn and he clutched the brim of his hat with both hands. Swaying on his feet, he waved his companions away, muttering, "Don't take off my hat or I'll die. My brains will fall out."

His companions had to determine the extent of his wounds and carefully removed his hat. His brains fell out.

Smith had found his wounded lion and it had charged him; mauling him terribly, it had bitten him through the head.

He was buried at Namwala in the little graveyard beside the man who was stamped to death by buffalo on the Kafue flats. And Ibamba was again abandoned until I took it over several years ago.

WHEN it became known that Sibyunibyuni—my native name, which means the Father of Birds—had taken over Ibamba, there was much covert amusement and much shaking of heads. Some people gave us six months. Others, more generous, said that we might last a year. But the end was inevitable. The lions would kill all our stock and chase us off in the bargain. Had this not happened to every one else who had tried to settle

upon Ibamba? Why should I be immune? There were just as many lions as ever, were there not? There were. There was no question about that.

It began almost immediately. Lions attacked the cattle which a trader had in a *kraal* near the river, fattening them preparatory to the trek to the railway. The lions killed two and mauled several more. We were interested listeners to the wild-eyed herd boys as they poured forth their stories the next morning. For our herd of a hundred cattle was due to arrive that very day and the only *kraal* which we had ready was a flimsy affair, made of small light poles.

There had been three lions. A huge male and his two wives. It seemed that they came upon Ibamba periodically and that whenever they did come they killed successfully.

Two weeks flew by. Very early in the morning of the fifteenth day after we had received our cattle, a tremendous racket burst out around the trader's *kraal*. Grass torches flared and nervous voices called and shouted. We could hear cattle bellowing and the crack of breaking poles and branches. Lions.

We rushed on our clothes and dashed for the truck. It was still dark and we had to have the headlights in order to see anything. But by the time we had reached the *kraal* the lions had gone. They had killed one bullock and stampeded the rest, but of themselves we could not find a trace, save tracks.

As soon as the sky lightened sufficiently to enable us to see clearly, I summoned my trackers. Starting at the dead bullock, we back-tracked the lions to find out where they had come from and how many there had been. A lion and two lionesses had come. As we tracked, my natives kept glancing at me and I at them in astonishment. For the trail was leading us first to our temporary and very flimsy pig pen—and from there straight to the *kraal* in which our cattle had spent the night. There, about the *kraal*, we found the depressions in the dust and grass where three lions had lain. From the positions in the dust it was obvious that they had been watching the cattle. One lion had gotten up; approaching the *kraal*, he had lain down again, so close that the imprints of his front paws actually extended under the poles and into the *kraal* itself.

This was the beginning. Regularly, every two weeks from then until the rains began, those three lions came and visited us. Each time they came up out of the long grass of the flats and headed first for the cattle *kraal*. There they would lie for several hours. I think they were counting the cattle to see how we were getting along and memorizing the colors and markings, so that they would not make a mistake and kill one. Having counted the cattle, the lions rose and walked along the paths to visit the pigs. They would look over our small herd of goats and wander about the new construction for a little. When they had satisfied their curiosity they would head straight for one of the trader's two *kraals* and kill. In between these regular visits, other lions came to Ibamba on occasions. Although our *kraals* were the flimsiest of all, although we had pigs, a few dogs and some goats, no lion even so much as attempted to stampede our stock.

Being only human, we could not refrain from boasting a little about our friendship with, and power over lions. The natives talked a bit among themselves, but they were loath to admit that there was anything unusual. Just wait until the dry season returns, they said. Then, Sibyunibyuni, you will find out about lions.

The dry season came and the lions returned. Once a troop of fourteen came. Our sawboy, old Malegebo, going to work on the far corner of the ranch, met six little cubs accompanied by a single huge lioness. Lions killed cattle at the near-by village of Chibunze and entered

our strip of *'saka* to sleep off their gorge. Often we found lion tracks in the freshly-plowed fields which we were clearing against the coming planting season. Eight lions visited the mission three miles away and killed in the compound. One night lions chased a herd of zebra right over the log-sawing encampment and one zebra actually fell into the saw pit and broke its neck.

During the seven months of dry weather surely one hundred lions must have slept, crossed or killed game upon Ibamba—and not one of our animals was even frightened by lions. Talk increased. Our natives began muttering among themselves. The few white people spoke of Hubbard's luck. It was not luck, for luck does not enter into such happenings. The lions were there. The cattle were there. Our *kraals* were no stronger nor any more formidable than those of the native village near by, nor were there as many people near the cattle.

WHEN we had been there a year we secured a baby lioness. Its mother had been killed while attacking a native *kraal*. We immediately adopted the big-headed orphan and raised it in the house with our other pets. With the arrival of this tiny lioness began the intimate knowledge of the actions of the wild lions of the Namwala district which has given me such a reputation among my native neighbors.

Paddy grew so big within a year that she could and did knock my wife down. It was just in play, but we had a year-old daughter too, so we moved Paddy outside to a huge, wire-enclosed paddock, fifty yards from the house. There Paddy roared and rolled, grew fat and mushily sentimental and prospered exceedingly. And all the wild lions learned of her presence. They roared in answer to her booming calls and loud and long conversations would roll and thunder across Ibamba. Great male lions came up out of the flats or the near-by *'saka;* prowling about our house, gardens and compounds, they would visit with Paddy for hours in the night.

Many times my wife and I, playing cards in our living room would stop our game to listen to the lions as they walked near the house,moaning, grunting and sometimes snarling to Paddy, fifty yards away. Wild lions grew so bold and so accustomed to the sights, sounds and smells of Ibamba homestead that they would climb into our truck—parked not more than a hundred feet from the back door—and steal whatever meat might be lying in it.

This must sound incredible. But to us it was an everyday affair. Our natives, however, were terrified. The houseboys would not stay after dark. Just before sunset the cook, tableboy, wood boy and kitchen *picanni* would gather up their bundles of spears and trot away to the compound. Just as regularly every morning there was a search about the house for lion tracks. On an average of three times a week the tracks were there.

Ibamba's reputation grew. Natives of the district avoided it just before sunset and after dawn, as though we had the plague. Our natives would not venture forth from the compound after dark. Every hut had a door of boards with hinges and some sort of lock. Our storeroom suffered grievous raids for nails and screws, bits of planks and hinges. The cook's house, which stood alone and was made of brick, had its windows barricaded with heavy slabs. For lions walked Ibamba at night. The rumbling of lions thundered from the grain fields; echoing from the walls of the house, it mingled with Paddy's welcoming roars until the volume seemed to set the iron roof of the house to vibrating in sympathy. We lived in the very midst of lions.

Only once did these visiting lions ever even so much as attempt to molest our

cattle. That night we awoke to the sound of yells and shouts from the compound. I went out on the veranda. Looking in the direction of the racket I could see flickering flares of light, where bunches of grass had been set alight and thrown out. Torches flared. The bellowing of cattle, the crack of poles and the barking of dogs mingled with the howls and cries of the natives. I heard a few low growls, the thudding of running hoofs. Lions had stampeded the cattle out of the *kraal* and were chasing them across the grain fields behind the house. I called at the top of my voice and was answered with shouts of "Lions, lions, *I'nkosi!*" Within a few minutes flaring torches issued from the compound and a group of my hunters came running to the house.

As the light from the flickering torches played over their black, earnest faces, the hunters told us that there had been six lions. They had crept up close to the huts of the compound and by a concerted rush between the huts had reached the *kraal* in the center, and so frightened the catttle that they had rushed against the poles and broken them down, so that the herd had streamed out into the fields. Even now we could hear the bawls of the cattle as they ran madly out on to the open veld. Now, they told us, you will find in the morning that the lions have killed.

It did indeed seem as if this would be so. But we had to carry our bluff through to the end.

"No," I assured the shaken group. "No. These lions are strangers. They have come from afar. They are not any of the lions which visit us regularly. But they will not kill. In the morning go out and find the cattle. You will find all."

Nobody knew better than I that when lions attack in force and succeed in stampeding cattle out of a *kraal* they almost invariably kill. Lions are cautious, careful animals. They know that men have guns which kill from afar. They know that men have lights which turn the protecting darkness into day and that we have traps and dogs and spears and even poison. When lions screw up sufficient courage to attack a village they are hungry indeed and intent upon a kill.

All the next day the natives scoured the veld, searching for the missing cattle. In groups of twos and threes, sometimes more, sometimes singly, the natives found our scattered herd and drove them home. One by one we counted them. The total mounted. By the evening only seven were missing. Which confirmed the natives' prophecy.

The next morning a native came over from Maala, the capital of the Mashakulumbwe tribe. He had news for me, he said. I produced a small gift and he asked if we had lost any cattle. At the word cattle my natives crowded around.

"Yes," I admitted, "we have lost some cattle. What do you know?"

"I know where they are," he replied.

"Where, and how many?"

"They are in my *kraal* at Maala. And there are so many." The native held out his hand and in the palm I counted seven grains of corn. Our herd was intact. The lions had failed to kill.

Our reputation rose to the sky. The tale was told and retold over the district. Had not Sibyunibyuni said that night, even as the lions were chasing his cattle in the darkness about him, that none would die? How had he known that the lions would not kill? How did Sibyunibyuni communicate with lions which came up out of the veld, lions which he did not know?

Never again were we molested by lions. A few days later the traders from Namwala passed across the upper end of Ibamba, driving a herd of some three hundred head of cattle down to the railway. They camped for the night at Maala, putting their cattle into the *kraals* of the villagers. And that night six lions attacked and stampeded the

entire herd so far that more than a week passed before all were collected. Nor did they find all. Some were stolen. And some were killed. Here and there over the veld the searchers found torn and mangled carcasses. The remains of the kills of lions.

NEVER over the course of the next two years did lions come but that we had warning. An electric, sort of a storm-is-coming feeling crept over my wife and me. Sometimes this came at breakfast and we would tell the astonished and rather frightened tableboy that lions would come that night. Sometimes the feeling crept over us at noon or late in the day. It never failed. Whenever we prophesied that lions would come, they did. Sometimes it was a single lion, sometimes one accompanied by his wife or wives. Six or eight would come and serenade us from the cornfield, sixty yards away. Lions trampled the tomatoes in our vegetable garden. They stalked up and down the paths about the house and down to the river. The wood boy found tracks amongst the chips from his chopping. Lions even came on to the veranda of the cook's house. They lay about the compound, sending the dogs into hysterics of barking.

No lion so much as frightened one of our domestic animals. We grew so careless that when white ants ate the *kraal* poles and they fell down, leaving great gaps, we merely plugged the openings with thorn bushes. It became an accepted fact that the cattle were completely safe so long as they remained upon Ibamba.

Our natives even brought their own cattle from their villages and kept them on Ibamba. With us they were safe. In the villages they were subject to attack at any time. For the immunity which we experienced stopped exactly at the borders of Ibamba. Chibunze village, four hundred yards outside the northeast boundary, was constantly attacked. Scarce a week passed but what lions killed one or more cattle beasts.

Luck? Possibly, although it does not seem to me that luck has anything to do with the killings of lions. Special protection does not give the answer, because for long periods of time we did not even have cartridges for our rifles. It is just a fact. Lions could not come onto Ibamba without our having foreknowledge of their coming, nor when they did come, over a period of four years, did they kill a single one of our cattle, pigs, goats or sheep.

Am I, then, what the black boys call me, a *matakati,* or witch-doctor of lions? It is absurd. Please let me say it first. But let me add to that statement another equally true—unless you are willing to admit the natives' reason there can be no other explanation. I have hunted, captured and otherwise been mixed up with lions for years; but such experiences do not ordinarily make one a brother of lions, as the natives of Northern Rhodesia insist that I am. Neither do they give one the power to foretell the arrival of lions on any given night.

All of which is something which I cannot explain. I am a little afraid to try. All I can do is lay the story before you. I, an American, a *matakati?* Who am I to answer? Strange things happen in Africa.

SURPRISE ATTACK

By Perry Adams

A COCKNEY cavalryman and a Ludiana Sikh infantryman—what an unholy combination! A pair of strange bulldogs, if ever there was one. Jim Tullibardine out of the 13th Hussars — Tully, the men called him—and Jir Singh of the 15th Sikhs—the chronicle of those two, its beginning rooted in misunderstanding and hate and violence seems out of the beaten path.

Chances are, had they remained in their original units they would never have met at all. Peshawar, gateway to the Khyber on India's Northwest Frontier, is a mighty big station, with plenty of elbow room; so big, even though all the renowned First Division is not quartered there, that you can move about the British cantonment for years and see new faces every day of your life.

Promotion in the Hussars appeared gallingly slow to big, good-natured, awkward-seeming Tully. For all the easy way of him, he was ambitious. And so there came a day when he ran a reflective ham of a hand over the crossed flags on his left sleeve—he'd been a regimental signaler for several years—and decided that if he couldn't wangle his overdue lance stripe in the cavalry at least he could catch himself more pay by taking his specialized knowledge to a signal company. He made his application for transfer and it was accepted.

In the Sikhs, because of his intelli-

gence, young Jir Singh was a natural selection for the momentarily depleted ranks of the signalers. The boy had no more than fired his recruit's musketry course and been "passed off the square," than they had him out with a flag learning his *iddy umpties.*

Jir Singh eventually applied for transfer to the Peshawar signal company for a reason quite different than Tully's. Thayer *sahib,* who as a company commander in the 15th enjoyed immense popularity with his men, had recently been loaned to the Engineers for the express purpose of assuming command of the signal company. Jir Singh, who had known Thayer as his skipper ever since recruit days, greatly desired to follow his beloved *sahib.* Write it off to pure chance that the young Sikh landed in the signal company's headquarters section, where big Tully was already well established.

Now, if you would witness a partial unrolling of the secret scroll which reveals how and why the English have been able to control more than three hundred million brown people who have license to hate them as usurpers, it is possible that here you may catch that glimpse. Detractors of the Raj sometimes claim that it is by force and fear alone that the British have ruled India.

Rubbish! The bond is made of different stuff—of finer stuff. It is conventionally illustrated by the devotion of the native rank and file for its British officers—fair enough and entirely true to type. Far less usual, though equally symbolic in its implications, is this story of British and Indian rankers of nominally equal standing, thrown together in that—well, preposterous — hodge-podge of men drawn from every arm of the service: Of Tullibardine and Jir Singh, Peshawar signal company.

THE blazing sun of a torrid June morning was ideal for heliograph; it was by helio that the various practice stations had been communicating. Brigade sections were scattered in the vicinity of the Bara River, about five miles from headquarters, which had set up shop on a small mound possibly a couple of hundred yards from barracks.

To an uninitiated observer a signal company operating under such conditions would have seemed a pretty dull affair. At headquarters the usual group of British N. C. O.'s and sappers—some Indian ranks, too—loitered with seeming carelessness about a young forest of funny looking tripods, upon each of which was mounted an object easily mistaken for a tiptilted shaving mirror—helios.

Jim Tullibardine, a fine reader who also possessed one of the surest key hands in the company, had been receiving for some time: the light from his distant out-station blazed dots and dashes through a slight ground haze, while Tully read aloud to the writer beside him. As messages were completed the writer handed them to an orderly —young Jir Singh—who carried them to Lieutenant Sanger, the subaltern in charge. He was seated at a table a few yards to the rear of the battery of instruments.

At last Tully relaxed, turned and spoke directly to his superior.

"Second Brigade just finished its block, sir. 'Ave yer h'anything fer 'em?"

The officer glanced at his watch. "Quite a batch. But we'll knock off for ten minutes first. Let them know."

Tully made a minute adjustment of his mirror spot on the vane and tapped out the necessary signals. Then he and his writer withdrew from their instrument, feeling in their pockets for cigarettes. Neither had any.

"We'll send the h'orderly fer some," Tully said.

He called the near-by Jir Singh, held out some coppers and addressed him in Hindustani.

"Brother, go to the coffee shop and buy me a packet of Scissors cigarettes."

Automatically, young Jir Singh took the proffered coins and stared at him incredulously. Hindustani was no more his native language than it was the big cavalryman's. Could he have misunderstood—or was this *Angrezi* deliberately trying to insult him? It simply did not occur to Jir Singh that any one might be unaware of the fact that asking a Sikh to handle tobacco, even packaged, was a deadly slur to his religion.

The boy ran a puzzled, hesitant hand over the soft down on his face—being what he was he would never shave, of course, but it would be a year or more before his whiskers were long enough to curl behind the ears, Sikh fashion.

Tully saw his hesitation, frowned.

"Why do you wait? We have ten minutes only. Go quickly."

"*Sahib,*" Jir Singh muttered, "I do not understand."

"Lazy blighter," Tully remarked to his writer, "'e'll waste the rest period playin' dumb."

And now more than ever he was determined to make the orderly do his bidding. He dropped back into Hindustani:

"You understand well enough. Go at once, without further talk."

Tully's harsh tone served to confirm Jir Singh's growing conviction that the Englishman was deliberately insulting him.

"You know I cannot do your errand," he demurred, watching Tully closely.

He spoke in dignified tone, without heat, but the look in his large brown eyes should have served as warning that he was not to be goaded further.

The two were utterly at cross purposes. Tully muttered thickly, "No bloomin' Indian's goin' ter come the old sodger over me!" and took a quick step forward, his usually calm, good natured face twisted in sudden rage.

He flung up a long arm, pointed toward the coffee shop: "It is an order—go!"

Somehow, the translation lacks the clipped impact of the Hindustani:

"*Hukum hai—jao!*"

Jir Singh's expression changed, his eyes narrowed. Deliberately he tossed a copper at Tully's feet and even more deliberately sent its mate in the same direction. Then woodenly, and without further speech, he turned away.

Tully's face flamed crimson. He leaped after the Sikh. Seizing his arm with itching fingers, he whirled the lighter man round until their faces all but touched.

"Son of an unchaste she-camel—go, or I shall kill you!"

Jir Singh spat squarely into his face and, eel-like, wriggled free. He wore belt and side arms. He went for the bayonet.

The weapon was half out of its heavy leather scabbard when Tully's giant fist met his jaw with a crack that could be heard a hundred yards away.

Clean out, Jir Singh pitched forward and sprawled in the dust.

IN THE Signal Service they had a summary way of dealing with rows between British and Indian ranks. That sort of thing had to be instantly checked; it was full of TNT—the stuff riots and race wars were made of. Mr. Tullibardine spent a bewildered night in clink. It was a long, long time since he'd so lost control of himself and—until some of the guard enlightened him—he had no idea why Jir Singh had refused what seemed a simple, reasonable request.

In the morning the company sergeant major came for him—the cadaverous Breen, whose peculiar Chinese cast of countenance might have been acquired through his long years in the China Telegraphs. China Breen marched the prisoner into the C. O.'s office.

The charge sheet read, "Assaulting Sepoy Jir Singh while on duty." Big Tully stood stiffly at attention, spruce and

smart as perhaps only a cavalryman can be. But for all his spit and starch, he looked at that moment like an overgrown Newfoundland puppy with a guilty conscience.

Major Thayer read the charge aloud. A hard-boiled egg, this major, when he chose to put on pressure, but square as a die. In the 15th he had been nicknamed "The Wise Man of Peshawar"—an apt sobriquet which had spread all over the division. Hard and just—his fine face with its searching, hooded eyes showed him to be just that; but the habitually stern expression was relieved by a mouth in which lurked kindliness and no little humor. He knew the answers and he knew men, this tall, blond *sahib*, else the name he went by would have been of far different character. Trust troops in that respect!

He scanned the paper before him and, looking up quickly, frowned at Tully.

"This doesn't seem the sort of business you'd be mixed up in, Tullibardine. What started it?"

"That blinkin' terbaccer business," Tully said uneasily. "I didn't know Sikhs was so tiddly h'over terbaccer—then." He added naively: "Plenty been tellin' me abaht it since, sir."

"How the devil could you have been in India eight years and remain unaware of a thing like that?" the major demanded heatedly.

"I just never run acrost it before, sir," Tully said with perfect candor.

The major nodded.

"All right. I'll concede you didn't know you were insulting him. What right had you to try to send him on a personal errand?"

Tully knew the major had him there. "I—I didn't fink 'e'd mind, sir," he finally blurted.

"In short, you took advantage of your race! Get this straight: That young man's people have been chiefs about Ludiana for more than five hundred years. Jir Singh comes of high-born fighting stock—of a breed which was more than a match for us during the greater part of the Sikh wars—people who have been our stanch, honored allies ever since. He knows all about that and is justly proud. You can't treat India's fighting men like coolies, Tullibardine. That blow you struck is a court-martial offense."

He snapped his eyes to the sergeant major.

"March him out and keep him handy until I've seen Jir Singh."

Breen said:

"Prisoner 'n escort, about turn! Quick march!" Once outside, he nodded to the duty jemadar, who was waiting with Jir Singh. Unfortunately for the youngster, there was then no Sikh in the company above the rank of *naik*. Had there been a Sikh jemadar, or even a senior havildar—a man of the world—probably matters could have been explained satisfactorily to the youngster. As it was, Jir Singh had had time to air his wrongs before a handful of young Sikhs no more qualified than he to appraise the incident at its true value. The boy went before his commanding officer burning with what he considered a triple affront: the slur to his religion, the fact that an ordinary British sapper had expected him to run an errand best left to some low-caste barrack servant, and lastly, that blow.

As a matter of course, he and the major carried on their conversation in Punjabi—the Sikh native tongue, unintelligible to the Gurkha jemadar. Thus isolated and with the feeling that of all the *sahib-log* in the world, this *sahib* was his best friend, the young fellow opened his heart.

He spoke with intense earnestness, rapidly, standing before the major's desk straight, slim and tall—a sprig of all that was best of the best of all Sikhs—the Ludianas. The pure Jat strain shone in his high caste, light olive-yellow face, with its broad, intelligent forehead,

expressive eyes, and finely chiseled nose, mouth and chin. He could go a long way, this one, in his hereditary profession of arms—to a Viceroy's commission and top rank.

If he carried out the affair with Tully to what must seem to him a logical conclusion, inevitably he'd have blood on his hands; would be court-martialed to an ignominious death. Jir Singh was at the crossroads that pleasant June morning; his whole future was in the balance—something crystal clear to the sagacious officer who heard him out so patiently.

"Now listen to me," the major said, "and believe. Until recently the years spent in India by the sapper Tullibardine have been in an English cavalry regiment. It has not been his lot to encounter many Sikhs. He has learned little of your religion and of those things offensive to you. You must not judge what he did yesterday by comparing his actions to those of the officer-*sahibs* you knew in the regiment before coming to the company, for they, one and all, are wise in Sikh ways. See, Jir Singh. Is it not possible that you, yourself, might unwittingly offer grave insult to some white man, because you had had small chance to become familiar with all his customs?"

Jir Singh gave him a long, searching look.

"*Sahib,* I see what you mean. Always I have been taught that the English and the Sikhs are friends. So to forgive the slur to my faith is not hard. That I do forgive, now that I better understand. But— He struck me, *sahib!* How overlook that?"

There it was—the real bone of contention. A tempest in a tea-pot? Make no mistake. Were the matter permitted to smolder on, sooner or later there would be a killing.

The Wise Man of Peshawar realized his own peculiar position. There must be a limit to his deprecation of Tully. Yet before all else an officer of Sikhs, he could gauge to a nicety the twist Jir Singh's reasoning was taking. The major sensed he could scarcely hope, with mere words, to erase from the other's mind the stigma of that wholly personal part of the business—the punch in the jaw.

He would do what he could.

"If you are man enough to forgive part, you should forgive all," he said, aware that had Jir Singh been British, there wouldn't have been any problem.

He'd have told the youngster to work off his bad blood in a boxing ring. As well attempt to jump over the moon as to tell a Sikh Kshatriya to carry out such an idea. He was confronted by the eternal, incalculable difference in their backgrounds.

Jir Singh said: "If you order me to forgive the blow, too, I shall do my best to obey." He spoke perfunctorily, with no great conviction. Then, suddenly squaring his shoulders and looking down at the major as at an equal, he added, "But I can never forget it. Nor would you, *sahib.*"

A man of less complete understanding than Thayer might have reprimanded him sharply for his presumption. The major, on the contrary, realized that the boy had paid him one of the most sincere compliments he'd ever had.

"You are one of us," Jir Singh said in effect, "you understand!"

And Thayer realized, too, how truly Jir Singh meant the words when he said he would never be able to forget that punch in the jaw. It might take many years, Thayer reflected, for this youngster to absorb sufficient of the British viewpoint to uncover a tolerance not inconsistent with the rigid tenets of his religion. Also, the boy was still perfervid with his fairly recent initiation into the order of Singhs—no Sikh is *born* a Lion—and it seemed to his Eastern mind utterly impossible supinely to absorb such an indignity and remain steadfast to his vows.

"When you are older," the major said with a sense of futility, "you will be able to look back at this incident with a smile."

Jir Singh retorted:

"Possibly, *sahib*. But old age is a long way off." There was nothing to be gained by further talk. To the Gurkha jemadar, who had stood by with an expression of mild injury at being thus excluded, the major offered a brief word of explanation, whereupon Jir Singh was marched away.

Tully, recalled to the presence, was sentenced to seven days' C. B.

"I'm letting you off damned lightly," the C. O. told him, "because you haven't any red ink on your crime sheet. Ignorance led you into a bad error of judgment. You really should get a court—will, if I ever hear of you bashing Jir Singh again. That's all."

When Tully had gone, the major remarked to China Breen:

"I suppose I could have had the man offer Jir Singh a public apology. Trouble is, under such circumstances that sort of thing simply isn't done. In the East, apologies are pretty generally regarded as confessions of fear or weakness."

"True, sir," Breen agreed, "but beggin' your pardon, no matter what's done, young Jir Singh won't rest till he gets even."

The C. O. nodded absently.

"I call t'mind a case in Shanghai," Breen went on. "It was much like this 'un: a Sikh policeman an' a French sailor. They—"

"I'll probably have to separate them for their own good," the major said suddenly. "They're both good men. I hate to return either to his unit. I've got to give it some thought."

Two days later, on his way from tiffin to the guard bungalow, the sergeant major encountered Tully. It was ninety-five in the shade, and the big Hussar left a trail of sweat in his wake as he arranged stones in a chastely decorative pattern about the building, preparatory to covering them with whitewash. He was not in the shade.

"Hullo, criminal," China Breen said lightly, "ain't you glad you joined the army?"

Tully raised a wet face, blinked. "Better 'n a court, sir, h'any dye!"

"Mebbe you ain't goin' to finish this stretch o' jankers," Breen said mysteriously.

"Don't tell me the C. O. 'as chynged 'is mind," Tully cried, visioning a court after all.

"Not that. Fact is, it looks like a merry little jaunt into the hills."

"Lumme! Wot's up, sir?"

"The Mohmands is up, that's what."

"But the chaps was syin' that business all blowed h'over."

"Well, they ain't up to date. This here, now, agent we sent—bloke named Rasul Khan—sends back a report to the Chief Commissioner sayin' he's fixed up the boundary trouble between the Mohmands and them Afridis. Next thing the Commissioner hears is that the Mohmands have up and cut Rasul Khan's throat. You been here long enough to know what that means: A nice, long walk and plenty trouble when we gets there."

"Well," retorted the sweating philosopher, "it can't be no 'otter there than 'ere."

"Maybe you won't get taken along, me lad." Breen had suddenly remembered the C. O.'s words.

Sure enough, in the days that followed almost every one in Peshawar stood to, packed up, ready to move at an hour's notice. Tully finished his bit in durance vile and returned to duty.

"Jir Singh's doin' some mighty big talkin' about what he's goin' to do to yer," a bungalow mate told Tully.

The big fellow merely shrugged.

IT BEGAN to look exceedingly like war. The air force johnnies flew out from their base at Risalpur and laid some eggs in Mohmand country. But rumor had it that the tribesmen continued to mass near the Afridi border north of the Khyber.

In Peshawar City occurred the usual forerunner of trouble further afield—rioting by Mohmand sympathizers. Armored cars and whippet tanks constantly patrolled the bazaars. Cavalry pickets reinforced the police, while details of the machine-gun corps occupied strategic points—street intersections and the tops of the taller buildings.

This state of affairs lasted for two weeks. Living in barracks out of field service kits in time affected the company—tempers got short and touchy. It was like sitting at home on a packed trunk with everything in the house locked up, anxiously waiting for a cab that never appeared.

Finally, the skipper ordered China Breen to break out some hockey equipment from the sealed athletic stores. Later the same afternoon two scratch company teams went at it hammer and tongs. Indian army hockey at no time is exactly an affair of sweetness and light—it comes more under the heading of rough, tough adventure—and today the men seemed bent upon getting the accumulation of steam out of their systems.

Quite by chance and without ironic intent on the part of the field captains who had chosen sides, Tully, in his usual position at right back, was opposed by Jir Singh, playing inside left. This was the first time Tully had seen Jir Singh play; at once Tully realized that, like most players developed by the 15th, the young Sikh knew his way about.

By the time Jir Singh had dribbled neatly past him three or four times Tully sensed that the flashing forward outclassed him completely. But the former hussar was a thorough-going sportsman; he took it all in good part.

And so, all circumstances considered, it was particularly unfortunate that the very next time Jir Singh came charging down, Tully inadvertently fouled him. For a moment the Sikh lay on the ground, the wind completely knocked out of him. Then he picked himself up, and the look he gave Tully was venomous. That foul, he reasoned, had been deliberate.

The game proceeded, with the score tied. Then, with only seconds left to play, Jir Singh took a long forward pass from his center and it seemed he might go on to score alone.

Tully, momentarily drawn out of position, charged desperately across the field. They met near the penalty area. Jir Singh brought his stick back and up as high as legally permitted; tensed for the winning shot. Tully was right on him.

As if deliberately, the Sikh swung short over the ball. He missed it completely, but his stick traveled on, its heavy hickory toe catching Tully squarely under the chin. The Englishman felt, vaguely, something warm pouring over his shirt; the field, the players, whirled about him in a darkening mass. He went down and out.

Not for long. He opened his eyes to find Major Thayer and a half-caste I. M. S. assistant surgeon—the latter a chance spectator—bending over him.

"Best I can do here," the half caste was saying as he worked a bandage under the injured man's chin and over his head. "Jawbone cracked, maybe. Suggest send him to hospital for X-ray, sair."

"Stop in at my office and telephone for an ambulance, will you?"

Tully sat up.

"I don't need no ambulance, sir. It's h'only a step. I c'n walk."

The major nodded. "If you're sure you can make it then." He turned to

Jir Singh, who lingered near by in a little knot of players.

The conversation that followed was meaningless to Tully, for it was in Punjabi. But it was obvious that the major was giving the Sikh a dressing-down. Jir Singh said little; his manner, if not exactly insolent, betrayed no sign of contrition. As the major dismissed him with a curt nod, China Breen came running up, an open chit in his hand.

"Or—orders t'march, sir," he said breathlessly. "Just got this from Brigade."

The major took the chit.

"Five a. m. tomorrow, eh?"

He glanced at Jir Singh's retreating back.

"Look here, sergeant major. Between now and tomorrow I'll have a good deal to do. Be sure to remind me to arrange for Jir Singh's transfer back to the 15th. That is, unless Tullibardine, here, finds he has a broken jaw and can't take the field. I've got to split 'em up, I've decided. Something's just happened—first thing we know one of them will be killed."

A little uncertainly, Tully wandered off to change his clothes. Jir Singh's intent, he reflected, must have been as apparent to the C. O. on the sidelines as it had been to him on the field of play. In his easy-going way, while deploring Jir Singh's lack of sportsmanship, he reasoned that now they were more or less even—a crack on the jaw apiece.

At best not over-familiar with Oriental psychology, he did not appreciate, as did his commanding officer so thoroughly, that far from ending matters, the recent incident was but a straw to point the way of the wind. It was, he thought, as presently he made his way toward the hospital, surprising that the C. O. seemed so determined to separate them. Why, they were quits—the whole thing was finished!

The X-ray revealed no crack in his jawbone. A couple of stitches were taken in the skin under his chin and upon his urgent request he was discharged from hospital early the same evening. As was natural, his jaw was stiff and swollen, but he felt otherwise fit.

Returning to barracks, he saw a light in company orderly room. He found China Breen alone, hunched over a huge stack of returns.

"Well—I'm fit ter go," Tully mumbled through his bandages with gruff enthusiasm. The hospital report and discharge form he laid on the edge of the desk.

The warrant officer scarcely glanced up.

"Uh-huh," he said abstractedly, "that's fine." Like a solemn mandarin, he continued his somewhat painful addition of a long column of figures.

When the company fell in the following morning, Tully observed that Jir Singh was in his accustomed place.

"Skipper must've forgot wot 'e h'intended doin'," he thought, "'n the S. M. must've forgot ter remind 'im. Lotta nonsense 'anyways, seems ter me."

For some days nothing happened to make him change his opinion. Tortuously, the expedition worked its way deeper and deeper into the rough Mohmand territory.

THERE came an evening when the British scouts, who had contacted outposts flung to the south of the main Mohmand position, fell back on the slowly advancing main body.

The expedition camped on a high plateau, picketing all surrounding heights in the usual manner. Tully, bothered by his bandages through the heat of the day, sank down gratefully. He removed his helmet; the cool twilight breeze was like a benediction.

The sun's afterglow still filled a cloudless sky with blue-bronze; against this lucent back-drop the serried ranks of the high hills began merging into solid

black masses, faintly haloed along jagged summits. The pungent odor of wood smoke reminded Tully that he was hungry. After eating he'd have to hunt up the medical unit to have the dressing changed on his chin. That damn' cut was mighty slow healing. He thought fleetingly, lazily, of Jir Singh. Hadn't seen much of him since leaving Peshawar. Pshaw, the kid was all right—that business had blown over.

He stretched luxuriously and was about to rise, when he heard China Breen speaking behind him.

"Been lookin' for you. Sergeant Flockhart's up to his ears in lame mules. Go over 'n give him a hand, will you?"

"Aw," Tully grumbled, "I knew this wuz too good ter last."

But he got up at once and headed for the mule lines. The animal sergeant often called for his help; he had a way with horses and mules.

Flockhart was scratching his head in perplexity. "Eleven lame, I've found, so far," he called out, seeing Tully. "I dunno what's got into 'em. I—it's gettin' too bloody dark to see without a *bhutti*. You wait here till I get a couple. You wouldn't know where t' look. Got 'em hid in one of the heavy cable wagons."

He wandered off.

It was very still. All about Tully was a soft, swishing sound—the mules munching and tossing their hay. A little farther off he could make out the turban and fixed bayonet of the picket. The man's beat at one point was fairly close to Tully's position. The picket began to retrace his steps. When he came nearer, Tully saw it was Jir Singh. Having identified him, Tully indifferently turned his eyes toward the mules. Over their backs he spied two dancing lights—that would be Flockhart with the *bhuttis*.

Tully was completely unprepared for what followed. There was a crash. The heat of the blast stung his cheek and unaccountably his helmet tried to jump away from his head, tugging violently at the chin-strap.

Jir Singh had fired at him, point blank, the bullet passing through his helmet.

Tully leaped between the mules in the Sikh's direction. Rifle still half raised to his shoulder, Jir Singh stood uncertainly, as if in a daze.

With a snarl of fury, Tully bore him to earth; began beating his head against it—up, down.

All at once a dozen hands pulled Tully away. Breen, more Chinese than ever, was squinting at Tully in the light of the lamp which Flockhart held on high.

"'E shot at me. 'E done it deliberate," Tully said over and over again.

Which was exactly what he told Major Thayer a few minutes later.

"This is perfectly delightful," remarked the Wise Man of Peshawar, turning up the lamp in his little tent. He looked from Tully to the sergeant major. "It's entirely our fault, Breen—yours and mine!"

"My fault, sir. I never reminded you, as you ordered. I forgot."

"Well, first off, why was Tullibardine among the mules?"

Breen explained.

"The point is—" But the major didn't finish his remark. The point was, had Jir Singh recognized Tully? "Let me see the helmet," the major said. He examined it. "Hum. A nice clean hole. Nice—and close!" He handed the headgear back to Tully. "How far was he from you when he fired?"

"I could myke 'im out—plain, sir. Mebbe forty, fifty feet. 'Course, there was still a little light, then. I knew 'oo 'e was, right enough—seemed like 'e must 'ave known 'oo I was, too."

The major thought it over. "And yet there's a reasonable doubt," he said at last. "In that uncertain light, your positions may have been such that you saw him far more distinctly than he saw you."

Tully shook his head incredulously.

"Did he challenge you?"

"Never a word, sir."

"Sure of that?"

"If 'e *did* challenge, 'e must've done it in the syme second 'e pulled 'is trigger. I never 'eard nothin', sir, s'w'elp me."

"Better and better," Major Thayer remarked. "All right, Tullibardine. Return to duty. I can't exactly blame you for trying to beat him up—after that!"

Calm again, Tully went back to help Sergeant Flockhart with the mules. Much later, when the job was finished, the big fellow suddenly realized that with all the excitement, he had been done out of his evening meal. He went to the cook tent. It was dark and the empty food *degshis* were piled outside. A shadow moved against the wall of the sergeant major's tent, near-by. Tully went there.

"Hi, sir—'ow abaht some *khana* fer the cavalry?"

China Breen favored him with a rare smile. "Missed out, eh? Well—happens I got a bit o' Machonochie ration, cold, in a tin here. You can heat it on this here Primus, though, if you want."

"That's the stuff ter give the troops. Thanks!" Tully worked up pressure in the little stove, lit it, and set the half-mess tin to heat. "Wot 'appened abaht Jir Singh?" he asked curiously.

Breen stifled a yawn.

"Oh, him. Well, the C. O. seen him after you. Sending him back to Peshawar with a return party leavin' early tomorrow."

"A prisoner? Pity I didn't kill the dirty blighter!"

"Not exactly a prisoner. You couldn't prove 'e done it deliberate—not before a court, you couldn't. Claims he thought you was a Mohmand spy. Got to give him the benefit of the doubt, too. C. O. says he feels certain the kid knew who you was, though."

"The dirty rat!"

"Seems like that to you, eh? Well, sort of—but you don't understand these fellers, Tully. See, the way they look at an insult—nothin' can wipe it out but death. Shootin' at you that way seems mighty sneaky to us. Thing is, in Jir Singh's eyes it was all fair 'n above board. Point of view don't come easy to us, but there it is. That's the way they're built."

"Just lemme get me dukes on 'im!"

"You won't see no more of him."

But China Breen reckoned without the Mohmands.

VALUABLE as is aerial reconnaissance, it didn't help the invaders this time. Under cover of darkness the entire Mohmand force—at least eight thousand men—force-marched the twenty odd miles that separated them from the British. It was an amazing feat in that mountainous, rough country, yet by no means a record.

Unfortunately, the general commanding the punitive expedition had split his force into two columns, with the idea of forking the enemy end on, as it were, then facing both units inward and crushing them front and rear. Taking into consideration the peculiarities of the terrain, the idea was sound enough and might have worked to perfection, had not the Mohmands upset the apple-cart by attacking first.

At that moment the second column was miles away—three or four valleys to the north. The attack upon the southern column came without warning and caught the English force absolutely flat-footed. Using the dawn mists which obscured the floors of the valleys, the Mohmands crept in between the heights where unconscious pickets waited bovinely for their morning reliefs.

Tully, a heavy sleeper, woke up in the middle of a pitched battle. Already the other men in his tent had swarmed out. For a few seconds Tully lay on his

blankets, as defenseless as a week-old baby in a Piccadilly Circus traffic jam. With that rude awakening were coupled flashes of kaleidoscopic movement through the yawning tent flap—aimless flying figures in various stages of undress, tents falling where friend and foe tripped over guys; and wild-eyed Mohmands everywhere, hacking, spearing, shooting and screaming.

"This," thought Tully, "is a bright mess."

He loosened his rifle chain from his wrist and with the other end still dangling from the trigger guard sallied forth to war. There was no order to anything. Look where he would, all he could see were a series of fierce, individual combats. Running nowhere in particular he fixed his bayonet—quite a feat in itself.

Without intent he collided with a tall, green-turbaned *ghazi* in a filthy *doti*. Instantly they were locked in a tangle of rifles, arms and legs. For awhile the tempo was that of a waltz; they swayed about cursing and snarling, doing each other little, if any, damage. Then the tribesman must have decided he'd had quite enough of this sort of business, for all at once he gave Tully a wicked knee to the groin.

Tully, bent double in quick agony, managed to implant a significant kick to one of the Mohmand's shins. The fellow hopped about on his sound leg, an easy mark, but Tully was unable to straighten up.

Suddenly and as if on signal, they flew together again. Tully's arms, holding his rifle at the "on guard" position, slipped over the wily Mohmand's shoulder; he began flailing the man's back with his rifle butt. Meanwhile, the other was doing his cramped best to work a cartridge into his magazine—hoping, obviously, to blow Tully's head off.

They broke apart. The Mohmand raised his weapon. Tully knocked it aside just as the tribesman pulled his trigger. At that the green-turbaned one turned tail, with Tully's steel at his shoulders. The pursuit came to an abrupt end when the Mohmand, tearing along with eyes only for the point of that bayonet behind him, inevitably tripped over the first obstruction which presented itself—a half fallen tent.

Tully finished him off with a well directed bayonet thrust; and looked up, to find the eyes of his commanding officer full on him.

A smoking Webley in his hand, the major was attired in socks and helmet. Nothing more. Now, no matter how discreetly one wears these articles, alone they simply will not convey an impression of a well turned-out British officer.

"My Gawd, sir," Tully gasped.

The swirling tide of battle soon separated them. At last—it seemed as if by a miracle—the British cleared the camp. The Mohmands pelted down off the plateau, crossed a valley and retreated up over a ridge, wiping out the parties which held it. That the tribesmen would rally their forces and return seemed a foregone conclusion. They had tasted British blood—a lot of it, in fact—and they would want more.

Major Thayer had brought from Peshawar only his headquarters section, the wireless crew and one brigade section; the latter, plus a wireless detail, was with the column across the hills. China Breen paraded the outfit to count noses, and a thinned-out lot it proved to be. Of British personnel there were only enough for a couple of sets of fours, one sergeant and, in addition to Breen, one subaltern —Sanger—and the C. O., who at this minute walked on parade, now fully dressed.

From his position in the ranks, Tully could easily overhear what the major said to Lieutenant Sanger and to Breen.

"I've just come from the general," the C. O. remarked. "Those devils have made a mess of us. The general thinks we may be able to stand off one more attack on our own. And we may not.

He wants us to wireless the other column to close on this position as fast as God will let 'em."

China Breen's face was suddenly long.

"Er—the fact is, sir, the wireless is—" he coughed self-consciously.

"Well, well—is what?"

"I mean—that is, sir, it isn't."

"Damn it," the major exploded, turning on Lieutenant Sanger, "what's this nonsense? What's the man trying to say? Wireless equipment is your special baby, Sanger: what's wrong with it?"

"It's gone, sir," Sanger said stonily.

The Wise Man of Peshawar looked very blank. "They captured it?"

"No, no, sir. At the beginning of the attack the men managed to pack the instruments into their *yackdans;* these, in turn, were loaded on mules. When the attack began, the mule *drabbis* got wind up and ran from their animals. All the loaded mules, frightened by the noise, then stampeded off into the blue. We haven't been able to find them."

"This," the major said solemnly, "is the beginning of a perfect day. Tell me this: Have the helios all disappeared, too?"

"We've plenty of helios, sir," Breen said.

"If we could afford to wait," the major muttered, "the air force could make wireless contact for us easily enough; but it may be hours before they fly out here. The next attack won't be long coming." He raised his voice. "We'll try to open up visually—at once."

Hurriedly three helio parties were told off, the necessary equipment was loaded on some of the remaining mules and, leaving a skeleton crew in camp, the rest headed for the highest of the surrounding hills.

As was customary, the afternoon before headquarters had received by wireless the compass bearing of the other column. It was after sun-up now: the distant force would be on the march, but that compass bearing was a guide.

Half way up the hill Tully had a fine view of the ridge over which the enemy had retired. Many of them had already returned to its crest and were busily engaged in enlarging the stone *sangars* built by the British. The tribesmen were going to make a strong point of that ridge—sound hill strategy. In a direct line Tully guessed they were no more than six hundred yards distant.

A bullet zipped close to the signaling party, whined off a boulder in a wild ricochet. Those on the ridge had spotted the signalers. Soon the hillside was a-creep with lead. Many of the Indian ranks, Tully knew, were under fire for the first time. He studied their faces. And then, as the pace quickened, Tully got a real shock; there, big as life, was Jir Singh!

The major must have spied the Sikh at about the same instant. Tully heard the C. O. call Breen to him and demand an explanation. "Last night I told you distinctly he was to return to Peshawar this morning!"

China Breen coughed nervously. "Bloomin' attack made me forget it clean, sir. Back in camp I never noticed him with the Indian ranks, neither. If you say the word, sir, I can—"

"Too late now. He'll have to carry on."

Jir Singh seemed fated to remain with the company.

THE lead mule took a bullet in the neck. *Yackdans* and all, the little beast stood straight up on his hind legs and screamed like a child. He pivoted, overbalanced, and crashed on his back. Sanger pulled out his Webley and finished him. Then Sanger gulped queerly and went down on hands and knees and a great stream of blood gushed from his mouth. He died in Major Thayer's arms as the party toiled past them. Tully saw the major slip Sanger's revolver into his tunic and follow on.

The sun was high now. It grew baking hot. For all their efforts, the party seemed to crawl as might torpid flies up an unending wall. The summit appeared as far away as ever. There was not a second's respite from the Mohmand's withering fire: the tribesmen were alive to the party's purpose; were determined to prevent its carrying out.

Tully felt his breath coming in great gasps; he was fighting for air. He didn't dare look up. It was a hellish nightmare, that hill—like a dream in which he tried to run, but was rooted to one spot.

Unexpectedly he staggered over the top, lungs bursting, a great blackness before his eyes. Unaccountably he was leading a mule: he had no faintest memory of seizing the animal's rein. Still holding it he sank down, khaki reeking with sweat.

A man beside him retched violently; when again he could focus his eyes, Tully saw that man was Jir Singh. For an instant they stared at each other expressionlessly, inscrutably.

Others, too, stumbled over to momentary safety. Tully paid no attention. He motioned to Jir Singh and together they unpacked and began to set up a helio.

As they worked, Tully heard China Breen's voice, high, cracked:

"You and I and Tullibardine and Jir Singh and a mule."

He laughed with queer mirthlessness —like a hyena at night. Tully looked—saw he had spoken to the major. Breen kept on laughing.

Then Tully saw the C. O. slap him with sudden fierceness across the mouth. With absurd suddenness, almost as if his head had been cut off, Breen's hysteria ended. But what he'd said was true enough; the party was reduced to four—and a single mule.

The mule, relieved of his burden, was clumsily galloping down the protected side of the hill. Englishman and Sikh completed the helio's assembly, mirror, arm, vane, tripod.

"You have a compass?" the major asked Tully. He nodded, and the major gave him the bearing. "Over you go, then. Set up and start traversing. Keep below the skyline."

Well did Tully know the magnitude of the task before him. In that inferno he would have to stand, defenseless and motionless, while with open light he endlessly rotated his traversing screw, back and forth, back and forth, in the hope of attracting the eye of some one of that distant force across the hills. Should he succeed, a helio would be aligned on the passing flash of his instrument. He, in turn, would be given an open light, upon which he would make an exact alignment. If all that could be accomplished, only then would both parties be ready to send and receive messages.

If! All four knew it might be hours before communication was established. And it might be never. Going one at a time, the four might not last long enough up there to do any good.

Big Tully squinted down at his commanding officer with a quizzical expression, squared his shoulders, grinned.

"Looks like a nice way ter spend a 'ot mornin', sir!"

"Good luck, boy," the Wise Man of Peshawar said simply.

Jir Singh was watching Tully closely—caught that infectious grin.

"By the gods, a brave man," he muttered wonderingly, as if the thought were entirely new.

Over the brow of the hill Tully started, but had taken only a step or two when China Breen leaped forward and snatched the helio from him.

"Beg pardon, sir—I should be first!" It was his way of apology for that brief show of weakness.

For the briefest of instants the major hesitated; then nodded and motioned Tully back.

Breen slipped over. Instantly the

Mohmand fire redoubled in fury. Tully, who considered himself "waiting man," lay down with head just high enough to give him a view over the top. Some one, he knew, was needed to watch for that hoped-for flash; all the sergeant major's energies would be bent upon keeping his spot on the vane.

Quickly China Breen got his bearing and began to traverse. It seemed impossible that he could long continue that deadly and monotonous task unscathed. Every second more and more tribal riflemen were finding the range.

Tully saw the camp they had left—was it a week ago?—so close it seemed that he felt he could have pitched a stone into it; yet he knew it must be a mile or more to the east. He looked north again, toward the ridge. And then he saw that a party of some three hundred had swarmed from the *sangars* and had begun to work down the ridge's southern face.

The move puzzled him. Surely such a small force was not setting out to attack the camp? It was only when they crossed the bed of the separating valley and turned sharply away from the direction of the camp, that their purpose became clear.

Quickly he called the major to his side. "See, sir, they figure they h'ain't doin' a good h'enough job wiv their rifles. That lot's bein' sent ter wipe us h'out."

"You're right. Set up another helio and let the camp know. I'll spot for the sergeant major."

Getting the camp was an easy matter. Tully put his helio together, stepped over into the danger zone and soon had the answering flash.

"Enemy party advancing on our position," he tapped.

"Have seen. M. G.'s ready," they replied.

Tully swept up the instrument and had almost gained cover when he heard the tinkle of broken glass. China Breen's mirror had been hit; in the nature of things, China was directly behind it. Fingers still grasping the traversing screw, the sergeant major sagged slowly over the useless instrument until man and tripod collapsed together.

Instantly Tully stopped and adjusted his set to pick up that weary, hideously dangerous traversing task all over again. The major slipped down to Breen and dragged him over the top.

Tully, tense over his helio, heard the major's voice:

"They got Breen through the stomach. Bullet wasn't a dumdum, thank God. Hole in his back where it came out is small and looks clean. A couple of field dressings and with any luck—"

Tully sighed his relief. Good old China had a chance, after all. But that thought brought another: A chance of what? Of surviving his wound only to be wiped out a little later? The odds against anybody's getting off this hill alive were—

"Lor' love a duck," Tully muttered with fierce contrition, "that h'aint no way ter figger!"

Back and forth. Back and forth. Tully began to believe he bore a charmed life. For the Mohmands, encouraged by the hit, were striving mightily to duplicate the feat. The hill fairly trembled with their shots.

To his rear, Tully heard the major say sharply:

"Get back!"

And then he knew that Jir Singh must have crawled up beside the officer. Had Tully been able to see what followed and more, to grasp its significance, despite his feeling of contempt for Jir Singh, he would have been profoundly moved.

Jir Singh paid no attention to the major's order. Lips parted, he was staring enigmatically at the broad, competent back of the man he had hated. So great was the young Sikh's absorption, he had heard no order.

And staring, staring so, all at once his eyes filled with tears.

In that fragment of time a boy died

and a man was born. Those tears of renunciation were dissolving the scales of youthful intolerance. In that first blinding light was vouchsafed him a vision of values fundamental—were he brown, yellow, black or white. He was seeing his supposed enemy as he truly was; that quiet heroism had swept Jir Singh out of himself, above the prejudice he had believed his faith imposed. The Spirit of the Service had entered, had quickened, his soul.

FROM the camp, a sudden staccato *rat-a-tat* announced that the oncoming Mohmands had been sighted as they climbed from the valley. Because of contour, the force remained invisible to those on the hill.

Solid as Gibralter itself, big Tully kept on, never moving—nor did he give any sign when the first of the turbans bobbed among the jutting rocks beneath. The deadly fire from the camp had taken fearful toll of the three hundred: little more than a score remained to storm the signalers' position.

But now the machine-gunners were forced abruptly to cease fire. The advancing tribesmen were directly between them and the helio—to continue would bring Tully directly into the line of fire.

For all his hardihood, common sense at last whispered to Tully that all this blood and sweat had been in vain. Relatively few as were the fast approaching attackers, he doubted the ability of the major and Jir Singh to account for them. To cease his seemingly fruitless task, to attempt to defend himself, never even entered his head. Simply, to keep on trying to raise the other force was his job. And he'd be doing it so long as he could work the helio.

As though Tully's doubt had communicated itself to him, with a curious hissing sigh Jir Singh sprang up. His face suffused with an ineffable light, he catapulted himself over the top and like an avenging avalanche, went dipping and sliding down the loose shale. In his new-found exaltation, it seemed he was running amok—would uselessly sacrifice himself.

"You bloody fool, come back!" the major roared.

Jir Singh swept on. But his was no wild dash of a fanatic; he had a plan—a plan to protect Tully. The mad descent ended abruptly as he skidded behind a huge rock. Thus shielded, he opened rapid fire.

The action spoke more eloquently than a book of words. There was a sudden warm glow in Tully's heart. Crouching over his helio, he said admiringly:

"Kid's got plenty guts! Wot's 'e fink 'e is—a 'ole bleedin' platoon?"

The Mohmands were coming up in short rushes, pausing warily wherever rocks afforded cover. The nearest were almost on Jir Singh.

From his position behind Tully, the C. O. emptied both Webleys at them.

"To hell with these things," he grunted as the revolvers clicked harmlessly.

The slope was dotted with signalers who had failed to reach the summit, rifles still slung to inert bodies. Seeing them, he said:

"I'll pick up a rifle and bayonet and try to help that boy!"

Then—*thup!*—with that solid ominous sound, oddly different from a bullet's impact with earth, Tully sat down and regarded the major with a foolish, dazed expression. From the cavalryman's shoulder oozed a crimson trickle.

"Damn the luck!" There was no going to Jir Singh's aid now, the major saw. At once he took Tully's place behind the helio. Barely had he touched the screw when an answering light blazed across the hills.

"Got 'em!" Tully cried thickly.

The major signaled: "Attacked in force. Close at once"—signed it "G. O. C."

But even now he could not move;

he must await the acknowledging flash. In the pause that followed, Tully staggered to his feet and loped down the hill, unslinging his rifle with his left arm.

The Mohmands had driven Jir Singh from behind his rock and into the open. He was retiring up the hill, backward, still firing. A cloud of dust marked Tully. Mohmands, Jir Singh and Tully were about to merge.

Jir Singh was down. Over, like a mad bull, raged Tully. The big fellow could move his numbed right arm sufficiently to steady the butt of his rifle; and, despite this handicap, was putting on a grim and magnificent exhibition of unorthodox bayonet fighting. It was proving—so far, at least—highly effective. About him the tribesmen milled, shooting, stabbing, hacking—but they could not budge that figure arched over the fallen Sikh.

A hundred feet above him, Major Thayer at last received the over-slow acknowledging signal. So they were coming! Exultantly, the major kicked the helio out of his way and leaped toward Tully. But a sudden memory of China Breen, lying wounded just over the crest, stopped him dead.

For just a second he, who so prided himself that he never hesitated, hesitated. His problem was solved in dramatic, unexpected fashion. Like a patch of mushrooms miraculously breaking earth before his very eyes, British helmets sprouted among the rocks. The camp had sent a strong relief party. They would take care of Tully.

Back went the major for China Breen; picked up the lanky warrant officer where he lay on the safe side of the hill and again stepped into the danger zone. He was in time to see a workmanlike polishing off of the attackers. When he reached Tully's position, it was all over. For fear of killing their own people, those on the ridge had held their fire during the brief hand-to-hand struggle, but resumed the instant they saw that their remaining men had been overcome.

Down that hill and out of range rolled the British like a troupe of exhausted Japanese tumblers. The major had become separated from Tully. Once in safety he spied him with Jir Singh on his back. Somehow Tully had managed to hold the limp form with his left arm.

Tully looked about him and saw the major, too. He shambled over and laid Jir Singh at his feet.

"Lookit 'im, sir." Not solely from weakness was his voice so muffled. His expression was one of irreparable loss. "Just when I'm beginnin' ter unnerstand this bloke—ter fink the world 'n all of 'im—'e ups an' dies." He sighed heavily, shook his big head, addressed the still form. "W'y did yer 'ave ter die?" he asked brokenly. "W'y? W'y?"

For a long minute the Wise Man of Peshawar stared down at them, hard eyes misty with understanding. And then his brows shot up.

"Half a tick, Tully. What makes you so sure he's dead?"

"Wot—wot mykes me sure!" Tully straightened, drew back as if stung.

Quickly the major knelt down; slipped an explorative hand under the young Sikh's blouse. A moment, and the major smiled up at Tully.

"You silly ass, he's only knocked out. He's—why, he's not even wounded. He'll live a hundred years!"

Incredulously, Tully looked from his C.O. to Jir Singh. The boy moved an uncertain arm.

"By Gawd, sir!" Tully dropped stiffly to his knees beside the major. As he did so, Jir Singh's eyes opened—looked straight up at him.

And it seemed to big Tully that never in his life had he seen eyes so filled with friendliness. The arm, less uncertain now, moved toward him; a hot hand fumbled for, found his own.

"Kid—" Tully choked. He could only squeeze the brown fingers.

"*Mera bhai,*" Jir Singh said softly. "My brother."

THE CAMP-FIRE

Where readers, writers and adventurers meet

GORDON YOUNG long wanted to do a certain serial, because the color and danger of the period fascinated him. He carried his "pet" idea for five or six years, never finding time because of other work, but about ten months ago he began to put it on his typewriter. The story begins in this issue.

"Huroc of the Uskobs" (as he called it) was 120,000 words long when he finished. He was shocked at the length himself, too long for any magazine, particularly in these days when every editorial pint is blurbed as a gallon on the magazine covers. He went over it carefully and removed 30,000 words. Still it was too long, but any more cutting would be shedding life blood, both his own and that of the story, so he sent it East.

Now we decided a while back that serials should never be more than five parts, preferably four. "Huroc" had to be six parts, if we were going to publish much of anything else. But I've also known for some time that any editorial rule or policy can be kicked right over by a story that is good enough. "Huroc" has power to spare.

Perhaps that's enough to say, except that you who read "Huroc" are starting on a sizable adventure; and you who do not are the kind of people an editor would remove if he could tinker with human nature. Because an editor knows that often the best stories he publishes are the serials.

Never having heard of Uskobs, I asked Gordon Young about these savage fighters. He sends us these notes on the story:

The most difficult material to assemble was that dealing with the Uskobs, or Uscocchi, who were originally Balkan mountaineers driven by the invading Turks to the Eastern Coast and innumerable islands of the Adriatic. The name Uskob, Uscoc, Uscocchi, or whatever spelling is preferred, meant mere "refugee"; and they attracted refugees from many races. From the beginnings of history the Eastern Adriatic was the home of pirates. They were the Illyrian pirates that harassed Greece and Rome. Legend tells of a Queen Teuta who plundered the Romans; and later legends claim that Sir Henry Morgan himself captured galleons in the Adriatic, stored the booty in island caves. There may or may not have been an English pirate who did things that inspired the legend. Hazlitt's *The Venetian Republic*, 2 vol. (reprinted London, 1900) is sprinkled with references to the Uscocchi. They probably were much more unadmirable savages than *Huroc* makes them appear. They massacred the crews of captured ships, cut up the captain's heart, divided it among themselves and ate it. Some romantic sympathy must go out to them because they were not mere pirates. They were untamable in their love of liberty; they fought the Turks continually and as Venice, primarily interested in commerce, undertook to guarantee safe passage to Turkish merchantmen, the

Uskobs turned on Venetian ships. For ten years, from 1607-1617, no merchant fleet dared sail eastward from Venice without a convoy. That is the sort of fellows they were even though Venice still called herself "Mistress of the Adriatic."

Austria encouraged them since the Uskobs warred on her enemies; and they were never subdued though both the Turks and Venice made expeditions to exterminate the pestilential pirates. It was only by treaty that Austria was persuaded to withdraw the Uskobs from the sea coast into the mountains. This passage is from George Proctor's *History of Italy from the Fall of the Western Empire*, London, 1844, ". . . and thus the Venetian Republic was finally delivered from the vexatious and lawless depredations of those freebooters who had so long annoyed her commerce and harassed her subjects. It does not appear that the force of this singular race of pirates, who had thus risen into historical notice, ever exceeded a thousand men; but their extraordinary hardihood and ferocity, their incessant enterprise and activity, their inaccessible position, and the connivance of Austria, had rendered them formidable enemies. Their depredations, and the constant expense of petty armaments against them, were estimated to have cost the Venetians in thirty years a loss of more than 20,000,000 gold ducats." A ducat was worth about $2.30; and $2.30 in those days had a much greater value than now.

The Uskobs began their raids on Venetian commerce rather timidly, being unfamiliar with the sea, about 1580 and continued with increasing skill and hardihood. The action in *Huroc* is dated at 1608-1604.

WYNANT DAVIS HUBBARD has crammed a lot of adventure into his thirty-five years. Last week (this is August 12) he left for Ethiopa to serve as war correspondent with the Ethiopian troops. If there's war, if there's any communications system left that can bring word past Italian troops, he'll tell us some things later on. This is the way he's spent his life to date:

Born in Kansas City in 1900 and lived there for ten years, when the family went to Europe. I went to school in Switzerland, and upon our return to America, went to Milton Academy, where I became very interested in science.

Went to Labrador to work for the Grenfell Mission in 1916. Worked during the summer months at every known kind of job. Blasted reservoirs, repaired engines, installed plumbing, pulled teeth, learned to handle corpses and conduct myself properly in an operating room.

Returned to Labrador the following summer. Same kind of work, only much more navigation. Ice along coast very thick. Made two voyages in such bad weather we were officially reported lost at sea.

Entered Harvard 1919, after a summer of exploration into the interior of Labrador with Mr. William B. Cabot of Boston. Mapped the lower regions of the Kenamou River. Owing to treachery of natives from whom we purchased a canoe, we lost our outfit and very nearly starved to death before we managed to get out.

Played tackle on the Harvard varsity football teams of 1919 and 1920. Was member of the team which played in the Rose Bowl, defeating Oregon 7-6.

During summer of 1920, worked in the silver mines of Silver Lake, Ontario, and the gold mines at Timmins.

Left college in 1921 as a mining geologist. Worked in the open pit asbestos mines at Black Lake, Quebec Province. Great deal of labor trouble. Lost my job because I defended a holdup man who had been shot through the head and left lying in the road, although still alive.

During 1922-1923 captured, bought and handled over twenty-seven hundred specimens of wild animals, birds and reptiles, making special study of the immunity which wild creatures exhibit to tropical stock diseases, also studied wild animal psychology. Animals hunted, captured, photographed, included lions, elephants, rhinos, leopards, antelopes of seventeen species, wild dogs, hyenas, warthogs, etc.

Because of articles written in various mining journals describing new methods of milling asbestos and new machines invented by myself, was offered job of building asbestos mills for the Kuruman Blue Asbestos at Kuruman, Griqualand, South Africa. Accepted and went, stepping from a temperature of 57° below zero to semi-tropical climate.

The Kuruman position never developed. Arrived in Johannesburg at time of color riots in 1922. Gave up mining and, in company with an Australian, started capturing wild animals for zoos. Was in close association for several years with the Franklin Park

Zoo in Boston. Remained in Northern Rhodesia until 1924. Then to Portuguese East Africa and stayed until 1925, returning to New York.

Wrote book, "Wild Animals," and many magazine articles, chiefly about wild animal psychology and the potential usefulness of wild animals as disease-resistant creatures. Began developing the idea of cross-breeding buffalo with domestic cattle and creating a disease-resisting beef animal for the tropics. In this connection worked under the direction of such eminent scientists as the late Doctors William H. Welch and Theobald Smith, and enjoyed the advice and help of Dr. W. T. Hornaday, Dr. Reed Blair and Dr. John Gowen.

Having insufficient money to start research station, decided to try to make a motion picture which, if successful, would return me sufficient profits to enable me to do my scientific work. In 1927, sold my idea to First National and returned to Northern Rhodesia, making pictures subsequently shown as "Adventures in Africa" and "Untamed Africa." During this expedition we caught lions, buffalo, leopards and other animals and brought them to camps, where, under prearranged conditions, we induced them to perform daylight acts of hunting and stalking which they would ordinarily do only at night. Made the only authentic pictures in existence of wild lions killing.

Back in America again, wrote book "Bong'-kwe." More magazine and newspaper articles. Gradually becoming known as one of the very few wild animal psychologists. Only other I know is Dr. William T. Hornaday.

Returned to the Namwala district of Northern Rhodesia to establish research laboratory for study of wild animal diseases and psychology in 1931.

Depression wiped out my small income. Tried to continue and hold my ranch by turning to farming. For the first time in forty years, swarms of locusts invaded the country and remained for three years, completely ruining me and all other farmers.

Back to America in January of this year. Hope some day to return to Somaliland in East Africa to broadcast the sounds of wild animals, the songs and witch doctor trials of the natives. My expedition will be an exploratory one, in that we shall attempt to locate some definite trace of the lost but rich gold mines from which King Solomon drew at least part of his great wealth. This expedition will be in the field eighteen months or two years.

PERRY ADAMS regards Sikhs with great respect — he's fought beside them in India—and he makes these remarks about the tall proud warriors who never go to a barber:

In case you don't suspect, our editor is rather a demon for asking hard-to-answer questions. In my current yarn, "Surprise Attack," he seized on a statement I made to the effect that Sikhs don't shave.

"Why don't they shave," he fired at me, "and how long do those beards grow, anyway?"

The first part is more easily answered than the second. It is strictly against the Sikh religion to remove the hair. Thus, throughout his life, the Sikh soldier cheats the barber unmercifully. For not only doesn't he shave or clip his beard; he never has his hair cut, either. How long does the beard get? That's something of a poser. All I can say is this: I've known a good many Sikhs, and never have I seen one with his beard dragging along the ground. I suppose a beard never shaved or trimmed tends to grow rather more slowly than one which is. At any rate, as the Sikh reaches manhood, his lengthening whiskers are rolled and tucked up behind his ears. If you catch him without his turban, you'll notice he wears a topknot, which accounts for a little more of his formidable hirsute adornment. Beyond that, for all I know, the rest of his hair *wears off!*

From the foregoing you might gather that the mature Sikh soldier presents an appearance not only wild, but downright woolly. Nothing could be further from the truth. In a land where cleanliness is not, unfortunately, always next to Godliness, this bird is remarkable for his trim, tidy appearance. And he is always scrupulously clean. Like everyone in the Indian army, British officers included, the Sikh doffs uniform whenever he can. As a race quite tall and full of a natural dignity, he is as striking a figure in mufti as in the familiar uniform. Free of the latter, he affects a very large turban, either white or of some light shade, usually with a patch of darker cloth showing high on his forehead, just between the turban's front folds. Often he will wear a quoit about the turban symbolic of the national weapon used by his forefathers with such deadly effect in bygone wars. Blouse and lower garments are of conventional soldier-mufti style.

The Sikh religion is an offshoot of Hinduism. Originally, the Sikhs (meaning disciples) were a pious sect of Hindus who followed the teachings of Nanak—their first

guru (prophet or teacher). This strong-willed, fifteenth century heretic had the courage to preach the unity of God, the futility of many Hindu forms of worship and the unreality of caste distinctions. The sect was still entirely a peaceful, religious one when in 1604 the *Adi Granth* (original Sikh bible) was compiled by Arjun, the fifth *guru*.

But when the sixth *guru*, Hargobind, came along, he had more far-reaching, worldly ideas. At his installation, when given the holy necklace and turban of his predecessors, he waved them scornfully away with the words, "My necklace shall be my sword-belt and my turban shall be decorated with a royal aigrette."

Then and there began the transformation of these quiet mystics into as fierce and warlike a military brotherhood as the world has known. Soon, with their numbers greatly increased, they were battling the Mogul emperors on even terms. In 1750 they occupied Lahore and proclaimed the *Khalsa* (Pure or Elect), as they were then known, to be a ruling nation.

Twice Sikh armies crossed the Sutlaj and twice bloody wars resulted. The East India Company more than had its hands full winning them, too. Conquering at last, the Company occupied the Punjab and in 1849 the Sikhs finally came under British rule.

Since then, their splendid loyalty and great fighting hearts have been revealed times without number. Even during the Mutiny, when so much of India turned against the Raj, the Sikhs never wavered. The country is full of memorial tablets eulogizing Sikh bravery and stanchness throughout that dark period. I have gone into action side by side with Sikhs, always with the feeling that no matter what happened, they would never let me or any white man down. And they never did.

Finally, Sikhs are thoroughly good sports and fine athletes; handled by officers who really understand them, they are always amenable to army discipline. In my day on the Frontier, there were still old timers who liked to tell of the immortal Sikh stand at Saragarhi, a small outpost poked away in the Kohat hills. Completely isolated and attacked by a horde of Afridis which outnumbered them hundreds to one, the Sikhs fought doggedly on and on until not a single one of the garrison was left alive.

Yes, judging them by any standards you like—and even though their hair grows long—they're *men*, these fellows; and well do the British know it!

A CHEERIO! from Madagascar to Owensboro, Kentucky, is reported by W. J. Hanning.

In the May 15th issue, you were good enough to print a notice regarding my file of back issues of *Adventure*, which I offered to sell at a nominal price to any interested reader.

I received two telegrams and twelve letters, including two from overseas, after my complete file had been sold on May 1st to the first comer. All letters were answered, and I am only sorry that so many had to be disappointed.

And, one unusual thing. The issue of *Adventure* containing my notice finally reached Mr. T. W. Hanning at Ambositra (Madagascar) on June 26th, who has just written me as follows:

"In the May 15th issue of *Adventure*, I find your communication regarding back numbers, but I am not writing to you about that. It is about the name, which I have so very seldom come across in print from overseas, especially from your side of the world. So, I cannot resist sending you a Cheerio! and all good wishes."

WE SAY to Arthur I. Foster, of Hibbing, Minnesota, we'll print better yarns if and when we can find them.

I have just written to Theodore Roscoe to thank him for the enjoyment I got out of "Rise and Fight Again." And I here and now stand up on my hind legs and publicly cast my vote for "Rise and Fight Again" as *Adventure's* best story of 1935. Sez you: "Don't be so damned previous!" Sez I: "I double-dare you to print a better yarn at any time during the balance of the year."

HAWKS, "the bad boys of the air," are vanishing because their food is vanishing, says Knowlton Rodlay, of St. Augustine, Florida. He also would like to see the hawk get a chance for survival instead of a load of shot. Another reader who heartily seconds Davis Quinn's defense of hawks is William Dunlap Sargent, of the Department of Entomology, Cornell University. Mr. Rodlay says:

Cheers for Davis Quinn's remark that hawks are beautiful birds. They are that and also are the epitome of grace, as well as being a kind of scavenger and eradicator of rodent and insect vermin. Nevertheless a hawk is primarily a bird of prey.

Two things which he overlooks reduced their numbers in the United States: viz, vanishing game and other birds on which hawks naturally feed and the constricting of wild woods country which hawks naturally frequent. Game hogs and pressure of civilization are killing off the game birds which once propagated so plentifully that the prey which hawks took from their ranks was unnoticeable. This more than "the propaganda of arms and ammunition makers" contributed to killing off the hawks, which Mr. Quinn bemoans.

As a boy in New York State, Ohio, Connecticut and other New England states I passed hours in the hills and woods watching and delighting in the superb grace and flying form of the hawks. But among rural residents there always has existed an ardent objection to hawks, because they preyed upon poultry, and the small farm animals. Conditions have changed. Poultry is less and less a staple of farm and rural life in the open. In my boyhood, beginning in the 80's, practically every farm and many town places had a chicken yard and open chicken run, swarming with poultry. Rabbit hutches too were frequent. These were natural prey for the hawks. Too, the countryside swarmed with wild bird life.

Hawks are the bad boys of the air. Like all criminals and living things of prey, they are fascinating.

THANKS to the following Camp-Fire comrades for their good letters: F. A. Frere, Madisonville, Louisiana; Mrs. Robert Hyde, San Francisco; Frank R. Farnham, Boston; H. E. Schulke, Philadelphia; N. L. Ripick, Cleveland; Lewis W. Bealer, Berkeley, California; G. H. Young, Vancouver, B. C.; William E. Fain, Houston, Texas; Eldridge H. Prickitt, Gloucester City, N. J.; J. L. Byerly, Pittsburgh; Leon C. W. Kettring, Toledo; Mrs. M. E. Deyo, Binghamton, N. Y.; Victor Mumfred, Hagerman, Idaho; William C. Cassel, Detroit; Harry E. Gladman, Jr., Washington, D. C.; J. E. Dubberly, Brunswick, Georgia; G. A. Wells, Forest Hills Gardens, N. Y.; E. C. Lester, Bloswich, Straffordshire, England; M. Muchnick, East St. Louis, Illinois; E. W. Baker, Livingston, Montana; S. T. Bryant, San Francisco; L. Baker, Silver Spring, Maryland; Mrs. Edna Gnau, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania; Carl H. Dork, Lansing, Michigan; Ray Ball, Houston, Texas; Bessie Rogow Solomon, Elmhurst, New York; Robert J. Icks, Stevens Point, Wisconsin; T. L. Dunn, Washington, D. C.

M. W. WALTER of New York City raises a good question, though I don't agree with him.

I want to speak to you about something I have often felt in reading period stories—which I am very fond of when they are well done. It seems to me that the authors are usually fairly well grounded in their *facts*, but often lack the ability to create the atmosphere of a period.

I think one reason for this failure is the kind of dialogue they use. That story, "Cleopatra's Promise," in your June issue was an example. When the author makes the men of ancient Egypt and Greece use such vulgar bits of Western slang as "belly ache," such slang phrases of today as "packing them in," a "hot one," "ham strung," "spitting image," "good lookers," incorrect English such as "along with"; plebianisms such as "folks"; gangster slang such as "pipe down"—there is no flavor of the period left.

In some cases I know this is lack of background on the part of the writer. Sometimes, I suppose, it is done on purpose to please the childish minded reader. But isn't this a mistake? Will the average boy of the streets enjoy a story more because it is written in his jargon? It spoils the story for the sophisticated reader, and would not the unsophisticated reader like it just as well with "folks" and "belly ache" left out?

I do not want "prithees" and "what hos" in such stories, but they are better than cheap modern slang.

IT SEEMS likely that all queens and lords and ladies used some slang, much as professors and presidents and their wives. None of us would be much astonished to hear that Cleopatra swore like a trooper. But Talbot Mundy, it

seems to me, uses restraint and consistency in the occasional slang spoken by his characters. Take that one-eyed barbarian Conops, for instance, tough noncom in charge of some hard-bitten fighting men. His rank and station, in modern terms, would be something like that of a seasoned old leatherneck top-sergeant. Why, then, can't Conops say "belly ache" and "pipe down"? Undoubtedly he had his own slang equivalent. Mundy merely translates, because he can't write hieroglyphics, we can't print them, and nobody can read them. It's less inconsistent that Conops, or top-sergeant, should use some slang than speak correct and formal rhetoric. The inconsistency is that Conops should speak English of any kind, because when his breed was fighting on the seas there was no English language. That one-eyed non-grammarian, it seems, has as much right to some of our slang as to any other part of our speech.

ADVENTURE'S first issue appeared November 1, 1910, and our next issue is our twenty-fifth anniversary.

It will go on sale October 15th. It will be a good thick magazine of 176 pages—the biggest issue of *Adventure* in many years. It will cost the usual fifteen cents. It will be on sale for a full month.

Please note the last statement: on sale for a full month. Why? I hope you'll find our November issue is as substantial an edition of good reading matter as you've held in your hands in a long while. Feeling that way about it, I hope you'll mention it to friends with good reading tastes. If those friends are inclined to buy *Adventure* and see for themselves, they'll have a month in which to find the anniversary issue on the stands. We'll have some other publicity for our magazine too (though none will be so valuable as your own good comments) and it takes time for such publicity to have effect—we don't want people looking for our anniversary number to find that it has just gone off sale. Or put it this way—it's the best and largest magazine we can put out, so we want to keep it on display as long as possible and catch all the eyes we can.

All subscriptions will be automatically extended.

As to what our November issue will contain, you may count upon the following yarns: (We have an idea that when the printers have made it up, there'll be room to squeeze in another item or two.)

New stories by—Arthur D. Howden Smith, James B. Hendryx, J. D. Newsom, Gordon Young, James Stevens, Harold Titus.

From our twenty-five years of publishing a selection that includes—The Riley Grannan Funeral Sermon; Talbot Mundy's famous, "The Soul of a Regiment"; a Magpie and Dirty Shirt yarn by W. C. Tuttle; an Orinoco adventure by Arthur O. Friel; Georges Surdez's dramatic story of the gentleman-murderer in the Foreign Legion; Bill Adams' powerful tale of the sailor, Jukes; and perhaps some more.

We'll give the comrades who have been with us since Volume One, Number One, another look at the first title page; and A. S. H. will tell us the story of *Adventure* and some of its own adventures along the way.

I want to thank all of you helpful readers who've made suggestions about the anniversary number. You will understand it has been impossible to follow all of your advice, however good; but we on the staff have done our best to arrange the November issue so that it will have something for all of you. I want to say more about that at the next Camp-Fire, because all of us can recall other splendid stories on the back-trails of our magazine, other writers whose fine talents have picked us up out of armchairs and carried us into adventures yonder and beyond, and to whom we must give our thanks. —H. B.

ASK ADVENTURE

for information you can't get elsewhere

WHO has seen a greater fight between animals?

Request:—In Johnson's picture of gorillas in Africa I noticed their great strength. How does a lion match up with a gorilla in a fight? Have you ever seen such a fight? I notice in particular the great strength in the neck of the gorilla.

—JOHN L. WEST, Eatonsville, Wash.

Reply by Captain F. J. Franklin:—I have never witnessed a fight between a gorilla and a lion, but some years ago I witnessed a fight between a huge baboon and a very powerful lurcher dog. An account of this fight was published in *Adventure* some years ago. I can, however, give you an authentic account of perhaps the greatest battle between animals ever witnessed by a hunter. I have prepared the account of this fight partly from an old issue of the *Johannesburg Star* but chiefly from the hunting stories as prepared by Hedley A. Chilvers for the South African Government, so its authenticity is assured.

Around the year 1900 in Beira, Portuguese East Africa, hunters, when they had ivory to sell would come to Beira and celebrate as long as the money lasted. One night some were celebrating and spinning yarns at the "Birdcage Inn" in Beira. Then a stranger who hailed from Kivu, an up-country native settlement, came in. He was a tall, grim fellow. Half his right hand had been shot away and he limped as he walked. He listened awhile and then some one asked him for a yarn and he complied. He told of a battle between a gorilla and a lion in a forest clearing near Kivu. He had watched this fight, he said, from start to finish and made bold to say that in a long hunting life he had never seen such a display of strength, ferocity and courage.

This was the way of it. Night was beginning to fall in the forest when he saw a baby gorilla wandering about in a bewildered fashion. It had lost its way and was sounding its call. (Gorillas usually go about in families.) Simultaneously the hunter discovered that the baby was being stalked by a lion. The broad paws of the stalker bespoke immense strength. The frightened baby set up a loud and querulous cry, echoing eerily through the gray-blue vistas of the forest as such cries have echoed there for countless centuries.

Suddenly out of the trees came a giant gorilla. He rose and then crouched. He had seen his baby and the lion, and in his rage roared that appalling roar which is meant to terrify his enemies. (The energy required to emit that roar, so some one has said, would be sufficient to break a strong man's neck.)

The lion stood his ground, twitching his mouth and lashing his tail. With the prospect of his meal vanishing, he angrily faced the great ape, which was coming to meet him with the formidable waddle characteristic of its kind, muzzle thrust down, fangs protruding, eyes flashing and deep set.

But when only ten yards apart the lion slowly faced about, trotted in a circle, and charged the ape at full speed. The gorilla rose to its full height as the lion sprang, leaping nimbly aside as the lion passed, and gripped its hind leg. The grip snapped the lion's leg but the shock also pulled the man-gorilla over. The lion twisted fiercely upon its antagonist, and a moment later they both were locked in a tight grip.

A few seconds and the lion had disemboweled the gorilla, had lacerated its back and, as the great ape, biting and roaring, released and rolled over inert, the lion, terribly injured and twisting in agony, limped away a few yards, and fell coughing on its side.

Its neck was so fearfully mangled it bled to death where it lay.

THE Everglades are snaky and buggy, but people still want to wade right in.

Request:—Will you please give me some information on the Everglades, about the climate, country, and what kind of outfit to take? I want to go in a canoe. I intend to stay about two months there.

—EUGENE DORMINT, Makanda, Ill.

Reply by Mr. Hapsburg Liebe:—The Everglades is vast—I can almost say as vast as the sea—an immense stretch of wet plain, marshes of reeds and sawgrass, ponds, bayheads, "hammocks" cluttered up with cabbage-palm and bushes and tangles of wild vines; sloughs and creeks that, most of them, lead nowhere at all. There are mosquitoes and other insects literally by the billion, and almost that many poisonous cottonmouth moccasins, with rattlers on the higher places. It is one of the wildest places left on earth, and nowhere on earth can the average man get himself hopelessly lost so quickly as there. I have known professional hunters' guides to be lost in the 'Glades, and the very best one of them died a few days after a searching party found him. The mud had poisoned his feet. My advice to you is to think it over a long time before tackling this. (To save me I can't think of any reason why you should want to spend two months in there!)

In the summer it is hot in the 'Glades. Not so bad in the winter. Neither snakes nor insects are so bad in the winter. I wouldn't spend two summer months in the 'Glades for ten thousand dollars a month.

As for the outfit you take:—Take food. Don't count on getting much to eat in there. Take medicine and snakebite medicine especially. As much clothing as you think you'll need. Cooking utensils, etc., and don't forget a vessel big enough for boiling the water you drink. Folding canvas cot to sleep on, and a good mosquito net. Small axe. Matches in water-tight container. Figure it all up for yourself. If you take a gun you'll need a hunter's license, which costs a non-resident $25.00.

Now as to going in a canoe. It should be wide, with a flat bottom, and not a cheap affair. Incidentally, the Seminoles usually pole their canoes (which are dugouts) and seldom paddle them.

You'll also need a light tent.

Can you take everything in a canoe? Somehow I doubt it.

The point of approach is important. I think I'd go up the Miami Canal from Miami. This is a drainage canal which runs up to Lake Okeechobee. It takes you into wild, wild country. You'd be going upstream all the time, but on the way back (if you come back) you'd have it easy. There should be big-mouthed black bass in this canal.

Good luck!

LOCK, stock and barrel, the distinctly American weapon.

Request:—I would appreciate very much any information you can give me concerning an old percussion-lock, muzzle loading, "squirrel rifle" in my possession. I picked this up in Southern Indiana, where many of this type are still being used by residents.

The description follows: Barrel is thirty-seven and three-quarters inches long, muzzle to breech. Inscribed with the name: J. Fordney, Lancaster, Pa. Barrel is octagonal, with a "rib" welded on along its bottom length. A hickory ramrod fits in brass guides soldered to this rib, and a recess in upper part of stock.

Has percussion lock, with two triggers. One is probably a "set" trigger; something of a hair-trigger arrangement. Pulling the rear trigger only sets the other so that a slight pressure on the second releases it. Lock is steel, engraved.

Butt plate is brass, as is also trigger guard. Don't know bore measurements but is about three-eighths inch at muzzle. Stock looks like maple; sure it is not walnut. Got a powder horn along with it, leather bag for bullets, and a pincer-like device which is assumed to be used for crimping. Pardon my ignorance if my fire-arm terminology seems to be "all wet."

—PAUL H. SULLIVAN, Chicago, Ill.

Reply by Mr. Donegan Wiggins:—From the excellent description you have given, I feel positive you are so fortunate as to possess the typical American rifle, the type made in the early part of the past century, possibly from 1840 or about that time. I judge it to have been a late type, from the half-stock and the rib below the barrel.

I judge it never to have been a flintlock, as practically all of them seem to have been originally made with fullstocks, clear to the muzzle. I have a cap-lock Kentucky rifle, as this type is called, with both full and half

stock, but my flintlock is a fullstock gun. So I judge your rifle is an original cap-lock type. The stock is doubtless maple or cherry.

The pincer-like device is, I feel sure, the mould with which bullets were cast. If a round cavity, half in each part of the tool, appears, that is the function of this tool, one of which went with every rifle, and the shooter cast his bullets from lead as needed.

Let me congratulate you on obtaining such a fine specimen of the distinctly American weapon.

WHENCE came the Ethiopian?

Request:—To what race do the people of Abyssinia belong?

Is the practice of slavery legal in Abyssinia?

—Paul Renner, Grass Valley, Calif.

Reply by Mr. Gordon Mac Creagh:—You ask me a question that nobody can answer. For nobody knows, not even the Ethiopians themselves, what race they are.

Broadly speaking, there are three schools of argument amongst the ethnologist highbrows.

One school traces the Ethiopians back to be Egyptians, overlaid by Hamitic and Semitic invasions before the Christian period. They back up their theory by the persisting strong characteristic features of all three peoples, as well as by the colonies of the Falasha Jews existing in the country.

Another school connects the Ethiopian legend of the Queen of Sheba—the Sheba-Solomon offspring, Menelek, founder of the Ethiopian dynasty—with "Saba," Sabian stock brought in by the himyaritic Arabs. This group bolsters its argument with undoubted Sabian inscriptions in the boustrophedon style (i. e. from left to right and back from right to left with the letters reversed) which exist upon monoliths near the sacred city of Axum.

Quite as well founded as any is the theory of my friend, Dr. Hannahbey Salib, an Egyptian scholar, who claims that a pre-Mosaic wave of Caucasian immigration penetrated as far south as Himyar in Arabia, settled there temporarily, and then, feeling the hereditary urge for a mountainous country, continued south through Yemen and thence crossed the Red Sea to the Ethiopian highlands.

To prove that the preceding schools are all wet about the Ethiopians being a mere branch of the Himyar, Dr. Salib produces a salient fact that the others have overlooked; namely that the Geez language, which is still the priestly tongue of the Ethiopian church, contains so many letters that are so identical with the Armenian, that an Armenian can read, though he may not understand, Geez. He goes on to show that the Geez language retains the Caucasian form of placing the adjective before the noun, as, a big house, while the Arabic says, a house big.

So the scientific gentlemen quarrel. But they all agree upon later Egyptian and Semitic influences; and, of course, on considerable intermarriage with African stock.

Slavery is still legal in Ethiopia. But under very benevolent conditions.

When Ethiopia entered the League of Nations, she had to promise to abolish slavery. The Emperor agreed to do so; but not, as America tried to do, with a stroke of the pen. He promised to let slavery die out with the existing generation, so that the country could adjust itself to the new condition. The League of Nations agreed fully with the program. So that all the Italian propaganda you see in the press just now is pure bunk.

The existing Ethiopian law is that no slave may be bought or sold. If his owner doesn't want him, he can't trade him away; he must set him free. Slave children are automatically born free. They are educated in a school founded by the Emperor, and the law is that, when they are grown, they must be given preference for all government jobs.

A more sensible way of wiping out slavery has not yet been evolved.

The penalty for slave selling is death, and no argument about it. Moreover, the chief in whose district any such crime may be committed is fined for the first time and deposed from his chieftainship for the second offense.

Next time you read of cruel slavery conditions, you'll know it's just war propaganda—and you probably know already that all propaganda for war is lies.

THE "warrior bold with spurs of gold" went heavily his way.

Request:—My questions have to do with the arms and armor of the thirteenth through the sixteenth centuries; of the days when man and horse went forth to do battle; man and horse in full armor, and the knight carrying lance, battle-axe, shield, sword, etc.

Were these giants or some type of superman?

I have seen collections of armor in Europe, and also that in the New York Metropolitan

Museum of Art, and the total weight of his accoutrements would seem to make any agile movement on his part impossible, even providing he was able in some manner to mount his steed.

What were the proportions of these men, and how were they able, laden down as they were, to split heads and bodies asunder and perform the deeds credited to them by authors whose veracity is not questioned?

—Robert M. Snyder, Garden City, L. I.

Reply by Capt. R. E. Gardner:—I believe that the average man of today is of larger stature and in better physical condition than the average man of the period of plate armor. I am aware that Dr. C. R. Beard, the British authority, is not in accord with this thought but his reference to several suits of plate for men of large stature which are preserved in the various museums, are the exception rather than the rule. None of these larger suits were designed for men of athletic figure but for the portly type such as Henry VIII of England.

Generations of helmet bearing developed in the armor wearing man of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries a sturdy neck and his constant use of knightly weapons gave him a fine shoulder and chest development. However, as most of their time afield was spent in the saddle, their lower limbs suffered accordingly. Most of the old-timers were quite thin from the hips down. I doubt it greatly if any man existed that could propel himself from the ground to saddle in one grand effort, when he was armed head to foot.

We must bear in mind that many armors were essential to the gentleman of rank. In the field he wore his battle harness to which he entrusted his life. In the warlike games for which he was trained from childhood, panoplies en suite were used. He possessed also a suit for fighting afoot with sword or mace and, if his position required it, a suit of splendid parade armor. A study of the fine old manuscripts which are preserved for us never depict a fighting man laden with all the tools of his trade. In other words a man armed with lance, sword, mace, dagger and shield would have little freedom to control his mount and use any one of these weapons effectively.

I will make this statement without fear of contradiction: there is not sufficient armor to arm a modern football squad of, say an institution like Ohio State, in the entire group of museums of Europe and America. And I doubt it greatly if any group of fighting men were ever brought together which compared favorably with our modern football warriors. We must remember the standards of living then as compared to the present, their lack of knowledge of hygiene, diet, ventilation, sanitation, etc. All the handicaps which arose from a lack of this essential knowledge would hardly produce a race of men superior to ours of today.

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I'LL give you PROOF in 7 days that I can turn you, too, into a man of might and muscle. Just think of it! Right in the first week under my guidance you will see and feel the improvement! Then as my weekly instructions arrive in your home you continue to re-build, renew and "overhaul" your body. By the end of three months you are the owner of a powerful body that you will be proud to display anywhere! People will notice the ruddy glow of health in your face, the sparkle in your clear eyes, your broad shoulders and they will seek your company. You will be the fellow who will walk off with the prettiest girl and the best job while the others wonder how you did it!

Write your name and address carefully on the coupon below. I'll send you absolutely free a copy of my new book, *"Everlasting Health and Strength."* It reveals the secrets that changed me from a 97-pound flat-chested weakling into a husky fellow who twice won the title "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man" against all comers! And it shows how I can make you an "Atlas Champion" the same way.

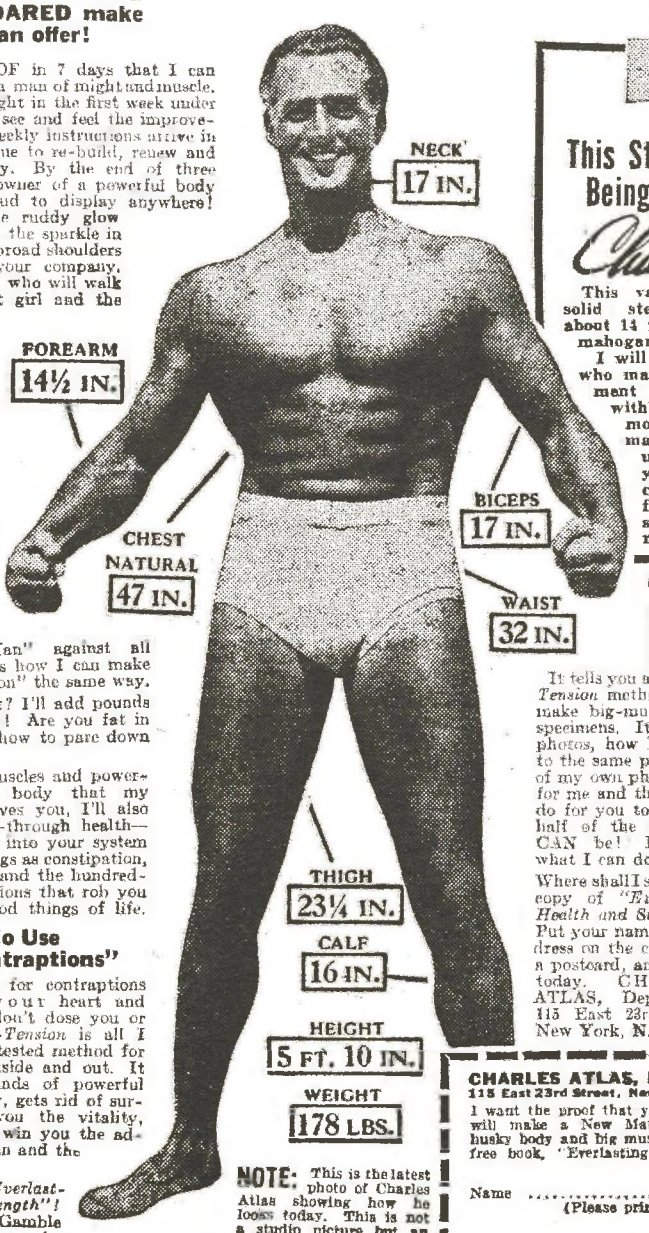
Are you underweight? I'll add pounds where they are needed! Are you fat in spots? I'll show you how to pare down to fighting trim.

And with the big muscles and powerful evenly-developed body that my method so quickly gives you, I'll also give you through-and-through health—health that digs down into your system and banishes such things as constipation, pimples, skin blotches and the hundred-and-one similar conditions that rob you of good times and good things of life.

I've Got No Use At All for "Contraptions"

I haven't any need for contraptions that may strain your heart and other vital organs. I don't dose you or doctor you. *Dynamic-Tension* is all I need. It's the natural, tested method for developing real men inside and out. It distributes added pounds of powerful muscles over your body, gets rid of surplus fat, and gives you the vitality, strength and pep that win you the admiration of every woman and the respect of any man.

Get my free book, *"Everlasting Health and Strength"!* Mail my coupon today. Gamble a stamp to prove I can make YOU a new man!



NOTE: This is the latest photo of Charles Atlas showing how he looks today. This is not a studio picture but an actual untouched snapshot.

This Sterling Silver Cup Being Given Away by Charles Atlas

This valuable cup, made of solid sterling silver, stands about 14 inches high on a black mahogany base.

I will award it to my pupil who makes the most improvement in his development within the next three months. Therefore, no matter what your measurements may be now, you have an equal chance to win this cup for permanent possession—and with YOUR name engraved on it!

48-PAGE BOOK FREE

It tells you all about my special *Dynamic-Tension* method, and what it has done to make big-muscled men out of run-down specimens. It shows you, from actual photos, how I have developed my pupils to the same perfectly balanced proportions of my own physique. What my system did for me and these hundreds of others it can do for you too. Don't keep on being only half of the man you CAN be! Find out what I can do for you.

Where shall I send your copy of *"Everlasting Health and Strength"?* Put your name and address on the coupon, or a postcard, and mail it today. CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 8310, 115 East 23rd Street, New York, N. Y.

CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 8310
115 East 23rd Street, New York, N. Y.

I want the proof that your system of Dynamic-Tension will make a New Man of me—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscle development. Send me your free book, "Everlasting Health and Strength."

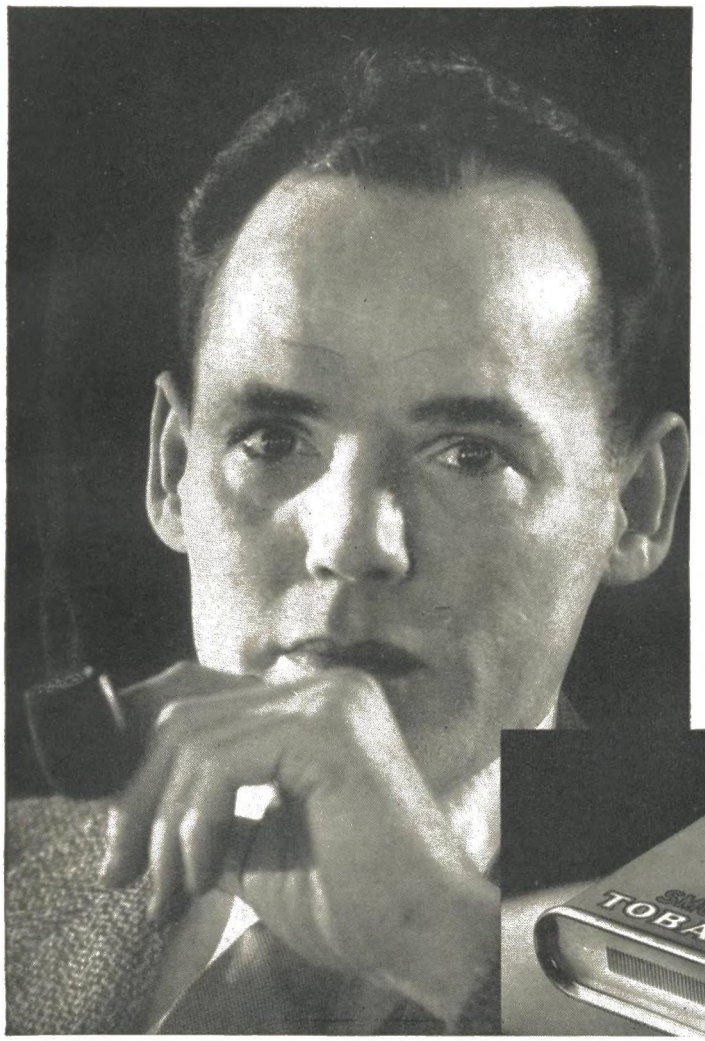
Name .....
(Please print or write plainly)

Address .....

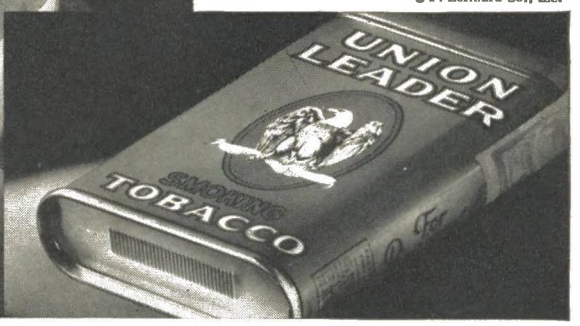
City ..... State .....

MAIL COUPON FOR FREE BOOK NOW!

"Shoot a dime *and win a Pal!*"



LAID end to end, the expensive pipe mixtures I've smoked would fill a five-foot shelf. Then, one day, a friend handed me a pipeful of Union Leader. With the first whiff of its mellow *old* Kentucky Burley, I found a pal! "How much?" I asked. And you could have knocked me over with an ash tray when I heard, "Ten cents a tin!" I'm no penny-pincher, but when a tobacco as fine as this sells for 10¢, I buy. (Grand in cigarettes, too.)



HENRY HULL, Universal Pictures Star, has smoked Union Leader since 1933

UNION LEADER

THE GREAT AMERICAN SMOKE

10¢