

20¢

JANUARY

GOLDEN FLEECE

HISTORICAL
ADVENTURE



Gates of Empire
by ROBERT E. HOWARD

• ALL STORIES COMPLETE •

Harold
Deloy

ERIC OF AZTALAN by RALPH MILNE FARLEY



Harold
Delay

Eric bent suddenly forward throwing his assailant clear over his head and crashing him to the ground at Ragnar's feet.
(See "Eric of Aztalan")

GOLDEN FLEECE

HISTORICAL ADVENTURE MAGAZINE

JANUARY 1939

Vol. 2 No. 1

A COMPLETE NOVEL

- ERIC OF AZTALAN**.....by Ralph Milne Farley 2
Vikings Meet Red Men and Red Altars in the New World.
Illustrated by Harold S. Delay

A NOVELETTE

- GATES OF EMPIRE**.....by Robert E. Howard 52
Giles Hobson, Braggart Rogue and Noble Toper, Invites Himself to the Crusades.
Illustrated by Harold S. Delay

SHORT STORIES

- THE LAST GIFT**.....by Capt. Hugh Thomason 82
Mary Stuart from the Scaffold Sends a Last Remembrance to Elisabeth.
Illustrated by Maurice Archbold, Jr.
- THE LAND STEALER**.....by Sam Carson 88
No Thief! This, But a Strange Instrument of Mercy
Illustrated by Maurice Archbold, Jr.
- PEACE ON THE SEA**.....by John Murray Reynolds 100
A High Prowed Minoan Galley Modestly Performs its Routine Duty
Illustrated by Jay Jackson
- THE HAIRLESS ONES COME**.....by L. Sprague de Camp 108
Cro-Magnon Hunters Extend Their Range a Bit on a Summer Day
Illustrated by Jay Jackson
- COWARD'S REWARD**.....by James Harry Martin 116
Clem Carson Conquers Fear in His Own Way. Illustrated by Jay Jackson
- A DESPICABLE CAVALIER**.....by Phyllis Moore Gallagher 122
Diane—What Mortal Man Could Resist a Beauty Such as Hers?

MISCELLANEOUS

- DID AZTALAN EXIST?**..... 51

DEPARTMENT

- THE ROUND TABLE**..... 128

COVER DESIGN

Painted in oils for "Eric of Aztalan" by Harold S. Delay.

These stories are fiction. If any character bears the name of a living person,
it is purely a coincidence.

A. J. Gontier, Jr.

ASSOCIATE EDITORS
J. H. Bellamy, Business Manager

C. G. Williams

Published monthly by Sun Publications. Executive and Editorial Offices, Rand McNally Bldg., 538 So. Clark St., Chicago, Illinois. Copyright 1938 by SUN PUBLICATIONS. Entered as second class matter August 19, 1938, at the Post Office at Chicago, Illinois, under the Act of March 3, 1879. Title Registration applied for at United States Patent Office. Single copy price 20c. Subscriptions in the United States and Canada \$2.00 per year. Foreign Postage \$1.00 a year extra. Notice to Writers and Artists: When submitting material, please enclose stamped and self-addressed envelope for return if not acceptable. Although care will be exercised in handling unsolicited material, the publishers cannot accept responsibility for its safe return.

PRINTED IN U. S. A.



Suddenly the golden priest grovelled on the ground mumbling, "Quetzalcoat!"

Eric of Aztalan

by RALPH MILNE FARLEY

Illustrated by HAROLD S. DELAY

CHAPTER I *Quetzalcoatl*

BACK to back stood Eric Thorfinnsson and Black Harald, his uncle, while around them surged a howling mob of red savages. The faces and shaved heads of the attackers were streaked with red and black and white and ochre, up to their narrow brush-like scalplocks. Their bodies were bare, down to the buckskin thong which served as a belt to support the leather strip passing from back to front between the thighs. Separate trouser-legs extended from the moccasined feet to the crotch on the inside, and a narrow point ran up to the waist-thong at each hip. Some brandished spears; others plied stone-headed battle-axes, or bows and arrows.

Each of the two Vikings held a small round bronze-bossed leather shield on his left forearm, while the shimmering steel broadsword, clenched in his right fist, cut and flailed. The skirts of their tunics, hanging below their coats of mail, flapped about the knotted muscles of their mighty thighs; and their knee-high buskins dripped with enemy blood.

Eric's helmet had been knocked off by the stone ax of one of the Indians, and his flowing yellow locks sparkled in the noonday sun. His red lips curled back over two rows of firm white teeth, in a fighting grin; and his keen blue eyes flashed, as he laughed aloud with the joy of battle.

At his back, his massive uncle, black-bearded, narrow-eyed and grim, fought with silent precision.

Together the pair were a match for any number of savages.

At length the redskins broke away, and fell back in a group, leaving a score or more of their number dead and dying, with cleft skulls, severed arms, or other equal evidence of Norse swordsmanship and sheer strength.

The two Norsemen lowered their blades, unclenched their tired fingers from sword-hilt and shield-hold, and shrugged their disarrayed chain mail into place. Young Eric retrieved his horned helmet from a pool of blood, wiped it off on the hem of his tunic—with a wry face as he did so—and clamped it down over his blond head.

"What a fight! What a fight!" he exulted. "These Skraelings are a braver and more brawny lot than those back at the coast."

"Brave and brawny enough to be nearly the death of us!" growled his uncle, spitting with disgust, and then wiping the back of his hairy right forearm across his black beard, "I wonder what is delaying Mord and the rest of the crew."

Eric laughed. "Probably drinking again," he said. "But whatever it is, they have missed a good battle; though Mord would rather drink than fight, any day."

A lusty shout sounded in the distant woods behind him. He turned, then

hallooted, "Hurry up, you slackers, before it is all over."

OUT of the woods ran nearly three score Vikings, clothed and armed like Eric and Harald, except that most of them also carried long-bows and quivers slung across their shoulders. At the arrival of these reinforcements, the surviving Indians, who had been muttering together a short distance away in evident preparation for a return to the attack, now thought the better of it, and streaked silently off into the woods in the opposite direction.

"Quick!" shouted Eric. "The first and third shifts of rowers go back to guard the ship." Then turning to a swart-visaged scowling man, with drooping black moustaches, he commanded, "Mord, bring the second shift, and follow Harald and me!"

Then sword in hand, and shield held high, he dashed after the fleeing savages. Behind him lumbered his massive black-bearded uncle.

The fight had taken place on a bare rocky knoll, across the summit of which led the Indian trail. Where this trail entered the woods again, Eric Thorfinnsson paused for his huge uncle to catch up.

"You fool!" panted Black Harald, "have you not had enough of fighting for one day?"

"No," Eric laughed back over his shoulder. "We came to them as friends, and they treated us as enemies. I wish to ask them but one simple question—the way across the great lake to the island whence comes the copper which we seek. It was for this that I have spent so much time learning the language of these people, on our trip up the great river from the sea."

"Well, here's your chance to ask,"

growled Black Harald, as they entered the woods, and an arrow whizzed by them.

Both men dropped behind the shelter of a large rock, and Eric waved for his followers to come up. As the first of these joined the two behind the rock, Eric borrowed the man's bow and quiver, and stood erect. Instantly an Indian missile winged past his ear.

Eric calmly fitted an arrow to the string of the bow which he held, thrust the bow forward to the length of his left arm, pulled the feathers of his shaft back to his right shoulder, and laughed, "These Skraelings do not use bows to aim with but merely to impart a bit more force and distance to a thrust than they could give with their hands. Whereas we Norse——"

His string twanged, and a painted savage leapt with a shriek out of a concealing thicket, to fall to earth again impaled by Eric's arrow. At this the other Indians broke and ran; and after them sped the shafts of the Vikings, finding many a victim.

Bows in hands, Eric and his men pursued them down the narrow winding trail.

Occasionally an Indian would wait in ambush in some clump or thicket. Occasionally a copper-tipped arrow would come hissing out into the ranks of the invaders. But most of such arrows went wide. Some glinted off shield or coat of mail. And only two found their mark: one a painful but not serious shoulder-wound in one of the Norsemen; and one deep in the thigh of another.

Both Indians paid for these indignities with their lives, in a shower of Viking arrows; the wounded men were sent back to the ship together; and the rest of the expedition pressed forward.

FINALLY they reached a cluster of tepees in a shady clearing. Fires were smoldering amid the tents, but the occupants—whether women and children, or merely some additional braves—had fled at the approach of the Vikings.

Nevertheless, fearing some treachery, Eric and his men with bows or swords held alert cautiously skirted the wigwams. And thus it was that Black Harald espied a savage crouching behind a crude shelter of brush. Up swung the Viking's broadsword in a figure eight, to sweep down again in a flaming arc. But, as it came, Eric Thorfinnsson leaped forward and interposed his own blade, turning the blow.

Spitting a mighty oath through his black beard, big Harald, with narrowed eyes, wheeled on his presumptuous nephew, and raised his blade aloft once more.

"Let it pass!" snapped Eric, as he nimbly sidestepped the expected blow. "Can't you see that the poor fellow is a prisoner, and tied?"

Then disregarding his amazed and wrathful uncle, he strode over to the crouching savage, and severed his bonds with a few deft sword-strokes.

The Indian staggered to his feet, and flexed and tensed his cramped muscles. He had a physique which was a match for that of Eric Thorfinnsson; and, except for the absence of war-paint and trouser-legs, he was gotten-up exactly like the savages with whom the Vikings had just been fighting.

As soon as he had stretched his cramped limbs, he fell on his knees before his liberator; and, hands stretched in front of him palms down, touched his forehead three times to the ground.

"Get up," said Eric, not unkindly

in Algonkian. "What is your name? And where are you from?"

"Dacori—from Minong," replied the savage, arising once more, and looking Eric squarely in the eye.

"Did you hear that?" jubilantly asked the Viking chief, turning to his still-scowling uncle.

"I hear a lot of meaningless Skraeling-talk," sniffed Black Harald.

"But did you not hear him say 'Minong'?"

"Well, what of it?"

"But do you not remember, my uncle? Minong is the Skraeling name for the Isle of the West, whence comes the copper metal which we seek." Then turning to Dacori, he said in Algonkian, "We have a war-canoe and many men, and will take you to your people, if you will lead us."

Dacori solemnly stared at his benefactor for a moment; then reached out, took Eric's hand between his own thumb and forefinger, and placed the hand on his own shoulder, as a sign of submission.

"I am thy son," he said, "and my life is thine to command."

"And what is the low-born one grunting about now?" asked Black Harald, contemptuously.

"He says that he is my son, and that he will guide us to Minong," Eric answered.

Black Harald roared a boisterous laugh through his beard, and opened his big red lips to make some ribald comment; but, at his nephew's frowning glance, desisted; and said instead, "Well, you have gotten your information, and have avenged the insult offered you by the Skraelings——"

"And have had a good fight," added Eric. "Let us return to our dragon-ship, and be on our way."

Meanwhile their companions had been looting the tents of all of value that could be removed—buffalo robes, doeskin jackets and trouser-legs, necklaces of beads and bear-claws, cooking utensils, and bows and arrows. One by one they joined Eric and Black Harald and their prisoner; and grumbled much, especially the scowling Mord, when Eric refused their demands to let them slay this last-remaining Skraeling. During all the argument, Dacori stood with arms folded, contemptuously aloof.

From the loot, Eric selected his one-tenth, as befitted the leader of the expedition; and, from his share, he outfitted Dacori completely, including trouser-legs, weapons, and a kit of war-paint.

Then the Vikings tore down the tepees, piled them on the still-smoldering camp-fires, and set out back down the trail toward their dragon-ship.

DACORI piloted them back through the Straits of Mackinac—for they were on the wrong lake, namely, Lake Michigan — and then northwardly, through the long narrow winding channel, which they had missed in their earlier voyaging, into Lake Superior, and across this lake to the westward.

At last, early one morning about a week later, as the chill mists rose wraithlike from the smooth surface of the lake, to drift and swirl in the almost imperceptible morning breeze, the rocky shores of a pine-clad island loomed before them, red-lit by the rising sun, which was overtaking them in spite of the speed with which their long oars urged their craft forward.

On a wide thwart in the bow, just behind the arching neck of the gaudily-painted dragon figurehead,

stood Eric Thorfinnsson in his suit of chain-mail, his broadsword sheathed, his feet planted wide and securely against the slight roll of the ship. His horned helmet he held on his left forearm, and his yellow hair fluttered in the breeze, and glinted in the red light of the early morning sun. At his right, stood his massive black-bearded uncle, similarly garbed. At Eric's left, stood the Indian Dacori, sinewy arms folded on bare broad chest; face expressionless, but eyes agleam with home-coming.

Behind them, as a low accompaniment to their conversation, sounded the rhythmic dip-clank-dip of their oars, and the "hoy-hoy-hoy" of the helmsman calling the stroke.

Black Harald spat over the starboard gunwale, and then snorted through his big bushy beard, but his snort sounded more like a sigh.

"Was it for this," he exclaimed, "that we have rowed three thousand miles across the stormy seas, and another thousand up the big river and through all these lakes? These cliffs and fjords might well be Norway. Look, Eric, if there were a church on that headland to the right, I'd think that this were the harbor of my own Trondjem."

Eric laughed, as he replied, "Home-sick, eh, my uncle? We have seen what white men have never seen. We have fought where white men have never fought before. And if, at the end of the voyage, we come to a land which resembles our own dear Norway, then so much the better, say I. For here some day we shall plant a second Norway, to rule the new world."

Dacori unfolded his arms, and pointed off the starboard bow. Eric shouted a command to the helmsman, and the dragon-ship swung in that direction.

Ahead, between them and the pine-clad cliffs, was to be seen a reef of low rocky islands. Between two of these skerries, their Indian guide now directed them to steer.

So narrow was the passage, that their oar-blades grated on the rocks on either side; but finally they were through, in a long bay which extended to the left between cliff and reef, terminating in a fjord which wound inland. Up this fjord they steered.

ON the beach at the head of the fjord, stood a group of dark-skinned savages—a score or more. All but one of this group were typical Indians, bare to the waist, with buckskin thongs, loin-cloths, and trouser-legs.

Among them, shorter but more imposingly dressed, stood a squat figure with repulsive, almost negroid features; and dark olive, rather than reddish, skin. His high headdress was of openwork wood, vermilion-lacquered, and surmounted with sweeping bird-plumes of vermilion and green. His upper body was bare, save for a circular cape-like collar of much-jeweled cloth. His forearms were covered by cuffs of strips of jade. A skirt of jaguar-skin hung to his knees, and his feet were encased in sandals of brightly colored braided leather, extending half-way up his calves.

As the dragon-ship of the Vikings approached, the ornate man fell on his knees, and bowed forward until the plumes of his red-lacquered headdress swept the sand on which he knelt.

"Quetzalcoatl!" he murmured, reverently, incredulously. "Quetzalcoatl!"

His Indian companions shrugged their shoulders and grunted; for, although the sight of a Viking dragon-ship coming out of the rising sun was

just as new and strange to them as to their Mayan guest, they had recognized their own tribesman, Dacori, standing in the bow with his right hand upraised in the sign of peace.

Beyond the beach a meadow sloped gently upward to the foot of the pine-forest, and on this meadow there stood a large Indian village of tepees. From this village, there now crowded down to the beach many a warrior, and squaw, and giggling dusky maid, and wide-eyed naked child.

Among them came a second grotesque and out-of-place figure. His was a nightmare face, foreheadless and chinless, with huge hooked nose. His head, bare shaven (or more likely plucked), slanted conically upward to a tuft of hair adorned with macaw-feathers. More macaw-feathers protruded upward like a bird's tail from the rear of the strap which held his loin-cloth. All visible portions of his skin were tattooed in green, thus adding to his birdlike appearance.

He, too, fell upon his knees beside the other grotesquely-clad individual, and like him murmured, "Quetzalcoatl! Quetzalcoatl!"

Then the prow of the dragon-ship grated upon the beach, and Eric and Black Harald and Dacori leaped overboard with the thirty-odd men who were not rowing, and tugged and heaved the ship up onto the sands.

This job completed, the Vikings snatched their shields from the gunwales of their vessel, and turned and faced the little group of natives, from whom there now stood forth a venerable brave, who greeted Dacori briefly and questioningly.

"He is Peane, the Chief of my people," Dacori explained in an aside to Eric, ere he turned and replied to Peane

at great length, gesticulating first toward scowling Black Harald, then toward the blond Eric, then toward the eastern horizon, the ship, the crew, himself, his clothes; and finally pointing inquiringly at the two strange creatures prostrate on the sands.

Chief Peane explained; and Eric, through his knowledge of Algonkian, was able to understand some of the venerable Chief's explanation. These two plumed dignitaries were People of the Serpent, from a rich land many marches to the southward. An outpost city of theirs, Aztalan by name, lay only six or eight days away. These two, with their retinue, were encamped here as guests of the Indians.

In halting Algonkian, Eric asked why they bowed before him. Chief Peane relayed the question to the two Mayans in a clacking sizzling tongue, and then translated the answer into Algonkian.

"They say," Eric retranslated to his black-bearded uncle, "that I am their king, Cussahl-Quottle, who ruled over them nearly a century ago for twenty years, and then returned to his home in the sun."

Black Harald let out a lusty blast of laughter, as he slapped his nephew on the broad back. "Then you're a lot older than I ever thought, my boy!" he roared.

The two People of the Serpent cringed and cowered at the sound of his laugh.

CHAPTER II

Wenona

BUT Eric Thorfinnsson, although just as amused as his massive uncle, showed his amusement less obtrusively.

Smiling kindly, although with a twinkle in his eye, he said to Chief Peane, "Tell my people that I am not their ancient King, but rather am his son. Tell them to rise—they have found favor in my sight."

"A good move," murmured Dacori in Eric's ear. "The People of the Serpent are treacherous, and will bear watching. We tolerate them only for the jade and cloth and plumes which they bring in exchange for our copper."

But Black Harald spat through his beard and roared, "Enough of all this twaddle and grunting! Eric, ask your low-born friend if any of his squaws can cook. We're hungry!"

Dacori had picked up considerable Norse since the day of his rescue. He turned a momentary contemptuous glance at the black-bearded giant, ere he addressed his answer to his young patron, "My people will be glad to feed you and your *crew*, Eric Thorfinnsson."

Meanwhile the Indian Chief had translated to the two groveling Mayans the gracious message from their god, Quetzalcoatl; and they had gotten to their feet again.

He now beckoned the Vikings to follow him into the village, which they did, although warily, with shields slung on left forearms, and keeping their right hands conveniently handy to the hilts of the sheathed broadswords which hung at their sides. Indian maids in doeskin suits gazed shyly at these sturdy men of another race, and the voyageurs stared boldly and appraisingly back at them.

Even Eric's laughing blue eyes, like those of his men, swept the crowd, and finally fixed upon one dusky beauty far ahead, whose charms stood out above those of her racial sisters. She was slim, yet delicately rounded. Her nose



She gazed into his rugged face with every evidence of adoration.

was straight and small, and her face unwrinkled. Her doeskin dress seemed of finer quality than those of the other young women, and was trimmed with small hemispherical buttons of some pink and green semi-precious stone, in place of wampum. She held herself aloof, with a regal air.

Eric's eyes narrowed as they took in every detail of her. The Island of Minong might not be such a bad place to stay awhile, after all.

But just then Dacori broke away from Eric's side, strode forward to the girl, placed both hands on her shoulders and held her at arm's length, surveying her possessively, while she gazed up into his rugged face with every evidence of adoration.

Eric shrugged his broad shoulders, and turned resignedly away. It was just his luck that the best pickings should be for someone else, and for a Skraeling at that. Black Harald, who had seen and taken in the entire pantomime, guffawed broadly, and slapped his nephew on the back.

Then the visitors proceeded to the council-ground, a dirt-trampled area on the top of a small knoll at the rear of the village. There they seated themselves in a half-circle, over against a half-circle of squatting leaders of the Indian tribe. Introductions were made, and a few brief speeches exchanged. Then squaws brought food in wicker

baskets and earthenware bowls, and the Vikings fell to. The two Mayans were not present at this ceremony.

One of the squaws who served the conclave was the beautiful girl whom Eric had noticed in the village. She it was who now brought him his food; and, as she did so, Dacori arose and strode across the circle, and said, "Eric my father, this is Wenona."

The girl smiled shyly, and transfixed the young Norseman for a moment with a pair of large limpid light-brown eyes. Then she turned away.

But Eric, intent on detaining her for a moment, asked her in Algonkian, "Those pretty buttons which adorn your dress. Whence come they?"

She gave a slight start of surprise, then replied, in a soft voice like the silvery note of the wood-thrush, "So you can speak the speech of my people—Eric? These jewels, though not so rare and valuable as the green stones

which the birdmen of Aztalan bring us from the south, are yet quite rare. They are found only on this island. Our men dig them out of the rocks, in the shape which you see, and our women polish them."

She smiled again at him, then turned and went about her duties, as Eric stared after her, and Dacori (standing above him) watched him intently with expressionless face.

Finally Dacori pursed his lips, narrowed his eyes, shrugged his broad red shoulders, and—still saying nothing—strode back across the circle and resumed his seat among his own people.

THE meal over, the Vikings were shown to a spot for their encampment, about half a mile along the beach to the south of the Indian village. Then they launched their dragon-ship, drew it up again near this new site, unloaded their supplies, and began to set up their awning-striped tents.

By mid-afternoon they had made themselves thoroughly at home; and just then one of the Indians arrived, with a peculiar olive-skinned, slant-headed companion. Eric, who was at leisure for the moment, met them and inquired their mission.

"This is a messenger from the People of the Serpent," explained the Indian. "He says that Ixtl, their chief—the one whom you doubtless saw on the beach this morning in his red headdress—wishes to give you gifts to the Son of the Sun, if you will but send back a squad of bearers with this messenger."

"Where are the Serpent People encamped?" asked Eric.

"By a pond to the southward on this island. You can make it and back by sundown."

"Good! Tell the messenger that

Quetzalcoatl's son will gladly accept the gifts of Ixtl." Then turning to his striped tents, Eric hallooed, "O, Mord!"

"Coming!" bellowed a voice from the tents; and the dark and scowling commander of the second shift of rowers lumbered up to them.

"Mord," said Eric, "you can speak Skraeling-talk, after a fashion. The People of the Serpent wish to give gifts to us. Take seven men of your shift, and go with this Skraeling and this Birdman. The Skraeling will translate for you."

"Just as though I hadn't worked enough——" Mord grumblingly began.

But Eric cut him short with, "Silence! You slept for two shifts just before we landed here; and all that you have done since has been merely to smirk at Indian maids, and guzzle yourself full of food, and help put up one small tent. Get along with you!"

Mord flashed a black look at his chief, and lumbered off to collect his squad. Presently they departed with the Indian and the Mayan.

LATE afternoon came. The evening meal was cooked and eaten. The sun sank behind the pine-clad heights of Minong. But no sign of the return of Mord and his men.

The Vikings stretched their sea-worn bodies upon their capes and blankets about their smoldering camp-fires. Then Ari, the white-bearded Bard, brought his golden harp from the ship, and sang to them, as the sky pinkened and turned to purple in the west, and the full moon rose out of the silver-rippling waters of Lake Superior.

He sang of the days when the sturdy Northmen lived on the narrow coast of a barren ice-capped land, which had been falsely named "Green Land," to



Then the white-bearded bard brought his golden harp and sang to them.

induce them to leave their pleasant homes in Norway, and settle there. But hardy sailors, venturing far asea—Biarni, and Leif the Lucky, and Thorfinn the Wanderer, and others—brought back tales of a fertile island just south of a large cape which jutted forth from the shores of the new world. This island they named "Vinland," because of the grapes which grew in abundance there. There also wheat, self-sown, grew wild in the valleys; and snow seldom fell.

At the tales of this Vinland, the hearts of those stout old Norsemen, worn out with the struggle for life on an inhospitable shore, cheered within them, and yearned for this pleasant land.

And they said, "Let us face the perils of the sea once more, for at worst we can but go down to a Viking's grave, and at best we may find rest, and peace and plenty."

Thus sang Ari the Bard. He sang of how Thorfinn the Wanderer had set out with five dragon-prowed barges, and three hundred men and women, from that misnamed and desolate shore, to colonize the new-found land.

He sang of the salt sea breeze, and the green waves that ran foaming by, and the creak of the straining oars. He sang of the setting sun, nicked by the dragon-prow, as seen beneath the curve of the sail.

How a black storm came up from the south, and drove them northward off their course. Northward, ever northward, day after day, till they came to the land that no man knows, the land of the drunken sun, which runs round and round in circles in the heavens, like a mad dog red with rage.

Then the men dropped their oars for weariness, and the women wished to

cast themselves into the sea. Food and drinking-water were gone. And all about them was ice, peopled by strange animals, who tried to come aboard and ride with them.

But the stout-hearted Thorfinn Karlsefne cheered their souls, and urged them on, until the storm abated, and they turned southward once more.

They found game and water; and, pressing on, came at last to the island of their dreams.

But Thorfinn's restless spirit would not let him stop there, so he and one ship, filled with men alone, kept on to the southward, to be gone for twenty years, on an adventure never told.

Thus sang the white-bearded Ari, to the accompaniment of his golden harp. And, as he sang, the Norsemen listened, rapt. The waves tinkled against the pebbles of the beach. The wind soughed in the trees on the uplands of Minong. The firelight flickered and died. And the moon rose higher, flooding the whole scene with silver light.

Eric sighed. He, like his kinsman Thorfinn Karlsefne, had ventured far. Would the bards some day compose a saga about him too?

HIS thoughts were broken by a distant shout, which echoed from the pine-clad hills. It was a drunken, ribald shout, and was followed by a drunken song.

Black Harald guffawed loudly.

"Well, Eric," he exclaimed, "these funny plumed people, whose king you used to be a hundred years ago, seem to have given Mord quite a skinful. The chances of your ever seeing your presents are rather slim."

But Eric was not amused. "I hope the fool doesn't pick a fight with our Skraeling friends," he muttered.

And, as if in answer to this thought, the drunken voice of their comrade sung out through the moonlit darkness, "I'm Mord th' Mighty! I'm Mord th' Mighty! An', if any dirty little low-born Skraeling tries t' innerfere with my love-affairs, the Northmen will come from their dragon-ship, an' dump th' whole stinkin' Skraeling village into th' sea."

Eric muttered, "Thank Heavens the fool is talking Norse instead of native language."

And again, as if in answer to Eric's thought, Mord bellowed, this time in Algonkian, "Oh, you Indians, come out and fight! For we Norse are after your women!"

Then the shrill scream of a girl, quickly muffled.

Eric jumped to his feet. "To arms!" he cried. "There's going to be trouble." And, snatching up his shield and sword-belt, he led the way northward up the beach toward the Indian village, buckling on his belt as he ran. Close behind him surged his massive black-bearded uncle, followed by others of his men.

Ahead of them on the moonlit beach they could see two compact groups of men approaching them. The nearer group was Mord and his squad, with several kicking, struggling captives in their midst. The further group was composed of Indians, several hundred of them.

Arrows were flying, but were doing very little harm, thanks to the usual poor marksmanship of the Indians, and the drunken aimlessness of the eight Vikings.

Speedily Eric and his men rushed past their retreating comrades, and formed a line between them and their pursuers. A shower of well-placed Norse arrows caused the enemy to halt

and fall back. Then Eric turned his attention to Mord.

Mord and two others of his squad held struggling Indian girls in their arms. Eric wrenched their hands from their captives.

Two of the girls slumped to the ground, but the third faced Eric in the moonlight. It was Wenona!

"I hate you!" she stormed. "We ought never to have let strangers land on our island. Oh, that drunken beast! And now I suppose you want me for yourself. No wonder the People of the Serpent claim you as their god, for you are as bad as they!"

Eric raised his blond eyebrows, and grinned in spite of the seriousness of the situation.

"You're very pretty when you're angry, Wenona," he irrelevantly replied.

"Oh, I hate you, I hate you!" she stormed, stamping one tiny moccasined foot. Then in a sudden note of terror, "Look out—behind you!"

Eric wheeled. Mord was lurching toward him with broadsword held high in both hands.

Stepping beneath the flailing blade, and not deigning to draw his own, Eric planted his fist against the point of the jaw of his drunken subordinate, felling the man with a resounding crack.

Then he turned in time to see Wenona standing with hands clasped in excitement on her heaving breast, and a light of admiration glowing in her amber eyes. At his glance, this light instantly faded, to be replaced by aloof scorn.

Eric shrugged his broad shoulders, then hallooed across the interval between the contending forces. "Oh, people of my friend Dacori, listen to me. Your women are returning to you.

Cease your arrows, lest you hit them." Then in Norse to his own followers, "And you too cease firing, as evidence of our good faith."

He stooped and dragged one of the cringing girls to her feet, and then the other, and thrust them both toward Wenona.

"Take them back to your people," he commanded her. "The way is clear. You are a brave maid, as behooves the affianced of a brave warrior."

She flashed him a quick glance, then tilting her chin once more in scorn, she put an arm around each of her two tribeswomen, and led them through the Viking press, out into the open, and to the haven of her own race.

THE shooting of arrows had come to an end, and now the Vikings fell back unmolested to their own encampment.

Mord was still out cold from the blow which Eric had dealt him. So he was carried back, and doused with water at Eric's command, until he recovered consciousness again.

Then demanded Eric, "Where are the presents from the People of the Serpent?"

Mord blinked stupidly, and gave his head several shakes to clear his befuddled brain.

"Wha' preshensh?" he bumbled. "Oh, yah. Presen' wash big deersskin full o' mead. Shnakes call it '*balché*.' Squad an' I drank presen'."

"So I see," Eric grimly commented. "And now you've got our Skraeling allies all worked up. Look over there."

He pointed to the Indian village, where campfires were beginning to break forth. Around these fires the Indians were dancing, hopping first on one foot and then on the other, with

bodies crouched, and stone axes clasped in right fists, while with their left hands they slapped their chests, or patted their rounded open mouths, as they omitted a "wow-oh-oh!"

Eric's uncle swaggered up.

"Well, my boy," he exulted, rubbing his big hands together, "we're in for a fight."

Eric sighed. "I, too, enjoy fighting, Black Harald," he said, "but these are the people of my friend Dacori. We came among them in peace, and they received us in peace. I wonder where Dacori is, and why he is not stopping them. This drunken lout here——! I'd like to ram my sword down his filthy throat."

"May I do it for you?" asked his uncle eagerly.

"No," sighed Eric reluctantly. "We shall need every man in the forthcoming battle."

CHAPTER III

The Burning of the Ship

THE howling of the dancing Indians had become a measured cadence, rising and falling.

"Mord," Eric announced, "you and your seven drunken friends will fight in the vanguard, for this battle is of your seeking."

He got wearily to his feet.

"Come on, my uncle," he continued. "Let us form the boar's head, for the enemy are working themselves into a berserk rage, and will soon attack."

So the Vikings marched out in the moonlight, and took up a position just beyond their camp, on the side toward the Indian village. They stood in a column of fives; and at the point of this column, three men, and then one. The

outer men carried spears, and wore shields on their outside arms, these shields overlapping, like shingles on a roof. The inner men carried long-bows and quivers of arrows. And all wore broadswords and war-clubs, slung at their hips.

Scarcely had they formed the boar's head, when the Indians, now worked up to a high pitch of frenzy, began to approach.

As the Indians drew near in the moonlight, Eric Thorfinnsson standing on one of the flanks near the point, shouted to them in Algonkian, "My friends! People of my friend Dacori! Why do you attack us? I restored your women to you, unharmed. The men who molested your women will be severely punished. Is not this enough? Go in peace."

From the enemy, the voice of Peane, the venerable chief, shouted back, "Turn the offenders over to us for torture, to show your good faith."

But Eric proudly replied, "No, none but a Viking has the right to punish a Viking."

"Then," said Peane, "it is war!"

"Where is Dacori?" asked Eric.

But there was no reply. The Indian horde moved forward. Then the outer rank of Norsemen knelt, so that the bowmen in the inner ranks could fire over their heads; and a shower of arrows met and halted the oncoming savages.

The savages fired back, but their shafts lacked the force and aim of those of the Vikings; and the few arrows which reached their mark were easily deflected by shields held high. Thus the Indians did little damage, and were held at bay until the Norse arrows were exhausted. Then the Indians charged.

Their onslaught was met by a bristling row of iron-tipped spears; and when their own copper-pointed shafts thrust through, the strokes were deflected by the metal bosses of the Viking shields.

But, when every Norse spear was buried in a brown body, the Indians still came on, and brushing aside their impaled comrades, they leapt upon the Norsemen with lance and stone war-hatchet.

Still the boar's-head held. Whenever a Viking was cut down, a comrade from the center of the column would step grimly into his place, and the line of overlapping shields would remain unbroken.

The boar's-head had now become a hollow ring of cursing, fighting men, around which surged a shrieking mob of painted savages. Cut, slash, cut, slash, swept the Norse broadswords in flaming arcs.

Side by side fought Eric Thorfinnsson and his black-bearded uncle. Eric's horned helmet, knocked slightly awry, exposed his glinting yellow locks to the white light of the now-high moon. His red lips were curled back over two rows of firm white teeth in a fighting grin; and his keen blue eyes flashed in the moonlight. But his usual battle-laugh was absent, for it saddened him to be fighting the people of his friend Dacori—and of the beautiful Wenona. And all for nothing!

Black Harald, towering and grim, fought with silent precision, occasionally spitting disdainfully through his big black beard, or pausing in his flailing blows to wipe his mouth on the back of the hairy forearm of his sword-hand.

The savages were paying, many fold, for the few Norsemen who were down,

when suddenly someone shouted, "Look! The ship!"

A BLAZE lit the night sky, and flickered along the beach. The dragon-ship was on fire.

"To the ship!" shouted Eric. The boar's-head formed once more; and, with sudden determination, charged through the press of savages to the rescue.

The red hordes fell back at this onslaught; and the boar's-head broke and strung out as it forced its way through the press, the fleetest and sturdiest among the Vikings rapidly distancing their fellows.

Thus it was that Eric Thorfinnsson reached the flaming boat well ahead of his men; and, when the momentarily dumfounded savages closed in again, he found himself cut off from his followers, standing alone on a narrow strip of beach, with his back to the water. Dead on the beach beside him lay the two Norsemen who had guarded the ship.

Valiantly his massive uncle strove to reach him, but it was no use, for the Indians slowly, inexorably drove Black Harald and the Vikings inland; while Eric, with one steep side of the dragon prow to guard his rear, cut and flailed at a small group of the bravest of the savages who now assailed him.

His lips were curled in his characteristic fighting grin, and his blue eyes flashed in the moonlight. A stone axe crashed down at his head; up came his bronze-bossed shield to deflect the blow. Then one stride forward he stepped, and his broadsword glinted as it sliced down, severing the arm which had held the axe.

The sweep of his weapon slightly unbalanced him; and, before he could

completely recover his poise, a copper-headed spear whistled through the air, straight at his unprotected throat. Eric saw it coming, and ducked; and the spear-point struck his helmet just at the juncture of one of the ox-horns, spinning it around and off his head, and onto the sand behind him. His yellow locks fell free, and tumbled about his shoulders, as he staggered back against the side of the blazing dragon-ship.

With a whoop of glee, the Indians closed in. But, even as Eric staggered, his sword-point instinctively came up to the position of guard, and catching the foremost Indian squarely on the left breast, impaled him there.

Back and up jerked Eric's sword-hand, as his enemy collapsed upon the sand. The bloody blade came free, but Eric's elbow smote a resounding crack against the hollow ship's-side behind him, and the sword-haft slipped from his numbed fingers.

But, as it fell, his shield-hand swept down with the shield still hanging to his elbow, and snatched the sword in mid-air, and held it and the shield aloft in guarding position before him; as, with his still numbed right hand, he swept the blond hair back from his eyes.

A stone axe struck at him from the left, and was neatly turned by the boss of his shield. An instant later another axe crashed down on him from the right. Seizing the haft of this axe with his free right hand, he wrenched it from its astounded owner, and hurled it back in the Indian's face, felling him to the ground.

Then Eric transferred his sword to its proper hand, regrasped the shield which dangled from his left elbow, parried a spear-stab, and slashed at the

nearest Indian, who stumbled backward in confusion, narrowly avoiding the blow.

A momentary lull ensued, during which the young Viking stood and panted, with feet wide-planted, and sword temporarily lowered.

"Friends," he finally said in Algonkian, "why do we fight? Let there be peace between us."

But, even while he was speaking, something slipped around his ankles and drew his feet sharply together. He glanced down, and swung his sword. One of the enemy whom he had thought killed, but who was merely wounded, had clasped his legs with two sinewy arms.

Eric's sword-stroke sheared the top of the Indian's skull; but even in death

the two arms held firm, and Eric toppled to the sand.

With a wild whoop the rest of his enemies pounced upon him.

A blow crashed against the side of his head, and all feeling left him. But, through a swimming haze, in which thousands of disembodied painted heads danced in the moonlight, he heard an authoritative Indian voice declare, "No! A better death than that."

Then he knew no more.

AGES later, it seemed, he felt himself falling through space, to end up—thwack—on an uneven surface, which smote his head, his back in several places, and his arms and legs. He tried to move, and found that he was bound hand and foot.



Eric's sword sheared the top off the Indian's skull; but even in death the two arms held firm, and Eric toppled to the sand.

Then there came a guttural shriek of terror quite near him.

Gradually Eric's vision cleared. In mingled moonlight and flickering fire-light, he was able to make out that he was lying in the bottom of the dragon-ship between the benches. Behind him a fire was roaring and snapping. In front of him, a short distance away, stood an Indian warrior, with both hands grasping one knee, in an evident attempt to pull one foot loose from something which held it. Eric's own ankles were lashed together with leather thongs, and his wrists were similarly secured behind his back. With a supreme effort, he lurched his body forward to a kneeling position; then straightened his legs, and sat upon one of the benches.

Such was the trapped Indian's frantic terror, that he paid no attention to Eric.

A burning spar crashed down upon Eric's shoulder in a shower of sparks. He shrugged away from it, and it slid to the bench beside him, where it lay, dully glowing, and pouring forth clouds of feathering smoke. Eric edged further away from its heat. Then, with a sudden afterthought, edged back again, and held his shackled hands to the blaze.

The pain was intense. The odor of singed flesh rose to his nostrils. He nearly swooned, but he did not flinch. Straining his mighty shoulders, he wrenched his wrists apart, felt the burnt strands give, felt them break. His hands were free.

An instant later, he had untied the thongs that bound his ankles.

Then he leaped upon his boat-mate. But, just at that instant, the Indian had succeeded in disentangling his foot from whatever held it in the bilge of

the ship. He looked up, as Eric sprang; and, snatching a sharp copper knife from its sheath which hung around his neck, he sprang to meet the young Viking.

But Eric was more accustomed than his assailant to keeping his footing amid the benches and tackle of a ship. Deftly avoiding the downward sweep of the enemy's knife-hand, he seized the man's wrist—and squeezed. The knife fell clattering into the hold. Then up swept Eric's left fist to the Indian's chin, spilling him backward across several benches, clear to the pilot's thwart just behind the arching neck of the dragon figure-head.

Trusting that the Indian was out cold, at least for the present, Eric now turned his attention to the fire. Most of it was in and around the mast and the awning-striped sail.

Groping hurriedly beneath the benches, he found a leather bailing-bucket on a rope, swung it overboard, and began dashing water at the foot of the mast. Then striding into the acrid smoke and sizzling steam, he seized the hot mast with his already charred hands, and heaved. Out of its stepping-holes it rose, and crashed, roaring down like a meteor upon one gunwale. Another heave upon its now-freed foot, and it splashed overboard, to be quenched in a shrieking sizzle of bubbling steam.

Then, with the water-bucket, Eric slowly and painstakingly sought out and doused each spot where any trace of smoldering embers remained.

So intent had he been on all these efforts to save his precious ship, that he had paid no attention to his whereabouts. But now he stood up on one of the benches, and stared around him in the moonlight. A light breeze was

blowing down the fjord from its head; and, under the influence of this breeze, the charred ship, which had evidently turned completely around from its beached position, was drifting slowly lakeward, head on.

On Eric's left lay the high shores of the main part of the Island of Minong. On his right was a rocky promontory, terminating in a row of skerries and reefs. And on this promontory now battled the forces of Black Harald, against the forces of the Indians.

The wily savages had cut off the Vikings from their camp, had trapped them upon this point of land, and were gradually forcing them out to its extremity; where, with their backs to the surging waves, they would have to make their last stand.

A SLIGHT rustling noise and a groan called Eric's attention back to his ship. The felled Indian was coming to his senses. Instantly Eric swung his bucket once more overside, and then dashed its contents upon the Indian. The latter sat up abruptly and blinked.

"Come here!" shouted Eric authoritatively in Algonkian.

Meekly the cowed native rose and obeyed.

Eric quickly grasped a port oar, and bade the Indian take a starboard one.

The Indian proved but little help, so stunned and bewildered was he, in addition to being wholly unused to this strange kind of canoeing. But at least he served to balance the rowing somewhat, and anyway Eric wished to veer to the right, so as to pass through between the end of the promontory and the first skerry.

Slowly, under the combined effect of wind and Eric's oar, the ship turned

and drifted in the proper direction. Then the young Norseman felt beneath the thwarts, found an ox-horn, and blew a blast—the old Norse signal-call for the assembly.

Towering above his slowly retreating forces, Black Harald heard the bugle-notes, paused in his grim battling, turned, saw the ship, and barked a sharp command to his men.

They broke and ran toward the end of the point; as the Indians, stunned by this sudden retreat, and evidently fearing some trap, halted irresolute. Then seeing that their enemies were really fleeing, they let out a loud war-whoop, and charged in pursuit.

By this time the dragon-ship had entered the narrow strait between the land's-end and the first skerry.

"Hold your oar against the land!" shouted Eric to his captive, as he braced his own against the skerry.

But there was no stopping the steady drift of the ship. The Indian's oar stuck in a cleft of rock, and was snapped off short. Eric's oar-handle hit him a sharp blow in the guts, knocking out his wind, and spilling him over backward off his seat.

Then, as the ship drifted slowly through the opening, the Indian jumped to his feet, and stood menacingly over the fallen, gasping Viking.

CHAPTER IV

The Fort

AS Eric Thorfinnsson sprawled upon his back between the rowing benches, and the Indian leaped upon him with outstretched fingers clutching for his throat, the young Norseman lifted up one leg, drew back his knee clear to his chest, and then thrust

out his foot with a vicious drive. The foot struck the Indian squarely in the groin, lifting him into the air, and hurtling him back, half the length of the ship.

An instant later, Eric had scrambled to his feet and was crawling rapidly sternward across benches and the smoking debris of the recently quenched fire.

But a squat, thickset Viking, with drooping black moustaches and scowling visage, leaped from the rocky point, and reached the stern of the boat ahead of Eric.

"Hooray for Mord!" shouted a chorus of lusty voices on the shore.

With the precision of a trained sailor, Mord snatched up a coil of rope, divided it into two sections, one in each hand, heaved one section ashore, and let the rope pay off of the other section as it flew. Straight at Black Harald flew the coil.

Dropping his sword, and letting his round shield dangle from his elbow, the bearded giant seized the rope-end with both mighty hands, and braced his feet. Five or six of his men joined him on the rope, while the rest formed an outward facing half circle between him and the Skraelings.

But Mord could not hold the line against the lakeward drift of the dragon-ship. Slowly he was dragged to the side. He braced his mighty thighs against the gunwale, but it was no use. The rope seared through his hands, and he let it go.

As its free end whipped across the benches, Eric leaped forward, seized the rope, and wrapped it several times around a cleat. Mord took hold of the rope again, but no need now, for the cleat firmly held it.

Again cheers for Mord from those

on shore, as they hauled the ship in and leaped aboard. And just in time, for the Indians were pressing them hard.

Once more freed to the will of wind and tide, the dragon-ship veered off the rocky point and drifted out into the open lake in the moonlight. The Indians clustered on the point, brandishing their stone-headed war-clubs, and shouting maledictions after the departing boat.

"Mord saved us! Mord saved us!" cried the Vikings. Eric bit his lip, and said nothing.

"What a fight! What a fight!" exclaimed Black Harald, his mouth showing red through his heavy beard. "And look, a dead Skraeling." Stooping, the massive Viking yanked the Indian to his feet. "No, by my shield, he lives! Ah, my pretty fellow, just wait until I count my wounds, and I'll carve a hole in you for each one of them."

"You'll do no such thing, my uncle," Eric quietly asserted, looking back from his post in the prow.

"And why not, if I may ask?" the scowling Mord shot back from his post at the steering oar.

Instantly Black Harald shifted sides in the dispute. "You may *not* ask, scum!" he roared. "It is enough that our leader wills it."

But there was much grumbling among the tired and wounded Vikings, and this encouraged Mord to continue the argument. "Eric Thorfinnsson," he shouted, "we have had enough of your womanish mercy to these lowborn Skraelings. If you hadn't spared the life of that Dacori person, where would we be now?"

"Still on the wrong lake, still aimlessly hunting for the Copper Isle," Eric levelly replied.

"Haw! Haw!" roared Black Harald.



Again cheers for Mord from those on shore, as they hauled the ship in.

"I guess that will hold Mord for a while."

Others joined in the laugh, until gradually most of the men, wishing to be on the popular side, began jibing at the discomfited and darkly scowling helmsman.

UNDER cover of the confusion, Eric nodded to his uncle to lead the Indian prisoner up into the bow.

"Your name?" he asked in Algonkian.

"Dakin, brother of Dacori."

Eric flashed a glance of triumph at Black Harald in the moonlight. Then placing his right hand on the Indian's shoulder, and looking him squarely in the eye, Eric said, "Brother of my friend, let us be friends from now on, you and I."

Dakin solemnly nodded, and returned the salute.

By now the dragon-ship was well out into the open lake. Eric called the roll and took stock of their losses. Of their original fifty-four men, ten were missing, but there were no really severe wounds among the survivors. Their principal loss was all their tents and equipment, and the mast and sails of their boat.

Eric redivided the men into three shifts. "Fourteen will row in each shift, one will steer, and one will act as lookout," he announced. "We shall row in ten-minute periods, for the night is cool, and we are all overheated. And each helmsman and lookout will take an oar in one of the other shifts."

"Me row?" growled Mord. "Not me! I am a helmsman. I refuse to submit to demotion and disgrace."

Others grumbled under their breath, "Ten-minute shifts! Who ever heard of ten-minute shifts?"

"Is it a disgrace to take an oar, if Harald and Ari and I do likewise?" Eric asked, unperturbed. "I thought that all Vikings were seamen, and proud of their seamanship."

And Black Harald added, "You'll do as you're told, fellow."

Mord was screwing up his mouth for some bold reply when Eric interposed, with just the trace of a sneer, "On second thought, Mord need not take his turn at an oar. If his muscles stiffen and become lame, he will be no great loss. I gladly will take his shift, so as to keep myself in fighting trim."

"And I! And I!" arose a chorus of shouts.

"You'll not cheat me out of my turn," snarled Mord. "Take oar! Ready! Hoy!-Hoy!-Hoy!—Where to, Captain?"

"Follow the coast of Minong southwestward, till we come to a good camping place." He turned and conversed in low tones with Dakin, then announced, "The Skraeling says that there is an excellent harbor only twenty miles away."

So on they rowed southwestward through the moonlight. To their right the tree-capped cliffs showed dark against the star-sprinkled sky. Finally they passed a small skerry-dotted harbor-mouth with a group of smoldering camp-fires beyond.

"Who are those?" Eric asked the Indian, standing beside him in the bow.

"The People of the Serpent from Aztalan," Dakin replied.

"Oh!" said Eric. "We certainly don't want to stop there just now. Row on."

The moon set, and the rowers rowed in darkness. The sky began to pinken off their port quarter, disclosing a row of rocky islets which hemmed them in on that side; and to the starboard the

cliffs of Minong began to take definite shape and to develop detail. Finally amid the swirling morning mists their guide indicated the opening of a narrow fjord, and into this they steered.

At the head of the fjord, a raging mountain torrent swept down, and at its right lay a small expanse of sand, barely sufficient to beach the ship. The weary Vikings pulled the ship ashore, and rolled themselves up in such sleeping rugs and capes and bits of spare sail as they were able to find aboard, while Eric and Black Harald and Dakin set out to explore the immediate surroundings.

JUST inland from the beach rose a small rocky knoll beside the tumbling stream. Around it lay a few hundred yards of meadows, flanked on the shoreward side by sloping pine woods.

"Here we must build a fort," Eric announced. "Ho, men! To work!"

Mord arose scowling from among the sleepers on the beach. "Eric Thorfinnsson," he bellowed, "you will be the death of us yet. Why did we ever leave the peace and comfort of our native land?"

"Oho!" laughed Black Harald. "Who ever heard of a Viking longing for peace? You volunteered for adventure, Mord, and you're getting your belly full. Come on, lead your shift up here, and fall to work. When the Skraelings come to attack us, you'll thank the gods of Norway that you are serving under a leader with foresight enough to build a fort. Come on!"

"It is my rede," growled Mord, "that we rest first, and then return across the lake to the great river and down to the sea. I wouldn't trade one foot of Norse soil for this whole plague-infested Island, copper and all."

"I'll trade you six feet of soil for your sword and armor, right here and now," roared Black Harald, half drawing his own weapon from its sheath. "I'm fed up and sick with your constant grumblings. Let's have it over with, here and now. And, whatever the outcome, I'll be shut of the sight of your scurvy face."

"Those be the most welcome words you have spoken to me all this long weary journey," Mord snarled, yanking out his blade.

But Eric stepped between them, his blue eyes flashing, and cried, "Peace, friends! We are among enemies, and can ill afford to lose another warrior. Shake hands, you two, and swear to me that there shall be no more bickering until we again set foot in the Northland. Then a plague on both of you."

Grumbling, the two men obeyed.

Then Eric parceled out the tasks. One of the three shifts, he put to work digging a fort on the brow of the hill, and lining it and capping its edge with stones. The second shift he set to felling a towering pine and trimming it to replace the lost mast of the dragon ship. And the third shift he sent inland to hunt for deer and small game.

Soon fires were crackling, savory food was stewing in the few pots and kettles which remained aboard, and all the little band were lustily at work.

Before sundown a new mast had been stepped, and enough of the fort had been completed to afford some degree of protection against sudden attack. The Vikings, replete with venison and rabbit and squirrel and beaver, lay down within the stone enclosure for a well-earned rest, while two of their number watched without, and

two more paced the deck of the dragon ship.

THE next morning, after assigning the entire crew to work upon the fort, and leaving his uncle in command, Eric set out with Dakin the Indian, and a blond youth named Ragnar, northeastward along the shore, to find Dacori, who Dakin said would be at the copper mines. That was where he had been, and why he was absent, the night when Mord and his drunken squad had started all the trouble.

Their route first lay along the shore to the northward, and thus about mid-morning just after fording a river they came to the encampment of the Mayans. Save for the elaborate awning-stripped marquee of the two Mayan potentates, this was a squalid affair, with filth lying all about, one or two smaller tents for the lesser nobility, and no shelter except reed huts for the scores of porters and spearmen, naked except for dirty loin-cloths knotted between their knees.

The trail lay right through the midst of this encampment. Eric was for passing quietly by, and avoiding attention, but Dakin laid a detaining hand on his arm. "We stop here," he announced. "Why?"

"To thank the Coatltec, the People of the Serpent, for their gift."

Eric made a wry face. "Bad luck it has brought us. Why should I thank them?"

"Worse luck will it bring us, if you don't," Ragnar counseled him. "And besides I am hungry. Let's see how these low-born men of the south feed their gods."

Eric shrugged his broad shoulders, and strode up to the gaudy tent.

At each side of the opening to the

marquee there stood a short broad-shouldered slant-headed warrior, armed with a glass-tipped spear. Both warriors prostrated themselves to the ground at the approach of the two Norsemen and their guide.

The flaps of the tent parted, and the green-tattooed monstrosity with parrot-beak nose and chinless, foreheadless face stalked majestically out, took one look at Eric and Ragnar, and prostrated himself between the two sentries. "Quetzalcoat! Quetzalcotal!" he cried.

"Tell him to get up. We would talk with him in his tent," said Eric.

Dakin relayed the message in a series of clickings and gutturals, and the Birdman rose and backed with much bowing and scraping into the tent. The two Vikings and their Indian guide followed.

Within, the tent was heavily ornamented with scenic tapestries made of woven feathers, but was almost devoid of furniture. Not a table nor a chair. But there were several cupboards, and two block-shaped wooden couches, all intricately carved and filigreed, and lacquered in red, green, blue, and yellow. On each of the couches there were piled many skins of deer, and puma, and ocelot, and boar, and tapir; and on top of one of these piles squatted Ixtl, the Mayan noble, his plumed red-lacquer headdress laid aside, but still wearing his jeweled cape, his jaguar-skin skirt, and his jade cuffs.

As Eric and the rest entered, Ixtl's oriental eyes narrowed, he hesitated a moment, and then slid his brightly booted feet out from under him and down off the couch. Eric promptly held up one hand, and Ixtl stopped.

"Tell him, Dakin, that he has found favor with the Son of the Sun, and that

within his own house he need not bow to me."

The Indian emitted a few guttural clicks. An expression first of fear, then of relief, then (Eric could swear) of contempt, flooded the negroid face of the Mayan potentate, as he slid his gaudy feet back under him again, and greeted his guests by a lordly but gracious inclination of his conical head.

Then, at Eric's command, Dakin asked for food and an escort to the mines. Ixtl promptly dispatched the green-tattooed Birdman, Cocome, for the food; and then invited Eric to seat himself on the other of the two block couches. Dakin he signed to a seat on the rug-strewn ground beside his own couch, and Ragnar to a seat beside Eric's.

There ensued for a few moments an embarrassing silence, which Eric finally broke by conveying, through Dakin, his thanks for the skin of liquor which had never reached him.

SOON slaves trooped in, headed by the green birdman, Cocome, and bearing earthenware plates, copper knives and skewers, and steaming food in bowls and wicker baskets. The faces of these slaves in spite of their flat stolidity, gave evidence of wonder that even so great a man as Ixtl, their Chief, should so freely consort with gods.

And Ixtl, encouraged by this increased show of respect by his own servitors, swelled out the jewel-caped chest above his leopard-skirted paunch, and through the interpreter who squatted at his feet, began to question Eric about his journey hither, and what life was like in the courts of his father: the Sun God.

But, due to Eric's limited knowledge of Algonkian, and (so he suspected)



Dakin's even more fragmentary acquaintance with Mayan, he could not be sure just how much mental contact there was between him and Ixtl. Some streak of perversity in his nature led him to attempt to convey the most complicated thoughts and the most preposterous word pictures, in the hope that his interpreter would garble them still more.

As the meal came to an end and the guests were toying with sugared fruits and cups of *balché*, Dakin announced: "Ixtl wishes the Son of the Sun to return with him to Aztalan. Great honors and great riches will be heaped upon him as when his father Quetzalcoatl visited the cities of the south. Ixtl is now a *Nacom* of the *holcones*—big chief of the warriors—of Aztalan; but, if Eric Thorfinnsson will go with him, Ixtl can be *Batab* of Aztalan, or even *Halach Uinic* of all the Serpent

People of all the cities of the world."

Eric looked at the bloated repulsive figure squatting on the skin-piled lacquered couch. Somehow he could not fancy himself allied to that creature, helping him rise to supreme power over mighty tribes. Whatever Norseman had impersonated the Sun God in days gone by must have had either better Mayans to deal with, or at least a stronger stomach than Eric. Furthermore he and his sturdy men had come here for copper, not for the jewels of the south.

Nevertheless he could not afford to make any enemies in his present predicament, so he answered, "Tell the great chief that I have other important affairs to settle on this Island, but that before I return to the East, I shall certainly visit him and his people."

His blue eyes were now twinkling with fun again, and he was so thor-

ougly enjoying his masquerade, that he missed what his usually keen sight would otherwise have undoubtedly noticed, until Ragnar leaned close to him and whispered in Norse, "Chief Eric, I mistrust the Skraeling. You, of course, can understand his tongue, but neither of us knows the bird-talk of the Serpent People. Watch apace."

CHAPTER V *Treachery*

ERIC'S blue eyes narrowed, and the smile left his lips, as he turned a keen scrutiny upon the painted savage engaged in earnest clicking conversation with the Mayan noble. And now Eric noted the covert glances which Ixtl kept flashing his way out of slant oriental eyes, and the fact that many more words passed between him and Dakin than could possibly be covered by what the Indian translated.

"Dakin!" snapped the Norseman, "tell our gracious host that we must be on our way. Thank him for our food, and request an escort of twenty warriors."

Another long conversation ensued back and forth between the Indian and the Mayan, until Eric sprang to his feet impatiently. "Enough," he roared. "Is the Son of the Sun to be kept waiting, while his servants chatter together like two old women?"

He placed the palm of his right hand against the hilt of his broadsword. A look of sudden fear flashed across Ixtl's olive-colored features. Dakin bared his teeth, as he scrambled to his feet; then once more his face resumed its customary inscrutability.

Ixtl clapped his hands, the green birdman Cocome entered; Ixtl clicked a sharp command, and Cocome bowed

himself out. Then Ixtl arose majestically, although with a slight trace of fear in his slant eyes, clamped his plumed red headdress in place, waddled over to Eric, placed one jade-laden arm across the young Viking's shoulders, and led him to the doorway of the tent. Eric cringed at the touch of the arm, but appreciated the man's courage.

Outside, all the populace humbled themselves in the dust. Then they rose and scattered at a sharply clicked command from their *Nacon*; all except about two score of squat naked loin-clothed men, and one rather personable young Mayan, clad like Ixtl in headdress, jeweled cape, leopard skirt, and gaudy buskins.

To him Ixtl clicked a few sharp commands, and he in turn assembled half the naked men in ranks, carrying spears and shield of plaited hide stretched on oblong wicker frames. The others, evidently slaves of the warriors, carried wicker knapsacks of food on their backs, surmounted by what appeared to be cotton quilts, and in their hands spare weapons—darts, dart-throwers, and glass-knived war-clubs—for their masters.

The leader was introduced as Coh; he drew a copper broadsword with which he saluted Eric. Eric removed his horned helmet, couched it in the crook of his left elbow, and smiled. Coh returned his sword to its scabbard, removed his lacquered headdress couched it in the crook of his left elbow, and smiled back. He was taller, slimmer, and narrower-hipped than most of his compatriots. His forehead, although flattened, was not quite so flattened; his nose was neither hooked nor negroid; and he actually had some chin. Eric smiled and nodded with appreciation.

A savage in full war paint arose out of the bushes ahead of them.



"Well, Dakin," he began, turning around. But Dakin was in earnest conversation with Ixtl, and broke away with a guilty start.

Eric's fair brow clouded. "Dakin!" he snapped. "Tell Coh to take up the march. Lead on to the copper mines. We must find your brother, and straighten out this mess about the battle between our two peoples."

Then, as they set out, he turned and whispered to Ragnar, "You're right about this Dakin. We'll have to play off the Serpent folk against the Skrae-lings, and keep a keen eye on Dakin, the while."

THROUGHOUT the early afternoon they marched on: inland around the edges of a large pond, across two streams that led into it; then zigzag northward through pine and birch forests, avoiding various

small ponds, until they came to a fjord with high clay cliffs extending due north to the northwesterly shore of Minong.

Dakin marched ahead with Ragnar close at his side. Next marched Eric and Coh at the head of half the *holcones*. Then the slaves, and then the balance of the spearmen. Thus Dakin was prevented from holding extensive conversation with Coh throughout the trip.

As the party came in sight of the fjord, Dakin cautioned, "Let the Serpent People remain here under cover. You and Ragnar come half way and remain within call. Then I alone will go forward and learn the temper of my people."

Eric looked him levelly in the eyes. "The first part of your advice I shall take. But Ragnar and I go with you to seek Dacori."

Dakin shrugged and grunted, then

clicked a command to Coh, and led the two Norsemen down into the valley. They had not gone far when a savage in full war-paint arose out of the bushes ahead of them, tomahawk in hand.

"I seek Dacori," Eric explained.

"These are our friends," Dakin added.

The explanation appeared sufficient. Quite evidently this warrior had heard nothing of the battle of two nights ago.

"Dacori at mines," he grunted, and the three proceeded down to the shore.

There great activity was under way. Some of the Indians were digging in the clay cliffs, with stone adzes and wooden picks, for rocks which showed the green streaks which indicated a copper vein. Others were felling trees by the slow process of building successive fires around the base, and chipping away the charred wood with stone or copper axes, until the tree fell. Others carted in from the beaches rounded rocks the size of a man's head to use as mauls. Still others brought water in buckets of birch bark or wooden bowls. Still others tended fires, built against the side of the cliffs wherever the green-streaked rocks were found. Repeatedly the fires were raked away, and the seams dashed with water until they cracked. The weaker portions were pounded with stone mauls.

This treatment was repeated over and over again, each time increasing the depth by a fraction of an inch, until the nugget of copper which underlay the green streak, was recovered. Canoe-paddles were used to shovel away the debris.

The nuggets were carried a short distance, and were freed from the remaining rock by placing them on large flat stones and hammering with small round stones held in one hand.

Eric marveled at the infinite patience and effort involved in producing such a small quantity of the precious metal. Fascinated, he and Ragnar moved from group to group, carefully studying every step of the laborious work.

The Indians looked up from their various tasks, grunted a greeting, and then fell to work again. Clearly no news of any disagreement between the two races had yet reached the mines.

As the two Norsemen stood inspecting the final step of pounding and heating and dousing and pounding the pure copper into plates, Ragnar suddenly laid his hand on Eric's arm, and whispered, "Don't look too quickly, but Dakin is up to something."

Feigning a casual interest in the cliff-side above them, Eric swung slowly around. Out of the corner of one eye, he observed Dakin in earnest conversation with a group of braves. They separated, and each went to another group. Many dark looks were flashed at the two Vikings from all sides.

"Oh, Dakin!" Eric sung out. The Indian looked up with a guilty start from one of his conferences. "This copper mining had so interested me that I had momentarily forgotten the object of our visit here. Where is Dacori, your brother?"

"I have sent for him," Dakin glibly explained. "This is why I have been talking to these of my people. Some say that he has gone into the woods for venison—others, that he is down at the entrance of this cove. He will be here shortly, never fear."

ERIC glanced around him. Most of the Indians had left their work. Groups of them were slowly converging on him and Ragnar from all sides. Dakin was slinking away.

Eric sniffed amusedly, though his jaw was grim. "Well, Ragnar," he loudly announced in Algonkian, "let us return to our warriors at the head of the fjord, and there await the return of Dacori." Then in Norse, "Come on, Ragnar, let's start walking."

The advancing Indians all cast a glance toward the head of the ravine; but, seeing nothing, continued to converge. A scowling group blocked Eric's and Ragnar's way, but these Indians were unarmed except for the copper hunting-knives which hung from their waist-thongs.

"My friends, permit us to pass," said Eric.

The Indians' hands slipped to their knife-hilts. "You are no friends," grunted one. "You stole our women."

"Someone has lied to you," Eric boldly replied. "Would we two have come among so many of you, if we had stolen your women?" He kept edging along the cliff up the ravine.

"Dakin says you stole our women," the Indian spokesman continued. "And he says that you came here today to spy out our stores of red metal so that you may steal that too."

"Aha," chortled Ragnar, grimacing and nodding his head. "Didn't I tell you that Dakin was up to something?"

"Shut up!" Eric snapped. "It's how we're to get out of this mess, not how we got into it, that counts."

"Cut our way through, of course," Ragnar replied, whipping out his blade. "The Skraelings have merely knives."

"Caution! Caution! I wish to be friends with these Skraelings. Why doesn't Dacori come? I wonder if Dakin really sent for him."

"Undoubtedly not!" snarled Ragnar.

They continued to edge their way

up the ravine, the glowering Indians falling slowly back before them.

"If you did not come to Mimong to steal our copper," one of the Indians demanded, "why did you come?"

"To bring Dacori, whom we had rescued; and to find the source of the copper, so that our people from the East might trade here for it, as do the Serpent People."

"And, having found it, why did you not leave? Why are you still camped on our Island, after stealing our women and fighting with us?" the Indian spokesman persisted.

"We must stay here until we find Dacori and clear up this misunderstanding. Else our people can never trade here in peace."

"Look!" Ragnar interrupted him. "Now we're in for it!" Down the ravine to meet them came five warriors in full war-paint, brandishing spears. "That's what Dakin sent for; rather than for his brother."

Ragnar and Eric halted, and now Eric too pulled out his broadsword, and brandished it aloft.

"Friends," he announced, "we came in peace, seeking Dacori. We would depart in peace. But if there is to be a war, we are ready to show you the sort of swordsmanship felt by these Skraelings of the East from whom we rescued Dacori."

For answer a spear hurtled through the air, straight at Eric's throat, but he turned it neatly with his shield.

"It is my rede that we shout for Coh," Ragnar counseled.

"And admit to these low-born Skraelings that we fear them? Never! Back against the cliff, Ragnar boy, and we can hold them off all day, until Dacori comes."

"If Dacori comes," Ragnar added un-

der his breath, as he and Eric fell back to the cliff.

A SHOWER of arrows sped in, and the two men took them on their shields. But one low-flying shaft pierced Eric's thigh. He thrust his sword point into the ground and yanked out the arrow, barbs and all, with both hands; the blood began to trickle down.

"Too bad we haven't our own bows with us," he commented grimly, as he snatched a spear in mid-air with his sword hand, then cast it back, piercing the shoulder of an Indian who was just about to throw his own.

More spears flew, some turned by the Vikings' shields, and some missing entirely and lodging in the clay bank behind them.

More arrows, then a shower of rocks.

"They're out of arrows," Eric shouted. "Come on!" And, snatching up his sword again from where he had plunged it into the sand, he charged forward into the midst of the enemy, flailing this way and that. Ragnar followed him.

One Indian parried a blow with a war-club, and Eric's blade sheared the club in twain. Another swung at him, but he stepped beneath the blow, and thrust his steel through the fellow's throat. Then caught a third with the boss of his shield against the warrior's chin, spilling the man backward.

"What a fight! What a fight!" he exulted, smiling happily as he smote with his sword. Then his face darkened. "But I would that these were not my friends."

"Friendly friends you have," Ragnar panted, fighting beside him.

A war-club swung at Eric's head. But, stooping to avoid the blow, he lunged upward with his sword, split-

ting the breast-bone of his assailant.

He glanced at his companion. Blood was flowing from a bad cut over Ragnar's left eye. Then the Indians forced them back against the cliff face again.

Although four of the five original warriors were now down, their weapons had been taken by an equal number of Indian miners, and others of the miners were now pressing forward armed with copper or stone axes.

"Better call for the Serpent People to help us," panted Ragnar.

"Never!" Eric panted back.

With their backs to the wall, the two comrades now fought more slowly and carefully, being content merely to parry the blows of their adversaries, and wait for openings. But, whenever a Skraeling got off guard for an instant, one or both of the Norsemen would leap forward with flashing steel, and there would be one less Skraeling.

The shadows lengthened in the canyon.

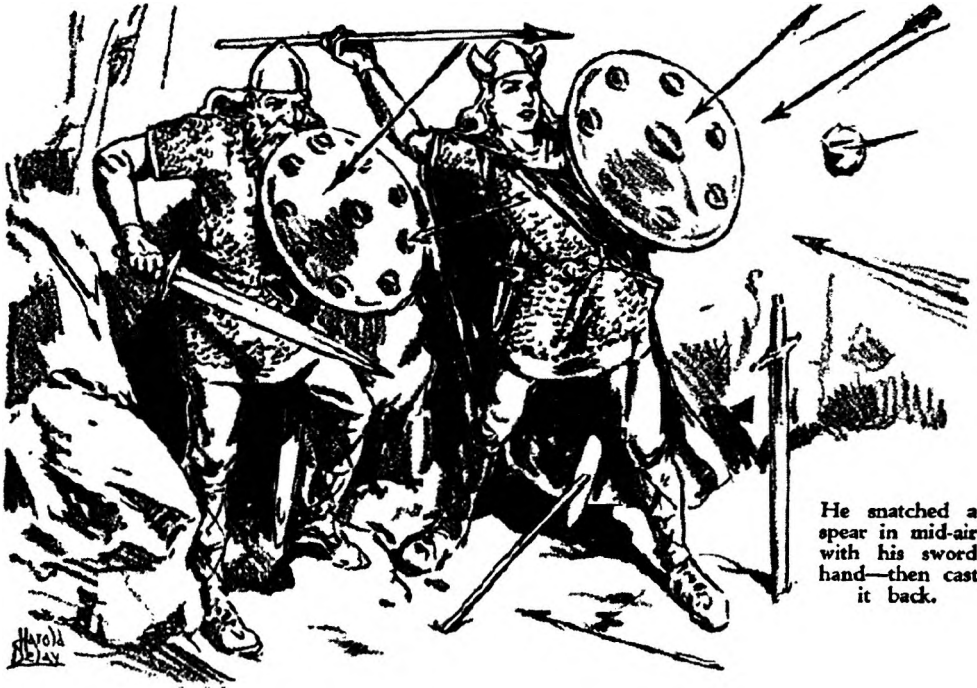
"I wish that Dacori would come, before we have to kill all his people," Eric panted.

A fist-size stone, flung from beyond the press of encircling braves, caught one of the horns of Eric's helmet, spinning it off. He shook his yellow locks to clear his head from the blow.

A shout from above him echoed across the ravine. He glanced quickly around and up, then ducked as a huge boulder came hurtling down the face of the cliff.

It struck his forehead a glancing blow, and everything went dark about him. His sword slipped from his fingers, his knees buckled, and he slumped to the ground.

For a moment his senses cleared, and he saw Ragnar's bloody buskins astride of him, and heard Ragnar's



He snatched a spear in mid-air with his sword hand—then cast it back.

voice shouting far above him: "Coh! Oh, Coh! Come quickly, ere the Son of the Sun God dies!"

Then dense blackness descended.

CHAPTER VI *A Captive God*

ERIC awoke to find himself jouncing along in the cool evening twilight. He was lying on an improvised litter borne by four Mayan slaves. Beside him limped Ragnar. Ahead and behind marched the spearmen of the Serpent People, and the rest of the slaves.

"What — what happened?" he breathed.

"Praise the gods! You live!" Ragnar ejaculated. "Coh arrived just as you went down. The Skraelings fled. And here we are. But as to how Coh learned of the fight, I know not, for that treacherous Dakin isn't here to

translate for us— Which is just as well," he added under his breath.

Eric's mind drifted off again, to be only dimly disturbed by the yapping of the dogs as they entered the Mayan village a bit later. He was carried into the marquee of Ixtl and Cocome, was placed tenderly upon one of the couches, and then slept again.

GRADUALLY the sound of a scuffle obtruded itself upon his numbed senses. Then suddenly, with the flooding back of full consciousness, his eyes snapped open. In the dim gray light of early dawn, he saw Ragnar, weaponless, barefooted and clad only in his tunic, wrestling with two loin-clothed Mayans, while Ixtl and the green Cocome stood by, urging them on with guttural clicks. With them stood the renegade Indian, Dakin.

Eric sprang to his feet—or tried to. But instead he merely toppled off the

couch and rolled onto the ground—for his ankles were firmly bound together by leather thongs, and likewise his wrists.

"This way, Ragnar!" he shouted; and his friend, heeding the command, surged in his direction.

The bare foot of one of the Mayans planted itself on Eric's face. The man slipped and stumbled; and Eric, raising his head, bit viciously at the man's ankle. With a yell of pain, the Mayan broke away from Ragnar, tripped over Eric's body, and fell in a heap, clutching his wounded leg with both hands.

Eric's hands were tied in front of him. A copper dagger hung in a sheath from the enemy's waist thong. Eric groped for it, thrust its point into the ground, seized its haft with his teeth, and pressed against it with the straps that bound his wrists. In an instant his hands were free. It took only another instant to loose his feet. He stood tottering erect, and glanced about him.

The other Mayan, his back to Eric, now had Ragnar by the throat with both hands. Eric plunged the copper knife into the man's back, and he dropped away. Ragnar craned his neck and wriggled his jaw, to free himself from the effect of the fellow's fingers, then cried, "Look out behind you, Eric!"

But too late, for a sinewy olive arm passed across Eric's shoulder from behind, and around in front of his throat.

Setting his chin and tensing the muscles of his neck just in time to keep his wind from being cut off, Eric bent suddenly forward, throwing his assailant clear over his head and crashing him to the ground at Ragnar's feet, where the fellow lay groaning. Some bones cracked as he fell.

Eric grinned and brushed off his hands. His eye met Ragnar's, and he laughed. "This being a god has certain disadvantages."

"Let's get Dakin," Ragnar growled. "It was all his doing."

But Ixtl and Cocomé and their Indian ally had already crowded out of the tent.

Eric glanced down at his legs and grimaced. Like his friend, he was clad only in his tunic. "What do you suppose they did with our clothes and weapons?" he asked.

Quite a commotion could now be heard outside the tent—the pattering of feet, guttural clicks of command and argument.

"Some kind of hell is about to break loose!" Ragnar asserted. "Let's get out of here in a hurry."

In an instant they had ripped every cupboard open, and strewed its contents on the ground. Not a sign of their own clothes and weapons, but they did find jeweled capes and leopard skirts and gaudily braided leather shoes. Also one war-club set with knife edges of sharp volcanic glass.

"Come on!" Eric shouted. And, ripping off his soiled and tattered tunic, he thrust his head through the opening in one of the capes, wrapped a leopard hide around his waist, and laced a pair of the gaudy buskins about his feet. Ragnar did the same.

Then Eric, planting Ixtl's plumed red-lacquer headdress upon his yellow curls, and grasping the war-club in one mighty fist, strode toward the exit. Ragnar followed him.

THE noise outside had by now increased to a bedlam in which Eric could distinguish the blowing of conchs, the guttural rattling howls of

the Serpent People, battle cries in the Norse language, and an occasional shout in Algonkian. Flinging aside the tent-flap, Eric strode forth.

Practically his entire ship's company, headed by Mord and Black Harald, wielding flailing broadswords, and supported by a small group of Indians headed by Dacori, were driving the quilt-armored Mayan warriors back past the tent. The shields of the Vikings were turning aside the final flight of Mayan spears. Then the servitors of the spearmen handed them dart-sticks and darts, and a new brand of fighting began.

Fitting a dart to the end of his throwing-stick, the Mayan would hurl it with uncanny precision, then yank it back again by means of a string attached to his right wrist. As Eric looked, one of these darts penetrated the belly of one of the Norsemen; then, as it was yanked back again, his entrails gushed out, and he pitched forward onto his face with a groan.

Swearing lustily, Black Harald leaped forward with agility surprising in one of his huge bulk, and cleft the skull of the perpetrator of this outrage. But, as he did so, the dart of another of the Mayans entered his own side. However, before its owner could pull his string, the obsidian-spiked club, which Eric had been holding, flew through the air, felling the Mayan. Harald severed the string with his broadsword, and dropped back behind his men to attend to his wound.

A shout went up from the spearmen, "Quetzalcoat! Quetzalcoat!" as they turned toward the tent of their rulers and saw the two golden-haired, but Mayan clad, figures standing there. The Vikings too gaped in their direction.

The black-faced Mord, with a howl of rage, dug his sword into the ground, snatched up the bow which hung across his stocky shoulders, and sped an arrow straight at Eric. But lightning swift though he was, the Indian Dacori was swifter. Wheeling, he planted a fist to the side of Mord's jaw, just as the shaft was loosed; and it went wide.

Cursing savagely, Mord staggered back; then, rushing forward again, he dragged his broadsword from the dirt, and looked around for the impudent Skraeling who had assaulted him.

But Dacori was already speeding toward the tent. Seizing Eric by both arms he forced him inside.

"You saved my life, friend, from Mord's mistaken shaft!" Eric exclaimed. "It is good to be in touch with you again, after all our vicissitudes."

"Mord's shaft was *not* a mistake," the Indian asserted in level tones.

"Let it pass," Eric snapped.

"I have now repaid you for saving my life," Dacori continued grimly, looking Eric darkly in the eye. "No longer am I in your debt. No longer am I your son."

Instantly Eric sensed his meaning. Dacori, no longer bound by any ties of friendship, was about to avenge upon Eric the outrage which Mord and his drunken squad had attempted to perpetrate upon Wenona and the other two Skraeling maidens, and the many Skraeling warriors whom the Norsemen had killed and maimed. Perhaps he even sensed Eric's concealed yearning for Wenona, who was pledged to *him*.

DACORI held a copper-tipped lance in one hand. Eric, having cast his club to save Black Harald, was now

unarmed. Yet, bracing his feet and tensing his muscles for a spring, he faced Dacori unafraid.

For a full minute neither moved.

Then the Indian continued, "I am glad that it is so, for now we can be brothers—equals in friendship." He dropped his spear to the floor of the tent, and held out his right hand.

With a glad laugh, Eric seized the outstretched hand with a mighty clasp. Then each placed his left hand on the other's shoulder.

For a moment they stood thus, in silence, each gazing warmly into the other's eye, each smiling into the other's face. Then the shouts of battle outside obtruded into their consciousness.

"Brother!" Eric exclaimed. "What is all this fighting about?"

"Why, to rescue you, of course."

"Well, I am the son of these people's God, even if they did try to kidnap me. In fact, that's why they tried it. I believe I can stop the fighting. Come on!" And he rushed to the doorway. "Stop!" he thundered.

Both contending forces looked his way.

"Can you talk the Serpent language, Dacori?"

"Yes. A little."

"Then tell them that the Son of Cussahl-Quottle wishes peace. That the People of the Serpent, the People of the Sun, and the Skrae—whatever they call your tribe—are all of them my people, and under my protection."

Dacori turned and jabbered a series of clicks at the quilt-armored Mayans.

"And you, my Vikings, peace!" Eric shouted. "I thank you for my rescue. Further fighting is not needed." Then, in Algonkian, "And you, people of my brother Dacori, thanks too, to you."

All three races lowered their weapons.

But, at the head of the Vikings, Mord scowled blackly, and tugged at first one of his long drooping mustaches and then at the other. "Are we not to avenge ourselves on these low-born snake-people, O Eric?" he shouted back.

Someone behind him snarled, "*You* tried to kill our Eric, O Mord."

Mord raised his sword and wheeled angrily.

But Eric interposed, in a tone honey-sweet, "It was a natural accident, Dolf. Mord thought that I was the chief of the enemy, in these clothes. Thinking thus, he is to be praised for the speed with which he attacked me. But let it pass. Dacori, ask Coh, the leader of these Serpent warriors, to send for Ixtl, their great chief."

This was done. From somewhere in the rear of the camp, Ixtl waddled forward in red-lacquered headdress, jeweled cape, leopard skirt, and gaudy buskins, with a furtive worried look on his slant-eyed negroid features. With him came Cocome, the green-tattooed birdman.

"Oh, my uncle!" Eric called. Black Harald limped up, nursing the wound in his side.

"Now, Dacori," Eric continued, "tell Ixtl that the Son of the Sun is not to be taken by force, but only by friendship. However, he will let it pass. He is still the friend of his people, the People of the Serpent."

Dacori relayed the message.

Coh, leader of the Mayan warriors, spoke up, and Dacori translated into Algonkian, "He says, Eric, that the Children of the Sun are mighty fighters. He invites them to stay and drink *balché* with him and his men."

At the word "*balché*" several of the Vikings pricked up their ears, but Eric responded. "*Balché* has already caused enough trouble between your people and mine, Dacori. We go!"

So, followed by ringing shouts of "Quetzalcoatl! Quetzalcoatl!" they set out through the morning mists toward the Viking encampment.

ERIC and Dacori strode side by side. And with them went Black Harald, grimacing with pain and missing a step occasionally, but doggedly refusing to ride in a litter. He was the only one seriously injured. The body of the disemboweled dead Norseman was carried slung on a pole between two bearers.

As they marched along, Eric recounted his adventures in the copper mines of the Indians and in the camp of the Mayans, and then queried Dacori and Harald. Dacori had returned to the mines just after the rescue of Eric by Coh. Learning then for the first time of the big battle of two nights previous, and instinctively feeling that it must have been due to a misunderstanding, especially in view of the fact that his Wenona had been restored unharmed, he set out with a few friends for the Viking fort to interview Eric. Finding that Eric had not yet returned, he at once suspected that the supposed rescue by the Mayans might be a kidnapping, and finally managed to get the idea across to Black Harald in halting Norse. Hence this morning's expedition.

Eric frowned, pursed up his lips, and nursed his chin with one hand, as he strode along. "Dakin stirred up the Skraelings against me at the mines," he mused aloud. "Then persuaded Coh and his spearmen to kidnap me,

under the guise of a rescue. But, if that is what the Serpent People were after, why go to all this roundabout trouble? Why didn't Ixtl seize me when I was in his tent?"

"That's the zig-zag way a Skraeling's mind works," snarled Black Harald. "All due respect to our friend here."

"No," Eric replied. "I think that Ragnar and I interrupted Dakin in getting the idea across to Ixtl and Cocomé in the tent, and prevented him from talking about it to Coh on the march to the mines. Or maybe it didn't occur to Dakin until after Coh had staged a genuine rescue."

Dacori interposed, "I understand your language a little, Eric. I cannot believe this about Dakin—Just as you cannot believe what we tell you about Mord."

Eric looked Dacori squarely in the eye. Then grinned. "I think," he said, "that we understand each other completely."

Black Harald interposed, "I hear you two grunting about Mord. Where is the scoundrel, anyway?"

Eric looked searchingly back at the Viking group which was following them along the trail. No Mord. Eric shrugged his broad shoulders. "Must have accepted Coh's invitation to drink *balché* with his yellow rabble. And, by the way, I haven't seen Dakin anywhere since he fled from the fight in the tent."

For a while they marched along in silence. Then Eric broached the question of blood-brotherhood to Dacori. The Indian's stolid face lit up at the suggestion. Black Harald agreed that it would be most appropriate: each had saved the other's life, and besides it would make for peace between the

Skraelings and the Norsemen. So, by the time they reached the stone fort of the Vikings, it was all arranged. Messengers were dispatched to the Indian village to invite them to the ceremony, which was to take place on the morrow.

Black Harald was a bit concerned about inviting all the Indians. "We have just had two battles with them," he objected, "once at our old encampment, and once at the mines. Many of their braves lie dead. And now we open our gates to them! Is that wise?"

"Many of our own men too lie dead," Eric replied. "If we can forgive, so can they. And I trust Dacori."

"You trust too many low-lives," Black Harald growled.

But Eric had his way, and the Indians were invited.

THE next day they came, scores of them, by war-canoe from the village, and on foot by trail from the mines.

The Viking rite of blood-brotherhood was very impressive. Two spears—one a steel-tipped Norse shaft, and the other a copper-tipped Indian weapon—were held parallel at waist height by Ragnar and one of the Indians. Eric and Dacori each dug a long strip of sod with swords, and a third strip they dug together.

These sods were draped over the spears, to form a low arch, one piece being hung on each spear, and the third piece being laid on the other two, across from spear to spear.

Under this arch crawled Eric and Dacori, each dressed in the full war regalia of his own people. Sitting thereunder, each pricked the palm of his own right hand with the point of his hunting-knife, let a few drops of blood

fall upon the ground, and then clasped the bloody hands together and swore a mighty oath before God and the Great Spirit and the attendant company, that as their life-blood had thus mingled together, the life of each was in the other's keeping.

Then crawling out again, they clasped right hands, and placed left hands on each other's shoulders, according to the Indian custom, and interchanged talismans symbolic of their respective tutelary gods. Dacori gave Eric a necklace of bear-claws, the bear being his totem. Eric gave Dacori a small gold cross inscribed in Runic.

Then the assembled company sat down to a deer-roast, and the peace-pipe was passed around, as Ari the silver-haired silver-tongued bard played upon his golden harp and chanted the saga of Leif the Lucky, son of Eric the Red, and discoverer of the Islands of Greenland and Vinland, and this continent.

These ceremonies, begun in mid-morning, lasted until mid-afternoon. Conspicuous by their absence were Mord, the surly Viking, and Dakin, brother of Dacori. "Drunk with *balché*, most likely," was a ready explanation for Mord, but for once Dacori was at a loss for a justification for Dakin.

As the final notes of Ari's harp died away, and all the Norsemen and Indians leaned back replete with food and good-fellowship, Ragnar suddenly cried out, "Look! Look to seaward!"

A fleet of canoes, southward bound, was passing them.

"The People of the Serpent!" Dacori exclaimed. "Why are they leaving before completing the purchase of the copper for which they came?"

"I smell trouble," growled Black Harald, lumbering to his feet, and then

clasping his wounded side with a groan.

Eric too sprang to his feet, his blue eyes narrowing. "Let us take a scouting party. But you, my uncle, stay here, and have one of the Indians poultice your wounds."

"It is time that my people set out for our village," announced Peane, the venerable Indian Chief. "You, Eric, can accompany us as far as the Serpent camp, if you wish."

SO THE expedition set out: all the Indians, except one herb-doctor, who remained behind to treat Black Harald's wounds; also Eric, Ragnar, and a handful of Norse. As they approached the site of the Mayan encampment, they met Mord, helmetless and smeared with dirt and blood, crawling along the trail. At first they thought that he was merely drunk; but when they came up with him, they realized that he was badly wounded.

"*There* is the cause of our trouble," said Dacori. Others of the Indians, remembering Mord's attempted seizure of their women, raised their spears.

But Eric stepped forward, his eyes flashing, his hand on the hilt of his sword. "We have sworn friendship and have smoked the peace-pipe!" he exclaimed in Algonkian. "The past is dead."

"True," Peane added. "Let him go."

Eric tried to question Mord, but he was too far gone to talk. So a litter was made of spears, and two Norsemen carried the wounded man back to their fort. The rest of the expedition pressed on.

The Mayan encampment bore every evidence of a hasty departure. As they were inspecting the place, five Indians rushed in from over the hill to the northward.

Prostrating themselves before the venerable Peane, they panted out, "Copper stolen!"

"Rise and tell us," Peane grimly commanded.

Then the full story was blurted out. The People of the Serpent, led by a man in Viking armor and by an Indian, had swooped down upon the Indian village, which had been left practically unguarded by the absence of almost entirely the whole male population at the ceremony of blood-brotherhood. Easily overcoming the few guards, the invaders had been led unerringly to the secret cache of the red metal, which they had looted in its entirety. The guards had followed them back, and had even loosed a few futile arrows from cover, but had not dared to attack the greatly superior numbers of the enemy, nor to come out into the open even after the departure of the Serpent People, until the arrival of the present expedition.

At the mention of the part played by Mord in this outrage, the Indians drew apart from the Vikings and gave them black looks, until Eric, nettled, exclaimed, "One of your own tribe led the enemy to your hidden store of copper."

"How about that?" Dacori asked the messengers.

"He has been captured," they replied.

And Chief Peane added, "*We* will attend to *him*."

"Then *we* will attend to *Mord*," Eric boldly asserted.

There was much grumbling among the Indians, as they gazed longingly down the trail over which Mord and his bearers had just departed.

But Dacori held up his hand. "We have sworn friendship to these strangers. Let each tribe punish its own."

"Shall we listen to this man?" snarled one of the Indians. "He is smeared with the pitch of his own brother's guilt."

One of the messengers laughed harshly, and everyone turned with surprise at the sound.

"O, Dacori," the man announced. "Mord seized your Wenona on the raid. The People of the Serpent have taken her with them."

Eric's face blanched with horror at this announcement. Pain and then hate flared across Dacori's stolid features. His eyes flashed as he turned to face the little group of Vikings. Then his broad shoulders slumped. "It is true," he listlessly admitted. "I am smeared with the pitch. Who will go with me to rescue our woman and our copper?"

There were shrugs and grunts among the Indians, but not a one volunteered.

Then Chief Peane spoke forth, "Our tribe has suffered enough since these two groups of strangers set foot on Minong. We have plenty of women left, and can dig more copper. Let Dacori go alone if he wishes."

Eric Thorfinnsson stepped forward. "I will go with my blood-brother," he said.

"It is well," the venerable Peane asserted. "This then is my decree. You two alone shall go. And unless you two return with Wenona and the copper within one moon, Dakin and all the strangers will be put to death. I have spoken."

Eric argued that Mord alone was to blame, of all the Vikings, and that they would punish Mord.

"So you said once before," Peane asserted. "Give us Mord to torture and to kill, and the rest of you may go free."

But Eric proudly raised his head. "Mord, evil though he be, is one of us. No Skraeling shall touch him!" he asserted.

"Then I have spoken."

Peane led his tribe off to the northward, and Dacori with the squad of Norsemen plodded back southward to the stone fort. There a great argument ensued. Some were for turning Mord over to the Skraelings to save their own hides. Some were for holding Dacori hostage, or even killing him in revenge. But loyalty to Norse tradition and to the rite of blood-brotherhood finally triumphed.

Some were for fleeing at once across the great lake in the dragon-ship, but Dacori warned them, "My people would outstrip you in their war-canoes, or proceed by land and waylay you at the narrows." So that idea was given up.

CHAPTER VII

The Impossible Task

LEAVING Black Harald in command, Eric set out with Dacori in a small canoe to the southward, as the evening shadows fell. For a while they paddled in darkness, until the full moon rose out of the lake.

"An almost hopeless task has Chief Peane set us," Dacori mused, the words dropping from his mouth in unison with the rhythmic dip of his paddle as he squatted in the stern. "And yet it is the only way in which we can save my brother and all your people."

Eric stiffened at the mention of the renegade Dakin, and his lips framed a scornful retort. But he choked back the words, and said instead, "No task is hopeless to a Viking. And I think that both you and I are more interested

in saving the beautiful Wenona than in anything else. Am I not right?" He glanced back across his shoulder at the man in the stern.

Dacori flashed him a look of sudden comprehension. But there was no resentment in it—merely fellow-feeling. Then Dacori smiled one of his rare smiles. "For Wenona," he breathed.

On through the moonlit night they forged, with rhythmic strokes. The yellow-haired Viking was unused to this form of exercise. New muscles twinged and ached, but grimly he made no complaint.

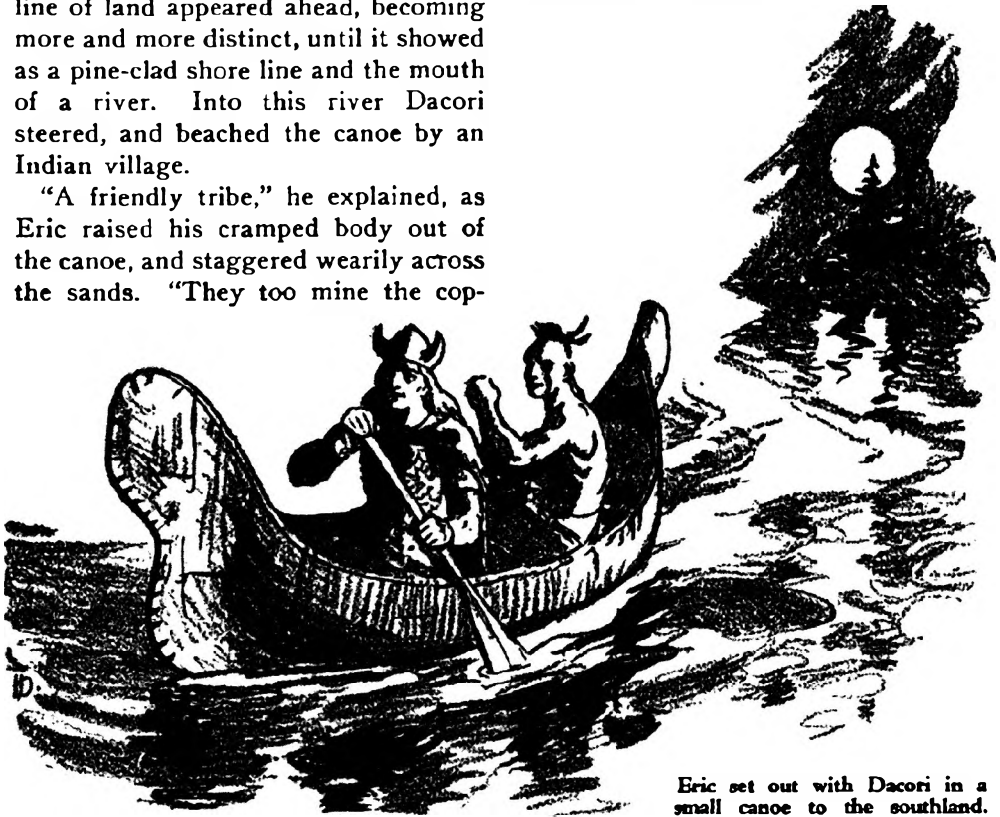
The sun rose, and all around them spread the expanse of water, with no land anywhere in sight; but unerringly the Indian in the stern held their course to the southward. Finally the dim outline of land appeared ahead, becoming more and more distinct, until it showed as a pine-clad shore line and the mouth of a river. Into this river Dacori steered, and beached the canoe by an Indian village.

"A friendly tribe," he explained, as Eric raised his cramped body out of the canoe, and staggered wearily across the sands. "They too mine the cop-

per, but their mines are not so good as ours. The People of the Serpent trade here too, and here lies the trail to the southland.—Ahai, there, people of Ontonagon! Dacori of Minong would have word with your chief."

The Ontonagons came running, furtive and suspicious at first, but reassured when they found that the fair-haired stranger could speak Algonkian after a fashion. Their Chief too came, a much younger man than Peane, and was introduced to Eric, whom Dacori glibly portrayed as High Chief of a federation of mighty tribes to the eastward.

Then, without the usual circumlocutions and greetings, Dacori plunged immediately into the business which had brought him here.



Eric set out with Dacori in a small canoe to the southland.

The Ontonagon Chieftain scowled at the recital. "We are friends of the Serpent People, and trade profitably with them. They gave me heavy gifts of green stone as they passed through here this morning. But you are of our blood. They carried a swathed figure on a litter; it writhed a bit; they said it was one of their men, ill with fever; it must have been Wenona. I will give you an escort to start you on the trail to Aztalan. But first rest a while, for you have paddled all night and part of a day, and—"

"We go on at once!" Eric cut in. "We must overtake the Serpent People, before they reach their city."

So, tired though they were, the two friends set out southward along the river bank and through dense pine-woods, with an escort of a dozen braves. Night fell without their overtaking the Mayans. The moon had not yet risen, and their guides insisted that the trail could not be followed in the darkness. So, reluctantly, Eric and Dacori ate and then lay down to await the moonrise.

When they awakened it was daylight. Indignantly chiding their escort for letting them oversleep, they at once resumed the trail, snatching a hasty meal of dried meat as they pushed on.

An hour later Eric cursed lustily to find the still smouldering campfires of the enemy. So near had they been to their quarry all unknown!

"How about a little dog-trotting?" he suggested. "Then mayhap we can overtake them before sundown."

Dacori was just nodding in agreement, when the bushes rustled at one side of the clearing. Instantly the Indians alertly brandished their spears, and Eric drew his sword.

"But don't cast until we see what it is," he cautioned.

A MOAN came from the bushes. Everyone tensed. And then out crawled a green-tattooed figure, hook-nosed, chinless and foreheadless, but stripped of all its feathered finery, Cocomo the birdman.

"Hold!" shouted Eric. "Let us question him."

One of the Ontonagon Indians proved better versed in the Serpent tongue than even Dacori. Through him they learned Cocomo's story: a quarrel over the spoils, an attempt by Cocomo to rescue Wenona and restore her to her people, frankly in the hope of more copper as a heavy ransom, and a beating at the hands of Ixtl's slaves.

"They left me for dead," the green one concluded. "Evidently the time is not yet ripe for the uprising."

"Ask him what he means by that last remark," Eric requested.

"We *chilans*, the scientists, artisans, artists, and other learned men of our people, have long resented the overlordship of the *batabs*, the nobles, and our bloody priesthood. Even the sons of the nobles, young men like Coh, are with us. Coh could have turned the trick this morning, but he claims that the time is not ripe. And now I shall never live to see the day of freedom." With a groan, he slumped to the ground, and lay still.

"Quick! Water!" Eric shouted.

Indians ran to the nearby stream, filled bladders which they carried with water, and squeezed it in the face of the dying Mayan. His eyes opened fitfully.

"Our pursuit ends here," Eric asserted.

Dacori stared at him with surprise. "What! Abandon Wenona now when we are so close to her?" he indignantly exclaimed.

Eric smiled tolerantly. "Not at all. But from now on we substitute strategy for force. If we can save the life of this green heron, he may prove to be the spear-head to wedge our way into the City of Aztalan."

Dacori sadly shook his head. "My way is to fight," he said.

"And so is mine, and the way of all my people," Eric readily agreed. "But too much is now at stake to risk butting our heads against a stone wall. For Wenona's sake, we must take every precaution."

Reluctantly Dacori agreed. Soft grass was gathered for a bed, the bird-man was tenderly laid upon it, the smouldering fires were rekindled, and

broth was brewed in birchbark cups from the dried meat carried by the Indians. Meanwhile first-aid was administered, and a runner was sent back down the trail for the most skilled herb-doctor of the Ontonagons.

Cocome, although badly bruised and exhausted, turned out to have incurred no severe injuries. The broth revived him mightily. He slept well through the night. The Indian doctor arrived the next morning and applied poultices of herbs which greatly relieved Cocome's stiffness and pains, so that by the second night he was sitting up and loudly boasting that if the Son of the Sun God would accompany him to Aztalan as a sign of divine favor, he would overthrow the existing regime single-handed. Eric was jubilant over the prospects, and even Dacori shared some of his gaiety.



"Aztalan," Cocome announced with a wave of his hand.

THE following morning Cocomé, doubtless somewhat buoyed up by his dreams of empire, was well enough to set out on the trail. So their Indian escort was dismissed with many thanks and the promise of presents, and the three allies set out by easy stages down the trail to Aztalan.

A strange trio they made! Blond Eric, in horned helmet, chain mail and tunic, and knee-high buskins, with steel-bossed shield on his left forearm, and broadsword hanging at his side. Copper colored Dacori, in moccasins and waist-high leggings, his naked torso and face painted an elaborate design of red and black and white and ochre, his head shaved up to his brushlike scalplock, a spear grasped in one hand. Green-tattooed Cocomé, stark naked except for a doeskin loincloth borrowed from one of the Ontonagons, looking like a mildewed plucked parrot. Each of the three carried a knapsack of dried food on his back.

Because of Cocomé's weakened condition, the trip, which should have taken only seven days, took twice that many. Finally they emerged from the woods upon the edge of a level plain, in the midst of which stood a palisaded city of garishly painted wooden buildings surrounding a pyramidal hill surmounted by the most elaborate building of all, a pillared edifice not unlike a Greek temple. All around outside the walls there lay cultivated fields, in which men and women could be seen working.

"Aztalan," Cocomé announced with a wave of his hand.

The three then held a council of war. Eric had picked up considerable of the Mayan tongue en route, and Cocomé considerable Algonkian, so the conversation was a mixture of those two lan-

guages. Not knowing whether or not the populace would readily recognize Eric as a deity, it was finally decided to enter the city in disguise.

Dacori, well-versed in the chemistry of the woods, located a squirrel's hoard of last year's butternuts, and from them brewed a dye which blackened Eric's yellow locks and turned his fair skin a yellow brown. Dacori's warpaint was washed off and his scalplock clipped. Loincloths were fashioned for each of them out of Eric's tunic. The rest of their belongings were cached in a hollow tree.

Then, in the twilight of early evening, which would serve to soften and obscure their disguise, with their hands tied behind them with buckskin thongs, Cocomé prodded them with the point of Dacori's copper-tipped spear, across the open fields and past the darkened huts of the peasantry, and reported to the quilted spearman at the city gate that he brought two prisoners.

Although it was a bit out of the ordinary for a *chilan* to engage in fighting, the guard did not question his own eyes, and admitted them.

On the four corners of the temple on the square hill in the center of the city, ceremonial fires now glowed against the darkening sky. Through half-curtained doorways came a flicker of light from lamp and candle. Behind the buildings cooking-fires gleamed, and their acrid smoke drifted through the streets. An occasional figure—loinclothed soldier or slave, feather green *chilan*, priest with blood-matted hair and blood-stained long white robe, or noble with lacquer headdress and jeweled cape—would raise his torch and peer into their faces, as he hurried by. But no one seemed to consider their presence sufficiently out of the ordinary to

be at all a matter of concern. An occasional dog scurried yelping under foot.

Alert and suspicious, Eric and Dacori preceded their pretended captor through the streets of a weird city such as neither had ever even imagined.

AT LAST Cocome indicated a house from which a great wailing was coming. Pushing aside the rush curtain which hung in the doorway, they entered the lighted interior. On the floor there lay a rude clay human figure, remarkably like Cocome. An ear of corn was stuffed into its open mouth, and beside it lay a dead dog and a broken spear. Around it, weeping and groaning, knelt a small naked boy, a girl unclothed except for a large clamshell hanging between her legs from a cord around her waist, a woman wearing only an embroidered cotton skirt, and a loinlothed man, all with deformed conical heads like Cocome, and all smeared with ashes and soot from head to foot. Green tattoo-marks showing here and there through the filth on the man, proclaimed him a *chilan*, like Cocome.

As Cocome entered with his two captives, the wailing ceased. For a moment stunned silence ensued. Then the woman and children with glad cries flung themselves upon him, while the man rose to his feet and looked embarrassed.

Freeing himself for a moment from the embraces of his family, Cocome clicked a sharp command, and the other *chilan*, evidently glad for something to do, stepped up and slit the bonds of the two captives.

Introductions were then made to Cocome's wife, son, daughter, and brother, who were just completing the

conventional three-days mourning for his death, using an improvised corpse which the brother, a sculptor of some note, had contrived.

"Very—much—look-like—Cocome," Eric commented in halting Mayan, and the brother beamed.

Suddenly the door-curtain parted, and Coh, in full regalia of lacquered head-dress, jeweled-cape, leopard skirt, and gaudy buskins, pushed into the room. The whole company fell back aghast.

"Oho!" laughed Coh. "So you survived? And bring captives. Who are they, and why have they not been turned over to the authorities?"

Eric got part of this, and part Dacori translated in a whisper.

Then Dacori spoke up, "Look close, O Coh. Do you not recognize Dacori of Minong and the Son of your Sun God."

It was now Coh's turn to let his jaw drop in horror.

Cocome drew his grotesque body up to its full height of five and a half feet. "Do you think the time is here now, O Coh?" he asked, with just the trace of a sneer.

"There are those in the temple who will be glad. The *Ahkin Mai* ["Head Medicine-man," Dacori translated in a whisper] is on a pilgrimage to the twin cities of the south. The Assistant *Ahkin Mai* is one of us. I will bring him." And off Coh dashed through the reed-draped doorway into the darkness beyond.

"Can we trust him?" Eric asked anxiously.

"I think so," Cocome replied in dubious tones. He led his guests into an adjoining room where warm water was brought them. They bathed and donned simple skirts and capes. Then Cocome's wife, cleaned now and wear-

ing a loose embroidered blouse and fresh skirt and belt, brought them a stew in yellow earthen bowls.

THE three of them had just finished eating when Coh returned, leading a shrouded figure in long black gown and hood. These garments the figure removed as he entered, disclosing a body gilded from head to foot. Coh and Cocome prostrated themselves on the floor at the sight, until commanded to rise.

Then Eric and Dacori were presented. The newcomer, Huaczin, Assistant *Ahkin Mai* of the temple, sniffed contemptuously, and then heaped a storm of abuse upon Coh. But at just this moment Cocome's brother entered, followed by another *chilan* carrying two earthen jugs and many strips of cotton cloth. After making due obeisance to the gilded priest, the strange *chilan* set to work to wash Eric with the chemical contents of the jugs, while all the others clustered eagerly and expectantly around.

Suddenly the golden priest groveled on the ground, mumbling, "Quetzalcoat!! Quetzalcoat!!" at the sight of Eric's newly restored yellow hair and fair skin.

"Arise!" Eric commanded, in lordly manner. Then, as the removal of the rest of the butternut-dye continued, he asked, "Now what of Wenona?"

Under questioning from Dacori and Cocome, the gilded priest explained that Ixtl had intended to make a personal slave of the girl, but that the priesthood had taken her from him as a sacrifice to be offered up on the altar of the Sun God. She was now in a cell beneath the temple, being fattened for slaughter.

"Lead us to her!" Eric commanded.

Then in an aside to Dacori, "You may not like this, but I think that it is best. Tell them that Wenona is my bride, and that I have come all the way from the land of the Sun to claim her."

The Indian's eyes narrowed, but he translated to the Mayans as bid. An immediate trip to the temple was arranged, Eric and Dacori being shrouded in long hooded robes like that which concealed the golden priest Huaczin. Through the dark city streets they threaded their way by torch-light to the foot of the square hill in the center of the city, and up its broad steps to the temple on the top.

Entering a small door, Huaczin led the group down a flight of steps into the dark interior of the hill, where he unbarred a grating and bade them enter. Cowering on a heap of rags in a far corner of the cell lay Wenona, a pathetic crumpled figure. Eric clenched his fists. The muscles of his sinewy Indian friend grew tense.

Then Dacori leaped forward, and knelt beside the girl. To cover up whatever explanation Dacori might be giving to her, Eric stepped between the Indian couple and the others, and began a loud harangue of whatever Norse words came into his head.

Dacori arose and rejoined the group. "She does not wish—," he began.

"Tell the Serpent People," Eric interrupted with a lordly wave of his hand, "that my bride must be bathed and properly clothed, before I can associate with her."

"Good work!" Dacori grunted in Eric's ear, "but I hope that *she* did not hear you!" Then he translated the order to Huaczin.

Slaves were at last summoned, and Wenona was led away to more attractive quarters elsewhere in the cellars

of the temple. Huaczin took Cocome, Coh, Eric, and Dacori up some stairs—which Eric carefully noted—into the great room of the temple.

THE golden priest, holding his torch aloft, indicated a carved face with bushy beard and flowing hair on a wall opposite the main entrance. "Your father," he announced. And indeed the carved face was more Norse than Mayan in appearance. Around the face was carved a design of plumed dragon-heads, not unlike the figure on the prow of Eric's own ship. What appeared to be horns projected from each side of the idol's head.

Against the wall below the face stood a stone bench on a raised platform; and, at the further edge of the platform, a block of stone waist-high with curved top. Eric examined this stone by the light of his torch. Dark brown clotted stains!

Huaczin explained, and Dacori translated, "Where the human victims are sacrificed to your father."

Eric winced. "This must stop! To kill men in battle is glorious. But it is cowardly to kill in peace."

"Our custom," Coh, the young Mayan soldier interposed, "is to kill not in battle, but rather to take prisoners for sacrifice to our gods."

"And yet," mused the green birdman, Cocome, "some writings which I have read in the College of Inscriptions where I work, relate that the Sun God when he lived among us, put an end to human sacrifice. Perhaps when 'the day' comes,—"

"The people would never stand for it," Huaczin snapped. "The bodies of the victims are their choicest food."

Cocome seemed suddenly to turn even greener in the light of the torches.

His knees wobbled, and he staggered over to the bench and slumped upon it.

Warrior Coh laughed. "He can't stomach our religion," he explained. "But that is merely because his daughter had such a red ending at the Skinning Time last summer. The harvest looked bad—no rain. So the *Ahkin Mai* called for four virgin sacrifices. Cocome's oldest daughter was one of those chosen. Gods, how she screamed, as the knives of the *nacons* ripped up her sides, and tore the skin off! One of the gilded priests wore her skin for a week, with the hands and feet still flapping around. Cocome used to take sick every time he saw it. But," Coh shrugged, "such are the ways of the gods. There would be no rain, if such sacrifices were refused them."

"This is horrible!" Eric exclaimed, when Coh's speech was translated to him by Dacori. "If I am to help them in their revolution, such things must stop."

"Caution," Dacori whispered. "We came here to rescue Wenona, not to change the totems of these filthy people."

"Tell them my orders," Eric snapped.

So Dacori obeyed. Cocome's nightmare face lit up with an almost human expression, but Coh and the golden priest scowled.

"Can't we sacrifice just a few victims—merely some fat old men—to you on the morrow?" Huaczin begged.

But Eric shook his head decisively.

THE party then returned to the cellars of the temple, where Wenona, now clothed in jeweled cotton blouse and skirt and belt, greeted them.

Eric stared searchingly at Dacori. The Indian tensed and set his jaw, but nodded. So Eric advanced toward We-

nona with outstretched arms. Everyone was intent upon them. He did not dare speak to warn her, for fear that some of the three Mayans might be able to understand that much Algonkian.

The maid flashed a glance at Dacori. He grimly nodded. Then she, looking up at Eric with ill-concealed hate and contempt, came stiffly into his arms. But, as he closed them around her, and whispered words of assurance, the stiffness suddenly left her taut body. She pressed against him with a sigh, and he crushed her close. Oh, but she was soft and desirable!

Yet she was the bride of his blood-brother, and he was supposed to be merely playing a part. Guiltily he released her and the blood flared up in both their faces. But, in the flickering light of the torches, perhaps Dacori did not see.

"The Son of the Sun is tired from his long journey," Dacori announced, "and his bride has suffered many indignities. They would rest."

So Huaczin showed them to three rooms, which had been hastily cleaned by the temple slaves, and provided with block-shaped sleeping couches, piles of soft skins, and feather tapestries.

In one of these rooms Wenona, Eric, and Dacori met together and recounted all that had happened to each of them since their troubles had begun, so soon after the first landing of the Vikings on Minong. Dacori warmly congratulated the girl on playing so well the part of bride of the Sun, at which her eyes and Eric's both fell.

"We are safe for the present," said Eric as they parted. "The next question is how to get out of here with our skins still on. This whole place reeks

with blood. I would not stay to rule over these people for all the wealth of the seas. And remember that we have not yet heard from our enemy Ixtl."

* * *

THEY were awakened the next morning by the blowing of conches on the porticos of the temple, high above them. Minor priests, gold tinted, brought them bowls and jugs of warm water and towels; then, when they had bathed, fresh fruits and savory stews and *balché*. Elaborate be-jeweled robes were provided for all three, and for Eric a fretwork lacquered headdress surmounted with heron-plumes, more gaudy even than that which he had seen worn by Ixtl at Minong.

This gave Eric an idea, and he arranged to have Cocome sent to retrieve the horned helmet which he had cached in the woods before entering Aztalan the night before, for he fancied that the carved idol of the Sun God in the temple above portrayed him as wearing such a Norse helmet.

At mid-morning they were led up the dark narrow stairs to the main hall of the temple, and were seated on the stone bench on the raised dais, Eric in the center, Wenona on his right, and Dacori on his left. More conches. Then the temple gates were flung open, and for hours the gaping populace filed in, to fall and worship before the Son of the Sun, and his bride, and his friend.

First came the priesthood, some gilded like Huaczin; *nacons* in bloodstained white robes and blood-matted hair; and their lay brothers wearing only loin-cloths. Then the nobles, *batabs* and lesser, dressed as Ixtl and Coh had been, in plumed openwork headdresses, jeweled capes, skirts of various animal skins

(jaguars predominating), and varicolored braided leather buskins. *Chilans* (birdmen like Cocome): the astronomers, historians, scientists, architects of the race. Spearmen in quilted armor. Loin-clothed guildsmen, merchants, peasants, and slaves; the merchants being distinguishable by their fans. Women of all classes, in embroidered or jeweled cotton blouses, skirts, and belts. Naked boys, and girl-children with only a single mussel-shell to hide their nakedness.

When it was all over, and the temple doors had been locked once more, Eric announced that he wished to see the city.

"You can see it all from the balcony of the temple," Huaczin informed him. So the three were led out onto the balcony.

Around them on all sides lay one-story wooden buildings of various sizes, painted every hue except the sacred color, blue. Most were windowless, but the larger and more elaborate had not only windows, but striped awnings as well.

One long building was pointed out as the College of Inscriptions, where Cocome and his fellow scientists worked. Another as the dormitory where the sons of the nobles lived and trained. These young men, so Huaczin informed Eric through Dacori, were willing and ready to join with the artisans and merchants and birdmen scientists, to overthrow the corrupt nobility (their own parents) and the bloody priesthood.

"But you yourself are a priest!" Eric exclaimed.

"I wish to be *Ahkin Mai*, when the *Ahkin Mai* is overthrown," was the unembellished reply.

A child in the streets below caught

sight of Eric on the balcony, and pointed with his finger, and shouted. Instantly the word spread through the populace, and everyone—from the highest *batab* to the lowest slave—prostrated himself in the dust.

"That must be stopped," Eric announced. "No one must bow to me, except in the temple. How can I see what my people are like, if they lie face down whenever I go among them."

"They do that for us, the godmen," Huaczin objected.

And Dacori, as he translated, added, "Eric, you must stop interfering with their religion, if we ever are to get out of here."

Nettled, Eric snapped, "Let it pass. Tell Huaczin that, if he wishes, the people may continue to bow to the golden ones, provided that he has the bloody altar in the temple carted away before nightfall. I wish the artisans sent for at once."

"The people will be displeased by that," Dacori objected. "Huaczin and Coh have told us so."

"Tell him!" Eric thundered.

So the message was relayed, and the priest and his three guests descended into the temple cellars for dinner.

ALL afternoon messengers arrived with gifts, from wealthy noble and humble serf alike. Gifts for their god and his bride and his friend—plumed headdresses, jeweled capes, jaguar-skins, ornaments of precious jade, jars and plates of fine pottery, feather tapestries, obsidian-spiked warclubs, knives of chert. Also foods both rare and simple, in hamper and bowl.

"It looks as though we had wealth enough to satisfy old Peane, Chief of Minong—this and Wenona," said Eric. "Let us plan our departure."

But when Dacori broached the matter to the gilded Huaczin, the priest scowled. "The time has not yet come," he said. "Coh and Cocome are spreading the word among their kind that the Son of the Sun is to bring about a change. Stay with us but a day or two more, and it shall be accomplished."

"I suppose we do owe it to our bird-man friend Cocome," Eric reluctantly admitted. "If it hadn't been for him we would never have gotten into Aztalan."

When the three were alone together in their own apartments, Eric said, "I mistrust this uprising and civil war. Almost anything may happen when brother fights brother, and son fights father. We must watch for the first chance to leave."

"And in the meantime, don't try to make too many changes in the religion," cautioned his Indian friend.

Wenona looked hard at Eric, and then said, "I sometimes wonder if he doesn't really wish to stay here and be big medicine-man, and keep me with him."

But Dacori warmly took Eric's part, and silenced her.

A meal more elaborate than any before, was now brought in, the gift of the *batab* Ixtl.

"Trying to make up for past indignities," Eric said.

"Or currying favor," Dacori suggested.

"Or thoroughly scared," was Wenona's opinion.

As they ate, conversation lagged. It had been a tiring day, and was beginning to get on the nerves of even the steadfast Eric and the stolid Dacori. Dacori yawned once or twice. So did Wenona. Eric laughed at them. Then he yawned himself. Wenona slumped

forward asleep among the dishes. Eric rose to go to her, but his knees buckled and he fell to the floor.

CHAPTER VIII

On the Bloody Altar

AGES later he awoke with a splitting headache. Instead of the room with the feathered tapestries and skin-strewn couch, he was lying on the floor of a filthy cell, in jet darkness. With an effort he pulled himself to his feet.

A voice, a girl's voice, to one side called, "Eric! Eric!"

He stumbled toward the sound. Wenona was speaking to him through a crack in the wall. "I am sorry for what I said about you. You risked your life to come and rescue me, and now you too are a prisoner like me."

"So did Dacori. What has become of him?"

"I do not know," the Indian girl replied, with a sob.

A light coming down the corridor interrupted them. The bars of the cell door became visible. One of the filthy blood-smeared *nacons* was standing there, torch in hand.

"Eric," he said in halting Algonkian, "I am Coh, disguised. The *Ahkin Mai* is back. Ixtl sent for him. Your food was drugged. Come quickly." He began to fumble with the fastenings of the door.

There was a rush of feet in the corridor. White-gowned *nacons* and loin-clothed *chacs* swarmed upon Coh and bore him away. Then darkness again, and silence.

At intervals, food was brought; nothing elaborate, merely corn-porridge, yet toothsome and wholesome.

"They feed us well for prisoners," Eric remarked through the crack in the wall, in an attempt at being reassuring.

"They fatten us for the sacrifice," Wenona grimly replied.

From time to time Eric strained at the grated door, tried to reach out through the bars and find the fastenings, tried to dig through the walls with the fingers of his bare hands, but without avail.

Hours later, the light of torches appeared in the corridor, and a squat and hideous Mayan with pendulous lips and bloodshot eyes came and stood by the grating. A long and elaborate jeweled gown covered most of his gilded body. He was followed by a considerable retinue of other gilded priests, blood-matted *nacons*, and naked *chacs*, and one green *chilan*.

The *chilan* translated, "This is the *Ahkin Mai*."

"I demand to be released," Eric

shouted, rattling the bars. "What will the people say when they find that I have disappeared?"

"We are already spreading the word that you are a mere man, and not a god," the *Ahkin Mai* calmly replied. "If that succeeds, you will be sacrificed upon the altar which you have profaned. If it fails, we shall kill you quietly here, and proclaim to the people that you have returned to the land of the Sun. We go now to sacrifice your friend Cocomé. If you are a god, prove it by saving his life."

With much cackling laughter, the procession moved on, leaving Eric again in darkness.

A filthy *nacon* came with a torch and thrust a bowl of maize beneath the bars. But Eric, flattened against the wall beside the grating, seized the fellow's wrist ere it could be withdrawn, then pulled the fellow toward him until he could seize his neck.



"Open!" he barked. It was one of the few Mayan words which he had learned.

Choking and coughing, the *nacon* undid the catches. Eric thrust him inside, his head struck the paved floor, and he lay still.

HASTILY Eric picked up the torch which the *nacon* had dropped, then released Wenona. He found Dacori, Coh, and the gilded Huaczin in adjoining cells and released them, too. A hurried search for weapons disclosed none.

"Come on!" Eric shouted. "No time to waste!" And led the way up the dark stair to the altar.

Pushing aside the curtain at the top, he peered out. The temple hall was crowded with every class of the populace. Bent back over the curved altar-stone lay their birdman friend, now painted a brilliant blue, his arms and legs held down by four naked *chacs*. By his left side stood a blood-matted *nacon*, curved copper knife poised in air. By his left side stood the elaborately gowned *Ahkin Mai*, intoning a chant, to the accompaniment of a chorus of temple singers in the front rank of the audience. A few gilded priests were scattered about the raised altar-platform.

The chant ceased. The sacrificial knife began to descend.

With a berserk shout, which momentarily paralyzed the arm of the *nacon*, Eric charged across the platform and planted one mighty fist against the *nacon's* jaw. Down he went without even a groan, and his knife clattered to the stones. The four *chacs* scattered.

Eric faced the crowd, his face raging.

Coh shouted, "People of the Serpent, there stands your god!"

But an angry murmur arose, "Not god, but man! Not god, but man!"

"I'll prove he is but man!" the *Ahkin Mai* shrieked, scooping up the sacrificial knife, and lunging with it at Eric.

Eric had no chance to dodge. But Dacori, the Indian, flung himself on Eric's unprotected back, and the knife sunk into Dacori's shoulder.

Eric wheeled and felled the *Ahkin Mai* with a fist-blow which crushed his skull. Wenona took the fallen Indian in her arms.

"The day has come!" Coh shouted. "Gather round, young nobles and spear-men!"

Cocome, the blue-smearing birdman, grabbed up the knife and drove it deep into one of the gilded priests. "My daughter is avenged!" he shouted.

"Quetzalcoatli! Quetzalcoatli!" cried the crowd. "He has survived the *Ahkin's Mai's* test. The *Ahkin Mai's* knife did not kill him. He is god, not man."

DACORI'S wound, though severe, proved to be not serious; his shoulder-blade had stopped the knife.

Every noble, Ixtl especially, every blood-smearing *nacon*, and most of the gilded priests, were run to earth and slain. Coh was proclaimed High *Batab* of the City; Huaczin, *Ahkin Mai*; and Cocome, head scientist of the College of Inscriptions. The revolution had won.

"And now," Eric announced when it was all over, "if you will provide a litter for the wounded Dacori, a palanquin for Wenona, and suitable bearers and guards for my presents, I will return to Minong, en route to the land of the Sun. The month allotted me by Chief Peane is almost up, and I must hurry to save my people from the wrath of the Skraelings."

But Coh and Huaczin and Cocome solemnly shook their heads. "You can never leave. You must stay and be our god."

"And if I refuse?" Eric indignantly demanded.

"We shall kill you and your bride and your friend in the cellars of the temple, as the former *Ahkin Mai* would have done. But if you yield, then Dacori and so much of the presents as you will, shall be sent back to Minong."

"If I yield, will you let my bride return to her people with Dacori?"

"Strange are the ways of the gods!" they exclaimed, incredulous.

"Will you?"

"Yes. We need but you."

A pang smote Eric. Never more to see

his lusty uncle, Black Harald, and young Ragnar, and the rest of his Norse comrades, even the scowling and treacherous Mord. Never more to set foot on his beloved Norway.

But he must save his comrades, and his blood-brother, and Dacori's bride, the lovely Wenona.

So he yielded. It seemed the only way.

* * *

THIS then is the story of the origin of the second Quetzalcoatl, Eric Thorfinnsson of Aztalan, gentle god and great ruler, the mighty general Axcitl Torpiltzin, who (so archeologists relate) led the Aztec Coatlics of Aztalan to the conquest of Yucatan.



DID AZTALAN EXIST?

INDEED yes. Near Lake Mills in Jefferson County, Wisconsin, may be seen the ruins of an ancient walled city, which archeologists call Aztalan or Aztalan. Within these walls lie two earthen pyramids—one with a top 60 feet square, the other slightly smaller. Potsherds found in the vicinity reveal characteristics of three widely distributed peoples, and are beautifully modeled, painted and incised.

Nearby in Rock Lake another pyramid, of smooth stones set in mortar, is arousing interest and debate. The chief definite opinion so far is that the lake must have arrived after the "truncated cone" was built.

Mayan and Aztec legends have long told of the far northern country from which their ancestors came. Readers who

are interested in Aztalan, may obtain bulletins from the Milwaukee Museum.

* * *

That the Vikings knew America long before Columbus is now generally accepted. Most interesting relic of their explorations is the much discussed Kensington stone found in Minnesota in 1897, which, translated, reads:

"Eight Swedes, twenty-two Norsemen on exploration trip through western regions. We had camp by two skerries one day journey north. We were out and fished one day. When we came home we found ten men red with blood and dead. Ave Maria! Save us from evil! We have sent ten of our party to look for our ship fourteen days' journey from this island. Year 1362."

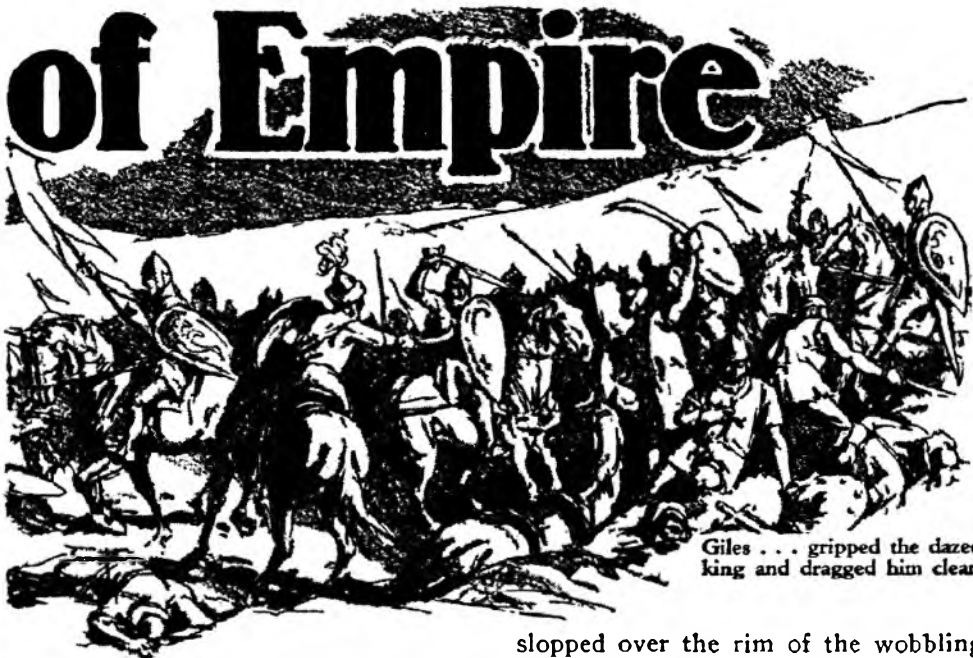
Gates



by **ROBERT E. HOWARD**

Illustrated by **HAROLD S. DELAY**

of Empire



Giles . . . gripped the dazed king and dragged him clear.

THE clank of the sour sentinels on the turrets, the gusty uproar of the Spring winds, were not heard by those who revelled in the cellar of Godfrey de Courtenay's castle; and the noise these revellers made was bottled up deafeningly within the massive walls.

A sputtering candle lighted those rugged walls, damp and uninviting, flanked with wattled casks and hogsheads over which stretched a veil of dusty cobwebs. From one barrel the head had been knocked out, and leathern drinking-jacks were immersed again and again in the foamy tide, in hands that grew increasingly unsteady.

Agnes, one of the serving-wenches, had stolen the massive iron key to the cellar from the girdle of the steward; and rendered daring by the absence of their master, a small but far from select group were making merry with characteristic heedlessness of the morrow.

Agnes, seated on the knee of the varlet Peter, beat erratic time with a jack to a ribald song both were bawling in different tunes and keys. The ale

slopped over the rim of the wobbling jack and down Peter's collar, a circumstance he was beyond noticing.

The other wench, fat Marge, rolled on her bench and slapped her ample thighs in uproarious appreciation of a spicy tale just told by Giles Hobson. This individual might have been the lord of the castle from his manner, instead of a vagabond rascal tossed by every wind of adversity. Tilted back on a barrel, booted feet propped on another, he loosened the belt that girdled his capacious belly in its worn leather jerkin, and plunged his muzzle once more into the frothing ale.

"Giles, by Saint Withold his beard," quoth Marge, "madder rogue never wore steel. The very ravens that pick your bones on the gibbet tree will burst their sides a-laughing. I hail ye—prince of all bawdy liars!"

She flourished a huge pewter pot and drained it as stoutly as any man in the realm.

AT this moment another reveller, returning from an errand, came into the scene. The door at the head of

the stairs admitted a wobbly figure in close-fitting velvet. Through the briefly opened door sounded noises of the night—slap of hangings somewhere in the house, sucking and flapping in the wind that whipped through the crevices; a faint disgruntled hail from a watchman on a tower. A gust of wind whooped down the stair and set the candle to dancing.

Guillaume, the page, shoved the door shut and made his way with groggy care down the rude stone steps. He was not so drunk as the others, simply because, what of his extreme youth, he lacked their capacity for fermented liquor.

"What's the time, boy?" demanded Peter.

"Long past midnight," the page answered, groping unsteadily for the open cask. "The whole castle is asleep, save for the watchmen. But I heard a clatter of hoofs through the wind and rain; methinks 'tis Sir Godfrey returning."

"Let him return and be damned!" shouted Giles, slapping Marge's fat haunch resoundingly. "He may be lord of the keep, but at present we are keepers of the cellar! More ale! Agnes, you little slut, another song!"

"Nay, more tales!" clamored Marge. "Our mistress's brother, Sir Guiscard de Chastillon, has told grand tales of Holy Land and the infidels, but by Saint Dunstan, Giles' lies outshone the knight's truths!"

"Slander not a—hic!—holy man as has been on pilgrimage and Crusade," hiccuped Peter. "Sir Guiscard has seen Jerusalem, and foughten beside the King of Palestine—how many years?"

"Ten year come May Day, since he sailed to Holy Land," said Agnes. "Lady Eleanor had not seen him in all that time, till he rode up to the gate

yesterday morn. Her husband, Sir Godfrey, never has seen him."

"And wouldn't know him?" mused Giles; "nor Sir Guiscard him?"

He blinked, raking a broad hand through his sandy mop. He was drunker than even he realized. The world spun like a top and his head seemed to be dancing dizzily on his shoulders. Out of the fumes of ale and a vagrant spirit, a madcap idea was born.

A roar of laughter burst gustily from Giles' lips. He reeled upright, spilling his jack in Marge's lap and bringing a burst of rare profanity from her. He smote a barrelhead with his open hand, strangling with mirth.

"Good lack!" squawked Agnes. "Are you daft, man?"

"A jest!" The roof reverberated to his bull's bellow. "Oh, Saint Withold, a jest! Sir Guiscard knows not his brother-in-law, and Sir Godfrey is now at the gate. Hark ye!"

Four heads, bobbing erratically, inclined toward him as he whispered as if the rude walls might hear. An instant's bleary silence was followed by boisterous guffaws. They were in the mood to follow the maddest course suggested to them. Only Guillaume felt some misgivings, but he was swept away by the alcoholic fervor of his companions.

"Oh, a devil's own jest!" cried Marge, planting a loud, moist kiss on Giles' ruddy cheek. "On, rogues, to the sport!"

"*En avant!*" bellowed Giles, drawing his sword and waving it unsteadily, and the five weaved up the stairs, stumbling, blundering, and lurching against one another. They kicked open the door, and shortly were running erratically up the wide hall, giving tongue like a pack of hounds.

THE castles of the Twelfth Century, fortresses rather than mere dwellings, were built for defense, not comfort.

The hall through which the drunken band was hallooing was broad, lofty, windy, strewn with rushes, now but faintly lighted by the dying embers in a great ill-ventilated fireplace. Rude, sail-like hangings along the walls rippled in the wind that found its way through. Hounds, sleeping under the great table, woke yelping as they were trodden on by blundering feet, and added their clamor to the din.

This din roused Sir Guiscard de Chastillon from dreams of Acre and the sun-drenched plains of Palestine. He bounded up, sword in hand, supposing himself to be beset by Saracen raiders, then realized where he was. But events seemed to be afoot. A medley of shouts and shrieks clamored outside his door, and on the stout oak panels boomed a rain of blows that bade fair to burst the portal inward. The knight heard his name called loudly and urgently.

Putting aside his trembling squire, he ran to the door and cast it open. Sir Guiscard was a tall gaunt man, with a great beak of a nose and cold grey eyes. Even in his shirt he was a formidable figure. He blinked ferociously at the group limned dimly in the glow from the coals at the other end of the hall. There seemed to be women, children, a fat man with a sword.

This fat man was bawling: "Succor, Sir Guiscard, succor! The castle is forced, and we are all dead men! The robbers of Horsham Wood are within the hall itself!"

Sir Guiscard heard the unmistakable tramp of mailed feet, saw vague figures coming into the hall—figures

on whose steel the faint light gleamed redly. Still mazed by slumber, but ferocious, he went into furious action.

Sir Godfrey de Courtenay, returning to his keep after many hours of riding through foul weather, anticipated only rest and ease in his own castle. Having vented his irritation by roundly cursing the sleepy grooms who shambled up to attend his horses, and were too bemused to tell him of his guest, he dismissed his men-at-arms and strode into the donjon, followed by his squires and the gentlemen of his retinue. Scarcely had he entered when the devil's own bedlam burst loose in the hall. He heard a wild stampede of feet, crash of overturned benches, baying of dogs, and an uproar of strident voices, over which one bull-like bellow triumphed.

Swearing amazedly, he ran up the hall, followed by his knights, when a ravening maniac, naked but for a shirt, burst on him, sword in hand, howling like a werewolf.

Sparks flew from Sir Godfrey's basinet beneath the madman's furious strokes, and the lord of the castle almost succumbed to the ferocity of that onslaught before he could draw his own sword. He fell back, bellowing for his men-at-arms. But the madman was yelling louder than he, and from all sides swarmed other lunatics in shirts who assailed Sir Godfrey's dumfounded gentlemen with howling frenzy.

The castle was in an uproar—lights flashing up, dogs howling, women screaming, men cursing, and over all the clash of steel and the stamp of mailed feet.

The conspirators, sobered by what they had raised, scattered in all directions, seeking hiding-places—all except Giles Hobson. His state of intoxication was too magnificent to be perturbed by

any such trivial scene. He admired his handiwork for a space; then, finding swords flashing too close to his head for comfort, withdrew, and following some instinct, departed for a hiding-place known to him of old. There he found with gentle satisfaction that he had all the time retained a cob-webbed bottle in his hand. This he emptied, and its contents, coupled with what had already found its way down his gullet, plunged him into extinction for an amazing period. Tranquilly he snored under the straw, while events took place above and around him, and matters moved not slowly.

THERE in the straw Friar Ambrose found him just as dusk was falling after a harassed and harrying day. The friar, ruddy and well paunched, shook the unpenitent one into bleary wakefulness.

"The saints defend us!" said Ambrose. "Up to your old tricks again! I thought to find you here. They have been searching the castle all day for you; they searched these stables, too. Well that you were hidden beneath a very mountain of hay."

"They do me too much honor," yawned Giles. "Why should they search for me?"

The friar lifted his hands in pious horror.

"Saint Denis is my refuge against Sathanas and his works! Is it not known how you were the ringleader in that madcap prank last night that pitted poor Sir Guiscard against his sister's husband?"

"Saint Dunstan!" quoth Giles, expectorating dryly. "How I thirst! Were any slain?"

"No, by the providence of God. But there is many a broken crown and

bruised rib this day. Sir Godfrey nigh fell at the first onset, for Sir Guiscard is a woundy swordsman. But our lord being in full armor, he presently dealt Sir Guiscard a shrewd cut over the pate, whereby blood did flow in streams, and Sir Guiscard blasphemed in a manner shocking to hear. What had then chanced, God only knows, but Lady Eleanor, awakened by the noise, ran forth in her shift, and seeing her husband and her brother at swords' points, she ran between them and bespoke them in words not to be repeated. Verily, a flailing tongue hath our mistress when her wrath is stirred.

"So understanding was reached, and a leech was fetched for Sir Guiscard and such of the henchmen as had suffered scathe. Then followed much discussion, and Sir Guiscard had recognized you as one of those who banged on his door. Then Guillaume was discovered hiding, as from a guilty conscience, and he confessed all, putting the blame on you. Ah me, such a day as it has been!

"Poor Peter in the stocks since dawn, and all the villeins and serving-wenches and villagers gathered to clod him—they but just now left off, and a sorry sight he is, with nose a-bleeding, face skinned, an eye closed, and broken eggs in his hair and dripping over his features. Poor Peter!

"And as for Agnes, Marge and Guillaume, they have had whipping enough to content them all a lifetime. It would be hard to say which of them has the sorest posterior. But it is you, Giles, the masters wish. Sir Guiscard swears that only your life will anyways content him."

"Hmmm," ruminated Giles. He rose unsteadily, brushed the straw from his garments, hitched up his belt and



This fat man was bawling, "Succor, Sir Guiscard, succor! The castle is forced—"

stuck his disreputable bonnet on his head at a cocky angle.

The friar watched him gloomily. "Peter stocked, Guillaume birched, Marge and Agnes whipped—what should be your punishment?"

"Methinks I'll do penance by a long pilgrimage," said Giles.

"You'll never get through the gates," predicted Ambrose.

"True," sighed Giles. "A friar may pass at will, where an honest man is halted by suspicion and prejudice. As further penance, lend me your robe."

"My robe?" exclaimed the friar. "You are a fool——"

A heavy fist *clunked* against his fat jaw, and he collapsed with a whistling sigh.

A few minutes later a lout in the outer ward, taking aim with a rotten egg at the dilapidated figure in the stocks, checked his arm as a robed and hooded shape emerged from the stables and crossed the open space with slow steps. The shoulders drooped as from a weight of weariness, the head was bent forward; so much so, in fact, that the features were hidden by the hood.

The lout doffed his shabby cap and made a clumsy leg.

"God go wi' 'ee, good faither," he said.

"*Pax vobiscum, my son,*" came the answer, low and muffled from the depths of the hood.

The lout shook his head sympathetically as the robed figure moved on, unhindered, in the direction of the postern gate.

"Poor Friar Ambrose," quoth the lout. "He takes the sin o' the world so much to heart; there 'ee go, fair bowed down by the wickedness o' men."

He sighed, and again took aim at the glum countenance that glowered above the stocks.

THROUGH the blue glitter of the Mediterranean wallowed a merchant galley, clumsy, broad in the beam. Her square sail hung limp on her one thick mast. The oarsmen, sitting on the benches which flanked the waist deck on either side, tugged at the long oars, bending forward and heaving back in machine-like unison. Sweat stood out on their sun-burnt skin, their muscles rolled evenly. From the interior of the hull came a chatter of voices, the complaint of animals, a reek as of barnyards and stables. This scent was observable some distance to leeward. To the south the blue waters spread out like molten sapphire. To the north, the gleaming sweep was broken by an island that reared up white cliffs crowned with dark green. Dignity, cleanliness and serenity reigned over all, except where that smelly, ungainly tub lurched through the foaming water, by sound and scent advertising the presence of man.

Below the waist-deck passengers, squatted among bundles, were cooking food over small braziers. Smoke mingled with a reek of sweat and garlic. Horses, penned in a narrow space, whinnied wretchedly. Sheep, pigs and chickens added their aroma to the smells.

Presently, amidst the babble below decks, a new sound floated up to the people above—members of the crew, and the wealthier passengers who shared the *patrono's* cabin. The voice of the *patrono* came to them, strident with annoyance, answered by a loud rough voice with an alien accent.

The Venetian captain, prodding among the butts and bales of the cargo, had discovered a stowaway—a fat, sandy-haired man in worn leather, snoring bibulously among the barrels.

Ensued an impassioned oratory in lurid Italian, the burden of which at last focussed in a demand that the stranger pay for his passage.

"Pay?" echoed that individual, running thick fingers through unkempt locks. "What should I pay with, Thinshanks? Where am I? What ship is this? Where are we going?"

"This is the *San Stefano*, bound for Cyprus from Palermo."

"Oh, yes," muttered the stowaway. "I remember. I came aboard at Palermo—lay down beside a wine cask between the bales——"

The *patrono* hastily inspected the cask and shrieked with new passion.

"Dog! You've drunk it all!"

"How long have we been at sea?" demanded the intruder.

"Long enough to be out of sight of land," snarled the other. "Pig, how can a man lie drunk so long——"

"No wonder my belly's empty," muttered the other. "I've lain among the bales, and when I woke, I'd drink till I fell asleep again. Hmmm!"

"Money!" clamored the Italian. "Bezants for your fare!"

"Bezants!" snorted the other. "I haven't a penny to my name."

"Then overboard you go," grimly promised the *patrono*. "There's no room for beggars aboard the *San Stefano*."

That struck a spark. The stranger gave vent to a war-like snort, and tugged at his sword.

"Throw me overboard into all that water? Not while Giles Hobson can wield blade. A free-born Englishman is as good as any velvet-breeched Italian. Call your bullies and watch me bleed them!"

leys off the starboard bow! Saracens!"

A howl burst from the *patrono's* lips and his face went ashy. Abandoning the dispute at hand, he wheeled and rushed up on deck. Giles Hobson followed and gaped about him at the anxious brown faces of the rowers, the frightened countenances of the passengers—Latin priests, merchants and pilgrims. Following their gaze, he saw three long low galleys shooting across the blue expanse toward them. They were still some distance away, but the people on the *San Stefano* could hear the faint clash of cymbals, see the banners stream out from the mast heads. The oars dipped into the blue water, came up shining silver.

"Put her about and steer for the island!" yelled the *patrono*. "If we can reach it, we may hide and save our lives. The galley is lost—and all the cargo! Saints defend me!" He wept and wrung his hands, less from fear than from disappointed avarice.

The *San Stefano* wallowed cumbrously about and waddled hurriedly toward the white cliffs jutting in the sunlight. The slim galleys came up, shooting through the waves like water snakes. The space of dancing blue between the *San Stefano* and the cliffs narrowed, but more swiftly narrowed the space between the merchant and the raiders. Arrows began to arch through the air and patter on the deck. One struck and quivered near Giles Hobson's boot, and he gave back as if from a serpent. The fat Englishman mopped perspiration from his brow. His mouth was dry, his head throbbled, his belly heaved. Suddenly he was violently sea-sick.

The oarsmen bent their backs, gasped, heaved mightily, seeming almost to jerk the awkward craft out of the water. Arrows, no longer arching,

FROM the deck came a loud call, strident with sudden fright. "Gal-

raked the deck. A man howled; another sank down without a word. An oarsman flinched from a shaft through his shoulder, and faltered in his stroke. Panic-stricken, the rowers began to lose rhythm. The *San Stefano* lost headway and rolled more wildly, and the passengers sent up a wail. From the raiders came yells of exultation. They separated in a fan-shaped formation meant to envelop the doomed galley.

On the merchant's deck the priests were shriving and absolving.

"Holy Saints grant me——" gasped a gaunt Pisan, kneeling on the boards—convulsively he clasped the feathered shaft that suddenly vibrated in his breast, then slumped sidewise and lay still.

An arrow thumped into the rail over which Giles Hobson hung, quivered near his elbow. He paid no heed. A hand was laid on his shoulder. Gaggling, he turned his head, lifted a green face to look into the troubled eyes of a priest.

"My son, this may be the hour of death; confess your sins and I will shrive you."

"The only one I can think of," gasped Giles miserably, "is that I mauled a priest and stole his robe to flee England in."

"Alas, my son," the priest began, then cringed back with a low moan. He seemed to bow to Giles; his head inclining still further, he sank to the deck. From a dark welling spot on his side jutted a Saracen arrow.

GILES gaped about him; on either hand a long slim galley was sweeping in to lay the *San Stefano* aboard. Even as he looked, the third galley, the one in the middle of the triangular formation, rammed the merchant ship with a deafening splin-

tering of timber. The steel beak cut through the bulwarks, rending apart the stern cabin. The concussion rolled men off their feet. Others, caught and crushed in the collision, died howling awfully. The other raiders ground alongside, and their steel-shod prows sheared through the banks of oars, twisting the shafts out of the oarsmen's hands, crushing the ribs of the wielders.

The grappling hooks bit into the bulwarks, and over the rail came dark naked men with scimitars in their hands, their eyes blazing. They were met by a dazed remnant who fought back desperately.

Giles Hobson fumbled out his sword, strode groggily forward. A dark shape flashed at him out of the mêlée. He got a dazed impression of glittering eyes, and a curved blade hissing down. He caught the stroke on his sword, staggering from the spark-showing impact. Braced on wide straddling legs, he drove his sword into the pirate's belly. Blood and entrails gushed forth, and the dying corsair dragged his slayer to the deck with him in his throes.

Feet booted and bare stamped on Giles Hobson as he strove to rise. A curved dagger hooked at his kidneys, caught in his leather jerkin and ripped the garment from hem to collar. He rose, shaking the tatters from him. A dusky hand locked in his ragged shirt, a mace hovered over his head. With a frantic jerk, Giles pitched backward, to a sound of rending cloth, leaving the torn shirt in his captor's hand. The mace met empty air as it descended, and the wielder went to his knees from the wasted blow. Giles fled along the blood-washed deck, twisting and ducking to avoid struggling knots of fighters.

A handful of defenders huddled in the door of the forecastle. The rest of the galley was in the hands of the triumphant Saracens. They swarmed over the deck, down into the waist. The animals squealed piteously as their throats were cut. Other screams marked the end of the women and children dragged from their hiding-places among the cargo.

In the door of the forecastle the blood-stained survivors parried and thrust with notched swords. The pirates hemmed them in, yelping mockingly, thrusting forward their pikes, drawing back, springing in to hack and slash.

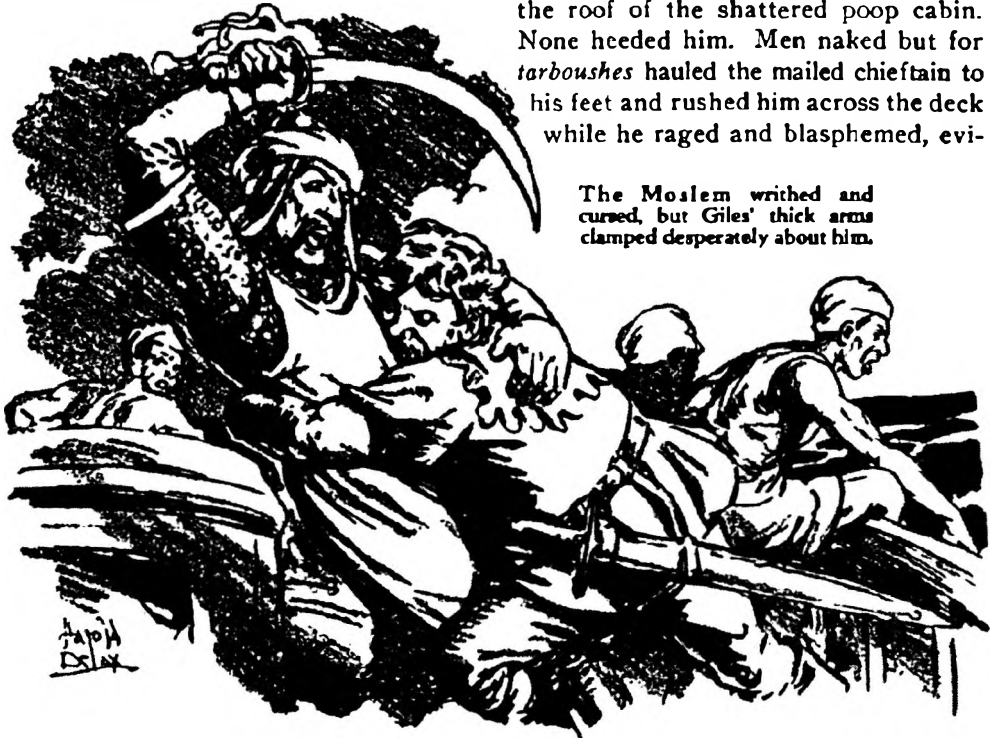
Giles sprang for the rail, intending to dive and swim for the island. A quick step behind him warned him in time to wheel and duck a scimitar. It was wielded by a stout man of medium height, resplendent in silvered chain-

mail and chased helmet, crested with egret plumes.

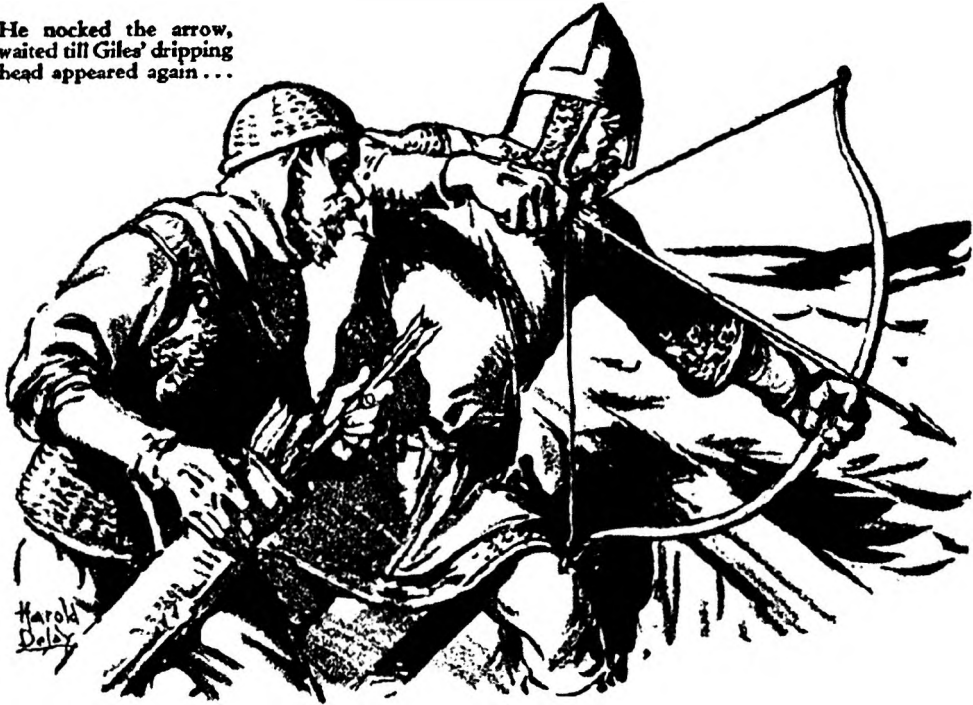
Sweat misted the fat Englishman's sight; his wind was short: his belly heaved, his legs trembled. The Moslem cut at his head. Giles parried, struck back. His blade clanged against the chief's mail. Something like a white-hot brand seared his temple, and he was blinded by a rush of blood. Dropping his sword, he pitched head-first against the Saracen, bearing him to the deck. The Moslem writhed and cursed, but Giles' thick arms clamped desperately about him.

Suddenly a wild shout went up. There was a rush of feet across the deck. Men began to leap over the rail, to cast loose the boarding-irons. Giles' captive yelled stridently, and men raced across the deck toward him. Giles released him, ran like a bulky cat along the bulwarks, and scrambled up over the roof of the shattered poop cabin. None heeded him. Men naked but for *tarboushes* hauled the mailed chieftain to his feet and rushed him across the deck while he raged and blasphemed, evi-

The Moslem writhed and cursed, but Giles' thick arms clamped desperately about him.



He nocked the arrow,
waited till Giles' dripping
head appeared again...



dently wishing to continue the contest. The Saracens were leaping into their own galleys and pushing away. And Giles, crouching on the splintered cabin roof, saw the reason.

AROUND the western promontory of the island they had been trying to reach, came a squadron of great red *dromonds*, with battle-castles rearing at prow and stern. Helmets and spear-heads glittered in the sun. Trumpets blared, drums boomed. From each mast-head streamed a long banner bearing the emblem of the Cross.

From the survivors aboard the *San Stefano* rose a shout of joy. The galleys were racing southward. The nearest *dromond* swung ponderously alongside, and brown faces framed in steel looked over the rail.

"Ahoy, there!" rang a stern-voiced command. "You are sinking; stand by to come aboard."

Giles Hobson started violently at that voice. He gaped up at the battle-castle towering above the *San Stefano*. A helmeted head bent over the bulwark, a pair of cold grey eyes met his. He saw a great beak of a nose, a scar seaming the face from the ear down the rim of the jaw.

Recognition was mutual. A year had not dulled Sir Guiscard de Chastillon's resentment.

"So!" The yell rang bloodthirstily in Giles Hobson's ears. "At last I have found you, rogue——"

Giles wheeled, kicked off his boots, ran to the edge of the roof. He left it in a long dive, shot into the blue water with a tremendous splash. His head bobbed to the surface, and he struck out for the distant cliffs in long pawing strokes.

A mutter of surprise rose from the *dromond*, but Sir Guiscard smiled sourly.

"A bow, varlet," he commanded.

It was placed in his hands. He nocked the arrow, waited until Giles' dripping head appeared again in a shallow trough between the waves. The bowstring twanged, the arrow flashed through the sunlight like a silver beam. Giles Hobson threw up his arms and disappeared. Nor did Sir Guiscard see him rise again, though the knight watched the waters for some time.

TO SHAWAR, vizier of Egypt, in his palace in el-Fustat, came a gorgeously robed eunuch who, with many abased supplications, as the due of the most powerful man in the caliphate, announced: "The Emir Asad ed din Shirkuh, lord of Emesa and Rahba, general of the armies of Nour ed din, Sultan of Damascus, has returned from the ships of el Ghazi with a Nazarene captive, and desires audience."

A nod of acquiescence was the vizier's only sign, but his slim white fingers twitched at his jewel-encrusted white girdle—sure evidence of mental unrest.

Shawar was an Arab, a slim, handsome figure, with the keen dark eyes of his race. He wore the silken robes and pearl-sewn turban of his office as if he had been born to them—instead of to the black felt tents from which his sagacity had lifted him.

The Emir Shirkuh entered like a storm, booming forth his salutations in a voice more fitted for the camp than for the council chamber. He was a powerfully built man of medium height, with a face like a hawk's. His *khalat* was of watered silk, worked with gold thread, but like his voice, his hard body seemed more fitted for the harness of war than the garments of peace. Middle age had dulled none of the restless fire in his dark eyes.

With him was a man whose sandy hair and wide blue eyes contrasted incongruously with the voluminous bag trousers, silken *khalat* and turned-up slippers which adorned him.

"I trust that Allah granted you fortune upon the sea, *ya khowand?*" courteously inquired the vizier.

"Of a sort," admitted Shirkuh, casting himself down on the cushions. "We fared far, Allah knows, and at first my guts were like to gush out of my mouth with the galloping of the ship, which went up and down like a foundered camel. But later Allah willed that the sickness should pass."

"We sank a few wretched pilgrims' galleys and sent to hell the infidels therein—which was good, but the loot was wretched stuff. But look ye, lord vizier, did you ever see a Caphar like to this man?"

The man returned the vizier's searching stare with wide guileless eyes.

"Such as he I have seen among the Franks of Jerusalem," Shawar decided.

Shirkuh grunted and began to munch grapes with scant ceremony, tossing a bunch to his captive.

"Near a certain island we sighted a galley," he said, between mouthfuls, "and we ran upon it and put the folk to the sword. Most of them were miserable fighters, but this man cut his way clear and would have sprung overboard had I not intercepted him. By Allah, he proved himself strong as a bull! My ribs are yet bruised from his hug.

"But in the midst of the *mêlée* up galloped a herd of ships full of Christian warriors, bound—as we later learned—for Ascalon; Frankish adventurers seeking their fortune in Palestine. We put the spurs to our galleys,

and as I looked back I saw the man I had been fighting leap overboard and swim toward the cliffs. A knight on a Nazarene ship shot an arrow at him and he sank, to his death, I supposed.

"Our water butts were nearly empty. We did not run far. As soon as the Frankish ships were out of sight over the skyline, we beat back to the island for fresh water. And we found, fainting on the beach, a fat, naked, red-haired man whom I recognized as he whom I had fought. The arrow had not touched him; he had dived deep and swum far under the water. But he had bled much from a cut I had given him on the head, and was nigh dead from exhaustion.

"Because he had fought me well, I took him into my cabin and revived him, and in the days that followed he learned to speak the speech we of Islam hold with the accursed Nazarenes. He told me that he was a bastard son of the king of England, and that enemies had driven him from his father's court, and were hunting him over the world. He swore the king his father would pay a mighty ransom for him, so I make you a present of him. For me, the pleasure of the cruise is enough. To you shall go the ransom the *malik* of England pays for his son. He is a merry companion, who can tell a tale, quaff a flagon, and sing a song as well as any man I have ever known."

SHAWAR scanned Giles Hobson with new interest. In that rubicund countenance he failed to find any evidence of royal parentage, but reflected that few Franks showed royal lineage in their features: ruddy, freckled, light-haired, the western lords looked much alike to the Arab.

He turned his attention again to Shir-

kuh, who was of more importance than any wandering Frank, royal or common. The old war-dog, with shocking lack of formality, was humming a Kurdish war song under his breath as he poured himself a goblet of Shiraz wine—the Shiite rulers of Egypt were no stricter in their morals than were their Mameluke successors.

Apparently Shirkuh had no thought in the world except to satisfy his thirst, but Shawar wondered what craft was revolving behind that bluff exterior. In another man Shawar would have despised the Emir's restless vitality as an indication of an inferior mentality. But the Kurdish right-hand man of Nour ed din was no fool. The vizier wondered if Shirkuh had embarked on that wild-goose chase with el Ghazi's corsairs merely because his restless energy would not let him be quiet, even during a visit to the caliph's court, or if there was a deeper meaning behind his voyaging. Shawar always looked for hidden motives, even in trivial things. He had reached his position by ignoring no possibility of intrigue. Moreover, events were stirring in the womb of Destiny in that early spring of 1167 A. D.

Shawar thought of Dirgham's bones rotting in a ditch near the chapel of Sitta Nefisa, and he smiled and said: "A thousand thanks for your gifts, my lord. In return a jade goblet filled with pearls shall be carried to your chamber. Let this exchange of gifts symbolize the everlasting endurance of our friendship."

"Allah fill thy mouth with gold, lord," boomed Shirkuh, rising; "I go to drink wine with my officers, and tell them lies of my voyagings. Tomorrow I ride for Damascus. Allah be with thee!"

"And with thee, *ya khawand*."



"But look ye, lord vizier, did you ever see a Capbar like to this man?"

AFTER the Kurd's springy footfalls had ceased to rustle the thick carpets of the halls, Shawar motioned Giles to sit beside him on the cushions.

"What of your ransom?" he asked, in the Norman French he had learned through contact with the Crusaders.

"The king my father will fill this chamber with gold," promptly answered Giles. "His enemies have told him I was dead. Great will be the joy of the old man to learn the truth."

So saying, Giles retired behind a wine goblet and racked his brain for bigger and better lies. He had spun this fantasy for Shirkuh, thinking to make himself sound too valuable to be killed. Later—well, Giles lived for today, with little thought of the morrow.

Shawar watched, in some fascination, the rapid disappearance of the goblet's contents down his prisoner's gullet.

"You drink like a French baron," commented the Arab.

"I am the prince of all toppers," answered Giles modestly—and with more truth than was contained in most of his boasts.

"Shirkuh, too, loves wine," went on the vizier. "You drank with him?"

"A little. He wouldn't get drunk, lest we sight a Christian ship. But we emptied a few flagons. A little wine loosens his tongue."

Shawar's narrow dark head snapped up; that was news to him.

"He talked? Of what?"

"Of his ambitions."

"And what are they?" Shawar held his breath.

"To be Caliph of Egypt," answered Giles, exaggerating the Kurd's actual words, as was his habit. Shirkuh had talked wildly, though rather incoherently.

"Did he mention me?" demanded the vizier.

"He said he held you in the hollow of his hand," said Giles, truthfully, for a wonder.

Shawar fell silent; somewhere in the palace a lute twanged and a black girl lifted a weird whining song of the South. Fountains splashed silverly, and there was a flutter of pigeons' wings.

"If I send emissaries to Jerusalem his spies will tell him," murmured Shawar to himself. "If I slay or constrain him, Nour ed din will consider it cause for war."

He lifted his head and stared at Giles Hobson.

"You call yourself king of toppers; can you best the Emir Shirkuh in a drinking-bout?"

"In the palace of the king, my father," said Giles, "in one night I drank fifty barons under the table, the least of which was a mightier toper than Shirkuh."

"Would you win your freedom without ransom?"

"Aye, by Saint Withold!"

"You can scarcely know much of Eastern politics, being but newly come into these parts. But Egypt is the keystone of the arch of empire. It is coveted by Amalric, king of Jerusalem, and Nour ed din, sultan of Damascus. Ibn Ruzzik, and after him Dirgham, and after him, I, have played one against the other. By Shirkuh's aid I overthrew Dirgham; by Amalric's aid, I drove out Shirkuh. It is a perilous game, for I can trust neither.

"Nour ed din is cautious. Shirkuh is the man to fear. I think he came here professing friendship in order to spy me out, to lull my suspicions. Even now his army may be moving on Egypt.

"If he boasted to you of his ambitions and power, it is a sure sign that he feels secure in his plots. It is necessary that I render him helpless for a few hours; yet I dare not do him harm without true knowledge of whether his hosts are actually on the march. So this is your part."

Giles understood and a broad grin lit his ruddy face, and he licked his lips sensuously.

SHAWAR clapped his hands and gave orders, and presently, at request, Shirkuh entered, carrying his silk-girdled belly before him like an emperor of India.

"Our royal guest," purred Shawar, "has spoken of his prowess with the wine-cup. Shall we allow a Caphar to go home and boast among his people that he sat above the Faithful in anything? Who is more capable of humbling his pride than the Mountain Lion?"

"A drinking-bout?" Shirkuh's laugh was gusty as a sea blast. "By the beard of Muhammad, it likes me well! Come, Giles ibn Malik, let us to the quaffing!"

A procession began, of slaves bearing golden vessels brimming with sparkling nectar. . . .

During his captivity on el Ghazi's galley, Giles had become accustomed to the heady wine of the East. But his blood was boiling in his veins, his head was singing, and the gold-barred chamber was revolving to his dizzy gaze before Shirkuh, his voice trailing off in the midst of an incoherent song, slumped sidewise on his cushions, the gold beaker tumbling from his fingers.

Shawar leaped into frantic activity. At his clap Sudanese slaves entered, naked giants with gold ear-rings and silk loin-clouts.

"Carry him into the alcove and lay him on a divan," he ordered. "Lord Giles, can you ride?"

Giles rose, reeling like a ship in a high wind.

"I'll hold to the mane," he hiccuped. "But why should I ride?"

"To bear my message to Amalric," snapped Shawar. "Here it is, sealed in a silken packet, telling him that Shirkuh means to conquer Egypt, and offering him payment in return for aid. Amalric distrusts me, but he will listen to one of the royal blood of his own race, who tells him of Shirkuh's boasts."

"Aye," muttered Giles groggily, "royal blood; my grandfather was a horse-boy in the royal stables."

"What did you say?" demanded Shawar, not understanding, then went on before Giles could answer. "Shirkuh has played into our hands. He will lie senseless for hours, and while he lies there, you will be riding for Palestine. He will not ride for Damascus tomorrow; he will be sick of overdrunkenness. I dared not imprison him, or even drug his wine. I dare make no move until I reach an agreement with Amalric. But Shirkuh is safe for the time being, and you will reach Amalric before he reaches Nour ed din. Haste!"

IN THE courtyard outside sounded the clink of harness, the impatient stamp of horses. Voices blurred in swift whispers. Footfalls faded away through the halls. Alone in the alcove, Shirkuh unexpectedly sat upright. He shook his head violently, buffeted it with his hands as if to clear away the clinging cobwebs. He reeled up, catching at the arras for support. But his beard bristled in an exultant grin. He seemed bursting with a triumphant

whoop he could scarcely restrain. Stumblingly he made his way to a gold-barred window. Under his massive hands the thin gold rods twisted and buckled. He tumbled through, pitching head-first to the ground in the midst of a great rose bush. Oblivious of bruises and scratches, he rose, careening like a ship on a tack, and oriented himself. He was in a broad garden; all about him waved great white blossoms; a breeze shook the palm leaves, and the moon was rising.

None halted him as he scaled the wall, though thieves skulking in the shadows eyed his rich garments avidly as he lurched through the deserted streets.

By devious ways he came to his own quarters and kicked his slaves awake.

"Horses, Allah curse you!" His voice crackled with exultation.

Ali, his captain of horse, came from the shadows.

"What now, lord?"

"The desert and Syria beyond!" roared Shirkuh, dealing him a terrific buffet on the back. "Shawar has swallowed the bait! Allah, how drunk I am! The world reels—but the stars are mine!"

"That bastard Giles rides to Amalric—I heard Shawar give him his instructions as I lay in feigned slumber. We have forced the vizier's hand! Now Nour ed din will not hesitate, when his spies bring him news from Jerusalem of the marching of the iron men! I fumed in the caliph's court, checkmated at every turn by Shawar, seeking a way. I went into the galleys of the corsairs to cool my brain, and Allah gave into my hands a red-haired tool! I filled the lord Giles full of 'drunken' boastings, hoping he would repeat them to Shawar, and that Shawar would take

fright and send for Amalric—which would force our overly cautious sultan to act. Now follow marching and war and the glutting of ambition. But let us ride, in the devil's name!"

A few minutes later the Emir and his small retinue were clattering through the shadowy streets, past gardens that slept, a riot of color under the moon, lapping six-storied palaces that were dreams of pink marble and lapis lazuli and gold.

At a small, secluded gate, a single sentry bawled a challenge and lifted his pike.

"Dog!" Shirkuh reined his steed back on its haunches and hung over the Egyptian like a silk-clad cloud of death. "It is Shirkuh, your master's guest!"

"But my orders are to allow none to pass without written order, signed and sealed by the vizier," protested the soldier. "What shall I say to Shawar——"

"You will say naught," prophesied Shirkuh. "The dead speak not."

His scimitar gleamed and fell, and the soldier crumpled, cut through helmet and head.

"Open the gate, Ali," laughed Shirkuh. "It is Fate that rides tonight—Fate and Destiny!"

In a cloud of moon-bathed dust they whirled out of the gate and over the plain. On the rocky shoulder of Mukattam, Shirkuh drew rein to gaze back over the city, which lay like a legendary dream under the moonlight, a waste of masonry and stone and marble, splendor and squalor merging in the moonlight, magnificence blent with ruin. To the south the dome of Imam Esh Shafi'y shone beneath the moon; to the north loomed up the gigantic pile of the Castle of El Kahira, its walls carved blackly out of the white moonlight. Between them lay the remains

and ruins of three capitals of Egypt; palaces with their mortar yet undried reared beside crumbling walls haunted only by bats.

Shirkuh laughed, and yelled with pure joy. His horse reared and his scimitar glittered in the air.

"A bride in cloth-of-gold! Await my coming, oh Egypt, for when I come

bending before a wind, and Giles Hobson, grotesque in his dusty silks and white turban, louted awkwardly and presented the sealed packet of Shawar.

Amalric took it with his own hands and read it, striding absently up and down the hall, a gold-maned lion, stately, yet dangerously supple.

"What talk is this of royal bastards?"



His scimitar gleamed and fell, and the soldier crumpled, cut through helmet and head.

again, it will be with spears and horsemen, to seize ye in my hands!"

ALLAH willed it that Amalric, king of Jerusalem, should be in Darum, personally attending to the fortifying of that small desert outpost, when the envoys from Egypt rode through the gates. A restless, alert and wary king was Amalric, bred to war and intrigue.

In the castle hall the Egyptian emissaries salaamed before him like corn

he demanded suddenly, staring at Giles, who was nervous but not embarrassed.

"A lie to cozen the paynim, your majesty," admitted the Englishman, secure in his belief that the Egyptians did not understand Norman French. "I am no illegitimate of the blood, only the honest-born younger son of a baron of the Scottish marches."

Giles did not care to be kicked into the scullery with the rest of the varlets. The nearer the purple, the richer the

pickings. It seemed safe to assume that the king of Jerusalem was not over-familiar with the nobility of the Scottish border.

"I have seen many a younger son who lacked coat-armor, war-cry and wealth, but was none the less worthy," said Amalric. "You shall not go unrewarded. Messer Giles, know you the import of this message?"

"The wazeer Shawar spoke to me at some length," admitted Giles.

"The ultimate fate of Outremer hangs in the balance," said Amalric. "If the same man holds both Egypt and Syria, we are caught in the jaws of the vise. Better for Shawar to rule in Egypt, than Nour ed din. We march for Cairo. Would you accompany the host?"

"In sooth, lord," began Giles, "it has been a wearisome time——"

"True," broke in Amalric. "Twere better that you ride on to Acre and rest from your travels. I will give you a letter for the lord commanding there. Sir Guiscard de Chastillon will give you service——"

Giles started violently. "Nay, lord," he said hurriedly, "duty calls, and what are weary limbs and an empty belly beside duty? Let me go with you and do my devoir in Egypt!"

"Your spirit likes me well, Messer Giles," said Amalric with an approving smile. "Would that all the foreigners who come adventuring in Outremer were like you."

"An they were," murmured an immobile-faced Egyptian to his mate, "not all the wine-vats of Palestine would suffice. We will tell a tale to the vizier concerning this liar."

BUT lies or not, in the grey dawn of a young spring day, the iron

men of Outremer rode southward, with the great banner billowing over their helmeted heads, and their spear-points coldly glinting in the dim light.

There were not many; the strength of the Crusading kingdoms lay in the quality, not the quantity, of their defenders. Three hundred and seventy-five knights took the road to Egypt: nobles of Jerusalem, barons whose castles guarded the eastern marches, Knights of Saint John in their white surcoats, grim Templars, adventurers from beyond the sea, their skins yet ruddy from the cold sun of the north.

With them rode a swarm of Turcoples, Christianized Turks, wiry men on lean ponies. After the horsemen lumbered the wagons, attended by the rag-and-tag camp followers, the servants, ragamuffins and trulls that tag after any host. With shining, steel-sheathed, banner-crowned van, and rear trailing out into picturesque squalor, the army of Jerusalem moved across the land.

The dunes of the Jifar knew again the tramp of shod horses, the clink of mail. The iron men were riding again the old road of war, the road their fathers had ridden so oft before them.

Yet when at last the Nile broke the monotony of the level land, winding like a serpent feathered with green palms, they heard the strident clamor of cymbals and *nakirs*, and saw egret feathers moving among gay-striped pavilions that bore the colors of Islam. Shirkuh had reached the Nile before them, with seven thousand horsemen.

Mobility was always an advantage possessed by the Moslems. It took time to gather the cumbrous Frankish host, time to move it.

Riding like a man possessed, the Mountain Lion had reached Nour ed din, told his tale, and then, with scarce-

ly a pause, had raced southward again with the troops he had held in readiness since the first Egyptian campaign. The thought of Amalric in Egypt had sufficed to stir Nour ed din to action. If the Crusaders made themselves masters of the Nile, it meant the eventual doom of Islam.

Shirkuh's was the dynamic vitality of the nomad. Across the desert by Wadi el Ghizlan he had driven his riders until even the tough Seljuks reeled in their saddles. Into the teeth of a roaring sandstorm he had plunged, fighting like a madman for each mile, each second of time. He had crossed the Nile at Atfih, and now his riders were regaining their breath, while Shirkuh watched the eastern skyline for the moving forest of lances that would mark the coming of Amalric.

The king of Jerusalem dared not attempt a crossing in the teeth of his enemies; Shirkuh was in the same case. Without pitching camp, the Franks moved northward along the river bank. The iron men rode slowly, scanning the sullen stream for a possible crossing.

The Moslems broke camp and took up the march, keeping pace with the Franks. The *fellaheen*, peering from their mud huts, were amazed by the sight of two hosts moving slowly in the same direction without hostile demonstration, with the river between.

So they came at last into sight of the towers of El Kahira.

The Franks pitched their camp close to the shores of Birket el Habash, near the gardens of el Fustat, whose six-storied houses reared their flat roofs among oceans of palms and waving blossoms. Across the river Shirkuh encamped at Gizeh, in the shadow of the scornful colossus reared by cryptic

monarchs forgotten before his ancestors were born.

MATTERS fell at a deadlock. Shirkuh, for all his impetuosity, had the patience of the Kurd, imponderable as the mountains which bred him. He was content to play a waiting game, with the broad river between him and the terrible swords of the Europeans.

Shawar waited on Amalric with pomp and parade and the clamor of *nakirs*, and he found the lion wary as he was indomitable. Two hundred thousand *dinars* and the caliph's hand on the bargain, that was the price he demanded for Egypt. And Shawar knew he must pay. Egypt slumbered as she had slumbered for a thousand years, inert alike under the heel of Macedonian, Roman, Arab, Turk or Fatimid. The *fellah* toiled in his field, and scarcely knew to whom he paid his taxes. There was no land of Egypt: it was a myth, a cloak for a despot. Shawar was Egypt; Egypt was Shawar; the price of Egypt was the price of Shawar's head.

So the Frankish ambassadors went to the hall of the caliph.

Mystery ever shrouded the person of the Incarnation of Divine Reason. The spiritual center of the Shiite creed moved in a maze of mystic inscrutability, his veil of supernatural awe increasing as his political power was usurped by plotting viziers. No Frank had ever seen the caliph of Egypt.

Hugh of Cæsarea and Geoffrey Fulcher, Master of the Templars, were chosen for the mission, blunt war-dogs, grim as their own swords. A group of mailed horsemen accompanied them.

They rode through the flowering gardens of el Fustat, past the chapel of Sitta Nefisa where Dirgham had died under the hands of the mob; through

winding streets which covered the ruins of el Askar and el Katai; past the Mosque of Ibn Tulun, and the Lake of the Elephant, into the teeming streets of El Mansuriya, the quarter of the Sudanese, where weird native cisterns twanged in the houses, and swaggering black men, gaudy in silk and gold, stared childishly at the grim horsemen.

At the Gate Zuweyla the riders halted, and the Master of the Temple and the lord of Cæsarea rode on, attended by only one man—Giles Hobson. The fat Englishman wore good leather and chain-mail, and a sword at his thigh, though the portly arch of his belly somewhat detracted from his war-like appearance. Little thought was being taken in those perilous times of royal bastards or younger sons; but Giles had won the approval of Hugh of Cæsarea, who loved a good tale and a bawdy song.

At Zuweyla gate Shawar met them with pomp and pageantry and escorted them through the bazaars and the Turkish quarter where hawk-like men from beyond the Oxus stared and silently spat. For the first time, Franks in armor were riding through the streets of El Kahira.

At the gates of the Great East Palace the ambassadors gave up their swords, and followed the vizier through dim tapestry-hung corridors and gold arched doors where tongueless Sudanese stood like images of black silence, sword in hand. They crossed an open court bordered by fretted arcades supported by marble columns; their iron-clad feet rang on mosaic paving. Fountains jetted their silver sheen into the air, peacocks spread their iridescent plumage, parrots fluttered on gold threads. In broad halls jewels glit-

tered for eyes of birds wrought of silver or gold. So they came at last to the vast audience room, with its ceiling of carved ebony and ivory. Courtiers in silks and jewels knelt facing a broad curtain heavy with gold and sewn with pearls that gleamed against its satin darkness like stars in a midnight sky.

SHAWAR prostrated himself thrice to the carpeted floor. The curtains were swept apart, and the wondering Franks gazed on the gold throne, where, in robes of white silk, sat al Adhid, Caliph of Egypt.

They saw a slender youth, dark almost to negroid, whose hands lay limp, whose eyes seemed already shadowed by ultimate sleep. A deadly weariness clung about him, and he listened to the representations of his vizier as one who heeds a tale too often told.

But a flash of awakening came to him when Shawar suggested, with extremest delicacy, that the Franks wished his hand upon the pact. A visible shudder passed through the room. Al Adhid hesitated, then extended his gloved hand. Sir Hugh's voice boomed through the breathless hall.

"Lord, the good faith of princes is naked; troth is not clothed."

All about came a hissing intake of breath. But the Caliph smiled, as at the whims of a barbarian, and stripping the glove from his hand, laid his slender fingers in the bear-like paw of the Crusader.

All this Giles Hobson observed from his discreet position in the background. All eyes were centered on the group clustered about the golden throne. From near his shoulder a soft hiss reached Giles' ear. Its feminine note brought him quickly about, forgetful of kings and caliphs. A heavy tapestry



was drawn slightly aside, and in the sweet-smelling gloom, a slender white hand waved invitingly. Another scent made itself evident, a luring perfume, subtle yet unmistakable.

Giles turned silently and pulled aside the tapestry, straining his eyes in the semi-darkness. There was an alcove behind the hangings, and a narrow corridor meandering away. Before him stood a figure whose vagueness did not conceal its lissomeness. A pair of eyes glowed and sparkled at him, and his head swam with the power of that diabolical perfume.

He let the tapestry fall behind him. Through the hangings the voices in the throne room came vague and muffled.

The woman spoke not; her little feet made no sound on the thickly carpeted floor over which he stumbled. She in-

vited, yet retreated; she beckoned, yet she withheld herself. Only when, baffled, he broke into earnest profanity, she admonished him with a finger to her lips and a warning: "Sssssh!"

"Devil take you, wench!" he swore, stopping short. "I'll follow you no more. What manner of game is this, anyway? If you don't want to deal with me, why did you wave at me? Why do you beckon and then run away? I'm going back to the audience hall and may the dogs bite your——"

"Wait!" The voice was liquid sweet.

She glided close to him, laying her hands on his shoulders. What light there was in the winding tapestried corridor was behind her, outlining her supple figure through her filmy garments. Her flesh shone like dim ivory in the purple gloom.

"I could love you," she whispered.

"Well, what detains you?" he demanded uneasily.

"Not here; follow me." She glided out of his groping arms and drifted ahead of him, a lithely swaying ghost among the velvet hangings.

He followed, burning with impatience and questing not at all for the reason of the whole affair, until she came out into an octagonal chamber, almost as dimly lighted as had been the corridor. As he pushed after her, a hanging slid over the opening behind him. He gave it no heed. Where he was he neither knew nor cared. All that was important to him was the supple figure that posed shamelessly before him, veiless, naked arms uplifted and slender fingers intertwined behind her nape over which fell a mass of hair that was like black burnished foam.

HE STOOD struck dumb with her beauty. She was like no other woman he had ever seen; the difference was not only in her dark eyes, her dusky tresses, her long *kohl*-tinted lashes, or the warm ivory of her roundly slender limbs. It was in every glance, each movement, each posture, that made voluptuousness an art. Here was a woman cultured in the arts of pleasure, a dream to madden any lover of the flesh-pots of life. The English, French and Venetian women he had nuzzled seemed slow, stolid, frigid beside this vibrant image of sensuality. A favorite of the Caliph! The implication of the realization sent the blood pounding suffocatingly through his veins. He panted for breath.

"Am I not fair?" Her breath, scented with the perfume that sweetened her body, fanned his face. The soft tendrils

of her hair brushed against his cheek. He groped for her, but she eluded him with disconcerting ease. "What will you do for me?"

"Anything!" he swore ardently, and with more sincerity than he usually voiced the vow.

His hand closed on her wrist and he dragged her to him; his other arm bent about her waist, and the feel of her resilient flesh made him drunk. He pawed for her lips with his, but she bent supplely backward, twisting her head this way and that, resisting him with unexpected strength; the lithe pantherish strength of a dancing-girl. Yet even while she resisted him, she did not repulse him.

"Nay," she laughed, and her laughter was the gurgle of a silver fountain; "first there is a price!"

"Name it, for the love of the Devil!" he gasped. "Am I a frozen saint? I can not resist you forever!" He had released her wrist and was pawing at her shoulder straps.

Suddenly she ceased to struggle; throwing both arms about his thick neck, she looked into his eyes. The depths of hers, dark and mysterious, seemed to drown him; he shuddered as a wave of something akin to fear swept over him.

"You are high in the council of the Franks!" she breathed. "We know you disclosed to Shawar that you are a son of the English king. You came with Amalric's ambassadors. You know his plans. Tell what I wish to know, and I am yours! What is Amalric's next move?"

"He will build a bridge of boats and cross the Nile to attack Shirkuh by night," answered Giles without hesitation.

Instantly she laughed, with mockery

and indescribable malice, struck him in the face, twisted free, sprang back, and cried out sharply. The next moment the shadows were alive with rushing figures as from the tapestries leaped naked black giants.

GILES wasted no time in futile gestures toward his empty belt. As great dusky hands fell on him, his massive fist smashed against bone, and the negro dropped with a fractured jaw. Springing over him, Giles scudded across the room with unexpected agility. But to his dismay he saw that the doorways were hidden by the tapestries. He groped frantically among the hangings; then a brawny arm hooked throttlingly about his throat from behind, and he felt himself dragged backward and off his feet. Other hands snatched at him, woolly heads bobbed about him, white eyeballs and teeth glimmered in the semi-darkness. He lashed out savagely with his foot and caught a big black in the belly, curling him up in agony on the floor. A thumb felt for his eye and he mangled it between his teeth, bringing a whimper of pain from the owner. But a dozen pairs of hands lifted him, smiting and kicking. He heard a grating, sliding noise, felt himself swung up violently and hurled downward—a black opening in the floor rushed up to meet him. An ear-splitting yell burst from him, and then he was rushing headlong down a walled shaft, up which sounded the sucking and bubbling of racing water.

He hit with a tremendous splash and felt himself swept irresistibly onward. The well was wide at the bottom. He had fallen near one side of it, and was being carried toward the other in which, he had light enough to see as he rose blowing and snorting above the surface,

another black orifice gaped. Then he was thrown with stunning force against the edge of that opening, his legs and hips were sucked through, but his frantic fingers, slipping from the mossy stone lip, encountered something and clung on. Looking wildly up, he saw, framed high above him in the dim light, a cluster of woolly heads rimming the mouth of the well. Then abruptly all light was shut out as the trap was replaced, and Giles was conscious only of utter blackness and the rustle and swirl of the racing water that dragged relentlessly at him.

This, Giles knew, was the well into which were thrown foes of the Caliph. He wondered how many ambitious generals, plotting viziers, rebellious nobles and importunate *harim* favorites had gone whirling through that black hole to come into the light of day again only floating as carrion on the bosom of the Nile. It was evident that the well had been sunk into an underground flow of water that rushed into the river, perhaps miles away.

Clinging there by his finger nails in the dank rushing blackness, Giles Hobson was so frozen with horror that it did not even occur to him to call on the various saints he ordinarily blasphemed. He merely hung on to the irregularly round, slippery object his hands had found, frantic with the fear of being torn away and whirled down that black slimy tunnel, feeling his arms and fingers growing numb with the strain, and slipping gradually but steadily from their hold.

His last ounce of breath went from him in a wild cry of despair, and—miracle of miracles—it was answered. Light flooded the shaft, a light dim and gray, yet in such contrast with the former blackness that it momentarily

dazzled him. Some one was shouting, but the words were unintelligible amidst the rush of the black waters. He tried to shout back, but he could only gurgle. Then, mad with fear lest the trap should shut again, he achieved an inhuman screech that almost burst his throat.

Shaking the water from his eyes and craning his head backward, he saw a human head and shoulders blocked in the open trap far above him. A rope was dangling down toward him. It swayed before his eyes, but he dared not let go long enough to seize it. In desperation, he mouthed for it, gripped it with his teeth, then let go and snatched, even as he was sucked into the black hole. His numbed fingers slipped along the rope. Tears of fear and helplessness rolled down his face. But his jaws were locked desperately on the strands, and his corded neck muscles resisted the terrific strain.

Whoever was on the other end of the rope was hauling like a team of oxen. Giles felt himself ripped bodily from the clutch of the torrent. As his feet swung clear, he saw, in the dim light, that to which he had been clinging: a human skull, wedged somehow in a crevice of the slimy rock.

He was drawn rapidly up, revolving like a pendant. His numbed hands clawed stiffly at the rope, his teeth seemed to be tearing from their sockets. His jaw muscles were knots of agony, his neck felt as if it were being racked.

JUST as human endurance reached its limit, he saw the lip of the trap slip past him, and he was dumped on the floor at its brink.

He grovelled in agony, unable to unlock his jaws from about the hemp. Some one was massaging the cramped

muscles with skilful fingers, and at last they relaxed with a stream of blood from the tortured gums. A goblet of wine was pressed to his lips and he gulped it loudly, the liquid slopping over and spilling on his slime-smearred mail. Some one was tugging at it, as if fearing lest he injure himself by guzzling, but he clung on with both hands until the beaker was empty. Then only he released it, and with a loud gasping sigh of relief, looked up into the face of Shawar. Behind the vizier were several giant Sudani, of the same type as those who had been responsible for Giles' predicament.

"We missed you from the audience hall," said Shawar. "Sir Hugh roared treachery, until a eunuch said he saw you follow a woman slave off down a corridor. Then the lord Hugh laughed and said you were up to your old tricks, and rode away with the lord Geoffrey. But I knew the peril you ran in dallying with a woman in the Caliph's palace; so I searched for you, and a slave told me he had heard a frightful yell in this chamber. I came, and entered just as a black was replacing the carpet above the trap. He sought to flee, and died without speaking." The vizier indicated a sprawling form that lay near, head lolling on half-severed neck. "How came you in this state?"

"A woman lured me here," answered Giles, "and set blackamoors upon me, threatening me with the well unless I revealed Amalric's plans."

"What did you tell her?" The vizier's eyes burned so intently on Giles that the fat man shuddered slightly and hitched himself further away from the yet open trap.

"I told them nothing! Who am I to know the king's plans, anyway? Then they dumped me into that cursed hole,

though I fought like a lion and maimed a score of the rogues. Had I but had my trusty sword——”

At a nod from Shawar the trap was closed, the rug drawn over it. Giles breathed a sigh of relief. Slaves dragged the corpse away.

The vizier touched Giles' arm, and led the way through a corridor concealed by the hangings.

“I will send an escort with you to the Frankish camp. There are spies of Shirkuh in this palace, and others who love him not, yet hate me. Describe me this woman—the eunuch saw only her hand.”

Giles groped for adjectives, then shook his head.

“Her hair was black, her eyes moon-fire, her body alabaster.”

“A description that would fit a thousand women of the Caliph,” said the vizier. “No matter; get you gone, for the night wanes and Allah only knows what morn will bring.”

THE night was indeed late as Giles Hobson rode into the Frankish camp surrounded by Turkish *mamluks* with drawn sabres. But a light burned in Amalric's pavilion, which the wary monarch preferred to the palace offered him by Shawar; and thither Giles went, confident of admittance as a teller of lusty tales who had won the king's friendship.

Amalric and his barons were bent above a map as the fat man entered, and they were too engrossed to notice his entry, or his bedraggled appearance.

“Shawar will furnish us men and boats,” the king was saying; “they will fashion the bridge, and we will make the attempt by night——”

An explosive grunt escaped Giles' lips, as if he had been hit in the belly.

“What, Sir Giles the Fat!” exclaimed Amalric, looking up; “are you but now returned from your adventuring in Cairo? You are fortunate still to have head on your shoulders. Eh—what ails you, that you sweat and grow pale? Where are you going?”

“I have taken an emetic,” mumbled Giles over his shoulder.

Beyond the light of the pavilion he broke into a stumbling run. A tethered horse started and snorted at him. He caught the rein, grasped the saddle peak; then, with one foot in the stirrup, he halted. Awhile he meditated; then at last, wiping cold sweat beads from his face, he returned with slow and dragging steps to the king's tent.

He entered unceremoniously and spoke forthwith: “Lord, is it your plan to throw a bridge of boats across the Nile?”

“Aye, so it is,” declared Amalric.

Giles uttered a loud groan and sank down on a bench, his head in his hands. “I am too young to die!” he lamented. “Yet I must speak, though my reward be a sword in the belly. This night Shirkuh's spies trapped me into speaking like a fool. I told them the first lie that came into my head—and Saint Withold defend me, I spoke the truth unwittingly. I told them you meant to build a bridge of boats!”

A shocked silence reigned. Geoffrey Fulcher dashed down his cup in a spasm of anger. “Death to the fat fool!” he swore, rising.

“Nay!” Amalric smiled suddenly. He stroked his golden beard. “Our foe will be expecting the bridge, now. Good enough. Hark ye!”

And as he spoke, grim smiles grew on the lips of the barons, and Giles Hobson began to grin and thrust out his belly, as if his fault had been virtue, craftily devised.

ALL night the Saracen host had stood at arms; on the opposite bank fires blazed, reflected from the rounded walls and burnished roofs of el Fustat. Trumpets mingled with the clang of steel. The Emir Shirkuh, riding up and down the bank along which his mailed hawks were ranged, glanced toward the eastern sky, just tinged with dawn. A wind blew out of the desert.

There had been fighting along the river the day before, and all through the night drums had rumbled and trumpets blared their threat. All day Egyptians and naked Sudani had toiled to span the dusky flood with boats chained together, end to end. Thrice they had pushed toward the western bank, under the cover of their archers in the barges, only to falter and shrink back before the clouds of Turkish arrows. Once the end of the boat bridge had almost touched the shore, and the helmeted riders had spurred their horses into the water to slash at the shaven heads of the workers. Skirkuh had expected an onslaught of the knights across the frail span, but it had not come. The men in the boats had again fallen back, leaving their dead floating in the muddily churning wash.

Shirkuh decided that the Franks were lurking behind walls, saving themselves for a supreme effort, when their allies should have completed the bridge. The opposite bank was clustered with swarms of naked figures, and the Kurd expected to see them begin the futile task once more.

As dawn whitened the desert, there came a rider who rode like the wind, sword in hand, turban unbound, blood dripping from his beard.

"Woe to Islam!" he cried. "The Franks have crossed the river!"

Panic swept the Moslem camp; men

jerked their steeds from the river bank, staring wildly northward. Only Shirkuh's bull-like voice kept them from flinging away their swords and bolting.

The Emir's profanity was frightful. He had been fooled and tricked. While the Egyptians held his attention with their useless labor, Amalric and the iron men had marched northward, crossed the prongs of the Delta in ships, and were now hastening vengefully southward. The Emir's spies had had neither time nor opportunity to reach him. Shawar had seen to that.

The Mountain Lion dared not await attack in this unsheltered spot. Before the sun was well up, the Turkish host was on the march; behind them the rising light shone on spear-points that gleamed in a rising cloud of dust.

This dust irked Giles Hobson, riding behind Amalric and his councillors. The fat Englishman was thirsty; dust settled greyly on his mail; gnats bit him, sweat got into his eyes, and the sun, as it rose, beat mercilessly on his basinet; so he hung it on his saddle peak and pushed back his linked coif, daring sun-stroke. On either side of him leather creaked and worn mail clinked. Giles thought of the ale-pots of England, and cursed the man whose hate had driven him around the world.

And so they hunted the Mountain Lion up the valley of the Nile, until they came to el Baban, The Gates, and found the Saracen host drawn up for battle in the gut of the low sandy hills.

Word came back along the ranks, putting new fervor into the knights. The clatter of leather and steel seemed imbued with new meaning. Giles put on his helmet and rising in his stirrups, looked over the iron-clad shoulders in front of him.

TO THE left were the irrigated fields on the edge of which the host was riding. To the right was the desert. Ahead of them the terrain was broken by the hills. On these hills and in the shallow valleys between, bristled the banners of the Turks, and their *nakirs* blared. A mass of the host was drawn up in the plain between the Franks and the hills.

The Christians had halted: three hundred and seventy-five knights, plus half a dozen more who had ridden all the way from Acre and reached the host only an hour before, with their retainers. Behind them, moving with the baggage, their allies halted in straggling lines: a thousand Turcoples, and some five thousand Egyptians, whose gaudy garments outshone their courage.

"Let us ride forward and smite those on the plain," urged one of the foreign knights, newly come to the East.

Amalric scanned the closely massed ranks, and shook his head. He glanced at the banners that floated among the spears on the slopes on either flank where the kettle-drums clamored.

"That is the banner of Saladin in the center," he said. "Shirkuh's house troops are on yonder hill. If the center expected to stand, the Emir would be there. No, messers, I think it is their wish to lure us into a charge. We will wait their attack, under cover of the Turcoples' bows. Let them come to us; they are in a hostile land, and must push the war."

The rank and file had not heard his words. He lifted his hand, and thinking it preceded an order to charge, the forest of lances quivered and sank in rest. Amalric, realizing the mistake, rose in his stirrups to shout his command to fall back, but before he could

speak, Giles' horse, restive, shouldered that of the knight next to him. This knight, one of those who had joined the host less than an hour before, turned irritably; Giles looked into a lean beaked face, seamed by a livid scar.

"Ha!" Instinctively the ogre caught at his sword.

Giles' action was also instinctive. Everything else was swept out of his mind at the sight of that dread visage which had haunted his dreams for more than a year. With a yelp he sank his spurs into his horse's belly. The beast neighed shrilly and leaped, blundering against Amalric's war-horse. That high-strung beast reared and plunged, got the bit between its teeth, broke from the ranks and thundered out across the plain.

Bewildered, seeing their king apparently charging the Saracen host single-handed, the men of the Cross gave tongue and followed him. The plain shook as the great horses stampeded across it, and the spears of the iron-clad riders crashed splinteringly against the shields of their enemies.

THE movement was so sudden it almost swept the Moslems off their feet. They had not expected a charge so instantly to follow the coming up of the Christians. But the allies of the knights were struck by confusion. No orders had been given, no arrangement made for battle. The whole host was disordered by that premature onslaught. The Turcoples and Egyptians wavered uncertainly, drawing up about the baggage wagons.

The whole first rank of the Saracen center went down, and over their mangled bodies rode the knights of Jerusalem, swinging their great swords. An instant the Turkish ranks held; then

they began to fall back in good order, marshalled by their commander, a slender, dark, self-contained young officer, Salah ed din, Shirkuh's nephew.

The Christians followed. Amalric, cursing his mischance, made the best of a bad bargain, and so well he plied his trade that the harried Turks cried out on Allah and turned their horses' heads from him.

Back into the gut of the hills the Saracens retired, and turning there, under cover of slope and cliff, darkened the air with their shafts. The headlong force of the knights' charge was broken in the uneven ground, but the iron men came on grimly, bending their helmeted heads to the rain.

Then on the flanks, kettle-drums roared into fresh clamor. The riders of the right wing, led by Shirkuh, swept down the slopes and struck the horde which clustered loosely about the baggage train. That charge swept the unwarlike Egyptians off the field in headlong flight. The left wing began to close in to take the knights on the flank, driving before it the troops of the Turcoples. Amalric, hearing the kettle-drums behind and on either side of him as well as in front, gave the order to fall back, before they were completely hemmed in.

To Giles Hobson it seemed the end of the world. He was deafened by the clang of swords and the shouts. He seemed surrounded by an ocean of surging steel and billowing dust clouds. He parried blindly and smote blindly, hardly knowing whether his blade cut flesh or empty air. Out of the defiles horsemen were moving, chanting exultantly. A cry of "*Yala-l-Islam!*" rose above the thunder—Saladin's war-cry, that was in later years to ring around the world. The Saracen center was

coming into the battle again.

Abruptly the press slackened, broke; the plain was filled with flying figures. A strident ululation cut the din. The Turcoples' shafts had stayed the Saracens' left wing just long enough to allow the knights to retreat through the closing jaws of the vise. But Amalric, retreating slowly, was cut off with a handful of knights. The Turks swirled about him, screaming in exultation, slashing and smiting with mad abandon. In the dust and confusion the ranks of the iron men fell back, unaware of the fate of their king.

GILES HOBSON, riding through the field like a man in a daze, came face to face with Guiscard de Chastillon.

"Dog!" croaked the knight. "We are doomed, but I'll send you to hell ahead of me!"

His sword went up, but Giles leaned from his saddle and caught his arm. The fat man's eyes were bloodshot; he licked his dust-stained lips. There was blood on his sword, and his helmet was dented.

"Your selfish hate and my cowardice has cost Amalric the field this day," Giles croaked. "There he fights for his life; let us redeem ourselves as best we may."

Some of the glare faded from de Chastillon's eyes; he twisted about, stared at the plumed heads that surged and eddied about a cluster of iron helmets; and he nodded his steel-clad head.

They rode together into the mêlée. Their swords hissed and crackled on mail and bone. Amalric was down, pinned under his dying horse. Around him whirled the eddy of battle, where his knights were dying under a sea of hacking blades.

Giles fell rather than jumped from his saddle, gripped the dazed king and dragged him clear. The fat Englishman's muscles cracked under the strain, a groan escaped his lips. A Seljuk leaned from the saddle, slashed at Amalric's unhelmeted head. Giles bent his head, took the blow on his own crown; his knees sagged and sparks flashed before his eyes. Guiscard de Chastillon rose in his stirrups, swinging his sword with both hands. The blade crunched through mail, gritted through bone. The Seljuk dropped, shorn through the spine. Giles braced his legs, heaved the king up, slung him over his saddle.

"Save the king!" Giles did not recognize that croak as his own voice.

Geoffrey Fulcher loomed through the crush, dealing great strokes. He seized the rein of Giles' steed; half a dozen reeling, blood-dripping knights closed about the frantic horse and its stunned burden. Nerved to desperation, they hacked their way clear. The Seljuks swirled in behind them to be met by Guiscard de Chastillon's flailing blade.

The waves of wild horsemen and flying blades broke on him. Saddles were emptied and blood spurted. Giles rose from the red-splashed ground among the lashing hoofs. He ran in among the horses, stabbing at bellies and thighs. A sword stroke knocked off his helmet. His blade snapped under a Seljuk's ribs.

Guiscard's horse screamed awfully and sank to the earth. His grim rider rose, spurting blood at every joint of his armor. Feet braced wide on the blood-soaked earth, he wielded his great sword until the steel wave washed over him and he was hidden from view by waving plumes and rearing steeds.

GILES ran at a heron-feathered chief, gripped his leg with his naked hands. Blows rained on his coif, bringing fire-shot darkness, but he hung grimly on. He wrenched the Turk from his saddle, fell with him, groping for his throat. Hoofs pounded about him, a steed shouldered against him, knocking him rolling in the dust. He clambered painfully to his feet, shaking the blood and sweat from his eyes. Dead men and dead horses lay heaped in a ghastly pile about him.

A familiar voice reached his dulled ears. He saw Shirkuh sitting his white horse, gazing down at him. The Mountain Lion's beard bristled in a grin.

"You have saved Amalric," said he, indicating a group of riders in the distance, closing in with the retreating host; the Saracens were not pressing the pursuit too closely. The iron men were falling back in good order. They were defeated, not broken. The Turks were content to allow them to retire unmolested.

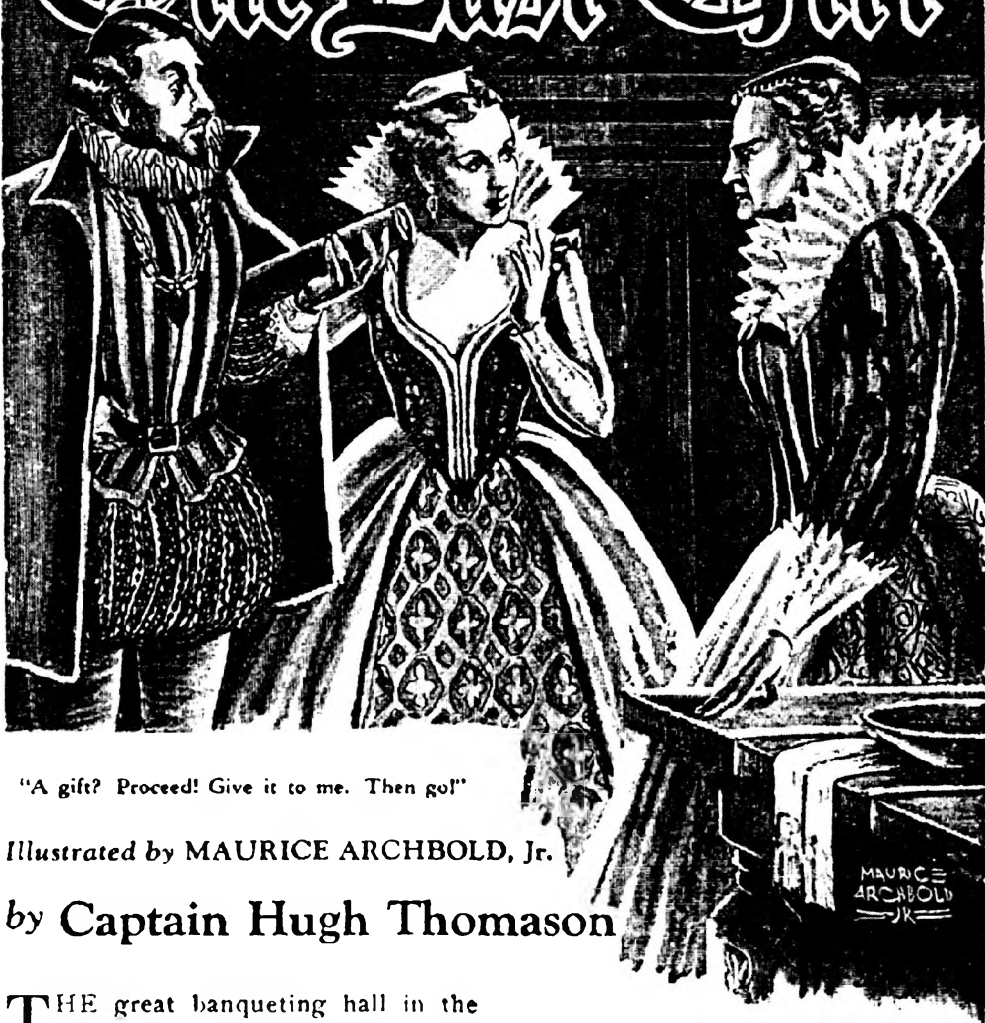
"You are a hero, Giles ibn Malik," said Shirkuh.

Giles sank down on a dead horse and dropped his head in his hands. The marrow of his legs seemed turned to water, and he was shaken with a desire to weep.

"I am neither a hero nor the son of a king," said Giles. "Slay me and be done with it."

"Who spoke of slaying?" demanded Shirkuh. "I have just won an empire in this battle, and I would quaff a goblet in token of it. Slay you? By Allah, I would not harm a hair of such a stout fighter and noble toper. You shall come and drink with me in celebration of a kingdom won when I ride into El Kahira in triumph."

The Last Gift



"A gift? Proceed! Give it to me. Then go!"

Illustrated by MAURICE ARCHBOLD, Jr.

by Captain Hugh Thomason

THE great banqueting hall in the royal palace of Greenwich was filled suddenly by a crimson glare, and through the window there pealed jarringly the loud clangor of bells. When the red glow died a little, there came, muffled, the sound of cheering—cries of: "God save the Queen!" and huzzas. People in the great room turned and looked at each other. There were shrugs and whisperings; a voice in the window, where two girls were seated at

their embroidery, grew distinct in the hush, in the listener's ear.

"They say Her Grace would fain stop it . . . that she storms and rages—vows she told Secretary Davison not to send the warrant till he spoke to her again! A lie, Davison vows . . .! She wanted Paulet or Shrewsbury to do the thing secretly by poison . . . and they would not. They say she is to fine Secretary

Davison ten thousand pounds. He will be ruined!"

Mary Fitton, threading her needle, gave a little low laugh, then shrugged her white shoulders. "There are some that would fain be rid of their enemies, but would use the sword of another. Our fair Gloriana never likes to shoulder the blame. Hark to the bells!"

"I heard all the story, Mary, from the man Cherostier," Kate whispered, "he who brought the news of execution. He is cousin to my lover, and Seymour commended him to me. In truth she made a gallant and courageous end, this Scottish queen! 'False Duenna' or no! He says she jested on the scaffold—told the executioners, when they helped to disrobe her, that she had never put off her clothes in such strange company, nor had such grooms. . . . There was no one to shout: 'Huzza!' when the dean cried: '*So perish all Queen Elizabeth's enemies!*'—three hundred people though there were. A strange lady: an alluring charm, they say—a bright wit, 'clouded with myldness.'" Kate laughed softly and bitterly. "'*Clouded with myldness!*'—God's death! Mary, think of our queen!"

Mary sewed on. Something in Kate's voice disturbed her.

"She struck me on the head to-day with her fan—the place bled!" Kate whispered sullenly. "The bells broke out, and she leaped to her feet, demanding who gave the orders, and for what were they? Stormed furiously about the Scots king and 'royal blood' . . . yet in the next breath thanked God 'the scourge of her life' was gone! Hark to the bells! Poor Mary! They say she thanked God for her happy release, and thanked the executioner. Mary, listen! Didst hear? That they painted her—? Painted the . . ."

"Painted her!" Mary shrank back. "Where? When?"

"Cherostier told me . . . has told me all. A man, Amyas Cawood, was there, with his canvas and his paints, staying in the village inn—hoping to paint her in life, and on the night of the tragedy—Melvin and her people, her women (they are prisoners in Fotheringhay now by Elizabeth's orders) got him into the castle, up to the great chamber where the sheriff and his men had carried the body. Her little dog had had to be taken whimpering from the corpse. They smuggled Cawood in—and he—painted the poor severed head! And, Mary, I had a long interview with him—and I promised—"

"Hush!" Mary shrank back from the whispering, terrified.

THE door had been flung open, and a sudden silence fell upon the groups of courtiers and the two whispering maids of honor. The girls dropped their work, and the silks, and stared before them. A new blaze from the bonfire outside had filled the room as Her Majesty of England entered, and a fresh peal of bells. Rejoicing or no, as her London might, there was no rejoicing in Elizabeth's face. Stormy passion, sullen wrath, a kind of recurring, fugitive fear, and hate and pain. She swept up to them in her wonderful glittering dress of old gold and crimson damask, with its "eyes and ears" embroidery; she had great red rubies at her thin throat. She stood staring before her moodily as the bells clanged and clashed. The room seemed to rock with the noise for a little, and Elizabeth's chestnut eyes blazed as she looked around the silent, apprehensive faces. She was in the mood to kick against the pricks, at anything, and

everything—everything was wrong! Their silence was wrong. So would have been their speech.

“God’s death! You look cheerily at me!” she cried. “My lords and ladies! One would think that it was Elizabeth of England whose death those bells and those flames celebrated—instead of Mary of Scotland—my enemy all her life—the murderess and adulteress. . . . She, who ate of my bread and salt, and plotted to kill me by dagger or by poison and reign here in my stead! Perhaps you would wish her success? You, Mary Fitton, with your face of milk and curd? You, Kate Carney? You, my Lord Seymour?”

There was a strain of madness in her voice. No one spoke; the bells filled the silence. The blood of her hearers turned cold in their veins. Speak? How dared they speak! For an incautious word—her mood was so wild and fickle—might mean the Tower, or a fine—like the unlucky secretary’s! Better silence, cowardly silence! Could there be an axe for silence?

The two girls shivered, huddled against the wall. Almost involuntarily Kate’s arm went up before her head, as if to ward off the blow.

The queen saw, and laughed mockingly. “What a nest of cowards and poltroons I have around me!” she cried. “By God’s son, there is not one of you with a drop of the Scots queen’s courage in you! She jested on the scaffold, I hear, and listened to the dean, with so careless and pleasant a regard, it might not have concerned her at all! The Tudor blood, my lords and ladies! the blood of a queen!” She stopped and stared through the window. She had made them tell her everything—every detail—the “small noyse” made when the stroke fell—the groping hands . . .

the dog whining piteously . . . even the dog could be faithful! Oh, it maddened her—maddened her, to hear of the weeping and sobbing retinue—the prayers, the tears! And now these bells!—these bells—and the red glare!

She turned furiously on Mary Fitton then, and tore the embroidery from her hands, stormed at the girl about it—about her dress, her shoes, her hair—they knew not what. Stormed and drove the two girls weeping from the presence, drove them all out, “trounced” them for being cowards and fools, trounced Davison for “destroying” her, and Paulet and Shrewsbury for traitors and knaves! Raved incoherently till they were all at the door, in a frightened mass, and then herself dashed past them, her hands to her ears, bidding them stop the bells, the cursed bells! For the thing was an outrage and a folly; an indecency! After all it was the death of a queen! Her “cousin and sister”! And then she laughed, hysterically.

The door banged behind her. They could hear her voice in the passage, storming, calling for her halberdiers, her maids, her horses! She would ride—ride and meet her faithful people, her loyal people, who loved her and were glad.

The voice died away; the glare died out of the sky, and the bells ceased. The palace was silent. They stood about, shrugging, whispering, scorning her. The victorious, triumphant queen—so safe now, so sheltered, in her great capital with her adoring people!

And in Fotheringhay a little dog moaned and whimpered, and Mary’s women wept—and wept—and prayed . . . and good Melvin bade them cheer, for, as she had said, were not her sorrows over for ever? And for her there



Elizabeth sat, pale and exhausted, before a table.

could be no more tears, for evermore!

IN HER chamber Kate Carney stood thinking, her hands pressed together, her white little face furious. The cut on her head still ached and stung. "He said at eight of the evening. I go to her at eight. I will do it!" she whispered, with clenched teeth. "I hate her—hate her! She sent my father to the Tower. I will do it! Though I die for it. 'I will not harm her,' Cherostier said: 'only I will strike her to the heart if I can.' Yes, I will do it."

She waited till a bell was struck sharply in the corridor. Taking her handkerchief in her hands that trembled a little, Kate crept down the corridor to the Queen's room.

Elizabeth sat, pale and exhausted, before a table, toying with a silver bowl in which was a mess of muskadel. She pushed it from her and looked at Kate. She was in the revulsion from her fury. She was used to Kate and Mary. She hated new faces—those who did not know her ways.

But she scowled at the girl. She could read hate in the averted look, fear in the trembling of the small hand which removed the dish. For long Elizabeth sat as if lost in thought.

"What is it, little poltroon?" she cried then, suddenly, as Kate turned her head sharply. "Methinks you listen—as if you expected a step—a message! Bring forth my dress—the emeralds—call Mary—what is it?"

Kate moved a candle from the dressing table. She had not lit the others. She looked at the Queen with sudden courage—she had heard the step.

The courtiers were all in the supper room. She had bidden Mary wait for her call. The corridors were empty. She had told him—"the moment before the

great supper bell rings." And—she heard the step now. Her hate rose and helped her. "Your Grace," she said, "I have a message to give you. I promised that I would tell you."

"What? Go on, little trembler!" Elizabeth turned around. She wanted her attention taken up, her thoughts diverted. What was this?

"A messenger has come from—from—Fotheringhay—" the girl whispered. "He brings you something, a gift, a memorial from the Queen of Scots."

Elizabeth raised her head; her eyes dilated, and were fixed and glittering. Then she laughed shrilly. "Do not falter, child! A gift? A jewel? She had some fair jewels. Was it the Medici pearl? The Guise ruby? She sends it to me? What can I do for her now? Curious—she—she—"

"Yes, the Scots queen sends her gift to YOUR Majesty!" A voice spoke from the door.

When the Queen looked round, she could see the tall cloaked figure of a young man, holding something wrapped in a black velvet cloth. Elizabeth stared at him and back at Kate. She knew he must have bribed the guards, and for a moment she stretched out her hand to the jeweled bell, her lips working. But something stayed her. Curiosity, greed, avarice? And after all, a man was behind the arras with a sword . . . she was in no danger. Also, this man had not the look of an assassin. "A gift?" she said coldly. "A gift? Proceed! Give it to me. Then go!"

"Yes, I will go," the man said; "but I want to show you my gift, as it should be seen. Will your Majesty turn to the window for a moment? Give me the candle. I will not stay. When I say: 'Turn'—I am ready."

There was something oddly compell-

ing in his voice, something odd in Kate's eager eyes, but Elizabeth, for once, obeyed, curious, greedy, intrigued; and she walked to the window and looked out at the river and the wavering shadow of a boat in the moonlight. She was not afraid now; indeed she was scornful. So Mary Stuart had sent her a ring, a pearl, a jewel? Perhaps to win favor for her son, this poltroon James, to whom she had written of the "*miserable accident*"! Elizabeth's lip curled as she remembered. And he—swallowed that!

A VOICE said low from the door, "Here is the Queen's gift!" and she turned round.

They had taken both candles to the end of the room, Kate held them at the side of the messenger, and the light, all the light of the room was reflected on the picture which the man held—the picture of the head!

The dead head of Mary, Queen of Scots! The severed head!

As the Queen looked she drew a shuddering breath, but she stood icily still, as if frozen, and she looked and looked—and gazed.

Amyas Cawood had done his work well. The poor head was on a cushion of velvet, the severed neck automatically, hideously, correct. The eyes were closed, under the marble forehead; a pearl rested on the brown-gold hair; a faint smile was on the parted lips. Peace—peace—that was the strange part of all—peace—peace—on those lips above the ghastly severed flesh, the congealed blood . . . peace!

The severed head of the Queen of Scots—sent to her . . .

Elizabeth stood and stared, and the horror of it all entered her soul, and chilled her blood. Again it rushed over

her, the scene, as she had made them tell her; every detail, every word! How the hands, the groping hands, were removed from the block . . . there were three blows. And only a small noyse. How the executioner held up the head, and the grey polled hair was there, under the brown wig . . . the little dog moaned and whimpered . . . the white eyelids quivered. They did not quiver now! She could hear the last brave words, see the outstretched arms. A queen knew how to die!

"In Te Domine confido—"

Elizabeth had sent many to the axe. Had jested and drunk the same night. Death was commonplace. Her own mother—did her head look like that? She took a faint step towards it, her hand before her face. She forgot to storm, forgot to rave, forgot to threaten and ring the bell, to dash aside the arras and call for the man with the sword.

She could see only the head—the awful head—the blood, the severed flesh and veins, the stark naked horror of our poor mortality.

She sank down before it moaning, and her head fell on her breast. She did not know if she swooned, but when she looked up they were gone.

She was alone.

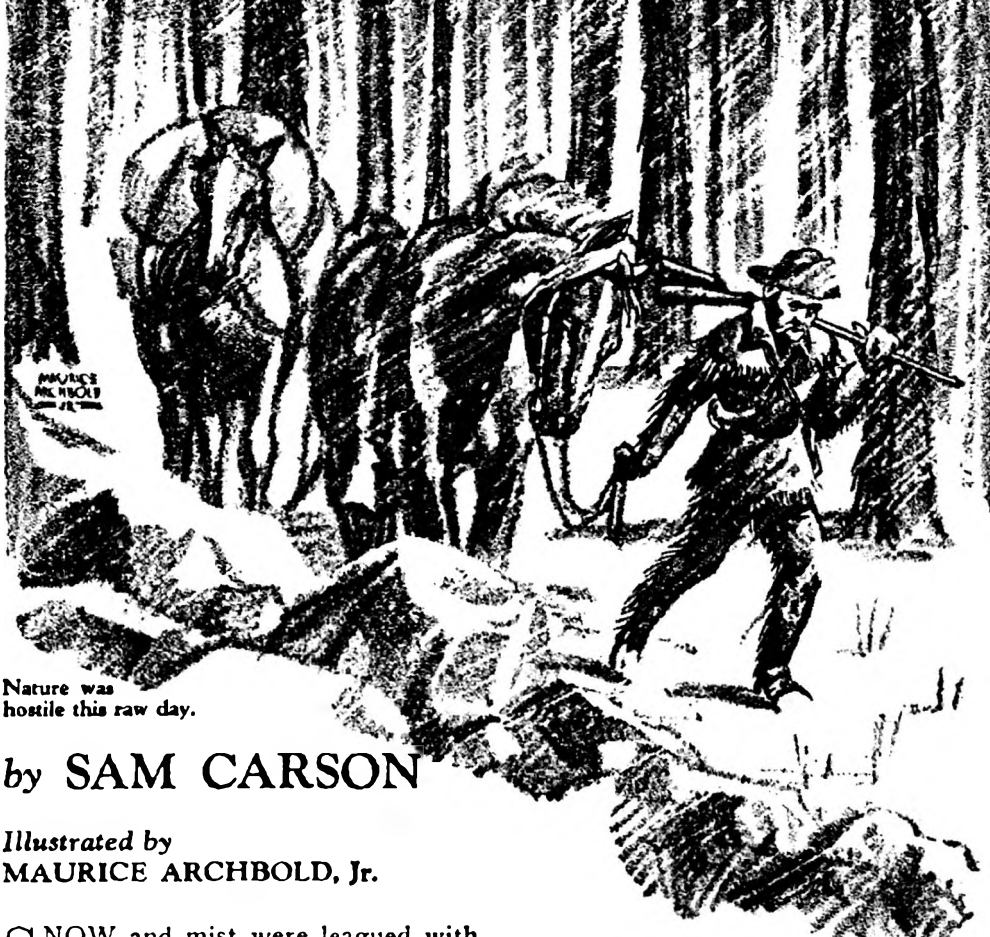
The Queen's bell rang furiously at last, and Mary Fitton hastened in, and found the Queen alone. Elizabeth demanded Kate, and sat with ashy face and trembling hands. Mary understood that something dreadful had happened. Had Kate been late, pert, unskillful? she asked falteringly.

"She will not be skillful in the Tower," the Queen whispered; and then, pale and haggard, her hands twitching, "Bring her here—send her to me!"

But Kate could not be found—and

(Continued on page 99)

The Land Stealer



Nature was hostile this raw day.

by SAM CARSON

Illustrated by
MAURICE ARCHBOLD, Jr.

SNOW and mist were leagued with January wind along the eastern scarp of the Cumberland mountains. Spruce and pine and hemlock were dark smudges through which the newly opened military trail to Nashville wriggled, up and up to the summit of an abrupt pass. Above the gray heights swept the winter storm, to scourge valleys of the Clinch, the Tennessee and the Holston. Nature was hostile this raw day. But hostile or not, the man walking ahead of two horses and lean-

ing against the gale, showed no inclination to rest.

The man was Tom Peeler, once a long hunter who knew the Kentucky road as few did, now dispatch rider from Nashville and the Bluff settlements to Jonesborough and the Virginia connection. There were two reasons for his haste. One was knowledge that Cherokees of three towns were in the field, with Creeks already harassing the trail. The other was the presence, just a few hours

ahead, of one General Hale, rival dispatch rider just come over from the Kentucky road.

Peeler had no special animosity toward the new rider. But Hale was threatening to cut rates and make concessions otherwise. Somehow luck had been with him on the eastern trip, so that he had arrived a full day ahead of Peeler. If he repeated on the way back, and in this sort of weather, Peeler would lose valuable revenue. Eventually the new trail would be widened, smoothed and made passable for teams. More people would travel westward. The man who knew the trail now, would profit when freighting came in. Hence Peeler, with some money and imagination, was worried.

The cold bored through his mittens, stiffened his leathern trousers, formed icicles at the extremities of his ropelike mustache. He had walked steadily the last five hours and both horses were steaming. Signs of Hale's earlier passage were scant, snow covered. "By grabies," Peeler exclaimed, after scanning the downward slant from a boulder, "if that peckerwood walked, he ain't human. If he rode his hoss, he still ain't human, and that's a fact."

The pack mare whinnied and Peeler was reluctant about going on. Like himself, pack mare and saddle horse were hungry. But it was eight miles yet to Peeler's regular night stop.

"We'll stop," Peeler spoke aloud, "beyond the next ford. Hale ain't fur ahead. And he ain't going to last ahead of us, pushing out so hard."

THE pace was telling on Peeler, for he was a man in the fifties, and his head was completely bald. He had a woolen sock beneath his hat, but that didn't help exclude the cold entirely.

But, as Peeler liked to point out, no Indian could scalp him, and he had nothing of value usually save his rifle. And that rifle was heavy now.

Whatever thoughts flowed dully through his mind, were erased abruptly, at the next turn. The saddle horse, in the lead, snorted, ears forward. Peeler saw a metal object, the base disklike, surmounted by a tiny cylinder. It was barely coated with the hard snow pellets now driving down. All in one move, apparently, Peeler sidestepped for a boulder. He called out "Git" and both horses turned out of the trail, to be lost in small pine. For minutes, as Tom Peeler, every sense alert, surveyed mountain and trail, there was no sound except the steady patter of sleet and hard snow.

"*Land stealer*," Peeler whispered, giving the Indian term for what he knew was a surveyor's compass. "It ain't been there more'n an hour—maybe a half hour. It didn't drap, right side up. It was put there."

Hale was the answer. He must have left it. Why? The compass evidently was in the rider's pack. It had to be removed. Delivery of that compass meant money, maybe ten — fifteen dollars. "Left fur me to find," Peeler reflected. "Means Hale is in trouble. Means somebody come along, maybe taking his hosses." Peeler felt for his powder horn. He liked to be reassured of that horn, and the buckskin bag holding his shot, for he recognized the symptoms full well. General Hale had stumbled into an Indian ambush.

Hale had escaped somehow. Maybe he had recovered the pack. An Indian would smash the compass, for he blamed plenty of grief upon the land stealers. But this compass was intact, seated upon its base.

Below Peeler the trail ran along a hump, the mountain falling away rapidly to a stream. Amid boulders and dense pine a man, even if wounded, could hide, for a while at least. Peeler began to work alongside the trail, toward the hump.

Momentarily, the snow curtain whisked aside. Peering between two spruce trunks, Peeler saw a large body on the ground, with a queer looking, much smaller object beside. Horse and rider had gone down. "Indian," Peeler said.

He tried to piece it out, for Peeler had to adopt his own course and maybe gamble with his life. "Small bunch," he decided. "Maybe not more'n three-four of them. They ambushed Hale. While they was plundering his things, he got a rifle and plugged one fur sure. He's hurt. If he shot one of the red varmints ahead, he crawled back here and left the compass."

Hale, Peeler finally decided, must be directly below, dead or alive. His energy, coming after receiving his own injuries, proved the man wasn't exactly near death. Peeler whistled his horses, deliberately crossed the trail and set out down the slope. On a bench, full one hundred yards below the trail level, he whistled twice.

Hale's voice, coming so close at hand and seemingly from a nearby cliff, was startling. "Git down below the laurel," he called. "There's a path fit for the hosses." As an afterthought the voice added, "I'm scalped."

PEELER found the man beneath shelving rock, flanked by giant boulders. There was charred wood, evidence of previous use by travelers, and below was a covered route to the stream. Hale had made a pallet of laurel

and his head was a sight. What intrigued Peeler was the fact that Hale seemed no more than half scalped. The right side of his head was covered with curly, black hair. "The damned red varmints," he told Peeler. "Four men and a boy they had tied to his saddle. Jumped me from behind and my hosses ran away."

"Rifle?"

"Gone," Hale groaned. "I'm pow'ful weak. One—he looked like a half breed, was pulling off my scalp when I come to after the clubbing. He'd put his rifle against his shoulder, and I slapped my hand up real quick and pulled the trigger. Blowed the top of his head off."

The others, Hale said, were moving on. They turned, one firing at him. "I scooted out, fell and rolled down the hill. Then I saw that Indian boy break loose. He legged it on by me. I kept rolling down in the pine and laurel, till I managed to crawl here."

Peeler looked his surprise. "You mean to say you stayed here, till I come?"

"Think I'd crawl back to the trail, and them varmints hunting around?"

"But the compass? Up on the trail. That's why I looked fur you about here."

Hale sat up, hand against head, holding a stained kerchief against the incredible wound. "I thought it was my hair, as much as that damned half breed ripped off when he fell. I ain't got any compass in my pack—or did have."

"It was a land stealer's compass, Hale." He broke off, because Hale was staring beyond Peeler so intently, that the latter turned. Startled, he swung his rifle, for squatting on a rock shelf was an Indian boy, beady eyes watching the white men without expression.

"That's him—the prisoner who broke loose," Hale said.

"Well, I'm plumb damned," Peeler said. "There's strange doings on this road, when a white man loses but half his scalp, and an Indian shows up with a land stealer. Because he's got it hanging like a powder horn. He dropped it on the trail."

"You Tom Peeler," the impassive faced boy spoke. "You come — my town."

"You look familiar, for a fact," Peeler admitted. "Ain't you from one of the old towns?"

The boy nodded. "Long Island. You come once—my house—Owl's house."

"Shorely. With Colonel Sevier. But the Owl's in a war on the upper settlements. By grabbies, did them Creeks raid the lower towns while the men were gone?" Peeler shifted to the Cherokee tongue. "I have called the Owl my friend for ten winters. Did the Creeks come while the warriors went north?"

"Big Horse came for the horses and women our people took. I was with my mother. Big Horse scalped her."

"And took you prisoner." Peeler glanced at the surveyor's compass. "And the land stealer? Why do you keep it?"

The boy's eyes lighted. "The Owl took that from a Virginian. The white man will steal no more land from my people. When the Owl painted his body, he left the land stealer with me."

"**W**HAT does the varmint have to say?" Hale demanded. "This damned butchery is hurting."

"You're lucky," Peeler said. "That was some of the Creeks with Big Horse. He crossed this road ten days ago, and I'll wager his rearguard waited for you

on the way back from the Cherokee towns."

"They'll find us," Hale groaned. "I'm ruind anyway. They plundered my things, and there were dispatches for Robertson."

"Well," Peeler observed, "it ain't the first time, or the last, packs will get plundered on this road. Luck's with us. If the Owl's boy hadn't dropped his compass on the trail, I would have gone ahead and maybe got lead inside my skull. You ain't lost all your hair."

"Got horse," the Owl's son put in. "Found him—his," he pointed at the wounded man with a look of contempt. To Peeler, in Cherokee, he asked, "Why not let him stay? He is scalped."

"White men fight again when they are scalped," Peeler replied gravely. "How does the Owl's son plan to go home?"

"You—my friend." The boy said no more, plainly indicating that it was up to Peeler to work out details. "And he means it, too," Peeler told Hale. "Now if this ain't a mess!"

"I've got to git somewheres," Hale complained. "To a doctor."

"That comes from riding the Kentucky road," Peeler said drily. "Too much civilization that way. You ain't hurt bad. Git your belly filled, you'll feel better."

"I'm skinned clean to the bone," Hale protested. "Place bigger'n my hand."

Peeler spoke to the boy, who began to gather up bits of dry wood. Peeler unslung his bag, got out tinder box and flint. "I got half a turkey and meal," he said. "Going to be mean, finding game. Till Big Horse and his rapscallions move on. The Owl's boy can keep the fire going. I'm going to doctor you."

Hale looked more than scared at Peeler's mode of preparation. He took

out knife and a pegging awl from his bag. Out came a kerchief. He wet it at the stream. Then he produced a bottle of whisky, poured it on the cloth. This he used to scrub Hale's wound. "It burns," the latter grunted.

"Wait till I really go to work on you," Peeler said with a grin. He took up the awl. Hale sat upright, thrusting Peeler away. The Owl's son squatted nearby, watching with cold interest. "Don't be a fool, Hale," Peeler said. "I seen what I aim to do, both on the Kentucky road, and at the Bluffs. By doctors. I play a tune on your skull with this awl. That granulates the flesh and makes it grow a clean surface. There's men living, fixed that way."

Hale was breathing hard. But he nodded. He was weak, Peeler realized. Straddling Hale, he began jabbing. Hale tried to keep from groaning. The Indian boy worked nearer, watching intently, as Peeler pegged back and forth, drawing new blood.

"You're a damned rough doctor," Hale said, between compressed lips. "Gone through yet to the other side?"

Peeler didn't answer. He was working swiftly. Just before Hale went limp, Peeler stopped. He grabbed the bottle, thrust it to Hale's lips. "Drink a toast, damn you, for a good peckerwood's job." Hale took a healthy swig. His recovery was testimony to the whisky's potency. The patient sat up. He reached a hand to the site of Peeler's treatment. "If I don't leak brains now, it's a miracle. One time I saw a woman take an awl to a tough piece of buffalo steak. You can beat her, Tom Peeler."

WHEN Peeler had affixed the bandage, he turned to the job of getting a meal. "Good thing there's wind and snow," he reflected. "We'd have no fire,

otherwise. Whoever found this hide-out first, knew what he was doing."

Hale found his appetite, with meal cakes in the ashes and the turkey hot and browned. The boy brought Hale's horse in and Peeler dealt nubbins with a spare hand. He sat down on a stone, counting his bullets. "We got fifty miles afore we git off the Cumberlands and down to the Caney Fork station," he told Hale. "You'll have to ride. Me'n the boy can walk. Damn sorry they took your rifle and ammunition."

"Not much, fur game and red varmints," Hale affirmed. He got to his feet. "I ain't so peart, but I think I can hang on. They'll be back shore—them Creeks."

Peeler rose, went below their refuge. There was no break in the weather. Overhead the clouds were a bit higher, and he could see them streaking in from the northwest. That meant clearing and colder by the next day. It would be a mean trip to Peeler's regular night stop, and Hale was right. The Creeks might double back, since Hale's horse and the Owl's son were loose.

It was then he saw the Cherokee boy, vanishing into the pine above the creek. He gave a cautious whistle. The Owl's son looked back, made a vague gesture and was gone. Peeler felt uneasy. "Good riddance," Hale said. "He et more than both of us."

"I don't like it," Peeler said. He wasn't thinking of the Owl's son.

If the Creeks had built those fires, represented by a cluster of charred embers, they were likely to put in before night. Again, the place could have been used by Major Evans' men, cutting the trail. It was more likely they had made this refuge a stop because of so many advantages. In a way it served better than The Cave, save that the latter was



more sheltered from flank attack. "I think it's better we put up here fur the night," he decided. "Fur one thing, you'll feel better, Hale. And when it gits colder, and stops snowing, we can see Indian signs."

Hale agreed. He asked about food. "Got no meat," Peeler replied cheer-

fully. "But that creek's got trout and bass in it. An I saved a string of turkey meat fur bait. With two hooks I guess we'll eat fish before we pull out." So saying, he went over to the fire. Peeler's expletives made Hale's eyes widen. "That damn little scamp. He took the bait."

"Maybe he wanted to chaw when he got hungry," Hale suggested. "It's a long trip to where he's bound."

Peeler grumbled considerably. He had a cut of side pork that was to wait till he found turnips at the Caney Fork station. And pork with turnips was something Tom Peeler craved. That slab wasn't large enough to whittle on, in his estimation, and Peeler's conscience fought with his desire, Hale watching with a gleam of sardonic humor. With a muttered oath Peeler got out the slab, sliced off a thin bit. He put his rifle beside Hale. "Give a turkey gobble for danger," he said. "And don't tell me it's too early for them to gobble." He got out his hooks. "Don't be scairt if you hear somebody coming either. That Indian ain't deserted us. He likes his hair and our grub too much."

IT WAS a job even Peeler's experience found a mean one, for bass and trout seemingly, had no appetite for pork. "Blast 'em," he thought, "if they knowed how good it is with biled turnips, they'd swaller."

He gave up presently, for he was cold, and the pork had suffered by attrition from nibbles and nothing more. Grumbling, he climbed through the thicket. He saw the Owl's son glide past the horses, saw something held firmly—a big trout—and then heard a squawk from Hale, followed by a rifle shot. The young Cherokee bounced back and to earth. Peeler let out a whoop. "You durn blasted fool."

The boy was unscathed. Wrathful, Peeler stormed across to Hale, snatched up his rifle. "Waking up the hull country—you plumb crazy galoot."

Hale was scared. His eyes told of fever. "I saw a red varmint and let

go," he said. "If you'd had one bent over you, scalping knife out—sawing away—"

Peeler interrupted him. "My whiskey," he cried. There, overturned and empty save for a scant spoonful of liquor, was the precious bottle. So that explained the feverish look of Hale's eyes. "I'm a good mind to leave you," Peeler said quietly. As he spoke he cleaned his rifle, made ready to reload. "No man could raise his voice agin me. You fired a load, not only when we need every pennyweight of powder and lead, if we live, but you drank my medicine, and I wasted a cupful on your scalp. You're a no good polecat, General Hale."

The Owl's son was beside Peeler, looking on expectantly. "If you kill the Kentuckian," he said, "take my knife with which I speared the fish." His face was so earnest that Peeler relaxed, shook his head. "Nope," he replied thoughtfully. "I reckon the Lord has to wish troubles on us. Maybe if my mind had been working, I'd have stayed here and prevented this. Might have known you'd gone looking fur fish, and when an Indian cain't git a fish, it just ain't got." He shook his head. "Reckon we got to scamper out uh here though. That rifle carries plenty fur."

"You ain't going to leave me?" Hale protested, somewhat maudlin. "I was hurting, and the whisky relieved me. I'll ride my hoss."

"Maybe," Peeler answered shortly. All at once he was tingling. One of the horses made a queer sound. The Owl's son crossed the opening and Peeler knew he was covering the uptrail. "Keep quiet," Peeler said, voice lowered. He still hadn't heard a distinct sound. Instead, he sensed the invisible danger and he knew the Cherokee was alarmed too. Accordingly, Peeler went

to the opposite side of the hideout, scanning the thicket. He saw motion, upgrade, and a flash that began as orange, suddenly giving way to cosmic brilliance as pine and spruce and the dim mountainside exploded and gave way to nothing whatever.

IT WASN'T a period of complete unconsciousness Tom Peeler suffered. He had a vague idea of falling into soft snow, of a pantherlike figure rolling him over and snatching off his headgear. He heard a cry of rage, and voices raised in laughter. Somehow he knew his bald head was the cause. And now, befuddled, with a forehead throbbing out of proportion to its size, the dispatch rider saw the hideout take shape, with blue smoke curling above a crackling fire. His wrists and ankles were bound. Huddled about the fire were five men, Creeks, while above them stood the figure of Big Horse, whom Peeler had seen before. The leader caught Peeler's open eyes. He held out the empty bottle. "Man without hair," he said, "we come for two prisoners. This—" he indicated Hale, "who killed the Bull, and the Owl's son. If you have more of the red liquor, we take horses and gun only."

"There was but a swaller, not large enough for a brave man," Peeler spoke, choosing his words carefully. "That the man who was half scalped by the Bull, took. The Owl's son took refuge here, but ran away when you shot me."

Big Horse touched his forehead. "I did not try to kill you, man without hair. You carry messages and do not fight my people. For you Colonel Robertson will pay ransom." He spat in contempt toward Hale. "He killed the Bull. When my party comes, he dies."

Peeler heard the other white man's

deep intake of breath. "If I was loose, jest a second," Hale groaned. "Jest a second." Big Horse paid that prayer no attention. He told Peeler of his successful raid on the lower Cherokee town; that he was leaving the white man's road and striking southward for the old War Trace.

"We have the same enemies," Peeler said. "The Owl and chiefs from other Cherokee towns are raiding along the Virginia border."

"Yet you gave his son refuge," Big Horse said scornfully.

"Yes," Peeler told him gravely. "And I'd do the same thing fur a son of yours, Big Horse, and you know it. So long as we're not personal enemies and I ride the Cumberland trail." Big Horse grunted and returned to the fire. Peeler saw his own rifle tied to his saddle. It looked as if there were a dozen animals in sight. Despite the neutral attitude of the Creek, Tom Peeler didn't exactly feel secure. His horses were lost. So was his rifle. And while Robertson might send ransom for the dispatch rider's release, there might be delays. The Creeks didn't exactly treat their captives with honor. Their women worked the slaves and Peeler had heard tales about White Rose, as tough a virago as the wilderness furnished. The Bull, named as Hale's victim during the scalping process, was typical of the Creek lieutenants. Hale, of course, wouldn't take the trail. That, Peeler could survive without deep mourning. But he wasn't exactly cheerful about his own destiny.

Besides, that crease along his forehead hurt. The ground was plenty cold. Hale, six feet away, was cursing and groaning. "Shut up," Peeler told him. "Your own foolishness got us into this mess."

"I wish I'd stayed on the Kentucky road," Hale complained. "There was a woman. She left Laurel and went to the Bluffs. I sold out and follered. She'd took up with another feller."

"Big Horse," Peeler called out, "you got my gun. Let me git up and keep warm."

The Creek came over and kicked Peeler in the ribs. "No red liquor," he said in disgust. As if that thought enraged him, Big Horse told off a couple of men to meet the main party. Another he detailed on the eastern trail. The remaining two were ordered to renew the search for the Owl's son. "I stay," he finished.

THE Creeks left with obvious reluctance, for by now Peeler could feel warmth from the fire. The leader chose a stone giving him full benefit of the heat, keeping his rifle trained on his fettered prisoners. He sat there motionless for quite a time. Then his head sagged and he straightened. His eyes caught Hale attempting to roll nearer Peeler, and Big Horse grinned. "Two white men, and half a scalp," he taunted.

Hale looked desperate. "Big Horse," he offered, "I can get ransom money. From my people in Kentucky."

"You killed the Bull," Big Horse replied. "The women can finish the scalping."

"Surely you could wait, till I sent for money. I might even get you more horses, and guns, Big Horse." Hale was pleading now. His nerve was going. For answer Big Horse leaned, picked up a war hatchet. He measured his distance and Hale screamed as the Creek drew back. Big Horse let the weapon fall and laughed. It was that revealed more than his promises.

But Tom Peeler forgot Hale's weakening, or the Creek's taunting. A pair of eyes watched the scene, from between a crevice of the great boulder just behind Big Horse. They watched, and then vanished. But in the vanishing, Peeler knew the watcher was the Owl's son. He knew, too, that the boy was aware of his discovery by the white man.

Without sound, Peeler managed to twist his body, so that his face was half concealed from Big Horse. He was waiting, straining to detect movement beyond the boulder. It was quite a while before the Owl's son worked into sight, and then he was atop the boulder.

Hale saw him too, now, and couldn't help but let out his breath. But the man gave no other sound. For both could hardly believe this courage in a boy not yet sixteen. The young Cherokee seemed without motion, flattened to the table top of the boulder. Inch by inch he came. Peeler risked a look toward Big Horse. The Creek had relaxed. His head was barely tipped, as it had been before. Never before had Peeler prayed so earnestly for Big Horse to nod.

He was thankful for the dirge of the gale overhead, for the tiny noises coming to them from the horses, and for the ripple of sound yielded by the creek. These things, and the Creek's belief of security, were in the boy's favor. By now Peeler's heart was thumping, so strongly that he felt it too must give forth sound. Above, the Owl's son moved his right arm, slowly bringing his knife into view. Peeler couldn't make up his mind whether the boy was going to throw the knife, or hurl himself from the boulder, when Big Horse solved the problem. He bounced from

the stone, turning about swiftly. And so he met the Cherokee boy's leap on his feet. Surprised, the Owl's son struck, but his blade met the rifle barrel. It flew into the air.

It was Hale who let out a hysterical yell. He went over, like a tied jack-rabbit, to plunge face downward.

But the white prisoner was beyond sane behavior. Peeler, backing against the cliff wall, swung his legs across a jagged piece of slate and tried his luck at sawing loose. He kept his eyes on Big Horse and the Owl's son. The young Cherokee ducked the Creek's swing with the rifle barrel. The bag containing the compass swung and met the Creek's grasp. Out bounced the instrument. Big Horse leaped backward. He was reaching for his tomahawk, forgetful in this crisis of his

rifle. Or maybe he didn't want to try it hand to hand. Whatever the motive, he moved more slowly than did the Owl's son. He scooped up the compass, wheeled on one foot and hurled the thing squarely into Big Horse's face. There was a solid thunk, and the Creek's knees sagged. Hale rolled over, kicking out with lashed feet. He struck Big Horse's thighs. Slowly the red man went down, sliding along the face of the boulder. The Cherokee boy snatched the war hatchet. Without preliminary he sank it into the Creek's forehead.

PEELER'S bonds loosened. He was free. But the dispatch rider didn't react at once. Added to other incredible happenings, were figures of men—of Cherokees, not Creeks, fitted into



the background to either side of the boulder. They were Cherokees, for Peeler recognized the Owl, with the coonskin cap presented by General McDowell some years before. The Owl was an ally then. He still wore the epaulets of an American officer. Now he glanced at Peeler with recognition, gave Hale a cold stare, and walked over to his son. He drew his own knife. "The scalp," he said, "is yours, my son—and man."

Very gravely the boy took the blade. As he bent, to make his first incision at the back of the Creek's neck, Hale let out a scream of terror. "Don't kill me," he begged. "Let me live. I'll get the money—"

"Shut up," Peeler called out. "These men are Cherokees, and you killed the Bull—their enemy." He grinned at the Owl. "You got the others?"

The Owl picked up the knife his son had dropped in the fight with Big Horse. He slashed Peeler's bonds. "We have nine scalps now," he spoke. "The main party, we overtook at daylight." He pointed down the trail. "They are waiting at the ford." His son had the Creek's scalp in his hand, holding it aloft. His eyes met Peeler's, and no longer did he seem a boy. "Big Heart," Peeler said, addressing the Owl. "That's the name I'd give him. The way he stalked Big Horse."

"He crossed the trail just after we ambushed the trail watchers," the Owl said. "A half dozen rifles were upon Big Horse, but we held our fire. Big Heart," he repeated. "My son, the man without hair has given you a name. When we return, we go before the war chief."

The Owl told Peeler then, the group about the fire, how he had returned from a disastrous trip against the No-

lichucky settlements, and how a truce had been agreed upon. When he learned by runner of the Creek raid, the Owl and his men had come by the Black Fox trail farther to the south. The main party had been cut to pieces and women and horses recaptured. He had hurried on, when Big Horse had turned back to look after the Cherokee fugitive. "And I had given up hope, till we ambushed the trail watchers," the Owl admitted gravely. "Then my son came upon us and I learned that you and the half-scalped one had given him refuge." He paused. Now he rose to his feet, with the look of a man in council. "You, Tom Peeler, get your horses back. And him," indicating a now subdued General Hale, "because he killed the Bull. You will find no more Creeks on the Cumberland trail, my friend."

Peeler grinned.

"I'm pow'ful obliged you happened along, with your friends." He reached over, picked up the surveyor's compass. It was in bad shape, glass broken and metal dented from contact with stone. "Land stealer," he observed. He handed it to the Owl. "Your boy shorely found a use fur it, and a damned good one, fur a fact."

The Owl shook his head sadly. "My friend, true it is broken, and can steal no more land. But there will come more white men, with more land stealers, I am afraid. I remember the first trails north of the old towns. Like this. Soon the trail was widened, and there were horses, and teams of oxen bearing your people. So it will be on this trail." He turned, spoke to his men. They cut out the dispatch riders' horses, gathered up the rest. The Owl's son went last. He held up his scalp in one hand, the surveyor's compass in the other. This time he grinned.

"Let's get going," Hale fumed. "I can ride. Let's cross the next ford, snow or no snow."

"Shuckings," Peeler exclaimed. "It's too late now, fur the trip to the Cave afore pitch dark." He retrieved his knife, examined the rifle the Owl had so considerably left behind. Then he picked up the fish left by the newly christened Big Heart. It was dirt caked, and Peeler reflected that the situation required a trip to the creek.

"And besides," he added, "an Indian don't gig, then leave fish fur you every day. Hale, you slice off a little hunk of that pork, and put it in that panikin in my pack."

Hale looked at all that was mortal of Big Horse and shuddered. "Shuckings," Peeler grunted. He grabbed the Creek's right arm and dragged the body around the boulder. "Comes from being too damned civilized," he muttered darkly. "Ought to 've stayed on the Caintuck road, fur a fact."

COMING

SWORDS AND MONGOLS . . . by Murray Leinster
THE FIRE-MASTER by Seabury Quinn
TOMORROW AT TEN by Robert Griffith
ARIADNE SPEAKS by Clyde B. Clason

THE LAST GIFT

(Continued from page 87)

she was never found; nor could Queen's Majesty hear anything of the unknown messenger who had traveled from Fotheringhay and entered the palace with something rolled in a cloth. He, too, had vanished.

Elizabeth told the whole story to no one. She let Kate go. They would tell her she had had a vision. Think that she was craven—mad! She had let Kate go.

They had seen her haunted, terror-stricken look.

FAR off on a country road, riding in disguise, Kate left the palace of

the Queen forever; and the picture of the Head went back to Scotland.

It had served its object, though Amyas Cawood and Cherostier never told even Melvin, and those who loved Mary, the whole story. Cherostier and Kate—whom he married, later, when her lover died in England—talked sometimes in the dusk of how the Majesty of England had fallen prone with terror before it.

"The Queen of Scots died fearless." Cherostier would say. "Terror never vanquished her. Death could not conquer her. So in the end she conquered England's Queen."



by JOHN MURRAY REYNOLDS

Illustrated by JAY JACKSON

IT WAS the day of the Ram, in the month of the Heron, in the year 2500 B.C. The wind was light and warm. The patrol galley *Dolphin* bowled along at a brisk clip, her colored sail spread to the Mediterranean breezes and her oars stowed inboard.

Man's grip was on but little of the world in that year. Europe was a wilderness, a mass of great forests ranged by wild beasts and inhabited by scattered and disorganized tribes. Only two nations had attained civilization. They divided the Mediterranean basin between them, far enough apart to avoid strife but knowing each other by

trade and commerce. One was Egypt, lying along the Nile like a string of emeralds, and the other was the island empire of the Minoans.

Children of Minos, the Minoans called themselves, and the Egyptians knew them as the Kestiu—"men from beyond." Centering in Crete, colonizing the other islands and surrounding shores, they ruled an empire broad and rich. They were the first sea-kings and the first navigators, and from them the later Phoenicians borrowed what they knew. To the landsmen of the Nile, the long black Minoan galleys with their high vermilion prows and creeping

banks of oars were always causes of wonder.

Harran of Palaikastro, master of the galley, stood on the little triangular platform in her bow. Beside him lounged an Egyptian nobleman named Perneb, going as a passenger to Knossos. Harran was slight in stature like all the Minoans, with the pleasant face and friendly eyes of his race. His long hair was iron gray, and his skin was ruddied and leathered by a lifetime spent in following the sea lanes. He wore a plumed bronze helmet, and at his wide girdle he carried a long and thin bladed sword.

The dark skinned, white robed Egyptian beside him was half a head taller, and he held to the bulwark with a landsman's awkwardness. After a while he pointed down at the rowers who were sunning themselves while the oars were not in use. They were lounging about on the benches and one of them was singing in a deep voice.

"A fine looking body of slaves you have there, Islander!" Perneb said. Harran laughed at him, his bright blue eyes twinkling.

"No slaves, Egyptian, those are free men all! Your sluggish Nile galleys cannot muster a crew like *that*. Every man of our nation of sound body must serve his time in the fleet, first as a rower and later as a marine. We are five moons out on patrol ourselves, and now we go home for a month's rest."

Perneb nodded thoughtfully. "It is in my mind that it might be better for Egypt if we had your system. But this is indeed a mighty ship!"

Harran glanced affectionately over his slender, graceful craft with her square sail and speedy lines.

"The *Dolphin* is staunch," he said, "But you should see one of our great,

two masted war galleys. This is but a small cruiser of the Western Squadron. We do the routine work. It is our task to patrol the sea-lanes, to protect the colonies and the merchant ships. We hunt down Euxine pirates, and search any suspicious sea craft, and otherwise maintain the peace of the seas. We are the work horses of the fleet."

FOR a few moments both men fell silent. There was a steady hiss of foam along the galley's strakes, and a rhythmic creaking of her cordage. All at once the stillness was broken as the lookout at the masthead shouted an alarm and pointed toward a small islet a little forward of the beam and a few miles off.

Harran grunted angrily as the lookout's hail came to his ears, and then he leaped up on the bulwarks to stare hard toward shore. The island was small, but thickly wooded. Though on this side there was no sign of human habitation, a haze of black smoke was beginning to rise above the tree tops. The smoke thickened and increased with every passing second.

"What does it mean?" Perneb asked.

"Trouble!" Harran answered grimly. "Yonder cloud of smoke comes from no wood cutter's fire!"

A moment more he paused, then leaped down to the deck and signed to the trumpeter. At once the alarm rang out, a silvery cascade of rapid notes that in an instant aroused the galley to orderly activity.

The rowers leaped to their seats on the benches and unlashd the oars. Archers and spearmen lined the bulwarks and the fore-and-aft bridge that ran amidships, their weapons ready. Harran turned grimly back to Perneb.

"You'll see some action, landsman!"

"What is it?" Perneb asked once more.

"A raid—beyond doubt. There is a fishing village on the far side of that island. From the look of the smoke, I'd say some northern raiders are sacking the place." He settled his helmet more firmly on his grizzled head, then glanced at his passenger. "You are unarmed save for your sword, Egyptian. Best take shelter in the stern."

"Have you no spare armor on board?" Perneb asked with a slow smile. "Having warred for years with Khita, Nubian and Hyksos on every frontier of Egypt, I am not like to take shelter from a few sea rovers." Harran grinned broadly.

"Well spoken, landsman! We shall be glad of your sword."

The *Dolphin* shot onward toward the island, the combined power of oars and sail driving her lean hull through the water at racing speed. A drum beat steadily to keep time for the rowers. In the tiny cabin aft, Harran gave Perneb a bronze helmet and a big ox-hide shield. Then the galley-master opened a carved wooden chest and began to hunt through the rolls of parchment it contained, squinting at the line of Minoan hieroglyphics written on each. At last he found the one he sought, and spread it out on a bench with a grunt of satisfaction. The Egyptian stared wondering at the strange arrangement of lines and figures the parchment contained.

"Magic?" he hazarded.

"Aye," snapped Harran, "the magic of a good seaman! This is a chart. It shows the arrangement of the island we approach. See! This is where we are now, this is that long point ahead, and beyond it lies the cove of the fishing village—so. These marks are shoals. As I thought, there is deep water right up to the shore at this point. I am minded to stop here

a moment. Come, Egyptian; shalt see Minoan justice!"

The *Dolphin* swept on at full speed until almost up to the shore, then she backed water in a smother of spray. A part of her complement of archers and marines swarmed down over the bow and ran into the woods. Then the galley swung offshore and the rowers took up a longer and slower stroke. Half naked seamen went aloft to lie along the yard and clew up the sail as the galley rounded the end of the point.

BEFORE them lay a broad cove, wide mouthed but sheltered by headlands on either side. Along the shore line had been a peaceful fishing village. Now it was an inferno. Red tongues of flame licked through the billowing clouds of black smoke, and the crackle of the fire was clearly audible. Some of the houses were already reduced to smoldering piles of ashes, and all of them were aflame. Two thong-bound longships from the Euxine, northern pirates, were drawn up on the beach. The bodies scattered on the trampled sand showed that the sea robbers had not had everything their own way. From the forest behind came shouting and horn blasts where the fisher-folk had fled to the woods and the fight still raged.

Leaving their comrades to hunt down the remaining villagers, about two score pirates—tall, bearded men in salt encrusted sheep skins—were busily plundering the beach. They were carrying to the ships such loot as they could find, collecting the scattered weapons, dispatching the wounded, and binding the arms of the dozen women captives. The noise of the blazing houses kept them from hearing the thud of the *Dolphin's* oars or the



First to sight them
was one of the pirates
binding the women.

beat of her drum, and she was half way into the cove before any of them saw her.

First to sight them was one of the pirates binding the women. He had twisted a half naked girl's wrists behind her and was binding them with a thong, knotting the rawhide so tightly she screamed with the pain. Then he lifted his head. As he saw the tall

vermilion prow of the galley swing in toward shore, with a white cascade of foam beneath her forefoot and the ruddy twinkle of sun on bronze above her hulwarks, he stood motionless and staring for one fleeting instant. Then he released the woman and rushed for the nearest ship, shouting loudly as he ran.

There was stark panic along the

beach as the sea-wolves saw their danger. Abandoning their plunder, and their comrades who still fought in the woods, they all scrambled aboard the nearest of their two craft. Intent only on slipping out the far side of the cove before the galley could overtake them, they shoved the longship off the beach. Hastily they took water, rowing with a jerky and uneven stroke.

As the tar-smearred hull of the Euxine craft headed for open water, Harran snapped an order to the man at the galley's steering oar. The *Dolphin* altered her course to cut off the other ship's escape. The beat of the drum quickened. The rowers bent to their oars till the long blades bent and quivered under their powerful drive. With the water hissing along her sleek black strakes, the fleet Minoan galley slid up alongside the more sluggish northerner within easy bowshot.

Hoarse shouts of defiance came from the sea-wolves, and the bowmen among them loosed hastily. Speeding shafts wounded two marines, while an arrow-glanced off Perneb's helmet, but the galley's higher sides made their aim uncertain.

SUDDENLY Harran flung up his hand, and the trumpeter blew a single blast. All the archers along the fore-and-aft bridge loosed together, each man shooting five arrows as fast as he could put shaft to string. So swift was the flight that there seemed to be a continuous cloud of arrows. Then they ceased, and the disciplined bowmen again stood with arrows on string.

The benches of the pirate were a shambles. Half the rowers lay dead, pierced by the bright feathered Minoan shafts, and the others had sought such

shelter as they could find behind the benches and bulwarks. Again Harran raised his hand, again the trumpeter blew a single blast, and again the archers loosed their five-fold volley. When it had ended the longship drifted helplessly away, with the steersman slain and her oars trailing uselessly at her sides for lack of rowers.

At Harran's command the *Dolphin* swung around and rowed slowly up till her tall prow towered above the pirate's low shield rail. At once a swarm of marines poured down into the longship. The handful of remaining sea-wolves met them with sword and axe, but the disciplined marines hemmed them in with a wall of ox-hide shields bristling with spears while the archers above picked off man after man.

Five minutes later it was over. There was no thought of quarter. Honest soldiers received little mercy from victorious foemen in the year 2500 B.C. What chance had sea-robbers taken red handed in a raid on a peaceful fishing village? They knew the stern Minoan code and fought to the finish, but the end came quickly. Then the big stone anchor was thrown overside and a few men remained on board as a prize crew. The rest of the boarders returned to the *Dolphin*, and she immediately headed inshore.

As the galley's keel grated on the shelving beach, Harran and Perneb leaped down into the shallows and waded ashore. The dozen or so women the pirates had captured crowded around them, together with a few of the wounded who had survived. Their story was soon told. The swift onrush of the two longships . . . the landing under cover of arrow fire . . . the stubborn fight on the beach . . . the firing

of the village and the retreat to the forest—it was all an old story to Harran. At his command the galley's crew landed on the trampled beach.

There came a renewed burst of shouting from somewhere back in the forest, followed by the short, deep shout that was the war cry of the Minoan soldiery. The marines landed around the point had at last made contact with the fight in the forest. Harran spread his men out on the beach, with the spearmen kneeling in front and the archers behind. The lightly armed and comparatively inexperienced rowers formed a compact group in reserve. Perneb, used to the disorderly turmoil of an Egyptian army, admired the silent precision of every movement.

THE advent of the Cretans had evidently turned the tide of the fight in the forest. The shouting and the horn blasts came nearer every moment, showing that the sea-robbers were now in full retreat toward the beach. The exultant cheering of the fisher-folk mingled with the Minoan war cry, and the flat blasts of the northern horns sounded hasty rallying calls.

Then the first of the pirates appeared on the edge of the woods. They leaned panting on their weapons while a dozen of their comrades joined them, then all turned toward the shore. As they peered through the smoke clouds that still rose from the ruined village, they saw the long lines of Minoans silently waiting and the red-prowed galley behind. They hesitated, and more men fleeing from the woods came out to join them. Silently they drew together and began to form the shield wall.

One of their long-ships swung at anchor out of reach, and the other was

even then being poled off shore by a few Cretan rowers. The pirates' only possible hope—a forlorn and desperate one at best—was the *Dolphin* herself. As the last few men ran out of the woods, with spent arrows streaking after them and the fisher-folk baying joyously behind, the sea-robbers all locked shields and moved straight for the center of the grim Minoan line.

For a moment there was a sort of lull. The northerners saved their breath and advanced in silence, and the motionless Cretan ranks waited in deadly quiet. The foremost of the pursuers began to appear along the edge of the forest—and fell silent as they saw the scene on the beach. Perneb could even hear the murmur of the miniature surf on the gravel behind him, and a faint creaking from the *Dolphin's* yard.

Then Harran drew his long sword. The trumpet sounded. The Minoan arrow blast struck the shield wall, and tore it asunder. With a shout the spearmen went forward, and the wings closed in on the run. The archers unstrung their bows, drew their swords, and prepared to cut down such of the pirates as might win through the ring of spearmen.

THEN began a fierce and deadly fight. One of a thousand nameless battles, where forgotten men have fought in forgotten places that the seas might be safe for their fellows. A steady clangor of bronze as blade met blade mingled with the hoarse cries of the fighters and the groans of the wounded. The women of the fisherfolk had gathered together and were chanting a wild song of the Islands that carried even above the noise of the battle. It had something of the

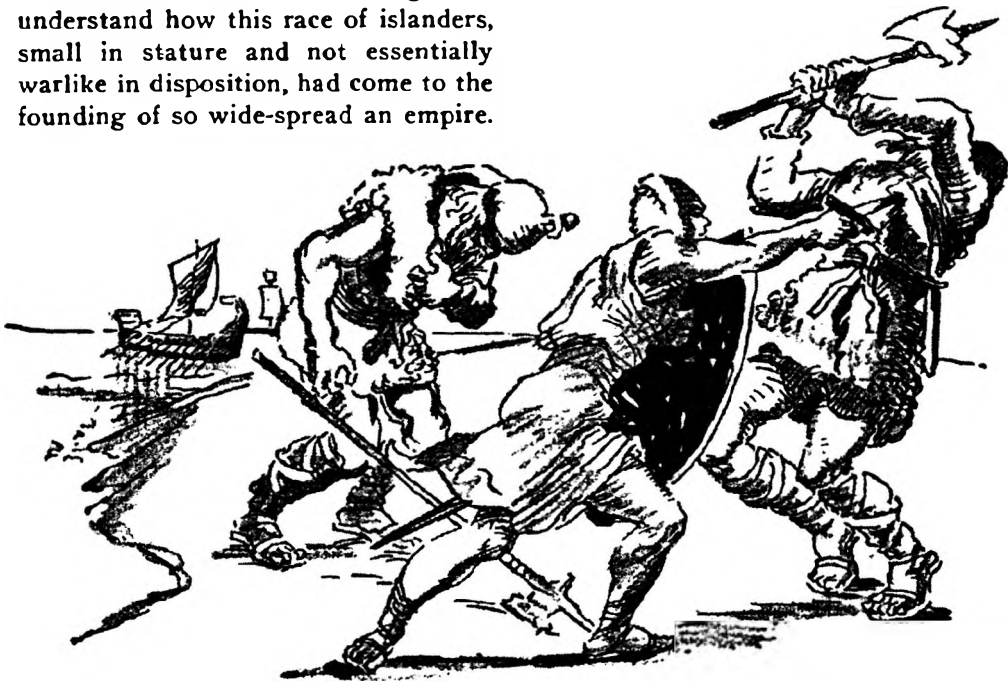
sea itself in its swinging lilt.

Occasionally two or three of the sea-wolves would pierce the ring of ox-hide shields—only to go down before the long blades of the archers and rowers. The big boned northerners were helpless before the swift sword play of the lithe Minoans. The long, slender bronze blades of the Islanders were like tongues of ruddy flame. Time and again Perneb saw a Minoan step aside with cat-like speed to avoid the crushing down stroke of a northern axe. Then the swift point would circle the guarding pommel, and the long blade would leap in and be drawn out again with such speed that the Cretan was often engaged with another antagonist before the first one had fallen to the bloody sand.

Perneb the Egyptian, stepping back from the fight for a moment to rest his sword arm, found time to admire the skill of the Minoans. He began to understand how this race of islanders, small in stature and not essentially warlike in disposition, had come to the founding of so wide-spread an empire.

It was not only that they had brought to the world stout ships, good seamanship, and the art of navigation. They had also brought skill and cleverness into the art of war—a quick eye, a strong wrist, and a well balanced sword. Finesse and science, rather than merely courage combined with brute strength!

Near the end of the fight one of the pirate leaders broke free. He was a giant of a man in sheep skins, with his long yellow hair streaming from under his dented copper helmet. Wielding a great axe in both hands, he smashed his way through the Minoan line and dashed straight toward the *Dolphin*. Harran stepped to meet him, parrying the axe blow with his sword, but the old Minoan's foot stepped in the soft sand and he fell. As the pirate shouted and swung up his axe to strike again, Perneb leaped



The big boned northerners were helpless before the swift sword play of the lithe Minoans.

forward and caught the blow on his sword blade.

Perneb's weapon was a short Egyptian blade that had served him for years along the upper Nile and on the Nubian frontier. It splintered like obsidian under the smash of the heavy axe. He closed with the pirate then, wrapping both arms around his waist and trying to trip him. The other hammered at his head with the pommel once or twice, then shortened grip to use the edge. At that moment a thin blade passed over Perneb's shoulder and caught the pirate squarely in the throat. Harran had regained his feet.

"My thanks for a moment ago, Egyptian!" he said, "An instant more and my course had been all sailed."

With the last of the pirates slain, the Minoans turned their attention to the burning village. Leathern buckets were produced, and lines formed from the shore to the houses. They saved a few of them, but most of the wooden structures were too far gone for any aid. The village had suffered heavily in both lives and gear, and Harran left the two captured long-ships with the fisher-folk as partial indemnity.

The crew of the *Dolphin* returned on board, and an hour after the end of the fight she was backing off the beach. Once beyond the shallows, the starboard bank changed direction and pulled ahead, and the galley's bow swung around toward the open sea again. Harran nodded, the drum took up its steady and rhythmic beat, and the *Dolphin* resumed her voyage. With the oars moving in perfect time, and the fisher-folk cheering from the shore, she swept out of the cove and turned again toward Knossos.

Perneb returned the borrowed armor and sought out Harran where he stood by the steersman.

"It was a memorable battle," he said, "Doubtless the scribes will write the account of it on your tomb."

Harran grinned at him like the grey old sea dog he was.

"Our scribes have better things to write about, Egyptian! Patrol ships like this are designed to keep the peace of the seas. We have but served our purpose."

Perneb the landsman, watching the sparkling waters around them and the blue sky overhead, nodded slow agreement.



NEXT MONTH

H. BEDFORD-JONES

Surpasses Himself in

"Lords of the Tideless Sea"

A Complete Novel of the Corsair Who Plotted to Kidnap a Pope



The Hairless Ones Come



Illustrated by
JAY JACKSON

by L. Sprague
de Camp

THE campfire sputtered and snapped, the wood being still damp from the morning's rain. But after a while it blazed cheerfully, and Otter, watching from behind his bush, backed farther into the shadows. He was frightened—more so than at any time since he had been treed by a lion, a year before. But also he was curious, and his curiosity was so strong as almost to get the better of his caution.

He was watching the seven who lay around the fire. He had heard of these beings, who came from the direction where the sun rose, but he had never before seen any. They don't look very

strong, he thought; I could kill one easily if I could get close to him. But could I get close? What long arms and legs they have! Strange-looking creatures, with bodies hairless like worms or fish!

His mind—an uncomplicated affair—slowly ground out its simple thoughts. His impulses said Run! Run as far and as fast as you can! But his mind asserted itself. If they heard him they would pursue, and they were said to run like the wind. He could believe that, looking at them. And what of his family? If they were not warned, they would be killed, and he would be left, a miserable lone hunter with no woman to work for him and no brother to help him in driving game. His group was

too small anyway. His brother should get a wife of his own. Not that Otter minded lending his wife to his brother now and then, but there was more work to be done than one woman could handle.

For Otter was what, far in the unimagined future, would be called a Neanderthal man—a stocky, barrel-chested fellow with short arms and legs, no neck to speak of, and an apish countenance. But the difference between him and the seven that struck him most was the fact that, whereas he was covered from crown to ankle with a beautiful silver-tipped pelt, like that of a wolf or bear—and he had no more use for clothes than a wolf or bear—they were almost entirely hairless, except for a thick growth about the head and a few patches elsewhere.

The seven were unaware of being observed. Three slept, one chewed meditatively on a piece of horse-intestine, and three talked. All were male. All were tall, with lean stringy muscles, jutting black beards, and sharp features. As it was midsummer, all were naked. Millenniums later, scientists would name them and their kind after the Cro-Magnon cave in the pleasant valley of the Vézère, in Dordogne.

DAYS before, they had left their bands to go on one of the long hunting trips in which the young unmarried men took part every summer. The oldest, and the natural leader of the group, named Ta-na-de-ko-ha, meaning He-who-kills-daily, had suggested that they strike to the West, into country seldom penetrated by their people.

On the third day the scanty supply of meat they had brought along was

exhausted, and the skin of their stomachs was flat. Though hunger was no novel sensation to members of a hunting race, they were relieved to come upon the fresh tracks of a herd of horse, about where now lies the sleepy Alsatian village of Thann.

They halted by a stream. Kills Daily with a spear-point sketched in the sand of its margin a bold and vivid picture of a horse. His leadership was partly based upon his artistic ability. Such pictures were a necessary part of the hunting ceremonies. Since they were to show your ancestral spirits what kind of animal you were hunting, it was obvious that if you couldn't draw a recognizable likeness of the beast, your ancestors couldn't help you out.

The seven chanted the horse-hunting song, and danced around the drawing. They finished with the traditional shout of "ho, hi, hah!" and jabbed their spears into the picture. Then they set out on the hunt proper. Two concealed themselves near the herd, and the others circled around to drive them past. As the shaggy little ponies thundered by, the two rose from their bushes and hurled their wooden throwing spears. One made a neat hit in a horse's flank. Then for hours they all loped after the wounded animal, following it by the bloodstains that it left. When they finally came in sight of it it was trotting slowly with its head down. At the sight of its pursuers it put on another burst of speed.

But the hunters kept on, their long legs pounding tirelessly through brush and heather. Just at sunset they overhauled the horse again. This time they spread out and surrounded the animal, so that when it saw them it ran this way and that confusedly. More spears

thudded into its hide. When they closed in on it it tried feebly to kick, but they pulled it down like a pack of wolves.

With stomachs bulging comfortably with horse-meat, the seven considered their position. The chase had led them farther west than any had ever been. Kills Daily suggested that they start back, but the others urged that they go on and have a look at the new country. It was finally agreed to continue west as long as their horse-meat held out. When Otter sighted the glow of their campfire in the twilight and crept up to investigate, they had just finished the last of it.

THE one with the large green frog painted on his chest spoke: "This is the last of these trips I shall make with you, brothers; when the bands congregate for the autumn drives I shall find a wife."

Kills Daily, on whose chest a bear was painted, answered, "Have you one picked yet, Noise-in-the-Belly?"

"Yes," said Noise-in-the-Belly, "Red Autumn Leaf, one of the daughters of old Stinking Hearth, of the Bear Clan. She's only fifteen years old, but has already borne two children. Stinking Hearth has been accepting my presents, so I do not think there will be any difficulty." Noise-in-the-Belly did not smile as he pronounced the shaman's name, which was after all a perfectly honorable one, and referred to his ability as a good provider for his family.

"I didn't know Stinking Hearth had another daughter," replied Kills Daily. "So fruitful a woman would be worth having; if she weren't of my own clan I'd like to have her myself."

The third talker, whose name, Lean Buttocks, referred to his swiftness of

foot, had been tenderly prodding a boil on his neck. He spoke: "The story is going around my band that Stinking Hearth's supernatural powers have begun to fail. What do you know about it, Kills Daily?"

"Don't you believe it! You remember young Fearless Bison, who hunted with us two summers ago? Well, at the salmon-run last spring this youth insulted the old man, who warned him that he might have cause to regret his words. Ten days later Fearless Bison got himself stepped on by a rogue mammoth, and that was the end of *him*. So you can see that Stinking Hearth's powers are as strong as ever."

Noise-in-the-Belly lowered his voice almost to a whisper, and glanced nervously into the shadows. "I have heard," he said, "that Stinking Hearth once overcame the Ga-we-na-hu-kha in a duel of magic!"

Kills Daily shuddered at the mention of the dread name of the Great Snake Spirit. "I have heard that also. You will be a fortunate man, brother, if you can get so mighty a shaman for a father-in-law! But let's talk about something more cheerful. Will the members of the—ah—noble Frog Clan honor us with a visit at the next salmon-run?"

Noise-in-the-Belly scratched his top-knot and grinned. "Yes, I suppose we shall; the band chiefs will have to decide. You may joke about our frog totem if you like, but it's convenient at times. On my first bachelor hunt we had a man from the South belonging to the Horse Clan. The game wasn't very plentiful, and all we got were horses. Of course, this unfortunate Horse Clansman couldn't eat his own totem animal for fear of bringing disaster on his clan, and he actually



He burst into his cave, panting, and cried,
"The hairless ones come!"

died of starvation while the rest of us did very well on horse-meat."

"If one were afraid of lions," said Lean Buttocks, "as Black Cloud asleep there is said to be, it would be convenient to belong to a Lion Clan—one would have a good excuse for not going on lion hunts."

Kills Daily grinned inside. Afraid of lions! He knew that Lean Buttocks would run from a lion as quickly as the next man. But his face with its high cheekbones remained impassive in the firelight. To the savage his dignity is vastly precious. One might kill a man over a trivial difference of opinion, but

to humiliate anyone by publicly hinting that he might lack infinite courage was unthinkable.

BEFORE the subject of lions was brought up, Otter had crept off into the darkness and then run for his home. He burst into his cave, panting, and cried, "The hairless ones come!"

His family looked up. The grizzled old Neanderthaler who was his father said, "How many?"

"More than five, but less than two fives." (Otter had no words for numbers larger than five.) What shall we do?"

"Flee!" said his wife.

"Fight!" said his younger brother.

"We can do nothing alone," said the old one, "But the people-whose-cave-is-by-a-waterfall may be near." (He referred to another Neanderthal family whose hunting circuit roughly paralleled theirs.) "If we can join them, the hairless ones will perhaps not dare attack us."

Neither of the younger Neanderthalers could think of a better plan, so the family gathered up their scanty gear and were soon trotting across the wilderness. By dawn they had reached the place of the waterfall-people's last encampment, but found nothing but a heap of ashes and the usual litter of bones and filth that marked a deserted campsite.

The old one stamped with annoyance. "Gone for another year! We must go on. In my youth the hairless ones never came so far into our country. Yearly they extend their range, and we must flee or be killed."

NOISE-IN-THE-BELLY stared at the track and frowned. "Kills

Daily!" he said, "What sort of footprint would you call this?"

"Let me see—why, that's the track of an almost-man! I thought they had all been frightened out of this country. Did you ever eat one? They're good—like swine, but not as tough. Quiet, everybody! They may have a cave or a camp around here. If we can surprise them, we may be able to kill some."

Two hours later they found Otter's cave, but without the Neanderthalers. When they had vented their disappointment Black Cloud said, "Let's start home. This country is just like our own, and if we get lost we may be late getting back for the Sun Ceremonies."

Kills Daily, looking very dignified, said "Yes, perhaps it would be wisest —" but the others shouted him down. "Oh, come on! If we go farther west, think of the new game lands that we shall be able to tell of on our return . . ." "There's plenty of time left before the Sun Ceremonies . . ." Finally the two conservatives gave in, and the trek was resumed.

They did not eat that day, but they had not begun to feel really hungry yet. The following morning, Black Cloud, knocking the sand out of his moccasins, said "I am not happy, brothers! Last night the spirit of my mother's brother visited me in sleep, and warned me to beware of danger."

Log-in-the-Swamp, winding his long rawhide belt around his middle and sticking his tools and fire-sticks into it, said "Perhaps you are right. If we keep on, we may wander into the country of the Ho-ta-ke-ke." He meant the evil spirits in the form of gigantic weasels that carried off hunters who lacked the proper supernatural protection.

Noise-in-the-Belly looked sober at these ominous words, but said "No, brothers, the country of the Ho-take-ke is much farther north. Anyway, Lean Buttocks here should know enough magic to protect us, even if he has not yet been initiated into the Shamanate. I say we go on!" And with more persuasion he won his now wavering friends to his point of view.

OTTER sat under his lean-to and scraped the trunk of a sapling into the shape of a fish-spear, now and then toasting the point in the fire to harden it. He still jumped when a twig snapped, but he had begun to get over his fright. But into his slow mind kept intruding the thought, oughtn't he to have made his family go further before settling down? They, of course, had not actually seen the hairless ones, as he had, and he had not been able to impress his alarm fully upon them. Consequently on the third day of their flight they had begun to dawdle and pick berries, and assure him that the hairless ones would never think of pursuing them so far. The old one at first had agreed with him about the necessity of haste, but as he had begun to tire he, too, wanted to stop.

So, when they found a stream teeming with fish, they pulled together their crude shelter and recommenced the monotonous routine of hunting, fishing, and berrying that comprised their normal existence. But Otter was not yet satisfied. Last night he had dreamt of fleeing through a huge swamp, pursued by three hairless one. His feet sank into the mud so that he could scarcely move, while his pursuers bounded lightly over the surface like water-insects. They were almost upon him when he awoke, shaking with ter-

ror. In his mind, his spirit had quite simply left its body and visited an actual swamp, and there been chased by the spirits of the hairless ones. His brother assured him that there were no large swamps in the neighborhood, but Otter made a mental note to avoid all swamps for a long time.

He looked across the fire to where his two children were having a glorious time, tearing a hunk of rotten wood apart to get the beetle-grubs and other delicacies. He had an uneasy feeling that he had forgotten something he intended to do. Then he remembered that he was going to make a small fish-spear and teach his older child the rudiments of fishing.

Otter's attitude toward small children was neutral; as he was ignorant of the connection between sex and offspring he regarded them, not as his at all, but simply as a natural phenomenon. He had no objection to his wife's fierce solicitude for the welfare of the creatures, though he did not understand it or try to. But when they became old enough to make themselves useful it seemed natural to take them in hand and teach them. He did not consciously reason that they should be taught to hunt and fish so that as they grew up they could help to support the family, or that he should impress them with his superior wisdom so that when he was old they would be glad to have him around and feed him. It was the way he had been reared, and the way he had seen other Neanderthals do with their young, so he simply followed the example.

But still the picture of those dreadful things, with their long spidery limbs and startlingly bare hides, bounding toward him over the surface of the swamp, pushed itself into his mind and

distracted his thoughts from the business of whittling his spear.

KILLS DAILY studied the stream-bed. "Brothers," he said, "these are the tracks of more almost-men; there are at least five, and they have been here recently. They can't be far away. I think we shall soon break our fast!" He grinned wolfishly through his beard.

Builds-a-Great-Lodge called down from his tree, "I see the smoke of a small fire up the valley!"

Kills Daily slapped his thigh. "This is better than I expected! Our ancestors have been good to us, and we shall have to thank them many times!"

Noise-in-the-Belly asked, "How does one hunt these almost-men?"

"Driving, just as with horse. But we must be careful; they use clubs and spears almost as if they were human, and if there are enough of them they may show fight. You take Black Cloud and Log-in-the-Swamp, and go up to where the valley is a little narrower. The rest of us will circle about to get above them. We'll try to stampede the whole herd. The wolf call will mean that there are too many, and we shall have to try to catch one by itself to kill it."

OTTER looked up suddenly from his fishing. Some sort of commotion was going on up the valley . . . A shriek, which he recognized as that of one of the children, was cut off in the middle. Then the familiar furry forms of his father, wife, and brother appeared, running for dear life. Behind them came four of the hairless ones. Otter dropped his slender fish-spear and snatched up his club. As the survivors of his family

passed him he fell in with them. As he ran he turned himself half around to look back, and saw that the Cro-Magnon men were gaining on them. A light throwing-spear hissed past his head; a glance showed him that the leading pursuer was fitting another into his throwing-stick.

Then three more of the hairless ones popped out of the bushes in front of them, darts ready. Several of the missiles went wild, but one struck Otter's brother in the neck. The young Neanderthaler turned to run at right angles to his former direction, but after a few steps wobbled and fell to his hands and knees. A hairless one seized the female Neanderthaler and held her, despite her kicks and attempts to bite, while another beat her over the head with a club.

One of them lunged at the old one, but as he raised his cudgel he tripped and fell sprawling. Another hairless one laughed shrilly, and the old one bolted off through the bushes.

Otter might have taken advantage of this distraction to bolt also. But Otter had ceased to think. His mind was filled with a red rage against these creatures who hunted down him and his kind, and he did not care whether they were seven to his one or seven hundred. As he closed with the nearest, a dart in his chest staggered him a little, but he kept on. Before the thrower—Noise-in-the-Belly—could send another missile, Otter had neatly cracked his skull with a two-handed sweep of his club. Then the others closed in on Otter, and more throwing-spears struck him. . . .

To kill a man with wood and chipped flint takes more time and effort than to kill him with explosives and sharp steel, so some minutes passed before Otter's

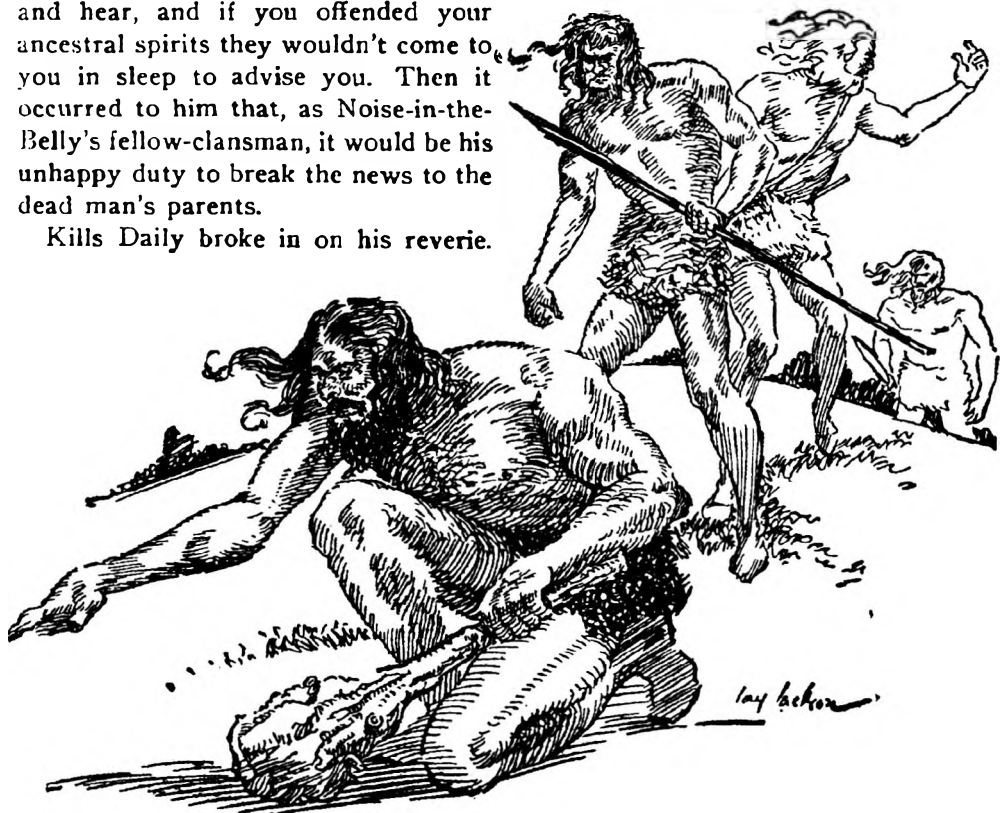
furry chest ceased to heave. The six Cro-Magnon men stood around panting. Somebody remembered that one of the almost-men had gotten away, but with so much meat in sight nobody showed much enthusiasm for trying to track it down.

Black Cloud, looking down at the corpse of Noise-in-the-Belly, thought the spirit of his mother's brother had been wrong again; he ought to have warned Noise-in-the-Belly instead of him, Black Cloud. Black Cloud had always privately considered his uncle something of an old fool; evidently death had not made him any brighter. But he said nothing aloud. The old man's ghost might be hanging around and hear, and if you offended your ancestral spirits they wouldn't come to you in sleep to advise you. Then it occurred to him that, as Noise-in-the-Belly's fellow-clansman, it would be his unhappy duty to break the news to the dead man's parents.

Kills Daily broke in on his reverie.

"Suppose you and Lean Buttocks fetch the carcasses of those two almost-men cubs; he'll show you where they are. The rest of us will make a camp right here."

When these things had been done, the six painted the mourning symbols on their chests, and chanted the death-song over the body of Noise-in-the-Belly. They propped his mouth open with a stick, so that the spirit could escape, and sadly hung the corpse in the crotch of a tree. Then for three days they gorged themselves on the meat of Otter and his family. And when they had finished eating the Neanderthals they returned to their own country.



The young Neanderthal turned to run at right angles to his former direction, but after a few steps wobbled and fell to his hands and knees.

COWARD'S

LITTLE Clem Carson was terrified, not just frightened as he had been the time big Tim Sullivan caught him "walking home Abigail"; but so scared his yellow soul cried out through every nerve for relief.

It was the sound of heavy booming up ahead, the hollow rattle of musketry, and the sight of so many riderless horses galloping back along the line of march. Those were the things that scared Carson; the knowledge that he was soon to face those heavy guns in the not too far distance; that soon he would be where so many muskets were rattling out their messages of death. . . .

Carson's own musket, shakily held in clammy hands, weighed a ton. His knees and elbows were quivering lumps of dough which threatened to collapse with each new movement. But with his mouth arid with the awful dryness of fear, his pale blue eyes filled with the burning red dust spiraling up from behind the shuffling feet ahead of him, Carson moved onward, his discolored teeth chattering and gnawing at his twisted thin lips.

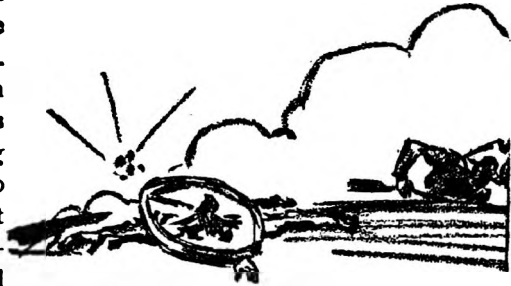
Onward . . . forever onward and ahead. For long days and endless nights it had been the same; because it was up there that the rebels were waiting. Those damn southerners in their confederate grey; waiting up there to fight for their niggers! Waiting up there with their heavy guns, and their muskets, and their sharp long swords.

And it was up there, too, Carson knew, that Death waited for him! Somewhere up there among the sharp-

ened branches of the Confederate abatis, behind one of their portable palisades, or crouched down in a rifle pit . . . Death waited, patiently, for the coming of Clem Carson.

Carson's dragging feet moved slower with the thought. Then he glanced up at the bearded giant striding along beside him. Could I, he thought as he flicked his dry tongue over the cracked bitterness that was his trembling lips, cut and run? Or would Tim . . .

As if he had unconsciously asked the



question aloud, staring up at the larger man's swaying shoulders, Carson waited as big Tim Sullivan jerked to a halt and shifted his heavy musket from shoulder to shoulder. But he started guiltily as Tim clamped a big red hand on his shoulder.

"Steady, Clem," growled the man Carson had always envied and hated: "Steady. It's coming any minute now. Jist don't let it git yuh. It'll be easler wen 'ey start shootin'—easier'n this waitin'."

Carson nodded as he stared up into the warm blue eyes of Tim Sullivan; but then the last of his strength seemed to ooze from his shivering body. Desperately he tried to swallow before he

REWARD



by James Harry Martin

Illustrated by JAY JACKSON

answered the larger man in a tone pitched with fear.

"I'm . . . I'm skeered, Tim . . . skeered stiff."

Big Tim Sullivan laughed harshly; but with understanding and sympathy showing in his eyes.

"Course yuh air, Clem," he rasped, his grip tightening on Carson's shoul-

der. "But all of us air jist as scared as yuh. An' the Greys, up ahead, I'll bet they're jist as—"

THE sharp clear notes of a bugle call cut into Tim's speech, and even as his heavy hand fell from Carson's shoulder drums sounded out at intervals along the column of waiting men.

Commands snapped out through the hot dusk and sunshine, and again the 8th Pennsylvania Infantry moved forward.

Carson was jostled and hustled along at the double, his mind dumb with fear; his eyes staring and his thin-lipped mouth hanging open. And then, suddenly, between the bobbing heads and over the bent shoulders of the men in front of him, he glimpsed the Confederate abatis, and each sharpened branch of the felled trees seemed to reflect the glare of the burning sun on its point. Points which, even as he looked, seemed to stab out at his throat.

"Oh, God!" Clem Carson heard himself call. "O-o-oh! God . . ." No woman, he thought, was worth the hell that was coming. But big Tim Sullivan—damn fool that he was!—enlisting early in the war just to show off to Abigail . . .

As Clem Carson pushed forward he closed his eyes and remembered how pleased he had been that day Tim Sullivan had marched away to war and left him at home with Abigail, alone.

But things had not gone well with Tim out of the way. Abigail hadn't fallen into Carson's arms as he had supposed she would. Instead: "I want a man that's a man," she had whined. "A man that's a soldier-man."

And that was when old Squire Lane had offered three hundred dollars to the man who would don the blue and take the place of the son he had had killed in the ranks!

The three hundred dollars; that had turned the trick. The three hundred dollars and the chance to look well in Abigail's squinty eyes.

Carson shuddered at his thoughts, his eyes opened wide and staring as the ground beneath him heaved and shook.

So close it had been, *that* one; so close that it seemed to have almost burst in his face. But even as the flower of steel and flame had blossomed upward in front of him, tearing others apart and throwing them to the ground, Carson felt only the noise.

Then the roar of an exploding torpedo beat upon his ear-drums like the blow of a mailed fist, and Carson stood still and screamed in agony. Frantically shouting, he felt bits of red earth and stone shower down upon him; and again he screamed aloud as something soft and viscous and warm slopped against his cheek.

He turned to run, but the bayonets of the men surging forward behind him menaced him there. With a low moan of despair he turned and faced about, to stumble forward, hurriedly, in big Tim Sullivan's wake.

"Oh, God! . . . Oh God! . . . *Oh God!*" he cried; but even as he continued to hear other mangled bodies plop to earth with a sickening thud, he heard another torpedo burst and blow up to his right, close.

The Confederate lines had come to life with an echo. From their rifle pits and the earthwork in front of them they were throwing out a line of fire and lead; pouring and pounding it into the advancing line of blue. A minié ball knocked the forage cap of Carson askew, and a ball in the guts lifted a man on his left and tossed him to the ground, moaning. And then the blue line reached the abatis!

CLUBBED muskets, bleeding hands and heavily-shod feet reached the first obstacle and hammered at it, tore at it, and kicked it aside. A short run, then, and the surging line of blue went over, under or around the Confederate

palisades. Enveloped in clouds of sulphurous smoke and red dust, looking like a multiped worm in death throes, they writhed on forward, up a slight incline toward the Confederate rifle pits.

Carson stumbled and fell to his knees at the edge of the first shallow trench, his blood-shot eyes staring through a reddish fog that refused to split and roll aside. Hatless, his greasy black hair on end, with his thin lips drawn back from yellowed teeth that were bared in a snarl of hate, he lifted his musket. To kill; to kill first . . . to fight even as big Tim Sullivan was fighting . . .

But then Carson groaned and yelled and lifted his outstretched arms in the direction of the grey-clad figure looming large above him. Mouth open, beseechingly, he thought of pleas for mercy, but he lacked the power to voice them.

The upraised musket of the man above him began its descent, its bayonet driving downward. Fascinated, stiff and leaning back, Carson stood petrified; to suddenly see another silvery sliver of steel flash in the sunlight, then drive deep into the bared brown throat of the grey-clad figure above him. He saw the Confederate bend backward, his jaws dropping open as blood gushed from his nose and mouth, a redder stream surging down over his tunic front as he fell from sight.

And then Carson recognized big Tim Sullivan, his red face sweat-stained and splattered with blood; fresh blood, running blood, as red as that which was dripping from the tip of his long bayoneted musket.

The big man leaned over, to lay a hairy paw on Carson's shoulder and grin. "Close, weren't et, Clem?" he

rasped. "But not close enough. Well, co'mon—we gotta lot'a——"

Big Tim failed to finish. He jerked erect. A look of surprise showed on his flat face for an instant; then the heavy lids of his eyes closed and his wide mouth became two thin grey lines. He rocked back on the heels of his feet, to stand poised and erect for a second; finally to topple backward heavily, upon the grey-clad man he had just bayoneted.

Teeth chattering, with every nerve and muscle in his body quivering with terror, Carson slithered over the edge of the red earth mound between big Tim and himself. But even as he reached out to shake the big man he knew his shaking would avail him nothing. Big Tim's huge bulk was too still; and his eyes were closed too tightly, too peacefully.

SUDDENLY Carson realized that all was quiet now. No longer was there the drumming and pounding and banging of exploding shells. There was just the faint roll and rattle of musketry; but even that drifted back through the distance from far up ahead. Nowhere was there a sign of life; and there were only some grotesque bundles of blue and grey—like Tim and the man beneath him—to give sign of that which had been before.

Slowly Clem Carson lifted his canteen and splashed his cracked lips and dry throat with water. And that was when, like a dead man coming to life, big Tim groaned and rolled over on his side, to spit a stream of clotted blood in the direction of the red earth mound as he stared up at Carson.

"Huh! I guess I got et bad," Carson heard the big man rasp painfully. "Yep!—too bad, I guess."

Again Carson looked about him, to stare at the many mounds of blue and grey which showed up so plainly against the red of the shell-shattered earth; the many blue and grey mounds which were still like big Tim's body had been but an instant before. Then the little man looked down at the man he had hated for so long as he could remember, his eyes fixed on the purple hollow which had once been bulging chest.

"Yeah, Tim," he nodded, "you're finished, I guess. An' even ef yuh don't die right away, you're so big an' heavy . . . I don't think I cu'd——"

Big Tim shook his head, pain showing in his eyes.

"No, I don't guess yuh cu'd, Clem," he agreed softly. "Yuh never were any too strong. Yuh jist don't have what et takes in the back."

For an instant, then, the big man hesitated; his eyes closed, a large hand moving around over his shell-mangled chest. But then again he stared up at Carson.

"How'd things go fer us?" he questioned in a whisper, and Carson noticed that his tone was flat and dead-like.

"We 'uns got beat back fer a minut', at firs', but I think the Rebs finally moved back. That's the way it looks, anyway."

Big Tim Sullivan nodded shortly and his head fell forward until his chin rested on his blood-clotted chest. Then, breathing heavily:

"Gimme a drink, Clem. Jist a little splash of water might——"

One of Carson's hands moved toward his canteen; but even as his fingers touched its hot metal, looking at the grey-clad body still partially covered by Tim's huge bulk, he shook his head.

"Ain't got nary a drop, Tim," he said. "I jist downed what I had about a minut' ago."

Big Tim's eyes seemed to clear, and in their blue depths, for just an instant, Carson saw mirrored the same feeling of mild contempt he had seen the night Tim caught him walking Abigail home. And even as Tim had smiled that night, now he smiled again. Then, the big fingers of his heavy hand still clutching at his blood-clotted chest, the big man closed his eyes.

For a second, his skinny-fingered hands clenched tightly, Carson hesitated about feeling Tim Sullivan's pulse. But finally he reached out and took the big man's wrist between his fingers, and leaned down to make sure he wasn't breathing. If Tim was really dead . . .

QUICKLY Clem Carson rolled the bulk of the man he hated off the grey-clad form of the man beneath it. And just as quickly, slapping at a swarm of green flies, he stripped that grey-clad form, and his own, then donned the grey uniform and threw his own blue down over the semi-nude body at his feet.

As a prisoner Carson didn't mean to suffer in no Confederate prison camp; and he didn't mean to let no Confederate firing squad stand him up and shoot him as a spy; but dressed in the grey uniform, not knowing where his own outfit was . . .

Dressed in the grey uniform Carson meant to sneak away from the scene of conflict and sudden death; southward. Then he could get other clothing, civilian clothing; and in a land where he wasn't known . . .

That was when distant shouting

broke through the fog of Carson's thoughts. He pulled himself erect, startled, to see a solid line of blue-clad figures advancing on him from the rear, the last rays of a scarlet sun casting a bloody glow on their bared and up-pointed fixed bayonets.

For a full second Carson stared at the advancing line of blue, his thin lips parted and his dry tongue flicking against the sticky roof of his mouth. Then he turned, his fingers all thumbs as he grabbed up his own uniform and darted toward a distant woodland, tearing at the wooden buttons of the grey uniform he had just put on.

Now there were blue-clad troops in

front of him, too; and too late he remembered that the 8th Pennsylvania had moved up, that they *had* taken the woods in the foreground; that they had held them, driving the Confederates before them and back. But now . . .

"Oh, God! *God!*" Clem Carson screamed, terrified as he waved his bundle of blue clothes around in the air. "Oh, God . . . *God . . .*" And that was when he felt the bullets strike his running body; one in the breast—the first one—from the North; the second one in the back, from the South.

But now Clem Carson wasn't afraid. He wasn't afraid because he couldn't feel fear. He was dead.



A Despicable Cavalier

Phyllis
Moore
Gallagher



When she finally stepped off the stage it was with the most painful sense of failure . . . John Stafford had not once returned her smiles.

AS DIANE CHRISTIAN reached the door of the green room of the Drury Lane Theater, she turned on a demure toe and glanced discreetly over the beruffled muslins of her left shoulder. There was no show of emotion on the dainty, clear-cut features, save perhaps an almost imperceptible tremble of the scarlet bloom of her lips. The tall young man who stood only a few steps across the flagstones quickened his pace, but Diane did not see,

so fleeting had been her glance.

But once inside the green room, leaning against the closed oaken door for support, she pressed her mittened fingers to her hot cheeks and exhaled a long and weary sigh. Could she never step out into the fog or brightness of a London afternoon without that despicable cavalier trailing her? Was she never to indulge in the pleasures of the shop windows without seeing *his* reflection in the small panes? Despicable

cavalier, indeed! For all his evident wealth and Bond Street foppishness, he was as unschooled in the graces of behavior as the most clumsy lamp-lighter who ever climbed a ladder!

Not twenty minutes had passed since he had stalked behind her across Westminster Bridge, quickening or slowing his pace until his gait matched hers. Beside them had passed the magnificent carriage of the Duchess of Cumberland. The great lady had leaned out her head, with its towering wig and bright plumed chip hat, to beckon to Richard Sheridan, Manager of the Drury Lane Theater, and the clever Charles Fox, both foot-passengers on the bridge, when a mad April gale had lifted her wig and soft plumage and had sent it floating toward the Thames.

Mr. Sheridan and Mr. Fox, who had witnessed the mortifying spectacle, had suddenly interested themselves in the soaps and oilmakers' warehouses on the river bank, but *he* had sprung into the air, like an inmate of Bedlam, to retrieve the wig and in so doing had addressed the back of the Duchess' flushed bald-pate, in mistake for her face, *with a speech of condolence!*

But Diane's thoughts of the despicable cavalier were destined for an abrupt ending, for the oaken door suddenly flew open and Lady Jersey, with a swish of her satins and silks that matched the grinding of her pretty teeth, burst into the room.

Diane thought that a mad woman had swooped down upon her. Never the glorious Lady Jersey! For the moment every atom of beauty had deserted this reigning favorite of the Prince of Wales.

"Look at me, you breedless slut!" the Lady Jersey screamed. "Remember what I was and look at me! *Look at me!*"

DIANE did look, swaying a little, too, with some undefined terror seizing at her heart. Dead silence. Not a breath. A full moment elapsed with not even a flutter of an eyelash from the women.

Then the Lady Jersey spoke, and her voice was in control of a sort. "You may tell the whole of London about this meeting! I do not care! From henceforth I will do what I please! . . . that I will!" And she lifted her graceful hands and slapped them several times across Diane's flushed cheeks, the great emeralds and diamonds leaving their crimson marks. Before the poor girl could regain her wits, Lady Jersey had turned on her indignant heel and had disappeared into the encroaching blue of the twilight.

Diane had not fainted and yet she was scarcely conscious of the strangeness of the scene that had just passed. She had not known how angry she was until the door had reverberated with the Lady's departure. Then, and not until then, did resentment and a pang of revenge surge over her. How dared the royal hussy! . . . and what the meaning of it all! But when she flung the door open and dashed into the street, the Lady Jersey was only a dim shadow on the barouche box of her already moving carriage.

Perhaps it was because her cheeks still smarted and her incurably Irish temper had had no outlet—in later years she was to wonder about that—but when she saw the despicable cavalier, only a pace away, staring not at her but on the watering processes of a cart that was making a pattern of mud-holes on the street, she crossed to his side and stamped her tiny foot loudly and would have yelled for him to "Be Off!" had not anger left her inarticulate.

He turned quickly on his glistening boot heel. "Gad's life, Madam!" But when he saw who stood there, the ferocity of his expression melted and his eyes burned into hers with a bright, inextinguishable flame.

Diane, whose lips had curled scornfully and whose tongue-tip was heavy with a loading of vicious phrases, suddenly felt the color drain from her face. For the life of her she could plot not a thing to say.

The despicable cavalier spoke again and his voice breathed a romance that would have graced the boards of the theater, so smooth it was, rich and resonant, though indeed he had an accent. Not French, like the infamous Duke of Orleans, that most advanced black-guard of the period, but foreign, notwithstanding, and hard to place.

"Pray, Madam," he said, bowing politely. "Had you better not have a bumper of claret, so pale and shaken have you become!"

Her silence was continued and so alarming that he flirted a handkerchief from his sleeve and fanned her delicate features.

Finally she spoke. "'Tis as easy to mill a cup of chocolate on the street as to produce a bumper of claret, Sir! May I inquire your reason for this solicitude?" She bridled sweetly, hardly knowing that she did.

"I beg of you, Madam, to suffer my attentions," he began in the high-flown language of the times. "I have followed you, the coarsest of things to do, I know! But, Lud! Madam! What mortal man can resist a beauty such as yours?" The beaver hat held in his gloved fingers was swept swiftly over his heart. "I am John Stafford, of Williamsburg, Virginia," he finished.

DIANE'S pretty teeth clipped her lower lip. A man of the Colonies! Ah! then she understood! . . . born an American, to which wild strain she immediately attributed his passion for adventure and bad behavior! But Stafford. John Stafford. The name was not new to her! For a full ten seconds it fought for recognition in her mind, tumbling about in every corner. Stafford? Stafford? Then she remembered. Mr. Sheridan had told her about this man who had played cards for such high stakes at Brooke's Gambling House with His Royal Highness and other leaders of fast London life. With Colonel Byrd of Westover, Virginia, and other gentlemen of the old Virginia school, who had half ruined themselves by high play. It was John Stafford who had received a message from the Prince of Wales that half the debt would be enough to settle the account between them. John Stafford had replied promptly that a Virginia gentleman never staked more than he could afford to pay.

And while he stood there waiting for her to speak, the most handsome young man she had ever beheld, she merely smiled and withdrew with only: "Sir, your attentions would be flattering were you a gentleman of my acquaintance. But not knowing you, I must ask you to cease following me like a shadow on a sunny afternoon. I bid you good-afternoon, Sir!"

But he could not let her go. He reached for her hand and closed his fingers about her wrist.

"Madam, a thousand pardons! I grow tedious, but really I must know who you are, or else how can a Virginia gentleman effect a means of introduction? I could stand here all afternoon running you off a list of your charms and graces and beauties. And

then I would not exaggerate. Rat me if I would!"

With feminine dissimulation Diane was at once righteously indignant at this despicable cavalier who was not only very despicable but overly-bold!

"Why, Sir! You are flattering as almost to deprive me of my reason! I am Diane Christian of the Drury Lane performers, and, if you do not unfasten my wrist I shall call Mr. Richard Brinsley Sheridan, who is doubtless at this minute impatiently awaiting me."

And as she left the young man at the kerb she heard only his breathless "You! . . . *An Actress!*"

And because she detected the note of disappointment in his voice—and indeed she didn't blame him, for the theater was no school for innocence and virtue, as one need only look back to Nell Gwynn and the Exquisite Perdita Robinson, both Royal mistresses, and others whose famous feet had trod the boards of Drury Lane, to see! She dried an unhappy tear with a cobwebby handkerchief and pined over a Fate that could be so cruel and merciless!

She deserved better than this! Because her family, of genteel birth, had been penniless, she must needs bask in the muddy reflections of the actresses who had preceded her! She who had refused the insulting advances of half the rank and fashion of London! She who had dared to refuse the advances of His Royal Highness, the Prince of Wales, and with him his costly presents. Fate had decreed that she follow in the professional footsteps of the Gwynn and the Robinson and the others, but it had not demanded that she follow in the jades' private lives! To think that he, the despicable cavalier, had dared to say "*actress*" with that indicting inflection!

And all that afternoon, practicing and repeating her lines before the great Sheridan, she had only half an ear to her own voice.

THE King was a great patron of the Drama and on that evening the Royal family would honor the Drury Lane Theater, where "By Command of Their Majesties" was to be performed, not Sheridan's "The School For Scandal," which recalled to the Royal Parents the first and tempestuous escapade of the young Prince with the exquisite Perdita, but "She Would, and She Would Not," a light, frothy affair, maudlin with romance.

It was no little thing to perform before a Royal Party, which in turn drew all the lights of London's fame and fashion, and as Diane waited in the ante-room for the theater to fill, her courage ebbed time and again.

But when the pit and galleries and boxes were filled to overflowing, and indeed it was rumored that two great Lords had dueled over the possession of a box, her confidence returned. So when she finally stepped out on the boards, curtsying to the Royal Box before commencing, what a gorgeous, glittering figure she cut in the pale blue lustring gown garnished with elegant point lace, and her powdered hair dressed high as the clouds!

But as Diane had curtsied to the Royal pair, her eyes had shot past their box abutting on the stage, ignoring their Majesties with a treason known only in the depths of her heart. Because her stare had seemingly lingered longingly on George III and his good Queen Charlotte, the audience became vehement in applause, scenting loyalty and patriotism in the enchanting smile. The audience did not know that Diane had not so much as seen the

Royal couple, nor indeed the Prince of Wales, on whom rested all their future hopes, but that the lovely eyes had drifted to Mr. Sheridan's box, where sat the despicable cavalier, leaning a little back in the gilt chair and surveying her with eyes that bespoke no hidden hiss for a woman who trod the theatrical boards.

In that one searching flash she saw that his clothes suited him magnificently well, uglifying all the men about him. Once again she thought: "Ah, yes! He is more princely than the fat Prince who ogles me from the Royal Box this very minute and who will send his intimate, Charles Fox, to beseech me relent!"

It is hard to believe that a girl could spurn such advances, but Diane did just that and likewise gave the performance of her career. For she played to John Stafford that night, glancing often at him during her lines, pursing her lips as if to meet *his* kiss instead of the stage-lover who seconded her. John Stafford, sitting there, linking and un-linking his long fingers against his velvet breeches, saw and wondered. And because he was not a man of conceit, he feared that the honeyed words and warm glances were darted at the Prince, who obviously had the same impression.

It was not until the Lady Jersey, who sat next to the Prince, suddenly gathered her full cloak about her shoulders and marched out of the Royal Box in an indignant huff, that John Stafford was sure where the lovely glances had truly fallen. And when the Prince did not follow the Lady Jersey his great heart sank in his breast. John Stafford knew then what it was to want to strangle a man!

Diane, so sure was she of her lines and her acting, had seen the Lady Jer-

sey leave. It was now that she began to understand the full significance of the fingers that had lashed her cheeks that very afternoon! Jealousy! And she had not suspected! She smiled broadly, though her lines demanded not so much merriment, and John Stafford, seeing, thought: "A smile of conquest, if ever I beheld one! Lud! what a fool I am to think of myself, a clumsy colonial, in competition with a royal blood!"

WHEN Diane finally stepped off the stage after an elaborate curtsy to the Royal Box, it was with the most painful sense of failure that she had ever felt. The debtor's prison, which she had known, the pangs of hunger, were naught compared to this!

She had failed tonight! . . . not in her performance, for she had surpassed her best. The thunderous uproar of the audience and the wild shrieks of the mob pushing into the street were proof conclusive of her artistry. But she had failed, nevertheless, for John Stafford had not once returned her smiles.

Diane was too wrapped in depression to go to the green room where the world of fashion awaited to pay homage to her talents and beauty and to speculate on her resistance to the Prince. Instead, she threw a cloak about her drooping shoulders and hurried out of a back entrance.

Mr. Sheridan, who had perceived her mood, and indeed the great man was said to have had a second sight when it came to his actresses, awaited Diane at the mouth of the lane. For an exciting, breathless moment she had thought that John Stafford had arranged for the suggested introduction through Mr. Sheridan and her cheeks had flamed as she cast a glance thither and yon for another, a tall dark figure!

But Mr. Sheridan's mission was for a more important personage. The Prince, Mr. Sheridan told her as best he could, for he was in his cups, lay in a dying condition in Mr. Sheridan's own quarters in the theater. His Royal Highness had packed the Lady Jersey on her way, with no mincing of words. Then he had stabbed himself over the heart because of Diane's cruel indifference. Diane, alone, could save his royal life! . . . the hopes of all England! . . . the future of the people!

"Don't preach to me, Mr. Sheridan!" she said coldly. "I sicken at the thought of the Prince! I'll be no royal mistress!"

Mr. Sheridan threw a heavy, shocked glance at her.

"Good God! Madam! The man is dying! Have you no patriotism for your country! Surely if you have not enough love in that stone that is your heart to save the life of a good Prince, have you not enough love for the Royal Parents! . . . the future of all England!"

Diane was moved, but what were mere words? There probably never was a man so ridiculous when playing the part of a lover as the Prince of Wales. To have himself bled that he might make himself look interesting to some fair lady was no unusual trick with him. He had stabbed himself before!

"Madam! I beseech you! . . . I . . ."

Diane cut Mr. Sheridan short almost in an agony. "I beg of you, no more of this! Go back to your Prince with the message that it is my patriotism that forbids my return! He would serve England better as a corpse than as a King! Good-night, Mr. Sheridan!"

Diane could not know that she had uttered a prophecy, for the career of George the Fourth is history.

THE same April gale that had bereft a Duchess of a wig now extinguished the flickering lights of the street-lamps, leaving the narrow way a path of blinding darkness.

Diane was not alone on the smooth flagstone, for a lugubrious figure walked as stealthily as a footpad behind her. It was an eerie hour and Diane, speeding along in the darkness, wondered if Fate had thrown her into a more revolting situation than the one from which she was fleeing?

And then a voice. "Ged, Madam! Wait! Pray wait!"

The heart that was sunk so low and trembling with fright flew in a fluttering fit to her throat! That voice, that gentle, foreign accent!

John Stafford was beside her now.

"Lud, Madam! I sought to escape the maelstrom of the green room," he began, his eyes fastened on her upturned face. "And in truth I could not bear the disheartening sight of you flashing witches' glances at His Royal Highness. A thousand pardons, Madam, but I overheard your inflamed words with Mr. Sheridan while you stood in the lane, and my own worst fears were dissipated." He paused as if to gather courage. Then he said, "I sail at dawn in a fortnight for Virginia, Madam, and I would be honored if you would go to America with me, as my wife."

Diane stopped from sheer exhaustion. John Stafford was staring at her with a love inexpressible in any words, and needing none, for in the next minute she was in his arms of her own volition and her slender, ringless fingers—and it is to be remembered that those same fingers could have been bedecked with the rarest jewels of a great Kingdom—were clasped about his neck.

The Round Table



AN OPEN FORUM FOR OUR READERS

Only one page for the Round Table this month, since we got too generous with illustrations. We hope you notice how GOLDEN FLEECE improves in make-up with every issue. We know Edith King will add this month's cover to her scrap-book.

Moreton Palmer of Hamilton, Ont., would like maps with stories such as "She Loved Iberville" and "Bunyips in the Mulga." Any seconds?

The following letters convince us that we will soon have a fine circulation, if *our* friends are equally enthusiastic to *their* friends.

"Like your new magazine fine. Please keep on publishing the same kind of stories . . . there are too many modern stories now."

Arthur C. Avis, Merna, Nebr.

"With your last two issues you have made a GOLDEN FLEECE fan of me. Please don't change your policy and include all sorts of fiction stories. . . I want my Historical Adventure *straight* without a chaser. May Heaven bless you if you heed this warning, and if you don't . . ."

Edson Griffith, Minneapolis, Minn.

"The idea is a good one if you stick to it," says Victor C. Ferkiss of Richmond Hill, L. I. "No stories of later than 1918. Insist on accuracy in all cases where it is important. How about some ANCIENT HISTORY stories?"

I realize the editors have little to do with advertising, but please don't have one column of advertising alongside one column of story on the back pages, and watch the quality of advertising."

"As a student of ancient history, ancient fighting men, ships, ways and manners—as well as being a writer of a number of published stories dealing with the 'good old days'—I want to welcome your splendid

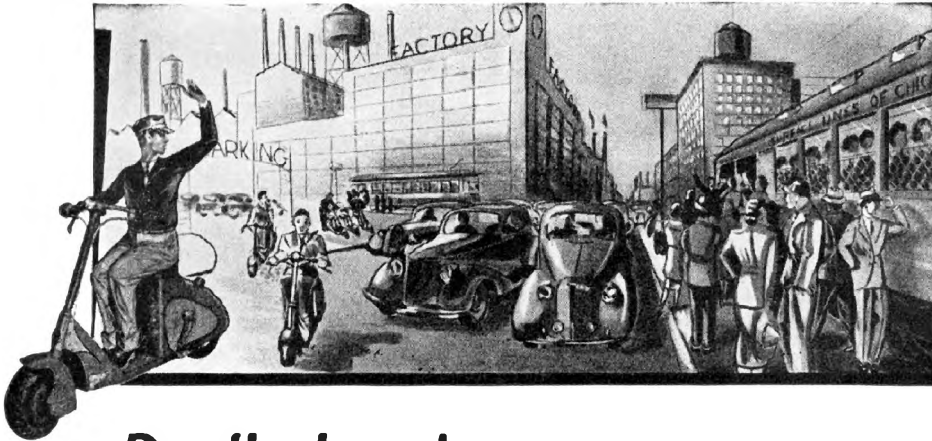
magazine," says Edward A. Dieckmann of San Diego, Cal., who then chides us gently about that ballista. Well, before anybody beats us to it, we hereby pish-tush Harold Delay for showing Giles Hobson fully clad on page 61, after losing his shirt on the preceding page. Not that Giles wouldn't have stolen another if he'd had time!

"Received your first copy of GOLDEN FLEECE. You have a magazine that should go places, but please keep it a magazine of Historical Adventure only, keep away from the modern stories and those of the future. There are any number of magazines on the market with these, I read them all; when I want Fantastic or Weird stories I buy magazines which feature them. I have waited a long time for a mag which had HISTORICAL fiction only; there is a place for such a mag on the market today. So please don't make a failure of your wonderful and different magazine by making it a JUMBLE of all types of stories; there are any number of these today.

"I may not be expressing the majority opinion of your readers—certainly the majority should rule—so let's have the opinion of all the readers. But whatever your editorial policy may be, count me in as a loyal reader of GOLDEN FLEECE.

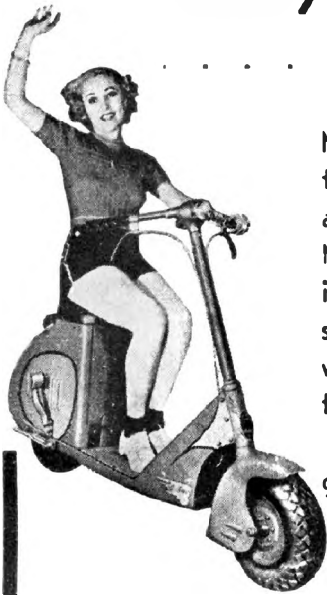
"Couldn't you have a column for readers who are collecting back issues of various magazines, to get together and help one another out? There are a lot of mags on the market but none that cater to those readers, and they are legion, who are 'bugs,' like myself, over this. If you do this you will get a lot of new readers, and the real thanks of hundreds of collectors. Will you please think this suggestion over?"

Gerald W. Meader, Rumford, Maine.



Really Live! Go Places and Do Things!

. . . . Moto-Scout to work, for sport, for economy



Moto-Scouting is more than the new national sport, it's the big step in modern, fast, low cost transportation, the answer to a thousand daily problems. With your own Moto-Scout you can really live—and save money doing it. You are no longer dependent on friends, crowded street cars, stuffy busses, infrequent trains—you go where you please, stay as long as you want—enjoy a thrilling, exhilarating, refreshing and healthful ride—go 120 miles on a gallon, anywhere in the U. S. for \$10. No garage expense, no parking worries.



GENUINE Moto - Scoots are widely imitated but unequalled for absolute dependability. They come in Models exactly suited to every need.

PASSENGER MODELS
THE SOLO SPORTER
SIDE CAR DUO
TANDEM DUO
COMMERCIAL MODELS

Messenger (rear Trunk) Side Car Delivery, and Special body jobs for ice cream delivery, flowers, etc.

\$69⁵⁰
AND UP

MOTO-SCOOT MFG. CO.
 201 S. Western Ave..
 Chicago, U. S. A.

Please send me catalog and prices on the new 1938 Moto-Scoots, for

(1) (2) (3) (4) (5)

Name

Address

City State

The name of latest dealer in my community is



Every month **POPULAR PHOTOGRAPHY** is packed with brilliant features and unusual pictures by outstanding authorities. Articles too, on how-to-make-it and how-to-do-it

On Sale at your Newsstand or Camera Store

ANSWERS ALL QUESTIONS ABOUT PHOTOGRAPHY