

The Flying Legion

George Allan England

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[Illustration: A HAIL OF SLUGS BOMBARDED THE VAST-SPREAD WINGS AND FUSELAGE OF _NISSR_.]

THE FLYING LEGION

BY GEORGE ALLAN ENGLAND

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The Flying Legion

CHAPTER I

A SPIRIT CAGED

The room was strange as the man, himself, who dwelt there. It seemed, in a way, the outward expression of his inner personality. He had ordered it built from his own plans, to please a whim of his restless

mind, on top of the gigantic skyscraper that formed part of his properties. Windows boldly fronted all four cardinal compass-points--huge, plate-glass windows that gave a view unequalled in its sweep and power.

The room seemed an eagle's nest perched on the summit of a man-made crag. The Arabic name that he had given it--_Niss'rosh_--meant just that. Singular place indeed, well-harmonized with its master.

Through the westward windows, umbers and pearls of dying day, smudged across a smoky sky, now shadowed trophy-covered walls. This light, subdued and somber though it was, slowly fading, verging toward a night of May, disclosed unusual furnishings. It showed a heavy black table of some rare Oriental wood elaborately carved and inlaid with still rarer woods; a table covered with a prayer-rug, on which lay various books on aeronautics and kindred sciences, jostling works on Eastern travel, on theosophy, mysticism, exploration.

Maps and atlases added their note of research. At one end of the table stood a bronze faun's head with open lips, with hand cupped at listening ear. Surely that head must have come from some buried art-find of the very long ago. The faint greenish patina that covered it could have been painted only by the hand of the greatest artist of them all, Time.

A book-case occupied the northern space, between the windows. It, too, was crammed with scientific reports, oddments of out-of-the-way lore, and travels. But here a profusion of war-books and official documents showed another bent of the owner's mind. Over the book-case hung two German gasmasks. They seemed, in the half-dusk, to glower down through their round, empty eyeholes like sinister devil-fish awaiting prey.

The masks were flanked by rifles, bayonets, knives, maces, all bearing scars of battle. Above them, three fragments of Prussian battle-flags formed a kind of frieze, their color softened by the fading sunset, even as the fading of the dream of imperial glory had dulled and dimmed all that for which they had stood.

The southern wall of that strange room--that quiet room to which only a far, vague murmur of the city's life whispered up, with faint blurs of steamer-whistles from the river--bore Turkish spoils of battle. Here hung more rifles, there a Kurdish yataghan with two hand-grenades from Gallipoli, and a blood-red banner with a crescent and one star worked in gold thread. Aviator's gauntlets draped the staff of the banner.

Along the eastern side of this eyrie a broad divan invited one to rest. Over it were suspended Austrian and Bulgarian captures--a lance with a blood-stiffened pennant, a cuirass, entrenching tools, a steel helmet with an eloquent bullet-hole through the crown. Some few framed portraits of noted "aces" hung here and elsewhere, with two or three photographs of battle-planes. Three of the portraits were framed in symbolic black. Part of a smashed Taube propeller hung near.

As for the western side of _Niss'rosh_, this space between the two broad windows that looked out over the light-spangled city, the Hudson and the Palisades, was occupied by a magnificent Mercator's Projection of the world. This projection was heavily annotated with scores of comments penciled by a firm, virile hand. Lesser spaces were occupied

by maps of the campaigns in Mesopotamia and the Holy Land. One map, larger than any save the Mercator, showed the Arabian Peninsula. A bold question-mark had been impatiently flung into the great, blank stretch of the interior; a question-mark eager, impatient, challenging.

It was at this map that the master of _Niss'rosh_, the eagle's nest, was peering as the curtain rises on our story. He was half reclining in a big, Chinese bamboo chair, with an attitude of utter and disheartening boredom. His crossed legs were stretched out, one heel digging into the soft pile of the Tabreez rug. Muscular arms folded in an idleness that irked them with aching weariness, he sat there, brooding, motionless.

Everything about the man spelled energy at bay, forces rusting, ennui past telling. But force still dominated. Force showed in the close-cropped, black hair and the small ears set close to the head; in the corded throat and heavy jaws; in the well-muscled shoulders, sinewed hands, powerful legs. This man was forty-one years old, and looked thirty-five. Lines of chest and waist were those of the athlete. Still, suspicions of fat, of unwonted softness, had begun to invade those lines. Here was a splendid body, here was a dominating mind in process of going stale.

The face of the man was a mask of weariness of the soul, which kills so vastly more efficiently than weariness of the body. You could see that weariness in the tired frown of the black brows, the narrowing of the dark eyes, the downward tug of the lips. Wrinkles of stagnation had begun to creep into forehead and cheeks--wrinkles that no amount of gymnasium, of club life, of careful shaving, of strict hygiene could banish.

Through the west windows the slowly changing hues of gray, of mulberry, and dull rose-pink blurred in the sky, cast softened lights upon those wrinkles, but could not hide them. They revealed sad emptiness of purpose. This man was tired unto death, if ever man were tired.

He yawned, sighed deeply, stretched out his hand and took up a bit of a model mechanism from the table, where it had lain with other fragments of apparatus. For a moment he peered at it; then he tossed it back again, and yawned a second time.

"Business!" he growled. "'Swapped my reputation for a song,' eh? Where's my commission, now?"

He got up, clasped his hands behind him, and walked a few times up and down the heavy rug, his footfalls silent.

"The business could have gone on without me!" he added, bitterly. "And, after all, what's any business, compared to _life_?"

He yawned again, stretched up his arms, groaned and laughed with mockery:

"A little more money, maybe, when I don't know what to do with what I've got already! A few more figures on a checkbook--and the heart dying in me!"

Then he relapsed into silence. Head down, hands thrust deep in pockets, he paced like a captured animal in bars. The bitterness of his spirit was wormwood. What meant, to him, the interests and pleasures of other men? Profit and loss, alcohol, tobacco, women--all alike bore him no message. Clubs, athletics, gambling--he grumbled something savage as his thoughts turned to such trivialities. And into his aquiline face came something the look of an eagle, trapped, there in that eagle's nest of his.

Suddenly the Master of _Niss'rosh_ came to a decision. He returned, clapped his hands thrice, sharply, and waited. Almost at once a door opened at the southeast corner of the room--where the observatory connected with the stairway leading down to the Master's apartment on the top floor of the building--and a vague figure of a man appeared.

The light was steadily fading, so that this man could by no means be clearly distinguished. But one could see that he wore clothing quite as conventional as his master's. Still, no more than the Master did he appear one of life's commonplaces. Lean, brown, dry, with a hawk-nose and glinting eyes, surely he had come from far, strange places.

"Risa!" the Master spoke sharply, flinging the man's name at him with the exasperation of overtensed nerves.

"_M'alme?_" (Master?) replied the other.

"Bring the evening food and drink," commanded the Master, in excellent Arabic, guttural and elusive with strange hiatuses of breath.

Risa withdrew, salaaming. His master turned toward the western windows. There the white blankness of the map of Arabia seemed mocking him. The Master's eyes grew hard; he raised his fist against the map, and smote it hard. Then once more he fell to pacing; and as he walked that weary space, up and down, he muttered to himself with words we cannot understand.

After a certain time, Risa came silently back, sliding into the soft dusk of that room almost like a wraith. He bore a silver tray with a hook-nosed coffee-pot of chased metal. The cover of this coffee-pot rose into a tall, minaret-like spike. On the tray stood also a small cup having no handle; a dish of dates; a few wafers made of the Arabian cereal called _temmin_; and a little bowl of _khat_ leaves.

"_M'alme, al khat aja_" (the khat has come), said Risa.

He placed the tray on the table at his master's side, and was about to withdraw when the other stayed him with raised hand.

"Tell me, Risa," he commanded, still speaking in Arabic, "where wert thou born? Show thou me, on that map."

The Arab hesitated a moment, squinting by the dim light that now had faded to purple dusk. Then he advanced a thin forefinger, and laid it on a spot that might have indicated perhaps three hundred miles southeast of Mecca. No name was written on the map, there.

"How dost thou name that place, Risa?" demanded the Master.

"I cannot say, Master," answered the Arab, very gravely. As he stood there facing the western afterglow, the profound impassivity of his expression--a look that seemed to scorn all this infidel civilization of an upstart race--grew deeper.

To nothing of it all did he owe allegiance, save to the Master himself--the Master who had saved him in the thick of the Gallipoli inferno. Captured by the Turks there, certain death had awaited him and shameful death, as a rebel against the Sublime Porte. The Master had rescued him, and taken thereby a scar that would go with him to the grave; but that, now, does not concern our tale. Only we say again that Risa's life lay always in the hands of this man, to do with as he would.

None the less, Risa answered the question with a mere:

"Master, I cannot say."

"Thou knowest the name of the place where thou wast born?" demanded the Master, calmly, from where he sat by the table.

"_A_ (yes), _M'alme_, by the beard of M'hamed, I do!"

"Well, what is it?"

Risa shrugged his thin shoulders.

"A tent, a hut? A village, a town, a city?"

"A city, Master. A great city, indeed. But its name I may not tell you."

"The map, here, shows nothing, Risa. And of a surety, the makers of maps do not lie," the Master commented, and turned a little to pour the thick coffee. Its perfume rose with grateful fragrance on the air.

The Master sipped the black, thick nectar, and smiled oddly. For a moment he regarded his unwilling orderly with narrowed eyes.

"Thou wilt not say they lie, son of Islam, eh?" demanded he.

"Not of choice, perhaps, _M'alme_," the Mussulman replied. "But if the camel hath not drunk of the waters of the oasis, how can he know that they be sweet? These _Nasara_ (Christian) makers of maps, what can they know of my people or my land?"

"Dost thou mean to tell me no man can pass beyond the desert rim, and enter the middle parts of Arabia?"

"I said not so, Master," replied the Arab, turning and facing his master, every sense alert, on guard against any admissions that might betray the secret he, like all his people, was sworn by a Very great oath to keep.

"Not all men, true," the Master resumed. "The Turks--I know they enter, though hated. But have no other foreign men ever seen the interior?"

"_A, M'alme_, many--of the True Faith. Such, though they come from

China, India, or the farther islands of the Indian Ocean, may enter freely."

"Of course. But I am speaking now of men of the _Nasara_ faith. How of them? Tell me, thou!"

"You are of the _Nasara, M'alme!_ Do not make me answer this! You, having saved my life, own that life. It is yours. _Ana bermil illi bedakea!_ (I obey your every command!) But do not ask me this! My head is at your feet. But let us speak of other things, O Master!"

The Master kept a moment's silence. He peered contemplatively at the dark silhouette of the Arab, motionless, impassive in the dusk. Then he frowned a very little, which was as near to anger as he ever verged. Thoughtfully he ate a couple of the little _temmin_ wafers and a few dates. Risa waited in silent patience.

All at once the Master spoke.

"It is my will that thou speak to me and declare this thing, Risa," said he, decisively. "Say, thou, hath no man of the _Nasara_ faith ever penetrated as far as to the place of thy birth?"

"_Lah_ (no), _M'alme_, never. But three did reach an oasis not far to westward of it, fifty years ago, or maybe fifty-one."

"Ah, so?" exclaimed the Master, a touch of eagerness in his grave, impassive voice. "Who were they?"

"Two of the French blood, Master, and one of the Russian."

"And what happened to them, then?"

"They--died, Master."

"Thou dost mean, thy people did slay them?"

"They died, all three," repeated Risa, in even tones. "The jackals devoured them and the bones remained. Those bones, I think, are still there. In our dry country--bones remain, long."

"Hm! Yea, so it is! But, tell me, thou, is it true that in thy country the folk slay all _Nasara_ they lay hands on, by cutting with a sharp knife? Cutting the stomach, so?" He made an illustrative gesture.

"Since you do force me to speak, against my will, _M'alme_--you being of the _Nasara_ blood--I will declare the truth. Yea, that is so."

"A pleasant custom, surely! And why always in the stomach? Why do they never stab or cut like other races?"

"There are no bones in the stomach, to dull the edges of the knives, _M'alme_."

"Quite practical, that idea!" the Master exclaimed. Then he fell silent again. He pressed his questions no further, concerning the great Central Desert of the land. To have done so, he knew, would have been entirely futile. Beyond a certain point, which he could gauge accurately, neither gold nor fire would drive Risa. The Arab would at

any hour of night or day have laid down his life for the Master; but though it should mean death he would not break the rites of his faith, nor touch the cursed flesh of a pig, nor drink the forbidden drop of wine, nor yet betray the secret of his land.

All at once the Arab spoke, in slow, grave tones.

"Your God is not my God, Master," said he, impersonally. "No, the God of your people is not the God of mine. We have our own; and the land is ours, too. None of the _Nasara_ may come thither, and live. Three came, that I have heard of, and--they died. I crave my Master's bidding to depart."

"Presently, yea," the Master answered. "But I have one more question for thee. If I were to take thee, and go to thy land, but were not to ask thy help there--if I were not to ask thee to guide me nor yet to betray any secret--wouldst thou play the traitor to me, and deliver me up to thy people?"

"My head is at your feet, _M'alme_. So long as you did not ask me to do such things as would be unlawful in the eyes of Allah and the Prophet, and seek to force me to them, this hand of mine would wither before it would be raised against the preserver of my life! I pray you, _M'alme_, let me go!"

"I grant it. _Ru'c'h halla!_" (Go now!) exclaimed the Master, with a wave of the hand. Rrisa salaamed again, and, noiseless as a wraith, departed.

CHAPTER II

"TO PARADISE--OR HELL"

For a time the Master sat in the thickening gloom, eating the dates and _temmin_ wafers, drinking the coffee, pondering in deep silence. When the simple meal was ended, he plucked a little sprig of leaves from the khat plant in the bowl, and thrust them into his mouth.

This khat, gathered in the mountains back of Hodeida, on the Red Sea not far from Bab el Mandeb, had been preserved by a process known to only a few Coast Arabs. The plant now in the bowl was part of a shipment that had been more than three months on the way; yet still the fresh aroma of it, as the Master crushed the thick-set, dark-green leaves, scented the darkening room with perfumes of Araby.

Slowly, with the contemplative appreciation of the connoisseur, the Master absorbed the flavor and the wondrous stimulation of the "flower of paradise." The use of khat, his once-a-day joy and comfort, he had learned more than fifteen years before, on one of his exploring tours in Yemen. He could hardly remember just when and where he had first come to know the extraordinary mental and physical stimulus of this strange plant, dear to all Arabs, any more than he definitely recalled having learned the complex, poetical language of that Oriental land of mystery. Both language and the use of khat had come to him from contact with only the fringes of the country; and both had contributed

to his vast, unsatisfied longing to know what lay beyond the forbidden zones that walled this land away from all the world.

Wherever he had gone, whatever perils, hardships, and adventures had been his in many years of wandering up and down the world, khat, the wondrous, had always gone with him. The fortune he had spent on keeping up the supply had many times over been repaid to him in strength and comfort.

The use of this plant, containing obscure alkaloids of the katinacetate class, constituted his only vice--if you can call a habit such as this vice, that works great well-being and that leaves no appreciable aftermaths of evil such as are produced by alcohol or drugs.

For a few minutes the Master sat quite motionless, pondering. Then suddenly he got up again, and strode to one of the westward-looking windows. The light was almost wholly gone, now. The man's figure, big-shouldered, compact, well-knit, appeared only as a dim silhouette against the faded blur in the west; a blur smoky and streaked with dull smudges as of old, dried blood.

Far below, stretching away, away, shimmered the city's million inconsequential lights. Above, stars were peeping out--were spying down at all this feverish mystery of human life. Some of the low-hung stars seemed to blend with the far lights along the Palisades. The Master's lips tightened with impatience, with longing.

"There's where it is," he muttered. "Not five miles from here! It's there, and I've got to have it. There--a thing that can't be bought! There--a thing that must be mine!"

Among the stars, cutting down diagonally from the north-west, crept a tiny, red gleam. The Master looked very grim, as his eyes followed its swift flight.

"The Chicago mail-plane, just getting in," he commented. "In half an hour, the Paris plane starts from the Cortlandt Street aero-tower. And beyond Paris lies Constantinople; and beyond that, Arabia--the East! Men are going out that way, tonight! And I--stick here like an old, done relic, cooped in _Niss'rosh_--imprisoned in this steel and glass cage of my own making!"

Suddenly he wheeled, flung himself into the big chair by the table and dragged the faun's head over to him. He pressed a button at the base of it, waited a moment and as the question came, "Number, please?" spoke the desired number into the cupped hand and ear of the bronze. Then, as he waited again, with the singular telephone in hand, he growled savagely:

"By Allah! This sort of thing's not going to go on any longer! Not if I die stopping it!"

A familiar voice, issuing from the lips of the faun--a voice made natural and audible as the living human tones, by means of a delicate microphone attachment inside the bronze head--tautened his nerves.

"Hello, hello!" called he. "That you, Bohannan?"

"Yes," sounded the answer. "Of course I know who you are. There's only one voice like yours in New York. Where are you?"

"In prison."

"No! Prison? For the Lord's sake!"

"No; for conventionality's sake. Not legally, you understand. Not even an adventure as exciting as that has happened to me. But constructively in jail. De facto, as it were. It's all the same thing."

"Up there in that observatory thing of yours, are you?" asked Bohannon.

"Yes; and I want to see you."

"When?"

"At once! As soon as you can get over here in a taxi, from that incredibly stupid club of yours. You can get to Niss'rosh even though it's after seven. Take the regular elevator to the forty-first floor, and I'll have Risa meet you and bring you up here in the special.

"That's a concession, isn't it? The sealed gates that no one else ever passes, at night, are opened to you. It's very important. Be here in fifteen minutes you say? First-rate! Don't fail me. Good-bye!"

He was smiling a little now as he pressed the button again and rang off. He put the faun's head back on the table, got up and stretched his vigorous arms.

"By Allah!" he exclaimed, new notes in his voice. "What if--what if it could be, after all?"

He turned to the wall, laid his hand on an ivory plate flush with the surface and pressed slightly. In silent unison, heavy gold-embroidered draperies slid across every window. As these draperies closed the apertures, light gushed from every angle and cornice. No specific source of illumination seemed visible; but the room bathed itself in soft, clear radiance with a certain restful greenish tinge, throwing no shadows, pure as the day itself.

The man pulled open a drawer in the table and silently gazed down at several little boxes within. He opened some. From one, on a bed of purple satin, the Croix de Guerre, with a palm, gleamed up at him. Another disclosed an "M.M.," a Medaille Militaire. A third showed him the "D.F.C.," or Distinguished Flying Cross. Still another contained aviator's insignia in the form of a double pair of wings. The Master smiled, and closed the boxes, then the drawer.

"After these," he mused, "dead inaction? Not for me!"

His dark eyes were shining with eagerness as he walked to a door beside that through which the Arab had entered. He swung it wide, disclosing an ample closet, likewise inundated with light. There hung a war-worn aviator's uniform of leather, gauntlets, a sheepskin jacket, a helmet, resistal goggles, a cartridge-belt still half full

of ammunition, a heavy service automatic.

For a moment the man looked in at these. A great yearning came upon his face. Caressingly he touched the uniform, the helmet. He unhooked the pistol from where it hung, and carried it back to the table.

There he laid it down, and drew up his chair in front of it. For a moment, silence fell as he remained there studying the automatic--silence save for the faint, far hum of the city, the occasional melodious note of steamer-whistles on the river.

The Master's face, now that full light brought out its details, showed a white scar that led from his right ear down along jaw and throat, till the collar masked it. Gray hairs, beyond those of his age, sprinkled his temples. Strangely he smiled as he observed the nicks and deep excoriations in stock and barrel of the formidable weapon. He reached out, took up the gun once more, weighed it, got the feel of it, patted it with affection.

"We've been through some wonderful times together, old pal, you and I," said he. "We thought it was all over, didn't we, for a while? But it's not! Life's not done, yet. It's maybe just beginning! We're going out on the long trek, _again_"

For a while he sat there musing. Then he summoned Risa again, bade him remove the tray, and gave him instructions about the guest soon to arrive. When Risa had withdrawn, the Master pulled over one of the huge atlases, opened it, turned to the map of Arabia, and fell into deep study.

Risa's tapping at the door, minutes later, roused him. At his order to advance, the door swung. The Arab ushered in a guest, then silently disappeared. Without a sound, the door closed.

The Master arose, advancing with outstretched hand.

"Bohannan! God, but I'm glad to see you!"

Their hands met and clasped. The Master led Bohannan to the table and gestured toward a chair. Bohannan threw his hat on the table with a large, sweeping gesture typical of his whole character, and sat down. And for a moment, they looked at each other in silence.

A very different type, this, from the dark, sinewed master of _Niss'rosh_. Bohannan was frankly red-haired, a bit stout, smiling, expansive. His blood was undoubtedly Celtic. An air of great geniality pervaded him. His hands were strong and energetic, with oddly spatulate fingers; and the manner in which his nails had been gnawed down and his mustache likewise chewed, bespoke a highly nervous temperament belied by his ruddy, almost boyish face. His age might have been thirty-five, but he looked one of those men who never fully grow up, who never can be old.

"Well, what's doing now?" demanded he, fixing blue eyes on his host. He produced a cigarette and lighted it, inhaled smoke deeply and blew a thin gray cloud toward the ceiling. "Something big, eh? by the way you routed me out of a poker-game where I was already forty-seven dollars and a half to the good. You don't usually call a fellow, that way, unless there's something in the wind!"

"There is, now."

"Big?"

"Very."

"So?" The newcomer's eyes fell on the pistol. "Yes, that looks like action, all right. Hope to heaven it is! I've been boring myself and everybody else to death, the past three months. What's up? Duel, maybe?"

"Yes. That's just it, Bohannan. A duel." And the Master fixed strange eyes on his companion. His muscular fingers fell to tapping the prayer-rug on the table, drumming out an impatient little tattoo.

"Duel? Lord's sake, man! With whom?"

"With Fate. Now, listen!" The Master's tones became more animated. A little of the inward fires had begun to burn through his self-restraint. "Listen to me, and not a word till I'm done! You're dryrotting for life, man. Dying for it, gasping for it, eating your heart out for it! So am I. So are twenty-five or thirty men we know, between us, in this city. That's all true, eh?"

"Some!"

"Yes! We wouldn't have to go outside New York to find at least twenty-five or thirty in the same box we're in. All men who've been through trench work, air work, life-and-death work on various fronts. Men of independent means. Men to whom office work and club life and all this petty stuff, here, is like dish-water after champagne! Dare-devils, all of them, that wouldn't stop at the gates of Hell!"

"The gates of Hell?" demanded Bohannan, his brow wrinkling with glad astonishment. "What d'you mean by that, now?"

"Just what I say! It's possible to gather together a kind of unofficial, sub rosa, private little Foreign Legion of our own, Bohannan--all battle-scarred men, all men with at least one decoration and some with half a dozen. With that Legion, nothing would be impossible!"

He warmed to his subject, leaned forward, fixed eager eyes on his friend, laid a hand on Bohannan's knee. "We've all done the conventional thing, long enough. Now we're going to do the unconventional thing. We've been all through the known. Now we're going after the unknown. And Hell is liable to be no name for it, I tell you that!"

The Celt's eyes were alight with swift, eager enthusiasm. He laid his hand on the other's, and gripped it hard in hot anticipation.

"Tell me more!" he commanded. "What are we going to do?"

"Going to see the stuff that's in us, and in twenty-five or thirty more of our kind. The stuff, the backbone, the heart that's in you, Bohannan! That's in me! In all of us!"

"Great, great! That's me!" Bohannan's cigarette smoldered, unheeded, in his fingers. The soul of him was thrilling with great visions. "I'm with you! Whither bound?"

The Master smiled oddly, as he answered in a low, even tone:

"To Paradise--or Hell!"

CHAPTER III

THE GATHERING OF THE LEGIONARIES

One week from that night, twenty-seven other men assembled in the strange eyrie of _Niss'rosh_, nearly a thousand feet above the city's turmoil. They came singly or in pairs, their arrival spaced in such a manner as not to make the gathering obvious to anyone in the building below.

Risa, the silent and discreet, brought them up in the private elevator from the forty-first floor to the Master's apartment on the top story of the building, then up the stairway to the observatory, and thus ushered them into the presence of the Master and Bohannan. Each man was personally known to one or the other, who vouched absolutely for his secrecy, valor, and good faith.

This story would resolve itself into a catalogue were each man to be named, with his title, his war-exploits, his decorations. We shall have to touch but lightly on this matter of personnel. Six of the men were Americans--eight, including the Master and Bohannan; four English; five French; two Serbian; three Italian; and the others represented New Zealand, Canada, Russia, Cuba, Poland, Montenegro, and Japan.

Not one of these men but bore a wound or more, from the Great Conflict. This matter of having a scar had been made one prime requisite for admission to the Legion. Each had anywhere from one to half a dozen decorations, whether the Congressional Medal, the V.C., the Croix de Guerre, the Order of the Rising Sun, or what-not.

Not one was in uniform. That would have made their arrival far too conspicuous. Dressed as they were, in mufti, even had anyone noted their coming, it could not have been interpreted as anything but an ordinary social affair.

Twenty-nine men, all told, gathered in the observatory, clearly illuminated by the hidden lights. All were true blue, all loyal to the core, all rusting with ennui, all drawn thither by the lure of the word that had been passed them in club and office, on the golf links, in the street. All had been pledged, whether they went further or not, to keep this matter secret as the grave.

Some were already known to each other. Some needed introduction. Such introduction consumed a few minutes, even after the last had come and been checked off on the Master's list, in cipher code. The brightly lighted room, behind its impenetrable curtains, blued with

tobacco-smoke; but no drop of wine or spirits was visible.

The Master, at the head of the table, sat with his list and took account of the gathering. Each man, as his name was called, gave that name in full, briefly stated his service and mentioned his wound.

All spoke English, though some rather mangled it. At any rate, this was to be the official language of the expedition, and no other was to be allowed. The ability to understand and obey orders given in English had, of course, to be one essential requisite for this adventurous band of Legionaries.

When all the credentials had been proved satisfactory, the Master rapped for order. Silence fell. The men settled down to listen, in tense expectancy. Some took chairs, others occupied the divan, still others--for whom there were no seats--stood along the walls.

Informal though the meeting still was, an air of military restraint and discipline already half possessed it. The bright air seemed to quiver with the eagerness of these fighting-men once more to thrust out into the currents of activity, to feel the tightening of authority, the lure and tang of the unknown.

Facing them from the end of the table, the Master stood and spoke to them, with Bohannon seated at his right. His face reflected quite another humor from that of the night, a week before, when first this inspiration had come upon him.

He seemed refreshed, buoyant, rejuvenated. His eyes showed fire. His brows, that had frowned, now had smoothed themselves. His lips smiled, though gravely. His color had deepened. His whole personality, that had been sad and tired, now had become inspired with a profound and soul-felt happiness.

"Gentlemen all, soldiers and good men," said he, slowly. "In a general way you know the purpose of this meeting. I am not given to oratory. I do not intend making any speech to you.

"We are all ex-fighters. Life, once filled with daring and adventure, has become stale, flat, and unprofitable. The dull routine of business and of social life is Dead Sea fruit to our lips--dust and ashes. It cannot hold or entertain us.

"By this I do not mean that war is good, or peace bad. For the vast majority of men, peace is normal and right. But there must be always a small minority that cannot tolerate ennui; that must seek risks and daring exploits; that would rather lay down their lives, today, in some man-sized exploit, than live twenty-five years longer in the dull security of a humdrum rut.

"Such men have always existed and probably always will. We are all, I believe, of that type. Therefore you will all understand me. I will understand you. And each of you will understand the rest.

"Major Bohannon and I have chosen you and have invited you here because we believe every man in this room is precisely the kind of man I have been defining. We believe you are like ourselves, dying of boredom, eager for adventure; and willing to undergo military discipline, swear secrecy, pledge honor and risk life itself, provided

the adventure be daring enough, the reward promising enough. If there is anyone here present who is unwilling to subscribe to what I have said, so far, let him withdraw."

No one stirred. But a murmur arose, eager, delighted:

"Go on! Go on--tell us more!"

"Absolute obedience to me is to be the first rule," continued the Master. "The second is to be sobriety. There shall be no drinking, carousing, or gambling. This is not to be a vulgar, swashbuckling, privateering revel, but--"

A slight disturbance at the door interrupted him. He frowned, and rapped on the table, for silence. The disturbance, however, continued. Someone was trying to enter there against Risa's protests.

"I did not bring you up, sir," the Arab was saying, in broken English. "You cannot come in! How did you get here?"

"I'm not in the habit of giving explanations to subordinates, or of bandying words with them," replied the man, in a clear, rather high-pitched but very determined voice. The company, gazing at him, saw a slight, well-knit figure of middle height or a little less, in aviator's togs. "I'm here to see your master, my good fellow, not you!"

The man at the head of the table raised a finger to his lips, in signal of silence from them all, and beckoned the Arab.

"Let him come in!" he ordered, in Risa's vernacular.

"_A, M'alme_" submitted the desert man, standing aside and bowing as the stranger entered. The Master added, in English:

"If he comes as a friend and helper, uninvited though he be, we welcome him. If as an enemy, traitor, or spy, we can deal justice to him in short order. Sir, advance!"

The stranger came to the foot of the table. Men made way for him. He stood there a moment in silence, dropped his gauntlets on the table and seemed peering at the Master. Then all at once he drew himself up, sharply, and saluted.

The Master returned the salute. A moment's silence followed. No man was looking elsewhere than at this interloper.

Not much could be seen of him, so swaddled was he in sheepskin jacket, aviator's helmet, and goggles. Leather trousers and leggings completed his costume. The collar of the jacket, turned up, met the helmet. Of his face, only the chin and lower part of the cheeks remained visible.

The silence tautened, stretched to the breaking-point. All at once the master of _Niss'rosh_ demanded, incisively:

"Your name, sir?"

"Captain Alfred Alden, of the R.A.F."

"Royal Air Force man, eh? Are you prepared to prove that?"

"I am."

"If you're not, well--this won't be exactly a salubrious altitude for you."

"I have my papers, my licenses, my commission."

"With you here?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well," answered the Master, "I will examine them in due time. English, American, or--?"

"I am a Canadian," answered the aviator. "I have seen nearly two years' active service. I rank as an ace. I bear three wounds and have been cited several times. I have the Distinguished Service Cross. What more need I tell you, sir?"

His voice was steady and rang true. The Master nodded approval, that seemed to echo round the room in a buzz of acceptance. But there were still other questions to be asked. The next one was:

"How did you come here? It's obvious my man didn't bring you up."

"I came in my own plane, sir," the stranger answered, in a dead hush of stillness. "It just now landed on the roof of this building. If you will draw the curtains, there behind you, I believe you can see it for yourself."

"I heard no engine."

"I volplaned in. I don't say this to boast sir, but I can handle the average plane as accurately as most men handle their own fingers."

"Were you invited to attend this meeting by either Major Bohannon or by me?"

"No, sir, I was not."

"Then, why are you here?"

"Why am I here? For exactly the same reason that all the rest are here, sir!" The aviator swept his arm comprehensively at the ranks of eagerly listening men. "To resume active service. To get back to duty. To live, again! In short, to join this expedition and to share all its adventures!"

"Hm! Either that, or to interfere with us."

"Not the latter, sir! I swear that!"

"How did you know there was going to be an expedition, at all?" demanded the Master, his brows tensed, lips hard, eyes very keen. The aviator seemed smiling, as he answered:

"I know many things. Some may be useful to you all. I am offering you

my skill and knowledge, such as they may be, without any thought or hope of reward."

"Why?"

"Because I am tired of life. Because I want--must have--the freedom of the open roads, the inspiration of some great adventure! Surely, you understand."

"Yes, if what you say is true, and you are not a spy. Show us your face, sir!"

The aviator loosened his helmet and removed it, disclosing a mass of dark hair, a well-shaped head and a vigorous neck. Then he took off his goggles.

A kind of communal whisper of astonishment and hostility ran round the apartment. The man's whole face--save for eyeholes through which dark pupils looked strangely out--was covered by a close-fitting, flesh-colored celluloid mask.

This mask reached from the roots of his hair to his mouth. It sloped away down the left jaw, and somewhat up the cheekbone of the right side. The mask was firmly strapped in place around the head and neck.

"What does all this mean, sir?" demanded the Master, sharply. "Why the mask?"

"Is that a necessary question, sir?" replied the aviator, while a buzz of curiosity and suspicion rose. "You have seen many such during the war and since its close."

"Badly disfigured, are you?"

"That word, 'disfigured,' does not describe it, sir. Others have wounds, but my whole face is nothing but a wound. No, let me put it more accurately--there is, practically speaking, no face at all. The gaping cavity that exists under this mask would certainly sicken the strongest men among you, and turn you against me.

"We can't tolerate what disgusts, even if its qualities be excellent. In exposing myself to you, sir, I should certainly be insuring my rejection. But what you cannot see, what you can only imagine, will not make you refuse me."

The Master pondered a moment, then nodded and asked:

"Is it so very bad, sir?"

"It's a thing of horror, incredible, awful, unreal! In the hospital at Rouen, they called me 'The Kaiser's Masterpiece.' Some of the most hardened surgeons couldn't look at me, or dress my--wound, let us call it--without a shudder. Ordinary men would find me intolerable, if they could see me.

"Unmasked, I bear no resemblance whatever to a man, but rather to some ghastly, drug-inspired dream or nightmare of an Oriental Dante. The fact that I have sacrificed my human appearance in the Great Cause cannot overcome the shrinking aversion that normal men would feel,

if they could see me. I say only this, that my mutilation is indescribable. As the officer and gentleman I know you to be, you won't ask me to expose this horror!"

CHAPTER IV

THE MASKED RECRUIT

A little silence lengthened, while the strange aviator continued to peer out with strangely shining eyes through the holes of his mask. The effect of that human intelligence, sheltered in there behind that expressionless celluloid, whose frail thinness they all knew covered unspeakable frightfulness, became uncanny.

Some of the men eased the tension by blowing ribbons of smoke or by relighting tobacco that had gone out while the stranger had been talking. Others shifted, a bit uneasily. Voices began to mutter, pro and con. The Master suddenly knocked again, for silence.

"I am going to accept this man," said he, sharply. "You notice I do not put this to a vote, or consult you about it. Nor shall I, in anything. The prime condition of this whole undertaking, as I was saying when Captain Alden here arrived, is unquestioning obedience to my authority.

"No one who is unwilling to swear that, need go any further. You must have confidence in my plans, my judgment. And you must be willing to obey. It is all very autocratic, I know, but the expedition cannot proceed on any other basis.

"You are to go where I will, act as I command, and only regain your liberty when the undertaking is at an end. I shall not order any man to go anywhere, or do anything, that I would not do myself. On this you can rely.

"In case of my death, the authority falls on Major Bohannon. He is today the only man who knows my plans, and with whom I have had any discussion. If we both are killed, then you can elect your own leader. But so long as either of us lives, you have no authority and no redress. I hope that's perfectly understood. Does any man wish to withdraw?"

Not one budged. All stood to their decision, hard as rock.

"Very well," said the Master, grimly. "But remember, disobedience incurs the death penalty, and it will be rigorously enforced. My word is to be supreme.

"Such being the case, I decide to take this man. His skill as an aviator cannot be denied. We shall need that. His ability to endure suffering and still remain efficient seems proved. That may be valuable; probably will be.

"I shall examine his credentials. If he turns out to be a spy--well, life will be short, for him."

He addressed himself to the masked aviator, who was still standing in an attitude of military attention.

"You are now one of us, sir. You become the thirtieth member of a little group of as brave men, as daring and determined fighters as can be found in America or in the world--all tried and tempered by the fires of war; all decorated for conspicuous valor; all ready to follow me to the ends of the earth and die, if need be; all eager to share in an undertaking as yet unknown to them, but one that promises to be the most extraordinary adventure ever undertaken on this planet. You understand all that, sir?"

"I do!"

"Raise your right hand, sir."

The aviator obeyed.

"All the others, too!"

Every hand went up.

"Swear allegiance to me, fidelity, secrecy, courage, obedience. On the thing you hold most dear, your honor as fighting-men, swear it!"

The shout that answered him, from every throat, made the eagle's nest ring with wild echoes. The Master smiled, as the hands sank.

"With men like you," said he, "failure is impossible. The expedition is to start at once, tomorrow night. No man in it has now any ties or home or kin that overbalance his ties to me and to the _esprit de corps_ of our body.

"The past is dead, for you. The future is all a mystery. You are to live only in the present, day by day. And now for some practical details.

"The means of transport you do not know. The perils and rewards are problematical. Of the former there will be enough; as for the latter, those lie on the knees of the gods. There will be no payment for any man. Not a cent of money is involved in this service.

"Commissary will be furnished. Each man is to wear his campaign equipment--his uniform and such kit as he can store in a rucksack. Bring small-arms and ammunition. In addition, I will furnish bombing material and six Lewis guns, with ammunition, also other materials of which I shall now say nothing. These things will be transported to the proper place without labor on your part. I think I have made the outlines of the matter reasonably clear to every man present."

"Our orders, sir?" asked a voice with a French accent, down the table.
"Are we to have no precise orders before leaving this room?"

"You are. Each man will receive his own, sealed, before leaving. I am now about to give them out, in alphabetical rotation. This will dismiss the meeting. You will withdraw as inconspicuously as you came. Remember, you are to become as cogs in the machine that I have devised. At the exact place, hour, minute, and second you are to do

exactly the thing ordered, _and nothing else_. Neglect, disobedience, or failure will positively not be condoned, but will be punished as I see fit, even to the death penalty.

"Come forward now, as I call your names, and receive what I shall give you."

He opened a drawer in the table, took out many small boxes and arranged them before him. Each box was carefully wrapped in stout paper, securely tied, and sealed with red wax.

Standing there, firm, impassive, with narrowed eyes, he began reading the names:

"Adams--Auchincloss--Brodeur--Cracowicz--Daimamoto--Emilio--Frazier--"

As each man's name was uttered he came down along the table, took the box extended to him, thrust it into his pocket, saluted stiffly, and withdrew in silence. At the end of a few minutes, no one was left but the Master, Bohannon, and the man in the celluloid mask.

"Have you no orders for me, sir?" asked the aviator, still erect in his place at the far end of the table. His eyes shone out darkly through his shield.

"None, sir."

"All the others--"

"You are different." The Master set hands on his hips, and coldly studied this strange figure. "The others have had their orders carefully worked out for them, prepared, synchronized. You have come, so to speak, as an extemporization, an auxiliary; you will add one more unit to the flyers in the expedition, of which there are nine aces, including Major Bohannon here. The others are now on their way to their lodgings, to study their instructions, to memorize, and prepare to carry them out. You are to remain here, with Major Bohannon and with me."

"Until what time, sir?"

"Until we start. You will be under continual surveillance. If you make any attempt to communicate in any way with anyone outside my apartment, it will be the last thing you will ever do. You will receive no other warning. Tomorrow night you will accompany us. Till then, you remain my--guest."

The aviator nodded.

"Very well, sir," he accepted. "But, my machine?"

"I will attend to your machine."

"I should hate to leave it there on the roof."

"It will not be left on the roof."

"I don't understand, exactly--"

"There will be very many things you do not understand before this expedition is over and done with. I need say no more."

Sharply he clapped his hands, thrice. In a moment, Rrisa appeared at the door. The Master spoke a few guttural, aspirated words of Arabic. Rrisa beckoned the stranger, who obeyed.

At the exit he faced about and sharply saluted. The Master returned it. Then he vanished, and the door noiselessly closed behind them.

The Master turned to Bohannan.

"Now," said he, "these few last details. Time is growing very short. Only a few hours remain. To work, Major--to work!"

At this same moment Auchincloss had already arrived at his rooms in the McAlpine; and there, having carefully locked his door, had settled himself at his desk with his sealed box before him.

For a moment he studied it under the electric light. Then, breaking the wax with fingers tensed by eagerness, he tore it open. He spread the contents on his blotting-pad. There was a small pocket-compass of the best quality, a plain-cased watch wound up and going, a map and a folded sheet of paper covered with typewriting. Auchincloss fell to reading:

GENERAL ORDERS

You are to learn your specific orders by heart, and then destroy this paper. You are to act on these orders, irrespective of every other man. You are not to communicate the contents of this paper to any other. This might upset the pre-arranged plan. You might try to join forces, assist each other, or exercise some mistaken judgment that might result in ruin. Each man is to keep his orders an absolute secret. This is vital.

Each man, like yourself, is provided with a map, a watch, and a compass. These watches are all self-luminous, all accurately adjusted to synchronize to the second, and all will run forty-eight hours.

SPECIFIC ORDERS

Tomorrow, proceed inconspicuously to Tenafly, New Jersey, and hire a room at the Cutter Inn. Carry your kit in a suit-case. At 7:30 p.m., go to Englewood. Go up Englewood Avenue toward the Palisades, turn left (north) along the road near edge of cliff; proceed half a mile and enter woods at your right. There you will find path marked "A" on your map. Put on rucksack and discard suit-case, which, of course, is to have no identifying marks. Proceed along path to point "B," and from under board you will find there take box with weapon enclosed. Box will also contain vacuum searchlight and directions for use of weapon, exact time, direction, and elevation for discharging same, and further instructions how to proceed. Act on these to the second. If interfered with, kill; but kill quietly, so as to avoid giving the alarm.

I expect every man to do his duty to the full. There will be but one excuse for failure, and that is death.

The Master.

CHAPTER V

IN THE NIGHT

The night was moonless, dark, warm with the inviting softness of late spring that holds out promises of romance. Stars wavered and wimpled in the black waters of the Hudson as a launch put out in silence from the foot of Twenty-seventh Street.

This launch contained four men. They carried but little baggage; no more than could be stowed in a rucksack apiece. All were in their old service uniforms, with long coats over the uniforms to mask them. All carried vacuum-flashlights in their overcoat pockets, and lethal-gas pistols, in addition to ordinary revolvers or automatics. And all were keyed to the top notch of energy, efficiency, eagerness. The Great Adventure had begun.

In the stern of the swift, twenty-four cylinder launch--a racing model--sat Captain Alden and Risa. The captain wore his aviator's helmet and his goggles, despite the warmth of the night. To appear in only his celluloid mask, even at a time like this when darkness would have hidden him, seemed distasteful to the man. He seemed to want to hide his misfortune as fully as possible; and, since this did no harm, the Master let him have his way.

The bow was occupied by the Master and by Major Bohannon, with the Master at the wheel. He seemed cool, collected, impassive; but the major, of hotter Celtic blood, could not suppress his fidgety nervousness.

Intermittently he gnawed at his reddish mustache. A cigar, he felt, would soothe and quiet him. Cigars, however, were now forbidden. So were pipes and cigarettes. The Master did not intend to have even their slight distraction coming between the minds of his men and the careful, intricate plan before them.

As the racer veered north, up the broad darkness of the Hudson--the Hudson sparkling with city illumination on either hand, with still or moving ships' lights on the breast of the waters--Bohannon murmured:

"Even now, as your partner in this enterprise--"

"My lieutenant," corrected the Master.

"As second in command," amended Bohannon, irritably, "I'm not wholly convinced this is the correct procedure." He spoke in low tones, covered by the purring exhaust of the launch and by the hiss of swiftly cloven waters. "It looks like unnecessary complication, to me, and avoidable danger."

"It is neither," answered the man at the wheel. "What would you have done? What better plan could you have proposed?"

"You could have built your own flyer, couldn't you? Since money's no object to you, and you don't even know, accurately, how much you've got--nobody can keep track of figures like those--why risk legal interference and international complications at the start, by--"

"To build the kind of flyer we need would have taken six or seven months. Not all my money could have produced it, sooner. And absolute ennui can't wait half a year. I'd have gone wholly stale, and so would you, and all of them. We'd have lost them.

"Again, news of any such operations would have got out. My plans would possibly have been checkmated. In the third place, what you propose would have been tame sport, indeed, as a beginning! Three excellent reasons, my dear Major, why this is positively the only way."

"Perhaps. But there's always the chance of failure, now. The guards--"

"After your own experience, when that capsule burst in the laboratory, you talk to me about guards?"

"Suppose one escapes?"

The Master only smiled grimly, and sighted his course up the dark river.

"And the alarm is sure to be given, in no time. Why didn't you just buy the thing outright?"

"It's not for sale, at any price."

"Still--men can't run off with three and a half million dollars' worth of property and with provisions and equipment like that, all ready for a trial trip, without raising Hell. There'll be pursuit--"

"What with, my dear Bohannan?"

"That's a foolish statement of mine, the last one, I admit," answered the major, as his companion swung the launch a little toward the Jersey shore. "Of course nothing can overhaul us, once we're away. But you know my type of mind weighs every possibility, pro and con. Wireless can fling out a fan of swift aerial police ahead of us from Europe."

"How near can anything get to us?"

"I know it all looks quite simple and obvious, in theory. Nevertheless--"

"Men of your character are useful, in places," said the Master, incisively. "You are good in a charge, in sudden daring, in swift attack. But in the approach to great decisions, you vacillate. That's your racial character.

"I'm beginning to doubt my own wisdom in having chosen you as next in command. There's a bit of doubting Thomas in your ego. It's not too late, yet, for you to turn back. I'll let you, as a special concession. Brodeur will jump at the chance to be your successor."

His hand swung the wheel, sweeping the racer in a curve toward the Manhattan shore. Bohannon angrily pushed the spokes over again the other way.

"I stick!" he growled. "I've said the last word of this sort you'll ever hear me utter. Full speed ahead--to Paradise--or Hell!"

They said no more. The launch split her way swiftly toward the north. By the vague, ghostly shimmer of light upon the waters, a tense smile appeared on the steersman's lips. In his dark eyes gleamed the joy which to some men ranks supreme above all other joys--that of bending others to his will, of dominating them, of making them the puppets of his fancy.

Some quarter hour the racer hummed upriver. Keenly the Master kept his lookout, picking up landmarks. Finally he spoke a word to Captain Alden, who came forward to the engines. The Master's cross-questionings of this man had convinced him his credentials were genuine and that he was loyal, devoted, animated by nothing but the same thirst for adventure that formed the driving power behind them all. Now he was trusting him with much, already.

"Three quarters speed," ordered the Master. The skilled hand of the captain, well-versed in the operation of gas engines, obeyed the command. The whipping breeze of their swift course, the hiss at the bows as foam and water crumbled out and over, somewhat diminished. The goal lay not far off.

To starboard, thinning lights told the Master they were breasting Spuyten Duyvil. To port, only a few scattered gleams along the base of the cliff or atop it, showed that the sparsely settled Palisades were drawing abeam. The ceaseless, swarming activities of the metropolis were being left behind. Silence was closing in, broken only by vagrant steamer-whistles from astern.

A crawling string of lights, on the New York shore, told that an express was hurling itself cityward. Its muffled roar began to echo out over the star-flecked waters. The Master threw a scornful glance at it. He turned in his seat, and peered at the shimmer of the city's lights, strung like a luminous rosary along the river's edge. Then he looked up at the roseate flush on the sky, flung there by the metropolis as from the mouth of a crucible.

"Child's play!" he murmured. "All this coming and going in crowded streets, all this fighting for bread, and scheming over pennies--child's play. Less than that--the blind swarming of ants! Tomorrow, where will all this be, for us?"

He turned back and thrust over the spokes. The launch drew in toward the Jersey shore.

"Let the engines run at half-speed," he directed, "and control her now with the clutch."

"Yes, sir!"

The aviator's voice was sharp, precise, determined. The Master nodded to himself with satisfaction. This man, he felt, would surely be a valued member of the crew. He might prove more than that. There might

be stuff in him that could be molded to executive ability, in case that should be necessary.

The launch, now at half-speed, nosed her way directly toward the cliff. Sounds from shore began to grow audible. A far, an auto siren shrieked. A dog barked, irritatingly. A human voice came vaguely hallooing.

Off to the right, over the cliff brow, a faint aura of light was visible. The eyes of the Master rested on this a moment, brightening. He smiled again; and his hand tightened a little on the wheel. But all he said was:

"Dead slow, now, Captain Alden!"

As the cliff drew near, its black brows ate across the sky, devouring stars. The Master spoke in Arabic to Risa, who seized a boat hook and came forward. Out of the gloom small wharf advanced to meet the launch. The boat-hook caught; the launch, easing to a stop, cradled against the stringpiece.

Risa held with the hook, while Bohannon and Alden clambered out. Before the Master left, he bent and seemed to be manipulating something in the bottom of the launch. Then he stepped to the engine.

"Out, Risa," he commanded, "and hold hard with the hook, now!"

The Arab obeyed. All at once the propeller churned water, reversed. The Master leaped to the wharf.

"Let go--and throw the hook into the boat!" he ordered.

While the three others stood wondering on the dark wharf, the launch began to draw slowly back into the stream. Already it was riding a bit low, going down gradually by the bows.

"What now?" questioned the major, astonished.

"She will sink a hundred or two yards from shore, in deep water," answered the Master, calmly. "The sea-cock is wide open."

"A fifteen thousand dollar launch--!"

"Is none the less, a clue. No man of this party, reaching the shore tonight, is leaving any more trace than we are. Come, now, all this is trivial. Forward!"

In silence, they followed him along the dark wharf, reached a narrow, rocky path that serpented up the face of the densely wooded cliff, and began to ascend. A lathering climb it was, laden as they were with heavy rucksacks, in the moonless obscurity.

Now and then the Master's little searchlight--his own wonderful invention, a heatless light like an artificial firefly, using no batteries nor any power save universal, etheric rays in an absolute vacuum--glowed with pale virescence over some particularly rough bit of going. For the most part, however, not even this tiny gleam was allowed to show. Silence, darkness, precision, speed were now

all-requisite.

Twenty-four minutes from leaving the wharf, they stood among a confused, gigantic chaos of boulders flung, dicelike, amid heavy timbers on the brow of the Palisades. Off to the north, the faint, ghostly aura dimly silhouetted the trees. Far below, the jetty river trembled here, there, with starlight.

They paused a moment to breathe, to shift straps that bound shoulders not now hardened to such burdens. The Master glanced at the luminous dial of his wrist-watch.

"Almost to the dot," he whispered. "Seventeen minutes to midnight. At midnight, sharp, we take possession. Come!"

They trailed through a hard, rocky path among thick oak, pine, and silver-birch. Now and then the little greenish-white light will-o'-the-wisped ahead, flickering hither, yon. No one spoke a word. Every footstep had to be laid down with care. After three minutes' progress, the Master stopped, turned, held up his hand.

"Absolute silence, now," he breathed. "The outer guards are now within an eighth of a mile."

They moved forward again. The light was no longer shown, but the Master confidently knew the way. Bohannon felt a certain familiarity with the terrain, which he had carefully studied on the large-scale map he and the Master had used in planning the attack; but the Master's intimate knowledge was not his. After two and one-half minutes, the leader stopped again, and gestured at heavy fern-brakes that could just be distinguished as black blotches in the dark of the woods.

"The exact spot," he whispered. "Take cover, and follow your memorized orders!"

He settled down noiselessly into the brakes. The others did likewise. Utter silence fell, save for the far, vague roar of the city. A vagrant little breeze was stirring the new foliage, through which a few stars curiously peeped. The four men seemed far, very far from any others. And yet--

Were there any others near them? the major wondered. No sign, no sound of them existed. Off to northward, where the dim glow ghosted up against the sky, an occasional noise drifted to the night. A distant laugh diffused itself through the dark. A dog yapped; perhaps the same that they had heard barking, a few minutes before. Then came the faint, sharp tapping of a hammer smiting metal.

"They're knocking out the holding-pins," thought the major. "In a few minutes it'll be too late, _if_ we don't strike now!" He felt a great temptation to urge haste, on the Master. But, aware of the futility of any suggestion, the risk of being demoted for any other _faux pas_, he bridled his impatience and held still.

Realizing that they were now lying at the exact distance of 440 yards from the stockade that protected the thing they had come to steal--if you can call "stealing" the forced sale the Master now planned consummating, by having his bankers put into unwilling hands every

ultimate penny of the more than \$3,500,000 involved, once the _coup_ should be put through--realizing this fact, Bohannan felt the tug of a profound excitement.

His pulses quickened; the tension of his Celtic nerves keyed itself up like a banjo-string about to snap. Steeled in the grim usages of war though he was, and more than once having felt the heart-breaking stress of the zero hour, this final moment of waiting, of suspense before the attack that was so profoundly to affect his life and the lives of all these other hardy men, pulled heavily at his nerves. He desperately wanted a smoke, again, but that was out of the question. It seemed to him, there in the dark and stillness, one of the fateful moments of time, pregnant with possibilities unlimited.

The Master, Alden, Risa, mere vague blurs among the ferns, remained motionless. If their nerves were a-tingle, they gave no hint or sign of it. Where might the others of the Legion be? No indication of them could be made out. No other living thing seemed in the woods encircling the stockade. Was each man really there and ready for the predetermined role he was to play?

It seemed incredible, fantastic, to suppose that all these adventurers, each separate and alone, each having no contact, with any other, should all have taken their assigned posts. That each, with luminous watch on wrist, was even now timing himself, to the second, before striking the single note calculated to produce, in harmony with all the rest, the finished composition. Such an assumption partook more of the stuff of an Arabian Nights tale than of stern reality in this Twentieth Century and on the outskirts of the world's greatest city.

The Master, crouching, whispered:

"Two minutes more! Keep your eyes on your watches, now. Get your lethal guns ready! In 120 seconds, you will hear the first capsule burst. Ten seconds after that, Alden, fire yours. Ten later, yours, Bohannan. Ten later, yours, Risa. Listen hard! Hold steady!"

The silence drew at them like a pain. Risa breathed something in which the words: "_La Illaha ilia Allah_" transpired in a wraith of sound. Alden nestled closer into the ferns. Bohannan could hardly hold his poise.

All three now had their capsule pistols ready. The self-luminous compass and level attached to each gun gave them their exact direction and elevation. Glimmering watches marked the time, the dragging of the last few seconds.

The Master drew no weapon. His mind, directing all, observing all, was not to be distracted by even so small a detail as any personal hand in the discharge of the lethal gas.

If he felt the strain of the final moment, on which hung vaster issues than mere life or death, he gave no indication of it. His eyes remained fixed on the watch-dial at his wrist. They were confident, those eyes. The vague shimmer of the watch-glow showed them dark and grave; his face, faintly revealed, was impassive, emotionless.

It seemed the face of a scientist, a chemist who--having worked out

his formula to its ultimate minutiae--now felt utter trust in its reactions, now was only waiting to observe what he well knew must inevitably happen.

"Thirty seconds more," he whispered, and fell silent. Presently, after what seemed half an hour: "Fifteen!"

Another long wait. The Master breathed:

"In just five seconds the first capsule will burst there!" He pointed with assurance. "In two--in one--"

CHAPTER VI

THE SILENT ATTACK

At the exact instant when the second hand notched to the minute's edge, and in precisely the spot indicated, a slight, luminous spot became dimly visible above the trees. The spot took uncertain form high above the ghost-glow rising from the unseen stockade. For an instant it hung suspended, pale-greenish, evanescent.

Then, as a faint plop! drifted to the watchers--a sound no louder than a feeble clack of the tongue--this indefinite luminosity began to sink, to fade, falling slowly, gradually dissipating itself in the dim light over the stockade.

The Master nodded, smiling, with never any hint of praise or approbation. The fulfilment of his order was to him no other than it is to you, when you drop a pebble into water, to hear the splash of it. That his plan should be working out, seemed to him a perfectly obvious, inevitable thing. The only factor that could possibly have astonished him, just now, would have been the nonappearance of that slight, luminous cloudlet at the precise spot and moment designated.

Neither Bohannan, Alden, nor Rrisa was watching the slow descent of the lethal gas. All three had their eyes fixed on their own lethal-gas pistols and on their watches. At mathematically the correct second, Bohannan discharged his piece, correctly sighting direction and elevation.

As he pressed trigger, a light sighing eased itself from the slim barrel. Something flicked through the leaves; and, almost on the instant, the phenomenon of the little phosphorescent spot repeated itself, though in a different place from the first one. Captain Alden's and Rrisa's shots produced still other blurs of virescence.

Then, as they all waited, crouching, came another and another tiny explosion, high aloft, at precisely ten-second intervals. Here, there, they developed, until twenty-nine of these strange, bubble-like things had burst above and all about the huge enclosure. Then darkness and silence once more settled down.

Nothing seemed to have happened. Night still reigned, starry with glimpses of sky through wind-swayed trees. One would have said

everything still remained precisely as it had been before.

Yet presently, within the stockade or near it, a certain uneasy _mélange_ of sounds began to develop. Here a cry became audible, there a command. A startled voice called an order, but suddenly fell silent, half-way through it. The worrying of the dog ceased with eloquent suddenness. A curse died, unfinished.

And silence, as perfect as the silence of the unseen watchers strung all about the periphery of the stockade, once more dominated the night.

For precisely ten minutes, nothing broke that silence--minutes during all of which the Master remained calmly waiting, with grave confidence. Bohannon shuddered a little. His Celtic imagination was at work, again. Uncanny the attack seemed to him, unreal and ghostlike. So, perhaps, might strange, unbelievable creatures from some other planet attack and conquer the world, noiselessly, gently, irrevocably.

This assault was different from any other ever made since man and man first began battling together in the dim twilights of the primeval. Not with shout and cheer did it rush forward, nor yet with venomous gases that gave the alarm, that choked, that strangled, that tortured.

Silence and concealment, and the invisible blight of sleep, like the greater numbing that once fell on the hosts of Sennacherib, enfolded all opposition. All who would have stood against the Legion, simply sighed once, perhaps spoke a few disjointed words, then sank into oblivion.

So far as anyone could see, save for the bursting of twenty-nine insignificant little light-bubbles, in mid-air, nothing at all had happened. And yet tremendously much had happened, inside the huge stockade.

Ten minutes to a dot had drifted by, seeming at least six times as long, when all at once the Master stood up.

"The gas has dissipated enough now," said he, "so that we can advance in safety. Come!"

The three also arose, half at his command, half from the independent impulses given them by their watches as these came to the designated second for the forward movement. The Master blew no whistle, gave no signal to the many others scattered all through those darkly silent woods; but right and left, and over beyond the stockade, he knew with the precision of a mathematical equation every man was at that exact moment also arising, also obeying orders, also preparing to close in on the precious thing whereof they meant to make themselves the owners.

Forward the Master made his way, with the three others of his immediate escort. Though there no longer existed any need of silence, hardly a word was spoken. Something vast, imminent, overpowering, seemed to have laid its finger on the lips of all, to have muted them of speech.

The vacuum-lights, however, were now freely flashing in the little party, as it advanced directly toward the stockade. The men clambered

over rocks, through bushes, across fallen logs. Risa stopped, suddenly, played his light on a little bundle of gray fur, and touched it with a curious finger. It was a squirrel, curled into a tiny ball of oblivion.

Alden's foot narrowly missed the body of a sleeping robin. An owl, lodged in the fork of a tree, moved not as the men passed. It, too, was whelmed in deep, temporary Nirvana.

The party's next find arrested them, with a thrill of genuine emotion, a triumph that could not be denied some few half-whispered exclamations of exultation from the Master's three companions. He himself was the only one who spoke no word. But, like the others, he had stopped and was pointing the beam of his light on the figure lying inert among broken bushes.

With his toe he touched this figure. His light picked up the man's face from the gloom. That face was looking at him with wide-open eyes. The eyes saw nothing; but a kind of overwhelming astonishment still seemed mirrored there, caught in the last moment of consciousness as the man had fallen.

The effect was startling, of that sleeping face, those open eyes, that lax mouth. The man was breathing easily, peacefully as a tired child. The Master's brows contracted a little. His lips tightened. Then he nodded, and smiled the ghost of a smile.

"Lord!" exclaimed Bohannan, half awed by the weirdness of the apparition. "Staring at us, that way--and all! Is he asleep?"

"Try him in any way your ingenuity may suggest," answered the Master, while Alden blinked strangely through his eyeholes, and Risa in Arabic affirmed that there is no God but Allah. "Try to force some sense-impression to his brain. It is sleep, but it is more than that. The best experiment for any doubting Thomas to employ is just to waken this guard--if possible."

Bohannan shook his head.

"No," he answered, "I'm not going to make a fool of myself. There's no going against any of your statements. I'm beginning to find that out, definitely. Let's be on our way!"

The Master spoke a few quick words of Arabic to his orderly. Risa knelt by the prostrate man. Then, while the Master kept the light-beam on him, Risa unbuckled the guard's belt, with cartridges and holster containing an ugly snouted gun. This belt the Arab slung round his own body. He arose. In silence, leaving the unconscious man just as he had fallen, they once more pushed onward.

Lights were beginning to gleam ahead, now, in what appeared to be a long, high line. The trees half hid them, but moment by moment they appeared more distinctly. Meantime, too, the glow over the stockade was getting stronger. Presently the trees ceased; and there before them the men saw a wide, cleared space, a hundred feet of empty land between the woods and a tall, stout fence topped with live wires and with numerous incandescents.

"Nice place to tackle, if anybody were left to defend it!" commented

Bohannan. None of the others answered. The Master started diagonally across the cleared space, toward a cluster of little buildings and stout gate-posts.

Hardly had they emerged from the woods, when, all up and down the line, till it was broken by the woods at both ends where the stockade joined its eastern and western wall, other men began appearing. And all, alike, converged toward the gate.

But to these, the little party of four gave no heed. Other men absorbed their interest--sleeping men, now more and more thickly scattered all along the stockade. Save for a slight, saline tang to the air--an odor by no means unpleasant--nothing remained of the lethal gas.

But its victims still lay there, prone, in every possible attitude of complete and overpowering abandonment. And all, as the party of four passed, were quickly disarmed. Up and down the open space, other Legionaries were at the same work.

The Master and his companions reached the gate-house first of any in the party. The gate was massive, of stout oaken planks heavily strapped with iron. About it, and the gate-house, a good many guards were lying. All showed evidence of having dropped asleep with irresistible suddenness.

Some were gaping, others foolishly grinning as if their last sensation had been agreeable--as indeed it had been--while others stared disconcertingly. The chin of one showed an ugly burn where his Turkish cigarette had sagged, and had smoldered to extinction on the flesh.

One had a watch in his hand, while another gripped a newspaper. In the gate-house, two had fallen face downward on the table that occupied the center of the rough room; checker-pieces lay scattered from the game they had been playing. Several men sprawled just outside the little house, on the platform. Under the incandescents, the effect grew weird.

Bohannan shuddered, as he glanced from one to another, then up at some of the approaching men of the expedition. Risa affirmed that Mohammed was indeed the prophet of Allah, and that the ways of the _Nasara_ were most strange.

"Good!" exclaimed the Master, with his first word of approval. Even his aplomb was a little shaken by the complete success of the attack. "It's all working like a clock."

"How about disarming these men, sir?" queried Captain Alden.

"No. They fall under the orders of another group."

"The way is clear, then--"

"Absolutely! These men will sleep almost precisely thirty minutes. The way is clear ahead of us. Forward into the Palisade!"

CHAPTER VII

THE NEST OF THE GREAT BIRD

As the little group of four penetrated into the enclosure which but a few moments before had been guarded all round its perimeter by a small army of determined men, more and more of the Legionaries began to concentrate toward the entrance.

Silently they came, with almost the precision of automata in some complex mechanical process. All were obeying the Master's will, because obedience was sweet to them; because it spelled adventure, freedom, life.

Now and then one stopped, bent, arose with some added burden taken from a fallen guard. Not one guard was to be injured in any manner. Human life was not to be taken. But nothing in the way of armament was to be left, by way of possible danger to the Legion. And already the telephone-wires had been effectively cut.

All the approaching Legionaries wore rucksacks, and all were in their respective uniforms, though every man still wore a long coat that concealed it. A few groups of two appeared, bearing rather heavy burdens.

The Master smiled again, and nodded, as he paused a moment at the gate to peer down, along the line of the clearing between stockade and forest.

"Here come some of the machine-guns," said he. "I shall be vastly surprised if one man or one single bit of equipment fails to appear on schedule time. Nothing like system, Bohannan--that, and knowing how to choose your men!"

He turned, and the other three followed him into the enclosure. Outside, all was developing according to plans and specifications. They four were to be pioneers into the jealously guarded space that for so long had been the mystery of the continent, yes, of the civilized world.

The whole enclosure was well lighted with a profusion of electric lamps. At first view, quite a bewildering mass of small buildings appeared; but second glance showed order in them all. Streets had been laid out, as in a town; and along these streets stood drafting-sheds, workshops, storehouses, commissary offices, dwellings for the workers, guards, and bosses. A well-built cottage on the main, forward-going road that led from the gate to an inner stockade, was probably headquarters for the chief engineers.

Not one sign of conscious life appeared. Men were lying here, there, in the roadways, in the porches, in the shadow of the power-plant where dynamos were still merrily singing. Few were armed. Most of them here were workers, judging by their garb and by the tools still in some hands.

The four pioneers gave them no heed, but pushed steadily on. In the road lay a couple of pigeons, farther on a sparrow, and still farther a sleeping dog, showed how complete had been the effect of the lethal

pellets.

The inner stockade was now close. It stood about twice as high as the outer, was also topped with live wires and lights, and was loopholed for defense. This formidable barrier was pierced by a small gate, flanked by two machine-guns. On the gate-post was affixed an elaborate set of rules regarding those who might and might not enter. The Master smiled dryly, and opened the gate.

Even from without, the loom of the monstrous airship had been visible. The eye could hardly at first glance take in the vastness of this stupendous thing, that overshadowed all the central portion of the huge enclosure. It gave a sense of power, of swift potentialities, of speed unlimited. It stood there, tense, ready, waiting, with a hum of engines audible in its vast heart, a thing almost of life, man's creation but how illimitably greater than man!

For a moment, as this tremendous winged fabric came to the Master's view, he halted, and a look of exultation, pride, and joy came over his face. But only for a moment. Quite at once his dark eyes veiled themselves with their habitual impassivity. Once more he strode forward, the others following him.

Now that they were inside the second barrier--where sleeping men were scattered more thickly than ever--they stood under the very wings of the most stupendous hydroplane ever conceived by the brain of man or executed by the cunning of his hand.

That this hydroplane had been almost on the moment of departure for its trial trip, was proved by the sleepers. Two were on the gangplank leading up to the entrance door in the fuselage. A number who had been knocking out the last holding-pins of the last shackles that bound it to its cradle, had fallen to earth, their sledge-hammers near at hand.

In the pilot-house, a figure had collapsed across the sill of an observation window. And the engines, purring softly, told that all had been in readiness for the throwing-in of the clutches that would have set the vast propellers spinning with roaring speed.

"Yes, they were certainly just on the dot of getting away," said the Master, nodding as he glanced at his watch. "This couldn't be better. Gas, oil, stores, everything ready. What more proof do you require, my dear Bohannan, of the value of exact coordination?"

The major could only answer: "Yes, yes--" He seemed quite amazed by this extraordinary mechanism--gigantic, weird, unreal in the garish electric lights. Risa was frankly staring, for once shaken out of his fatalistic Mussulman tranquillity.

As for Captain Alden, he stood there a compact, small figure in his long coat with the rucksack strapped to his shoulders, peering up with the eye of the connoisseur. His smile was of contentment absolute.

"My beauty--ah, my beauty!" he was murmuring.

Then, in the presence of this mighty thing, silence fell on all. The major set hands on hips, blinked, puckered his lips, and silently whistled. His expression was half incredulous, half enthusiastic.

What Alden was thinking revealed itself by the sparkle of his eyes through the holes of the mask behind the goggles. Expressionless though that terribly mutilated face had to remain, you could sense in the man's whole attitude the exultation of the expert ace as he beheld the perfect machine.

The droning of the engines came distinctly to them all, a low, steady, powerful note, beautiful in its steady undertones of strength. Behind the little group, a few involuntary exclamations of astonishment and joy became audible, as some of the Legionaries came into the second enclosure.

Without, blows on metal sharply resounded. The Master smiled again, as he realized his orders were going on with exact precision.

"That's the wireless they're putting out of commission," thought he, glancing at his watch again. "No mere untuning of wave-lengths. Good, old-fashioned hammer-blows! This station won't work again for a while!"

Bohannon, meantime, was trying to get some general impression of the giant plane. Not all the Master's descriptions of it, to him, had quite prepared him for the reality. Though he well knew all the largest, biggest machines in the world, this stupendous creation staggered him. By comparison with the Handley-Page, the Caproni, the D.H.-4, the Gotha 90-120, the Sikorsky, it spread itself as an eagle spreads beside a pigeon.

It lay in a kind of metallic cradle, almost like a ship ready for launching on its ways. Ahead of it, metal plates stretched away like rails, running toward the lip of the Palisades. Its quadruple floats, each the size of a tugboat and each capable of being exhausted of air, constituted a potential lifting-force of enclosed vacuums that very largely offset the weight of the mechanism. It was still a heavier-than-air machine, but the balance could be made nearly perfect. And the six helicopters, whose cylindrical, turbine-like drums gleamed with metallic glitters--three on each side along the fuselage--could at will produce an absolutely static condition of lift or even make the plane hover and soar quite vertically.

There the monster lay, outstretching its enormous sextuple wings, each wing with an area of 376 by 82.5 feet. The non-inflammable celluloid surfaces shone white as fresh-cut ivory, clean, smooth, unbreakable. The plane reminded one of some Brobdingnagian dragon-fly, resting for flight, shimmering with power as it poised for one swift leap aloft into the night.

Bohannon, still a bit confused, noted the absence of any exhaust from the speeding engines. This, too, gave a sense of vast, self-contained power. He saw stupendous propeller-blades, their varnished surfaces flicking out high-lights as the incandescents struck them. Motionless these propellers were; but something in their tense, clean sweep told of the raging cyclone to which they could whip the air, once the spinning engines should be clutched in on their shafts.

The captain's eyes wandered over the whole enormous construction, towering there above him. He saw rows of lighted windows, each cased in shining metal; a V-pointed pilot-house--the same where the still figure had dropped over the sill of the open window--a high-raised

rudder of artful curve, vast as the broadside of a barn; railed galleries running along the underbody of the fuselage, between the floats and far aft of them.

Everything gleamed and flickered with bright metal, varnish, snowy celluloid. The body of the machine looked capable of housing twice as many men as the Legion numbered. But everything, after all, was quite shrunk by the overpowering sweep of the wings. These dwarfed the fast-gathering group that stood peering up at them, like pygmies under the pinions of the fabled roc in Sinbad the Sailor's story.

These stupendous wings, the captain now saw, were not braced together by hampering struts and wires, but seemed cantilevered into position, giving a clean run to the structure, great simplicity, and the acme of mechanical beauty. This giant bird of heaven lay in its nest, free of pattern, powerful beyond any air-mechanism ever built by man, almost a living thing, on whose back its captors might ride aloft defying man and nature, to whatsoever goal they chose.

"Everything is ready," said the Master. "That is quite obvious. Let us get aboard now, with no further delay, and be off!"

He drew a little notebook from his pocket, took a pencil, and faced the gathering group inside the second stockade.

"Stow your equipment," he directed "according to your orders. Ten minutes will be enough for you to unload your machine-guns and all gear, each in the assigned space. Bring out all the sleeping men and lay them down along the stockade, here. Injure no man. Valdez, are the take-off gates, over the Palisade, correctly opened?"

A dark, thin man saluted, as he answered with a Spanish accent:

"Yes, sir. Everything is ready, sir."

"Very well. Now, all to work! And then, each to his place, in engine-room, cabins, or however and where assigned. Come, come!"

As the men trailed up the gangplank, that steeply rose to the sliding door in the fuselage, the Master checked them on his list. Not one was absent. He shut the notebook with a snap, and slid it back into his pocket.

"This goes on well," he commented to the major. "So far, we are within three minutes, eighteen seconds, of schedule."

The little group of four stood waiting, watching, while the others carried out all orders, aboard. There was no hesitation, no confusion. Each had already learned the exact plan of the airship. Each knew precisely where every door led, what each passageway meant; each understood perfectly his own post and what to do there.

Two by two, Legionaries came down the gangplank, bearing limp bodies. These they laid in a row along the stockade, till seventeen had accumulated. No more came.

A figure appeared in the sliding doorway, and saluted.

"The last sleeper is out, sir," he reported.

The Master nodded, and gestured to his three companions. The group of four ascended the sharp tilt of the plank and entered the airship. As they did so, Legionaries hoisted the plank aboard, with its tackle, and lashed it to the waiting chocks. Others could be heard, in the penetralia of the vast structure, coming, going, busily at work.

The entrance door slid shut. A bolt shot home. All the Legion was now aboard, and communication with the ground had been broken.

The four men found themselves in a brightly lighted corridor that led directly across the fuselage to a similar door on the other side. This corridor was of some metal, painted a glossy white. Doors opened out of it, on either hand. Its length was just a few inches over forty-two feet. Half-way along it, a wider corridor crossed it at right angles--the main passage of the ship.

The Master led the way toward this median corridor. His tall, big-shouldered figure swung along, triumphant, impressive in the long coat, dominant and free. Followed by the other three, he turned to the left, forward of the ship.

The main corridor, like the other, was flanked by doors. Two or three stood open, giving glimpses of comfortable staterooms. The men's footfalls sounded with softened tread on a strip of thick, brown carpet that made pleasant contrast with the gleaming white walls. Light from frosted glass circles, flush with walls and ceiling, made the corridor bright as day.

The Master walked with the confident precision of one who already had passed that way a score of times. He opened the third door on the left--it slid into the wall, instead of swinging, thus economizing space--and all entered what was obviously the main saloon of the giant plane.

This saloon measured seventeen feet six inches, from corridor to windows, and twenty-nine fore-and-aft. It was furnished with a center-table, book-cases, easy-chairs, two commodious sofa-lockers, and had an excellent carpet. Bohannon noted a Victrola, with many records.

Like all parts of the ship, its lighting was splendid. Well-curtained windows gave it a homelike air. At first glance, one would have thought oneself in a rather luxurious private house; but second inspection showed all possible construction and furnishings were of aluminum alloy, of patterns designed to cut weight to the lowest minimum.

The walls bore lightly framed photographs of men famous in the annals of flying, from Santos-Dumont and the Wrights to Gruynemer and Nosworthy; also pictures of famous machines--the Spad, Bristol Fighter, Sopwith Pup, 120-135, and others. More conspicuous than any of these was a framed copy of the International Air Commission's latest condensed rules.

Signs of recent occupancy were not wanting. An extinct cigar lay on the carpet, where it had fallen from the mouth of some airman swiftly overtaken by sleep. The table bore an open cigar-box, several packs of cigarettes with loose "fags" scattered round, and a number of

champagne bottles.

Two of these were opened; one had been emptied. The other had lost part of its contents. Several champagne glasses stood on the table, and one lay on its side, where perhaps a falling hand had overset it. In one of the glasses, a few last, vagrant little bubbles were still rising from the tall, hollow stem.

"Hm!" grunted the Master contemptuously. "Fools! Well--there'll be no alcohol aboard this craft!" He loosened the buckles of his rucksack, and cast the burden on one of the sofa-lockers. The others did as much.

"Shall we stow the gear in our cabins?" asked Bohannon, gesturing at the doors that led off the saloon.

"Not yet," answered the Master, glancing at the chronometer that hung beside the air-rules. "Time enough to get settled, later. Every second counts, now. We're due to start in seven minutes, you know. Risa will attend to all this. We three have got to be getting forward to the pilot-house."

Bohannon nodded.

"Let's have some air in here, anyhow," said he, turning toward one of the windows. "This place is damned hot!"

"We'll need all the heat, soon," the Master commented. "At a few thousand feet, the engine-exhaust through those radiators won't be any too much. Forward!"

CHAPTER VIII

THE EAGLE OF THE SKY

He slid open another door. The three men passed through the captain's cabin and pilot-house. This place measured twelve feet on its longer axis and nine on its shorter, being of approximately diamond shape with one point forward in the very nose of the machine, one ending in a door that gave access to the main, longitudinal corridor, and the right and left points joining the walls of the backward-sloping prow. It contained two sofa-lockers with gas-inflated, leather cushions, a chart-rack, pilot's seat, controls, and instrument-board.

The whole front was a magnificent stretch of double plate-glass, with warm air between the sheets to keep snow, frost, or dew from obscuring the vision. Bright light flooded it.

Though one window had been slid partly open--the window on the sill of which the sleeping aviator had lain--a scent of cigarette-smoke still permeated the place. The Master sniffed with disgust. Then suddenly, to the great astonishment of Bohannon, he commanded:

"Bring me that champagne, in the saloon. All of it!"

The major opened wide eyes, but unquestioningly obeyed. Could it be possible the Master, in this moment of exultation, was about to break his lifelong rule and drink a toast, in sparkling bubbles, to success thus far achieved, to the stupendous voyage now about to begin?

Wondering, Bohannon departed. The Master gestured for Captain Alden to seat himself on one of the lockers. Alden kept complete silence as he sat down, crossed one leg over the other and began to study the complex apparatus before him. Most of it was familiar; but some new factors needed inspection.

The Master peered curiously at him. Surely, this man was odd, unusual. Most aviators, thus confronted by strange problems, would have grown loquacious, tried to exhibit their knowledge, asked questions, made much talk. But Alden held his tongue.

A look of appreciation, of liking, came upon the Master's face. It was just the suspicion of a look, for in all this strange man's life no great show of emotion ever had been permitted to mirror itself upon his countenance. But still, the look was there. He half opened his lips, as if to speak, then closed them again, and--like Alden--fell to studying the control apparatus.

All was beautifully arranged, all nicely calculated for instant use. Not here, as in small machines, could the pilot handle his own engines, tilt his planes, or manipulate his rudders by hand. That would have been as absurd to think of, as for the steersman of an ocean liner to work without the intervention of steam steering-gear.

No, these controls actuated various motors that, using current from the dynamos, produced the desired action with smooth and certain promptness. A turn of the wrist, perhaps no more than the touch of a finger, and the whole vast creation would respond as easily as a child's toy can be manipulated by a strong man's hand.

Hooded dials, brightly lighted push-buttons, a telephone headpiece and receiver combined, and switches all lay in easy reach. Here was the tachometer, that would give to a fraction the revolutions of each screw per minute; here the altimeter, to indicate height; here the air-speed indicator, the compass with reflector, the inclinometer, the motometers--to show the heat in each engine--and there, the switch to throw on the gigantic searchlight, with the little electric wheel to control its direction, as accurately as you would point a wand.

Throttle and spark, of course, there were none. All engine control was by telephone, with the engine-room which lay a little aft of midships. But the controls of the vacuum apparatus were within easy reach, so that at will the pilot could exhaust the floats, or fill them.

Here were the starting, stopping, and speed controls of the helicopters, which were under direct electrical motivation by the pilot. Here also were the magnetic-anchor release and the air-skid pump control; here were telephonic connections with the wireless-room and with the fore-and-aft observation pits, where observers were already lying on their cushions upon the heavy, metal-reinforced glass floor-plates.

"This is really very complete," approved the Master. Not Alden, but he, had been first to speak. The Master spoke half against his own

wish, but a resistless impulse to make some comment, in this moment of triumph, possessed him.

"Only as expected, sir," replied Alden. The Master bit his lip a second, and said no more.

Bohannon's return with several champagne bottles in his arms, put an end to any possible developments the terse conversation might have had.

"Well, sir," said the major, "here it all is. And I've got glasses in my pocket--and a corkscrew, sir. It never does to forget the corkscrew! We'll drink to happy days, eh, sir?"

Already the Celt's mouth was watering for draughts of the precious liquid. Joy pervaded him that, for once at least, the iron rule of the Master was to be broken, and that the journey was to begin with proper libations. The Master's curt syllables, however, instantly dispelled any illusions he might have entertained on that score.

"Drop them all out that open window, there," commanded the Master.

"What, sir? Good Pommery? Veuve?"

"No argument, Bohannon! Out they go!"

Dismayed, the Celt did the other's bidding, while Alden smiled grimly. Far below, glass crashed and jangled.

"What's the idea?" demanded the major ruefully.

"You know very well, Major, my ruling on alcohol. It doesn't mix with any motive power on this trip. Moreover, it's customary to christen every launching with champagne. We've done it!"

"Well, that's not so bad an idea, at that," Bohannon admitted, scratching his fiery head. "What name have you given this bus?"

"_Nissr Arrib ela Sema._"

"Come again, sir?"

"Eagle of the Sky, in Arabic. I suppose we'll have to cut that down to _Nissr_, for everyday use. But at any rate, our craft is christened. Well, now--"

He settled himself in the pilot's seat, reached forward and drew toward him a shining metal shaft. Four stout spokes unfolded; and from these, quadrants of a rim that easily snapped together. The Master laid one hand easily on the rim of the big steering-wheel, flung his cap upon a locker, pulled down the telephone headpiece and snapped it on.

He touched a button. The light died in the pilot-house, leaving only the hooded glows of the dials, switches, and small levers. Night seemed suddenly to close in about the vast machine. Till now it had been forgotten, ignored. But as darkness fingered at the panes, something of the vastness of sky and air made itself realized; something of the illimitable scope of this adventuring.

Bohannon slid the window shut and settled himself beside Captain Alden. He glanced at his wrist-watch, and a thrill of nervous exultation stabbed him.

"Only two minutes and six seconds more!" he murmured, gnawing at his mustache and blinking with excitement. Alden remained calm, impassive as the Master himself, who now, pressing another button, sent a beam of wonderful, white light lancing through the darkness.

Track, buildings, trees all leaped into vivid relief as he tested the searchlight control. He shot the beam up, up, till it lost itself, vaguely, in mist and cloud; then flung it even across the river, where it picked out buildings with startling detail.

He turned it, finally, square down the launching-way, through the yawning gates where the track abruptly ended at the brow of the Palisades--the empty chasm where, if all went right and no mistake had been made in build, engine-power, or control, the initial leap of _Nissr Arrib ela Sema_ was to be made.

Came a moment's wait. Faintly the pulsing of the engines trembled the fabric of _Nissr_. Finely balanced as they were, they still communicated some slight vibration to the ship. The Master snicked the switch of the magnetic-anchor release; and now the last bond that held _Nissr_ to her cradle was broken. As soon as the air-skid currents should be set going, she would be ready for her flight.

This moment was not long in coming. Another turn of a switch, and all at once, far below, a faint, continuous hissing made itself audible. Compressed air, forced through thousands of holes at the bottom of the floats, was interposing a gaseous cushion between those floats and the track, just as it could do between them and the earth wherever _Nissr_ should alight.

Suspended thus on a thin layer of air, perhaps no more than a sixteenth of an inch thick but infinitely less friction-producing than the finest ball-bearing wheels and quite incapable of being broken, the ship now waited only the application of the power in her vast propellers.

"Let in numbers two and four," commanded the Master, suddenly, into the engine-room telephone. "In five seconds after we start, hook up one and three; and five later, the other two."

"Aye, aye, sir," came back the voice of Auchincloss, chief engineer. "Ready, sir!"

Almost at once, the vibration of the engines altered, grew more marked, seemed to be taking hold of something with strong but easy effort. Another trembling made itself felt, as two of the giant screws, connected by reducing-gears with the engine-shafting--all three engines being geared to one shaft, but any one being capable of separate running--began to revolve.

From astern, a dull, droning hum mounted, rose, grew rapidly in volume and power. And, as two more screws began to whirl, the Eagle of the Sky shook herself slightly. She awoke from slumber. Steadily, smoothly on her air-cushions she began to move forward down the long, sloping

trackway to the brink of the cliff.

"Lord above!" breathed Bohannan, chewing at his nails. "We're off!"

Neither the Master nor Captain Alden moved, spoke, manifested any excitement whatever. Both might have been graven images of coolness. The Celt, however, got up and leaned at the window-jamb, unable to keep still. He turned suddenly to Alden.

"Come, man!" he exclaimed, half angrily. "Got no heart in you, eh? No interest? Come along out of that, now, and see what's what!"

He laid hold on the captain, and drew him to the window as the airship accelerated her plunge along the rails. The hum of the propellers had now risen to a kind of throaty roar; the craft was shaking with strange quivers that no doubt would cease if she but once could launch herself into the air. Under her, in and in, the shining metal rails came running swiftly and more swiftly still, gleaming silver-like under the vivid beam of the searchlight.

Wind began to rise up against the glass of the pilot-house; the wind of _Nissr's_ own making.

Cool as if in his own easy-chair in the observatory, the Master sat there, hand on wheel. Then all at once he reached for the rising-plane control, drew it over, and into the telephone spoke sharply:

"Full speed ahead, now! Give her all she's got!"

A shout, was it? Many shouts, cries, execrations! But where? Over the roar of the propellers, confused sounds won to the men in the pilot-house. And all at once, by the dim aura of diffused light reflected from the huge beam, the major saw dim figures running, off there to the left, among the buildings of the stockade.

"For the Lord's sake!" he cried, amazed, with drooping jaw. "Men--after us! Look there--_look_!"

The Master remained utterly impassive, eyes keen on the in-rushing track, now close to its abrupt ending over the vacancy of space. Captain Alden's pupils narrowed, through the mask-holes, but he said nothing. Bohannan gripped the captain's shoulder painfully, then reached for the pistol in his own holster.

"They're on to us!" he vociferated. "Somebody's got wise--they're--"

Little red spurts of fire began to jet, among the buildings; the crackling of shots started popping, like corn-kernels exploding. Dark figures were racing for the Palisade gate--the gate where, if any slightest thing went wrong with track or giant plane, the whole vast fabric might crash down, a tangled mass of wreckage.

Then it was, that for the first time in all his knowledge of the Master, Bohannan heard the strange man laugh.

Joyously he laughed, and with keen pleasure. His eyes were blazing, as he thrust the rising-plane lever sharply up.

More shouts volleyed. From somewhere back there in the body of the

ship, a cry of pain resounded.

Bohannon flung the window-pane to one side, and blazed away like mad at the attackers.

A shatter of broken glass burst into the pilot-house. Alden, catching his breath, quivered. He uttered no outcry, but his right hand went across and clutched his wounded left arm.

"Got you?" cried the major, still pumping lead. He paused, jerked Alden's automatic from its holster and thrust it into the captain's hand, now red.

Alden, a bit pale but quite impassive, opened fire through the jagged hole in the double pane. Accurately the captain fired at dark figures. One fell. Another staggered; but as the machine swept on, they lost sight of it.

Men rose up before the rushing airship. One of the great gates began to swing shut, far at the end of the track. The Master laughed again, with the wind whipping at his hair. "Full speed ahead!" he shouted into the telephone.

The _Nissr_ leaped into a swifter course. Then all at once she skidded clear of the track, slanted upward, breasted the air. Her searchlight blazed. All along her flanks, fire-jets spangled the night. Cries echoed from her, from the great stockade.

The Master gave her all the lift the farthest wrench of the levers would thrust on her. The gate was almost shut now--would she clear it?

Below, track, earth, everything was spinning in and in. Ahead, above, yawned vastnesses. The Master could no longer see the gate. A second of taut thrill--

Crash!

The _Nissr_ quivered, staggered, yawed away. The forward starboard float had struck. A faint yell rose as someone, hurled backward by the shattered _debris_ of the gate, plunged down the cliff.

For half a second, the giant plane reeled over the abyss. Her rush and fury for that half-second threatened to plunge her, a mangled, flaming wreck, hundreds of feet down on the black, waiting rocks below the Palisades.

But engine-power and broad wings, skill of the hand at the levers, and the good fortune that watches over bold men, buoyed her again.

Suddenly she lifted. Up at a dizzy angle she sped.

A thing of life, quivering, sentient, unleashed, the gigantic Eagle of the Sky--now in heroic flight toward the greatest venturing ever conceived by the brain of man--steadied herself, lifted on the wings of darkness, and, freed from her last bonds, leaped quivering and triumphant into the night.

CHAPTER IX

EASTWARD HO!

Not all the stern discipline that had been enforced by the Master--discipline already like a second nature to this band of adventurous men--could quite prevent a little confusion on board the Eagle of the Sky.

As the huge machine crashed, plunged, staggered, then righted herself and soared aloft, shouts echoed down the corridors, shots crackled from the lower gallery and from a few open ports.

At sound of them, and of faint, far cries from the Palisades, with a futile spatter of pistol-and rifle-fire, the Master frowned. This intrusion of disorder lay quite outside his plans. He had hoped for a swift and quiet getaway. Complications had been introduced. Under his breath he muttered something as he manipulated the controls.

The major, laughing a bit wildly, leaned from the shattered window and let drive a few last pot-shots into the dark, at the faint flicker of lights along the crest of the black cliff. In the gloom of the pilot-house, his shoulders bulked huge as he fired. Captain Alden, staggering back, sat down heavily on one of the sofa-lockers.

One or two faint shots still popped, along the cliff, with little pin-pricks of fire in the dark. Then all sounds of opposition vanished. The _Nissr_, upborne at her wonderful climbing-angle toward the clouds painted by her searchlight--clouds like a rippled, moonlit veil through which peeped faint stars--spiraled above the Hudson and in a vast arc turned her beak into the south.

Disorder died. Silence fell, save for the whistling of the sudden wind of the airship's own motion, and for the steadily mounting drone of the huge propellers.

"Made it all right, by God!" exclaimed Bohannan, excitedly. "No damage, either. If the floats had smashed when they hit the gate, there'd have been a devil of an explosion--vacuum collapsing, you know. Close call, but we made it! Now, if--"

"That will do!" the Master curtly interrupted, with steadfast eyes peering out through the conning windows. Now that the first _elan_ of excitement had spent itself, this strange man had once more resumed his mantle of calm. Upborne on the wings of wondrous power, wings all aquiver with their first stupendous leap into the night-sky, the Master--impassive, watchful, cool--seemed as if seated in his easy-chair at _Niss'rosh_.

"That will do, Major!" he repeated. "None of your extravagance, sir! No time now for rodomontade!" He glanced swiftly round, saw Captain Alden by the dim aura of light reflected from the instrument-board. Blood reddened the captain's left sleeve.

"Wounded, Captain?"

"Only a scratch!"

"Report to Dr. Lombardo. And have Simonds, in charge of the stores, replace this broken pane."

"Yes, sir!"

Alden saluted with a blood-stained hand, slipped his gun back into its holster and got up. He swayed a little, with the swinging slide of the air-liner and with the weakness that nerve-shock of a wound brings. But coolly enough he slid open the door leading into the main corridor, and passed through, closing the door after him. Where his hand touched the metal, red stains showed. Neither man of the pair now left in the pilot-house made any comments. This was all in the day's work--this and whatever else might befall.

Spiraling vastly, up, up climbed the giant plane. A colder air nipped through the broken window. Cloud-wisps began to blur the glass; the stars began to burn more whitely in a blacker sky.

The Master touched a button at the left side of the steering-post. Below his feet, as they rested in their metal stirrups, an aluminum plate silently slid back. An oblong of dim light blurred up through the heavy plate-glass sheet it had masked.

Glancing down, the Master saw far, far below him a slowly rotating vagueness of waters black and burnished, of faintly twinkling lights. Lights and water drew backward, as the rotary motion gave way to a southern course. The Master slowed the helicopters. A glance at the altimeter showed him 1,965 feet. The compass in its binnacle gave him direction.

"Pit number one!" he sharply exclaimed into the phone connecting therewith.

"Yes, sir!" came back the observer's voice.

"Keep a sharp eye out for _Niss'rosh_! Remember, two red lights showing there!"

"Yes, sir. I'll report as soon as I pick them up."

The Master, knowing his course thither should be S.E. by S., drew the liner to that exact angle. Under his skilled touch at the wheel, the compass needle steadied to the dot. The searchlight lanced its way ahead, into the vague drift of the smoke arising from New York.

"Sight it, yet?" demanded the Master, presently.

"Yes, sir. Just picked it up. Hold hard, sir!"

Almost at once, the Master also got a glimpse of two tiny pin-pricks of crimson, high in air above the city-mass. Swiftly _Nissr_ drew over the building. Far, very far down in the chasm of emptiness, tiny strings of light--infinitesimal luminous beads on invisible threads--marked Broadway, Fifth Avenue, countless other streets. The two red winks drew almost underneath.

Down plunged the searchlight, picking _Niss'rosh_ out of the gloom. Through the floor-glass, the Master could descry it clearly. He

slowed, circled, playing with vacuum-lift, helicopters, engines, as if they had been keys of a familiar instrument. Presently the liner hovered, poised, sank, remained a little over 750 feet above the observatory on the roof-top.

"Cracowicz!" ejaculated the Master, into the phone again, as his deft fingers made another connection. A foreign voice answered: "Yes, sir!" alertly.

"Ready in the lower gallery now, with the winch and tackles!" bade the Master.

Again came: "Yes, sir!" from the man in charge of the three who already knew perfectly well what was expected of them. As _Nissr_ slowly turned, a trap opened in the bottom of her lower gallery, almost directly between the two forward vacuum-floats, and down sped a little landing nacelle or basket at the end of a fine steel cable.

Swiftly the electric winch dropped the nacelle, containing three men. It slowed, at their command, through the phone that led up the wire. With hardly a jar, the basket landed on the roof.

The men jumped out, made fast their tackles to Captain Alden's plane there, leaped in again and signaled: "Hoist away!"

With noiseless speed the winch gathered in the cable. Up swooped the nacelle. As it cleared the roof, _Nissr_ purred forward, slid away, gathered speed over the city where already the alarm had been given.

In four minutes the men had safely landed in the lower gallery once more, and the plane was being hoisted by davits and made fast on the upper platform, known as the take-off, which served as a runway for planes leaving the ship or alighting thereon.

Over the light-spangled city the giant air-liner gathered way. Three or four searchlights had already begun trying to pick her up. Quiverings of radiance reached out for her, felt into the void, whirled like cosmic spokes. The Brooklyn Navy Yard whipped the upper air for her. Down on Sandy Hook, a slim spear of light stabbed questingly through the night. Then all at once the monster light on Governor's Island caught her, dazzling into the Master's eyes.

He only smiled, as he sheered eastward, dropped East River behind and unloosed the Sky-eagle's course above Brooklyn.

"Just a little fireworks, as a send-off, Major," said he, notching the speed ahead, ever ahead, till a whipping gale began to beat in at the broken pane. "They got word of it pretty quick, eh? I suppose they'll send up a few planes after us."

"_After_ us, yes!" exulted the major. "Faith, they'll be after us, all right--a devil of a long way after!"

To this the Master gave no answer, but signaled Auchincloss in the engine-room for full speed. Now a subtle tremor possessed the vast fabric, mistress of the upper spaces and the night. The close-compacted lights beneath commenced to sprinkle out into tenuous dots. The tiny blazing fringe of Coney burned a moment very far below, then slid away, under the glass flooring. Still heading

sharply upward, with altimeter needle steadily mounting, with the cold becoming ever greater, the liner flung herself out boldly over the jet plain of ocean.

Right into the eye of heaven she seemed to point, into a vast and profound blackness, that, as the Master snicked off the no-longer needed searchlight, unleashed myriad stars--stars which leaped out of the velvet night. Already man and the works of man lay far behind. If there had been any tentative pursuit, the Legionaries knew nothing of it. Outdistancing pursuit as an eagle distances sparrows, the liner gloried in her swift trajectory.

The Master nodded, well pleased. Bohannon laughed like a boy, and holstered his gun. He moved over to the starboard window, out of the gale. With mocking eyes he watched the futile searchlight at the Hook.

"They've got as much chance of overhauling us as the proverbial celluloid cat has of catching the asbestos rat," said he. "A clean getaway, barring the little damage we've taken--this window, and Alden, and--"

"Better unpack your kit, and settle down," the Master dryly interrupted him. "Take a look around and see that everything's shipshape. Be sure the port and starboard watches are chosen. Everything's been arranged, already, but in dealing with human beings there's bound to be a little confusion. They aren't automata--unfortunately. And, Major!"

"Yes, sir?" answered Bohannon, who despite his familiarity with the Master was now constrained to formality. Resentment sounded in his voice.

"Send Brodeur to relieve me, in about ten minutes."

"Yes, sir," repeated the Celt. For a moment, standing there in the gloom of the pilot-house, he eyed the dim, watchful figure at the wheel. Then he turned, slid the door, and disappeared.

As he walked aft, past the aluminum ladder that led to the upper galleries, he muttered with dudgeon:

"He rates us two for a nickel, that's plain enough--plain as paint! Well, all right. I'll stand for it; but there may be others that--"

He left the words unfinished, and went to do the Master's bidding.

Alone, the Master smiled. Wine of victory pulsed in his blood and brain. Power lay under his hand, that closed with joy upon it. Power not only over this hardy Legion, but power in perspective over--

"God, if I can do it!" he whispered, and fell silent. His eyes rested on the instruments before him, their white dials glowing under the little penthouses of their metal shields. Altitude now showed 2,437 feet, and still rising. Tachometers gave from 2,750 to 2,875 r.p.m. for the various propellers. Speed had gone above 190 miles per hour. No sign of man remained, save, very far below through a rift in the pale, moonlit waft of cloud, a tiny light against a coal-black plain of sea--the light of a slow, crawling steamer--a light which almost at once dropped far behind.

Vast empty spaces on all hands, above, below, engulfed _Nissr_. The Master felt himself alone with air and sky, with power, with throbbing dreams and visions.

"If it can be done!" he repeated. "But--there's no 'if' to it, at all. It _can_ be! It _shall_! The biggest thing ever attempted in this world! A dream that's never been dreamed, before! And if it can't, well, a dream like that is far more than worth dying for. A dream that can come true--by God, that shall come true!"

His hands tightened on the wheel. You would have said he was trying to infuse some of his own overflowing strength into the mechanism that, whirling, zooming with power, needed no more. The gleam in his eyes, there in the dark pilot-house, seemed almost that of a fanatic. His jaw hardened, his nostrils expanded.

This strange man's face was now wholly other than it had been only a week before, drawn and lined by ennui. Now vast ambitions dominated and infused it with virile force.

As he held the speeding air-liner to her predetermined course through voids of night and mystery, he peered with burning eagerness at the beckoning stars along the world's far, eastern rim.

"Behold now, Allah!" he cried suddenly. "_Labbayk_![1] I come!"

[Footnote 1: _Labbayk_ (I am here) is the cry of all Mohammedan pilgrims as they approach the holy city of Mecca.]

CHAPTER X

"I AM THE MASTER'S!"

The arrival of Simonds, with the spare window-pane, and of Brodeur--one of the boldest flyers out of Saloniki in the last months of the war--broke in upon the Master's reveries. Only a few minutes were required to mend the window. During this time, the Master explained some unusual features of control to the Frenchman, then let him take charge of _Nissr_.

"She's wonderful," said he, as Brodeur settled himself at the wheel. "With her almost unlimited power, her impeccable controls and her automatic stabilizers, I hardly see what could happen to her."

"Fire, of course, _m'sieur_," the ace replied, "always has to be guarded against."

"Hardly on an all-metal liner. Now, here you see--and here--"

He finished his explanations, and, satisfied that all was safe, passed into his own cabin. Rrisa, he found, had already unpacked his kit, and had arranged it to perfection. Even a copper bowl of khat, the "flower of paradise," was awaiting him.

The Master sat down, chewed a few leaves and indulged in a little time of what the Arabs call _kayf_, or complete relaxation and inner contemplation--a restful trick he had learned many years ago on the coast of Yemen. The ticking of the aluminum-cased chronometer, now marking a little past 2 a.m., soothed him, as did the droning hum of the propellers, the piping whistle of the ship-made hurricane round the fuselage, the cradling swing and rock of the air-liner hurling herself almost due east.

After some quarter-hour of absolute rest, he rang for his Arab orderly. Risa appeared at once. Already he had got himself into his military uniform, the one he had worn at Gallipoli when the Master had saved his life. As he stood there in the doorway, he swung his left foot out and back, with clicking heels, and made a smart salute.

"What does _M'alme_ desire?" asked he, in Arabic.

"I desire to know thy opinion of all this, Risa. Tell me, did thy great prophet, M'hamed, ever ride in such state through the air? Was Al Burak, his magic horse, on which he traveled to the paradise of the houris, more swift or mighty than this steed of mine?"

The Master speaking Arabic, weighted every word with its full meaning.

"Tell me, Risa, what of all this?"

"Your steed is very swift and very mighty. Your flying ship is very great," the Arab admitted. "But Allah and his Prophet are greater! _Allahu akbar!_" (Allah is greatest!)

"Of course. But tell thou me, Risa, if I were to appear at Mecca in my _Nissr Arrib ela Sema_--my Eagle of the Sky--would not thy people give me great honors?"

"My head is at your feet, _M'alme_, and I am yours to do with as you will, even to the death, but I implore you, by the beard of the Prophet, do not do this thing!"

"And why not, Risa?"

"You and I, Master, are _akhawat_.^[1] Therefore I can speak true words. You must not go to Mecca. No man of the _Nasara_ may go there--and live."

[Footnote 1: _Akhawat_ signifies in Arabic the tie of sworn brotherhood between an Arab and one of different blood.]

"Thou meanest that if we go to Mecca and they capture us, they will kill us all?"

"Yea, Master. And I too shall die, for being with you, though I count that as less than nothing."

The Master kept a moment's silence, pondering; while, without, the voices of empty heaven whistled by, from strut and wire, brace and stay. The wild mystery of that outer night, excluded by the close-drawn curtains, contrasted strongly with the light and the warm comfort of the cabin with its snug berth, its aluminum furniture, its shining walls where were affixed charts and maps, rules, photographs.

Under the clear, white light, Risa anxiously studied his master's face. Great anxiety had begun to make itself manifest in the Arab's voice and in his eyes. Another troubled look came, too, as he glanced at the chronometer.

It struck, sharply. The Arab, contrary to all his habits and training, spoke first, without being spoken to.

"Master," said he, timorously, "excuse the speech I offer without waiting. But I must ask. This is my hour of night prayer, and I must bow to Mecca. Whither, from here, lieth The City?"

The Master raised a hand, glanced at a compass set like a wrist-watch, peered a moment at one of the charts, and then nodded toward the door that led into the pilot-house.

Without delay, Risa faced that door and prostrated himself. The ancient cry: "_La Illaha illa Allah! M'hamed rasul Allah!_" was raised there in the cabin of the rushing Eagle of the Sky--surely the strangest place where Moslem prayer was ever offered since first the Prophet's green banner unfurled itself upon the desert air of Araby.

Devoutly Risa prayed, then with a "_Bismillah!_" (In the name of Allah!) arose and faced his master. The latter, wise in Eastern ways, remained gravely unsmiling. Never in all his dealings with the son of the East had he by word or look offended against Islam. There was, however, iron determination in his eyes as he demanded:

"Is it indeed true that in Mecca stands a building called the Ka'aba, also called _Bayt Ullah_, or Allah's House?"

"Yea, Master, that is true," answered the Arab, with strange eyes.

"And is it indeed covered with a wondrous silken and gold cloth, every year renewed, known as the _kiswa_?"

"Those words are true."

"All Moslems greatly revere the Ka'aba?"

"It is the center of our mighty faith, Master."

"And thou hast seen it with thine own eyes?"

"With my own eyes, Master, for I am a _Hadji_.^[1]" Attentively the Arab was now watching the Master. Slowly he continued: "Prayer, with face to Mecca, alms-giving, the keeping of the fast of Ramadan, and the pilgrimage to the Ka'aba, these are our law. Yea, Master, I have myself seen the Ka'aba, and more than once!"

[Footnote 1: Title among the Arabs and Moslems in general for one who has performed the pilgrimage to Mecca, a journey which every good Moslem considers necessary for salvation.]

A certain trouble had now grown manifest in Risa's eyes. His lips moved silently, as if still praying; but no words were audible. The Master pondered a moment more, then demanded:

"Is it true there is a sacred Black Stone in the walls of the Ka'aba, precious to all followers of the Prophet, from Africa to China and to the farthest isles? Revered by all the two hundred and thirty million of your faith?"

"That is true, _M'alme_. I myself have touched and kissed the Black Stone."

"Mecca, the Ka'aba, and the Black Stone are forbidden to all heretics?" relentlessly pursued the Master.

"_Wallah_! Yea, so they are to--all who are not of Islam," Rrisa tried to soften the answer.

"They tell me," persisted the Master, "the Black Stone is in the western wall of the Ka'aba, about seven feet from the pavement."

"That is a lie!" flared Rrisa, with indignation. "It is in the northeast corner, at the very corner, Master. It is between four feet and five from the ground. That, and no other, is the true place, Master, the place of _Hajar el Aswad!_" (Black Stone.)

"Ah, yes, yes, the books lie," agreed the Master. "And they say, too, that certain of the Feringi have indeed touched and even kissed the Black Stone, and still lived."

Rrisa's face clouded. It burned coppery, with a flush of hot blood under that dark skin. By the clear white light in the cabin, the Master closely observed him. Idly he broke off a leaf of the khat, and nibbled at it.

"Is that the truth?" he inquired, pitilessly.

"I must speak truth to you, Master," confessed the Arab, with bitter shame. "Two of the Feringi--_Nasara_ men like yourself--have indeed touched and kissed it. Two that we know of. _Shaytan el Kabir_ (the Great Satan) may have permitted others to do that, but we know of only two who have done it--and lived."

"Thou meanest one named Burckhardt, and Sir Richard Burton?"

The Arab shuddered at sound of those names, and silently nodded. Then he burst out:

"Those were their names, _M'alme!_ Those two, disguised as _Hujjaj_, defiled the Black Stone, which was given by Allah to the first Arabs; and they both escaped. But many others who have tried--"

"Have died at the hands of thy people?"

"_Bismillah_! Yea!" A flash of pride irradiated the dark face of Rrisa. His figure drew itself erect. Beneath the veneer of civilization with which life among the Feringi had overlaid him, the Master sensed the wild, fierce, free soul of the desert man, to whom the death of the unbelieving dog is sweet.

"It is well," nodded the Master. Then, suddenly he stood up, faced the Arab, and bent on him a sternly penetrant look.

"Risa," said he, impressively, his voice slow, grave, sonorous, "only for me thy bones would today be moldering in the trenches at Gallipoli or maybe rotting in a Turkish grave. The life that is in thee belongs to me! That is thy ancient law. Is it not true?"

"It is true, Master. _Nahnu malihin._" (We have eaten salt together.)

"And the salt is still in thy stomach?[1]"

[Footnote 1: Some Arab tribes hold that the salt binds protection for only twenty-four hours and at the end of that time must be renewed, otherwise it is "not in their stomachs."]

"Aye, Master. You are still _dakhil_ (protected) to me."

"Thou art mine to do with as I will?"

"I am the Master's!"

"Treason to me, Risa, is treason to thy holy laws. Surely, such treason would plunge thy soul far into the depths of Eblis. When thy time cometh to walk across the burning pit, on the bridge as fine and sharp as the edge of a simitar, if it be laden with treachery to one who hath saved thy life and whose salt thou hast eaten, surely it shall not pass over, but shall fall. Far into the deeps of Jehannum it shall fall, where the Prophet says: 'Stones and men shall be the fuel of the everlasting flame!'"

"I am the Master's," repeated Risa, with trembling mouth. He raised his hand to forehead, lips, and heart. "My head is at the Master's feet!"

"Forget that not, thou!" cried the Master, dominantly. "_Ru'c'h halla!_" (Go!)

CHAPTER XI

CAPTAIN ALDEN STANDS REVEALED

Hardly had the trembling Arab salaamed and departed in terror of soul, knowing not what fearful events might be impending, when Bohannan appeared. The smile on the Master's lips, the sternly calculating expression in his eyes, faded into something as near astonishment as this strange man ever felt, when the major exclaimed:

"Well, faith now, what d'you think? The most improbable thing you can imagine!"

"What may that be, Major?"

"It's not what it may be, it's what it _is_ that's astonishing me. We've got a stowaway aboard us!"

"Stowaway? Impossible!"

"True, nevertheless. Manderson has just now routed him out of the starboard storage-room, near the reserve petrol-tank."

"Hm! Who is he?"

Bohannon shrugged stout shoulders.

"Don't know yet. He's still dopy. Just coming out of the effects of the lethalizing gas."

"Ah, yes, yes, I see. One of the former crew, I suppose. This is quite inexcusable. That a man should have been overlooked and left aboard--it won't do, Major. Kloof was responsible for that room. Kloof will have to suffer. Any other news?"

"Travers, the New Zealander, is wounded."

"Badly?"

"I'm afraid he's hard hit, sir."

"Well, I'll have a look at him and at this stowaway. Where are they, now?"

"In the lazaret, I suppose you call it. Though what a hospital is, aboard an air-liner, blest if I know!"

"Sick-bay, we'll call it. Problems rising already. A stowaway--rather odd, I must say. Still, as a problem, it's not hard to solve. Nothing simpler than dropping a man overboard."

"You--surely, you wouldn't do that!" ejaculated the major, startled. His rubicund face grew round with amazement.

"That remains to be seen. Come, let's have a look at him!"

Together they went out into the brightly lighted main corridor, near the ladder to the upper gallery, turned to the right and walked aft. A door, just a little abaft the chartroom and, opposite the Master's cabin, gave a glimpse of the as yet unoccupied smoke-room. Astern of this, they passed the dining-saloon with its long table and its swivel-chairs. Beyond several stateroom doors they came to the transverse corridor at the other side of which, directly facing the main corridor, the engine-room door opened.

Entering the engine-room, they found themselves in a brightly lighted compartment fifteen feet wide by twenty-six feet, seven inches long. This compartment contained six Norcross-Brail engines, each capable of developing 1,150 H.P. The engines were in charge of Auchincloss and two assistant engineers, who had all six engines filling the room with a drowsy drone, like ten billion bees humming themselves to sleep in some mysterious hive.

So nicely adjusted was every part, so accurately true was every shaft, bearing, gear, that practically no vibration could be noted. The voice, in ordinary tones, carried perfectly; and yet in that small space nearly 7,000 H.P. were being produced and transmitted to the propellers and to the storage batteries that operated helicopters and compressed-air system, as well as the lighting-plant of the air-liner.

As the two men entered the engine-room, the Master nodded to Auchincloss. He stood a moment gazing at the brightly flecked metal of the engines, the gleaming walls--hollow and filled with noninflammable helium gas of great lifting power--the men on watch over all this splendid mechanism. Then he passed between engines No. 4 and No. 5, toward the aft wall of the compartment.

Four doors opened in the bulkhead, there. Two communicated with storerooms, one opened into the passage that led to the aft observation pit, the fourth gave access to the sick-bay. This door the Master slid back. Followed by the major he passed through.

A small but fully equipped hospital met their eyes. Cots, operating-table, instrument-cases, sterilizers, everything was complete. Immaculate cleanliness reigned. On two of the cots, men were lying.

Beyond, Captain Alden--still fully dressed--was sitting on a white metal chair. The captain's face was still concealed by the celluloid mask, but a profound pallor was visible on the lower portion of his right cheek and along his left jaw. The set of that jaw showed an invincible obstinacy that bespoke rebellion.

Dr. Lombardo, a dark-skinned Florentine, who had been talking with Captain Alden, turned at the Master's entrance into the sick-bay. Already Lombardo had put on a white linen jacket. Though he had not yet had time to change his trousers, he nevertheless presented a semi-professional air as he advanced to meet the newcomers.

"I'm glad you're here, sir," said he to the Master. "There's trouble enough, already."

"Stowaway?" The Master advanced to the nearer cot.

"Yes, sir. Perhaps not voluntarily so. You know how he was found."

"Such oversight is inexcusable!" The Master leaned down and shook the man by the shoulder. "Come, now!" he demanded. "What's your name?" Curiously he looked at the stranger, a man of great strength, with long arms and powerful, prehensile hands that reminded one of an ape's.

"It's no use questioning him, sir," put in Lombardo, while the major peered curiously at Alden and at the other cot where a man was lying with a froth of bright, arterial blood on his lips. Though this man was suffering torment, no groan escaped him. A kind of gray shadow had settled about eyes and mouth--the shadow of the death angel's wings.

"It's no use, sir," repeated the doctor. "He hasn't recovered consciousness enough, yet, to be questioned. When he does, I'll report."

"Do so!" returned the Master, curtly. "I hardly think we need use much ceremony in disposing of him." He turned to the other cot. "Well, sir, how about this man?"

"I'm--all right, sir," weakly coughed the wounded New Zealander. He tried to bring a hand to his forehead, but could hardly lift it

from the sheet. The doctor, with compressed lips, slightly shook a negating head, as the Master raised interrogative brows.

"Serious," Lombardo whispered. "Shot through the right lung. Bullet still there. Severe internal hemorrhage. I may be able to operate, with Daimamoto assisting, but only in case the patient rallies. We really need a nurse, on this expedition. Medically speaking, we're short-handed. However, I'll do my best, sir."

"I know you will," answered the Master. He stood a moment gazing down at the New Zealander, with stern face and tight mouth. This man on the cot had already given much for the expedition, and might give all. Not without blood and suffering--death, perhaps--was the Master's dream to come to its fruition. After a moment, the Master turned away. He faced Captain Alden.

"Your wound not yet dressed?" demanded he.

"No, sir, not yet."

"And why not, pray?"

"He's simply refused all attention, whatever!" put in the doctor.

"I have a reason, sir," Alden proffered.

"No reason can overrule my orders!" the Master exclaimed. "I commanded you to report to Dr. Lombardo for treatment."

"Nevertheless, sir, I refuse--"

"Insubordination will not be condoned, sir!"

"My reason is valid. When you have heard it, you will understand."

"State your reason, sir!"

"I decline--here."

For a long moment the eyes of the Master met those of Captain Alden, that strangely peered out at him through the eyeholes of the pink, celluloid mask. Bohannon and the doctor stood by, curiously observing this conflict of two wills. Silence came, save for the droning purr of the engines, the buffeting gusts of wind along the fuselage, the slight trembling of the gigantic fabric as it hurled itself eastward through the high air of night.

"This is inexcusable," said the Master, crisply. "I give you one last chance. Either permit treatment, or consider yourself under arrest."

"Before you proceed to such lengths," the captain replied, "I ask one favor of you."

"What favor?"

"Two minutes alone with you, sir."

"Come with me!"

The Master turned and left the sick-bay. Alden rose, weakly enough, and followed him. As the door opened and closed again, the engines hummed louder, then sank again to their dull murmur. Bohannan remained with the doctor.

"Well, faith, can you beat that?" exclaimed the major. "There's an Ethiopian in the woodpile, sure enough. Something strange, here, I'm thinking! Something damned strange here!"

"Is there anything here that _isn't_?" asked Lombardo, with an odd laugh, as he turned back to the cot where lay the dying New Zealander.

Alone in his cabin with Captain Alden, the Master faced the insubordinate member of his crew with an expression of hard implacability. The captain stood there determinedly confronting him. His right hand held to the table for support. His left sleeve was sodden with blood; the left arm, thrust into the breast of his coat, was obviously numbed, paralyzed.

"Well, sir, what have you to say for yourself?" coldly demanded the Master.

"I repeat that I cannot--and will not--submit myself to any medical attention from any member of this expedition."

"This is dangerous ground you're treading!" the Master exclaimed. His voice had deepened, grown ominous. "You understood perfectly well the conditions of the undertaking--unquestioning obedience to my orders, with life-and-death powers in my hands, to punish insubordination."

"I understand all that, sir," answered the captain. "I understand it now. Nevertheless, I repeat my refusal to obey."

"By Allah! There must be some deep cause here!" ejaculated the Master, his eyes smoldering. "I intend to work my will, but I am a man of reason. You are entitled to a hearing state your objection, sir. Speak up!"

The captain's answer was to raise his right hand and to loosen the cords securing the celluloid mask. As the Master watched, steadying his nerves against the shock of what he felt must be a nameless horror underneath, Alden tore away the mask and threw it upon the table.

"Here is my reason, sir," said he very quietly, "for not permitting Lombardo, or any other man here, to dress my wound."

"Good God!" exclaimed the Master, shaken clean out of his aplomb. The shock he had expected had come to him, but in far other guise than he had counted on. With clenched fists and widening eyes he peered at Alden.

The face he now suddenly beheld, under the clear white light of the cabin, was not the hideous, mangled wreck of humanity--The Kaiser's Masterpiece--he had expected to see.

No--far, and very far from that!

It was the face of a woman. One of the most beautiful women his eyes ever had rested on.

CHAPTER XII

THE WOMAN OF ADVENTURE

A moment's utter silence followed. The woman, with another gesture, drew off the aviator's cap she had worn; she pulled away the tight-fitting toupee that had been drawn over her head and that had masked her hair under its masculine disguise. With deft fingers she shook out the masses of that hair--fine, dark masses that flowed down over her shoulders in streams of silken glory.

"Now you see me as I am!" said she, her voice low and just a little trembling, but wholly brave. "Now, perhaps, you understand!"

"I--but you--" stammered the Master, for the first time in all his life completely at a loss, dazed, staggered.

"Now you understand why I couldn't--wouldn't--let Dr. Lombardo dress my wound."

"By the power of Allah! What does all this mean?" The Master's voice had grown hoarse, unsteady. "A woman--_here_--!"

"Yes, a woman! The woman your expedition needs and must have, if death and sickness happen, as happen they will. The woman you would never have allowed to come--the woman who determined to come at all hazards, even death itself. The woman who--"

"But, Lord Almighty! Your papers! Your decorations!"

"Quite genuine," she answered, smiling at him with dark eyes, unafraid. Through all his dazed astonishment he saw the wonder of those eyes, the perfect oval of that face, the warm, rich tints of her skin even though overspread with the pallor of suffering.

"Madam," said he, trying to rally, "this is past all words. No explanation can make amends for such deception. Still, the secret is yet yours--and mine. Until I decide what to do, it must be respected."

Past her he walked, to the door, and snapped the catch. She, turning, leaned against the table and smiled. He saw the gleam of perfect teeth. A strange figure she made, with loose hair cascading over her coat, with knickers and puttees, with wounded arm slung in the breast of her jacket.

"Thank you for your consideration," she smiled. "It is on a par with my conception of your character."

"Pray spare me your comments," he replied, coldly. He returned to his desk, but did not sit down there. Against it he leaned, crossed his arms, and with somewhat lowered head studied her. "Your explanation, madam?"

"My papers are _en regle_," said she. "My decorations are genuine."

Numbers of women went through the great war as men. I am one of them, that is all. Many were never discovered. Those who were, owed it to wounds that brought them under observation. Had I not been wounded, you would never have known. I could have exercised my skill as a nurse, without the fact of my sex becoming apparent.

"That was what I was hoping for and counting on. I wanted to serve this expedition both as a flyer and as a nurse. Fate willed otherwise. A chance bullet intervened. You know the truth. But I feel confident, already, that my secret is safe with you."

The light on her forehead, still a little ridged and reddened by the pressure of the edge of the mask, showed it broad, high, intelligent. Her eyes were deep and eager with a kind of burning determination. The hand she had rested on the table clenched with the intensity of her appeal:

"Let me stay! Let me serve you all! I ask no more of life than that!"

The Master, knotting together the loose threads of his emotion, came a step nearer.

"Your name, madam!" he demanded.

"I cannot tell you. I am Captain Alfred Alden to you, still. Just that. Nothing more."

"You continue insubordinate? Do you know, madam, that for this I could order you bound hand and foot, have you laid on the trap in the lower gallery, and command the trap to be sprung?"

His face grew hard, deep-lined, almost savage as he confronted her--the only being who now dared stand against his will. She smiled oddly, as she answered:

"I know all that, perfectly well. And I know the open Atlantic lies a mile or two below us, in the empty night. Nevertheless, you shall not learn my name. All I shall tell you is this--that I am really an aviator. 'Aviatrix' I despise. I served as 'Captain Alden' for eight months on the Italian front and twenty-one months on the Western. I am an ace. And--"

"Never mind about all that!" the Master interrupted, raising his hand. "You are a woman! You are here under false colors. You gained admission to this Legion by means of false statements--"

"Ah, no, pardon me! Did I ever claim to be a man?"

"The impression you gave was false, and was calculated to be so. This is mere quibbling. A lie can be acted more effectively than spoken. All things considered, your life--"

"Is forfeited, of course. I understand that perfectly well. And that means two things, as direct corollaries. First, that you lose a trained flyer and a woman with Red Cross training; a woman you may sorely need before this expedition is done. Second, you deny a human being who is just as eager as you are for life and the spice of adventure, just as hungry for excitement as you or any man here--you deny me all this, everything, just because a stupid accident of birth

made me a woman!"

Her clenched right fist passionately struck the table at her side.

"A man's world! That's what this world is called; that's what it is!
And you--of all men--are living down to that idea! You--_the Master!_"

The man's face changed color. It grew a little pale, with deepening lines. He passed a hand over his forehead, a hand that for the first time trembled with indecision. His strong teeth gnawed at his lower lip. Never before had he lacked words, but now he found none.

The woman exclaimed, her voice incisive, eager, her eyes burning:

"It is because you _are_ a master of men, and of yourself, that I have taken this chance! It is because I have heard of your absolute sense of justice and fair play, your appreciation of unswerving loyalty and of the heart that dares! Now you understand. I have only one more thing to say."

"And what is that?"

"If you respect my secret and let me go with you on this great enterprise, no man aboard the Eagle of the Sky will serve you any more loyally than I. No man will venture more, endure more, suffer more--if suffering has to be. I give you my word of honor on that, as a fighter and--a woman!"

"Your word of honor as--"

"A woman! Do you understand?"

Silence again. Their eyes met. The Master's were first to lower.

"Your life is spared," he answered. "That is a concession to your sex, madam. Had you been a man, I would inevitably have put you to death. As it is, you shall live. And you shall remain with us--"

"Thank God for that!"

"Till we reach land. There you must leave _Nissr_."

"I shall not leave it alive," the woman declared, her eyes showing dilated pupils of resentment, of anger. "I haven't come this far to be thrown aside like a bit of worthless gear!"

"You and your machine will be cast off, over the first land we touch," the Master repeated doggedly. "Whatever information you may give, cannot injure us, and--"

"Stop! Not another word like that, to me!"

Her eyes were blazing now; her right fist quivered in air.

"You accuse me of treason," she cried. "Oh, what injustice, what--"

"I accuse you of nothing, save of having deceived us all, and of being very much _deplacee_ here. The deception shall continue, as far as the others are concerned. You came to us, as a man. You shall go as

one. Your secret shall be absolutely respected, by me. But, madam, understand one thing clearly."

"What is that?" she demanded, still trembling with indignation.

"The fact that you are a woman has no weight with me, so far as your persuading me to let you remain of the party may be concerned. Women have never counted in my life. Their wiles, arts, graces, tears, mean

nothing to me. Their entreaties seem futile. Their arguments appear like trivial puerilities.

"Other men are sometimes influenced by such. I tell you now, madam, I shall not be. Your entreaties will have no weight. When the time comes for you to leave _Nissr_, I trust you will go quietly, with no distressing scene."

A certain grimness showed in the woman's face, making it sternly heroic as the face of Medea or Zenobia. She answered:

"Do you think me the type that entreates, that sheds tears, that exercises wiles?"

"We won't discuss your personality, madam! This interview is drawing to an end. Until we reach land, nothing can be done. Nothing, but to look out for your injury. Common humanity demands that your wound be dressed. Is it a serious hurt?"

"Not compared with the hurt you are inflicting, in banishing me from the Flying Legion!"

"Come, madam, refrain from extravagant speeches! What is your wound?"

"A clean shot through the left arm, I think, a little below the shoulder."

"I realize, of course, that to have Dr. Lombardo dress it would reveal your sex. Could you in any way manage the dressing, yourself?"

"If given antiseptics and bandages, yes."

"They shall be furnished, also a stateroom."

"That will excite comment."

"It may," the Master answered, "but there is no other way. I will manage everything privately, myself. Then I will let it transpire that there was some injury to the face, as well, and that the mask had to be removed. I can let the impression get about that you refused to allow anyone but me see your mutilated face.

"I can also hint that I have helped you with the dressing, and have ordered you to keep your stateroom for a while. When it comes time to leave _Nissr_, I will dispatch you as a messenger. Thus your secret will remain intact. Besides, no one will dare inquire into anything. No one ventures to discuss or question any decision of mine."

Something of hard arrogance sounded in the Master's voice. The woman thanked him, her eyes penetrant, keenly intelligent, even a trifle

mocking. One would have said she was weighing this strange man in the balance of judgment, was finding him of sterling stuff, yet was perhaps cherishing a hope, not untinged with malice, that some day a turn of fate might humble him. The Master seemed to sense a little of this, and took a milder tone.

"I must compliment you on one thing, madam," said he, with just the wraith of a smile. "Your acting has been perfection itself. And the fortitude with which you have borne the discomfort of that mask for more than a week, to achieve your ends, cannot be too highly praised."

"Thank you," she replied. "I would have stood that a year, to be one of your Legion! But now--tell me! Isn't there any possibility of your reversing your decision?"

"None, madam."

"Isn't there anything I can say or do to--"

"Remember, you told me just a minute ago you were not the type of woman who entreats!"

CHAPTER XIII

THE ENMESHING OF THE MASTER

She fell silent, biting her full lip. Something in her eyes shamed the man. Not for all his inflexible sternness could he feel that he had come out a winner in this, their first encounter. A woman--one of the despised, ignored creatures--had deceived him. She had disobeyed his orders. She had flatly thrown down the gage of battle to him, that she would never leave Nissr alive. And last, she had forced him into planning to disseminate falsehoods among his crew--falsehoods the secret of which only she shared with him.

Unwilling as this man was to have anything in common with her, he had been obliged to have something in common--to have much. Something existed; a bond, even if an unpleasant one, had already stretched itself between these two--the first secret this man ever had shared with any woman.

"Captain Alden" smiled a little. The honors of war, so far, lay all in her camp.

The Master, feeling this to the inner marrows, humiliated, shaken, yet through it all not quite able to suppress a kind of grudging and unwilling tribute of admiration, sought to conceal his perturbation with a stern command:

"Now, madam, I will call my orderly and have you escorted to a stateroom; have you provided with everything needful for your injury. I trust it is not causing you any severe pain?"

"Pray don't waste any time or thought on any injury of mine, sir!" the woman returned.

"Very well, madam! Resume your disguise!"

She tried to sweep up her magnificent hair and secure it upon her head. But with only one hand available this proved impossible. They both saw there was no way for her to put on the toupee again.

She smiled oddly, with a half-whimsical, wholly feminine bit of malice. Her eyes seemed dancing.

"I'm afraid I can't obey you, sir," she proffered. "You can see for yourself, it can't be done."

A dull, angry flush crept over the Master's rather pale face, and lost itself in the roots of his thick, black hair. Perfectly well he saw that he was being cornered in an untenable position of half-command, half-intimacy. Without apparently exercising any wiles, this woman was none the less involving him in bonds like those the Lilliputians threw round sleeping Gulliver.

Anger welled up in his proud heart that anyone--much less a woman--should thus lower his dignity. But still his manhood dictated courtesy. He came a few steps nearer, and said:

"I must admit this seems rather an embarrassing situation. Frankly, it does not tend to ameliorate the relation between us. You have placed yourself--and me--in a peculiarly compromising position. I must try to meet it.

"Obviously you cannot expect one so unskilled as I, in things feminine, to help you in the capacity of lady's maid. Therefore only one thing remains to do. Instead of calling my orderly, and having him show you your stateroom, I must in some way arrange to get you there, myself."

"That's kind of you, I'm sure," she answered, half in mockery, half in gratitude.

"There I will supply you with medical supplies. In some manner or other you can manage to do up your hair and resume your disguise. You will remain in your stateroom--under arrest--until such time as you are cast loose, tomorrow, in your plane."

"Tomorrow?"

"I should say, sometime before night of the day that has already begun. Food and drink will be brought you, of course."

"That's very good of you, sir." Her smile tantalized. The curt laconicism of her manner, in the masculine role, had changed to the softer ways of womankind. Despite himself, the Master was constrained to admire her ability as an actress.

"Of course you realize," she continued, "that to cast me loose in a plane, with only one serviceable arm, will be equivalent to committing cold-blooded murder."

"A mere detail!"

"A mere detail--to murder a woman?"

"Pardon me, you misunderstand. I mean, the manner in which you are to leave Nissr matters little, so long as you leave. I will see that you are safely landed--that no harm arrives to you.

"But you--shall not remain with us. Now, kindly stay here. Lock the cabin door after I have gone, and admit no one until I return. I will signal you with two triple knocks, thus."

He illustrated the knocks, on the table, and, unlocking the door, left the cabin in a black humor. The sound of the woman locking the door after him, the knowledge that he had been obliged to make up a little code for readmission, angered him as he rarely had been angered.

Self-protection, however, demanded these subterfuges. To let the secret escape, and to be obliged to admit having been deceived by a woman, would fatally lower his prestige with the Legionaries. How could he, if known to be the dupe of a woman, command those hard, bold men?

Humiliated, yet in his heart thankful that no one had yet penetrated the secret--as Dr. Lombardo easily might have done, had he laid forcible hands on "Captain Alden"--the Master set about the necessary task of himself preparing a stateroom and providing the requisite medical supplies.

Lombardo asked no questions. His eyes, however, had grown quizzical. No one else seemed to notice what the Master was about. Each was busy in his own place, at his own task.

Twenty minutes had passed before all was ready and the Master could return to his cabin. He rapped as agreed, and was admitted, feeling his cheeks burn at even the analogy between this clandestine entrance and some vulgar liaison--a thing he scrupulously had avoided all his life.

"Come!" he directed. She followed him. Silently he ushered her into her appointed place. No one had seen them. He followed her into the little stateroom, closed the door, folded his arms and confronted her with a grim face.

"Before leaving you, madam," said he, "I wish to repeat that only your sex has saved you from summary execution. You are guilty of high crimes and misdemeanors, in the code of this expedition--guilty of falsehood and deception that might have introduced fatal complications into my most carefully evolved plan.

"Nevertheless, my code as an officer prohibits any punishment other than this merely nominal arrest. I must offer you temporary hospitality. Moreover, if you need any assistance in dressing your wound, I will give it. Common humanity demands that."

"I don't need anything, thank you," she answered. "I don't ask for anything, but to stay with the Legion."

"That's a point I must positively decline to argue, madam," he informed her, shaking his head. "And, since there is nothing more to say, I wish you a very good night!"

Bowing, he left the stateroom. He heard the door-catch snap. Somehow, in some way as yet inexplicable to him, that sound caused him another discomfort. For the first time in his life he had been having private conversation with a woman--conversation that might almost have been construed as intimate, since it had held secrets. For the first time he had felt himself outwitted by a woman, beaten, made mock of. Now he was being shut away from her.

Inwardly raging as he was, hot, confused, unhorsed, still a strange, fingering insinuation of something agreeable had begun to waken in him. The Master, not understanding it at all, or being able to analyze sensations so foreign to all his previous thought and experience, cut the Gordian knot of puzzlement by roundly cursing himself, by Allah and the Prophet's beard, as a fool. And with a vastly disturbed mind he returned along the white, gleaming corridor--that dipped and swayed with the swift rush of _Nissr_--back to his own cabin.

There he found the buzzer of his little desk-telephone intermittently calling him.

"Yes, hello?" he answered, receiver at ear, as he sat down in the swivel-chair of aluminum with its hydrogen cushion.

The voice of the wireless man, Menendez, reached him. In a soft, Spanish-accented kind of drawl, Menendez said:

"Just picked up two important radios, sir."

"Well? What are they?"

"International Air Board headquarters, in Washington, has been notified of our getaway. They have sent out calls for all air-stations in both America and Europe to put up scout-squadrons to watch for us."

"What else?"

"Two squadrons have been started westward across the Atlantic, already, to capture or destroy us."

"Indeed? Where from?" The Master spoke coldly. This information, far from seeming important to him as it had to Menendez, appeared the veriest commonplace. It was nothing but what he had expected and foreseen. He smiled grimly as he listened to the radio man's answer:

"One squadron has started from Queenstown. The other from the Azores--from St. Michaels."

"Anything else?"

"Well, sir, now and then I can get a few words they're sending from plane to plane--or from plane to headquarters. They mean business. It's capture or kill. They're rating us as pirates."

"Very well. Anything really important?"

"Nothing else, sir."

"Keep me informed, if any real news comes in. But don't disturb me

with trifles!"

The Master hung up the receiver, sat back in his chair and stretched his long, powerful legs under the desk. He set both elbows on the arms of the chair, joined his finger-tips and sank his lips upon them.

"I'd better be rigging that vibratory apparatus before long," he reflected. "But still, there's no immediate hurry. Time enough for all that. Lots of time."

His thoughts wandered from _Nissr_ and the great adventure, from the coming attackers, from the vibratory apparatus, yes from the goal of all this undertaking itself, back to "Captain Alden." The _who_ and _why_, the _whence_ and _whither_ of this strange woman urgently intruded on his mind; nor by any effort of the will could he exclude these thoughts.

For a long time, while _Nissr_ roared away eastward, ever eastward into the night, he sat there, sunk in a profound revery.

"A woman," he whispered, finally, the words lingering on his lips. "A woman, eh? Strange--very strange!"

Resolutely he forced himself to consider the plans he had laid out; his success thus far; the means he meant to take with the attacking squadrons; the consummation of his whole campaign so vast, so overpowering in its scope.

But through it all, persisted other thoughts. And these, he found, he could not put away.

The buzzer of the desk-telephone again recalled him to himself. "Hello, hello?"

"I have to report that a third squadron has been ordered into the air, from Monrovia," announced Menendez.

"Very well! Anything else?"

"No, sir."

The Master hung up the receiver, arose, and seemed to shake himself from the kind of torpor into which his thoughts of the woman had plunged him.

"Enough of this nonsense!" growled he. "There's work to be done--_work_!"

With fresh energy he flung himself into the task of planning how to meet and to repel the three air-fleets now already on the westward wing to capture or annihilate the Flying Legion.

CHAPTER XIV

STORM BIRDS

The first slow light of day, "under the opening eyelids of the morn," found the Master up in the screened observation gallery at the tip of the port aileron. Here were mounted two of the six machine-guns that comprised _Nissr's_ heavier armament; and here, too, were hung a dozen of the wonderful life-preservers--combination anti-gravity turbines and vacuum-belt, each containing a signal-light, a water-distiller and condensed foods--that, invented by Brixton Hewes, soon after the close of the war, had done so much to make air-travel safe.

Major Bohannan was with the Master. Both men, now in uniform, showed little effect of the sleepless night they had passed. Wine of excitement and stern duties to perform, joined with powerful bodies, made sleeplessness and labor trivialities.

For an hour the two had been standing there, wrapped in their long military overcoats, while _Nissr_ had swooped on her appointed ways, with hurtling trajectory that had cleft the dark. Somewhat warmed by piped exhaust-gases though the glass-enclosed gallery had been, still the cold had been marked; for without, in the stupendous gulf of emptiness that had been rushing away beneath and all about them, no doubt the thermometer would have sunk below zero.

Nissr's altitude was now very great, ranging between 17,500 and 21,000 feet, so as to take advantage of the steady eastward setting wind in the higher air-lanes. A hard, frozen moonlight, from the steely disk sinking down the western sky, had slashed ink-black shadows of struts and stanchions across the gallery, and had flung _Nissr's_ larger shadow down the hungering abysses of the sky that yawned beneath.

That shadow had danced and quivered at fantastic speed across dazzling moonlit fields of cloud, ever keeping pace with the Sky Eagle, now leaping across immense and silent drifts of white, now plunging, vanishing into black abysses that showed the ocean spinning backward, ever backward toward the west.

With the coming of dawn, the shadow had faded, and the watchers' eyes had been turned ahead for some first sight of the out-riders of the attacking fleets. Bohannan, a little nervous in spite of his well-seasoned fighting-blood, had smoked a couple of cigars in the sheltered gallery, pacing up and down with coat-collar about his ears and with hands thrust deep in pockets. The Master, likewise muffled, had refused all proffers of tobacco and had contented himself with a few khat leaves.

Silence had, for the most part, reigned between them. Up here in the gallery, conversation was not easy. The hurricane of _Nissr's_ flight shrieked at times with shrill stridor and with whistlings as of a million witches bound for some infernal Sabbath on the Matterhorn. A good deal of vibration and of shuddering whipped the wing-tip, too; all was different, here, from the calm warmth, comfort, and security of the fuselage.

The men seemed standing on the very pinion-feathers of some fabled roc, sweeping through space. Above, below, complete and overwhelming vacancy clutched for them. The human is not yet born who can stand thus upon the tip of such a plane, and feel himself wholly at ease.

As darkness faded, however, and as approaching dawn began to burn its slow way up the stupendous vaults of space above the eastern cloud-battlements--battlements flicked with dull crimson, blood-tinged blotches, golden streaks and a whole phantasmagoria of shifting hues--something of the oppression of night fell from the two men.

"Well, we're still carrying on. Things are still going pretty much O.K., sir," proffered the major, squinting into the East--the cold, red East, infinitely vast, empty, ripe with possibilities. "A good start! Close to a thousand miles we've made; engines running to a hair; men all fitting into the jobs like clockwork. Everything all right to a dot, eh?"

The Master nodded silently, keeping dark eyes fixed on the horizon of cloud-rack. Above, the last faint prickings of stars were fading. The moon had paled to a ghostly circle. Shuddering, *Nissr* fled, with vapory horizons seemingly on her own level so that she appeared at the bottom of an infinite bowl. Bohannon, feeling need of speech, tried to be casual as he added:

"I don't feel sleepy. Do you? Seems like I'd never want to sleep again. Faith, this *is* living! You've got us all enthused. And your idea of putting every man-jack in uniform was bully! Nothing like uniforms--even a jumble of different kinds, like ours--to cement men together and give them the *esprit de corps*. If we go through as we've begun--"

The Master interrupted him with a cold glance of annoyance. The Celt's exuberance jarred on his soul. Since the affair with "Captain Alden," the Master's nerves had gone a little raw.

Bohannon rallied bravely.

"Of course," he went on, "it was unfortunate about that New Zealand chap going West. He looked like a right good fellow. But, well--*c'est la guerre!* And I know he wouldn't have chosen a finer grave than the bottom of the Atlantic, where he's sleeping now.

"By the way, how did Alden come out? Much hurt, was he? I know, of course, he didn't go back to the sick-bay. So he couldn't have been badly wounded, or he would be--"

"The Arabs have a saying, my dear fellow," dryly answered the Master, "that one ear is worth ten thousand tongues. Ponder it well!"

The major's look of astonishment annoyed the Master, even while it hurt him. He took scant pleasure in rebuffing this old friend; but certainly "Captain Alden" would not bear discussing. Feeling himself in a kind of *impasse* regarding Alden, and fearing some telltale expression in his eyes, the Master swung up his binoculars and once more swept the cloud-horizons from northeast to southeast.

"We ought to be sighting some of the attackers, before long," judged he. "I'm rather curious to see them--to see flies attacking an eagle. I haven't had a real chance of testing out the neutralizers. Their operation, in actual practice, ought to be interesting."

He tried to speak coldly, impersonally; but he well realized a certain strained quality in his voice. Even now, in the hour of impending

attack, his thoughts could not remain wholly fixed on the enemy which--so the wireless informed him--lay only a little beyond the haze-enshrouded, burning rim of cloudland.

Despite every effort of the will, he kept mentally reverting to the midships port stateroom containing the woman. He could not keep himself from wondering how she was getting on. Her wound, he hoped--he felt confident--could not be serious.

Had it been, of course, the woman would have asked some further aid. And since the moment when he had left her, no word had come to him. More than once, temptation had whispered: "Go to her! She has deceived you, and you are master here. But, above all, you are a man!"

Twice he had all but yielded to this inner voice. But he had not yielded. Another and a sterner voice had said: "She is an interloper. She has no rights. Why give her another thought?"

This voice had prevailed. The Master had told himself only a few hours more remained, at all events, before the woman should be cast off and abandoned in whatever strange land might befall--probably Morocco, or it might be the Spanish colony of Rio de Oro on the western fringes of the Sahara. After that, what responsibility for her safety or her welfare would be his? Why, he had none, even now!

"But, man," the small voice insinuated, "she came to you on an errand of mercy, to nurse and care for such as might fall ill or be wounded. It was not wholly the desire for adventure that led her to deceive you. Her motive was high and fine!"

"A curse on all women!" retorted the other voice. "Away with her!" And this sterner voice again prevailed. Still, at thought that sometime during the day now close at hand he was to see the last of this woman who had stood there before him in his cabin, with dark eyes looking into his, with eager, oval face upturned to his, with all that glory of lustrous hair a flood about her shoulders, something unknown, unwonted, fingered at the latchets of his heart.

He realized that he felt strange, uneasy, uprooted from his sober aplomb. Unknown irritations possessed him. Under his breath he muttered an Arabic cynicism about woman, from the fourth chapter of the Koran: "Men shall have the preeminence above women, because Allah hath caused the one of them to excel the other!"

Then came the philosophical reflection:

"Man, you were seeking new sensations, new experiences, to stir your pulses. This woman has given you many. She has served her purpose. Now let her go!"

Thus, seeming to have reached a certain finality of decision, he dismissed her again from his mind--for perhaps the twentieth time--and with new care once more began studying the gold-edged, shining clouds where now a dull, broad arc of molten metal had burned its way out of the mists.

The Master slid colored ray-filters over his binoculars, to shield his eyes from the direct dazzle of the rising sun, and swept that incandescent arc. Suddenly he drew a sharp intake of breath.

"Sighted something, eh?" demanded the major, already recovered from the snub administered.

"See for yourself, Major, what you make of it! Right in the sun's eye, and off to southward--all along that fantastic, crimson cloud-castle."

Bohannon's gaze narrowed through his own glasses. Bracing his powerful legs against the quivering jar of the aileron, he brushed the horizon into his eager vision. The glasses steadied. There, of a truth, black midges had appeared, coming up over the world's rim like a startled covey of quail.

CHAPTER XV

THE BATTLE OF VIBRATIONS

Two, five, a dozen, now a score of tiny specks dotted the mist, some moving right across the broadening face of the sun itself. As _Nissr's_ flight stormed eastward, and these gnats drove to the west, their total rate of approach must have been tremendous; for even as the men watched, they seemed to find the attackers growing in bulk. And now more and ever more appeared, transpiring from the bleeding vapors of dawn.

"Looks like business, sir!" exclaimed the Celt, his jaw hard.

"Business, yes."

"Bad business for us, eh?"

"It might be, if we had only the usual means of defense. Under ordinary circumstances, our only game would be to turn tail and run for it, or cut away far to the south--or else break out a white flag and surrender. But--"

"That must be the Azores air-fleet," judged Bohannon. "The others couldn't have made so much westing, in this time. Faith, what a buzzing swarm of mosquitoes! I had no idea there were that many planes on the Azores International Air Board station!"

"There are many things you have no idea of, Major," replied the Master, sharply. "That, however, is immaterial. Yes, here come the fringes of attack, all right enough. I estimate forty or fifty in sight, already; and there must be a few hundred back of those, between here and land, north and south. Technically, we're pirates, you know."

"Pirates?" demanded the major, lowering his glass.

The Master nodded.

"Yes," he answered. "That's what the wireless tells us. We'll get short shrift if--my apparatus fails."

"How do they make us out pirates?" Bohannon ejaculated. It was not

fear that looked from his blue eyes, but a vast astonishment. His ruddy face, amazed under the now strengthening light of day, brought a smile to the Master's lips.

"What else are we, my dear fellow?" the Master queried. "To seize a ship--a water-ship or one of the air matters nothing--and to overpower the crew, kill or wound a few, throw them outboard and sail away, comes pretty near constituting piracy. Of course the air-rules and laws aren't wholly settled yet; but we're in a fair way of giving the big-wigs a whacking precedent to govern the future. I fancy a good many cases will be judged as _per_ the outcome of this expedition.

"We're pirates all right--if they catch us. And they _will_ catch us if they get within gunshot. The next few minutes will settle that question of whether they're going to, or not!"

"Nice, comforting prospect!" muttered the Celt. "What do they do with pirates, anyhow, these days? They can't hang us at the yard-arm, because airships don't have 'em. Of course they might stage a hanging-bee with this Legion dangling from the wings, but that would be pretty hard to manage. It'll be shooting, eh?"

"Probably, if my neutralizer fails."

"You're cheerful about it! The neutralizer may be all right, in its way, but personally I'm rather strong for these!" He laid a hand on the breech of the Lewis machine-gun mounted in the gallery, its grim muzzle pointed out through a slit in the colloid screen. "The six guns we've got aboard, in strategic positions, look like good medicine to _me_! Wouldn't it be the correct thing to call the gun-crews and limber up a little? These chaps aren't going to be all day in getting here, and when they do--"

"I admire your spirit, Major," interrupted the other, with undertones of mockery, "but it's of the quality that, after all, can't accomplish anything. It's the kind that goes against artillery with rifles. Six guns against perhaps six hundred--and we're not built for rapid maneuvering. That swarm could sting us a thousand times while we were giving them the first round. No, no, there's nothing for it now, but the neutralizer!"

"My will is made, anyhow," growled Bohannan. "Faith, I'm glad it is!"

The Master gave no reply, but took from the rail the little phone that hung there, and pressed a button, four times. He cupped the receiver at his ear.

"You, Enemark?" asked he, of the man at the neutralizer far down in the penetralia of the giant air-liner. "Throw in the first control. Half-voltage, for three minutes. Then three-quarters, for two; and then full, with all controls. Understand?"

"Yes, sir!" came the crisp voice of Enemark. "Perfectly!"

The Master hung up the receiver, and for a moment stood brooding. An intruding thought had once more forced itself into his brain--a thought of "Captain Alden." In case of capture or destruction, what of the woman? Something very like a pang of human emotion pierced his heart. Impatiently he thrust the thought aside, and turned with a

quiet smile to Bohannan.

The major, red with excitement and impatience, still had a hand on the machine-gun. He was patting it slightly, his face eloquent of longing and regret.

"Still pinning your faith to steel-jacketed streams of bullets, are you, as against ion-jacketed streams of vibrations?" the Master rallied him. "We shall see, immediately, whether you're right or I am! Bullets are all well enough in their place, Major, but electrons are sometimes necessary. Vibrations, Major--I pin my faith to vibrations."

"Vibrate all you want to!" exclaimed the Celt, irefully, his eyes on the thickening swarm of flyers, some of them now plainly visible in detail against the aching smears of color flung across the eastern reaches of cloudland. "Vibrate away; but give me this!" He fondled the gleaming gun as if it had been a pet. "I tell you frankly, if I were in charge here, I'd let the vibrations go to Hell and begin pumping lead. I'd have all gun-crews at stations, and the second we got in range I'd open with all six Lewises!"

"Yes, and Nissr would go crumpling down, a minute later, a blazing sieve fore-and-aft--wings, tanks, fuselage, everything riddled with thousands of bullets. Vibration is the trick, I tell you. It's everything.

"All life is vibration. When it ceases, that is death--and even dead matter vibrates. All our senses depend on vibration. Everything we feel, see, hear, taste, comes to our knowledge through vibrations. And the receptive force in us is vibration, too. The brain is just one great, central ganglion for the taking in of vibrations.

"The secret of life, of the universe itself, is vibration. If we understood all about that, the cosmos would have no secrets from us. So now--ah, see there, will you? See, Major, and be convinced!"

He pointed eastward, into the blazing sunrise. The out-fling of his arm betrayed more human emotion than he had yet shown. Exultation leaped to his usually impassive eyes. Surely, had not this expedition--which he had hoped would give surcease from ennui and stir the pulses--had it not already yielded dividends? Had it not already very richly repaid him?

"See there, now!" he cried again, and gripped the rail with nervous hands.

"Lord above!" ejaculated the major, squinting through his binoculars.

"Astonished, eh?" demanded the Master, smiling with malice. "Didn't think it would work, did you? Well, which do you choose now, Major--bullets or vibrations?"

"This--this is extraordinary!" exclaimed Bohannan. His glasses traveled to and fro, sweeping the fringelike fan of the attackers, still five or six miles away. "Faith, but this is--"

The binoculars lowered slowly, as Bohannan watched a falling plane.

Everywhere ahead there in the brazier of the dawn, as the two men stood watching from the wind-lashed gallery of the on-roaring liner, attackers were dropping. All along the line they had begun to fall, like ripe fruit in a hurricane.

Not in bursts of flame did they go plunging down the depths, gyrating like mad comets with long smoke-trailers and redly licking manes of fire. Not in shattered fragments did they burst and plumb the abyss. No; quite intact, unharmed, but utterly powerless they fell.

Some spiraled down, like dead leaves twirling in autumnal breezes, with drunken yaws and pitches. Others in long slants volplaned toward the hidden sea, miles below the cloud-plain. A few pitched over and over, or slid away in nose-dives and tail-spins. But one and all, as they crossed what seemed an invisible line drawn out there ahead of the onrushing Eagle of the Sky, bowed to some mysterious force.

It seemed almost as if _Nissr_ were the center of a vast sphere that moved with her--a sphere through which no enemy could pass--a sphere against the intangible surface of which even the most powerful engines of the air dashed themselves in vain.

And still, as others and still others came charging up to the attack like knights in joust, they fell. One by one the white wool cushions of the cloud, gold-broidered by the magic needles of the sun, received them. One by one they faded, vanished, were no more.

So, all disappeared. Between a hundred and a hundred and twenty-five planes were silently, swiftly, resistlessly sent down in no more than twenty minutes, while the watchers stood there in the gallery, fascinated by the wondrous precision and power of this new and far-outflung globe of protection.

And again the blood-red morning sky grew clear of attackers. Again, between high heaven's black vault and the fantastic continent of cloud below, nothing remained but free vacancy. The Master smiled.

"Vibrations, my dear Major!" said he. "Neutralize the currents delivered by the magnetos of hostile planes to their spark-plugs, and you transform the most powerful engines into inert matter. Not all the finely adjusted mechanism in the world, nor the best of petrol, nor yet the most perfect skill is worth _that_, with a snap of the strong fingers, "when the spark dies.

"My device is the absolute ruler of whatever spark I direct it against. Our own ignition is screened; but all others within the critical radius become impotent. So you recognize, do you not, the uselessness of machine-guns? The groundlessness of any fears about the Air Patrol's forces?"

"Lord, but this is wonderful!" Bohannon ejaculated. "If we'd only had this in the Great War, the Hun would have been wiped out in a month!"

"Yes, but we didn't have it," the Master smiled. "I've just finished perfecting it. Put the last touches on it hardly twenty-four hours ago. If there's ever another war, though--ah, see there, now! Here comes one lone, last attacker!"

He pointed. Far at the edge of empty cloudland, now less blood-stained

and becoming a ruddy pink under the risen sun, a solitary aerial jousting had grown visible.

The last attacker appeared a feeble gnat to dance thus alone in the eye of morning. That one plane should, unaided, drive on at _Nissr's_ huge, rushing bulk, seemed as preposterous as a mosquito trying to lance a rhinoceros. The major directed a careful lens at this survivor.

"He has his nerve right in his baggage with him," announced the Celt. "Sure, he's 'there.' There can be no doubt he's seen the others fall. Yet--what now? He's turning tail, eh? He's on the run?"

"Not a bit of it! He's driving straight ahead. That was only a dip and turn, for better air. Ah, but he's good, that fellow! There's a man after my own heart, Major. Maybe there's more than one, aboard that plane. But there's one, anyhow, that's a real man!"

The Master pondered a moment, then again picked up the phone.

"Enemark?" he called. "That you?"

"Hello! Yes, sir! What orders, sir?"

"Cut off the ray! Quick, there!"

"Yes, sir!" And through the phone the Master heard the _snick_ of a switch being hastily thrown.

"What's the idea, now?" demanded the major, astonished. "Going to let that plane close in on us, and maybe riddle us?"

The Master smiled, as he made answer:

"I'll chance the bullets, this time. There's a _man_ on board that plane. A _man_! And we--need men!"

The Master smiled, as he made answer:

"I'll chance the bullets, this time. There's a man on board that plane. A man! And we--need men!"

CHAPTER XVI

LECLAIR, ACE OF FRANCE

Swooping, rising, falling like a falcon in swift search of quarry, the last plane of the Azores squadron swept in toward the on-rushing Eagle of the Sky.

Undismayed by the swift, inexplicable fall of all its companions, it still thrust on for the attack. In a few minutes it had come off the port bows of the giant air-liner, no more than half a mile distant. Now the watchers saw it, slipping through some tenuous higher cloud-banks that had begun to gather, a lean, swift, wasplike

speedster: one of the Air Control Board's--the A.C.B.'s--most rapid aerial police planes. The binoculars of the Master and Bohannan drew the machine almost to fingers' touch.

"Only one man aboard her, with a machine-gun," commented the Master, eyes at glass, as he watched the flick of sunlight on the attacker's fuselage, the dip and glitter of her varnished wings, the blur of her propellers. Already the roaring of her exhaust gusted down to them.

"Ah, see? She's turning, now. Banking around! We may catch a burst of machine-gun fire, in a minute. Or, no--she's coming up on our tail, Major. I think she's going to try and board us!"

"You going to let her?" protestingly demanded Bohannan. His hand twitched against the butt of the Lewis. "In two seconds I could sight an aft gun, sir, and blow that machine Hell-for-leather!"

"No, no--let that fellow come aboard, if he wants," the Master commanded. And with eager curiosity in his dark eyes, with vast wonder what manner of human this might be who--all alone after having seen more than a hundred comrades plunge--still ventured closing to grips, the Master watched.

The air-wasp was already swerving, making a spiral glide, coming up astern with obvious intentions. As the two men watched--and as a score of other eyes, from other galleries and ports likewise observed--the lean wasp carried out her driver's plan. With a sudden, plunging swoop, she dived at the Eagle of the Sky for all the world like a hawk stooping at quarry.

A moment she kept pace with the air-liner's whirring rush. She hovered, dropped with a wondrous precision that proved her rider's consummate skill, made a perfect landing on the long take-off that stretched from rudders to wing observation galleries, atop the liner.

Forward on _Nissr_ the wasp ran on her small, cushioned wheels. She stopped, with jammed-on brakes, and came to rest not forty feet abaft the Eagle's beak.

Quite at once, without delay, the little door of the pilot-pit in the wasp's head swung wide, and a heavily-swaddled figure clambered out. This figure stood a moment, peering about through goggles. Then with a free, quick stride, he started forward toward the gallery where he had seen Bohannan and the Master.

The two awaited him. Confidently he came into the wind-shielded gallery on top of _Nissr's_ port plane. He advanced to within about six feet, stopped, gave the military salute--which they both returned--and in a throaty French that marked him as from Paris, demanded:

"Which of you gentlemen is in command, here?"

"_Moi, monsieur!_" answered the Master, also speaking French. "And what is your errand?"

"I have come to inform you, in the name of the A.C.B.'s law, recognized as binding by all air-traffic, that you and your entire crew are under arrest."

"Indeed? And then--"

"I am to take charge of this machine at once, and proceed with it as per further instructions from International Aerial headquarters at Washington."

"Very interesting news, no doubt," replied the Master, unmoved. "But I cannot examine your credentials, nor can we negotiate matters of such importance in so off-hand a manner. This gallery will not serve. Pray accompany me to my cabin?"

"_Parfaitement, monsieur!_ I await your pleasure!"

The stranger's gesture, his bow, proclaimed the Parisian as well as his speech. The Master nodded. All three proceeded in silence to the hooded companion-way at the forward end of the take-off, that sheltered the ladder. This they descended, to the main corridor.

There they paused, a moment.

"Major," said the Master, "pardon me, but I wish to speak to our--guest, alone. You understand."

The major's glance conveyed a world of indignant protest, but he obeyed in silence. When he had withdrawn into the smoke-room, where a brooding pipe would ill divert his mind from various wild speculations, the Master slid open his own cabin door, and extended a hand of welcome toward it.

"_Après vous, monsieur!_" said he.

The A.C.B. officer entered, his vigorous, compact figure alive with energy, intelligence. The Master followed, slid the door shut and motioned to a chair beside the desk. This chair, of metal, was itself placed upon a metal plate. The plate was new. At our last sight of the cabin, it had not been there.

Taking off goggles and gauntlets, and throwing open his sheepskin jacket, the Frenchman sat down. The Master also plate was new. At our last sight of the cabin, it had not been there.

Taking off goggles and gauntlets, and throwing open his sheepskin jacket, the Frenchman sat down. The Master also sat down at the desk. A brief silence, more pregnant than any speech, followed. Each man narrowly appraised the other. Then said the newcomer, still in that admirable French of his:

"You understand, of course, _n'est-ce pas?_ that it is useless to offer any resistance to the authority of the A.C.B."

"May I take the liberty of inquiring what your credentials may be, and with whom I have the great pleasure of speaking?" returned the Master. His eyes, mirroring admiration, peered with some curiosity at the dark, lean face of the Frenchman.

"I," answered the other, "am Lieutenant Andre Leclair, formerly of the French flying forces, now a commander in the International Air Police."

"Leclair?" demanded the Master quickly, his face lighting with a glad surprise. "Leclair, of the Mesopotamian campaign? Leclair, the world-famous ace?"

"Leclair, nothing else. I deprecate the adjectives."

The Master's hand went out. The other took it. For a moment their grip held, there under the bright white illumination of the cabin--for, though daylight had begun fingering round the drawn curtains, the glow-lamps still were burning.

The hand-clasp broke. Leclair began:

"As for you, monsieur, I already know you, of course. You are--"

The Master raised a palm of protest.

"Who I am does not matter," said he. "I am not a man, but an idea. My personality does not count. All that counts is the program, the plan I stand for.

"Many here do not even know my name. No man speaks it. I am quite anonymous; quite so. Therefore I pray you, keep silent on that matter. What, after all, is the significance of a name? You are an ace, an officer. So am I."

"True, very true. Therefore I more keenly regret the fact that I must place you under arrest, and that charges of piracy in the high air must be lodged against you."

"Thank you for the regret, indeed," answered the Master dryly. Save for the fact that this strange man never laughed and seldom smiled, one would have thought the odd twinkle in his eye prefaced merriment. "Well, what now?"

The Frenchman produced a silver cigarette-case, opened it and extended it toward the man now technically his prisoner. As yet he had said no word concerning the tremendous execution done the air police forces. His offer of the cigarettes was as calm, as courteous as if they two had met under circumstances of the most casual amity. The Master waved the cigarettes away.

"Thank you, no," said he. "I never smoke. But you will perhaps pardon me if I nibble two or three of these khat leaves. You yourself, from your experience in Oriental countries, know the value of khat."

"I do, indeed," said the other, his eyes lighting up.

"And may I offer you a few leaves?"

"_Merci_! I thank you, but tobacco still satisfies." The Frenchman lighted his cigarette, blew thin smoke, and cast intelligent, keen eyes about the cabin. Said he:

"You will not, of course, offer any resistance. I realize that I am here among a large crew of men. I am all alone, it is true. You could easily overpower me, throw me into the sea, and _voila_--I die. But that would not be of any avail to you.

"Already perhaps a hundred and fifty air police have fallen this morning. It is strange. I do not understand, but such is the fact. Nevertheless, I am here, myself. I have survived--survived, to convey organized society's message of arrest. Individuals do not count. They are only representatives of the mass-power of society. _N'est-ce pas?_"

"Quite correct. And then--"

"Sooner or later you must land somewhere for petrol, you know. For _essence_, eh? Just as sea-pirates were wiped out by the coming of steam-power, which they had to adopt and which forced them to call at ports for coal, so air-pirates will perish because they must have essence. That is entirely obvious. Have I the honor of your signed surrender, my dear sir, including that of all your men?"

"Just one question, please!"

"A thousand, if you like," smiled the Parisian, inhaling smoke. His courtesy was perfect, but the glint of his eye made one think of a tiger that purrs, with claws ready to strike.

"What," demanded the Master, "is your opinion of the peculiar and sudden fall of all your companions?"

"I have no opinion as to that. Strange air-currents, failure of ignition due to lack of oxygen--how do I know? A thousand things may happen in the air."

"Not to more than a hundred planes, all in a half-hour."

The Frenchman shrugged indifferent shoulders and smiled.

"It does not signify, in the least," he murmured. "I am here. That suffices."

"Do you realize that I, perhaps, have forces at my command which may negative ordinary conditions and recognized laws?"

"Nothing can negative the forces of organized society. I repeat my request, _monsieur_, for your unconditional written surrender."

The Master's hand slid over the desk and rested a moment on a button there. A certain slight tremor passed through the Frenchman's body. Into his eyes leaped an expression of wonder, of astonishment. His mouth quivered, as if he would have spoken; but he remained dumb. The hand that held his cigarette, resting on his knee, relaxed; the cigarette fell, smoldering, to the metal plate. And on the instant the fire in it died, extinguished by some invisible force.

"Are you prepared to sign a receipt for this airship, if I deliver her over to you, sir?" demanded the Master, still speaking in French. He smiled oddly.

No answer. A certain swelling of the Frenchman's throat became visible, and his lips twitched slightly, but no sound was audible. A dull flush mounted over his bronzed cheek.

"Ah, you do not answer?" asked the other, with indulgent patronage. "I assume, however, that you have the authority to accept my surrender and that of my crew. I assume, also, that you are willing to sign for the airship." He opened a drawer, took a paper, and on it wrote a few words. These he read over carefully, adding a comma, a period.

Leclair watched him with fixed gaze, struggling against some strange paralysis that bound him with unseen cords of steel. The Frenchman's eyes widened, but remained unblinking with a sort of glazed fixity. The Master slid the paper toward him on the desk.

"_Voila, monsieur!_" said he. "Will you sign this?"

A shivering tremor of the Frenchman's muscles, as the ace sat there so strangely silent and motionless, betrayed the effort he was making to rise, to lift even a hand. Beads of sweat began to ooze on his forehead; veins to knot there. Still he remained seated, without power to speak or move.

"What? You do not accept?" asked the Master, frowning as with puzzlement and displeasure. "But, _allons donc!_ this is strange indeed. Almost as strange as the fact that your whole air-squadron, with the sole exception of your own plane, was dropped through the clouds.

"I have no wish unnecessarily to trouble your mind. Let me state the facts. Not one of those machines was precipitated into the sea. No life was lost. Ah, that astonishes you?"

The expression in the Frenchman's face betrayed intense amazement, through his eyes alone. The rest of his features remained almost immobile. The Master smiling, continued:

"The fleet was dropped to exactly one thousand feet above the sea. There the inhibition on the engines was released and the engines began functioning again. So no harm was done. But not one of those machines can rise again higher than one thousand feet until I so choose.

"They are all hopelessly outdistanced, far down there below the cloud-floor. Midges could catch a hawk as readily as _they_ could overhaul this Eagle of the Sky.

"Nowhere within a radius of twenty-five miles can any of those planes rise to our level. This is curious, but true. In the same way, on much the same principle, though through a very different application of it, you cannot speak or move until I so desire. All your voluntary muscles are completely, even though temporarily, paralyzed. The involuntary ones, which carry on your vital processes, are untouched.

"In one way, _monsieur_, you are as much alive as ever. In another you are almost completely dead. Your fleet has enjoyed the distinction of having been the very first to serve as the object of a most important experiment. Likewise, your own person has had the honor of serving as material for another experiment, equally important--an experiment whose effect on your body is similar to that of the first one on the air-fleet.

"You can hear me, perfectly. You can see me. I ask you to watch me closely. Then consider, if you please, the matter of placing me under

arrest."

His hand touched a small disk near the button he had first pressed; a disk of some strange metal, iridescent, gleaming with a peculiar greenish patina that, even as one watched it, seemed to blend into other shades, as an oil-scum transmutes its hues on water.

Now a faint, almost inaudible hum began to make itself heard. This hum was not localized. One could not have told exactly whence it came. It filled the cabin with a kind of soft murmuring that soothed the senses like the drowsy undertone of bees at swarm.

For a moment nothing happened. Then the pupils of Leclair's eyes began to dilate with astonishment. Immovable though he still remained, the most intense wonder made itself apparent in his look. Even something akin to fear was mirrored in his gaze. Again his lips twitched. Though he could form no word, a dry, choking gasp came from his throat.

And there was cause for astonishment; yes, even for fear. A thing was beginning to take place, there in the brightly lighted cabin of _Nissr_, such as man's eye never yet had beheld.

The Master was disappearing.

CHAPTER XVII

MIRACLES, SCOURGE OF FLAME

His form, sitting there at the desk--his face wearing an odd smile--had already begun to grow less distinct. It seemed as if the light surrounding him had faded, though everywhere else in the cabin it still gleamed with its accustomed brilliance. And as this light around him began to blur into a russet dimness, forming a sort of screen between him and visibility, the definition of his outlines began to melt away.

The Master still remained visible, as a whole; but the details of him were surely vanishing. And as they vanished, faintly a high-light, a shadow, a bit of metal-work showed through the space where he sat. He seemed a kind of dissolving cloud, through which now more and more clearly objects beyond him could be distinguished. Impossible though this seemed, it was indubitably true.

As he disappeared, he kept speaking. The effect of that undiminished voice, calm, slow, resonant, issuing from that disintegrating vapor, stirred the hair on the captive Frenchman's neck and scalp.

"Vibration, _mon cher monsieur_," said he, "is everything. According to the researches of the Ecole Polytechnique, in Paris--no doubt you, yourself, have studied there, _n'est-ce pas?_--vibration of the first octave from 2 to 8 per second, give us no sense-impression. From the fourth to the fifteenth octave, 16 to 32,768 per second, we get sound. The qualities of the 16th to the 24th are--or have been, until I investigated--quite unknown. The 25th to the 35th, 33, 554, 432 to 34, 859, 738, 868 vibrations per second, give us electricity. Thence to

the 45th, again unknown.

"The 4th to the 48th give us heat. The 49th gives light The 50th, chemical rays, vibrating 1, 125, 899, 906, 842, 624 per second. The 51st to the 57th have never been touched by anyone save myself. The X-ray group extends from the 58th to the 61st octave. The 62d, with 4, 611, 686, 427, 889, 904 vibrations per second, is a field where only I have worked. And beyond these, no doubt, other octaves extend with infinite possibilities.

"You will note, _monsieur_," he continued, while the dun penumbra still more and more withdrew him from Leclair's sight, "that great lacunae exist in the scale of vibratory phenomena. Some of the so-called lower animals take cognizance of vibrations that mean nothing to us. Insects hear notes far above our dull ears. Ants are susceptible to lights and colors unseen to our limited eyes. The emperor-moth calls its mate--so says Fabre--by means of olfactory vibrations totally uncomprehended by us. The universe is full of hues, tones, radiant phenomena that escape us, because our senses are not attuned to them."

Steadily he spoke, and steadily the humming drone that filled the cabin kept its undertones that lulled, that soothed. The Frenchman, staring, hardly breathed. Rigid he sat and pale, with sweat now slowly guttering down his face, his jaws clamped hard and white.

"If the true nature of the universe could suddenly be revealed to our senses," went on the Master, now hardly more than a dull blur, "we could not survive. The crash of cosmic sound, the blaze of strange lights, the hurricane forces of tempestuous energies sweeping space would blind, deafen, shrivel, annihilate us like so many flies swept into a furnace. Nature has been kind; she has surrounded us with natural ray-filters of protection."

His voice now seemed issuing from a kind of vacancy. Save for a slight darkening of the air, nothing was visible of him. He went on:

"With our limited senses we are, in a way, merely peeping out of little slits in an armored conning-tower of life, out at the stupendous vibratory battles of the cosmos. Other creatures, in other planets, no doubt have other sense-organs to absorb other vibratory ranges. Their life-experiences are so different from ours that we could not possibly grasp them, any more than a blind man could understand a painting.

"Nor could those creatures understand human life. We are safe in our own little corner of the universe, comfortably sheltered in our vestments of clay. And what we cannot understand, though it is all perfectly natural, we call religion, the supernatural, God."

From a great vacancy, the Master's words proceeded. Leclair, tugging in vain at the bonds that, invisible yet strong as steel, held him powerless, stared with wild eyes.

"There is no supernatural," said the now disembodied voice. "What we call spirit, psychic force, hypnosis, spiritualism, the fourth dimension, is really only life on another scale of vibration. If we could see the whole scale, we would recognize it as a vast, coherent, perfectly natural and rational whole, in which we human beings fill

but a very insignificant part. That, monsieur, is absolutely true!

"I have investigated, I have ventured along the coasts of the unknown vibratory sea, and even sailed out a little way on the waters of that unknown, mysterious ocean. Yet even I know nothing. What you are beholding now is simply a slightly new form of vibratory effect. The force that is holding you paralyzed on that chair is still another. A third, sent down the air-squadron. And--there are many more.

"I am not really vanishing. That is but an illusion of your senses, unable to penetrate the screen surrounding me. I am still here, as materially as ever. Illusion, _mon cher monsieur_, yet to you very real!"

The voice seemed moving about. The Frenchman now perceived something like a kind of moving blur in the cabin. It appeared a sort of hole of darkness, in the light; and yet the light shone through it, too.

Every human eye has a blind spot in the retina. When things pass over this blind spot, they absolutely vanish; the other eye supplies the missing object. To the French ace it seemed that his eyes were all blind spots, so far as the Master was concerned. The effect of this vacancy moving about, shifting a chair, stirring a book, speaking to him like a spirit disembodied, its footfalls audible but its own self invisible, chilled the captive's blood. The Master said:

"Now I have totally disappeared from your eye or any other material eye. I cannot even see myself! No doubt dwellers on some other planet would perceive me by some means we cannot imagine. Yet I am materially here. You feel my touch, now, on your shoulder. See, now I put out the lights; now I draw aside this curtain, and admit the golden morning radiance. You see that radiance, but you do not see me.

"A miracle? _Pas du tout!_ Nothing but an application of perfectly natural laws. And so--well, now let us come back to the matter under discussion. You have come hither to arrest me, _monsieur_. What do you think of arresting me, now? I am going to leave that to your own judgment."

His voice approached the desk. The chair moved slightly, and gave under his weight. Something touched the button on the desk. Something pressed the iridescent metal disk. The humming note sank, faded, died away.

Gradually a faint haze gathered in the chair. Dim, brownish fog congealed there. The chair became clouded with it; and behind that chair objects grew troubled, turbid, vague.

The ace felt inhibitions leaving him. His eyes began to blink; his half-opened mouth closed with a snap; a long, choking groan escaped his lips.

"_Nom de Dieu_" he gulped, and fell weakly to rubbing his arms and legs that still prickled with a numb tingling. "_Mais, nom de Dieu!_"

The Master, now swiftly becoming visible, stood up again, smiled, advanced toward his guest--or prisoner, if you prefer.

A moment he stood there, till every detail had grown as clear as before this astounding demonstration of his powers. Then he stretched forth his hand.

"Leclair," said he, in a voice of deep feeling, "I know and appreciate you for a man of parts, of high courage and devotion to duty in the face of almost certain death. The manner in which you came ahead, even after all your companions had fallen--in which you boarded us, with the strong probability of death confronting you, proves you the kind of man who wins and keeps respect among fighting men.

"If you still desire my arrest and the delivery to you of this air-liner, I am at your complete disposal. You have only to sign the receipt I have already written. If--" and for a moment the Master paused, while his dark eyes sought and held the other's, "if, _monsieur_, you desire to become one of the Flying Legion, and to take part in the greatest adventure ever conceived by the mind of man, in the name of all the Legion I welcome you to comradeship!"

"_Dieu_!" choked the lieutenant, gripping the Master's hand. "You mean that I--I--"

"Yes, that you can be one of us."

"Can that be true?"

"It is!"

The Master's right hand closed firmly on Leclair's. The Master's other hand went out and gripped him by the shoulder.

To his feet sprang the Frenchman. Though still shaken and trembling, he drew himself erect. His right hand loosened itself from the Master's; it went to his aviator's helmet in a sharp salute.

"_J'y suis! J'y reste!_" cried he. "_Mon capitaine!_"

The day passed uneventfully, at high altitudes, steadily rushing into the eye of the East. In the stillness and solitude of the upper air-lanes, _Nissr_ roared onward, invincibly, with sun and sky above, with shining clouds piled below in swiftly retreating masses that spun away to westward.

Far below, sea-storm and rain battled over the Atlantic. Upborne on the wings of the eastward-setting wind, _Nissr_ felt nothing of such trivialities. Twice or thrice, gaps in the cloud-veil let dim ocean appear to the watchers in the glass observation pits; and once they spied a laboring speck on the waters--a great passenger-liner, worrying toward New York in heavy weather. The doings of such, and of the world below, seemed trivial to the Legionaries as follies of dazed insects.

No further attack was made on _Nissr_, nor was anything seen of any other air-squadron of International Police. The wireless picked up, however, a cross-fire of dazed, uncomprehending messages being hurled east and west, north and south--messages of consternation, doubt, anger.

The world, wholly at a loss to understand the thing that had come upon

it, was listening to reports from the straggling Azores fleet as it staggered into various ports. Every continent already was buzzing with alarm and rage. In less than eighteen hours the calm and peaceful ways of civilization had received an epoch-making jar. All civilization was by the ears--it had become a hornet's nest prodded by a pole no one could understand or parry.

And the Master, sitting at his desk with reports and messages piling up before him, with all controls at his finger-tips, smiled very grimly to himself.

"If they show such hysteria at just the initial stages of the game," he murmured, "what will they show when--"

The Legion had already begun to fall into well-disciplined routine, each man at his post, each doing duty to the full, whether that duty lay in pilot-house or cooks' galley, in engine-room or pit, in sick-bay or chartroom. The gloom caused by the death and burial at sea of Travers, the New Zealander, soon passed. This was a company of fighting men, inured to death in every form. And death they had reckoned as part of the payment to be made for their adventuring. This, too, helped knit the fine mass-spirit already binding them together into a coherent, battling group.

A little after two in the afternoon, _Nissr_ passed within far sight of the Azores, visible in cloud-rifts as little black spots sown on the waters like sparse seeds on a burnished plate of metal. This habitation of man soon slipped away to westward, and once more nothing remained but the clear, cold severity of space, with now and then a racing drift of rain below, and tumbling, stormy weather all along the sea horizons.

The Master and Bohannon spent some time together after the Azores had been dropped astern and off the starboard quarter. "Captain Alden" remained in her cabin. She reported by phone, however, that the wound was really only superficial, through the fleshy upper part of the left arm. If this should heal by first intention, as it ought, no complications were to be expected.

Day drew on toward the shank of the afternoon. The sun, rayless, round, blue-white, lagged away toward the west, seeming to sway in high heaven as _Nissr_ took her long dips with the grace and swiftness of a flying falcon. Some time later the cloud-masses thinned and broke away, leaving the world of waters spread below in terrible immensity.

As the African coast drew near, its arid influences banished vapor. Now, clear to the up-curving edge of the world, nothing could be seen below save the steel-gray, shining plains of water. Waves seemed not to exist. All looked smooth and polished as a mirror of bright metal.

At last, something like dim veils of whiteness began to draw and shimmer on the eastern skyline--the vague glare of the sun-crisped Sahara flinging its furnace ardor to the sky. To catch first sight of land, the Master and Bohannon climbed the ladder again, to the take-off, and thence made their way into the starboard observation gallery. There they brought glasses to bear. Though nothing definite could yet be seen through the shrouding dazzle that swaddled the world's rim, this fore-hint of land confirmed their reckonings of latitude and longitude.

"We can't be more than a hundred and fifty miles west of the Canaries," judged the major. "Sure, we can eat supper tonight in an oasis, if we're so minded--with Ouled Nails and houris to hand round the palm-wine and--"

"You forget, my dear fellow," the Master interrupted, "that the first man who goes carousing with wine or women, dies before a firing-squad. That's not the kind of show we're running!"

"Ah, sure, I did forget!" admitted the Celt. "Well, well, a look at a camel and a palm tree could do no harm. And it won't be long, at this rate, before--"

A sudden, violent concussion, far aft, sent a quivering shudder through the whole fabric of the giant liner. Came a swift burst of flame; black, greasy smoke gushed from the stern, trailing on the high, cold air. Long fire-tongues, banners of incandescence, flailed away, roaring into space.

Shouts burst, muffled, from below. A bell jangled madly. The crackle of pistol-fire punched dully through the rushing swiftness.

With a curse the major whirled. Frowning, the Master turned and peered. _Nissr_, staggering, tilted her beak sharply oceanward. At a sick angle, she slid, reeling, toward the burnished, watery floor that seemed surging up to meet her.

A hoarse shout from the far end of the take-off drew the Master's eyes thither. With strange agility, almost apelike in its prehensile power, a human figure came clambering up over the outer works, clutching at stays, wires, struts.

Other shouts echoed thinly in the rarefied, high air. The climber laughed with savage mockery.

"I've done for _you_!" he howled exultantly. "Fuel-tanks afire--you'll all go to Hell blazing when they explode! But first--I'll get the boss pirate of the outfit--"

Swiftly the clutching figure scrambled in over the rail, dropped to the metal plates of the take-off--now slanting steeply down and forward--and broke into a staggering run directly toward the gallery where stood Bohannan and the Master.

At the little ladder-housing sounded a warning shout. The head and shoulders of Captain Alden became visible there. In Alden's right hand glinted a service-revolver.

But already the attacker--the stowaway--had snatched a pistol from his belt. And, as he plunged at full drive down the take-off platform, he thrust the pistol forward.

Almost at point-blank range, howling maledictions, he hurled a murderous fusillade at the Master of the now swiftly falling Eagle of the Sky.

CHAPTER XVIII

"CAPTAIN ALDEN" MAKES GOOD

The crash of shattered glass mingled with the volley flung by the murderously spitting automatic of the stowaway. From the forward companion, at the top of the ladder, "Captain Alden" fired--one shot only.

No second shot was needed. For the attacker, grunting, lunged forward, fell prone, sprawled on the down-slanting plates of the take-off platform. His pistol skidded away, clattering, over the buffed metal.

"As neat a shot as the other's was bad," calmly remarked the Master, brushing from his sleeve some glittering splinters of glass. A lurch of _Nissr_ threw him against the rail. He had to steady himself there, a moment. Down his cheek, a trickle of blood serpented. "Yes, rather neat," he approved.

He felt something warm on his face, put up his hand and inspected red fingers.

"Hm! A sliver from that broken shield must have cut me," said he, and dismissed it wholly from his mind.

Major Bohannon, with chromatic profanity, ran from the gallery. "Captain Alden" drew herself up the top rounds of the ladder, emerged wholly from the companion and likewise started for the wounded interloper. Both, as they ran aft toward the fallen man, zigzagged with the pitch and yaw of the stricken airship, slipped on the plates, staggered up the incline.

And others, from the aft companion, now came running with cries, their bodies backgrounded by the leaping flames and smoke that formed a wake behind the wounded Eagle of the Sky.

Before the major and Alden could reach the stowaway, he rallied. Up to hands and knees he struggled. He dragged himself away to starboard. Trailing blood, he scrambled to the rail.

The major snatched his revolver from its holster. Up came the "Captain's" gun, once more.

"No, no!" the Master shouted, stung into sudden activity. "Not that! Alive--take him alive!"

The stowaway's answer was a laugh of wild derision; a hideous, shrill, tremulous laugh that rose in a kind of devilish, mockery on the air of that high level. For just a second the man hung there, swaying, at the rail. Beyond him, up the tilt of the falling _Nissr_, brighter flames whipped back. Came a burst of smoke, another concussion, a shuddering impact that trembled through the whole vast air-liner. White-hot fire ribboned back and away, shredded into little, whirling gusts of incandescence that dissolved in black smoke.

"Take me alive, eh?" the stowaway shouted, madly. "Ha-ha! I see you! You're all dead men, anyhow! I'll go first--show you I'm not afraid!"

With astonishing agility he leaped. Hands on rail, with a last supreme burst of the energy that innervated his dying body, he vaulted clear. Out and away he hurled himself. Emptiness of space gathered him to its dizzy, vacant horror.

The Master, quite unmindful of the quickening bloodstream down his face and neck, looked sharply--as if impersonally interested in some problem of ballistics--at the spinning, gyrating figure that with grotesque contortions plummeted the depths.

Over and over, whirling with outflung arms and legs, dropped the stowaway. Down though _Nissr_ herself was plunging, he fell faster. Swiftly his body dwindled, shrinking to a dwarf, an antlike thing, a black dot. Far below on the steely sea-plain, a tiny bubble of white leaped out, then faded. That pinpoint of foam was the stowaway's grave.

"Very good," approved the Master, unmoved. He lurched against the rail, as a sudden maneuver of the pilot somewhat flattened out the air-liner's fall. The helicopters began to turn, to buzz, to roar into furious activity, seeking to check the plunge. The major came staggering back. But quicker than he, "Captain Alden" was at the Master's side.

"He shot you?" the woman cried, pointing.

"Bah! A splinter of glass!" And the Master shook off the blood with a twitch of his head. "That was a neat bull's-eye you made on him, Captain. It saves you from punishment for forgetting you were under arrest; for climbing the ladder and coming above-decks. Yes--I've got to rescind my order. You're at liberty. And--"

"And I stay with the expedition, sir?" demanded Alden, her hand going out in an involuntary gesture of appeal. For the first time, she was showing eagerness of a feminine sort. But she suppressed it, instantly, and stood at attention. "If I have done you any service, sir, reward me by letting me stay!"

"I will see. There may be no expedition to stay with. Now--"

"Life-belts, sir? And take to the small planes?" came a voice from the companion-way. The face of Manderson--of him who had found the stowaway--appeared there. Manderson looked anxious, a trifle pale. Aft, more figures were appearing. In spite of the iron discipline of the Legion, signs of disorder were becoming evident. "We're hard hit, sir," Manderson reported. "Every man for himself, now? Orders, sir?"

"My orders are, every man back to his post!" cried the Master, his voice a trumpet-call of resolution. "There'll be no _sauve qui peut_, here!" He laid a hand on the butt of his pistol. "Back, every man of you!"

Came another dull, jarring explosion. _Nissr_ reeled to port. The Legionaries trickled down the companion-ladders. From somewhere below a cry rose: "The aft starboard float--it's gone! And the stabilizer--"

Confused sounds echoed. _Nissr_ sagged drunkenly, lost headway and slewed off her course, turning slowly in the thin, cold air. Her

propellers had been shut off; all the power of her remaining engines had now been clutched into the helicopter-drive.

The Master, indifferently smearing off the blood from his neck, made his way toward the forward companion. He had to hold the rail with one hand, for now the metal plates of the observation gallery were sharply canted. _Nissr_ had got wholly out of control, so far as steerage-way was concerned; but the rate of her fall seemed to have been a trifle checked.

Alden and the major followed their chief to the companion. All three descended the ladder, which hung inward and away from them at a sharp angle. They reached the strangely inclined floor of the main corridor, and, bracing themselves against the port wall, worked their way aft.

Not all the admirable discipline of the Legion could prevent some confusion. Such of the men as were on duty in pilot-house, pits, wireless, or engine-room were all sticking; but a number of off-duty Legionaries were crowding into the main corridor. Among them the Master saw Leclair and Risa. No one showed fear. The white feather was not visible; but a grim tension had developed. Death, imminent, sobers the boldest.

From the engine-room, shouts, orders, were echoing. The engine-room door flung open. Smoke vomited--thick, choking, gray. Auchincloss reeled out, clutching at his throat.

"What chance?" the Master cried, staggering toward him.

"If--the fire spreads to the forward petrol-tanks, none!" gasped the chief engineer. "Aft pit's flooded with blazing oil. Gorlitz--my God!"

"What about Gorlitz?"

"Burned alive--to a crisp! I've got four extinguishers at work. Two engines out of commission. Another only limping! And--"

He crumpled, suddenly, dropping to the metals. The Master saw through the clinging smoke, by the dimmed light of the frosted disks, that the skin of the engineer's face and hands was cooked to a char.

"If he's breathed flame--" began the major. Alden knelt beside him, peered closely, made a significant, eloquent gesture.

"Volunteers!" shouted the Master, plunging forward.

Into the fumes and smother, half a dozen men fought their way. From the bulkheads they snatched down the little fire-grenades. The Master went first. Bohannan was second, with Risa a close third. Leclair in his forward rush almost stumbled over Alden. The "Captain," masked and still unrecognized as a woman by any save the Master, was thrust back from the door by the Celt, as she too tried to enter.

"No, not you!" he shouted. "You, with only one arm--faith, it's worse than useless! Back, you!" Then he and many plunged into the blazing engine-room.

Thus they closed with the fire-devil now licking ravenous tongues about the vitals of _Nissr_.

CHAPTER XIX

HOSTILE COASTS

An hour from that time, the air-liner was drifting sideways at low altitudes, hardly five hundred feet above the waves. A sad spectacle she made, her wreckage gilded by the infinite splendors of the sun now lowering toward the horizon. Her helicopters were droning with all the force that could be flung into them from the crippled power-plant. Her propellers--some charred to mere stumps on their shafts--stood starkly motionless.

Oddly awry she hung, driven slowly eastward by the wind. Her rudder was burned clean off; her stern, warped, reeking with white fumes that drifted on the late afternoon air told of the fury that had blazed about her. Flames no longer roared away; but the teeth of their consuming rage had bitten deep. Where the aft observation pit had been, now only a twisted net of metal-work remained, with all the plate-glass melted and cracked away. The body of Gorlitz, trapped there, had mercifully fallen into the sea. That ghastly thing, at any rate, no longer remained.

Four Legionaries were in the pilot-house: the Master, Bohannon, Leclair, and "Captain Alden." For the most part, they held silence. There was little for them to say. At length the major spoke.

"Still sagging down, eh?" he commented, his eyes on the needle of the altimeter. "Some situation! Two men dead and others injured. Engines crippled, propellers the same, and two floats so damaged we couldn't stay on the surface if we came down. Well, by God!"

Leclair looked very grim.

"I regret only," said he in broken English, "that the stowaway escaped us. Ah, la belle execution, if we had him now!"

The Master, at the starboard window, kept silence. No one sat at the wheel. Of what use could it have been? The Master was looking far to eastward, now with the naked eye, now sweeping the prospect with binoculars. He was studying the African coast, clearly in sight as a long, whitish line of sand with a whiter collar of foamy surf, fifteen miles away.

A few gulls had begun to show--strange, small gulls, yellow-beaked and swift. Off to northward, a native dhow was beating down-wind with full-bellied lateen sail, with matting over its hatches. Heat was beginning to grow intense, for no longer was Nissr making a gale that cooled; no longer was she at high, cold levels. Africa, the tropics, had suddenly become real; and the sudden contrast oppressed them all.

Through the shimmering, quivering air, an arid pallor extended up the eastern sky; a pale, milky illumination, dull-white over the desert, that told of the furnace into which Nissr was drifting--if indeed

she could survive till she reached land. The glasses showed tawny reaches of sand, back a little from the coast; and beyond these, low hills, or rather rolling dunes, lay empurpled by vibrant heat-hazes.

"It won't be much like navigating over that Hell-spot, three or four miles in the air," muttered Bohannon. He looked infinitely depressed. The way he gnawed at his red mustache showed how misadventure had raveled his nerve.

No one answered him. Leclair lighted a cigarette, and silently squinted at Africa with eyes long inured to the sun of that land of flame. Alden, at the other window, kept silence, too. That masked face could express no emotion; but something in the sag of the woman's shoulders, the droop of her head, showed how profound and intense was her suffering.

"Faith, are we going to make it, chief?" asked the major, impatiently. Not his the temperament that can wait in silence. He made a singular figure as he lounged there at the pilot-house window, huge elbows on the sill. One hand was wrapped in bandages, well saturated with croton-oil. Chars and burns on his uniform showed where blazing petrol from the final explosion had spattered him.

His eyes, like the Master's, were bloodshot, inflamed. Part of his red crop of hair had been singed off, and all his eyelashes were gone, as well as half his bushy red brows. But the ugly set of his jaw, the savage gleam of his eyes showed that no physical pain was depressing him. His only trouble was the thought that perhaps the expedition of the Flying Legion had ended before it had really begun.

"What chance, sir?" he insisted. "It's damned bad, according to my way of thinking."

"What you think and what you say won't have any weight with this problem of aerial flotation," the Master curtly retorted. "If we make land, we make it, that's all, sir." He relapsed into silence. Leclair muttered, in Arabic--his words audible only to himself--an ancient Islamic proverb: "Allah knows best, and time will show!" Then, after a moment's pause, the single word: "Kismet!"

Silence again, in which the Master's brain reviewed the stirring incidents of the past hour and a half--how the stowaway had evaded Dr. Lombardo's vigilance and (thoroughly familiar with every detail of _Nissr_) had succeeded in making his way to the aft port fuel-tank, from which he had probably drained petrol through a pet-cock and thereafter set it afire; how the miscreant had then scrambled up the aft companion-ladder, to shoot down the Master himself; and how only a horrible, nightmare fight against the flames had saved even this shattered wreck of the air-liner.

It had all been Kloof's fault, of course, and Lombardo's. Those two had permitted this disaster to befall, and--yes, they should be punished, later. But how? The Master's mind attacked this problem. Each of the four Legionaries in the pilot-house was busy with his own thoughts.

On and on toward the approaching shores of Africa drifted the wounded Eagle of the Sky, making no headway save such as the west wind gave her. Steadily the needle of the altimeter kept falling. The

high-pitched drone of the helicopters told that the crippled engines were doing their best; but even that best was not quite enough.

Like a tired creature of the air, the liner lagged, she sank. Before half the distance had been covered to that gleaming beach, hardly six hundred feet lay between the lower gallery of _Nissr_ and the long, white-toothed waves that, slaving, hungered for her gigantic body and the despairing crew she bore.

Suddenly the Master spoke into the engine-room telephone.

"Can you do any better?" exclaimed the chief. "This is not enough!"

"We're doing our best, sir," came the voice of Frazier, now in charge.

"If you can possibly strain a point, in some way, and wring a little more power out of the remaining engines--"

"We're straining them beyond the limit now, sir."

The Master fell silent, pondering. His eyes sought the dropping needle. Then the light of decision filled his eyes. A smile came to his face, where the deep gash made by the splinter of glass had been patched up with collodion and cotton. He plugged in on another line, by the touch of a button.

"Simonds! Is that you?"

"Yes, sir," answered the quartermaster, in charge of all the stores.

"Have you jettisoned everything?"

"All we can spare, sir. All but the absolute minimum of food and water."

"Overboard with them all!"

"But, sir--"

"And drop the body of Auchincloss, too. This is no time for sentiment!"

"But--"

"My order, sir!"

Five minutes later, cases, boxes, bales, water-tanks, began spinning from open ports and down through the trap-door in the lower gallery. Then followed the seared corpse of Auchincloss, a good man who had died in harness, fighting to the end. Those to whom the duty was assigned of giving his metal-weighted body sea burial turned away their eyes, so that they might not see that final plunge. But the sound of the body striking the waves rocketed up to them with sickening distinctness.

Lightened a little, _Nissr_ seemed to rally for a few minutes. The altimeter needle ceased its drop, trembled and even rose .275 degrees.

"God! If we only had an ounce more power!" burst out the major, his mouth mumbling the loose ends of that flamboyant mustache. The Master remained quite impassive, and made no answer. Bohannon reddened, feeling that the chief's silence had been another rebuff. And on, on drifted _Nissr_, askew, up-canted, with the pitiless sunlight of approaching evening in every detail revealing--as it slanted in, almost level, over the far-heaving infinitudes of the Atlantic--the ravages wrought by flame.

Bohannon could not long be silent. The exuberance of his nature burst forth with a half-defiant:

"If _I_ were in charge, which I'm not, I'd stop those damned helicopters, let her down, turn what power we've got into the remaining propellers, and taxi ashore!"

"And probably sink, or break up in the surf, on the beach, there!" curtly rejoined the Master. "Ah! _What_?"

His binoculars checked their sweep along the coast, which in its absolute barrenness looked a place of death for whatever might have life there.

"You see something, _mon capitaine?_" asked Leclair, blowing smoke from his cigarette. "Allow me also to look! Where is it?"

"Just to north of that gash--that wady, or gully, making down to the beach. You see it, eh?"

Slowly the French ace swept the glasses along the surf-foamed fringes of that desolation. Across the lenses no tree flung its green promise of shade. No house, no hut was visible. Not even a patch of grass could be discerned. The African coast lay stretched out in ivory nakedness, clean, bare, swept and garnished by simooms, by cruel heat, by the beatings of surf eternal.

Back of it extended an iron hinterland, savage with desert spaces of sun-baked, wrinkled earth and sand here and there leproously mottled with white patches of salt and with what the Arabs call _sabkhah_, or sheets of gypsum. The setting sun painted all this horror of desolation with strange rose and orange hues, with umbers and pale purples that for a moment reminded the Master of the sunset he had witnessed from the windows of _Niss'rosh_, the night his great plan had come to him. Only eight days ago, that night had been; it seemed eight years!

Carefully Leclair observed this savage landscape, over which a brilliant sky, of luminous indigo and lilac, was bending to the vague edge of the world. Serious though the situation was, the Frenchman could not repress a thought of the untamed beauty of that scene--a land long familiar to him, in the days when he had flown down these coasts on punitive expeditions against the rebellious Beni Harb clans of the Ahl Bayt, or People of the Black Tents. Africa, once more seen under such unexpected circumstances, roused his blood as he peered at the crude intensity of it, the splendid blaze of its seared nakedness under the blood-red sun-ball now dropping to rest.

All at once his glass stopped its sweep.

"Smoke, my Captain!" he exclaimed. "See, it curls aloft like a lady's ringlet. And--beyond the wady--"

"Ah, you see them, too?"

The major's glass, held unsteadily in his unbandaged hand, was now fixed on the indicated spot, as was "Captain Alden's."

"I see them," the Master answered. "And the green flag--the flag of the Prophet--"

"The flag, _oui, mon capitaine!_ There are many men, but--"

"But what, Lieutenant?"

"Ah, do you not see? No horses. No camels. That means their oasis is not far. That means they are not traveling. This is no nomadic moving of the Ahl Bayt. No, no, my Captain. It is--"

"Well, what?"

"A war-party. What you in your language call the--the reception committee, _n'est-ce pas?_ Ah, yes, the reception committee."

"And the guests?" demanded the major.

"The guests are all the members of the Flying Legion!" answered the Frenchman, with another draw at his indispensable cigarette.

CHAPTER XX

THE WAITING MENACE

"Ah, sure now, but that's fine!" exclaimed the major with delight, his eyes beginning to sparkle in anticipation. "The best of news! A little action, eh? I ask nothing better. All I ask is that we live to reach the committee--live to be properly killed! It's this dying-alive that kills _me_! Faith, it tears the nerves clean out of my body!"

"That is a true Arab idea, Major," smiled Leclair. "To this extent you are brother to the Bedouin. They call a man _fatis_, as a reproach, who dies any other way than fighting. May you never--may none of us--ever suffer the disgrace of being _fatis_!"

"There's not much danger of that!" put in the Master. "That's a big war-party, and we're drifting ashore almost exactly where they're waiting. From the appearance of the group, they look like Beni Harb people--'Sons of Fighting' you know--though I didn't expect we'd sight any of that breed so far to westward."

"Beni Harb, eh?" echoed the Frenchman, his face going grim. "Ah, _mes amis_, it is with pleasure I see that race, again!" He sighted carefully through his glass, as _Nissr_ sagged on and on, ever closer to the waves, ever nearer the hard, sun-roasted shores of Africa.

"Yes, those are Beni Harb men. _Dieu_! May it be Sheik Abd el Rahman's

tribe! May I have strength to repay the debt I owe them!"

"What debt, Lieutenant?" asked the chief.

Leclair shrugged his shoulders.

"A personal matter, my Captain! A personal debt I owe them--with interest!"

"You will have nearly a score and a half of good fighting men to help you settle your account," smiled the Master. Then, to Bohannan: "It looks now, Major, as if you'd have a chance to try your sovereign remedy."

"Faith! Machine-guns, eh?"

"Yes, provided we get near enough to use them."

"No vibrations this time, eh?" demanded the Celt, a bit of good-humored malice in his voice. "Vibrations are all very well in their way, sir, but when it comes to a man-to-man fight--"

"It's not that, Major," the chief interrupted. "We haven't the available power, now, for high-tension current. So we must fall back on lesser means."

"You, sir, and Lieutenant Leclair, get the six gun-crews together at their stations. When we drift in range, give the Beni Harb a few trays of blanks. That may scatter them without any further trouble. We want peace, but if it's got to be war, very well. If they show real fight, rake them hard!"

"They will show fight, surely enough, mon capitaine," put in Leclair, as he and the major made their way to the oddly tiptilted door leading back into the main corridor. "I know these folk. No blank cartridges will scatter that breed. Even the Turks are afraid of them. They have a proverb: 'Feed the Beni Harb, and they will fire at Allah!' That says it all."

"Mohammed laid a special curse on them. I imagine your orderly, Rrisa, will have something to say when he learns that we have Beni Harb as opponents. Now, sir, we shall make all haste to get the machine-guns into action!"

Major Bohannan laughed with more enjoyment than he had shown since _Nissr_ had left America. They both saluted and withdrew. When the door was closed again, a little silence fell in the pilot-house, the floor of which had now assumed an angle of nearly thirty degrees. The droning of the helicopters, the drift of the sickly white smoke that--rising from _Nissr's_ stern--wafted down-wind with her, the drunken angle of her position all gave evidence of the serious position in which the Flying Legion now found itself. Suddenly the Master spoke. His dismissal of Bohannan and Leclair had given him the opportunity he wanted.

"Captain Alden," said he, bruskiy, with the unwillingness of a determined man forced to reverse a fixed decision. "I have reconsidered my dictum regarding you."

"Indeed, sir?" asked the woman, from where she stood leaning against the sill of the slanted window. "You mean, sir, I am to stay with the Legion, till the end?"

"Yes. Your service in having shot down the stowaway renders it imperative that I show you some human recognition. You gained admission to this force by deception, and you broke parole and escaped from the stateroom where I had imprisoned you. But, as you have explained to me, you heard the explosion, you heard the outcry of pursuit, and you acted for my welfare.

"I can weigh relative values. I grant your request. The score is wiped clean. You shall remain, on one condition."

"And what is that, sir?" asked "Captain Alden," with a voice of infinite relief.

"That you still maintain the masculine disguise. The presence of a woman, as such, in this Legion, would be a disturbing factor. You accept my terms?"

"Certainly! May I ask one other favor?"

"What favor?"

"Spare Kloof and Lombardo!"

"Impossible!"

"I know their guilt, sir. Through their carelessness in not having discovered the stowaway and in having let him escape, the Legion came near sudden death. I know _Nissr_ is a wreck, because of them. Still, we need men, and those two are good fighters. Above all, we need Lombardo, the doctor I ask you to spare them at least their lives!"

"That is the woman's heart in you speaking, now," the chief answered, coldly. His eyes were far ahead, where the war-party was beginning to debouch on the white sands along the shore--full three hundred fighting-men, or more, well armed, as the tiny sparkles of sunlight flicking from weapons proved. As _Nissr_ drew in to land, the Beni Harb grew visible to the naked eye, like a swarm of ants on the desert rim.

"The woman's heart," repeated the Master. "That is your only fault and weakness, that you are a woman and that you forgive."

"You grant my request?"

"No, Captain. Nor can I even discuss it. Those two men have cut themselves off from the Legion and signed their own death warrant. The sentence I have decided on, must stand. Do not speak of this to me again, madam! Now, kindly withdraw."

"Yes, sir!" And Alden, saluting, approached the door.

"One moment! Send Leclair back to me. Inform Ferrara that he is to command the second gun-crew."

"Yes, sir!" And the woman was gone.

Leclair appeared, some moments later. He suspected nothing of the subterfuge whereby the Master had obtained a few minutes' conversation alone with "Captain Alden."

"You sent for me, sir?" asked the Frenchman.

"I did. I have some questions to ask you. Others can handle the guns, but you have special knowledge of great importance to me. And first, as an expert ace, what are our chances of making that shore, sir, now probably five miles off? In a crisis, I always want to ask an expert's opinion."

Leclair peered from under knit brows at the altimeter needle and the inclinometer. He leaned from the pilot-house window and looked down at the waves, now hardly a hundred feet below, their foaming hiss quite audible. From those waves, red light reflected as the sun sank, illuminated the Frenchman's lean, brown features and flung up wavering patches of illumination against the pilot-house ceiling of burnished metal, through the tilted windows that sheerly overhung the water.

"_Eh bien_--" murmured Leclair, noncommittally.

"Well, can we make it, sir?"

The ace inspected the vacuum-gauges, the helicopter tachometers, and shrugged his shoulders.

"_Fais tout, toi-meme, et Dieu t'aidera_," he quoted the cynical old French proverb. "If nothing gives way, there is a chance."

"If we settle into the sea, do you think that with our damaged floats we can drive ashore without breaking up?"

"I do not, my Captain. There is a heavy sea running, and the surf is bad on the beach. This Rio de Oro coast is cruel. Have you our exact position?"

"Almost exactly on the Tropic of Cancer, half-way between Cape Bojador to north of us, and Cape Blanco, to south."

"Yes, I understand. That brings us to the Tarmanant region of the Sahara. Fate could not have chosen worse for us. But, _c'est la guerre_. All I regret, however, is that in a crippled condition we have to face a war-party of the Beni Harb. Were we intact, and a match for them, how gladly would I welcome battle with that scum of Islam! Ah, the _canaille_!"

CHAPTER XXI

SHIPWRECK AND WAR

"You call them dogs, eh?" asked the chief. "And why?"

"What else are such apostate fanatics? People who live by robbery and

plunder--people who, if they find no gold in your money-belt, will rip your stomach open to see if you've swallowed it! People who boast of being _harami_ (highwaymen), and who respect the _jallah_ (slave-driver)!

"People who practice the barbaric _thar_, or blood-feud! People who torture their victims by cutting off the ends of their fingers before beheading or crucifying them! People who glory in murdering the 'idolators of Feringistan,' as they call us white men! Let me advise you now, my Captain, when dealing with these people or fighting them, never use your last shot on them. Always keep a mercy-bullet in your gun!"

"A mercy-bullet?"

"For yourself!"

The Master pondered a moment or two, as _Nissr_ drifted on toward the now densely massed Arabs on the beach, then he said:

"You seem to know these folk well."

"Only too well!"

The Master's next words were in the language of the desert:

"_Hadratak tet kal'm Arabi?_" (You speak Arabic?)

"_Na'am et kal'm!_" affirmed the lieutenant, smiling. And in the same tongue he continued, with fluent ease: "Indeed I do, _Effendi_. Yes, yes, I learned it in Algiers and all the way south as far as the headwaters of the Niger.

"Five years I spent among the Arabs, doing air-work, surveying the Sahara, locating oases, mapping what until then were absolutely unknown stretches of territory. I did a bit of bombing, too, in the campaign against Sheik Abd el Rahman, in 1913."

"Yes, so I have heard. You almost lost your life, that time?"

"Only by the thickness of a _semmah_ seed did I preserve it," answered the Frenchman. "My mechanician, Lebon, and I--we fell among them on account of engine trouble, near the oasis of Adrar, not far from here. We had no machine-gun--nothing but revolvers. We stood them off for seven hours, before they rushed us. They captured us only because our last cartridges were gone."

"You did not save the mercy-bullet that time, eh?"

"I did not, _Effendi_. I did not know them then as I do now. They knocked us both senseless, and then began hacking our machine to pieces with their huge _balas_ (yataghans). They thought our plane was some gigantic bird.

"Superstition festers in their very bones! The giant bird, they believed, would ruin their date crops; and, besides, they thirsted for the blood of the Franks. As a matter of fact, my Captain, these people do sometimes drink a little of the blood of a slaughtered enemy."

"Impossible!"

"True, I tell you! They destroyed our plane with fire and sword, reviled us as pigs and brothers of pigs, and named poor Lebon 'kalb ibn kalb,' or 'dog and son of a dog.' Then they separated into two bands. One band departed toward Wady Tawarik, taking Lebon. They informed me that on the morrow they would crucify him on a cross of palm-wood, head downward."

"And they executed Lebon?"

Leclair shrugged his shoulders.

"I suppose so," he answered with great bitterness. "I have never seen or heard of him since. As for me, they reserved me for some festivities at Makam Jibrail. During the next night, a column of Spanish troops from Rio de Oro rushed their camp, killed sixty or seventy of the brown demons, and rescued me. Since then I have lusted revenge on the Beni Harb!"

"No wonder," put in the chief, once more looking at the beach, where now the war-party was plainly visible to the naked eye in some detail. The waving of their arms could be distinguished; and plainly glittered the blood-crimson sunset light on rifle-barrels, swords, and javelins. The Master loosened his revolver in its holster. "About twenty minutes from now, at this rate," he added, "some of the Beni Harb will have reason to remember you."

"Yes, and may Jehannum take them all!" exclaimed the Frenchman, passionately. His eyes glowered with hate as he peered across the narrowing strip of waves and surf. "Jehannum, where every time their skins are burned off, as the Koran says, new ones will grow to be burned off again! Where 'they shall have garments of fire fitted upon them and boiling water poured upon their heads, and they shall be beaten with maces of iron--"

"And their tormentors shall say unto them: 'Taste ye the pain of burning!'" the Master concluded the familiar quotation with a smile. "Waste no time in wishing the Beni Harb future pain, my dear Lieutenant. Jehannum may indeed reserve the fruit of the tree Al Zakkum, for these dogs, but our work is to give them a foretaste of it, today. Kismet seems to have willed it that you and the Beni Harb shall meet again. Is it not a fortunate circumstance, for you?"

"Fortunate, yes," the Frenchman answered, his eyes glowing as they estimated the strength of the war-party, now densely massed along the shining sands, "But, thank God, there are no women in this party! That would mean that one of us would have to kill a woman--for God help a woman of Feringistan caught by these _jinnee_, these devils of the waste!"

Silence again. Both men studied the Beni Harb. The Frenchman judged, reverting to his native tongue: "Certainly more than three hundred of these 'abusers of the salt,' my Captain. And we are hardly thirty. Even if we reach land, we must soon sink to earth. Without food, water, anything--_ce n'est pas gai, hein?_"

"No, it is not gay," the chief answered. "But with machine-guns--"

"Machine-guns cannot fight against the African sun, against famine, thirst, delirium, madness. Well--'blessed be certainty,' as the Arabs say."

"You mean death?"

"Yes, I mean death. We always have that in our grasp, at any rate--after having taken full toll of these devils. I should not mind, so much, defeat at the hands of the nobler breed of the Arabian Peninsula. There, in the _Ruba el Khali_[1] itself, I know a chivalric race dwells that any soldier might be proud to fight or to rule over. But these Shiah heretic swine--ah, see now, they are taking cover already? They will not stand and fight, like men!"

[Footnote 1: _Ruba el Khali_ (The Empty Abodes), a name applied by the Arabs to the Peninsula, especially the vast inner region never penetrated by any white man.]

Scornfully he flung a hand at the Beni Harb. The fringes of the tribe were trickling up the sands, backward, away, toward the line of purple-hazed dunes that lined the coast. More and more of the war-party followed. Gradually all passed up the wady, over the dunes and vanished.

"They are going to ambush us, my Captain," said Leclair. "'In rice, strength; in the Beni Harb, manhood!'"

Nearer the land, ever sagging down but still afloat--though now at times some of the heavier surges broke in foam over the rail of the lower gallery--the Eagle of the Sky drifted on, on. Hardly a half-mile now lay between air-liner and shore. Suddenly the Master began to speak:

"Listen, Lieutenant! Events are at a crisis, now. I will speak very plainly. You know the Arabs, good and bad. You know Islam, and all that the Mohammedan world is. You know there are more than 230,000,000 people of this faith, scattered from Canton to Sierra Leone, and from Cape Town to Tobolsk, all over Turkey, Africa, and Arabia--an enormous, fanatic, fighting race! Probably, if trained, the finest fighting-men in the world, for they fear neither pain nor' death. They welcome both, if their hearts are enlisted!"

"Yes, yes, I know! Their Hell yawns for cowards; their Paradise opens to receive the brave! Death is as a bride to the Moslem!"

"Fanatics all, Lieutenant! Only a few white men have ever reached Mecca and returned. Bartema, Wild, and Joseph Pitt succeeded, and so did Hurgronje, Courtelmont, Burton, and Burckhardt--though, the Arabs admit only the two last.

"But how many hundreds have been beheaded or crucified? No pilgrimage ever takes place without a few such victims. A race of this type is a potential world-power of incalculable magnitude. Men who will die for Islam and for their master without a quiver--"

"My Captain! What do you mean?"

The lieutenant's eyes had begun to fill with flame. His hand tightened to a fist.

"_Mon Dieu_, what do you mean? Can it be possible you dream of ruling the races of Islam?"

Something whined overhead, from the beach now only about a quarter-mile distant. Then a shot from behind the dunes cracked out across the crumbling, hissing surf.

"Ah," laughed Leclair, "the ball has opened, eh? Well this is now no time for talk, for empty words. I think I understand you, my Captain; and to the death I stand at your right hand!"

Their palms met and clasped, a moment, in the firm grip of a compact between two strong men, unafraid. Then each drew his pistol, crouching there at the windows of the pilot-house.

"Hear how that bullet sang?" questioned the Frenchman. "It was notched--a notched slug, you understand. That is a familiar trick with these dog-people of the Beni Harb. Sometimes, if they have poison, they dip the notched slug in that too. And, ah, what a wound one makes! Dum-dums are a joke beside such!"

Another shot sounded. Many cracked out along the dune. All up and down the crest of the tawny sand-hills, red under the sun now close to the horizon, the fusillade ran and rippled. On _Nissr_, metal plates rang with the impact of the slugs, or glass crashed. The gigantic Eagle of the Sky, helpless, received this riddling volley as she sagged ashore, now almost in the grip of the famished surf.

"Yes, the ball is opening!" repeated Leclair, with an eager laugh. His finger itched on the trigger of his weapon; but no target was visible. Why waste ammunition on empty sand-dunes?

"Let it open!" returned the chief. "We'll not refuse battle, no, by Allah! Our first encounter with Islam shall not be a surrender! Even if we could survive that, it would be fatal to this vast plan of mine--of ours, Lieutenant. No, we will stand and fight--even till 'certainty,' if Allah wills it so!"

A sudden burst of machine-gun fire, from the upper starboard gallery, crashed out into the sultry, quivering air. The kick and recoil of the powerful Lewis sent a fine, swift shudder through the fabric of the wounded Eagle.

"There goes a tray of blanks," said the Master. "Perhaps that will rout them out, eh? Once we can get them on the run--"

Leclair laughed scornfully.

"Those dog-sons will not run from blanks, no, nor from shotted charges!" he declared. "Pariahs in faith, despoilers of the Haram--the sacred inner temple--still this breed of _Rafaz_ (heretic) is bold. Ah, 'these dogs bare their teeth to fight more willingly than to eat.' It will come to hot work soon, I think!"

Keenly he scanned the dunes, eager for sight of a white _tarboosh_, or headgear, at which to take a pot-shot. Nothing was visible but sand--though here, there, a gleam of steel showed where the Arabs had nested themselves down in the natural rampart with their long-barreled

rifles cuddled through carefully scooped rifts in the sand.

Again the machine-gun chattered. Another joined it, but no dust-spurts leaped from the dune, where now a continual play of fire was leaping out. The Beni Harb, keenly intelligent, sensed either that they were being fired at with blanks, or that the marksmanship aboard the air-liner was execrable. A confused chorus of cries and jeers drifted down from the sand-hills; and all at once a tall, gaunt figure in a brown and white striped burnous, with the hood drawn up over the head, leaped to sight.

This figure brandished a tremendously long rifle in his left hand. His right was thrust up, with four fingers extended--the sign of wishing blindness to enemies. A splendid mark this Arab made. The Master drew a fine bead on him and fired.

Both he and Leclair laughed, as the Arab pitched forward in the sand. Unseen hands dragged the warrior back, away, out of sight. A slug crashed through the upper pane of the port window, flattened itself against the main corridor door and dropped to the sofa-locker.

The Master reached for the phone and switched in the connection with the upper starboard gallery.

"Major Bohannan!" he ordered. "No more blanks! The real thing, now--but hold your fire till we drift over the dune!"

"Drift over!" echoed Leclair. "But, _monsieur_, we'll never even make the beach!"

"So?" asked the chief. He switched to the engine-room.

"Frazier! Lift her a little, now! Rack everything--strain everything--break everything, if you must, but lift her!"

"Yes, sir!" came the engineer's voice. "I'll scrap the engines, sir, but I'll do that!"

Almost as if a mocking echo of the command and the promise, a dull concussion shuddered through _Nissr_. The drone of the helicopters sank to a sullen murmur; and down below, waves began combing angrily over the gallery.

"Ah, _nom de Dieu_!" cried Leclair, in sudden rage at seeing his chance all gone to pot, of coming to grips with the hated Beni Harb. From the penetralia of the air-liner, confused shouts burst forth. The upper galleries grew vocal with execrations.

Not one was of fear; all voiced disappointment, the passion of baffled fury. Angrily a boiler-shop clatter of machine-guns vomited useless frenzy.

Wearily, like a stricken bird that has been forced too long to wing its broken way, the Eagle of the Sky--still two hundred yards from shore--lagged down into the high-running surf. Down, in a murderous hail of fire she sank, into the waves that beat on the stark, sun-baked Sahara shore.

And from hundreds of barbarous throats arose the killing-cry to

Allah--the battle-cry of Beni Harb, the murder-lusting Sons of War.

CHAPTER XXII

BELEAGUERED

"La Illaha illa Allah! M'hamed rasul Allah!" Raw, ragged, exultant, a scream of passion, joy, and hate, it rose like the voice of the desert itself, vibrant with wild fanaticism, pitiless and wild.

The wolflike, high-pitched howl of the Arab outcasts--the robber-tribe which all Islam believed guilty of having pillaged the Haram at Mecca and which had for that crime been driven to the farthest westward confines of Mohammedanism--this war-howl tore its defiance through the wash and reflux of the surf.

The pattering hail of slugs continued to zoon from the sand-hills, bombarding the vast-spread wings and immense fuselage of Nissr. For the most part, that bombardment was useless to the Beni Harb. A good many holes, opened up in the planes, and some broken glass, were about the Arabs' only reward.

None of the bullets could penetrate the metal-work, unless making a direct hit. Many glanced, spun ricochetting into the sea, and with a venomous buzzing like huge, angry hornets, lost themselves in quick, white spurts of foam.

But one shot at least went home. Sheltered though the Legion was, either inside the fuselage or in vantage-points at the gun-stations, one incautious exposure timed itself to meet a notched slug. And a cry of mortal agony rose for a moment on the heat-shimmering air--a cry echoed with derision by fifteen score barbarians behind their natural rampart.

There was now no more shooting from the liner. What was there to shoot at, but sand? The Arabs, warned by the death of the gaunt fellow in the burnous, had doffed their headgear. Their brown heads, peeping intermittently from the wady and the dunes, were evasive as a mirage.

The Master laughed bitterly.

"A devil of a place!" he exclaimed, his blood up for a fight, but all circumstances baffling him. A very different man, this, from the calm, impersonal victim of ennui at _Niss'rosh_, or even from the unmoved individual when the liner had first swooped away from New York. His eye was sparkling now, his face was pale and drawn with anger; and the blood-soaked cotton and collodion gave a vivid touch of color to the ensemble. That the Master had emotions, after all, was evident. Obvious, too, was the fact these emotions were now fully aroused. "What a devil of a place! No way to get at those dog-sons, and they can lie there and wait for _Nissr_ to break up!"

"Yes, my Captain, or else starve us where we lie!" the lieutenant put in. "Or wait for thirst and fever to do the work. Then--rich plunder for the sons of theft!"

"Ah, Leclair, but we're not going to stay here, for any such contingency!" exclaimed the chief, and turned toward the door. "Come, _en avant_! Forward, Leclair!"

"My Captain! You cannot charge an entrenched enemy like that, by swimming a heavy surf, with nothing but revolvers in hand!"

"Can't, eh? Why not?"

"The rules of war--"

"To Hell with the rules of war!" shouted the Master, for the first time in years breaking into profanity. "Are you with me, or are you--"

"Sir, do not say that word!" cried the Frenchman, reddening ominously. "Not even from you can I accept it!"

The Master laughed again, and strode out into the main corridor, with Leclair close behind him.

"Men!" he called, his voice blaring a trumpet-call to action. "Volunteers for a shore-party to clean out that kennel of dogs!"

None held back. All came crowding into the spacious corridor, its floor now laterally level but sloping toward the stern, as _Nissr's_ damaged aft-floats had filled and sunk.

"Revolvers and lethal pistols!" he ordered. "And knives in belts! Come on!"

Up the ladder they swarmed to the take-off gallery. Their feet rang and clattered on the metal rounds. Other than that, a, strange silence filled the giant air-liner. The engines now lay dead. _Nissr_ was motionless, save for the pitch and swing of the surf that tossed her; but forward she could no longer go.

As the men came up to the top gallery, the hands of the setting sun reached out and seized them with red ardor. The radiance was half blinding, from that sun and from light reflected by the heavily running waves, all white-caps to shore. On both aileron-tips, the machine-guns were spitting intermittently, worked by crews under the major and Ferrara, the Italian ace.

"Cease firing!" ordered the Master. "Simonds, you and Prisrend deal out the lethal guns. Look alive, now!"

Sheltering themselves from the patter of slugs behind stanchions and bulwarks, the Legionaries waited. The sea wind struck them with hot intensity; the sun, now almost down, flung its river of blood from ship to horizon, all dancing in a shimmer of heat.

By the way _Nissr_ was thumping her floats on the bottom, she seemed about to break up. But, undismayed, the Legionaries armed themselves, girt on their war-gear and, cool-disciplined under fire, waited the order to leap into the sea.

Not even the sight of a still body in the starboard gallery--a body from under which a snaky red line was crawling, zigzagging with each

pitch of the liner--gave them any pause. This crew was well blooded, ready for grim work of give-and-take.

"A task for me, sir!" exclaimed "Captain Alden," pointing at the body. The Master refused.

"No time for nursing, now!" he negatived the plea. "Unless you choose to remain behind?"

"Never, sir!"

"Can you swim with one arm?"

"With both tied!"

"Very well! All ready, men! Overboard, to the beach! There, dig in for further orders. No individual action! No charge, without command! Overboard--come on--who follows me?"

He vaulted the rail, plunged in a white smother, surged up and struck out for shore. Risa was not half a second behind him. Then came all the others (save only that still figure on the buffed metals), a deluge of leaping, diving men.

The surf suddenly became full of heads and shoulders, vigorous arms, fighting beachward. Strong swimmers every one, the Legion battled its way ashore, out from under _Nissr's_ vast-spreading bulk, out from under her forward floats. Not one Legionary but thrilled with the killing-lust, the eager spur of vengeance for Kloof, first victim of the Beni Harb's attack.

Along the dune, perhaps five hundred yards back of the beach, very many heads now appeared. The Arabs well knew themselves safe from attack, so long as these hated white swine of _Ajam_[1] were in the breakers. Golden opportunity to pick them off, at ease!

[Footnote 1: Arabs divide the world into two categories; themselves, and _Ajam_, or all non-Arabs.]

A long, ragged line of desert men appeared, in burnouses and _benishes_, or loose floating garments, and all heavily armed. The last bleeding rays of the sunset flickered on the silver-mounted rifles as they spat fire into the heat-quivering air.

All about the swimmers, waterspouts jetted up. Two men grunted, flailed wild arms and sank, with the water about them tinged red as the sunset. Another sank face downward, a moment, then with only one arm, continued to ply for land, leaving a crimson trail behind.

None of the untouched Legionaries took any heed of this, or stopped their furious swimming to see what damage had been done or to offer help. Life was at stake. Every second in the breakers was big with death. This was stern work, to be put through with speed. But the faces of the swimming men grew hard to look upon.

The Master and Leclair were first to touch foot to the shelving bottom, all churned up by the long cavalry-charges of the sea-horses, and to drag themselves out of the smother. Risa and Bohannan came next, then Enemark, and then the others--all save Beziers and

Daimamoto, French ace and Japanese surgeon, whose work was forever at an end. Enemark, engineer and scientist, shot through the left shoulder, was dragged ashore, strangling, by eager hands.

"Down! Down!" shouted the Master. "Dig in!"

Right well he knew the futility, the suicidal folly of trying to charge some three hundred entrenched men with a handful of panting, exhausted soldiers armed only with revolvers.

"Take cover!" his cry rang along the beach. They obeyed. Under a galling fire that flung stinging sand into their faces and that took toll of two more Legionaries, wounded, the expedition dug for its very life.

The best of strategy! The only strategy, the Master knew, as--panting a little, with thick, black hair glued by sea-water to his head--he flattened himself into a little depression in the sand, where the first ripple of the dunes began.

Hot was the sand, and dry. Withered camel-grass grew in dejected tufts here, there, interspersed with a few straggles of half a. A jackal's skull, bleached, lay close to the Master's right hand. Its polish attested the care of others of its kind, of hyenas, and of vultures. Just so would a human skull appear, in no long time, if left to nature's tender ministrations. Out of an eyehole of the skull a dusty gray scorpion half crawled, then retreated, tail over back, venomous, deadly.

Death lurked not alone in sea and in the rifles of the inhabitants of this harsh land, but even in the crawling things underfoot.

The Master paid no heed to shriveled grass, to skull, or scorpion. All his thoughts were bent on the overcoming of that band of Islamic outcasts now persistently pot-shotting away at the strange flying men from unknown lands "that faced not Mecca nor kept Ramadan"--men already hidden in swiftly scooped depressions, from which the sand still kept flying up.

"Steady, men!" the Master called. "Get your wind! Ready with the lethal guns! Each gun, one capsule. Then we'll charge them! And--no quarter!"

Again, silence from the Legion. The fire from the dunes slackened. These tactics seemed to have disconcerted the Beni Harb. They had expected a wild, only half-organized rush up the sands, easily to be wiped out by a volley or two from the terribly accurate, long-barreled rifles. But this restraint, this business-like entrenching reminded them only too forcibly of encounters with other men of the Franks--the white-clad Spanish infantry from Rio de Oro, the dreaded _piou-pious_, zouaves, and _Legion Etrangere_ of the French.

Firing ceased, from the Beni Harb. Silence settled on both sides. From the sea, the noise of waves breaking along the lower works of _Nissr_ mingled with the hiss and refluent slither of the tumbling surf on the gleaming beach. For a while peace seemed to have descended.

A purple shade settled over the desert. The sun was nearly gone, now, and dusk would not be long in closing its chalice down over the

light-wearied world. Leclair, entrenched beside the Master, whispered:

"They do not understand, these dog-brothers--may Allah make their faces cold!" He grinned, frankly, with sparkling eyes and white teeth. "Already we have their beards in our hands!"

The Master's only answer was to draw from his pocket an extra lethal gun, hand it over and, in a whisper, hastily instruct the Frenchman how to use it. Then he cried, loudly:

"Ready, men! Fire!"

All along the line, the faint, sighing hiss of the strange weapons sounded. Over the top of the dune little, almost inaudible explosions began taking place as--_plop! plop! plop!_--the capsules burst. Not now could their pale virescence be seen; but the Master smiled again, at realization that already the lethal gas was settling down upon the horde of Shiah outcasts.

To Leclair he whispered in Arabic an ancient saying of the desert folk: "Allah hath given skill to three things, the hands of the Chinese, the brains of the Franks, the tongues of the Arabs!" He added: "When the gas strikes them, they would think the Frankish brain more wonderful than ever--if they could think at all!"

He slid his hand into the breast of his jacket, pulled a little cord and drew out a silver whistle, the very same that he had used at Gallipoli. As he slid it to his lips, they tautened. A flood of memories surged over him. His fighting-blood was up, like that of all the other Legionaries in that hasty trench-line along the white sand-drifts.

A moment's silence followed. Outwardly, all was peace. No sound but the waves broke the African stillness. A little sand-grouse, known as _kata_ by the Arabs, came whirring by. Far aloft, a falcon wheeled, keen-eyed for prey. Once more the deadly scorpion peeped from the skull, an ugly, sullen, envenomed thing.

The Master held up the silver whistle, glinting in the last sun-glow. They saw it, and understood. All hearts thrilled, tightening with the familiar sense of discipline. Fists gripped revolver-butts; feet shuffled into the sand, getting a hold for the quick, forward leap.

Keenly trilled the whistle. A shout broke from some twenty-five throats. The men leaped up, forward, slipping, staggering in the fine sand, among the bunches of dried grass. But forward they drove, and broke into a ragged, sliding charge up the breast of the dunes.

"Hold your fire, men! Hold it--then give 'em Hell!" the Master shouted. He was in the first wave of the assault. Close by came Rrisa, his brown face contracted with fanatic hate of the Beni Harb, despoilers of the Haram sanctuary.

There, too, was "Captain Alden," grim with masked face. There was Bohannan, Leclair--and pistol-barrels flickered in the evening glow, and half the men gripped knives in their left hands, as well. For this was to be a killing without quarter, to the very end.

CHAPTER XXIII

A MISSION OF DREAD

Panting, with a slither of dry sand under their laboring feet, the Legionaries charged. At any second, a raking volley might burst from the dunes. The lethal pellets--so few in this vast space--might not have taken effect. Not one heart there but was steeling itself against ambush and a shriveling fire.

Up they stormed. The Master's voice cried, once more: "Give 'em Hell!"

He was the first man to top the dune, close to the wady's edge. There he checked himself, revolver in mid-air, eyes wide with astonishment. This way and that he peered, squinting with eyes that did not understand.

"_Nom de Dieu!_" ejaculated Leclair, at his side.

"_Wallah!_" shouted Rrisa, furiously. "Oh, may Allah smite their faces!"

Each man, as he leaped to the rampart top, stood transfixed with astonishment. Most of them cried out in their native tongues.

Their amazement was well-grounded. Not an Arab was to be seen. Of all those Beni Harb, none remained--not even the one shot by the Master. The sand on the dune was cupped with innumerable prints of feet in rude _babooshes_ (native shoes), and empty cartridges lay all about. But not one of the Ahl Bayt, or People of the Black Tents, was visible.

"Sure, now, can you beat that?" shouted Bohannan, exultantly, and waved his service cap. "Licked at the start! They quit cold!"

Sheffield, at his side, dropped to the sand, his heart drilled by a jagged slug. The explosion of that shot crackled in from another line of dunes, off to eastward--a brown, burnt ridge, parched by the tropic sun of ages.

Sweating with the heat and the exertion of the charge, amazed at having found--in place of windrows of sleeping men--an enemy still distant and still as formidable as ever, the Legionaries for a moment remained without thought or tactics.

Rrisa, livid with fury and baffled hate, flung up wild arms and began screaming the most extravagant insults at the still invisible nomads, whose fire was now beginning again all along their line.

"O rejected ones, and sons of the rejected!" the Arab howled. "O hogs and brothers of hogs!" He fell to gnawing his own hand, as Arabs will in an excess of passion. Once more he screamed: "O Allah, deny not their skin and bones to the eternal flame! O owls, oxen, beggars, cut-off ones! Oh, give them the burning oil, Allah! The cold faces! Oh, wither their hands! Make them _kusah_! (beardless). Oh, these swine with black livers, gray eyes, beards of red. Vilest that ever

hammered tent-pegs, goats of El Akhfash! O Beni Harb![1]"

[Footnote 1: Beni Harb, or Sons of Battle, by a change in the aspiration of the "H," becomes "Sons of Flight, or Cowardice."]

The Master gripped his furious orderly, and pushed him back, down the slope.

"No more of that, Risa!" he commanded, fiercely. "These be old woman's ways, these screamings! Silence, _Bismillah_!"

He hailed the others.

"They score, the first round! Their game is to retreat, if they're suspicious of any ruse or any attack from us. They're not going to stand and fight. We can't get near enough to them to throw the remaining lethal capsules over. And we can't chase them into the desert. Their plan is to hold us here, and pick us off one by one--wipe us out, without losing a man!

"Dig in again! That's our only game now. We're facing a situation that's going to tax us to the utmost, but there's only one thing to do--dig in!"

Life itself lay in digging, death in exposure to the fire of those maddeningly elusive, unseen Bedouins. Like so many dogs the Legionaries once more fell to excavating, with their knives and their bare hands, the sun-baked sand that slithered back again into their shallow trench almost as fast as they could throw it out.

A ragged fire from the Beni Harb lent speed to their efforts. Dead men and wounded could now have no attention. Life itself was all at stake.

In their rude trench they lay at last, sweating, panting, covered with sand and dust, with thirst beginning to take hold on them, and increasing swarms of flies--tiny, vicious, black things, all sting and poison--beginning to hum about them. On watch they rested there, while dull umbers of nightfall glowered through the framework of _Nissr_, tossing in the surf. Without much plan, wrecked, confronted by what seemed perils unsurmountable, the Flying Legion waited for the coming of dark to respite them from sniping.

The Master, half-way along the line with Leclair, Risa, the major and "Captain Alden," mentally took stock of losses thus far sustained. The wounded were: Alden, Bohannan (burned), Enemark and himself. The dead: Kloof, Sheffield, Beziers, Travers, Gorlitz, Auchincloss, Daimamoto.

Twenty-four living remained, including Leclair. The mortality, in about eighteen hours, had been twenty percent. At this rate the Master understood the Flying Legion was slated for very speedy destruction.

"It's touch-and-go now," he pondered. "We've got to annihilate these infernal Bedouins, repair the liner and get ahead, or--but there's no 'or' in this! None, at all!"

As dark settled down over the Sahara, the leprous patches of white, saline earth took on a ghostly pallor. The light of the southern stars began to glow with soft radiance. A gigantic emptiness, a rolling vacancy of sea and earth--brine-waves to rear of the Legion,

sand-waves ahead--shrank the party to seeming insignificance.

A soft, purple tapestry of night unrolled across the desert; the wind died, and the suffocating breath of overheated sands began to emanate from the baked earth. And ever more and more pestiferously the infernal torment of the flies increased.

Inflamed with chagrin, rage, and grief for the lost comrades, the Legionaries lay in waiting. No conversation ran along the line. Silence held them--and their own thoughts. Wounds had been dressed as well as they might be. Nothing remained but to await the Master's next command.

"Captain Alden's" suggestion that Kloof, still lying aboard in the liner, should be seen to, met a rebuff from the Master. Living or dead, one man could not now endanger the lives of any others. And that danger still lay in any exposure was proved by the intermittent firing from the Arab lines.

The Beni Harb were obviously determined to hold back any possibility of a charge, or any return to the protection of the giant flying-ship. Bullets whimpered overhead, spudded into the sand, or pinged against metal on the liner. Parthian fighters though these Beni Harb were, they surely were well stocked with munitions and they meant stern business.

"And stern business is what they shall have, once the dark is complete," the Master pondered. "It is annihilation for them or for us. There can be no compromise, nor any terms but slaughter!"

One circumstance was favorable--the falling of the wind. Had it risen, kicking up a harsher surf, _Nissr_ must have begun to break. But as the cupped hand of night, closing over the earth, had also shut away the wind, the air-liner was now resting more easily. Surf still foamed about her floats and lower gallery--surf all spangled with the phosphorescence that the Arabs call "jewels of the deep"--but unless some sudden squall should fling itself against the coast, every probability favored the liner taking no further damage.

In silence, save for the occasional easing of positions along the trench, the Legionaries waited. Strange dim colors appeared along the desert horizons, half visible in the gloom--funeral palls of dim purple, with pale, ghostly reflections almost to mid-heaven.

Some of the men had tobacco and matches that had escaped being wet; and cigarettes were rolled, passed along, lighted behind protections that would mask the match-gleam from the enemy. The comforting aroma of smoke drifted out on the desert heat. As for the Master, from time to time he slipped a khat leaf into his mouth, and remained gravely pondering.

At length his voice sounded along the trench.

"Men of the Flying Legion," said he, "this situation is grave. We can't escape on foot, north or south. We are without provisions or water. The nearest white settlement is Rio de Oro, about a hundred miles to southward; and even if we could reach that, harassed by the Beni Harb, we might all be executed there, as pirates. We must go forward or die right here on this beach.

"In any kind of a straight fight, we are hopelessly out-classed. There are about three hundred men against twenty-four of us, some of whom are wounded. Even if we took life for life, the Bedouins would lose less than ten percent, and we'd be wiped out. And we couldn't expect to take life for life, charging a position like theirs in the night. It can't be a stand-up battle. It's got to be science against savagery, or nothing."

A murmur of approval trickled along the sands. Confidence was returning. The Legionaries' hearts tautened again with faith in this strange, this usually silent and emotionless man whose very name was unknown to almost all of them.

"Just one other word," the Master continued, his voice calm, unshaken, quite impersonal. "If science fails, do not allow yourselves to be captured. The tortures of Hell await any white man taken by these fanatics. Remember, always keep one mercy-bullet--for yourselves!"

Another little silence. Then the chief said:

"I am going to take two men and undertake what seems a preposterous attack. I need only two. I shall not call for volunteers, because you would all offer yourselves. You must stay here."

"In case my plan succeeds, you are to come at my call--three long hails. If my plan fails, Major Bohannan will command you; and I know you will all fight to the last breath and to the final drop of blood!"

"Don't do this thing, sir!" the major protested. "What chance of success has it? These desert men can see, where a white man is blind. They can scent danger as a hunting-dog scents the spoor of game. You're simply throwing your life away, and we need that life!"

"I will take Lieutenant Leclair, who knows these people," the Master continued, paying no heed, "and Rrisa, who is of their kin. You others, all sit tight!"

A chuckling laugh, out there on the vague sands, seemed to mock him. It burst into a raw, barking cachinnation, that somehow stirred the blood with shrinking horror.

"One of the Sahara Sanitary Corps," remarked Leclair, dryly. "A hyena. Well may he laugh! Feasting enough for him and his before this dance is over!"

A gleam of fire, off to the left where the farther dunes approached the sea, suddenly began to show. All eyes turned toward it. The little fire soon grew into a leaping flame, its base hidden by sand-mounds.

No Arabs were visible there, but they had surely lighted it, using driftwood from the beach. Up into the purple-velvet night whirled sparks and fire-tongues; red smoke spiraled on the vagrant desert breeze.

"A signal-fire, Master!" whispered Rrisa. "It will be seen in far oases. If it burn two hours, that will mean an enemy with great plunder. Others of the Beni Harb will come; there will be gathering of the tribes. That fire must not burn, _M'alme!_"

"Nor must the Beni Harb live!" To the major: "Collect a dozen lethal guns and bring them to me!"

When the guns were at hand, the Master apportioned them between Leclair, Rrisa, and himself. With the one apiece they already had, each man carried five of the guns, in pockets and in belt. The small remaining stock of lethal pellets were distributed and the weapons fully loaded.

"In three minutes, Major," said the Master, "we leave these lines. Ten minutes after that, open a scattering fire, all along the trench. Shoot high, so as to be sure we are not hit."

"Ah, a barrage, sir?" the major exclaimed.

"Not in the least. My purpose is quite different. Never mind, but listen to my orders. Keep up that fire sparingly, for five minutes. Then cease. And keep silent till we return.

"Remember, I will give three long hails when we start to come back. Those will warn you not to shoot if you see dim figures in the night. Either we shall be back in these lines by nine o'clock, or--"

"Or we will go after you!" came the voice of "Captain Alden," with a little catch of anxiety not at all masculine. Something in the femininity of her promise stirred the Master's heart a second, but he dismissed it.

"Either we shall return by nine, or never," he said calmly.

"Let me go, then!" whispered Alden. "Go, in place of you! You are more needed than I. Without you all these men are lost. Without me--they would not miss me, sir!"

"I cannot argue that point with you, Captain. We start at once." He turned to Rrisa, and in Arabic said:

"The road we are about to take may lead thee to Paradise. A sand-adder, a scorpion, or a bullet may be the means. Dost thou stand firm with me?"

The Arab stretched out a thin, brown hand to him in the dark.

"Firm as my faith, Master!" he replied. "Both to help you, and to destroy the _beni kalb_ (dog-sons), I would pass through Al Araf, into Eblis! What will be, must be. No man dieth except by permission of Allah, according to what is written on the scrolls of the angel, Al Sijil.

"I go with you, Master, where you go, were it to Jehannum! I swear that by the rising of the stars, which is a mighty oath. _Tawakkal al Allah!_" (Place reliance on Allah!)

"By the rising of the stars!" repeated Leclair, also in Arabic. "I too am with you to the end, _M'alme!_"

The Master assured himself that his night-glasses with the megaphotic reflectors were in their case slung over his shoulder. He looked once

more to his weapons, both ordinary and lethal, and likewise murmured:

"By the rising of the stars!"

Then said he crisply, while the fire-glow of Leclair's strongly inhaled cigarette threw a dim light on the tense lines of his wounded face:

"Come! Let us go!"

Leclair buried his cigarette in the warm earth.

Risa caught up a handful of sand and flung it toward the unseen enemy, in memory of the decisive pebbles thrown by Mohammed at the Battle of Bedr, so great a victory for him.

Then he followed the Master and Leclair, with a whispered:

"_Bismillah wa Allahu akbar_[1]"

[Footnote 1: In the name of Allah, and Allah is greatest!]

Together, crawling on their bellies like dusty puff-adders of the Sahara itself, the three companions in arms--American, French, Arab--slid out of the shallow trench, and in the gloom were lost to sight of the beleaguered Flying Legion.

Their mission of death, death to the Beni Harb or to themselves, had begun.

CHAPTER XXIV

ANGELS OF DEATH

In utter silence, moving only a foot at a time, the trio of man-hunters advanced. They spaced themselves out, dragged themselves forward one at a time, took advantage of every slightest depression, every wrinkle in the sandy desert-floor, every mummy-like acacia and withered tamarisk-bush, some sparse growth of which began to mingle with the halfa-grass as they passed from the coast-dunes to the desert itself.

Breathing only through open mouths, for greater stillness, taking care to crackle no twig nor even slide loose sand, they labored on, under the pale-hazed starlight. Their goal was vague. Just where they should come upon the Beni Harb, in that confused jumble of dunes and _nullahs_ (ravines) they could not tell; nor yet did they know the exact distance separating the Legion's trenches from the enemy. All was vague mystery--a mystery ready at any second, at any slightest alarm, to blaze out death upon them.

None the less, stout-hearted and firm of purpose, they serpented their painful way prone on the hot, dusty bosom of the Sahara. Fate for them and for all the Legion, lay on so slight a thing as the stirring of a twig, the _tunk_ of a boot against a bleached camel's skull, the

possibility of a sneeze or cough.

Even the chance scaring-up of a hyena or a vagrant jackal might betray them. Every breath, every heartbeat was pregnant with contingencies of life and death.

Groveling, they slipped forward, dim, moving shadows in a world of brown obscurity. At any moment, one might lay a hand on a sleeping puff-adder or a scorpion. But even that had been fore-reckoned. All three of them had thought of such contingencies and weighed them. Not one but had determined to suppress any possible outcry, if thus stricken, and to die in absolute silence.

What mattered death for one, if two should win to the close range necessary for discharging the lethal capsules? What mattered it even for two, if one should succeed? The survivors, or the sole survivor, would simply take the weapons from the stricken and proceed.

After what seemed more than an hour, though in fact it was but the ten minutes agreed on with Bohannan, off behind them toward the coast a sudden staccato popping of revolvers began to puncture the night. Up and down the Legionaries' trench it pattered, desultory, aimless.

The three men engaged in the perilous task of what the Arabs call _asar_, or enemy-tracking, lay prone, with bullets keening high overhead. As the Master looked back, he could see the little spurts of fire from that fusillade.

The firing came from more to the left than the Master had reckoned, showing him that he had got a little off his bearings. But now he took his course again, as he had intended to do from the Legion's fire; and presently rifle work from the Arabs, too, verified, his direction.

The Master smiled. Leclair fingered the butt of his revolver.

Risa whispered curses:

"Ah, dog-sons, may you suffer the extreme cold of El Zamharir! Ah, may _Rih al Asfar_, the yellow wind (cholera), carry you all away!"

The racket of aimless firing continued a few minutes, underneath the mild effulgence of the stars. It ceased, from the Legion's trenches at the agreed moment; and soon it died down, also from the Arabs'. Quiet rose again from the desert, broken only by the surf-wash on the sand, the far, tremulous wail of a jackal, the little dry skitter of scorpions.

The three scouts lay quiet for ten minutes after the volleying had ceased. Silence settled over the plain; but, presently, a low moaning sound came indistinctly from the east. It lasted only a moment, then died away; and almost at once, the slight wind that had been blowing from the sea hushed itself to a strange calm.

Risa gave anxious ear. His face grew tense, but he held his peace. Neither of the white men paid any heed to the slight phenomenon. To them it meant nothing. For all their experience with the desert, they had never happened to hear just that thing. The Arab, however, felt a stab of profound anxiety. His lips moved in a silent prayer to Allah.

Once more the Master raised his hand in signal of advance. The three man-stalkers wormed forward again. They now had their direction, also their distance, with extreme precision; a simple process of triangulation, in which the glow of the beach-fire had its share, gave them the necessary data.

Undaunted, they approached the camp of the Beni Harb; though every moment they expected to be challenged, to hear the crack of an alarm-rifle or a cry to Allah, followed by a deadly blast of slugs.

But fortune's scale-pan dipped in their direction, and all held still. The sun-baked desert kept their secret. Onward they crawled, now over sand, now over cracked mud-flakes of saline deposit where water had dried at the bottom of a _ghadir_. All was calm as if the spirit of rest were hovering over the hot, fevered earth, still quivering from the kiss of its great enemy, the sun.

"Peace, it is peace until the rising of the morn!" a thought came to the Master's mind, a line from the chapter Al Kadr, in the Koran. He smiled to himself. "False peace," he reflected. "The calm before the storm!" Prophetic thought, though not as he intended it!

On and on the trio labored, soundlessly. At last the chief stopped, held up his hand a second, lay still. The others glimpsed him by the starlight, nested down in a shallow depression of the sand. They crept close to him.

"Lieutenant," he whispered, "you bombard the left-hand sector, toward the fire and the sea. Risa, take the right-hand one. The middle is for me. Fire at will!"

Out from belts and pockets came the lethal pistols. With well-estimated elevation, the attackers sighted, each covering his own sector. Hissing with hardly audible sighs, the weapons fired their stange pellets, and once again as over the woods on the Englewood Palisades--really less than twenty-four hours ago, though it seemed a month--the little greenish vapor-wisps floated down, down, sinking gently on the Sahara air.

This attack, they knew, must be decisive or all would be hopeless. The last supply of capsules was now being exhausted. Everything had been staked on one supreme effort. Quickly the attackers discharged their weapons; then, having done all that could be done, lay prone and waited.

Once again that hollow moaning sound drifted in across the baked expanse of the Sahara--a strange, empty sound, unreal and ominous. Then came a stir of sultry breeze, from the east. It strengthened; and a fine, crepitant sliding of sand-particles became audible. Risa stirred uneasily.

"Master," he whispered, "we should not delay. If the _jinnee_ of the waste overtake us, we may be lost."

"The _jinnee_ of the waste?" the Master answered, in a low tone. "What nonsense is this?"

"The simoom, Master--the storm of sand. We call it the work of evil spirits!"

The Master made no reply, save to command silence.

For a time nothing happened in the Arabs' camp. Then came a little stir, off there in the gloom. A sound of voices grew audible. The name of Allah drifted out of the all-enveloping night, to them, and that of his Prophet. A cry: "_Ya Abd el Kadir_--" calling on a patron saint, died before the last word, "_Jilani_," could find utterance. Then silence, complete and leaden, fell with uncanny suddenness.

The Master laughed, dryly. He touched Leclair's arm.

"Strong medicine for the Beni Harb, Lieutenant," said he. "Their own _imams_ (priests) have strong medicine, too, but not so strong as that of the cursed sons of Feringistan. Sleep already lies heavy on the eyelids of these sons of Allah. And a deeper sleep shall soon overcome them. Tell me, Lieutenant, can you kill men wholesale?"

"Yes, my Captain."

"Sleeping men, who cannot resist you? Can you kill them scientifically, in masses, without anger?"

"How do you know now, my Captain, that it will not be in anger?" And the Frenchman half eased himself up on hands and knees, peering forward into the night. "After what these Beni Harb--or their close kin--have done to me and to poor Lebon--listen! What was that?"

"What do you mean?"

"That far, roaring noise?"

"It is nothing! A little wind, maybe; but it is nothing, nothing! Come, I am ready for the work!"

The Master stood up. Rrisa followed suit. No longer crawling, but walking erect, they advanced. They still used caution, careful to make no noise; but confidence had entered into them. Were not the Arabs all asleep?

The white men's faces were pale and drawn, with grim determination for the task that lay ahead--the task of converting the Beni Harb's camp into a shambles. The Arab's face, with white-rimmed eyes and with lips drawn back from teeth, had become that of a wild animal. Rrisa's nostrils were dilated, to scent out the enemy. He was breathing hard, as if he had run a mile.

"They are near, now, _Ya M'alme!_" said he. "They are close at hand, these _nakhawilah_! (pariahs). Allah, the high, the great, hath delivered them into our hands. Verily there is no power or might but Allah. Shall I scout ahead, Master, and spy out the camp?"

"No, Rrisa. I send no man where I will not gladly go myself. All three of us, forward!"

Again they advanced, watchful, revolvers in hands, ready for any sudden ambush. All at once, as they came up over a breastwork of hard clay and gravel that heaved itself into rolling sands, the camp of the Beni Harb became visible. Dim, brown and white figures were lying all

about, distorted in strange attitudes, on the sand beyond the ridge. There lay the despoilers of the Haram, the robber-tribe of Sheik Abd el Rahman, helpless in blank unconsciousness.

The Master laughed bitterly, as he strode forward into the camp, the long lines of which stretched vaguely away toward the coast where the fire was still leaping up against the stars, now paled with a strange haze.

Starlight showed weapons lying all about--long rifles and primitive flint-locks; _kanat_ spears of Indian male-bamboo tipped with steel and decorated with tufts of black ostrich-feathers; and _jambiyehs_, or crooked daggers, with wicked points and edges.

"Save your fire, men," said the Master picking up a spear. "There are plenty of means, here, to give these dogs the last sleep, without wasting good ammunition. Choose the weapon you can handle best, and fall to work!"

With a curse on the heretic Beni Harb, and a murmur of thanks to Allah for this wondrous hour, Risa caught up a short javelin, of the kind called _mirzak_. The lieutenant chose a wide-bladed sword.

"Remember only one thing, my brothers in arms!" exclaimed the Master. "But that is most vital!" He spoke in Arabic.

"And what may it be?" asked the Frenchman, in the same tongue.

"I do not know whether old Sheik Abd el Rahman is with this party or not, but if either of you find him, kill him not! Deliver him to me!"

"Listen, Master!" exclaimed Risa, and thrust the point of his javelin deep into the sand.

"Well, what now, Risa?"

"Shall we, after all, kill these sleeping swine-brothers?"

"Eh, what? Thy heart then, hath turned to water? Thou canst not kill? They attacked us--this is justice!"

"And if they live, they will surely wipe us out!" put in the Frenchman, staring in the gloom. "What meaneth this old woman's babble, son of the Prophet?"

"It is not that my heart hath turned to water, nor have the fountains of mine eyes been opened to pity," answered Risa. "But some things are worse than death, to all of Arab blood. To be despoiled of arms or of horses, without a fight, makes an Arab as the worm of the earth. Then he becometh an outcast, indeed! 'If you would rule, disarm'," he quoted the old proverb, and added another: "'Man unarmed in the desert is like a bird shorn of wings.'"

"What is thy plain meaning in all this?" demanded the chief.

"Listen, _M'alme_. If you would be the Sheik of Sheiks, carry away all these weapons, and let these swine awaken without them. They would drag their way back to the oases and the black tents, with a story the like of which hath never been told in the Empty Abodes. The Sahara

would do homage, Master, even as if the Prophet had returned!"

"_Lah_! I am not thinking of the Sahara. The goal lies far beyond--far to eastward."

"Still, the folk are Arabs there, too. They would hear of this, and bow to you, my _M'alme_!"

"Perhaps. Perhaps not. I can take no chances, Risa. The land, here and to the eastward, might all arise against us. The tribes might come against us like the _rakham_, the carrion-vultures. No, we must kill and kill, so that no man remaineth here--none save old Abd el Rahman, if Allah deliver him into our hands!"

"That is your firm command, Master?"

"My firm command!"

"To hear the Master is to obey. But first, grant me time for my _isha_, my evening prayer!"

"It is granted. And, Risa, _there_ is the _kiblah_, the direction of Mecca!"

The Master pointed exactly east. Risa faced that way, knelt, prostrated himself. He made ablution with sand, as Mohammed allows when water cannot be found. Even as he poured it down his face, the strangely gusting wind flicked it away in little whirls.

CHAPTER XXV

THE GREAT PEARL STAB

The Master began to feel a peculiar anxiety. Into the east he peered, where now indeed a low, steady hum was growing audible, as of a million angry spirits swarming nearer. The stars along that horizon had been blotted out, and something like a dark blanket seemed to be drawing itself across the sky.

"My Captain," said the lieutenant, "there may be trouble brewing, close at hand. A sand-storm, unprotected as we are--"

"Men with stern work to do cannot have time to fear the future!"

Leclair grew silent. Risa alone was speaking, now. With a call of "_Ya Latif!_" (O Merciful One!) he had begun the performance of his ceremony, with rigid exactness. He ended with another prostration and the usual drawing down of the hands over the face. Then he arose, took up his javelin again, and with a clear conscience--since now his rites had all been fulfilled--cried aloud:

"Now, Master, I am ready for the work of helping Azrael, the death-angel, separate the souls and bodies of these Shiah heretics!"

A sudden howling of a jackal startled Risa. He quivered and

stood peering into the night, where now the unmistakable hum of an approaching sand-storm was drawing near. His superstitious soul trembled with the old belief of his people that creatures of the dog breed can see Azrael, invisible to human eyes. At thought of the death-angel standing nigh, his heart quaked; but rage and hate inspired him, and he muttered:

"Fire to your bellies, broiling in white flame! Fuel of Jehannum, may Eblis be your bed, an unhappy couch! Spawn of Shaytan (Satan), boiling water to cool your throats! At Al Hakkat (judgment day) may the _jinnee_ fly away with you!"

"To work, men!" cried the Master. "There is great work to do!"

As if in answer to his command, a blustering, hot buffet of wind roared down with amazing suddenness, filling the dark air with a stinging drive of sand. The fire by the beach flailed into long tongues of flame, throwing black shadows along the side of the wady. No stars were now visible. From empty spaces, a souging tumult leaped forth; and on the instant a furious gust of fine, cutting particles whirled all about, thicker than driven snow in a northern blizzard.

"Iron, O thou ill-omened one!" cried Risa, with the ancient invocation against the sand-storm. He stretched out his forefinger, making the sign of protection. Neither the meaning of his cry nor of the gesture could he have explained; but both came to him involuntarily, from the remote lore of his people.

He turned from the oncoming storm, leaning against the wind, clutching for his cap that the wind-devil had just whirled away. After it he stumbled; and, falling to his knees, groped for it in the gloom.

"Thousand devils!" ejaculated the Frenchman. "No time, now, for killing! Lucky if we get back ourselves, alive, to the beach! My Captain!"

"What now?" the Master flung at him, shielding mouth and eyes with cupped hands.

"To the wady, all of us! That may give protection till this blast of Hell passes!"

A startled cry from Risa forestalled any answer. The Arab's voice rose in a wild hail from the sand-filled dark:

"O _M'alme_, _M'alme!_"

"What, Risa?"

"Behold! I--_I have found him!_"

"Found--?" shouted the Master, plunging forward.

Leclair followed close, staggering in the sudden gale. "_Abd el Rahman?_"

"The old hyena, surely! _M'alme, M'alme! See!_"

The white men stumbled with broken ejaculations to where Risa was

crouched over a gaunt figure in the drifting sand.

"Is that he, Risa?" cried the Master. "Art thou sure?"

"As that my mother bore me! See the old jackal, the son of Hareth! (the devil). Ah, see, see!"

"_Dieu_!" exclaimed the Frenchman, in his own tongue. "It is none other!" With a hand of great rejoicing, he stirred the unconscious Sheik--over whom the sand was already sifting as the now ravening simoom lashed it along.

Forgotten now were all his fears of death in the sand-storm. This delivery of the hated one into his hands had filled him with a savage joy, as it had the two others.

"Ah, _mon vieux!_" he cried. "It is only the mountains that never meet, in time!"

The Master laughed, one of those rare flashes of merriment that at infrequent intervals pierced his austerity. Away on the growing sand-storm the wind whipped that laugh. Simoom and sand now appeared forgotten by the trio. Keen excitement had gripped them; it held them as they crouched above the Sheik.

"Allah is being good to us!" exulted the Master, peering by the gale-driven fire-glare. "This capture is worth more to the Legion than a hundred machine-guns. What will not the orthodox tribes give for this arch-Shiah, this despoiler of the sacred Haram at Mecca?"

He began feeling in the bosom of the old man, opening the cloaklike burnous and exploring the neck and chest with eager fingers.

"If we could only lay hands on the fabled loot of the Haram!" he whispered, his voice tense with excitement.

Risa, wide-eyed, with curling lips of scorn, peered down at the Sheik. The orderly, bare-headed, was shielding eyes and face from the sand-blast, with hands that trembled. His teeth were bared with hate as he peered at the prostrate heretic.

A tall, powerful figure of a man the Sheik was, lying there on his right side with his robe crumpled under him--the robe now flapping, whipping its loose ends in the high and rising wind. His _tarboosh_ had been blown away, disclosing white hair.

That hair, too, writhed and flailed in the gusts that drove it full of sand, that drifted his whole body with the fine and stinging particles. His beard, full and white, did not entirely conceal the three parallel scars on each cheek, the _mashali_, which marked him as originally a dweller at Mecca.

One sinewy brown arm was outflung, now almost wholly buried in the growing sand-drift. The hand still gripped a long, gleaming rifle, its stock and barrel elaborately arabesqued in silver picked out with gold.

"Ah!" exclaimed the Master again, pulling at a thin crimson cord his questing fingers had discovered about the old man's neck. With hands

that trembled a little, he drew out this cord. Then he uttered an exclamation of intense disappointment.

There was nothing at the end of the crimson loop, save a _lamail_, or pocket Koran. Leclair muttered a curse, and moved away, peering toward the fire, spying out the wady through the now almost choking sand-drive--the wady where they certainly must soon take refuge or be overwhelmed by the buffeting lash of sand whirled on the breath of the shouting tempest.

Even in the Master's anger, he did not throw the Koran away. Too astute, he, for any such act in presence of Risa. Instead, he bound the Arab to fresh devotion by touching lips and forehead, and by handing him the little volume. The Master's arm had to push its way against the wind as against a solid thing; and the billion rushing spicules of sand that swooped in upon him from the desert emptiness, stung his flesh like tiny scourges.

"This Koran, Risa, is now thine!" he cried in a loud voice, to make the Arab hear him. "And a great gift to thee, a Sunnite, is the Koran, of this desecrating son of the rejected!"

Bowed before the flail of the sand--while Risa uttered broken words of thanks--the Master called to Leclair:

"By _Corsi_ (Allah's throne), now things assume a different aspect! This old dog of dogs is a prize, indeed! And--what now--"

Leclair did not answer. The Frenchman was not even near him. The Master saw him in the wady, dimly visible through the ghostly white sand-shrouds spinning in the blue-whipped fire-glare. There on hands and knees the lieutenant was huddled. With eager hands he was tearing the hood of a _za'abut_--a rough, woolen slave cloak, patched and ragged--from the face of a prostrate figure more than half snowed under a sand-drift.

"_Nom de Dieu!_" the Master heard him cry. "_Mais, nom de_--"

"What have you found, Lieutenant?" shouted the Master, letting the simoom drive him toward the wady. In their excitement none of the men would yet take cover, lie down and hide their faces under their coats as every dictate of prudence would have bidden. "Who is it, now? What--"

"Ah, my Captain! Ah! the pity of it! Behold!"

The Frenchman's voice, wind-gusted, trembled with grief and passionate anger; yet through that rage and sorrow rang a note of joy.

"Tell me, Leclair! Who, now?" demanded the Master, as he came close and peered down by the fire-gleam roaring on the beach, sending sheaves of sparks in comet-tails of vanishing radiance down-wind with rushing sand.

"It is impossible, my Captain," the lieutenant answered in French. His voice could now make itself heard more clearly; for here in the wady a certain shelter existed from the roaring sand-cyclone. "Impossible, but--_Dieu!_--it is true!"

"What is true?"

"Incredible, yet--_voila_!"

"In Allah's name, Lieutenant!" the Master ejaculated, "compose yourself! Explain! Who is this Arab, here?"

"No Arab, sir! No, no!"

"Not an Arab? Well, what is he, then?"

"Ah, these scars, my Captain! Behold--see the slave dress, the weals of the branding-iron on cheek and brow! Ah, for pity! See the starved body, the stripes of the lash, the feet mangled by the bastinado! What horrible things they have done to him--ah, God have pity on us!"

Tears gleamed on the stern fighter's cheeks, there in the ghostly blue firelight--tears that washed little courses through the dust and sand now griming his face. The French airman, hard in battle and with heart of steel and flame, was crying like a child.

"What now? Who is it?" shouted the Master. "A European?"

"Yes, my Captain! A Frenchman!"

"A Frenchman. You don't mean to say it--is--"

"Yes, yes! My orderly! Lebon!"

"God!" exclaimed the Master. "But--"

A cry from Risa interrupted him, a cry that flared down-wind with strange, wild exultation. The Arab had just risen from the sand, near the unconscious, in-drifting form of the Sheik, Abd el Rahman.

In his hands he was holding something--holding a leather sack with a broken cord attached to it. This cord in some way had been severed by the Sheik's rifle when the old man had fallen. The leather sack had rolled a few feet away. Now, with hands that shook so that the Arab could hardly control them, Risa was holding out this sack as he staggered through the blinding sand-storm towards his chief.

"_Al Hamdu Lillah!_" (Praise to the Lord of the Three Worlds!) choked Risa in a strange voice, fighting for his very breath. "See--see what I--have found!"

Staring, blinking, trying to shelter his eyes against the demons of the storm, the Master turned toward him.

"What, Risa?"

Down into the wady stumbled the Arab, gray-powdered with clinging sand.

"Oh," he choked, "it has been taken from these _yezid_, these abusers of the salt! Now we rescue it from these cut-off ones! From the swine and brothers of the swine it has been taken by Allah, and put back into the hands of Risa, Allah's slave! See, _M'alme_, see!"

The shaking hands extended the leather sack. At it the Master stared, his face going dead white.

"Thou--dost not mean--?" he stammered.

"Truly, I do!"

"Not Kaukab el Durri?"

"Aye--it was lying near that heretic dog!"

"The Great Pearl Star, the sacred loot from the Haram?"

"Kaukab el Durri, _M'alme_. The Great Pearl Star itself!"

CHAPTER XXVI

THE SAND-DEVILS

With hands that quivered in unison with his nerves, now no longer impassive, the strange chief of this still stranger expedition took from Rrisa the leather sack. Over the top of the wady a million sand-devils were screeching. The slither of the dry snow--the white, fine snow of sand--filled all space with a whispering rustle that could be heard through the shouting of the simoom.

Sand was beating on them, everywhere, in the darkness lighted only by the tortured beach-fire. The stinging particles assailed eyes, ears, mouth; it whitened clothing, sifted into hair, choked breath. But still the Legionaries could not take shelter under their coats. In this moment of wondrous finding, they must see the gem of gems that Kismet had thus flung into their grasp.

The Master loosed a knot in the cord, drew the sack open and shook into his left palm a thing of marvellous beauty and wonder.

By the dim, fitful gleam of the fire, probably the strangest and most costly necklace in the world became indistinctly visible. At sight of it, everything else was forgotten--the wrecked air-liner, the waiting Legion, the unconscious Arabs now being buried in the resistless charge of the sand-armies. Even poor Lebon, tortured slave of the Beni Harb, a lay neglected. For nothing save the wondrous Great Pearl Star could these three adventurers find any gaze whatever, or any thoughts.

While Leclair and Rrisa stared with widening eyes, the Master, tense with joy, held up their treasure-trove.

"The Great Pearl Star!" he cried, in a strange voice.

"Kaukab el Durri! See, one pearl is missing--that is the one said to have been sold in Cairo, twelve years ago, for fifty-five thousand pounds! But these are finer! And its value as a holy relic of Islam--who can calculate that? God, what this means to us!"

Words will not compass the description of this wondrous thing. As

the Master held it up in the sand-lashed dimness, half-gloom and half-light, that formed a kind of aura round the fire--an aura sheeted through and all about by the aerial avalanches of the sand--the Legionaries got some vague idea of the necklace.

Three black pearls and two white were strung on a fine chain of gold. A gap in their succession told where the missing pearl formerly had been. Each of the five pearls was of almost incalculable value; but one, an iridescent Oman, far surpassed the others.

This pearl was about the size of a man's largest thumb-joint. Its shape was a smooth oval; its hue, even in that dim, wind-tossed light, showed a wondrous, tender opalescence that seemed to change and blend into rainbow iridescences as the staring Legionaries peered at it. The other pearls, black and white alike, ranked as marvelous gems; but this crown-jewel of the Great Pearl Star eclipsed anything the Master--for all his wide travel and experience of life--ever had seen.

By way of strange contrast in values the pearls were separated from each other by worthless, little, smooth lumps of madrepore, or unfossilized coral. These lumps were covered with tiny black inscriptions in archaic Cufic characters; though what the significance of these might be, the Master could not--in that gloom and howling drive of the sand-devils--even begin to determine.

The whole adornment, as it lay in the Master's palm, typified the Orient. For there was gold; there were gems and bits of worthless dross intermingled; and there about it was drifting sand of infinite ages, darkness, flashes of light, color, mystery, wonder, beauty.

"God! What this means!" the Master repeated, as the three men cringed in the wady. "Success, dominion, power!"

"You mean--" put in Leclair, his voice smitten away by the ever-increasing storm that ravened over the top of the gully.

"What do I not mean, Lieutenant? No wonder the Apostate Sheik had to flee from Mecca and take refuge here in this impassable wilderness at the furthest rim of Islam! No wonder he has been hounded and hunted! The only miracle is that some of his own tribesmen have not betrayed him before now!"

"Master, no Arab betrays his own sheik, right or wrong!" said Rrisa in a strange voice. "Before that, an Arab dies by his own hand!" He spoke in Arabic, with a peculiar inflection.

Their eyes met a second by the light of the gusting fire.

"Right or wrong, M'alme!" repeated the Arab. Then he added: "Shall I not now go to drag in the swine-brother Abd el Rahman?"

"Thou sayst, if he be left there--"

"Yes, Master, he will surely die. All who are not sheltered, now, will die. All who lie there on the dune, will be drifted under, will breathe sand, will perish."

"It is well, Rrisa. Go, drag in the swine-brother. But have a care to harm him not. Thou wouldst gladly slay him, eh?"

"More gladly than to live myself! Still, I obey. I go, I bring him safe to you, O Master!"

He salaamed, turned, and vanished up over the edge of the wady.

The lieutenant, warned of the danger of sand-breathing by an unconscious man, drew the hood of the woollen _za'abut_ up over the face of Lebon. There was nothing more he could do for the poor fellow. Only with the passage of time could he be reawakened. The French ace turned again to where his chief was still scrutinizing the Pearl Star as he crouched in the wady, back to the storm-wind, face toward the fire on the beach.

"Do you realize what this thing is?" demanded the Master, turning the necklace in his hands. "Do you understand?"

"I have heard of it, my Captain. For years vague rumors have come to me from the desert-men, from far oases and cities of the Sahara. Now here, now there, news has drifted in to Algiers--not news, but rather fantastic tales. Yes, I have often heard of the Kaukab el Durri. But till now I have always believed it a story, a myth."

"No myth, but solid fact!" exulted the Master, with a strange laugh. "This, Lieutenant, is the very treasure that Mohammed gathered together during many years of looting caravans in the desert and of capturing _sambuks_ on the Red Sea. Arabia, India, and China all contributed to it. The Prophet gave it to his favorite wife, Ayesha, as he lay dying at Medina in the year 632, with his head in her lap.

"Next to the Black Stone, itself, it is possibly the most precious thing in Islam. And now, now with this Great Pearl Star in our hands, what is impossible?"

Silence fell between the two men. They still huddled there in the partial protection of the wady, while all the evil _jinnee_ of the sand-storm shrieked blackly overhead. With no further words they continued to study the wondrous thing. The fire was dying, now, burned out by the fierce blast of the storm and blown away to sea in long spindrifts of spark and vapor, white as the sand-drive itself. By the fading light little could now be seen of the Great Pearl Star. The Master replaced it in its leather bag, knotted the cord securely about the mouth of the receptacle, and pocketed it.

A rattle of pebbles down the side of the wady, and a grunting call, told them Rrisa had returned. Dimly they saw him dragging the old Sheik over the lip of the gully, down into its half-protection. He brought the unconscious man to them, and--though bowed by the frenzy of the storm--managed a salute.

"Here, Master, I have saved him from the _jinnee_ of the desert," Rrisa pantingly announced. His voice trembled with a passionate hate; his eyes gleamed with excitement; his nails dug into the palms of his hands. "Now Master, gladden my eyes and expand my breast by letting me see this old jackal's blood!"

"No, Rrisa," the Master denied him. "I have other use for the old jackal. Other punishments await him than death at my hands."

"What punishments, Master?" the Arab cried with terrible eagerness.

"Wait, and thou shalt see. And remember always, I am thy sheik, thy preserver, with whom thou hast shared the salt. 'He who violates the salt shall surely taste Jahannum!'"

"Death shall have me, first!" cried Rrisa, and fell silent. And for a while the three men crouched in the wady with the two unconscious ones, torturer and victim. At length the Master spoke:

"This won't do, Lieutenant. We must be getting back."

Leclair peered at him in the screaming dark.

"Why, my Captain?" asked he. "The Legionaries can care for themselves. If _Nissr_ is breaking up, in the gale, we can do nothing. And on the way we may be lost. To retrace our journey over the desert would surely be to invite death."

"We must return, nevertheless. This storm may last all night, and it may blow itself out in half an hour. That cannot be told. The Legion may think us lost, and try to search for us. Lives may be sacrificed. Morale demands that we go back. Moreover, we certainly need not traverse the desert."

"How, then?"

"We can descend the wady to the beach, and make southward along it, under the shelter of the dunes."

"In the noise and confusion of the storm they may take us for Arabs and shoot us down."

"I will see to that. Come, we must go! Carry Lebon, if you like. Rrisa and I will take Abd el Rahman."

"_M'alme_, not Abd el Rahman, now," ejaculated Rrisa, "but Abd el Hareth!^[1] Let that be his title!"

[Footnote 1: The former name signifies "Slave of Compassion;" the latter, "Slave of the Devil."]

"As thou wishest, Rrisa. But come, take his feet. I will hold him by the shoulders. So! Now, forward!"

"And have a care not to breathe the sand, Master," Rrisa warned. "Turn thy face away when the _jinnee_ smite!"

Stumbling, heavy-laden, the three men made their painful way down to the beach, turned to the left, and plowed southward in deep sand. As they left the remains of the fire a great blackness fell upon them. The boisterous exultation of the wind, howling in from a thousand miles of hot emptiness, out over the invisible sea now chopped into frothy waves, seemed snatching at them. But the dunes at their left flung the worst of the sand-storm up and over. And though whirls and air-eddies, sand-laden, snatched viciously at them, they won along the beach.

That was lathering toil, burdened as they were, stumbling over

driftwood and into holes, laboring forward, hardly able to distinguish more than the rising, falling line of white that marked the surf. Voices of water and of wind conclamantly shouted, as if all the devils of the Moslem Hell had been turned loose to snatch and rave at them. Heat, stifle, sand caught them by the throat; the breath wheezed in their lungs; and on their faces sweat and sand pasted itself into a kind of sticky mud.

After fifteen minutes of this struggle the Master paused. He dropped Abd el Rahman's shoulders, and Risa the Sheik's feet, while Leclair stood silently bowed with the weight of Lebon and of the belaboring storm.

"_Oooo-eeee! Ooooooooo! Oooooo-eeee!_" the Master hailed, three long times. An answering shout came back, faintly, from the black. The Master bent, assured himself the old Sheik's mouth and nose were still covered by the hood of the burnous, and cried: "Forward!" And the three men stumbled on and on.

Five minutes later the Master once more paused.

"Remember, both of you," he cautioned, "not one word of the find!"

"The Great Pearl Star?" asked Leclair gruntingly.

Their voices were almost inaudible to each other in that mad tumult. "That is to be a secret, my Captain?"

"Between us three; yes. Let that be understood!"

"I pledge my honor to it!" cried the Frenchman. Risa added: "The Master has but to command, and it is done!" Then once more they plowed on down the shore.

Only a few minutes more brought them, with surprising suddenness, to the end of the Legionaries' trench. Trench it no longer was, however. All the paltry digging had been swiftly filled in by the sand-devils; and now the men were lying under the lee of the dunes, protecting themselves as best they could with the tunics of their uniforms over their heads.

They got up and came stumbling in confusion to greet the returning trio. Peering in the dark, straining their eyes to see, they listened to a few succinct words of the Master:

"Perfect success! Lethalizing was complete. Sand has buried the entire tribe. Leclair found his former orderly, who had been their slave. We have here their Sheik, Abd el Rahman. Nothing more to fear. Down, everybody--tunics over heads again--let the storm blow itself out!"

The Legion lay for more than an hour, motionless, waiting in the night. During this hour both Lebon and the old Sheik recovered consciousness, but only in a vague manner. There was no attempt to tell them anything, to make any plans, to start any activities. In a Sahara simoom, men are content just to live.

CHAPTER XXVII

TOIL AND PURSUIT

Before midnight the storm died with a suddenness even greater than that of its onset. Like a tangible flock of evil birds or of the spirits Victor Hugo has painted in *_Les Djinns_*, the sand-storm blew itself out to sea and vanished. The black sky opened its eyes of starlight, once again; gradually calm descended on the desert, and by an hour after midnight the steady east wind had begun to blow again.

The "wolf's tail," or first gray streak of dawn along the horizon, found the Legion all astir. Lebon had long since been told of his rescue; he and his lieutenant had embraced and had given each other a long story--the enslaved man's story making Leclair's face white with rage, his heart a furnace of vengeance on all Islam.

The Sheik, dimly understanding that these devils of Feringistan had by their super-magic overwhelmed him and his tribe with sleep-magic and storm-magic of the strongest, lay bound hand and foot, sullenly brooding. No one could get a word from Abd el Rahman; not even Risa, who exhausted a wonderful vocabulary of imprecation on him, until the Master sternly bade him hold his peace.

A gaunt, sunken-eyed old hawk of the desert he lay there in the sand, unblinkingly defiant. Tortures and death, he felt, were to be his portion; but with the stoicism of the barbarian he made no sound. What his thoughts were, realizing the loss of tribesmen, capture, despoilment of the Great Pearl Star, who could tell?

A wondrous dawn, all mingled of scarlet, orange, and vivid yellows, with streaks of absinthe hue, burned up over the desert world. It showed *_Nissr_* about as she had been the night before; for the simoom had not thrashed up sea enough--offshore, as it had been--to break up the partial wreck.

The air-liner had, however, settled down a good deal in the sand, and had canted at a sharp angle to port. Her galleries, fuselage, and wings were heavily laden with sand that materially increased her weight; and to the casual eye she gave the impression of a bird which never again would soar on level wing.

The major voiced discouragement, but no one shared it. Spirits were still high, in spite of thirst and exhaustion, and of the losses already sustained in men and material. Lombardo and "Captain Alden" had patched up the wounded in rough, first-aid fashion; and they, in spite of pain, shared the elation of the others in the entire wiping-out of the Beni Harb.

As soon as the light permitted operations to begin again, the Legion trekked over to the Arabs' former lines. Nothing now remained to tell them of the enemy, save here or there the flutter of a bit of burnous or *_cherchia_* (head-dress), that fluttered from the white sand now all ribbed in lovely scollops like the waves of a moveless sea. In one spot a naked brown arm and hand were projecting heavenward, out of the sand-ocean, as if in mute appeal to Allah.

The Legionaries heaped sand on this grim bit of death, completely

burying it, and on the fluttering cloths. And as they peered abroad across the desert, in the glory of morning, now nothing could be seen to mind them of the fighting-men who, like the host of Sennacherib, had been brushed by the death-angel's wing.

The jackals knew, though, and the skulking hyenas, already sneaking in the _nullahs_; and so did the _rion_ and the yellow _ukab_-birds--carrion-fowl, both--which already from the farthest blue, had begun to wheel and volplane toward the coast.

Back on the beach, exultant, yet rather silent in the face of all that death, the Legion at once got itself into action under the vigorous command of the Master. Twenty-three men were still fit and active for service; and both Enemark and Lebon would in a few days be of help.

"Man-power enough," thought the Master, as he laid out his campaign. "The only troublesome factors, are, first, _Nissr's_ condition; second, our lack of water and supplies; and third, the possibility of interference from Arabs or European forces, by land or sea. If we can overcome all these--_if_, did I say? We can! We will!"

First of all, three volunteers swam out to _Nissr_ through the surf now again beating in from the open sea. Their purpose was to bring the wounded Kloof ashore. Even though Kloof's oversight of the stowaway had wrecked the expedition, and though Kloof would probably be executed in due time, common humanity dictated succoring him.

The volunteers returned, after a hard fight, with a body past any human judgments. Kloof, Daimamoto, Sheffield, and Beziers, all of whom had lost their lives in the battle with the Beni Harb, were soon buried on the beach by the hungry, thirsty, sand-penetrated Legionaries. The shallow graves were piled with driftwood--rocks there were none, even in the wady, which' was of clay and gravel--and so, protected as best might be from beasts and birds, four of the Legion entered their long homes. The only ceremony over the fallen adventurers was the firing of a volley of six pistol-shots.

Swiftly returning heat, and a plague of black flies that poisoned with every bite, warned the Legionaries not to delay. Hunger and thirst, too, scourged them on. Their first care was food and drink.

Fortune favored them. In spite of the simoom the prevailing west wind had cast up all along the shore--for two or three miles each way--perhaps a quarter or a third of the stores they had been forced to jettison. Before doing anything else, the Legion brought in these cases of provisions and established a regular camp in the wady where they would be protected from observation from the Sahara. The piling up of these stores, the building of a fire to keep off the flies, and the portioning out of what little tobacco they had with them, wonderfully stiffened their morale.

Water, however, was still lacking; and all the Legionaries, as well as the old Sheik who would have died in the flames before asking for drink, were beginning to suffer extremely. The Master detailed Simonds, L'Heureux, and Seres to construct a still, which they did in only a little more than three hours.

The apparatus was ingeniously and efficiently built, out of two large provision tins and some piping which they got--together with a few

tools--by swimming out to the air-liner. The still, with a brisk fire under it, proved capable of converting sea-water into flat, tasteless fresh water at the rate of two quarts an hour. Thirsty they might all get, to desperation; but with this supply they could survive till better could be had.

While the distilling apparatus was being built, work was already under way on _Nissr_; work which old Abd el Rahman watched with beady eyes of hate; work in which Dr. Lombardo, fellow-partner in Kloof's guilt, was allowed to share--the condition being frankly stated to him that his punishment was merely being deferred.

Under the Master's direction, stout mooring-piles of driftwood were sunk into the dunes, block-and-tackle gear was improvised, and lines were rove to the airship. She was lightened by shoveling several tons of sand from her and by removing everything easily detachable; the men working in baths of sweat, with a kind of ardent abandon.

Enough power was still left in her storage-batteries to operate the air-pressure system through the floats. This air, with a huge boiling and seething of the white surf, loosened the floats from the cling of the sand; and a score of men at the tackles succeeded at high-tide in hauling _Nissr_ far up on the beach.

Rough gear, broken ship, toiling men blind with sweat, blazing African sun, appalling isolation, vultures and jackals at work behind the dunes, and--back of all--ocean and Sahara, made a picture fit for any master-painter. We must throw only one glance at it, and pass on.

This much accomplished, nightfall, with the west glowing like a stupendous jewel, brought rest. They camped in the wady, with machine-guns mounted and sentinels out. Abd el Rahman, liberated from his bonds and under strict surveillance, still refused to talk. No information could be got from him; but Risa's eyes brightened with unholy joy at sight of the old man ceremonially tearing his burnous and sifting sand on his gray head.

"Allah smite thy face, _ya kalb!_" (O dog!) he murmured. "Robber of the Haram, from Jehannum is thy body!"[1]

[Footnote 1: Alluding to the Arab superstition that every man's body is drawn from the place where it will eventually be buried. Risa's remark, therefore, was an Oriental way of wishing the Sheik back into Hell.]

Night passed with no alarm, quietly save for the yelping and quarreling of the jackals and hyenas at work beyond the dunes. Early morning found the Legionaries again at work; and so for five days they toiled. The Legion was composed of picked men, skilled in science and deep in technical wisdom. With what tools still remained from the time when all surplus weight had been jettisoned, and with some improvised apparatus, they set vigorously to work repairing the engines, fitting new rudder-plates, patching up the floats and providing the burned propellers with metal blades.

Metal enough they had at hand, by cutting out dispensable partitions from the interior. And beavers never worked as these men worked in spite of the fierce smittings of the tropic sun. Even the wounded men helped, holding or passing tools. The Master labored with the rest,

grimy, sweating, hard-jawed; and "Captain Alden" did her bit without a moment's slackening. Save for Abd el Rahman, now securely locked without any means of self-destruction in a stateroom, no man idled.

Anxiety dogged their every moment. Sudden storm might yet hopelessly break up the stranded air-liner. Other tribes might have seen the signal-fire and might descend upon the Legionaries. Arab slavers might discover them, beating along the coast in well-armed dhows. Twice, in five days, latteen-sailed craft passed south, and one of these put in to investigate; but a tray of blanks from a machine-gun, at half a mile, turned the invader's blunt nose seaward again.

The greatest peril of all was that some news of the wreck might reach Rio de Oro and be wirelessly to civilization. That would inevitably mean ruin. Either it would bring an air-squadron swooping down, or battle-ships would arrive.

The Master labored doggedly to get his neutralizing apparatus effectively operating once more; and besides this, he spent hours locked in his cabin, working on other apparatus the nature of which he communicated to no one. But the Legion knew that nothing could save them from long-range naval guns, if that kind of attack should develop. They needed no urging to put forth stern, unceasing energies. Twice smoke on the horizon raised the alarm; but nothing came of it.

With great astuteness the Master had the wireless put in shape, at once, and sent out three messages at random, on two successive days. These messages stated that _Nissr_ had been sighted in flames and falling, in North latitude 19 deg., 35'; longitude 28 deg., 16', or about two hundred and fifty miles north-west of the Cape Verdes; that wreckage from her had been observed somewhat south of that point; and that bodies floating in vacuum-belts had been recovered by a Spanish torpedo-boat.

No answer came in from any of these messages; but there was always an excellent chance that such misinformation would drag a red herring across the trail of pursuit.

Men never slaved as the Legionaries did, especially toward the end. The last forty-eight hours, the Master instituted night work. The men paused hardly long enough to eat or sleep, but snatched a bite when they could, labored till they could do no more, and then dropped in their places and were dragged out of the way so that others could take hold. Some fell asleep with tools in hand, stricken down as if by apoplexy.

The Master had wisely kept the pace moderate, at first, but had speeded up toward the end. None grew more haggard, toil-worn, or emaciated than he. With blistered hands, sweat-blinded eyes, parched mouths and fevered souls these men fought against all the odds of destiny. Half naked they strove, oppressed by heat, sun, flies, thirst, exhaustion. Tobacco was their only stay and solace. The Master, however, only chewed khat leaves; and as for "Captain Alden," she toiled with no stimulant.

It was 7:33, on the morning of the sixth day, that Frazier--now chief engineer--came to the Master, as he was working over some complex bit of mechanism in his cabin. Frazier saluted and made announcement:

"I think we can make a try for it now, sir." Frazier looked white and wan, shaking, hollow-eyed, but a smile was on his lips. "Two engines are intact. Two will run half-speed or a little better, and one will do a little."

"One remains dead?"

"Yes, sir. But we can repair that on the way. Rudders and propellers will do. Helicopters O.K."

"And floats?"

"Both aft floats repaired, sir. One is cut down a third, and one a half, but they will serve."

"How about petrol?" the Master demanded. "We have only that one aft starboard tank, now, not over three-quarters full."

"There's a chance that will do till we can run down a caravan along the Red Sea, carrying petrol to Suakin or Port Sudan. So there's a fighting hope--if we can raise ourselves out of this sand that clings like the devil himself. It's lucky, sir, we jettisoned those stores. Wind and current brought some of them back, anyhow. If they'd stayed in the storeroom they'd have all been burned to a crisp."

"Yes, yes. You think, then, we can make a start?" The Master put his apparatus into the desk-drawer and carefully locked it. He stood up and tightened his belt a notch.

"We can try, sir," Frazier affirmed grimly. Unshaven, haggard, dirty, and streaked with sweat, he made a strange figure by contrast with the trim, military-looking chap who only a week before had started with the other Legionaries, now no less altered than he.

"Very well," said the Master decisively. "Our prospects are good. The wounded are coming on. Counting Lebon, we have twenty-five men. I will have all stores reloaded at once. Be ready in one hour, sir. Understand?"

"Yes, sir!" And Frazier, saluting again, returned to the ravaged but once more efficient engine-room.

All hands plunged into the surf, wading ashore--for it was now high-tide--and in short order reloaded the liner. In forty-five minutes stores, machine-guns, and everything had been brought aboard, the cables to the posts in the beach had been cast off and hauled in, and all the Legionaries were at their posts. The ports were closed. Everything was ready for the supreme test.

The Master was last to come aboard. Still dripping seawater, he clambered up the ladder from the lower gallery to the main corridor, and made his way into the pilot-house. Bohannon was with him, also Leclair and Captain Alden.

The engines had already been started, and the helicopters had begun to turn, flickering swiftly in their turbine-tubes. The Master settled himself in the pilot's seat. All at once a buzzer sounded close at hand.

"Well, what now?" demanded the Master into the phone communicating with the upper port gallery.

"Smoke to southward, sir. Coming up along the Coast."

"Smoke? A steamer?"

"Can't see, sir." It was the voice of Ferrara that answered. "The smoke is behind the long point to southward. But it is coming faster than a merchant vessel. I should say, sir, it was a torpedo-boat or a destroyer, under forced draft. And it's coming--it's coming at a devil of a clip, sir!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

ONWARD TOWARD THE FORBIDDEN CITY

The Master rang for full engine-power, and threw in all six helicopters with one swift gesture.

"Major," commanded he, as _Nissr's_ burned and wounded body began to quiver through all its mutilated fabric; "Major, man the machine-guns again. All stations! _Quick_!"

Bohannan departed. The droning of the helicopters rose to a shrill hum. The Master switched in the air-pressure system; and far underneath, white fountains of spumy water leaped up about the floats, mingled with sand and mud all churned to frenzy under the bursting energy of the compressed air released through thousands of tubules.

Nissr trembled, hesitated, lifted a few inches, settled back once more.

Again the buzzer sounded. The noise of rapid feet became audible above, in the upper galleries. Ferrara called into the phone:

"It's a British destroyer, sir! She's just rounded the point, three miles south. Signals up for us to surrender!"

"Machine-guns against naval ordnance!" gritted the Master savagely. "Surrender?" He laughed with hot defiance.

The first shell flung a perfect tornado of brine into air, glistening; it ricocheted twice, and plunged into the dunes. A "dud," it failed to burst.

Nissr rose again as the second shell hit fair in the hard clay of the wady, cascading earth and sand a hundred feet in air. Both reports boomed in, rolling like thunder over the sea.

"Shoot and be damned to you!" cried the Master. _Nissr_ was rising now, clearing herself from the water like a wounded sea-bird. A tremendous cascade of water sluiced from her hissing floats, swirling in millions of sun-glinted jewels more brilliant even than Kaukab el Durri.

Higher she mounted, higher still. The destroyer was now driving in at full speed, with black smoke streaming from four funnels, perfectly indifferent to possible shoals, rocks or sand-bars along this uncharted coast. Another shell screamed under the lower gallery and burst in a deluge of sand near one of the mooring-piles.

"Very poor shooting, my Captain," smiled Leclair, leaning far out the port window of the pilot-house. "But then, we can't blame the gunners for being a bit excited, trying to bag a bit of international game like this Legion."

"And beside," put in Alden coolly, "our shifting position makes us rather a poor target. Ah! That shell must have gone home!"

Nissr quivered from nose to tail. A violent detonation flung echoes from sea and shore; and bits of splintered wreckage spun down past the windows, to plunge into the still swirling, bubbling sea.

The Master made no answer, but rang for the propellers to be clutched in. _Nissr_ obeyed their quickening whirl. Her altitude was already four hundred and fifty feet, as marked by the altimeter. Lamely she moved ahead, sagging to starboard, badly scarred, ill-trimmed and awry, but still alive.

Her great black shadow, trailing behind her in the water, passed on to the beach, wrinkled itself up over the dunes and slid across the sand-drifts where little flutters of cloth, uncovered by the ghoulis jackals, showed from the burning stretch of tawny desert.

Flocks of vultures rose and soared away. Jackals and hyenas cowered and slunk to cover. The tumult of the guns and this vast, drifting monster of the air had overcome even their greed for flesh.

Another shot, puffing white as wool from the bow-chaser of the destroyer, screeched through the vultures, scattering them all ways, but made a clean miss of _Nissr_.

The air-liner gathered speed as the west wind got behind her, listed her, pushed her forward in its mighty hands. Swifter, ever swifter, her shadow slipped over dune and wady, over hillock and _nullah_, off away toward the pellucidly clear-golden tints of the horizon beyond which lay the unknown.

Risa, at his gun-station, gnawed his fingers in rage and scorn of the pursuing Feringi, and cried: "Allah make it hard for you! _Laan'abuk!_" (Curses on your fathers!)

Old Sheik Abd el Rahman, close-locked in a cabin, quivered, not with fear, but with unspeakable grief and amazement past all telling. To be thus carried away through the heavens in the entrails of the unbelievers' flying dragon was a thing not to be believed. He prostrated himself, with groans and cries to Allah. The Legionaries, from galleries and gun-stations waving derisive arms, raised shouts and hurrahs.

Sweaty, spent, covered with grease and dirt, they cheered with leaping hearts.

Another shell, bursting in mid-air not fifty yards away, rocked _Nissr_, keeled her to port, and for a moment sent her staggering down. She righted, lifted, again gathered speed.

More and more wild became the shooting, as she zigzagged, rose, soared into something like her old-time stride. Behind her the sea drew back, the baffled destroyer dwindled, the harmless shots crashed in.

Ahead of her the desert opened. Uncouth, lame, scarred by flame and shell, _Nissr_ spread her vast wings and--still the Eagle of the Sky, undaunted and unbeaten--roared into swift flight toward the waiting mysteries of the vacant abodes.

Mid-morning found _Nissr_ far from the coast, skimming along at fifteen hundred feet altitude over the Tarmanant region of the Sahara. The one shell from the destroyer that had struck her had done no more than graze the tip of the starboard aileron, inflicting damage of no material consequence. It could easily be repaired.

For the present, all danger of any interference from any civilized power seemed to be at an end. But the world had discovered that _Nissr_ and her crew had not yet been destroyed, and the Legionaries felt they must prepare for all eventualities. The stowaway's rash act was still big with possibilities of the most sinister import.

"This is probably just a temporary respite," said Bohannon, as he sat with the Master in the latter's cabin. The windows had been slid wide open, and the two men, leaning back in easy wicker chairs, were enjoying the desert panorama each in his own way--Bohannon with a cigar, the Master with a few leaves of the "flower of paradise."

Now once more clean and a little rested, they had again assumed something of their former aspect. "Captain Alden," and as many others as could be spared from duty, were asleep. The Legion was already pulling itself together, though in depleted numbers. Discipline had tautened again. Once more the sunshine of possible success had begun to slant in through a rift in the lowering clouds of disaster.

"It's still, perhaps, only a temporary respite," the major was saying. "Of course, as long as we stay in the Sahara, we're safe enough from molestation. It's trying to get out--that, and shortage of petrol--that constitute our problem now."

"Yes?" asked the chief, noncommittally. He peered out the window at the vast, indigo horizons of the desert, curving off to northward into a semicircle of burnished blue. Here, there, the etherial wonder of a mirage painted the sandy sea. Vast distances opened on all sides; the sparkling air, brilliant with what seemed a kind of suspended jewel-dust, made every object visible at an incredible remoteness. The wonder of that morning sun and desert could not be put in words.

"Our troubles are merely postponed," the Celt continued, gloomily. "The damage was done when that infernal destroyer sighted us. Just how the alarm was given, and what brought the sea-wasp racking her engines up the coast, we can't tell. But the cat's out of the bag, now, and we've got to look out for an attack at any moment we try to leave this region."

"It's obvious my wireless messages about being wrecked at sea won't have much weight now," the Master replied, analytically. "They would have, though, if that slaving-dhow hadn't put in to investigate us. I have an idea that those _jallahs_ (slavers) must in some way have let the news out at Bathurst, down in Gambia. That's the nearest British territory."

"I wish they'd come within machine-gun fire!" growled the major, blowing smoke.

"Still, we've got lots of room to maneuver," the chief continued. "We're heading due east now," with a glance at the wall-compass and large-scale chart of Northern Africa. "We're now between Mauretania and Southern Algeria, bound for Fezzan, the Libyan Desert, and Nubia on the Red Sea. That is a clear reach of more than three thousand miles of solid desert."

"Oh, we're all right, as long as we stay in the desert," Bohannan affirmed. "But they'll be watching for us, all right, when we try to leave. It's all British territory to the east of us, from Alexandria down to Cape Town. If we could only make our crossing of the Nile and the Red Sea, at night--?"

"Impossible, Major. That's where we've got to restock petrol. If it comes to a show-down, crippled as we are, we'll fight! Of course, I realize that, fast as we fly, the wireless flies faster. We may have to rely on our neutralizers again--"

"They're working?"

"Imperfectly, yes. They'll still help us, in 'civilized warfare.' And as for what will happen at Mecca, if the Faithful are indiscreet enough to offer any resistance--"

"Got something new, have you?"

"I think it may prove something of a novelty, Major. Time will tell, if Allah wills. Yes, I think we may have a little surprise for our friends, the Meccans."

The two fell silent again, watching the desert panorama roll back and away, beneath them. Afar, two or three little oases showed feathery-tufted palms standing up like delicate carvings against the remote purple spaces or against the tawny, seamed desolation that burned as with raw colors of fires primeval. Here, there, patches of stunted tamarisk bushes were visible. A moving line of dust showed where a distant caravan was plodding eastward over the sparkling crystals of an ancient salt sea-bottom. A drift of low-hanging wood-smoke, very far away, betrayed the presence of a camp of the Ahl Bayt, the People of the Black Tents.

The buzzer of the Master's phone broke the silence between the two men, a silence undertoned by the throb and hum of the now effectively operating engines.

"Well, what is it?" the Master queried.

"Promising oasis, _mon capitaine_," came the voice of Leclair from the upper starboard gallery. "Through my glass I can make out extensive

date-palm groves, pomegranate orchards, and gardens. There must be plenty of water there. We should take water, eh?"

"Right!" the Master answered. He got up and turned to Bohannan.

"Major," commanded he, "have Simonds and a crew of six stand by, in the lower gallery, to descend in the nacelle. Risa is to go. They will need him, to interpret. Give them a few of the trinkets from that assortment we brought for barter, and a little of our Arabic money."

"Yes, sir. But you know only two of the detachable tanks are left."

"Two will suffice. Have them both lowered, together with the electric-drive pump. Don't annoy me with petty details. You are in charge of this job now. Attend to it!"

He passed into the pilot-house, leaned at the window and with his glasses inspected the deep green patch, dark as the profoundest sea, that marked the oasis. A little blind village nestled there, with mud-brick huts, a watch-tower and a tiny minaret; date-grounds and fields of corn, melons, and other vegetables spread a green fringe among the groves.

CHAPTER XXIX

"LABBAYK!"

As Nissr slowed near the oasis, the frightened Arabs--who had been at their _ghanda_, or mid-day meal--swarmed into the open. They left their mutton, _cous-cous_, date-paste, and lentils, their chibouques with perfumed vapor and their keef-smoking, and manifested extreme fear by outcries in shrill voices. Under the shadows of the palms, that stood like sentinels against the blistering sands, they gathered, with wild cries.

No fighting-men, these. The glasses disclosed that they were mostly old men, women, children. Young men were few. The fighters had probably gone with the caravan, seen a while before. There came a little ragged firing; but a round of blanks stopped that, and sent the villagers skurrying back into the shelter of the palms, mimosas, and jamelon trees.

Nissr poised at seven hundred and fifty feet and let down tanks, nacelle, and men. There was no resistance. The local _naib_ came with trembling, to make salaam. Water was freely granted, from the _sebil_, or public fountain--an ancient tank with century-deep grooves cut in its solid stone rim by innumerable camel-hair ropes. The flying men put down a hose, threw the switch of the electric pump, and in a few minutes half emptied the fountain. The astonishment of the villagers passed all bounds.

"These be men of great magic," said the _naib_, to Risa, after the tanks had been hoisted to _Nissr_, and a dozen sacks of fresh dates had been purchased for the trinkets plus two _ryals_ (about two dollars). "Tell me of these 'People of the Books!'"

"I will tell thee of but one thing, Abu Shawarib," (father of whiskers) answered Rrisa with pride. "Old Abd el Rahman is our prisoner in the flying ship above. We are taking him back to Mecca. All his people of the Beni Harb lie dead far toward the great waters, on the edge of the desert of the sea. The Great Pearl Star we also have. That too returneth to the Haram. _Allah iselmak!_" (Thanks be to Allah!)

The _naib_ prostrated himself, with joyful cries, and touched lips and forehead with quivering fingers. All others who heard the news, did likewise. Fruits, pomegranate, syrup, honey, and _jild el faras_[1] were brought as offerings of gratitude. The crew ascended to the air-liner amid wild shouts of praise and jubilation.

[Footnote 1: Literally "mare's skin." Apricot paste in dried sheets, cut into convenient sizes. A great dainty among the Arabs.]

"You see, Leclair?" the Master inquired, as _Nissr_ drew away once more to eastward, leaving the village in the palms behind. "We hold power already with the sons of Islam! What will it be when--?"

"When you attempt to take from them their all, instead of returning to them what they so eagerly desire to have!" the Frenchman put in. "Let us hope all for the best, my Captain, but let us keep our powder very dry!"

Two days and one night of steady flying over the ocean of sand, with but an occasional oasis or caravan to break the appalling wastes of emptiness, brought _Nissr_ to the Valley of the Nile. The river of hoar antiquity came to view in a quivering heat-haze, far to eastward. In anticipation of possible attack, _Nissr_ was forced to her best altitude, of now forty-seven hundred feet, all gun-stations were manned and the engines were driven to their limit. The hour was anxious; but the Legion passed the river in safety, just a little south of the twentieth degree, near the Third Cataract. Bohannan's gloomy forebodings proved groundless.

The Red Sea and Arabia were now close at hand. Tension increased. Rrisa thrilled with a malicious joy. He went to the door of the captive Sheik, and in flowery Arabic informed him the hour of reckoning was at last drawing very near.

"Thou carrion!" he exclaimed. "Soon shalt thou be in the hands of the Faithful. Soon shall Allah make thy countenance cold, O offspring of a one-eyed man!"

Three hours after, the air-liner sighted a dim blue line that marked the Red Sea. The Master pointed at this, with a strange smile.

"Once we pass that sea," he commented, "our goal is close. The hour of great things is almost at hand!"

"Provided we get some petrol," put in Bohannan.

"Faith, an open gate, that should have been closed, defeated Napoleon. A few hundred gallons of gasoline--"

"The gasoline is already in sight, Major," smiled the chief, his

glasses on the coastline. "That caravan--see there?--comes very apropos."

The Legion bore down with a rush on the caravan--a small one, not above fifty camels, but well laden. The cameleers left off crying "_Ooosh! Ooosh!_" and beating their spitting beasts with their _mas'hab_-sticks, and incontinently took to their heels. Risa viewed them with scorn, as he went down in the nacelle with a dozen of the crew.

The work of stripping the caravan immediately commenced. In an hour some five hundred tin cases of petrol had been hoisted aboard. On the last trip down, the Master sent a packet wrapped in white cloth, containing a fair money payment for the merchandise. British goods, he very wisely calculated, could not be commandeered without recompense. The packet was lashed to a camel-goad which was driven into the sand, and _Nissr_ once more got slowly under way.

All eyes were now on the barren chalk and sandstone coasts of the Red Sea, beyond which dimly rose the castellated peaks of Jebel Radhwa. At an altitude of 2,150 feet the air-liner slid out over the Sea, the waters of which shone in the mid-afternoon sun with a peculiar luminosity. Only a few _sambuks_, or native craft, troubled those historic depths; though, down in the direction of Bab el Mandeb--familiar land to the Master--a smudge of smoke told of some steamer beating up toward Suez.

Leaning from the upper port gallery, the Master with Bohannan, Leclair, and "Captain Alden," watched the shadow of the giant air-liner sliding over the tawny sand-bottom. That shadow seemed a scout going on before them, spying out the way to Arabia and to Mecca, the Forbidden City. To the white men that shadow was only a shadow. To Risa, who watched it from the lower gallery, it portended ominous evil.

"It goes ahead of us, by Allah!" he murmured. "Into the Empty Abodes, where the sons of Feringistan would penetrate, a shadow goes first! And that is not good." He whispered a prayer, then added: "For the others, I care not. But my Master--his life and mine are bound with the cords of Kismet. And in the shadows I see darkness for all!"

At 4:27, _Nissr_ passed the eastern shores of the Red Sea. Arabia itself now lay beneath. There exposed to their eyes, at length lay the land of mystery and fear. Bare and rock-ribbed, a flayed skeleton of a terrain, it glowed with wondrous yellow, crimson, and topaz hues. A haze bounded the south-eastern horizon, where a range of iron hills jaggedly cut the sky. Mecca was almost at hand.

The Master entered his cabin and summoned Risa.

"Listen," he commanded. "We are now approaching the Holy City. I am bringing back the Apostate Sheik and the Great Pearl Star. I am the preserver of the Star. Thine own people could not keep it. I have recovered it. Is that not true?"

"True, _M'alme_, praise to Allah!"

"It may be that I shall be called on to preserve some other and still more sacred thing. If so, remember that my salt is still in thy

stomach."

"Master, I will not forget." Rrisa spoke dutifully, but his eyes were troubled. His face showed lines of fear, of the struggle already developing in his soul.

"Go thou, then! And remember that whatever happens, my judgment tells me it is best. Raise not a hand of rebellion against me, Rrisa, to whom thou owest life itself. To thy cabin--go!"

"But, Master--"

"_Ru'c'h halla!_"

The Arab salaamed and departed, with a strange look in his eyes.

When he was gone, the Master called Bohannan and Leclair, outlined the next coup in this strange campaign, and assigned crews to them for the implacable carrying-out of the plan determined on--surely the most dare-devil, ruthless, and astonishing plan ever conceived by the brain of a civilized man.

Hardly had these preparations been made, when the sound of musketry-fire, below and ahead, drew their attention. From the open ports of the cabin, peering far down, the three Legionaries witnessed an extraordinary sight--a thing wholly incongruous in this hoar land of mystery and romance.

Skirting a line of low savage hills that ruggedly stretched from north to south, a gleaming line of metal threaded its way. A train, southbound for Mecca, had halted on the famous Pilgrims' Railway. From its windows and doors, white-clad figures were violently gesticulating. Others were leaping from the train, swarming all about the carriages.

An irregular fusillade, harmless as if from pop-guns, was being directed against the invading Eagle of the Sky. A faint, far outcry of passionate voices drifted upward in the heat and shimmer of that Arabian afternoon. The train seemed a veritable hornets' nest into which a rock had been heaved.

"Faith, but that's an odd sight," laughed the major. "Where else in all this world could you get a contrast like that--the desert, a semibarbarous people, and a railroad?"

"Nowhere else," put in Leclair. "There is no other road like that, anywhere in existence. The Damascus-Mecca line is unique; a Moslem line built by Moslems, for Moslems only. Modern mechanism blent with ancient superstition and savage ferocity that implacably hold to the very roots of ancient things!"

"It is the Orient, Lieutenant," added the Master. "And in the Orient, who can say that any one thing is stranger than anything else? To your stations, men!"

They took their leave. The Master entered the pilot-house and assumed control. As Nissr passed over the extraordinary Hejaz Railway, indifferent to the mob of frenzied, vituperating pilgrims, the chief peered far ahead for his first sight of Mecca, the Forbidden.

He had not long to wait. On the horizon, the hills seemed suddenly to break away. As the air-liner roared onward, a dim plain appeared, with here or there a green-blue blur of oasis and with a few faint white spots that the Master knew were pilgrims' camping-places.

Down through this plain extended an irregular depression, a kind of narrow valley, with a few sharply isolated, steep hills on either hand.

The Master's eyes gleamed. His jaw set; his hand, on the controls, tightened till the knuckles whitened.

"The Valley of Mina!" he exclaimed. "Mount Arafat--and there, beyond, lies Mecca! _Labbayk! Labbayk!_"

CHAPTER XXX

OVER MECCA

The descent of the giant air-liner and her crew of masterful adventurers on the Forbidden City had much the quality of a hawk's raid on a vast pigeon-cote. As _Nissr_, now with slowed engines loomed down the Valley of Sacrifice, a perfectly indescribable hurricane of panic, rage, and hate surged through all the massed thousands who had come from the farthest ends of Islam to do homage to the holy places of the Prophet.

The outraged Moslems, in one fierce burst of passion against the invading Feringi, began to swarm like ants when the stone covering their ant-hill is kicked over. From end to end of the valley, a howling tumult arose.

On the Darb el Ma'ala, or Medina Road, a caravan bearing the annual _mahmal_ gift of money, jewels, fine fabrics, and embroidered coverings for the Ka'aba temple, cut loose with rifles and old blunderbusses. Dogs began to bark, donkeys to bray, camels to spit and snarl. The whole procession fell into an anarchy of hate and fear.

The vast camp of conical white tents in the Valley of Mina spewed out uncounted thousands of _Hujjaj_ (pilgrims), each instantly transformed into a blood-lusting fiend. From the Hill of Arafat; from Jannat el Ma'ale Cemetery; from the dun, bronzed, sun-baked city of a hundred thousand fanatic souls; from the Haram sanctuary itself where mobs of pilgrims were crowded round the Ka'aba and the holy Black Stone; from latticed balcony and courtyard, flat roof, mosque, and minaret, screams of rage shrilled up into the baked air, quivering under the intense sapphire of the desert sky.

Every crowded street of the bowl-shaped city, all converging toward the Sacred Enclosure of the Haram, every caravanserai and square, became a mass of howling _ghuzzat_, or fighters for the faith. Mecca and its environs, outraged as never before in the thousands of years of its history, instantly armed itself and made ready for a _Jihad_, or holy war of extermination.

Where the Ahl Bayt, or People of the Black Tents, had tamely enough submitted to the invaders, these Ahl Hayt, or People of the Walls, leaped to arms, eager for death if that could be had in the battle against the infidel dog--for death, so, meant instant bearing up to Paradise, to cool fountains and sweet fruits, and to the caresses of the seventy entrancing houris that each good Moslem has had promised him by "The Strong Book," Al Koran.

Every man and boy in all that tremendous multitude spread over many square miles of rocky, sun-blistered aridity, seized whatever came first to hand, for the impending war, as the black shadow of _Nissr_ lagged down toward the city and the Haram. Some snatched rifles, some pistols; others brandished spears and well-greased _nebut_ clubs, six feet long and deadly in stout hands. Even camel-sticks and tent-poles were furiously flung aloft. Pitiful, impotent defiance, no more effective than the waving of ants' antennae against the foot that kicks their nest to bits!

Screams, curses, execrations in a score of tongues mounted in one frenzied chorus. Swarms of white-robed pilgrims came running in masses after the drifting shadow, knocking each other down, falling over tent-pegs, stampeding pack-animals. The confusion amazed the Legionaries as they watched all this excitement through their powerful glasses.

"It looks," thought the Master, with a smile, "as if our little surprise-party might be a lively affair. Well, I am ready for it. 'Allah knows best, and time will show!'"

All over the plain and through the city, myriads of little white puffs, drifting down-wind, showed the profusion of firing. Now came the boom of a cannon from the Citadel--an unshot gun, used only for calling the Faithful to prayer. Its booming echo across the plain and up against the naked, reddish-yellow hills, still further whipped the blood-frenzy of the mad mobs.

Even the innumerable pigeons, "Allah's announcers,"^[1] swirled in clouds from the arcades, mosques, and minarets surrounding the Haram, and from the Ka'aba itself, and began winging erratic courses all about the Forbidden City. Men, birds, and animals alike, all shared the terror of this unheard-of outrage when--according to ancient prophesy--the Great Devils of Feringistan should desecrate the holy places.

[Footnote 1: So called because of their habit of cooing and bowing. Moslems fancy they are praying to Allah and making salaam to him.]

"Slow her!" commanded the Master into the engine-room phone, and began compensating with the helicopters, as _Nissr_ lagged over the crowded city. "Shut off--let her drift! Stand by to reverse!"

Mecca the Unattainable now lay directly beneath, its dun roofs, packed streets, ivory minarets all open to the heretics' gaze from portholes, from the forward observation pit and from the lower gallery. As _Nissr_ eased herself down to about one thousand feet, the plan of the city became visible as on a map. The radiating streets all started from the Haram. White mobs were working themselves into frenzy, trampling the pilgrims' shrouds that had been dipped in the waters of

the well, Zem Zem, and laid out to dry.

Not even the Master's aplomb could suppress a strange gleam in his eye, could keep his face from paling a little or his lips from tightening, as he now beheld the inmost shrine of two hundred and thirty million human beings. Nor did any of the Legionaries, bold as they were, look upon it without a strange contraction of the heart. As for the Apostate Sheik, that old jackal of the desert was crouched in his place of confinement, with terror clutching at his soul; with visions of being torn to pieces by furious Sunnite mobs oppressing him.

And Rrisa, what of him? Shut into his cabin, with the door locked against intrusion, he was lying face downward on the metal floor, praying. For the first time in the world's history, a Moslem's _kiblah_, or direction of prayer, was directly downward!

"Reverse!" ordered the Master. Nissr hovered exactly above the Haram enclosure. "Lower to five hundred feet, then hold her!"

The air-liner sank slowly, with a hissing of air-intakes into the vacuum-floats, and hung there, trembling, quivering with the slow back-revolution of her screws, the swift energy of her helicopters. The Master put her in charge of Janina, the Serbian ace, and descended to the lower gallery.

Here he found the crew assembled by Bohannon and Leclair ready for the perilous descent they were about to make.

He leaned over the rail, unmindful of the ragged patter of bullets from below, and with a judicial eye observed the prospect. His calm contrasted forcibly with the frenzied surging of the pilgrim mobs below, a screaming, raging torrent of human passion.

Clearly he could discern every detail of the city whereof Mohammed wrote in the second chapter of the Koran: "So we have made you the center of the nations that you should bear witness to men." He could see the houses of dark stone, clustering together on the slopes like swallows' nests, the unpaved streets, the _Mesjid el Haram_, or sacred square, enclosed by a great wall and a colonnade surmounted by small white domes.

At the corners of this colonnade, four tall white minarets towered toward the sky--minarets from which now a pretty lively rifle-fire was developing. A number of small buildings were scattered about the square; but all were dominated by the black impressive cube of the Ka'aba itself, the _Bayt Ullah_, or Allah's house.

The Master gave an order. Ferrara obeying it, brought from his cabin a piece of apparatus the Master had but perfected in the last two days of flight over the Sahara. This the Master took and clamped to the rail.

"Captain Alden," said he, "stand by, at the engine-room phone from this gallery, here, to order any necessary adjustments as weights are dropped or raised. Keep the ship at constant altitude as well as position. Major Bohannon and Lieutenant Leclair, are your crews ready for the descent?"

"Yes, sir," the major answered. "_Oui, mon capitaine_," replied the Frenchman.

"Tools all ready? Machine-guns installed? Yes? Very well. Open the trap, now, and swing the nacelle by the electric crane and winch. Right! Steady!"

The yells of rage and hate from below were all this time increasing in volume and savagery. Quite a pattering of rifle-bullets had developed against the metal body of the lower gallery and--harmlessly glancing--against the fuselage.

Smiling, the Master once more peered over. He seemed, as indeed he was, entirely oblivious to any fear. Too deeply had the Oriental belief of Kismet, of death coming at the appointed hour and no sooner, penetrated his soul, to leave any place there for the perils of chance.

The swarming Haram enclosure presented one of the most extraordinary spectacles ever witnessed by human eyes. The strangeness of the scene, witnessed under the declining sun of that desert land, was heightened by the fact that all these furious Moslems were seen from above. Men cease to appear human, at that angle. They seem to be only heads, from which legs and arms flail out grotesquely.

The Haram appeared to have become a vast pool of brown faces and agitated white _ihrams_ (pilgrim robes) of weaving brown hands, of gleaming weapons. This pool, roaring to heaven, showed strange, violent currents in flow and reflux ebb of hate.

To descend into that maelstrom of frenzied murder-lust took courage of the highest order. But neither Bohannon nor the Frenchman had even paled. Not one of their men showed any hesitancy whatever.

"Ready, sir," said the major, crisply. "Faith, give the signal and down we go; and we'll either bring back what we're going after, or we'll all come back and report ourselves dead!"

"Just a minute, Major," the Master answered. He had opened a small door of the box containing the apparatus he had just clamped to the rail, and had taken out a combination telephone earpiece and receiver. With this at mouth and ear, he leaned over the rail. His lips moved in a whisper inaudible even to those in the lower gallery with him.

An astonishing change, however, swept over the infuriated mob in the Haram and throughout the radiating streets. One would have thought a bolt from heaven had struck the Moslems dumb. The angry tumult died; the vast hush that rose to _Nissr_ was like a blow in the face, so striking was its contrast with the previous uproar. Most of the furious gesticulation ceased, also. All those brown-faced fanatics remained staring upward, silent in a kind of thunder-struck amazement.

CHAPTER XXXI

EAST AGAINST WEST

The major, peering down through the trap, swore luridly. Leclair muttered something to himself, with wrinkled brow. "Captain Alden's" eyes blinked strangely, through the holes of the mask. The others stared in frank astonishment.

"What the devil, sir--?" began the major; but the chief held up his hand for silence. Again he spoke whisperingly into the strange apparatus. This time a murmur rose to him; a murmur increasing to a confused tumult, that in an angry wave of malediction beat up about Nissr as she hung there with spinning helicopters, over the city.

The Master smiled as he put up the receiver in the little box and closed the door with a snap. Regretfully he shook his head.

"These Arabic gentlemen, _et al_," he remarked, "don't seem agreeably disposed to treat with us on a basis of exchanging the Sheik Abd el Rahman for what we want from them. My few remarks in Arabic, via this etheric megaphone, seem to have met a rebuff. Every man in the Haram, the minarets, the arcade, and the radiating streets heard every word I said, gentlemen, as plainly as if I had spoken directly into his ear. Yet no sound at all developed here."

"The principle is parallel to that of an artillery shell that only bursts when it strikes, and might be extremely useful in warfare, if properly developed--as I haven't had time, yet, to develop it. No matter about that, though. My proposal has been rejected. Peace having been declined, we have no alternative but to use other, means. There is positively no way of coming to an agreement with our Moslem friends, below."

As if to corroborate his statement, a rifle-bullet whistled through the open trap and flattened itself against the metal underbody of the fuselage, over their heads. It fell almost at "Captain Alden's" feet. She picked it up and pocketed it.

"My first bit of Arabia," said she. "Worth keeping."

The firing, below, had now become more general than ever. Shrill cries rose to Allah for the destruction of these infidel flying dogs. The Master paid no more heed to them than to the buzzing of so many bees.

"I think, Major," said he, "we shall have to use one of the two kappa-ray bombs on these Arabic gentry. It's rather too bad we haven't more of them, and that the capsules are all gone."

"Pardon me, my Captain," put in Leclair, "but the paralysis-vibrations, eh? As you did to me, why not to them?"

"Impossible. The way we're crippled, now, I haven't the equipment. But I shall nevertheless be able to show you something, Lieutenant. Major will you kindly drop one of the kappa-rays?"

He gestured at two singular-looking objects that stood on the metal floor of the lower gallery, about six feet from the trap. Cubical objects they were, some five inches on the edge, each enclosed in what seemed a tough, black, leather-like substance netted with stout white cords that were woven together into a handle at the top.

Strong as Bohannan was, his face grew red, with swollen veins in forehead and neck, as he tried to lift this small object. Nothing in the way of any known substance could possibly have weighed so much; not even solid lead or gold.

"Faith!" grunted the major. "What the devil? These two little metal boxes didn't weigh a pound apiece when--ugh!--when we packed 'em in our bags. How about it, chief?"

The Master smiled with amusement.

"They weren't magnetized then, Major," he answered. "Shall I have someone help you?"

"No, by God! I'll either lift this thing or die, right here!" the Celt panted, redder still. But he did not lift the little cube. The best he could do was to drag it, against mighty resistance, to the edge of the trap; and with a last, mighty heave, project it into space.

As it left the trap, _Nissr_ rocked and swayed, showing how great a weight had been let drop. Down sped the little, netted cube, whirling in the sunlight. Its speed was almost that of a rifle-ball--so far in excess of anything that could have been produced by gravitation as to suggest that some strange, magnetic force was hurling it earthward, like a metal-filing toward an electro-magnet. It dwindled to nothing, in a second, and vanished.

All peered over the rail, eager with anticipation. No explosion followed, but the most astonishing thing happened. All at once, without any preliminary disturbance, the ground became white. A perfect silence fell on the Haram and the city for perhaps half a mile on all sides of the sacred enclosure Haram and streets, roof-tops, squares all looked as if suddenly covered with deep snow.

This whiteness, however, was not snow, but was produced by the _ihrams_ of the pilgrims now coming wholly to view.

Instead of gazing down on the heads of the multitude--all bare heads, as the Prophet commands for pilgrims--the Legionaries now found themselves looking at their whole bodies. Every pilgrim in sight had instantaneously fallen to the earth, on the gravel of the Haram, along the raised walks from the porticoes to the Ka'aba, on the marble tiling about the Ka'aba itself, even in the farthest visible streets.

The white-clad figures lay piled on each other in grotesque attitudes and heaps. Even the stone tank at the north-west side of the Ka'aba, under the famous Myzab, or Golden Waterspout on the Ka'aba roof, was heaped full of them; and all round the sacred Zem Zem well they lay in silent windrows, reaped down by some silent, invisible force.

In the remote suburbs and out on the plain, the Legionaries' binoculars could still see a swarming of white figures; but all the immediate vicinity was now wholly silent, motionless. To and fro the Master swept his glasses, and nodded with satisfaction.

"You have now fifteen minutes, men," said he, "before the paralyzing shock of that silent detonation--that noiseless release of molecular energies which does not kill nor yet destroy consciousness in the

least--will pass away. So--"

"You mean to tell me, my Captain, _those pilgrims are still conscious?_" demanded Leclair, amazed.

"Perfectly. They will see, hear, and know all you do. I wish them to. The effect will be salutary, later. But they cannot move or interfere. All you have to look out for is the incoming swarm of fanatics already on the move. So there is no time to be lost. Into the nacelle, and down with you!"

"But if they try to rush us you can drop the other bomb, can't you?" demanded the major, as they all clambered into the nacelle.

The Master smiled, as he laid his hands on top of the basket and cast his eyes over the equipment there, noting that machine-guns, pick-axes, crowbars, and all were in position.

"The idea does you credit, Major," said he. "The fact that the other bomb would of course completely paralyze you and your men, here, is naturally quite immaterial. Let us have no more discussion, please. Only fourteen minutes, thirty seconds now remain before the _Hujjaj_ will begin to recover their muscular control. You have your work cut out for you, the next quarter-hour!"

The Master raised his hand in signal to Grison, at the electric winch. A turn of a lever, and the nacelle rose from the metals of the lower gallery. It swung over the trap and was steadied there, a moment, by many hands. The raiding-party leaped in.

"Lower away!" commanded the chief

Smoothly the winch released the fine steel cable, with a purring sound. Down shot the nacelle, steadily, swiftly, with the major, Leclair, and the others now engaged in the most perilous, dare-devil undertaking imaginable.

Down, swiftly down, to raid the _Bayt Ullah_, the sacred Ka'aba, holy of holies to more than two hundred million Moslem fanatics, each of whom would with joy have died to keep the hand of the unbelieving dog from so much as touching that hoar structure or the earth of the inviolate Haram.

Down, swiftly down with picks and crowbars. Down, into the midst of all that paralyzed but still conscious hate, to the very place of the supremely sacred Black Stone, itself.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE BATTLE OF THE HARAM

The raiding-party, beside its two leaders, consisted of Lombardo, Rennes, Emilio, Wallace, and three others, including Lebon. The lieutenant's orderly, now having recovered strength, had pleaded so hard for an opportunity to avenge himself on the hated Moslems that

Leclair had taken him.

As for Lombardo, he had downright insisted on going. His life, he knew, was already forfeited to the expedition--by reason of his having let the stowaway escape--and, this being so, he had begged and been granted the favor of risking it in this perilous undertaking.

Such was the party now swiftly dropping toward the Haram where never yet in the history of the world two English-speaking men had at one time gathered; where never yet the speech of the heretic had been heard; where so many intruders had been beheaded or crucified for having dared profane the ground sacred to Allah and his Prophet.

To the major, peering over the side of the nacelle, it seemed as if the Haram--central spot of pilgrimage and fanatic devotion for one-seventh of the human race--were leaping up to meet him. With dizzying rapidity the broad square, the grim black Ka'aba, the prostrate white throngs all sprang up at the basket. Fascinated, the major watched; his eyes, above all, sought the mysterious Ka'aba. Excitement thrilled his romantic soul at thought that he was one of the very first white men in the world ever to behold that strange, ancient building.

Clearly he could see the stone slabs cemented with gypsum, the few stricken pigeons lying there, the cords holding the huge _kiswa_, or brocaded cloth, covering "Mecca's bride," (the Ka'aba). The Golden Waterspout was plainly visible, gleaming in the sun--a massive trough of pure metal, its value quite incalculable.

Now the Ka'aba was close; now the nacelle slowed, beside it, in the shadow of its grim blackness. The major got an impression of exceeding richness from the shrouding veil, which he saw to be a huge silken fabric, each side like a vast theater curtain of black, with a two-foot band a little more than half-way up, the whole covered with verses from the Koran worked in gold.

The nacelle sank gently on to a heap of motionless pilgrims, canted to the left, and came to rest. Not a groan, curse, or even a sigh escaped the desecrated Moslems forever defiled by the touch of the infidels' accursed machine.

The effect was horribly uncanny--of all those brown men, open-eyed and conscious, but perfectly unable to move so much as an eyebrow. Such as had fallen with their eyes in the direction of the nacelle, could see what was going on; the others could only judge of this incredible desecration by what they could hear. The sound of foreign voices, speaking an unbelievers' tongue in the very shadow of the Ka'aba, must have been supremely horrible to every Mohammedan there.

"Out, men, and at it!" the major commanded, as he scrambled from the nacelle, slid and stumbled over the Moslems, and reached hands for the tools passed out to him. Leclair followed. Men and tools were swiftly unloaded, leaving only Wallace and Emilio at their guns, as agreed.

"Faith, but this is some proposition!" grunted the major, as the seven men trampled over the prostrate bodies, without any delay whatever to peer at the Haram or the Ka'aba.

"The stone's there, men, at the south-east corner! Get busy!"

No exhortation was necessary. Every man, nerved to the utmost energy by the extreme urgency of the situation, leaped to work. And a strange scene began, the strangest in all the history of that unknown city of mysteries. The little troop of white men in uniform stumbled over the bodies and faces of their enemies along the Ka'aba, past the little door about seven feet from the ground, and so, skirting the slanting white base, two feet high, came to the Hajar el Aswad, or Black Stone, itself.

Above, in the burning Arabian sky, the air-liner hovered like a gigantic bird of prey, her gallery-rails lined with motionless watchers. The Master observed every move through powerful glasses. Over his ears a telephone headpiece, which he had slipped on, kept him in close touch with the men in the nacelle, via the steel cable. This cable formed a strand between East and West; if any evil chance should break it, life would end there and then for nine members of the Legion, brave men all.

That their time was short, indeed, was proved by the vague, hollow roar already drifting in from the outskirts of the city, and from the plain whence, crowding, struggling into the city's narrow ways, a raging mass of pilgrims was already on the move. A tidal-wave, a sea of hate, the hundred thousand or more _Hujjaj_ as yet untouched by the strong magic of the Feringi, were fighting their way toward the Haram.

The time of respite was measured but by minutes. Each minute, every second, bore supreme value.

"There she is, men!" the major shouted, pointing. And on the instant, driving furiously with pick-axe, he struck the first blow.

Plainly, about three feet below the bottom of the silken veil and four feet above the pavement, there indeed they saw the inestimably sacred stone, which every Moslem believes once formed a part of Paradise and was given by Allah to the first man. To the Legionaries' excited eyes it seemed to be an irregular oval, perhaps seven inches in diameter, with an undulating surface composed of about a dozen smaller stones joined by cement and worn blackly smooth by millions of touches and kisses.

It was surrounded by a border of cement that looked like pitch and gravel; and the major noted, even as he drove his pick into this cement, that both the stone and the border were enclosed by a massive circle of gold with the lower part studded full of silver nails.

Only these hasty observations, and no more, the Legionaries made as they fell with furious energy to the task of dislodging the venerable relic. To all but this labor they were oblivious--to the heat and stifle of that sun-baked square, the mute staring of the paralyzed _Hujjaj_, the wafting languor of incenses from the colonnades, the quiet murmur of waters from the holy well, Zem Zem.

The scene, which ordinarily would have entranced them and filled them with awe, now had become as nothing. Every energy, every sense had centered itself only on this one vital work of extracting the Black Stone from the Ka'aba wall and of making a swift getaway with it before the rising murmur of rage, from without the area of paralysis, should sweep in on them with annihilating passion.

"Here, Emilio--drive your pick here!" commanded the major, his red face now dark crimson with heat and excitement as well as with the intense force wherewith he was wielding his implement. Cement flew in showers at every stroke, out over the sweating Legionaries and the prostrate Moslems near the stone. The white men slid and stumbled on limp bodies, trampled them unheedingly, and of the outstretched pilgrims made as it were a kind of vantage-post for the attack on the inmost citadel of Islam.

"Work quick, Major!" came the Master's voice, seemingly at Bohannan's elbow. "There's a fearful drove of the rascals coming. You'd better get that stone out and away in double-quick time!"

The major replied nothing, but his pick-axe flailed into the cement with desperate energy. Emilio and others seconded him, while Rennes and Wallace dug, kneeling, with their crowbars. The blows echoed with staccato rapidity through the sacred Haram, which now had begun to fill with the confused roar of the on-coming mobs from the Ma'abidah suburb and the Plain of Mina, from Jebel Hindi and the Sulaymainyah quarter.

"You have about five minutes more," the Master spoke again. "If necessary, we will open on them with machine-guns, from the ship, but I'd like to avoid bloodshed if possible. Do the best you can!"

Bohannan had no breath for answering. Every ounce of energy of all seven men was being flung into that mad labor. Sweat streamed into their eyes, half blinding them; they dashed it off, and struck again and again. The cement crumbled and gave; the heavy gold band commenced to bend; Rennes got his crowbar into an advantageous leverage and gave a mighty heave.

The stone seemed to cry aloud, with a dry, harsh screaming sound of outraged agony, as it yielded. It was only the sundering of the mortar, of course; but a chill ran up the major's spine, and goose-flesh prickled all over him. Furiously the Legionaries worked the stone back and forth; a shower of mortar fell on the workers' feet and on the upturned, staring faces of the paralyzed Moslems trampled by the horrible contamination of heretical boots--perhaps even pigskin boots!--and then, all at once, the Hajar el Aswad slid from the place where it had lain uncounted centuries.

Cursing with frantic excitement, the Legionaries tugged it from the wall, together with its golden band. Above them the kiswah bellied outward, swaying in the breeze. No Moslem has ever admitted that the Ka'aba veil is ever moved by any other thing than the wings of angels. Those of the Faithful who now beheld that movement, felt the avenging messengers of Allah were near, indeed; and a thousand unspoken prayers flamed aloft:

"Angels of death, Azrael and his host, smite these outcasts of Feringistan!"

The prayers seemed more likely of fulfilment from the hands of the oncoming hordes already streaming into the converging streets to the Haram. As the stone came clear, into the hands of the invaders, a dank, chill blast of air blew from the aperture against the white men's faces. It seemed to issue as from a cavern; and with it came a

low, groaning sound, as of a soul in torment.

A shadow fell across the Haram; the light of the sun was dulled. The sudden crack of a rifle-shot snapped from the arcade, and a puff of rock-dust flew from the corner of the Ka'aba, not two feet from the major's head.

"Come on, men!" cried the major. "Away!"

Some latent mysticism had been stirred in him; some vague, half-sensed superstition. Nothing more natural than that a cold draught should have souged from the pent interior of the temple, or that the air-liner, slowly turning as she hung above the Haram, should with her vast planes have for a moment thrown her shadow over the square. But the Celt's imaginative nature quivered as he gripped the stone.

"You, quick, on the other end!" he cried to Emilio. "You, Lombardo, steady her! So! Now--to the nacelle!"

The rifles were opening a lively fire, already, as the men staggered over the prostrate Moslems, reached the nacelle and with a grunt and a heave tumbled the Hajar el Aswad into it. They scrambled after, falling into the shelter of the basket.

Into the arcade, at the north-east corner and half-way along the western side, two furious swarms of white-robed _Hujjaj_ were already debouching, yelling like fiends, firing as they came. The uproar swelled rapidly, in a swift-rising tide. The Haram grew all a confusion of wild-waving arms, streaming robes, running men who stumbled over the paralyzed forms of their coreligionists. Knives, spears, scimitars, rifles glinted in the sun.

The whine and patter of bullets filled the air, punctured the _kiswa_, slogged against the Ka'aba. Lebon and Rennes, turning loose the machine-guns, mowed into the white of the pack; but still they came crowding on and on, frenzied, impervious to fear.

Up rose the nacelle, as the major wildly shouted into the phone. It soared some forty feet in air, up past the black silken curtain, then unaccountably stopped, level with the Ka'aba roof.

"Up! Up!" yelled Bohannan, frantically. The spud of bullets against the steel basket tingled the bodies of the men crouching against the metal-work.

All at once Dr. Lombardo stood up, pick-axe in hand, fully exposed to rifle-fire.

"Down, you blazing idiot!" commanded the major, dragging at him with hands that shook. The doctor thrust him away, and turned toward the Ka'aba, the roof of which was not three feet distant.

"The golden spout--see?" he cried, pointing. "_Dio mio_, what a treasure!" On to the edge of the nacelle he clambered.

"Don't be a damn fool, Doctor!" the major shouted; but already Lombardo had leaped. Pick in hand, he jumped, landing on the flat roof of the temple.

Ferocious howls and execrations swelled into a screaming chorus of hate, of rage. Unmindful, the Italian was already frantically attacking the Myzab. Blow after blow he rained upon it with the sharp, cutting edge of the pick, that at every stroke sank deep into the massive gold, shearing it in deep gashes.

A perfect hail of rifle-fire riddled the air all about him, but still he labored with sweat streaming down his face all blackened with dirt and cement. From _Nissr_, far above, cries and shouts rang down at him, mingled with the sharp spitting of the machine-guns from the lower gallery. The guns in the nacelle, too, were chattering; the Haram filled itself with a wild turmoil; the scene beggared any attempt at description, there under the blistering ardor of the Arabian sun.

All at once Dr. Lombardo inserted the blade of the pick under the golden spout, pried hard, bent it upward. He stamped it down again with his boot-heel, dropped the pick and grappled it with both straining hands. By main force he wrenched it up almost at right angles. He gave another pull, snapped it short off, dragged it to the parapet of the Ka'aba, and with a frantic effort swung it, hurled it into the nacelle.

Down sank the basket, a little, under this new weight.

The doctor leaped, jumped short, caught the edge of the basket and was just pulling himself up when a slug caught him at the base of the brain.

His hold relaxed; but the major had him by the wrists. Into the nacelle he dragged the dying man.

"For the love o' God, _haul up!_" he shouted.

The basket leaped aloft, as the winch--that had been jammed by a trivial accident to the control--took hold of the steel cable. Up it soared, still pursued by dwindling screams of rage, by now futile rifle-fire. Before it had reached the trap in the lower gallery, the main propellers had begun to whicker into swift revolution, all gleaming in the afternoon sun. The gigantic shadow of the Eagle of the Sky began to slide athwart the hill-side streets to south-eastward of the Haram; and so, away.

Up came the nacelle through the trap. The davit swung it to one side; the trap was slammed down and bolted. Out of the nacelle tumbled the major, pale as he had formerly been red, his face all drawn with grief and pain.

"The damned Moslem swine!" he panted. "Faith, but they--they've killed him!" He flung a passionate hand at the basket, in which, prone across the golden spout, the still body of Lombardo was lying. "They've killed as brave a man--"

"We all saw what he did, Major," the chief said quietly. "Dr. Lombardo owed us all a debt, and he has paid it. This is Kismet! Control yourself, Major. The price of such brave adventure--is often death."

They lifted out the limp form, and carried it away to the cabin Dr. Lombardo had occupied, there to wait some opportune time for burial

in the desert. Mecca, in the meanwhile, was already fading away to north-westward. The heat-shimmer of that baked land of bare-ribbed rock and naked, igneous hills had already begun to blur its outlines. The white minarets round the Haram still with delicate tracery as of carved ivory stood up against the sky; but of the out-raged people, the colonnades, the despoiled and violated Ka'aba, nothing could any more be seen.

Southward by eastward sped _Nissr_; and with her now was departing the soul of Islam. In her keeping lay three things more sacred than all else to Mohammedan hearts--Kaukab el Durri, the Great Pearl Star; Ha jar el As wad, the Black Stone; and Myzab, the Golden Waterspout.

Awed, silenced, the Legionaries stood there in the lower gallery, peering into the blood-stained nacelle. Hard-bitten men, all, and used to the ways and usages of war; yet factors were present in this latest exploit that sobered and steadied them as never before.

The Master, still unmoved, merely smiled a peculiar smile as he commanded:

"Major, have the stone and the golden spout carried to my cabin. And, if you please, no remarks!"

Bohannan picked a few men to fulfil the order. Then he asked and received permission to retire to the smoke-room, for a pipe and a quiet half-hour, after having washed the dust and grime of battle from his hands and face. The major's Celtic nerves needed tobacco and reflection as they had rarely needed them.

The Master, climbing up the ladder to the main gallery, left Leclair and a few off-duty men in the lower one. Two or three approached the French ace, to hold speech with him about the exploit at the Ka'aba, but he withdrew from them to the extreme rear end of the gallery and remained for a long time in silent contemplation of the fading city, the Plain of Mina, and Mount Arafat, beyond.

As the vague purple haze of late afternoon deepened to veils that began to hide even the outlines of the mountain, he leaned both elbows on the rail and in his own language whispered:

"_Nom de Dieu!_ The Pearl Star--the Golden Waterspout--the sacred Black Stone!" His face was white with pride and a fire of eagerness that burned within. "Why, now we're masters of all Islam--masters of the treasure-houses of the Orient!"

"_Mais--nom de Dieu!_"

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE ORDEAL OF RRISA

Alone in his cabin with the waterspout of massive gold and with the sacred Black Stone, the Master sat down in front of the table where they had been laid, took a few leaves of khat, and with profound

attention began to study the treasures his bold coup had so successfully delivered into his hands.

The waterspout, he saw at once, would as a mere object of precious metal be worth a tremendous sum. It was of raw gold, apparently unalloyed--as befitted its office of carrying the water from the roof of the Ka'aba and throwing it upon Ishmael's grave, where pilgrims have for centuries stood fighting to catch it. Its color verged on reddish; all its lateral surfaces were carved with elaborate arabesques and texts from the Koran. The bottom bore an inscription in Tumar characters, easily decipherable by the Master, stating that it had been sent from Constantinople in the year of the Hegira 981, by Shafey Hanbaly, the Magnificent.

"A great treasure," pondered the Master. "An almost incalculable treasure, in itself; but less so, intrinsically, than as an object of Moslem veneration. In either case, however, enormously valuable."

He examined it a moment or two longer, noting with care the gashes and deep cuts made by the frantic strokes of Dr. Lombardo's pick-axe. What his thoughts might have been regarding the doctor's tragic death, none could have told. For with a face quite unmoved, he turned now to the examination of the world-famous Black Stone.

This object, he saw, possessed no value whatever, per se. Aside from its golden encircling band studded with silver nails, its worth seemed practically nothing. As it lay on the table before him, he realized that it was nothing but a common aerolite, with the appearance of black slag. Its glossy, pitchlike surface, on the end that had been exposed from the wall, was all worn and polished smooth by innumerable caresses from Moslem hands and lips.

"Very hygienic," the Master thought. "If there was ever a finer way devised for spreading the plague and other Oriental diseases, I can't very well imagine what it could be!"

A bit of the stone had been broken off by Leclair's crowbar. The Master's trained, scientific eye saw, by the brightly sparkling, grayish section of the break, that iron and nickel formed the chief elements of the stone. Its dimensions, though its irregular form made these hard to come by, seemed about two and a half feet in length, by about seven or eight inches in breadth and thickness. Its weight, as the Master stood up and lifted it, must have been about two hundred pounds. No doubt one man could have carried it from its place in the Ka'aba to the nacelle; but in the excitement of battle, and impeded by having to stumble over prostrate Moslems, the major had considered it advisable to ask for help.

"Mineralogically speaking, this is a meteor or a block of volcanic basalt," judged the Master. "It seems sprinkled with small crystals, with rhombs of tile-red feldspath on a dark background like velvet or charcoal, except for one reddish protuberance of an unknown substance. A good blow with a hammer would surely break it along the original lines of fracture--and this is well worth knowing and remembering".

"Well, so far so good," he concluded. "The Air Control Board hasn't got us, yet. Neither have the Mohammedans. True, we've lost a number of men, but that was to have been expected. That's inevitable, and we still have enough. I hardly see that we have so very much to complain

of, so far."

He turned, pulled a blanket from his berth and carefully spread it over the loot on the table. Then he pushed the button communicating with the cabin wherein Risa was still quivering as a result of having heard the fusillades and the terrific tumult--unseen though they had been to him--at Mecca.

In a couple of minutes the faithful orderly appeared, salaamed, and stood waiting with a drawn, troubled face.

"_Allah m'a!_" the Master greeted him, in Allah's name inquiring for his good health. "I have something important to ask thee. Come in. Come in, and close the door."

He spoke in Arabic. The orderly, in the same tongue, made answer as he obeyed:

"The Master hath but to talk, and it is answered, if my knowledge can suffice." His words were submissive; but the expression was strange in his eyes, at sight of the blanket on the table. That blanket might hide--what might it not hide? The light in his gaze became one the Master had never yet seen there, not even in the sternest fighting at Gallipoli.

"Mecca lieth behind us, Risa," the Master began. "Thou hast seen nothing of it, or of what happened there?"

"Nothing, _M'alme._ I was bidden remain in my cabin, and the Master's word is always my law. It is true that I heard sounds of a great fighting, but I obeyed the Master. I saw nothing. The Sheik Abd el Hareth, did you deliver him into the hands of the Faithful?"

"No, Risa. They refused to accept him. And now I have other plans for him. It is well that thou didst see nothing, for it was a mighty fighting and there was death both to them and to us. Now, my questions to thee."

"Yea, Master?"

"Tell me this thing, first. Is it indeed true speaking, as I have heard, that the Caliph el Walid the First, in Hegira 88, sent to Mecca an immense present of gold and silver, forty camel-loads of small cut gems and a hundred thousand _miskals_ in gold coin?"

"It is true, Master. Save that he sent more; nearly two hundred thousand _miskals_. He also sent eighty Coptic and Greek artists to carve and gild the mosques.

"One Greek sculptured a hog on the Mosque of Omar, trying to make it into a _kanisah_ (unclean idol-house). My people discovered the sacrilege, and"--he added with intent--"gave that Greek the bowstring, then quartered the body and threw it to the vultures."

"That is of no importance whatever, Risa," answered the Master with an odd smile. "What thy people do to the unbeliever, if they capture him, is nothing to me. For--dost thou see?--they must first make the capture. What I would most like to know is this: where is all that treasure, now?"

"I cannot tell you, Master."

"At Mecca?"

"No, Master, not at Mecca."

"Then where?"

"_M'alme!_ My lips are sealed as the Forbidden Books!"

"Not against the commands of thy sheik--and I am thy sheik!"

Risa's lips twitched. The inner struggle of his soul reflected itself in his lean, brown face. At last he aroused himself to make answer:

"The treasure, Master, is far to the south-east--in another city."

"Ah! So there _is_ another city far out in Ruba el Khali, the Empty Abodes!"

"Yea, _M'alme_, that is so."

"Then the ancient rumor is true? And it is from near that city that thou didst come, eh? By Allah's power, I command thee to tell me of this hidden city of the central deserts!"

"This thing I cannot do, my sheik."

"This thing thou must do!"

"O Master! It is the secret of all secrets! Spare me this!"

"No Risa, thou must obey. Far inside El Hejaz (the barrier), that city is lying for my eyes to behold. I must know of it. Thy oath to me cannot be broken. Speak, thou!"

The Master made no gesture with his hands, did not frown or clench his fists, but remained impassively calm. His words, however, cut Risa like knives. The orderly remained trembling and sweating, with a piteous expression. Finally he managed to stammer:

"_M'alme_, in our tongue we have a proverb: 'There are two things colder than ice--a young old man and an old young man.' There is still a colder thing--the soul that betrays the Hidden City!"

"Speak Risa! There is no escape for thee!"

"My sheik, I obey," quavered the unfortunate orderly, shaken with a palsy of fear. Without a quiver, the Arab would rush a machine-gun position or face a bayonet-charge; but this betrayal of his kin struck at the vitals of his faith. Still, the Master's word was law even above Al Koran. With trembling lips he made answer:

"This city--spare me uttering its name, Master!--lies many hours' journey, even by this Eagle of the Sky, beyond the Iron Mountains that no man of the Feringi hath ever seen. It lies beyond the Great Sand Barrier, in a valley of the Inner Mountains; yea, at the very heart of Ruba el Khali."

"I hear thee, Risa. Speak further. And let thy speaking be truth!"

"It shall be truth, by the Prophet's beard! What doth the Master ask of me?"

"Is it a large city, Risa?"

"Very large."

"And beautiful?"

"As the Jebel Radhwa!" (Mountain of Paradise).

"Thou hast been in that secret city, Risa?"

"Once, Master. The wonderful sight still remaineth in mine eyes."

"And, seeing the Iron Mountains again, thou couldst guide us thither?"

"Allah forbid! That is among the black deeds, Master! 'The grave is darkness and good deeds are its lamps; but for the betrayer, there shall be no light!' _Wallah, Effendi!_ Do not make me your guide!"

"I have not said I intended to do so, Risa. I merely asked thee if thou _couldst_!" The Master's voice was silken, fine, penetrant. "Well, Risa, tell me if thou couldst!"

"Yea, Master. _Ya gharati!_ (O my calamity!) It is true I could." The words issued from his unwilling throat as if torn out by main force. "But I earnestly beg of you, my sheik, do not make me do this thing!"

"Risa, if I command, thou must obey me! 'There is only one thing can ever loose the bonds I have knotted about thee.'"

"And that is certainty (death), Master?"

"That is certainty! But this, to the oath-breaker and the abuser of the salt, means a place among the _mujrim_ (sinful). It means Jehannum, and an unhappy couch shall it be!"

Risa's face grew even more drawn and lined. A trembling had possessed his whole body.

"Master, I obey!" he made submission, then stood waiting with downcast eyes of suffering.

"It is well," said the chief, rising. He stood for a moment peering at Risa, while the hum and roar of the great air-liner's mechanism, the dip and sway of its vast body through the upper air, seemed to add a kind of oppressive solemnity to the tense situation. To the cabin wall the Master turned. There hung a large-scale map of the Arabian Peninsula. He laid a hand on the vast, blank interior, and nodded for Risa to approach.

"Listen, thou," said he. "Thy knowledge is sufficient. Thou dost understand the interpretation of maps, and canst read latitude and longitude. Mark here the place of the Hidden City!"

"Of the Bara Jannati Shahr, Master? Ah no, _no_!"

"So then, that is its name?" the chief demanded, smiling.

"No, _M'alme_. Thou dost know the Arabic. Thou dost understand this means only, in thy tongue, the Very Heavenly City."

"True. Well, let it pass. Very Heavenly City it shall be, till the real name becomes known. Come now, mark the place of the Hidden City and mark it truly, or the greatest of sins will lie upon thy soul!"

The Arab advanced a brown, quivering hand.

"Give me a pencil, Master, and I obey!" he answered, in a voice hardly audible.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE INNER SECRET OF ISLAM

The chief handed him a pencil. Rrisa intelligently studied the map for nearly two minutes, then raised his hand and made a dot a few miles north-east of the intersection of fifty degrees east and twenty degrees north. The Master's eye was not slow to note that the designated location formed one point of a perfect equilateral triangle, the other points of which were Bab el Mandeb on the south and Mecca on the north.

"There, _M'alme_," whispered the Arab, in a choking voice. "Now I have told you the secret of all secrets, and have lost my soul. I have revealed the inner mystery of Islam, that to this day no man of the Feringi hath ever known. I am a very great man of sin, and should have first torn out my tongue.

"But my life is in your hands, Master, and I have shared your salt. Allah knows I was forced to speak. _Shal'lah!_ (It is _Allah's_ will!) Allah will weigh my heart and will forgive, for he is the Compassionate, the Merciful! I beg you, Master, now let me go!"

"Soon, Rrisa," the chief answered, turning away from the map. "But first there is something of highest import I must show thee."

"And what may that be, my sheik?" the Arab queried, his widening eyes fixed on the blanket that covered the loot from Mecca. Instinctively he sensed that some horrible sight was about to be presented to him. His face paled even more. He licked dry lips with a tongue equally dry, and leaned against the table to steady himself. "What have you now to show me, O _M'alme?_"

"Listen!" the chief commanded sternly. "The Meccans are a people corrupt and accursed. 'Their hearts are black as their skins are white.' They live by fleecing the _Hujjaj_, by making sale and barter of relics, by turning the holy places into marts of trade. All this is well known throughout Islam. Ah, the degenerate breed of the sons of the Prophet!"

"That is true, Master. And what then?"

"Is it not a fact that they could not even safeguard the Kaukab el Durri from the hand of the Great Apostate Sheik? How much less, then, could they protect their other and more sacred things, if some Shiah dog should come to rob them of the things they value?"

"Would it not be better that such things should be carried far from danger, to the hidden, inner city? I ask thee this, Risa; would it not be better far?"

"And what is the meaning of my master's strange words?" ventured Risa, a sort of dazed horror dawning in his eyes. "The other and more sacred things of Islam--are they there under that cloth, O Master?"

"Thou hast said it, Risa! Now, behold them!"

With a quick, dramatic gesture, well-calculated to strike at the roots of the superstitious Arab's nature, he flung away the blanket. To Risa's horrified gaze appeared the Myzab and the sacred Black Stone.

"_Ya Allah!_" gulped the orderly, in a choking whisper. His face became a dull gray. His eyes, rimmed with white, stared in terror. His teeth began to chatter; and on his forehead appeared little glistening drops.

"O Master, that is not--."

"Truly, yea! The Golden Waterspout, Risa, and the Black Stone itself! I am carrying them to the Very Heavenly City, far in the Iron Mountains! They shall be given to the Great Olema, there, who is more fit to guard and keep them than the Sheriff of Mecca or than his sons Feisal and the two Alis. No harm shall befall them, and--"

"And your hand--the hands of other Feringi who are not my masters--have touched these things?" stammered Risa. "O my calamity! O my grief!"

"Thou canst go now, Risa," the Master said. "Go, and think well of what I have told thee, and--"

But Risa, falling prone to the metal of the cabin floor, facing the Black Stone, gave vent to his feelings and burst into a wild cry of "_La Illaha_--" and the rest of the immemorial formula.

The Master smiled down at him, quizzical and amused yet still more than a little affected by the terror and devotion of his orderly. Wise, he waited till Risa had made the compulsory prayers of _Labbayk, Takbir_, and _Tahiti_, as all Moslems must do when coming near the Black Stone. Then, as the orderly's voice suddenly died away, he bent and laid a hand on the quivering Arab's shoulder.

"Come, come, Risa," said he, not unkindly. "Be thou not so distressed. Is it not better that these very precious things be kept in greater safety at the Jannati Shahr? Come, Risa! Arise!"

The orderly made no move, uttered no sound. The Master dragged him

up, held him, peered into his face that had gone quite ashen under its brown.

"Why, Lord! the man has fainted dead away!" exclaimed the Master. He gathered Risa in his powerful arms, carried him to his own cabin and laid him in the berth, there; then he bathed his face with water and chafed his hands and throat.

In a few minutes, Risa's eyes vaguely opened. He gulped, gasped, made shift to speak a few feeble words.

"Master!" he whispered.

"Well, what dost thou wish?"

"One favor, only!"

"And what is that?"

"Leave me, a little while. I must be alone, all alone with Allah--to think!"

The Master nodded.

"It shall be as thou wishest," said he. "Think, yes. And understand that what I do is best for all of Sunnite Islam! As for the Shiah dogs, what hast thou to trouble about them?"

Saying no more, he withdrew to his own cabin, wrapped the Myzab and the Stone in the blanket and laid them carefully under his berth. Opening his desk-drawer, he assured himself the Pearl Star was still there. This done, he turned again to the map, carefully studied the location of the point Risa had designated, and--going to the pilot-house--gave directions for a new course to "Captain Alden," now at the wheel.

This course, he calculated by allowing for wind and lateral drift, would carry _Nissr_ directly toward the site of the still half-mythical Iron Mountains and the Bara Jannati Shahr.

He now returned to his cabin, locked himself in and--pondering over a few khat leaves--passed the remainder of the afternoon sunk in deep abstraction.

Evening and night still found him in profound thought, while the giant air-liner steadily rushed into the south-east, bearing him and the Legion onward toward dim regions now veiled in purple darkness under strange stars.

At nine o'clock he ordered _Nissr_ stopped, and had the body of Dr. Lombardo sent down with six men in the nacelle, for burial. No purpose could be served by keeping the body, and all unnecessary complications had to be dispensed with before the morrow. Lombardo, who had fully atoned for his fault by having given his life in the service of the now depleted Legion, was buried in his service-uniform, in a fairly deep grave on which the Legionaries heaped a great tumulus of sand. The only witnesses were the Arabian Desert stars; the only requiem the droning of the helicopters far above, where _Nissr_ hung with her gleaming lights like other, nearer stars in the dense black sky.

By ten o'clock, the air-liner had resumed her course, leaving still another brave man to his last sleep, alone. The routine of travel settled down again on the ship and its crew of adventurers.

At half-past eleven, the Master issued from his cabin. All alone, and speaking with no man, he took a quarter-hour constitutional up and down the narrow gallery along the side of the fuselage--the gallery on which his cabin window opened. His face, by the vague light of the glows in this gallery, looked pale and worn; but a certain gleam of triumph and proud joy was visible in his dark eyes.

All about him, stretched night unbroken. Far behind, lay vast confusions involving hundreds of millions of human beings violently wrenched from their accustomed routines of faith and prayer, with potential effects beyond all calculation. Ahead lay--what?

"It may be glory and power, wealth past reckoning, incredible splendor," thought the Master, "and it may be ignominy, torture, death. 'Allah knows best and time will show.' But whatever it may be--is it completion? The human heart, alone--can that ever be complete in this world?"

He bent at the rail, gazing far out into the vague emptiness through which the air-liner was pushing.

"Come what may," he murmured, "for tonight, at any rate, it is peace. 'It is peace, till the rising of the dawn!'"

In a strange mood, still holding no converse with any man, he returned to the main corridor and went toward his cabin. His way led past the door of "Captain Alden." There he paused a moment, all alone in the corridor. The lights in the ceiling showed a strange look in his eyes. His face softened, as he laid a hand on the metal panels of the door, silently almost caressingly.

To himself he whispered:

"I wonder who she really is? What can her name be--who can she be, and--and--"

He checked himself, impatiently:

"What thoughts are these? What nonsense? Such things are not for me!"

Silently he returned to his cabin, undressed, switched off the light and turned into his berth, under which lay the incalculable treasures of Islam. For a long time he lay there, thinking, wondering, angry with himself for having seemed to give way for a single moment to softer thoughts than those of conquest and adventure.

Gradually the cradling swing, the quivering power of the airship, lulled his fevered spirit. Sleep won upon him, dulled the excitements of the past twenty-four hours, sank him into oblivion. His deep, regular breathing sounded in the gloom of the cabin that contained the Great Pearl Star, the Myzab, the sacred Black Stone of infinite veneration.

An hour he slept. On, on roared _Nissr_, swaying, rising, falling

a little as she hurled herself through the Arabian night toward the unknown Bara Jannati Shahr, hidden behind the Iron Mountains of mystery as yet unseen by any unbelieving eye.

Peace, all seemed peace, for one dark hour.

But as the hour ended, a shadow fell along the narrow gallery outside the cabin window. A silent shadow it was, that crept, paused, came on again. And now in the dark, had there been any eye to see, the shadow would have been identified as a barefoot man, lithe, alert, moving silently forward with the soundless stealth of an Arab versed in the art of _asar_, or man-stalking.

To the Master's window this shadow crept, a half-invisible thing in the gloom. It paused there, listening to the deep, regular breathing within. Then a lean, brown hand was laid on the sill. It still seemed to hesitate.

Something gleamed vaguely in that hand--a crooked _jambiyeh_, needle-sharp at the point, keen-edged and balanced for the stroke that silently slays.

Motionless, unbreathing even, the shadow waited a long minute. Then all at once over the sill it writhed, quick, lithe as a starved panther.

Dagger in hand, the shadow slid to the berth where lay the Master of the Legionaries. There Risa paused, listening to the slow respiration of the White Sheik with whom he had shared the inviolable salt, to whom he owed life itself.

Up, in the gloom, came the dagger-blade.

Over the unconscious Master it poised, keen, cold, avenging in the dark of the cabin where lay the three supreme treasures of all Islam.

CHAPTER XXXV

INTO THE VALLEY OF MYSTERY

The upraised blade, poised for swift murder, did not descend. With a groan from the heart's core, Risa let fall his trembling hand, as he recoiled toward the vague patch of starlight that marked the cabin window.

"_Bismillah_!" he whispered hoarsely. "I cannot! This is my sheik--'and thrice cursed is the hand that slays the sheik.' I cannot kill him!"

For a moment he remained there, pondering. Swift, passionate thoughts surged through his brain, which burned with fever. In Risa's fighting-blood the supreme battle of his whole existence was aflame--duty of annihilating the violator of his Faith combating duty of loyalty absolute to one whose salt he had eaten, to one who had preserved his life.

So, in the dark he stood there, a shadow among shadows. He peered about with white-rimmed eyes, striving to discover where now the Myzab and the sacred Black Stone might be. The dim bulk of the blanket under the berth came to his senses. He knelt, touched the blanket, felt the hard solidity within.

Torn with anguish of a great conflict, he pondered, smearing the sweat of agony from his hard-wrinkled forehead. Better was it to fling these holy things from the cabin window, out into the night? Better the certainty that the desert sands, far below, would inevitably drift over them, forever burying them from the sight of his people; or better the chance that the Master, after all, really intended to deliver them back into Moslem hands at Bara Jannati Shahr?

"Allah, oh, guide thy servant now!" the orderly prayed with trembling lips. "Allah, show thou me the way!"

The Master, stirring in his sleep, sighed deeply and let his right hand fall outside the berth. Risa, fearful of imminent discovery, made up his mind with simple directness. He salaamed in silence, all but brushing the Master's hand with his lips.

"_Wa'salem!_" (Farewell!) he breathed. Then he got up, turned, laid his dagger on the table and slid out through the window as soundlessly as he had come. He crossed the marrow gallery in the gloom, and mounted the rail beyond which yawned black vacancy.

For a moment he stayed there, peering down first at the impenetrable abysses below, then up at the unmoved stars above. The ghostly aura of light in the gallery showed his face wan, deep-graven with lines, agonized, ennobled by strong decisions of self-sacrifice.

"Thou, Allah," he whispered, "dost know life cannot be for both my Master and thy servant, after what thy servant hath seen. I offer thee my life for his! Thou wilt judge aright, for thou knowest the hearts of men and wilt wrong no man by the weight of a grain of sand. Thou art easy to be reconciled, and merciful! There is no God but Allah, and M'hamed is his Prophet!"

With no further word, he leaped.

Just a fraction of a second, a dim-whirling object plummeted into space. It vanished.

As best he understood, Risa had solved his problem and had paid his score.

The Master wakened early, with the late May sun already Slanting in from far, dun and orange desert-levels, gilding the metal walls of his cabin. For a few moments he lay there, half dreamily listening to the deep bass hum of the propellers, the slight give and play of the air-liner as she shuddered under the powerful drive of her Norcross-Brail engines.

His thoughts first dwelt a little on yesterday's battle and on the wondrous treasure now in his hands. Then they touched the approaching campaign beyond the Iron Mountains in regions never yet seen by any

white man's eye, and for a while enveloped some of the potentialities of that campaign.

But "Captain Alden" recurring to his mind, drove away such stern imaginings. The Master's lips smiled, a little; his black eyes softened, and for a moment his face assumed something that might almost have made it akin to those of men who feel the natural passions of the heart. Never before, in all his stern, hard life, had the Master's expression been quite as now.

"Who can she be, I wonder?" he mused. "A woman like that, possessed of that extraordinary beauty; a woman with education, languages, medical skill; a woman with courage, loyalty, and devotion beyond compare, and with all the ardor for service and adventure that any man could have--who can she be? And--damn it, now! Who am I, to be thinking of such nonsense, after all?"

His eyes fell on the table. Something lay there, a gleam with the sunlight flicking blood-red spots from a polished metal surface. What could this thing be? Surely, it had not lain there, the night before.

The Master wrinkled heavy brows, focussing his sight on this metal object. Puzzled, not yet able to make it out clearly, he raised himself on his elbow and looked with close attention at the mysterious object.

Suddenly he leaped from the berth, strode to the table and caught up--Risa's dagger.

"Allah! What's this?" he exclaimed. "Risa--he's been here--and with a knife?--"

For a second or two he stood there, staring at the _jambiyeh_ in his grip. His powerful frame tautened; his thick, corded neck swelled with the intensity of his emotion as his head went forward, staring. His jaw set hard. Then with a kind of half-comprehension, he turned quickly toward the window.

Yes, there were traces on the sill, that could not be mistaken. The Master's keen eyes detected them, under the morning sun. He stepped to his desk, dropped the dagger into a drawer, and pressed the button for his orderly.

No one appeared. The Master rang again. Quite in vain. With more precipitation than was customary with him, he dressed and went to Risa's cabin.

Its emptiness confirmed his suspicions. Returning along the outer gallery, a little pale, he reached the railing opposite his own window. Here a scratch on the metal drew his attention. Closely he scrutinized this scratch. A hint of whitish metal told the tale--metal the Master recognized as having been abraded from a ring the Master himself had given him; a ring of aluminum alloy, fashioned from part of a Turkish grenade at Gallipoli.

The Master's face contracted painfully. In his mind he could reconstitute the scene--Risa's hands gripping the rail, his climb over it, his leap. For a moment the Master stood there with blank eyes, peering out over the burning, tawny desolation of the great

sand-barrens that stretched away, away, to boundless immensity.

"Yes, he is surely gone," he whispered. "_Shal'lah! Razi Allahu anhu!_" (It is Allah's will; may Allah be satisfied with him!) "What would I not give to have him back!"

The trilling of his cabin phone startled him to attention. He entered, took the receiver and heard Leclair's voice from the pilot-house:

"Clouds on the horizon, my Captain. And I think there is a mountain range coming in sight. Would you care to look?"

The Master, very grim and silent, went into the pilot-house. He had decided to make no mention of what had happened. The suicide must pass as an accident. He himself must seem to have no knowledge of it. Morale forbade the admission either of treachery or self-destruction, for any member of the Legion.

The sight of vague, pearl-gray clouds on the far south-east horizon, and of a dim, violet line of peaks notched across the heat-quivering sky in remotest distances, struck him like a blow in the face. Clouds must mean moisture; some inner, watered plain wholly foreign to the general character of the Arabian Peninsula. And the peaks must be the Iron Mountains that Risa had told him about. They seemed to rebuff him, to be pointing fingers of accusation at him. Had it not been for his insistence--

"But that is all nonsense!" he tried to assure himself, as he took his binoculars from the rack and sighted at the forbidding, mysterious range. "Am I responsible for a Moslem's superstitions, or his fanatic irrationality?"

The Master's own narrow escape from death disturbed him not at all. He hardly even thought of it. All he strove for, now, was to exculpate himself for Risa's death. But this he could not do.

A sense of blood-guiltiness clung about him like a garment--the first that he had felt on this expedition. His soul, unemotional, practical, hard, was at last touched and wounded by the realization that Risa, pushed beyond all limits of endurance, had chosen death rather than inflict it on his sheik. And the thought that the faithful orderly's body was now lying on the flaming sands, hundreds of miles away--that it was already a prey to jackals, kites, and buzzards--sickened his shuddering heart and filled him with remorse.

"Allah send a storm of sand--_jinnee_ to bury the poor chap, that's all I can wish now!" he pondered, as he studied the strange yellowish and orange tints in utmost horizon distances. The air, over the shimmering peaks, seemed of a different quality from that elsewhere. To north, to west, the desert rim of the world veiled itself in magic blue, mysteriously dim. But there, it glowed in golden hues. What, thought the Master, might be the meaning of all this?

The Master had no time for speculation. The urgent problem of locating the Bara Jannati Shahr, beyond that inhospitable sierra, banished thoughts of all else. He inspected his charts, together with the air-liner's record of course and position. He slightly corrected the direction of flight. "Captain Alden" was already in the pilot-house, with Leclair. The Master summoned Bohannon tersely, and briefly

instructed him:

"You understand, of course, that we may now be facing perils beyond any yet encountered. We have already upset all Islam, and changed the _kiblah_ --the direction of prayer--for more than two hundred million human beings. The 'fronting-place' is now aboard _Nissr_. "[1]

[Footnote 1: So long as the Black Stone was at the Ka'aba, this building was the only spot in the world where the _kiblah_ was circular, that is, where Moslems could pray all around it. The Legion's theft of the stone had completely dislocated all the most important beliefs and customs of Islam.]

"The most intense animosity of religious fanaticism will pursue us. If the news of our exploit has, in any unaccountable way such as the Arabs know how to employ, reached Jannati Shahr, we are in for a battle royal. If not, we still have a chance to use diplomacy. A few hours now will determine the issue.

"We are approaching what will probably be the final goal of this expedition; a city beyond unknown mountains; a city that no white man has ever yet seen and that few have even heard of. What the conditions will be there no one can tell; but--"

"Not even Risa?" put in the major. "Faith, now's the time, if ever, to consult that lad!"

"Correct, for once," assented the Master. With purpose to deceive, he phoned for Risa. No answer coming, he got Simonds on the wire and ordered him to find the orderly. The investigation thus started would, he knew, soon bring out the fact of the orderly's disappearance. This line of action fairly started, he went on formulating his plans:

"Major, look well to your guns. For once you may have a chance to use them. I have put my various pieces of apparatus in good condition, and have improvised some new features. In addition, we have the second kappa-bomb."

"But I trust we shall not be driven to a fight. If diplomacy can win, there will be no bloodshed. Otherwise, our only limit will be the total destruction of these unknown people, or our own annihilation. It's a case, now, of win what we are after, or end everything right there, beyond those mountains!"

He ascended to the upper port gallery, and concentrated himself on observation. A certain change in the desert was becoming noticeable, as the air-liner flung herself at high speed into the south-east. At times there must be a little rainfall here, or else some hidden source of water, for a scrub, of dwarf acacia, of camel-grass, and tamarisk had begun to show.

But as the black, naked mountains drew near, this gave place to flats white with salt, to jagged upcroppings of dull, yellowish rock--how little they then suspected its true nature!--and to detached cliffs sharp as a wolf's teeth, with strata of greenish schist.

It was at 9:30 a.m. of May 28, that _Nissr_ tilted her planes and soared abruptly over the first crags of the Iron Mountains. At a height of forty-five hundred feet she sped above them, the heat of

their sun-baked blackness radiating up against her wings and body. No more terrible desolation could be imagined than this rock fortress, split with chasms and unsounded gorges, where here and there more of the yellow outcrops showed. No life appeared, not even vultures. For more than an hour, _Nissr's_ shadow leaped across this utter solitude of death.

The Master summoned Leclair, Bohannan, and "Captain Alden," and for some time gave them careful instructions which none but they were allowed to hear.

CHAPTER XXXVI

JOURNEY'S END

All this time, the strange, yellowish sheen against the heavens was increasing. What might lie beyond the mountains--who could tell? But that its nature was wholly different from anything any white man ever had beheld seemed obvious.

Quite suddenly, at 10:05, the Master's binoculars detected a break far to southward, in the craggy wall of rock. He ordered _Nissr's_ beak turned directly thither. Swiftly the Eagle of the Sky held her course, speeding like an arrow. And now a vast, open plain was seen to be spreading away, away to indeterminable distances; a plain the further limits of which veiled themselves in bister and dull ocher vapors.

The aureate shimmer on the sky kept steadily increasing, from a point somewhat to the left of _Nissr's_ line of flight. What this might be, none could guess. None save the Master. More agitated than any had ever seen him, he stood there at the rail, lips tight, hands clutching the binoculars at his eyes.

"By Allah!" the major heard him mutter. "It can't be true--the thing I've heard. Only a fable, surely! And yet--"

Now the vast plain was coming clearly to view. It appeared fully under cultivation with patches of greenery that denoted gardens, palm-groves, fruit-orchards; all signs of a well-watered region here at the center of the world's most appalling desert.

This in itself was a thing of astonishment. But it faded to insignificance as all at once a far, dazzling sheen burst on the watchers. Up against the sky a wondrous, yellow blaze seemed to be burning. Enormously far away as it still was, it filled the heart of every observer with a strange, quick thrill of wonder, of hope. Something of wild exultation seemed to leap through the Legionaries' veins, at sight of that strange fire.

Leclair glanced at the Master. The dark, taciturn man, for all his self-control, had set teeth into his lip till the blood was all but starting.

On, on swooped _Nissr._ Now the plain was widening. Now, off at the left, behind the shimmer of the wondrous sight that seemed a fantastic

city of dreams, long black cliffs had become visible--surely some spur of the Iron Mountains, making to southward at the eastern edge of the plain. This line of crags faded, in remote distance, into the brown vapors that ringed the mystic horizon.

"The city?" asked Bohannan. "That--can't be the city, can it, now? Faith, if it is, we're too late. Damn me, sir, but the whole infernal place is on fire! Just our rotten luck, eh?"

The Master made no reply. As if he would devour the place with his eyes, he was leaning over the rail, boring through those powerful glasses at the dazzle and bright sheen of the wonder-city now every moment becoming more clearly visible.

That it was in truth a city could no longer be doubted. Long walls came to view, pierced by gates with fantastic arches. Domes rose to heaven. Delicate minarets, carved into a fretwork of amazing fineness, pointed their fingers at the yellow shimmering sky. The contrast of that brilliance, with the soft green gardens and feathery palm-groves before, the grim black cliffs behind, filled the Legionaries with a kind of silent awe.

But most wonderful of all was the metallic shimmer of those walls, domes, minarets, under the high sun of this lost Arabian paradise. So amazing was the prospect that, as Nissr hurled herself in over the last ranges of the mountains and shot out across the open plain itself, only one man found words.

This man was Leclair. Close beside the Master, he said in Arabic:

"I too have heard, my Captain. I too know the story of the Bara Jannati Shahr--but I have always thought it fable. Now, now--."

"Faith!" interrupted the major, with sudden excitement. He smote the rail a blow with an agitated fist. "If that doesn't look like gold, I'm a--."

"Gold?" burst out the Master, unable longer to control himself. "Of course it's gold! And we--are the first white men in all the world to look on it--the Golden City of Jannati Shahr!"

Stupefaction overcame the Flying Legion. The sight of this perfectly incredible city, which even yet--despite its obvious character--they could not believe as reality, for a little while deprived all the observers of coherent thought.

Like men in a daze, they stood watching the far-distant mass of walls, buildings, towers, battlements all agleam with the unmistakable sheen of pure metal. The human mind, confronted by such a phenomenon, fails to react, and for a while lies inert, stunned, prostrate.

"Gold?" stammered the major, and fell to gnawing his mustache, as he stared at the incredible sight. "By God--gold? Sure, it can't be that!"

"It not only can be, but is!" the Master answered. "The old legend is coming true, that's all. Have you no eyes in your head, Major? If that shine isn't the shine of gold, what is it?"

"Yes, but the thing's impossible, sir!" cried Bohannan. "Why, man alive! If that's gold, the whole of Arabia would be here after it! There'd be caravans, miners, swarms of--"

"It's obvious you know nothing of Moslem severity or superstition," the Master interrupted. "There is no Mohammedan beggar, even starving, who would touch a grain of that metal. Not even if it were given him. There's not one would carry an ounce away from the Iron Mountains. This whole region is under the ban of a most terrific tabu, that loads unthinkable curses on any human being who removes a single atom of any metal from it!"

"Ah, that's it, eh?"

"Yes, that's very much it! And what is more, Major, no word of this ever gets out to the white races--or hardly any. Nothing more than vague rumors that barely amount to fairy stories. Even though I forced Risa to tell me the location of this city, he wouldn't mention its being gold, and I knew too much to ask him or try to make him. Why, he'd have been torn to bits before he'd have betrayed that Inner Secret. So now you understand!"

"I see, I see," the major answered, mechanically. It was plain, however, that his mind had received a shock from which it had not yet fully recovered. He remained staring and blinking, first chewing at his mustache and then tugging it with blunt, trembling fingers. Now and then he shook his head, like a man just waking from a dream and trying to make himself realize that he is indeed awake.

The others, some to a greater degree, some to a less, shared the major's perturbation. A daze, a numb stupefaction had fallen on them. The Master, however, soon recalled them to activity. Not much time now remained before Nissr must make her landing on the plain near the Golden City. None was to be wasted.

Vigorous orders set the Legionaries to work. The machine-guns were loaded and fully manned; several pieces of apparatus that the Master had been perfecting in his cabin were brought into the lower gallery; everyone was commanded to smarten his personal appearance. The psychology of the Oriental was such, well the Master knew, that the impression the Legion should make upon the people of this wonder-city could not fail to be of the very highest importance.

The plain over which Nissr was now sweeping, with the black mountains left far behind, seemed a fairyland of beauty compared with the desolation of the Central Arabian Desert.

"This is surely a fitting spot for the exact geometrical center of Islam," the Master said to Leclair, as they stood looking down. "My measurements show this secret valley to be that center. Mecca, of course, has only been a blind, to keep the world from knowing anything about this, the true heart of the Faith. The Meccans have been usurping the Black Stone, all these centuries, and these Jannati Shahr people have submitted because any conflict would have betrayed their existence to the world. That is my theory. Good, eh?"

"Excellent!" the lieutenant replied. "There must be millions of Mohammedans, themselves, who have hardly learned of this valley. Certainly, very few from the outside world ever have been able to

cross the Empty Abodes, and reach it.

"These people here evidently represent a far higher culture than any other Moslems ever known. Who ever saw a finer city--even not considering its material--or more wonderful cultivation of land?"

His eyes wandered out over the plain, which lost itself to sight in the remote south. Roads in various directions, with here and there a few white dromedaries bearing bright-colored _shugdufs_ (litters), showed there was travel to some other inhabited spots inside the forbidding mountain girdle.

Here, there, herds of antelope and flocks of sheep were grazing on broad meadows, through which trickled sparkling threads of water, half glimpsed among feathery-tufted date-palms. Plantations of fig and pomegranate, lime, apricot, and orange trees, with other fruits not recognized, slid beneath the giant liner as she slowed her pace. And broad fields of wheat, barley, tobacco, and sugar-cane showed that the people of the city had no fear of any lack.

Birds were here--pelicans, cranes, and water-fowl along the brooks and gleaming pools; swift little yellow birds with crownlike crests; doves, falcons, and hawks of unknown species. Here was life abundant, after the death of the Empty Abodes. Here was rich color; here arose a softly perfumed air, balmy, incensed as with strange aromatics. Here was peace--eternal _kayf_--blessed rest--here indeed lay a scene that gave full explanation of the ancient name "Arabia Felix."

And at the left, dominating all this beauty, shone and glimmered in the ardent sun the wondrous Golden City of Jannati Shahr.

Nissr had already begun to slant to lower levels. Now at no more than twenty-five hundred feet, with greatly reduced speed, she was drifting down the valley toward the city, the details of which were every moment becoming more apparent. Its size, the wondering Legionaries saw, must be very considerable; it might have contained three or four hundred thousand inhabitants. Its frontage along the black mountains could not have been less than two and a half miles; and, as it seemed to lose itself up a defile in those crags, no way at present existed of judging its depth.

The general appearance was that of stern simplicity. A long wall of gleaming yellow bounded it, from north to south; this wall being pierced by seven gates, each flanked by minarets. Behind the wall, terraces arose, with _mesjid_ (temple) domes, innumerable houses, and some larger buildings of unknown purpose.

The powerful glasses on _Nissr_ showed fretwork carving everywhere; but the main outlines of the city, none the less, gave an impression of almost primitive severity. No touch of modernity affected it. Everything appeared immensely archaic.

"The Jerusalem of Solomon's day," thought the Master, "must have looked like that--barring only that this is solid gold."

Out from the city, a little less than two-thirds of the way down, issued a rather considerable stream. It seemed to come from under the wall fronting the plain. Its course, straight rather than sinuous, lay toward the south-west, and was marked by long lines of giant

date-palms and pale-stemmed eucalyptus trees, till it lost itself in brown distances.

"Faith, but that looks like lotus-eating, all right," said the major, notching up his cartridge-belt another hole. "That looks like 'A book of verses underneath the bough,' with Fatima or Lalla Rookh, or the like, eh?" He drew at a cigarette, and smiled with sweet visionings of Celtic exuberance. "A golden city! Lord!"

"You'll do no dallying 'with Amaryllis in the shade,' in _this_ valley!" the Master flung at him. "Nor any lotus-eating, either. To your stations, men! Wake up! Forget all about this gold, now--remember my orders! That's all you've got to do. The gold will take care of itself, later. For now, there's stern work ahead!"

The Legionaries assumed their posts, ready for whatever attack might come. They still moved like men in a trance. Whether they could quite even realize the true character of Jannati Shahr seemed doubtful. The Inca's room of gold stunned Pizarro and his men. How much more, then, must a whole city of gold numb any concrete thought?

Down, still down sank _Nissr_, now beginning to circle in broad, descending spirals, seeking where she might land. The roar of the propellers lessened; and at the same time, the increasing hum of the helicopters made itself heard, counterbalancing the loss of lifting power of the planes, yet gradually letting the air-liner sink. Came, too, a sighing hiss of the air-intakes as the vacuum-floats filled.

High noon was now at hand. The sun burned, a copper ball, in the very forehead of a turquoise sky. A light breeze, lazying over the plain, stirred the fronded tufts of the date-palms' thick plantations. Beyond a massy grove, stretching for nearly two miles out from the northernmost gate of the city, a grassy level quite like a parade-ground invited the liner to rest.

As she sank still lower, the Master's glass again picked up the city wall and ran along it. Here, there, white dots were visible; human figures, surely--the figures of men in snowy burnouses, on the ramparts of heavy metal.

The Master smiled, and nodded.

"My men think they are surprised," he mused. "What will these Jannati Shahr men think, when I have opened my little box of tricks and shown them what's inside?"

He pressed a button on the rail. A bell trilled in the pilot-house; another in the engine-room. The Norcross-Brails died to inactivity.

With a last long swoop, an abandonment of all the furious energies that for so long had been hurling her over burning sand and black crag, _Nissr_ slanted to the grassy sward. A sudden, furious hissing burst out beneath her, as the compressed-air valves were thrown and the air-cushions formed beneath her thousands of spiracles. Then, with hardly a shudder, easily as a tired gull slips down into the quiet of a still lagoon, the vast air-liner took earth.

She slid two hundred yards on her air-cushions, over the close-cropped turf, slowed, came to rest there fronting the northern gate of Bara

Jannati Shahr. And the shimmer of those golden walls, one mile to east of her, painted her all a strangely luminous yellow.

Journey's end, at last!

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE GREETING OF WARRIORS

Without delay, everything was put in complete readiness for whatever eventualities might develop. If these strange people meant peace and wanted it, the Legion would give them peace. If war, then by no means was the Legion to be unprepared.

The gangplank was put down from the starboard port in the lower gallery. The helicopters were cut off. Nothing was left running but one engine, at half-speed, to furnish current for the apparatus the Master had decided to use in dealing with the Jannati Shahr folk in case of need--some of this having been evolved on the run from Mecca.

Four hampers were carried down the gangplank and set on the grass, about fifty feet ahead of _Nissr's_ huge beak, that towered in air over the men like an eagle over sparrows. These hampers contained the chosen apparatus. Wires were attached, and run back to the ship, and proper connections made at once by Leclair and Menendez, under the Master's instructions.

The machine-guns were dismounted and taken "ashore," to borrow a nautical phrase. These were set up in strategic positions before the liner, and full supplies of ammunition both blank and ball were served to them.

About a quarter of a mile to north of _Nissr's_ position, one of the small watercourses or irrigating ditches that cut the plain glimmered through a grove of Sayhani dates.[1] To this ditch the Master sent two men in search of the largest stone they could find there. When they returned with a rock some foot in diameter, he ordered it placed half-way between _Nissr_ and the palm-grove.

[Footnote 1: Sayhani (the Crier), so called because one of these palms is fabled to have cried aloud in salutation to Mohammed, when the Prophet happened to walk beneath it.]

These preparations made, the Master lined up his Legionaries for inspection and final instructions. Standing there in military array, fully armed, they made rather a formidable body of fighters despite their paucity of numbers. Courage, eagerness, and joy--still unalloyed by all the fatigues and perils of the long trek after adventure--showed on every face. Even through the eyeholes of "Captain Alden's" mask, daring exultation glimmered.

The dead, left behind, could not now depress the Legionaries' spirits. To be on solid earth again, in this wonderland with the Golden City fronting them, quickened every man's pulse.

What though they were but a handful, ringed round by grim, jagged mountains, beyond which lay hundreds of leagues of burning sand? What though an unknown people of great numbers already had begun to stir in that vast hive of gold? What though all of Islam, which had already learned of the sacrilege the accursed Feringi had wrought, was lusting their blood? Nothing of this mattered. It was enough for the Legionaries that adventure still beckoned onward, ever on!

The Master, standing there before them, called the roll. We should listen, by way of knowing just how the Legion was now composed. It consisted of the following: Adams, "Captain Alden," Bohannon, Bristol, Brodeur, Cracowicz, Emilio, Enemark, Frazier, Grison, Janina, Lebon, Leclair, L'Heureux, Manderson, Menendez, Prisrend, Rennes, Seres, Simonds, Wallace. All the wounded had recovered sufficiently to be of some service. The dead were: Travers, who had died on the passage of the Atlantic; Auchincloss and Gorlitz, burned to death; Kloof, Daimamoto, Beziers and Sheffield, killed by the Beni Harb; Lombardo, killed by the Meccans; Risa, suicide.

In addition to these, we must not forget the Sheik Abd el Rahman, still locked a prisoner in the cabin that for some days had been his swift-flying prison-cell of torment.

The Master had just finished checking his roster, when quite without any preliminary disturbance a crackle of rifle-fire began spattering from the city. And all at once, out of the gate opposite _Nissr_, appeared a white-whirling swarm of figures, at the same time that a green banner, bearing a star and crescent, broke out from the highest minaret.

The figures issuing in a dense mass from the gate were horsemen, all; and they were riding full drive, _ventre a terre_. Out into the plain they debouched, with robes flying, with a green banner, steel flashing, and over all, a great and continual volleying of rifle-fire.

This horde of rushing cavaliers must have numbered between five and six hundred; and a fine sight they made as the Master got his binoculars on them. Here, there, a bit of lively color stood out vividly against the prevailing snowy white of the mass; but for the most part, horses and men alike came rushing down like a drive of furious snow across that wondrous green slope between the palm-groves and the city wall.

As they drew near, the snapping of burnouses and cherchias in the wind, the puffs of powder-smoke, the glint of brandished arms grew clearer; and now, too, the muffled sound of kettle-drums rolled down-breeze, in booming counterpoint to the sharp staccato of the rifles.

Furious as an army of _jinnee_ with wild cries, screams, howls, as they stood in their stirrups and discharged their weapons toward the sky, the horsemen of Jannati Shahr drove down upon the little group of Legionaries.

The major loosened his revolver in its holster. Others did the same. At the machine-guns, the gunners settled themselves, waiting the Master's word of command to mow into the white foam of that insurging wave--a wave of frantic riders and of lathering Nedj horses, the thunder of whose hoofs moment by moment welled up into a

heart-breaking chorus of power.

"Damn it all, sir!" the major exclaimed. "When are you going to rip into them? They'll be on us, in three minutes--in two! Give 'em Hell, before it's too late! Stop 'em!"

Leclair smiled dryly behind his lean hand, as the Master emphatically shook a head in negation.

"No, Major," he said. "No machine-guns yet. You and your eternal machine-guns are sometimes a weariness to the flesh." He raised his voice, above the tumult of the approaching storm of men and horses. "I suppose you've never even heard of the _La'ab el Barut_, the powder-play of the Arabs? They are greeting us with their greatest display of ceremony--and you talk about machine-guns!"

He turned, lifted his hand and called to the gunners:

"No mistakes now, men! No accidents! The first man that pulls a trigger at these people, I'll shoot down with my own hand!"

The lieutenant touched the Master's arm.

"We must give them a return salute, my Captain," he said in Arabic. "To omit that would be a grave breach of the laws of host and guest--almost as bad as violating the salt!"

The Master nodded.

"That is quite true, Lieutenant," he answered. "Thank you for reminding me!"

Once more he turned to the gunners.

"Load with blanks," he commanded, "and aim at an elevation of forty-five degrees. Hold your fire till I give the word!"

"It is well, _Effendi_!" approved the lieutenant, his eyes gleaming with Gallic enthusiasm. "These are no People of the Black Tents, no Beni Harb, nor thieving Meccans. These are men of the very ancient, true Arabic blood--and we must honor them!"

Already the rushing powder-play was within a few hundred yards. The roar of hoofs, the smashing volleys of fire, raging of the kettle-drums, wild-echoing yells of the white company deafened the Legionaries' ears.

What a sight that was--archaic chivalry in all the loose-robed flight and flashing magnificence of rushing pride! Not one, not even the least imaginative of the Legion, but felt his skin crawl, felt his blood thrill, with stirrings of old romance at sight of this strange, exalting spectacle!

In the van, an ancient horseman with bright colors in his robe was riding hardest of all, erect in his high-horned saddle, reins held loose in a master-hand, gold-mounted rifle with enormously long barrel flourished on high.

Tall old chief and slim white horse of purest barb breed seemed almost

one creature. Instinctively the Master's service-cap came off, at sight of him. The lieutenant's did the same. Both men stepped forward, cap over heart. These two, if no others, understood the soul of Arabia.

Suddenly the old Sheik uttered a cry. An instant change came over the rushing horde. With one final volley, silence fell. The kettle-drums ceased their booming. Every rider leaned far back in his pearl-inlaid, jewel-crusted saddle, reining in his horse.

And in a moment, as innumerable unshod hoofs dug the heavy turf, all that thundering host--which but a second before had seemed inevitably bound to trample down the Legion under a hurricane of white-lathered horses and frenzied, long-robed men--came to a dead halt of silence and immobility.

It was as if some magician's wand, touching the crest of an inbreaking storm-wave, had instantaneously frozen it, white-slaving foam and all, to motionless rigidity.

Ahead of all, standing erect and proud in his arabesque stirrups, with the green banner floating overhead, the chief of this whole marvelous band was stretching out the hand of salaam.

"_Fire_!" cried the Master.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

BARA MIYAN, HIGH PRIEST

The crash of six machine-guns clattered into a chattering tumult, muzzles pointed high over the heads of the Jannati Shahr men. Up into the still, hot air jetted vicious spurts of flame.

The Legion's answer lasted but a minute. As the trays of blanks became empty, the tumult ceased.

Silence fell, strangely heavy after all that uproar. This silence lengthened impressively, with the massed horsemen on one side, the Legionaries on the other. Between them stretched a clear green space of turf. Behind loomed the vast bulk of _Nissr_, scarred, battle-worn, but powerful. Away in the distance, the glinting golden walls shimmered across the plain; and over all the Arabian sun glowed down as if a-wonder at this scene surpassing strange.

Forward stepped the Master, with a word to Leclair to follow him but to stand a little in the rear. The old Sheik dismounted; and followed by another graybeard, likewise advanced. When the distance was but about eight feet between them, both halted. Silence continued, broken only by the dull drone of one engine still running on board the ship, by the creaking of saddle-leather, the whinny of a barb.

Lithe, powerful, alert, with his cap held over his heart, the Master stood there peering from under his thick, dark brows at the aged Sheik. A lean-faced old man the Sheik was, heavily bearded with white,

his brows snowy, his eyes a hawk's, and the fine aquilinity of his nose the hallmark of pure Arab blood.

Hard as iron he looked, gravely observing, unabashed in face of these white strangers and of this mysterious flying house. The very spirit of the Arabian sun seemed to have been caught in his gleaming eyes, to glitter there, to reflect its pride, its ardor. He reminded one of a falcon, untamed, untamable. And his dress, its colors distinguishing him from the mass of his followers, still further proclaimed the rank he occupied.

His cherchia of jade-green silk was bound with a _ukal_, or fillet of camel's-hair; his burnous, also silk, showed tenderest shades of lavender and rose. Under its open folds could be seen a violet jacket with buttons of filigree ivory. He had handed his gun to the man behind him, and now was unarmed save for a _gadaymi_, or semicircular knife, thrust into his silk sash of crimson, with frayed edges.

A leather bandolier, wonderfully tooled and filled with cartridges, passed over his right shoulder to his left hip. His feet, high-arched and fine of line, were naked save for silk-embroidered _babooshes_.

The Master realized, as he gazed on this extraordinary old man, whose dignity was such that even the bizarre _melange_ of colors could not detract from it, that he was beholding a very different type of Arab from any he yet had come in contact with.

The aged Sheik salaamed. The Master returned the salutation, then covered himself and saluted smartly. In a deep, grave voice the old man said:

"_A'hla wasa'halan_!" (Be ye welcome!)

"_Bikum_!" (I give thee thanks!) replied the Master.

"In Allah's name, who are ye?"

"Franks," the Master said, vastly relieved at this unexpected amity. Strange contrast with the violent hostility heretofore experienced! What might it mean? What might be hidden beneath this quiet surface?

Relief and anxiety mingled in the Master's mind. If treachery were intended, in just this manner would it speak.

"Men of Feringistan?" asked the aged Sheik. "And what do ye here?"

"We be fighting-men, all," replied the Master. He had already noted, with a thrill of admiration, the wondrous purity of the old man's Arabic. His use of final vowels after the noun, and his rejection of the pronoun, which apocope in the Arabic verb renders necessary in the everyday speech of the people, told the Master he was listening to some archaic, uncorrupted form of the language. Here indeed was nobility of blood, breed, speech, if anywhere!

"Fighting-men, all," the Master repeated, while Leclair listened with keen enjoyment and the Legion stood attentive, with the white-burnoused horsemen giving ear to every word--astonished, no doubt, to hear Arabic speech from the lips of an unbeliever. "We have traveled far, from the Lands of the Books. Is it not meritorious, O

Sheik? Doth not thy Prophet himself say: 'Voyaging is victory, and he who journeyeth not is both ignorant and blind?'"

The old man pondered a moment, then fell to stroking his beard. The act was friendly, and of good portent. He murmured:

"I see, O Frank, that thou hast read the Strong Book. Thou dost know our law, even though thou be from Feringistan. What is thy name?"

"Men know me only as The Master. And thine?"

"_Bara Miyan_ (The Great Sir), nothing more."

"Dost thou wish us well?" the Master put a leading question.

"_Kull'am antum bil khair_!" (May ye be well, every year!) said the old Sheik. The Master sensed a huge relief. Undoubtedly--hard as this was to understand, and much as it contradicted Risa's prediction--the attitude of these Jannati Shahr folk was friendly. Unless, indeed, all this meant ambush. But to look into those grave, deep eyes, to see that furrowed countenance of noble, straight-forward uprightness, seemed to negative any such suspicion.

"We have come to bring ye wondrous gifts," the Master volunteered, wanting to strike while the iron was hot.

"That is well," assented Bara Miyan. "But never before have the Franks come to this center of the Empty Abodes."

"Even Allah had to say 'Be!' before anything was!" (_i.e._, there must be a first time for everything).

This answer, pat from a favorite verse of the Koran, greatly pleased Bara Miyan. He smiled gravely, and nodded.

"Allah made all men," he affirmed. "Mayhap the Franks and we be brothers. Have ye come by way of Mecca?"

"Yea. And sorry brotherhood did the Mecca men offer us, O Sheik! So, too, the men of Beni Harb. Together, they slew five of us. But we be fighting-men, Bara Miyan. We took a great vengeance. All that tribe of Beni Harb we brushed with the wing of Azrael, save only the Great Apostate. And from the men of the 'Navel of the World'--Mecca--we exacted greater tribute than even death!"

The Master's voice held a quiet menace that by no means escaped Bara Miyan. Level-eyed, he gazed at the white man. Then he advanced two paces, and in a low voice demanded:

"Abd el Rahman still lives?"

"He lives, Bara Miyan."

"Where is the Great Apostate?"

"In our flying house, a prisoner."

"_Bismillah_! Deliver him unto me, and thy people and mine shall be as brothers!"

"First let us share the salt!"

Speaking, the Master slid his hand into the same pocket that contained the Great Pearl Star, and took out a small bag of salt. This he opened, and held out. Bara Miyan likewise felt in a recess of his many-hued burnous. For a moment he hesitated as if about to bring out something. But he only shook his head.

"The salt--not yet, O White Sheik!" said he.

"We have brought thy people precious gifts," began the Master, again. Behind him he heard an impatient whisper--the major's voice, quivering with eagerness:

"Ask him if this place is really all gold! Faith, if I could only talk their lingo! Ask him!"

"I shall place you under arrest, if you interfere again," the Master retorted, without turning round.

"What saith the White Sheik?" asked Bara Miyan, hearing the strange words of a language his ears never before had listened to.

"Only prayer in my own tongue, Bara Miyan. A prayer that thine and mine may become _akhawat_"[1]

[Footnote 1: Friends bound by an oath to an offensive and defensive alliance.]

"Deliver unto me Abd el Rahman, and let thine _imams_ (priests) work stronger magic than mine," said the old Sheik with great deliberation, "and I will accept thy gifts and we will say: '_Nahnu malihin_' (We have eaten salt together!) And I will make thee gifts greater than thy gifts to me, O White Sheik. Then thou and thine can fly away to thine own country, and bear witness that there be Arabs who do not love to slay the Feringi, but count all men as brethren.

"But if thou wilt not deliver Abd el Rahman to me, or test thy magic against my magic, then depart now, in peace, before the setting of the sun. I have spoken!"

"Take him at his word, my Captain!" murmured Leclair. "We can get no better terms. Even these are a miracle!"

"My opinion, exactly," replied the Master, still facing Bara-Miyan, who had now stepped back a few paces and was flanked by two huge Arabs, in robes hardly less chromatic, who had silently advanced.

"I accept," decided the Master. He turned, ordered Enemark and L'Heureux to fetch out the Apostate, and then remained quietly waiting. Silence fell on both sides, for a few minutes. The Arabs, for the most part, remained staring at _Nissr_, to them no doubt the greatest miracle imaginable. Still, minds trained to believe in the magic carpet of Sulayman and quite virgin of any knowledge of machinery, could easily account for the airship's flying by means of _jinnee_ concealed in its entrails.

As for the Legionaries, their attention was divided between the

strange white host, still sitting astride those high-necked, slim-barreled Nedj horses, and the luring glimmer of the golden walls. In a few minutes, however, all attention on both sides was sharply drawn by the return of the two Legionaries with the Apostate.

Without ado, the lean, wild man of the Sahara was led, in wrinkled burnous, with disheveled hair, wild eyes, and an expression of helpless despair, to where the Master stood. At sight of the massed horsemen, the grassy plain--a sight never yet beheld by him--and the distant golden, glimmering walls, a look of desperation flashed into his triple-scarred face.

The whole experience of the past days had been a Jehannum of incomprehensible terrors. Now that the climax was at hand, strength nearly deserted him even to stand. But the proud Arab blood in him flared up again as he was thrust forward, confronting Bara Miyan. His head snapped up, his eyes glittered like a caged eagle's, the fine, high nostrils dilated; and there he stood, captive but unbeaten, proud even in this hour of death.

Bara Miyan made no great speaking. All he asked was:

"Art thou, indeed, that Shaytan called Abd el Rahman, the Reviler?"

The desert Sheik nodded with arrogant admission.

Bara Miyan turned and clapped his hands. Out from among the horsemen two gigantic black fellows advanced. Neither one was Arab, though no doubt they spoke the tongue. Their features were Negroid, of an East African type.

The dress they wore distinguished them from all the others. They had neither _tarboosh_ nor burnous, but simply red fezes; tight sleeveless shirts of striped stuff, and trousers of Turkish cut. Their feet were bare.

Strange enough figures they made, black as coal, muscled like Hercules, and towering well toward seven feet, with arms and hands in which the sinews stood out like living welts. Their faces expressed neither intelligence nor much ferocity. Submission to Bara Miyan's will marked their whole attitude.

"Sa'ad," commanded Bara Miyan, "seest thou this dog?"

"Master, I see," answered one of the gigantic blacks, speaking with a strange, thick accent.

"Lead him away, thou and Musa. He was brought us by these _zawwar_ (visitors). Thy hands and Musa's are strong. Remember, no drop of blood must be shed in El Barr.[1] But let not the dog see another sun. I have spoken."

[Footnote 1: Literally "The Plain." This name, no doubt, originally applied only to the vast inner space surrounded by the Iron Mountains, seems to have come to be that of Jannati Shahr itself, when spoken of by its inhabitants. El Barr is probably the secret name that Risa would not divulge.]

The gigantic executioner--the strangler--named Sa'ad, seized Abd el

Rahman by the right arm. Musa, his tar-hued companion, gripped him by the left. Never a word uttered the Apostate as he was led away through the horsemen. But he gave one backward look, piercing and strange, at the Master who had thus delivered him to death--a look that, for all the White Sheik's aplomb, strangely oppressed him.

Then the horsemen closed about the two Maghrabi, or East Africans, and about their victim. Abd el Rahman, the Great Apostate, as a living man, had forever passed from the sight of the Flying Legion.

His departure, in so abrupt and deadly simple a manner, gave the Master some highly conflicting thoughts. The fact that no blood was ever to be shed in this city had reassuring aspects. On the other hand, how many of these Maghrabi stranglers did Bara Miyan keep as a standing army? A Praetorian guard of men with gorilla-hands like the two already seen might, in a close corner, prove more formidable than men armed with the archaic firearms of the place or with cold steel.

A sensation of considerable uneasiness crept over the Master as he pondered the huge strength and docility of these two executioners. It was only by reflecting that the renegade Sheik would gladly have murdered the whole Legion, and that now (by a kind of poetic justice) he had been delivered back into the hands of the Sunnites he had so long defied and outraged, that the Master could smooth his conscience for having done this thing.

The direct, efficient way, however, in which Bara Miyan dealt with one held as an enemy, urged the Master to press forward the ceremony of giving and taking salt.

At all hazards, safeguards against attack must be taken. Once more the Master addressed Bara Miyan:

"_Effendi_! Our gifts are great to thee and thine. Great, also, is our magic. Let thine _imams_ do their magic, and we ours. If the magic of El Barr exceeds ours, we will depart without exchange of gifts. If ours exceeds thine, then let the salt be in our stomachs, all for all, and let the gifts be exchanged!

"Thy magic against our magic! Say, O Sheik, dost thou dare accept that challenge?"

The old man's head came up sharply. His eyes gleamed with intense pride and confidence.

"The magic of the unbelievers against that of the People of the Garment!" (Moslems!) cried he. "_Bismillah_! To the testing of the magic!"

CHAPTER XXXIX

ON, TO THE GOLDEN CITY!

The Spartan simplicity of the proceedings impressed the Master far more than any Oriental ceremony could have done. Here was the Olema,

or high priest and chief, of a huge city carved of virgin gold, coming to meet him on horseback and speaking to him face to face, like a man.

It was archaic, patriarchal, dramatic in the extreme. No incensed courts, massed audiences, tapestried walls, trumpeting heralds, genuflexions, could have conveyed half the sense of free, virile power that this old Bara Miyan gave as he stood there on the close turf, under the ardent sun, and with a wave of his slim hand gave the order:

"The magic! To the testing of the magic!"

Thoroughly well pleased with progress thus far, the Master turned back to give final instructions to his men and to examine the apparatus. This was in perfect condition, all grouped with controls centered in one switchboard and focussing-apparatus so that Brodeur, in charge, could instantly execute any command.

Bara Miyan, clapping his hands again, summoned three horsemen who dismounted and came to him. By the emerald color of their head-fillets and jackets, as well as by their tonsure, the Master recognized them as mystics of the class known as _Sufis._

That he was about to face a redoubtable test could not be doubted. Long experience with Orientals had taught him the profundity of their legerdemain, practically none of which ever has been fathomed by white men. The Master realized that all his powers might be tried to the utmost to match and overcome the demonstration of the Jannati Shahr folk.

While Bara Miyan stood talking to the three _Sufis_, the Master was in a low voice instructing his own men.

"Everything now depends on the outcome of the approaching contest," said he. "These people, irrespective of what we show them, will probably evince no surprise. If we allow any sign or word of astonishment to escape us, no matter what they do, they will consider us beaten and we shall lose all. There must be no indication of surprise, among you. Remain impassive, at all costs!" He turned to Brodeur, and in French warned him:

"Remember the signals, now. One mistake on your part may cost my life--more than that, the lives of all the Legion. Remember!"

"Count on me, my Captain!" affirmed Brodeur. The masked woman, coming to the Master's side, said also in French:

"I have one favor to ask of you!"

"Well, what?"

"Your life is worth everything, now. Mine, nothing. Let me subject myself--"

He waved her away, and making no answer, turned to the Olema.

"Hast thou, O Bara Miyan," he asked in a steady voice, "a swordsman who can with one blow split a man from crown to jaw?"

"Thou speakest to such a one, White Sheik!"

"Take, then, a simitar of the keenest, and cut me down!"

The old man turned, took from the hand of a horseman a long, curved blade of razor-keenness and with a heavy back. The Master glanced significantly at Brodeur, who knelt by the switchboard with one steady hand on a brass lever, the other on the control of a complex ray-focussing device.

Toward Bara Miyan the Master advanced across the turf. He came close. For a moment the two men eyed each other silently.

"Strike, son of the Prophet!" cried the Master.

Up whirled the Olema's blade, flickering in the sun. The metallic _click_ of the brass switch synchronized with that sweep; Brodeur shifted the reflector by the fraction of a degree.

Bara Miyan's arm grew rigid, quivered a second, then dropped inert. From his paralyzed hand the simitar fell to the grass. Brodeur threw off the ray; and the Master, unsmiling, stooped, picked up the blade and with a salaam handed it back, hilt-first, to the old man.

Only with his left hand could Bara Miyan accept it. He spoke no word, neither did any murmur run through the massed horsemen. But the shadow of a deep astonishment could not quite veil itself in the profound caverns of the old man's eyes.

"Strike again, Bara Miyan," invited the Master. "The other arm, perhaps, may not have lost its cunning!"

The Olema shook his head.

"No, by Allah!" he replied. "I know thy magic can numb the flesh, and it is a good magic. It is strong. But by the rising of the stars--and that is a great oath--the bullets of our long rifles can pierce thine unbelieving body!"

"Then bring six of thy best riflemen and station them a dozen paces from me," the Master challenged. "Let them look well to their cartridges. It is not I who load the guns with bullets made of soft black-lead, as the _Effendi_ Robert-Houdin did long ago to the confusion of the Marabouts in Algeria. No, let thy men load their own rifles. But," and his voice grew mocking, "let their aim be good. Death is nothing, O Bara Miyan, but clumsy shooting means much pain."

His tone galled the aged Sheik, despite that impassive exterior. Bara Miyan beckoned, and with a command brought six riflemen from their horses.

"Load well, and shoot me this Frank!" exclaimed the Olema. A fire was burning in his eyes.

"_Aywa_!" (Even so!) replied one of the riflemen. "Allah will make it easy for us!"

"Have no fear, Bara Miyan," another said. "Not so easily shall El Kisa (the People of the Garment) be overcome by the Feringi!"

Tension held Arabs and Legionaries, alike. All remained calm, though had you watched "Captain Alden," you would have seen her fingers twisting together till the blood almost started through the skin.

The Master walked a few paces, turned and faced the squad.

"Ready, men of Jannati Shahr?" asked he, with a smile.

"We are ready, Unbeliever!"

"Then fire!"

Up came the rifles. Brodeur turned a knurled disk, and from one of the boxes on the grass a sudden, whining hum arose, like millions of angry hornets.

"_Fire_!" repeated the Master.

Six rifle-hammers fell with dull clicks. Nothing more.

The Master smiled in mockery.

"O Bara Miyan," said he, "let thy men reload and fire again! Perhaps the sweat of a great anxiety hath wet their powder!"

"Thou must indeed be _Khalil Allah_" (a friend of Allah), he admitted.

"No doubt thou art a great _caid_ in thy own country. It is strong magic, Frank. But now behold what mine _imams_ can do!"

The riflemen, disgruntled but still, Arab-like, holding their impassivity, returned to their horses and mounted again. At another call of Bara Miyan, three _imams_ came from among the horsemen. They were dressed alike, in brilliant saffron _gandouras_, with embroidered muslin turbans from under which hung _daliks_, or sacred plaits of hair; and each carried a plain white cloth in his hand.

In complete silence they showed the Legionaries both sides of these cloths, then spread them on the grass. In not more than two minutes, a slight fluttering became visible. This increased and grew more agitated. One by one, the _imams_ gathered up the cloths, opened them and exhibited three bluish-black birds with vivid scarlet crests.

The Master nodded.

"It is an old trick," said he, indifferently. "I have seen hawks, much larger, come from under smaller cloths even in the great _suk_ (market-place) at Cairo."

Bara Miyan made no answer. The _imams_ drew knives from their belts of plaited goat-hide, and without more ado severed the birds' heads.

This the Legionaries saw with perfect distinctness. The blood on the feathers was entirely visible. The bodies quivered. Calmly the _imams_, with reddened hands, now cut wings and legs from the bodies. They laid these dead fragments on the blood-stained cloths in front of them.

"Let every Frank behold!" exclaimed the Olema. The Legionaries drew

near. The _imams_ gathered up the fragments in the cloths.

"Now," said the Master, "thine _imams_ will toss these cloths in the air, and three whole birds will fly away. The cloths will fall to earth, white as snow. Is that not thy magic?"

Bara Miyan glowered at him with evil eyes. Not yet had his self-control been lost; but this mocking of the unbeliever had kindled wrath. The Master, however, wise in the psychology of the Arab, only laughed.

"This is very old magic," said he. "It is told of in the second chapter of Al Koran, entitled 'The Cow;' only when Ibrahim did this magic he used four birds. Well, Bara Miyan, command thine _imams_ to do this ancient magic!"

The sharp click of a switch on the control-board sounded as the imams picked up the little, red-dripping bundles. Silently they threw these into the air and--all three dropped back to earth again, just as they had risen.

A growl burst, involuntarily, from the Olema's corded throat. The growl echoed through the massed horsemen. Bara Miyan's hand went to the butt of his pistol, half glimpsed under his jacket. That hand fell, numb.

"Look, O Sheik!" exclaimed the Master, pointing. The Olema turned; and there on the highest minaret of gold, the green flag had begun smoldering. As Brodeur adjusted his ray-focuser, the banner of the Prophet burst into bright flame, and went up in a puff of fire.

Only by setting teeth into his lip could the Sheik repress a cry. Dark of face, he turned to the Master. Smiling, the Master asked:

"Perhaps now, O Bara Miyan, thou wouldst ask thine _imams_ to plant a date-stone, and make it in a few minutes bear fruit, even as the Prophet himself did? Try, if thou hast better fortune than with the birds! But have care not to be led into committing sin, as with these birds--for remember, thou hast shed blood and life hath not returned again, and El Barr is sacred from the shedding of blood!"

His tone was well calculated to make the lesson sink well to the Olema's heart--a valuable lesson for the Legion's welfare. But the Olema only replied:

"The blood of believers is meant. Not of animals--or Franks!"

"And wilt thou make further trial with me?" demanded the Master.

"No, by the Prophet! It is enough!" The Master's soul warmed toward the honesty of this bluff old Arab. "Thy magic is good magic. Give me thy salt, Frank, and take mine!"

The Master signaled to Brodeur as he drew forth his bag of salt. He stretched it out in his open palm; and all at once, bag, hand, and arm up to the elbow enveloped themselves in a whirling mist and vanished from sight, even as the Master's whole body had vanished in the cabin when Leclair had tried to arrest him.

The Sheik's eyes grew white-rimmed with astonishment. Vaguely he groped for the Frank's hand, then let his own fall limp.

"_Allahu akbar!_" he gasped.

The Master nodded at Brodeur. The droning of the apparatus ceased, and again the hand became visible.

"Faith!" the major's voice was heard. "We've landed half a dozen home runs, and they've never even got to second!"

"Come, O Bara Miyan!" the Master smiled. "Now we will put away the things of magic, and talk the words of men. Here is my salt!"

The Sheik gingerly accepted a pinch, and with much misgiving put it into his mouth. He produced salt of his own, which the Master tasted.

"It is done," said the Master. "Now thou and I are _akhawat. Nahnu malihin._" (We have eaten salt.)

"But only from this mid-day till noon of the morrow," the Olema qualified the bond.

"Even so! Remember, though, that the salt is now in the stomachs of all thy people, both here and in the city, as it is in the stomachs of all my men!"

"I will remember."

"And now, O Bara Miyan, I will show thee the very great gifts that I have brought thee!"

The Olema nodded, in silence. A great dejection held him and his men. The Master dispatched half a dozen men for the Myzab and the Black Stone, also for three sticks of a new explosive he had developed on the run from the Sahara. This explosive, he calculated, was 2.75 times more powerful than TNT.

"Men," said he to the remaining Legionaries, "be ready now for anything. If they show fight, when they realize we have touched the sacred things of Islam, let them have it to the limit. If the salt holds them, observe the strictest propriety.

"Some of us may go into the city. Let no man have any traffic with wine or women. If we commit no blunder, in less than twenty-four hours we shall be far away, each of us many times a millionaire. Watch your step!"

The six men returned, carrying the blanket that contained the sacred things. At the Master's command, they laid the heavy bundle on the grass before the Olema and his beaten men.

"Behold!" cried the Master. "Gifts without price or calculation! Holy gifts rescued from unworthy hands, to be delivered into the hands of True Believers!"

And with swift gestures he flung back the enveloping folds of the blanket, as if only he, the Master, could do this thing. Then, as the Myzab and the Stone appeared, he drew from his pocket the Great Pearl

Star, and laid that also on the cloth, crying in a loud voice:

"O, Bara Miyan, and people of Jannati Shahr, behold!"

An hour from that time, the Master and seventeen of the Legionaries were on their way to the City of Gold.

The stupefaction of the Arabs, their prostrations, cries, prayers would delay us far too long, in the telling. But the Oath of the Salt had held; and now reward seemed very near.

There could be no doubt, the Master reflected as he and his men galloped on the horses that had been assigned to them, with the white-robed and now silent horde, that the reward--in the form of exchange gifts--would be practically anything the Legionaries might ask and be able to carry away.

Treachery was now not greatly to be feared. Even had the salt not held, fear of the explosive would restrain any hostile move. One stick of the new compound, exploded at a safe distance by wireless spark, had utterly demolished the stone which had been brought from the watercourse.

The plain statement given Bara Miyan that the Myzab and the Black Stone must be left on the grass until the Feringi had again flown away toward their own country, had duly impressed the Arabs. They had seen two sticks of the explosive laid on the holy objects, and well had understood that any treachery would result in the annihilation of the most sacred objects of their faith.

The Master felt, as well he might, that he absolutely held the whip hand of the Jannati Shahr people. Elation shone in his face and in the faces of all. The problem now had simplified itself to just this: What weight of jewels and of gold could _Nissr_, by jettisoning every dispensable thing, whatsoever, carry out of El Barr, over the Iron Mountains and the Arabian Desert, back to the civilization that would surely make peace with the Legion which would bring such incalculable wealth?

Even the Master's level head swam a little, and his cool nerves tingled, as he sat on his galloping white horse, riding beside the Olema, with the thunder of the rushing squadrons--Arabs and his own men--like music of vast power in his ears.

He did not, however, lose the coldly analytic faculty that weighed all contingencies. The adventure still was critical; but the scales of success seemed lowering in favor of the Legion. The feel, in his breast pocket, of the leather sack containing Kaukab el Durri, which he had again taken possession of after the magic tests, gave added encouragement. This, the third gift, was to be delivered only at the last moment, just before _Nissr_ should roar aloft.

"I think," reflected the Master, "the Pearl Star is an important factor. It certainly will put the final seal of success on this extraordinary bargain."

While his thoughts were busy with the pros and cons of the soul-shaking adventure now coming to its climax, his eyes were busy with the city wall and towers every moment closer, closer still.

The Master's knowledge of geology gave him the key to the otherwise inexplicable character of Jannati Shahr. This gold, in incredible masses, had not been mined and brought hither to be fashioned into a great city.

Quite the contrary, it formed part of the cliffs and black mountains themselves. Some stupendous volcanic upheaval of the remote past had cleft the mountain wall, and had extruded through the "fault" a huge "dyke" of virgin metal--to use technical terms. This golden dyke, two and a half to three miles wide and of undeterminable length and depth, had merely been formed by strong, cunning hands into walls, battlements, houses, mosques, and minarets.

It had been carved out in situ, the soft metal being fashioned with elaborate skill and long patience. Jannati Shahr seemed, on a larger scale and a vastly more magnificent plan, something like the hidden rock-city of Petra in the mountains of Edom--a city wholly carved by the Edomites out of the solid granite, without a single stone having been laid in mortar.

Wonderful beyond all words as the early afternoon sun gleamed from its broad-flung golden terraces and mighty walls--whereon uncounted thousands of white figures had massed themselves--the "Very Heavenly City" widened to the Legionaries' gaze.

On, up the last slope of the grassy plain the rushing horsemen bore. Into a broad, paved way they thundered, and so up, on, toward the great gate of virgin gold now waiting to receive them.

CHAPTER XL

INTO THE TREASURE-CITADEL

Well might those Legionaries who had been left behind to protect Nissr and the sacred gifts have envied the more fortunate ones now sweeping into Jannati Shahr. The rear guard, however, formed no less essential a part of the undertaking than the main body of the Legion.

This rear guard consisted of Grison, Menendez, Prisrend, Frazier, and Manderson. Their orders were as follows: If the main body did not return by midnight, or if sounds of firing were heard from the city, or again if they received direct orders via the Master's pocket wireless, they were at once to load the machine-guns on board the liner. They were to carry Myzab on board, also, and with the wireless spark detonate the explosive which would reduce the Black Stone to dust.

This accomplished, they were to start the engines and, if possible, make a getaway--which might be feasible for five men. If they succeeded, they were to wheel over the city and drop the second kappa-bomb, also all the remaining explosive, by way of punitive measures. Well-placed hits might wipe out most of the city and, with it, the population which had broken the Oath of the Salt.

The main body of the Legion would, of course, also perish in this _debacle_ if still alive; but the probability existed that before Nissr could take the air, all would be dead.

The program was explicit. All five men of the rear guard fully understood its every detail and all had sworn to carry it out to the letter. Their morale remained perfect; their discipline, under the command of Grison--left alone as they were in the midst of potentially hostile territory and with overwhelming masses of Mohammedans close at hand--held them as firmly as did that of the advance guard now whirling up the wide, paved road to the gleaming gate of Jannati Shahr.

This band of hardy adventurers, stout-hearted and armed with service-revolvers, remained rather closely grouped, with the Arabs flanking and following them. At their head rode old Bara Miyan with the Master, who well bestrode his saddle with burnished metal peaks and stitching of silver thread. After them came the three _imams_, Major Bohannon, Leclair, and "Captain Alden."

The "captain's" mask seemed somewhat to impress the Arabs, who whispered among themselves concerning it. But not one suspected the sex of this Frank. The "captain" rode as gallantly as any, and with a firm hand reined her slim, white horse.

As the on-thundering swarm of horsemen approached the pointed arch, some sixty feet wide by ninety high, its intaglios and complex arabesques flashing with millions of sunlit sparkles, a clear, sustained chant drifted out over city and plain--the cry of some unseen muezzin, announcing news of great import to Jannati Shahr. Came an echoing call of trumpets, from far, hidden places in the city; and kettle-drums boomed with dull reverberation.

"_Labbayk_, _Allahuma_!" shouted Bara Miyan, announcing with praise to Allah his entrance into the City of Gold. A long, great shouting answered him from the massed thousands of white figures on the walls.

The Master saw innumerable dark faces peering down from snowy burnouses and haiks. He saw the gleam of steel. Not one of the figures on the wall was veiled. Not one woman, therefore, had as yet been permitted to leave the perfumed dimness of the harems, even for this stupendous event in the city's history. So far as the Master could judge, Captain Alden, lithely galloping close behind him, was the only woman visible in all that multitude.

With a bold clatter of hoofs, now loudly echoed and hurled back by the walls, the cavalcade burst up to the city like the foam-crest of a huge, white wave. For a moment, as the Master's horse whirled him in under the gate, he cast a backward glance at the plain and along the battlements.

That glance showed him a small, white-clad band of Arabs trudging afoot over the green expanse--the men who, dismounting, had given their horses to the Legionaries. It showed him the pinions of _Nissr_ gleaming like snow on the velvet plain; showed him, too, the vast sweep of the city's walls.

Those walls, no less than a hundred feet high, were cunningly loopholed for defense. They presented a slightly concave facade to the

plain, and slanted backward at about the angle of the Tower of Pisa.

Through their aureate glimmer, dazzling in the direct rays of the sun now well past its meridian, a glimpse of a flashing river instantaneously impressed itself on the Master's sight, with cascading rapids among palm-groves, as it foamed from beneath the city walls. Then all was blotted out by the gleaming side of the stupendous archway.

Up into a broad thoroughfare that rose on a steep slant--a thoroughfare very different from the usual narrow, tortuous alleys of Arabian cities--the swarm of horsemen swept, with a dull clatter of hoofs on the soft yellow pavement that gave almost like asphalt. The utter lack of any ruts well proved that wheeled vehicles were here unknown. Nothing harder than unshod horses, than goats and sheep, and the soft pads of camels had ever worn these gleaming ways.

The brush of a Verestchagin, a Gerome, a Bida, skilled in the colors of the Orient, would have been needed to paint even an impressionistic coup d'oeil of this scene surpassing strange, now opening out before the Legionaries' eyes. Its elements were golden houses with door and window-frames of cedar, sandal, and teak; fretwork golden balconies overhanging streets and gardens where delicate palm-fronds swayed--balconies whence no doubt kohl-tinted eyes of women were peering at the strange men in khaki, as henna-dyed fingers pulled aside silken curtains perfumed with musk and jasmine; mosques and minarets carven of the precious metal; dim streets, under striped silk awnings; a world of wonder to the Legion.

The Master saw, as the cavalcade swept along at unabated swiftness, glimpses of terraced roofs and cupolas tiled with blue and peacock hues; open-fronted shops hewn out of the all-present gold and displaying wares whereof the purchase-price could not be imagined since gold was everywhere; bazaars heaped with babooshes, cherchias, and robes of muslin, wool and silk, with fruits and flowers, tobacco, spices, sweetmeats, and perfumes, and with strange merchandise unknown.

He caught swift vision of a wide mirbad, or open court for drying dates; and then, through a low, golden arch, a camel-yard with a vast number of kneeling, white dromedaries. And everywhere he saw innumerable hosts of the people of Jannati Shahr.

The streets themselves were clear of people as the cavalcade thundered on and on with many turnings; but every doorway, shop, arch, roof, terrace, and tower was packed with these silent, white-clad folk, bronze-faced and motionless, all armed with pistols, rifles, and cold steel.

What some poet has called "a joyous fear" thrilled the Legion. No, not fear, in the sense of timidity, but rather a realization of the immense perils of this situation, and an up-springing of the heart to meet those perils, to face and overcome them, and from out their very maw to snatch rewards beyond all calculation.

Even the Master himself, tempered in the fires of war's Hell, sensed this tremendous potentiality of death as the tiny handful of white men galloped on and on behind Bara Miyan. Here the Legion was, hemmed and pent by countless hordes of fanatics whom any chance word or look,

construed as a religious insult, might lash to fury. Five men remained outside. The rest were now as drops of water in a hostile ocean. In the Master's breast-pocket still lay Kaukab el Durri--and might not that possession, itself, be enough to start a jihad of extermination?

Was not the fact of unbelieving dogs now for the first time being in the Sacred City--was not this, alone, cause for a massacre? What, in sober reason, stood between the Legion and death? Only two factors: first, the potential destruction of the Myzab and the Black Stone in case of treachery; and second, two tiny pinches of salt exchanged between the Master and old Bara Miyan!

The situation, calmly reviewed, was one probably never paralleled in the history of adventure--more like the dream of a hashish-smoking addict than cold reality.

Very contending emotions possessed the hearts of the Legionaries, in different reactions to their diverse temperaments. Only a vast wonder mirrored itself in some faces, a kind of numb groping after comprehension, a failure to believe such a thing possible as a city of pure and solid gold.

Others showed more critical interest, appreciation of the wonderful artistic effects of the carven gold in all its architectural developments under the skilled chisels of the Jannati Shahr folk.

Still others manifested only greed. The eyes of such, feverishly devouring walls, cornices, pillars, seemed to say:

"God! If we only had the smallest of these things, what a fortune that would mean! What an incredible fortune!"

Each man, reacting under the overwhelming stimulus of this wonder city, in his own expression betrayed the heart and soul within him. And thus, each absorbed in his own thoughts and dreams, silently the Legionaries pondered as they galloped through the enchanted streets.

Some fifteen minutes' riding, with no slackening of the pace and always on an upward grade toward what seemed the central citadel of Jannati Shahr, brought the party to an inner wall, forty feet high and pierced by a triple-arched gate surmounted by a minaret of golden lacery.

Through the center arch rode Bara Miyan, now reining into a canter. The _imams_ and the Legionaries followed, and with them about fifty of the Arabs, of superior rank. The rest drew rein outside, still in complete silence.

The lessened cavalcade now found itself in what at first glance seemed an enchanted garden. Not even a feeling of anxiety caused by the silent closing of the hugely massive golden gates that, as they passed through, immediately blocked the triple exit, could divert the Legionaries' minds from the wondrous park confronting them.

Date and cocoa-palms with shadowy paths beneath them; clear rills with bamboo thickets along their banks and with tangles of white myrtle, red clouds of oleanders that diffused an almond perfume, delicate hybiscus, and unknown flowers combined to weave a magic woof of beauty, using the sifted sunlight for gold threads of warp.

Unseen water-wheels splashed coolly; vivid butterflies flickered through masses of greenery among the acacia, mimosa, lote and mulberry trees. And there were color-flashing parrots, too, a-wing and noisy in the high branches; and apes that swung and chattered; and round the high, golden walls of the citadel, half visible through the cloud of green and party-colored foliage, whirls of pigeons, white as snow, flicked against the gold.

The Legionaries were hard put to it to obey the Master's order never to express surprise or admiration. But they kept silence, though their eyes were busy; and presently through another smaller gate they all clattered into a _hosh_, or court, facing what obviously must have been the central citadel of Jannati Shahr.

Bara Miyan pulled sharply on the red, silver-broidered reins and cut back the frothing lip of his barb. With a slide almost on its haunches, along the soft, golden pavement, the horse came to a quivering stand. All halted. And for a moment, the stamping of the high-nerved horses' hoofs echoed up along the tall citadel with its latticed windows and its machicolated parapet a hundred and fifty feet in air.

"Well ridden, O Frank! Well ridden by thee and by all thy men of Feringistan!" exclaimed Bara Miyan, with what seemed real friendliness, as he sat there on his high saddle, gravely stroking his beard. "It was a test for thee and thine, to see, by Allah! if the men of the unbelieving nations be also men like us of Araby!"

"We of the Empty Abodes are 'born on horseback.' But ye, white as the white hand of Musa (Moses) have houses that, so I have heard, move on iron roads. And I see now ye have flying houses. Wherefore horses are not dear to you, as to us. But I see that ye can ride like men. Well done! _Salaam_!"

The Master returned a "_Bikum!_" of thanks. He would have been glad to wipe his forehead, streaming with sweat; and so, too, would the others. But pride restrained them. Not for them such weakness as the use of a handkerchief, in presence of these half-hundred grave-eyed, silently observing men of Jannati Shahr.

"Faith, though," the major whispered to "Captain Alden," close behind him, "of all ways to take a walk, my favorite way _not_ to is on an Arab horse with a saddle like the Inquisition! Tomorrow, oh, my poor bones, tomorrow!"

Bara Miyan was speaking again, while the Master, Leclair, and his orderly, Lebon--who alone of the Legionaries understood Arabic--listened closely.

"Now that we have eaten salt and are _akhawat_ brethren," said he, "we must break bread together. Let thyself and all thy men partake of food with us, O Frank! Then we will speak of the present, we shall bestow on thee. _Bismillah!_ Dismount, White Sheik, and enter!"

The Master bowed, and swung himself from his horse. All did the same, Legionaries and Arabs alike. And for a moment they stood there in the sunlight before the long colonnade that occupied the lower story of the citadel; while from beneath that colonnade issued a dozen or

fifteen of the black, muscular Maghrabi men, two of whom--in the role of official stranglers--they had already seen. These powerful half-savages took the horses away, the hoofs clacking hollowly on the golden pavement.

Bara Miyan led the way in under the colonnade, which, though of gold like all else in this, wonder city, still offered grateful shade. The perpetual glare of the golden roadways, houses, towers, balconies--even covered as many were with floating curtains of muslin or silk--had been trying to eyes and nerves. Infinitely preferable would stone or wood have been, for dwellings; but as Jannati Shahr was, so the Legion had to take it. And doubtless long generations of familiarity with it had made it wholly normal, pleasant, and innocuous to these super-Arabs.

The Jannati Shahr men began kicking off their babooshes and sliding their naked feet into light slippers, rows upon rows of which stood under the portico. The Master and Leclair quickly put off their shoes and took slippers; the others followed suit. But not without unwillingness did the Master make the change.

"This will put us at a very serious disadvantage," thought he, "in case it comes to fighting. These people are used to going almost barefooted. We are not. Still, there's no help for it. But I'd like infernally well to keep my shoes!"

All he said was:

"Remember now, men, no women and no wine! If this city is like the usual Arab towns, there will be neither in sight. But if not, and temptations arise, remember my orders! No drop of any kind of liquor--and no flirtation. I'll deal summarily with any man who forgets himself. There's everything at stake now, in the next hour or two. We can't jeopardize it all for any nonsense!"

The major groaned, inwardly. Thirsts were on his Celtic soul that longed for dalliance with the Orient; but he well knew that tone of voice, and sadly resigned himself to abstinence.

"Keep your revolvers loose in the holsters, men," the Master added, as Bara Miyan gestured toward the slowly opening entrance of the citadel--a massive door as all doors seemed in Jannati Shahr; a door of gold reinforced with huge teak beams. "Watch for any sign of treachery, but don't shoot until I give the order. Then, shoot to kill! And whatever you do, stick together. Don't separate, no matter what the provocation! Now, follow me!"

A strange feeling of anxiety, almost of fear, had taken hold on the Master's heart. This fear was not in the least for himself or any of the men. Hard-bitted adventurers all, they had gone into this expedition with their eyes open, well knowing that some must inevitably die before its close. They had gambled at dice with Fate; and, losing, could have no complaint.

It was all for "Captain Alden" that the Master's anxiety was now awakened. Here was a woman, not only exposed to risks of death, but also of capture by Orientals--and what it might mean to a white woman to be seized for some hidden harem in Jannati Shahr the Master knew only too well. He found a moment's pause to speak in a low tone to the

"captain," unheard by any of the others.

"Remember the mercy-bullet!" said he. "If anything happens and there's any risk of capture--remember, the last one for yourself!"

"If the worst comes," she whispered, "we can at least share death together!"

He gazed at her a moment, not quite fathoming her words, but with an inexplicable tightening round the heart.

"We can at least share death together!"

Why should those words so powerfully affect him? What were these uncomprehended, new emotions stirring in his hard soul, tempered by war and by unnumbered stern adventurings?

The Master had no skill in self-analysis, to tell him. Leader of others, himself he did not understand. But as that night aboard Nissr, when he had laid a hand on the woman's cabin door, something unknown to him seemed drawing him to her, making her welfare and her life assume a strange import.

"Come, O Frank!" Bara Miyan was saying. The Olema's words recalled the Master to himself with a start. "Such food and drink as we men of El Barr have, gladly we share with thee and thine!"

The old man entered the dark doorway of the citadel, noiselessly in soft sandals. Beside him walked the Master; and, well grouped and flanked and followed by the Arabs in their white robes--all silent, grave, watchful--the Legion also entered.

Behind them once more closed the massive doors, silently.

The eighteen Legionaries were pent in solid walls of metal, there in the heart of a vast city of fighting-men whose god was Allah and to whom all unbelievers were as outcasts and as pariah dogs--anathema.

CHAPTER XLI

THE MASTER'S PRICE

A dim and subtly perfumed corridor opened out before them, its walls hung with tapestries, between which, by the light of sandal-oil _mash'als_, or cressets, the glimmer of the dull-gold walls could be distinguished.

Pillars rose to the roof, and these were all inlaid with mother-of-pearl, with fine copper and silver arabesques of amazing complexity. Every minutest architectural detail had been carved out of the solid gold dyke that had formed the city; nothing had been added to fill out any portion. The imagination was staggered at thought of the infinite skill and labor required for such a task. The creation of this city of El Barr seemed far beyond the possible; yet here it was, all the result of the graver's chisel.[1]

[Footnote 1: If any reader doubts the existence of El Barr, as a city of gold carved from a single block, on the ground that such a work would be impossible, I refer him to an account of Petra, in the National Geographic Magazine for May, 1907. Petra, in all details, was carved from granite--a monolithic city.]

Blase as the Legionaries were and hardened to wonders, the sight of this corridor and of the vast banquet-hall opening out of it, at the far end, came near upsetting their aplomb. The major even muttered an oath or two, under his breath, till Leclair nudged him with a forceful elbow.

Not thus must Franks, from Feringistan, show astonishment or admiration.

"May the peace be upon thee," all at once exclaimed Bara Miyan, gesturing for the Master to enter the vast hall. "Peace, until the rising of the day!"

"And upon thee, the peace!" the Master answered, with the correct Arabic formula. They entered, and after them the other Legionaries and the sub-chiefs of Jannati Shahr.

The banquet-hall was enormous. The Master's glance estimated it as about two hundred and fifty feet long by one hundred and seventy-five wide, with a height from golden floor to flat-arched roof of some one hundred and twenty-five. Embroidered cloths of camel's-hair and silk covered the walls. Copper braziers, suspended from the pillars, sent dim spirals of perfumed smoke aloft into the blue air.

About sixty feet from the floor, a row of clerestory windows, unglazed, admitted arrows of sunlight through a golden fretwork; and these arrows, piercing the incense vapor, checkered intricate patterns on the enormous, deep-piled Persian rugs of rose, lilac, and misty blue.

Tables and chairs, of course, there were none. A dakkah, or platform, in horseshoe shape, at the far end, covered with rugs and cushions, and with water-jars, large copper fire-pans, coffee-pots of silver, and shishahs (water-pipes) told where the feast was to be offered.

From a side door, as a silken curtain was drawn back, some fifteen slave-girls entered--whiter than their masters and in tight jackets and loose, silk trousers. These girls brought copper basins of rose-water for the Arabs' "lesser ablution" before a meal. Bara Miyan smiled slightly as he gestured the Legionaries also to wash hands and faces; but the Master, little relishing the idea of using this same water after the Arabs, shook his head.

Not thus slyly could the Olema inflict humiliation on unbelievers. A hard look crept into the Master's eyes. This covert insult, after the exchange of salt, boded very ill.

In silence the Legionaries watched the Arabs dry their hands and faces on towels given them by the slave-girls, who then noiselessly withdrew. All the Arabs prostrated themselves and prayed. The Master was the only one who noticed one significant fact: that now the

kiblah, or direction of prayer, was not to the north-west, where lay Mecca, but--judging by the sun--was almost due west, toward the spot where lay the Black Stone. This reassured him once more.

"They recognize the Stone, right enough," thought he. "As long as nothing happens to that, we hold the whip-hand of them. Our only real danger is that something _might_ happen to it. But a few hours, now, will end all this. And in a few hours, what can happen?"

The Arabs ceased their droning supplications to Allah, which had been rising with hypnotically soothing murmurs through the incensed air, and now followed Bara Miyan toward the raised platform. The old Sheik beckoned his guests. All disposed themselves comfortably among the cushions. The Legionaries ignored what seemed a disposition on the part of the Arabs to separate them--to scatter them along the platform.

"Keep together, men," the Master commanded. "Group yourselves closely here, in the middle. Say nothing. Watch everything. Make no move without specific orders. If it comes to a fight, and I am killed, Leclair will command you. His knowledge of Arabic temporarily ranks him above Bohannan. Don't shoot unless it comes to hard necessity; but if you do shoot, make every bullet count--and save the last one for yourselves!"

Bara Miyan clapped his hands. Through two arched doorways, to right and left, entered a silent file of the huge, half-naked Maghrabi men. All were unarmed; but the muscles of their heavy shoulders, the gorilla-like dangle of their steel-fingered hands produced an effect more ominous even than the gleam of simitars in the dim cressets' light would have been.

Along the walls these black barbarians disposed themselves, a full hundred or more, saying nothing, seeming to see nothing, mere human automata. Bohannan, seated cross-legged between Captain Alden and the Master, swore an oath.

"What are these infernal murderers here for?" growled he. "Ask the Sheik, will you? I thought you and he had eaten salt together! If this isn't a trap, it looks too damned much like it to be much of a picnic! Faith, this is a Hell of a party!"

"Silence, sir!" commanded the Master; while Leclair, at his other side, cast a look of anger at the Celt. "Diplomacy requires that we consider these men as a guard of honor. Pay no attention to them, anybody! Any sign of hesitation now, or fear, may be suicide. Remember, we are dealing with Orientals. The 'grand manner' is what counts with them. I advise every man who has tobacco, to light a cigarette and look indifferent. _Verb sap!_"

Most of the Legionaries produced tobacco; but the Olema, smiling, raised a hand of negation. For already the slave-girls were entering with trays of cigarettes and silver boxes of tobacco. These they passed to the visitors, then to the Arabs. Such as preferred cigarettes, suffered the girls to light them at the copper fire-pans. Others, choosing a _shishah_, let the girls fill it from the silver boxes; and soon the grateful vapors of tobacco were rising to blend with the spiced incense-smoke.

A more comfortable feeling now possessed the Legionaries. This sharing of tobacco seemed to establish almost an amicable Free Masonry between them and the Jannati Shahr men. All sat and smoked in what seemed a friendly silence.

The slave-girls silently departed. Others came with huge, silver trays graven with Koran verses. These trays contained meat-pilafs, swimming in melted butter; vine leaves filled with chopped mutton; _kababs_, or bits of roast meat spitted on wooden splinters; crisp cucumbers; a kind of tasteless bread; a dish that looked like vermicelli sweetened with honey; thin jelly, and sweetmeats that tasted strongly of rosewater. Dates, pomegranates, and areca nuts cut up and mixed with sugar-paste pinned with cloves into a betel leaf--these constituted the dessert.

The Arabs ate with strict decorum, according to their custom, beginning the banquet with a _Bismillah_ of thanks and ending with an _Al Hamd_ that signified repletion. Knives and forks there were none; each man dipped his hand into whatever dish pleased him, as the trays were passed along. The Legionaries did the same.

"Rather messy, eh?" commented the major; but no one answered him. More serious thoughts than these possessed the others.

After ablution, once more--this time the white men shared it--tobacco, pomegranate syrup, sherbet, water perfumed with _mastich_-smoke, and thick, black coffee ended the meal.

The Master requested khat leaves, which were presently brought him--deliciously green and fresh--in a copper bowl. Then, while the slave-girls removed all traces of the feast, all relaxed for a few minutes' _kayf_, or utter peace.

Utter peace, indeed, it seemed. Nothing more soothing could have been imagined than the soft wooing of repletion and of silken cushions, the dim sunlight through the smoke of incense and tobacco, the gentle bubbling of the water-pipes, the half-heard courting of pigeons somewhere aloft in the embrasures of the clerestory windows.

All possibility of warfare seemed to have vanished. Under the magic spell of this enchanted, golden hall, even the grim Maghrabis, black and motionless along the tapestried walls, seemed to have sunk to the role of mere spectators.

The Arabs' glances, though subtly curious, appeared to hold little animosity. Now that they had broken bread together, cementing the Oath of the Salt, might not hospitality have become inviolable? True, some looks of veiled hostility were directed against "Captain Alden's" strangely masked face, as the woman sat there cross-legged like the rest, indifferently smoking cigarettes. For what the Arab cannot understand is always antipathetic to him. But this hostility was not marked. The spirits of the Legion, including those of the Master himself, rose with a sense of greater security.

Even Bohannan, chronic complainer, forgot to cavil and began to bask in contentment.

"Faith, but this is a good imitation of Lotus-land, after all," he murmured to Janina, at his side. "I wouldn't mind boarding at this

hotel for an indefinite period. Meals excellent; waitresses beat anything on Broadway; atmosphere very restful to wandering gentlemen. Now if I could only get acquainted with one of these lovely Fatimas, and find out where the bar is--the bar of El Barr! Very good! Faith, very good indeed!"

He laughed at his own witticism and blew perfumed smoke toward the dim, golden roof. But now his attention was riveted by the silent entrance of six dancing-girls, that instantly brought him to keen observation.

Their dance, barefooted and with a minimum of veils, swayed into sinuous beauty to the monotonous music of kettle-drums, long red flutes and guitars of sand-tortoise shell with goat-skin heads--music furnished by a dozen Arabs squatting on their hunkers half-way down the hall. The gracious weaving of those lithe, white bodies of the girls as they swayed from sunlit filigree to dim shadow, stirred even the coldest heart among the Legionaries, that of the Master himself. As for Bohannan, his cup of joy was brimming.

The dance ended, one of the girls sang with a little foreign accent, very pleasing to the ears of the Master and Leclairs the famous chant of Kaab el Ahbar:

A black tent, swayed by the desert wind
Is dearer to me, dearer to me
Than any palace of the city walls.
Dearer to me!

[1]_And the earth met with rain!_

A handful of dates, a cup of camel's milk
Is dearer to me, dearer to me
Than any sweetmeat in the city walls.
Dearer to me!

And the earth wet with rain!

A slender Bedouin maid, freely unveiled
Is dearer to me, dearer to me
Than harem beauties with henna-stained fingers.
My Bedouin maid is slim as the _ishkil_ tree.
Dearer to me!

And the earth wet with rain!

Black tent, swift white mare, camel of Hejaz blood
Are dear to me, are dear to me!
Dearest is my slim, unveiled one of the desert sands!
Dearest to me!
Ibla her name is; she blazes like the sun,
Like the sun at dawn, with hair like midnight shades,
Oh, dear to me!
Paradise is in her eyes; and in her breasts, enchantment.
Her body yields like the tamarisk,
When the soft winds blow over the hills of Nedj!
Dearest to me!

And the earth wet with rain!

[Footnote 1: _W'al arz mablul bi matar._ A favorite refrain for songs among the Arabs, to whom rain represents all comforts and delights.]

A little silence followed the ending of the song and the withdrawal of the girls and musicians. The major seemed disposed to call for an encore, but Janina silenced his forthcoming remarks with a sharp nudge. All at once, old Bara Miyan removed the amber stem of the water-pipe from his bearded lips and said:

"Now, White Sheik, thou hast eaten of our humble food, and seen our dancing. Thou hast heard our song. Wilt thou also see jugglers, wrestlers, trained apes from Yemen? Or wilt thou take the _kaylulah_ (siesta)? Or doth it please thee now to speak of the gifts that my heart offers thee and thine?"

"Let us speak of the gifts, O Bara Miyan," answered the Master, while Leclair listened intently and all the Arabs gave close heed. "We have not many hours more to stay in this paradise of thine. We must be away to our own Feringistan, in our flying house. Let us speak of the gifts. But first, I would ask thee something."

"Speak, in Allah's name, and it shall be answered thee!"

"The salt is still in thy stomach for us?"

"It is still in my stomach."

"Thou dost swear that, O Bara Miyan, by a great oath?"

"By the rising of the stars, which is a great oath!"

"And by the greatest oath, the honor of thy women?"

"Yea, Frank, by the honor of my women! But thou and thine, too, have covenants to keep."

Old Bara Miyan bent shaggy white brows at the Master, and peered out intently from under the hood of his burnous. The Master queried:

"What covenants, great Olema?"

"These: That no harm shall befall Myzab and the Great Pearl Star and the Black Stone, before thou and thine fly away to the Lands of the Books. Then, that no blood of our people shall be shed in El Barr, either the city of Jannati Shahr or the plain. These things thou must understand, O Frank. If harm befall the sacred relics, or blood be shed, then the salt will depart from my stomach, and we will be _kiman_,^[1] and the _thar_^[2] will be between thine and mine. I have spoken!"

[Footnote 1: Kiman, of hostile tribes.]

[Footnote 2: Thar, the terrible blood-feud of the Arabs.]

The Master nodded.

"These things be very clear to my heart," he answered. "They shall be treasured in my memory."

"It is well. Now speak we of the gifts."

The fixed attention of the Arabs told the Legionaries, despite their ignorance of Arabic, that at last the important negotiation of the reward was under way. Pipes and cigarettes smoldered, unsmoked; all eyes turned eagerly toward the Master and Bara Miyan. Silence fell upon the banquet-hall, where still the thin, perfumed incense-smoke writhed aloft and where still the motionless Maghrabi men stood in those ominous lines along the silk-tapestried walls.

"And what things," began the Olema, "doth thy heart desire, in this city of Jannati Shahr? Tell thy wish, and perchance it shall be granted thee!"

The Master paused, deliberately. Well he understood the psychological value of slow action in dealing with Orientals. Bargaining, with such, is a fine art. Haste, greed, eagerness defeat themselves.

Contemplatively the Master chewed a khat leaf, then smiled a very little, and asked:

"Is it permitted to tell thee that this gold, of which thou hast carved thy city--this gold which to thee is as stones and earth to the people of Feringistan--hath great value with us?"

"It is permitted, O Frank. This thing we already know." The old man frowned ominously. "Dost thou ask gold?"

The Master nerved himself for the supreme demand, success in which would mean fortune beyond all calculation, power and wealth to shame all plutocrats.

"Gold?" he repeated. "Yea, that is what we ask! Gold! Give unto us what gold our flying house can carry hence to our own land beyond the salted seas, and we will depart. Before the rising of the stars we will be gone. And the peace be unto thee, O Bara Miyan, master of the gold!"

Tension as of a wire about to snap contracted the Master's nerves, strong as they were. Leclair leaned forward, his face pale, teeth set hard into his lip.

"Yea, gold!" the Master repeated with hard-forced calm. "This is the gift we ask of thee, for the Myzab and the holy Black Stone and Kaukab el Durri--the gift of gold!"

CHAPTER XLII

"SONS OF THE PROPHET, SLAY!"

The Olema shook an emphatic head of negation. "_Yafta Allah!_" he exclaimed, using the absolute, decisive formula of refusal in Arab bargaining. "This gold of ours is sacred. The angel Jibrail himself struck the Iron Mountains with his wing, at the same hour when the

Black Stone fell from Paradise, and caused the gold to gush out. It is not earthly gold, but the gold of angels.

"Not one grain can be taken from El Barr. The curses of Jehannun, of Eblis, rest on Arab or _Ajam_ who dare attempt it. Surely, such a one shall be put to the sword, and his soul in the bottom pits of Hell shall be taken by the feet and forelock and cast into the hottest flames! That soul shall eat of the fruit of the tree Al Zakkum, and be branded forever with the treasure he did attempt to ravish from us!"

"Remember, great Olema, we did bring thee the Myzab and Kaukab el Durri, and the holy Black Stone!"

"I remember, White Sheik, and will reward thee, but not with gold!"
The old man's face was stern, deep-lined, hard; his eyes had assumed a dangerous glitter. "Thou hast a good tongue, but though it speak from now till the angel Al Sijil roll up all the scrolls of life, it shall not avail.

"Ask some other thing; and remember, if thou dost try by any magic to remove even a sand-grain of this gold, the salt will be no longer between thee and me. This must be added to the two things I have already told thee of, that would take away the salt!"

Narrowly the Master eyed him, then nodded. Huge though this rebuff had been, and great as the loss must be, the Master realized the utter impossibility of coming to any terms with Bara Miyan on a gold basis. All the fanaticism of these people would resist this, to the death. Even to insist further might precipitate a massacre. Therefore, like the philosopher he was, he turned to other possibilities, considering what was best to be done.

The Olema spoke again, pausing now and then as he puffed reflectively at his water-pipe. Said he:

"I will tell thee a great secret, O Frank. In this city lie the lost books of the Arwam (Greek) wise men and poets. When the Alexandrian library was burned by Amrou, at Omar's order, the four thousand baths of the city were heated for six months by ancient scrolls. I have heard that ye Feringi have greatly mourned the loss of the Arwam learning and poetry. Not all this treasure was lost, White Sheik!"

The Master started, peered at Bara Miyan and forgot to chew his soothing khat leaves.

"And then--?" asked he.

"Some twenty thousand of the most precious parchments were privately carried by our _Sufis_ to Medina, and thence, after many years, to Jannati Shahr. Here they still lie, in perfect form, clearly to be read. This is a treasure that would set the world of the Feringi ablaze and make thee as a god among thy people. Ask this gift, O Frank, and it shall be granted thee! For the mere asking, this treasure shall be thine!"

The Master shook his head. Deeply as he understood the incalculable value of the lost books of antiquity, he well knew that to offer his Legion such a booty would be all in vain. Men who have suffered and bled, risked all, seen their comrades die, and even now stand in

the shadow of death--hoping some vast, tangible loot--are not proper material for discussion of literary values.

"_Yafta Allah!_" the Master exclaimed, with emphasis equal to the Olema's. "No, Bara Miyan, this cannot be."

"Our dancing and singing maidens are like a flame of Paradise. Their enchantments make the heart of man glad with perpetual springtime. Choose, O Frank, two handmaids for thyself and for each of thy men, and let them be yours to go with you to your own country and to be your chattels and your sweet delights!"

The eyes of "Captain Alden" narrowed with sudden, painful emotion as she peered at the Master. With some smattering of Arabic, she may have caught something of the sense of this offer. But the Master, unmoved by this second offer of Olema's, merely shook his head again, saying:

"No, Bara Miyan. Though thy women be fair as the dawn over the Sea of Oman, and soft-eyed as the gazelles in the oasis of the _Wady el Ward_ (Vale of Flowers), not for us are they. We seek other rewards. Therefore will I ask thee still another question."

"Thy question shall be answered, O Frank!"

"Is it true that the Caliph el Walid, in Hegira 88, sent forty camel-loads of cut jewels to Mecca?"

"That is true."

"And that, later, all those jewels were brought hither?"

"Even so! It is also true that two Franks in Hegira 550, dugged a tunnel into the Meccan treasury from a house they had hired in the guise of Egyptian _Hujjaj_. They were both beheaded, White Sheik, and their bodies were burned to ashes."

"No doubt," the Master answered, nonchalantly. "But they had brought no rich gifts to the Meccans. Therefore, now speaking of these forty camel-loads of cut jewels, O Bara Miyan--"

"It is in thy mind to ask for those, White Sheik?"

"Allah giveth thee two hearts, Bara Miyan, as well as the riches of Karun. Surely, 'the generous man is Allah's friend,' and thy hand is not tied up." [1]

[Footnote 1: "To have two hearts" (_dhu'kulbein_) signifies to be prudent, wise. Karun is the Arabic Croesus. "Thy hand is tied up" is equivalent to calling a man niggardly.]

The Olema, a quick decision gleaming in his eyes--though what that decision might be, who could tell?--put down the amber mouthpiece and with an eloquent, lean hand gestured toward a silk-curtained doorway at the right of the vast hall.

"Come with me, then, White Sheik!" said he, arising and beckoning his white-robed sub-chiefs. He raised a finger in signal to the Maghrabis, though what the signal might mean, the Legionaries could not know. "Come, with all thy men. And, by Allah! I will show thee the things

whereof thou dost speak to me. I will show thee all these things--and others!

"_Come_!"

In silence the Legionaries followed old Bara Miyan through the curtained doorway; and after them came the sub-chiefs. The Maghrabi stranglers, noiseless and bare-footed, fell in behind; a long ominous line of black human brutes, seeming hardly above the intellectual level of so many gorillas.

Stout-hearted as the Legionaries were, a kind of numbing oppression was closing in upon them. City battlements and double walls of inner citadel, then massive gates and now again more doors that closed behind them, intervened between them and even the perilous liberty of the plain of El Barr. And, in addition to all this, some hundreds of thousands of Arabs, waiting without, effectually surrounded them, and the Maghrabi men cast their black shadow, threatening and ominous, over the already somber enough canvas.

A web, they all felt, was closing about them that only chance and boldness could unravel. Everything now hung on the word of an aged fanatic, who for any fancied breach of the Oath of Salt might deliver them to slavery, torture, death.

"Remember, men," the Master warned his men as they penetrated the dim, golden-walled passage also lighted with sandal-oil
mash'als--"remember the mercy-bullets. If it comes to war, none of us must be taken prisoner!"

To the Olema he exclaimed, in suave tones:

"_Dakhilak, Ya Shayk!_ (Under thy protection, O Sheik!) Let not the laws of hospitality or the Oath of Salt be forgotten!"

The Olema only smiled oddly, in the dim and perfumed obscurity of the passageway, along which the slither of the many sandaled feet on the gold pavement made a soft, creeping sound. Nothing more was said--except for some grumbled mouthings of Bohannan--during the next few minutes.

The passage seemed enormously long to the Master as, flanked by Leclair, "Captain Alden," and the major, he peered curiously at its smooth, dull-yellow walls all chased with geometrical patterns picked out in silver and copper, between the dull-hued tapestries, and banded with long extracts from the Koran inlaid in Tumar characters of mother-of-pearl.

Several turnings, and three flights of steps descending through the solid gold "dyke" that ran down into the bowels of the earth no one could even guess how far, served still more to confuse the Legionaries' sense of direction and to increase their conviction that, in case of any outbreak of hostilities, they would find themselves trapped more helplessly than rats in a cage.

It is no aspersion on their bravery to say that more than one among them had already begun inwardly to curse this wild-goose chase into Jannati Shahr. It all had now begun to assume absolutely the appearance of a well-formulated plan of treachery. Even the Master

gave recognition to this appearance, by saying again: "Be ready for a quick draw. But whatever you do, don't be the aggressor. Watch your step!"

The passage suddenly reached its end. Another heavy door of the yellow metal swung back, and all issued into a hall even more vast than the one they had quitted.

No windows here admitted light. The air, though pure enough as from some hidden source of ventilation, hung dead and heavy. Not even the censers, depending from the dim roof, far above, could freshen it; nor could the cressets' light make more than a kind of ghostly aura through the gloom.

By this dim half-illumination the Master beheld, there before him in the middle of the tremendous golden pavement, a strange, pyramidal object rising four-square in the shape of an equilateral triangle--just such a triangle as was formed by the locations of Mecca, Bab el Mandeb, and El Barr.

This pyramid, polished and elaborately engraved, towered some ninety feet above the floor. It was pierced by numbers of openings, like the entrances to galleries; and up the smooth face nearest the entrance to the hall, a stairway about ten feet wide mounted toward the apex.

Completely finished all save the upper part, which still remained truncated, the golden pyramid gleamed dully in the vague light, a thing of awe and wonder, grimly beautiful, fearsome to gaze up at. For some unknown reason, as the Legionaries grouped themselves about their Master, an uncanny influence seemed to emanate from this singular object. All remained silent, as the Olema, an enigmatic smile on his thin, bearded lips, raised a hand toward the pyramid.

"This thing, O Frank, thou shouldst see," he remarked dryly. "Above all, the inner chambers. Wilt thou go with me?"

"I will go," the Master answered. "Lead the way!"

The Olema beckoned one of the Maghrabis, who delivered a torch of some clear-burning, resinous, and perfumed material into his hand.

"Come," bade the old man, and gestured toward the steps of gold.

Together, in silence, they mounted toward the dim, high-arched roof. From near the top, the Master, glancing down, could see the white-robed mass of the Arabs, the small, compact group of his own men; and, behind them all, the dim, black lines of the stranglers. But already the Olema was gesturing for him to enter the highest of the galleries.

Into this, carved in the virgin metal, both made their way. The torchlight flung strange, wavering gleams on smooth walls niched with dark embrasures. At the further end of the passage, the Olema stopped.

"Here is a new trophy, just added to all that Allah hath placed in our hands," said he, gravely. "There are some three-and-twenty places yet left, to fill. Wilt thou see the new trophy?"

The Master nodded silently. Raising the torch, the Olema thrust it

into one of the embrasures. There the Master beheld a human skull.

The empty eye-sockets, peering out at him, seemed to hold a malevolent malice. That the skull had been but freshly cleaned, was obvious.

"Abd el Rahman?" asked the Master.

"Yea, the Apostate," answered Bara Miyan. "At last, Allah hath delivered him to us of El Barr."

"Thou hast used a heavy hand on the Apostate, O Sheik."

"We of Jannati Shahr do not anoint rats' heads with jasmine oil. Tell me, Frank, how many men hast thou?"

"Three-and-twenty, is it not so?"

"Yea, it is so. Tell me, Bara Miyan, this whole pyramid--"

"Skulls, yea."

"This is the Pyramid of Ayes Shah that I have heard strange tales of?" the Master demanded, feeling even his hard nerves quiver.

"The Pyramid of Ayes Shah."

"No myth, then, but reality," the Master commented, fascinated in spite of himself. "Even as the famous Tower of Skulls at Jerba, in Tunis!"

"Thou hast said it, O Frank. Here be more than ten-score thousand skulls of the enemies of Islam, of blasphemers against the Prophet, of those who have penetrated the Empty Abodes, of those who have sought to carry gold from El Barr. It is nearly done, this pyramid. But there still remain three-and-twenty vacant places to be filled."

For a long minute, the eyes of the Master and of Bara Miyan met, in silence, with the torch-flare glinting strange lights from them. Then the Olema spoke.

"Hast thou seen enough?" demanded he.

"Mine eyes are filled."

"And dost thou still ask rewards of gold?"

"Nay, it is as I have already told thee; let the cut jewels of the Caliph el Walid suffice!"

"It is well spoken. Let us descend."

In silence, again, they left the gruesome gallery and went down the stairway with the Olema's torch leaving vague, fantastic wreaths of odorous smoke curling up along the polished, dull-yellow slant of the pyramid. Back on the floor again, the Master said to his men:

"This pyramid is filled with skulls of men who have tried to carry gold from El Barr. For the present, we must dismiss gold from our minds. Common prudence dictates that we abandon all idea of gold, take

whatever reward we can get, and leave this city at once.

"The gold is of no importance, whatever. On the way back over the outer foothills of the Iron Mountains, many outcrops of gold exist. _Nissr_ can poise above some of these; and a few hours' labor will load her with all the gold we can carry. There can be no sense in trying to get any here. It would simply add to our peril.

"Everything is therefore quite satisfactory. But watch every move. If nothing breaks, in two hours from now we should be on our way. Again I caution you all, keep silent and make no move without my orders. The prize is at our very finger-tips. So long as we shed no blood and as nothing happens to the Myzab and the Black Stone, we are safe. But remember--_be careful!_"

The Olema touched him on the elbow.

"Now," the old man asked, "now, O Frank, wouldst thou see the cut jewels of the Caliph el Walid?"

"Even so!"

"Come, then!" And Bara Miyan gestured toward another door that led, at the left, out of the Chamber of the Pyramid.

Again the strange procession formed itself, as before, with the gorilla-like Maghrabi stranglers a rear guard. A few minutes through still another passage in the gold brought them to a door of ebony, banded with silver. No door of gold, it seemed, sufficed for this chamber they were about to enter. Stronger materials were needed here.

This door, like the others, swung silently on its massive hinges.

"Come, O Master of the fighting-men of Feringistan!" exclaimed the Olema. "In Allah's name, take of the gifts that I have already offered thee, and then in peace depart!"

Before the Master could reply, a shuddering concussion shivered through the solid gold all about them. The tremor of this shock, like that of an earthquake, trembled the cressets on the walls and made the huge ebony door, ajar into a dim-lighted hall, groan on its hinges.

Stupefied, Legionaries and Arabs alike, stared silently under the vague gleam of the torches.

Then, far and faint, as though coming along tortuous passages from distances above, a muffled concussion smote their ears. The shock of the air-wave was distinctly felt, eloquent of the catastrophe that in a second of time had shattered every plan and hope.

As if an echo of that thunderous, far explosion, a faint wailing of voices--echoing from very far above--drifted eerily along the passage; voices in blended rage and fear, in hate, agony, despair.

"God above--!" the major gulped. "Captain Alden" whipped her pistol from its holster, not a fraction of a second before the Master's leaped into his hand. The torchlight flickered on Leclair's service-revolver, and was reflected on the guns of every Legionary.

"If that's the explosive," Bohannan cried, "faith, we're in for it! _Is_ it the explosive that's blown Hell out o' the Black Stone?"

A wild cry echoed down the passage. The Olema, his face suddenly distorted with a passion of hate, snatched a pistol from beneath his burnous.

"The dogs of Feringistan have spat on all Islam!" he screamed, in a shrill, horrible voice. "The Black Stone is no more! Vengeance on the unbelieving dogs! _Allah il Allah!_ Kill, kill, and let no dog escape!

"Sons of the Prophet! Slay me these dogs! Kill!"

CHAPTER XLIII

WAR IN THE DEPTHS

Horrible, unreal as a fever-born nightmare in its sudden frenzy, the Arab's attack drove in at them. The golden passageway flung from wall to wall screams, curses in shrill barbaric voices, clangor of steel whirled from scabbards, echoes of shots loud-roaring in that narrow space.

Bara Miyan's pistol, struck up by the woman's hand, spat fire over the Master's head just as the Olema himself went down with blood spurting from a jugular severed by the major's bullet. The Olema's gaudy burnous crimsoned swiftly.

"Got _him_!" shouted Bohannan, firing again, again, into the tangle of sub-chiefs and Maghrabi men. Adams pitched forward, cleft to the chin by a simitar.

The firing leaped to point-blank uproar, on both sides. The men of Jannati Shahr numbered more pistols, but the Legionaries had quicker firers. Arabs, Legionaries, Maghrabis alike falling in a tumult of raw passions, disappeared under trampling feet.

Deafening grew the uproar of howls, curses, shots. The smell of dust and blood mingled with the aromatic perfume of the cressets.

The Master was shouting something, as he emptied his automatic into the pack of white-robed bodies, snarling brown faces, waving arms. But what he was commanding, who could tell?

Like a storm-wave flinging froth ashore, the rush of the Moslems drove the Legionaries--fewer now--back into the treasure-chamber. The Master, violent hands on "Captain Alden," swung her back, away; thrust her behind him. Her eyes gleamed through the mask as she still fired. The Master heard her laugh.

From dimness of gloom, within the doorway, two vague figures rained dagger-blows. Janina, mortally stabbed, practically blew the head off one of these door-keepers.

Cracowicz got the other with a blow from the butt of his empty

pistol--a blow that crushed in the right temporal bone. Then he, too, and three others, fell and died.

Outside, in the passage, the Maghrabis were wringing the necks of the wounded white men. The dull sound of crushed and broken bones blent with the turmoil.

"_The door--shut the door!_"

The Master's voice penetrated even this Hell-tumult. The Master flung himself against the door, and others with him.

The very frenzy of the attack defeated the Arab's object, for it drove the survivors back into the treasure-crypt. And in the narrow doorway the white men could for a moment hold back the howling tides of fury.

With cold lead, butts, naked fists, the remaining Legionaries smashed a little clearance-room, corpse-heaped. They stumbled, fought, fell into the crypt.

The heavy door, swung by panting, sweating men--while others fired through the narrowing aperture--groaned shut on massive hinges.

As the space narrowed, frenzy broke loose. Arabs and Maghrabis crawled and struggled over bodies, flung themselves to sure immolation in the doorway. As fast as they fell, the Legionaries dragged them inside. The place became an infernal shambles, slippery, crimson, unreal with horror.

For one fate-heavy moment, the tides of war hung even. Furiously the remaining Legionaries toiled with straining muscles, swelling veins, panting lungs, to force the door shut, against the shrieking, frenzied drive of Moslem fanatics lashed into fury by the _thar_, the feud of blood.

"Captain Alden" turned the tide. She snatched down one of the copper lamps that hung by chains from the dim ceiling of the treasure-crypt. Over the heads of the Legionaries she flung blazing sandal-oil out upon the white-robed jam of madmen.

The flaming oil flared up along those thin, white robes. It dripped on wounded and on dead. Wild howls of anguish pierced the tumult. In the minute of confusion, the door boomed shut. Bohannan dropped a heavy teakwood bar into staples of bronze.

"God!" he panted, his right eye misted with blood from a jagged cut on the brow. Shrieks of rage, from without, were answered by jeers and shouts of exultation from the Legionaries.

"_Nom de Dieu!_" gasped Leclair. His neck was blackened with a powder burn, and the tunic was ripped clean off him. Not one of the Legionaries had uniforms completely whole. Hardly half of them still kept their slippers.

Torn, barefooted, burned, bleeding, decimated, they still laughed. Wild gibes penetrated the door of the treasure-crypt, against which the mad attack was already beginning to clash and thunder.

"Faith, but this is a grand fight!" the major exulted. "It's

Donnybrook with trimmings!" He waved his big fists enthusiastically on high, and blinked his one good eye. "If a man can die this way, sure, what's the use o' living?"

"Steady men! Steady!" the Master cautioned, reloading his gun. "No time, now, for shouting. Load up! This fight's only begun!"

Already, as they recharged their weapons, the door was groaning under the frantic attack of the Arabs and Maghrabis. Wild curses, howls to Allah and to the Prophet, came in dull confusion through the massive plates. A hail of blows besieged them. The bronze staples began to bend.

"Come, men!" commanded the Master. "No chance to defend this position. They'll be in, directly. There are thousands of them in reserve! Away from here!"

"Where the devil _to_?" demanded the major, defiantly. "Hang to it--give 'em blue Hell as they come through!"

The Master seized and flung him back.

"If you're so keen on dying," he cried, "you can die right now, for insubordination! Back, away from here, you idiot!"

The major obeyed. The others followed. Already the door was creaking, giving, as the Legionaries--now hardly more than a dozen in number--began the first steps of their retreat, that should rank in history with that of Xenophon's historic Ten Thousand.

The Greeks had all of God's outdoors for their maneuvers. These Legionaries had nothing but dark pits and runways, unexplored, in the bowels of a huge, fanatic city. Thus, their retreat was harder. But with courage unshaken, they turned their backs on the yielding door, and set their faces toward darkness and the unknown.

Two of their number lay dead inside this chamber where the Legionaries now were. Nothing could be done for them; the bodies simply had to be abandoned where they lay. Eight were dead in the passage outside the chamber, their corpses mingled with those of Arabs and Maghrabis.

In the chamber, as the Master glanced back, he could see a heap of bodies round the door. These bodies of attackers who had been pulled inside and butchered, made a glad sight to the Master. He laughed grimly.

"We're more than even with them, so far," he exulted. "We've beaten them, so far! The rest will get us, all right enough, but Jannati Shahr will remember the coming of the white men!"

The survivors--the Master, Bohannan, "Captain Alden," and Leclair and nine others--were in evil case, as they trailed down the low-roofed chamber lighted with copper lamps. More than half bore wounds. Some showed bleeding faces, others limp arms; still others hobbled painfully, leaving bloody trails on the floor of dull gold. Curses on the Arabs echoed in various tongues. This first encounter had taken frightful toll of the Legion.

But every heart that still lived was bold and high. Not one of the

little party entertained the slightest hope of surviving or of ever beholding the light of day. Still, not one uttered any word of despair or suggestion of surrender.

Everything but a fight to the finish was forgotten. Only one man even thought of _Nissr_ and of what probably had happened out there on the plain. This man was Leclair.

"_Dieu_!" he grunted. "An accident, eh? Something must have gone wrong--or did the brown devils attack? I hope our men outside made good slaughter of these Moslem pigs, before they died. Eh, my Captain?"

"Well?"

"Is it not possible that _Nissr_ and our men still live? That they will presently bombard the city? That they may rescue us?"

The Master shook his head.

"They may live," he answered, "but as for rescuing us--" His gesture completed the idea. Suddenly he pointed.

"See!" he cried. "Another door!"

CHAPTER XLIV

INTO THE JEWEL-CRYPT

It was time some exit should be discovered. The tumult had notably increased, at the barred entrance. The staples could not hold, much longer.

The Legionaries pressed forward. At the far end of the chamber, another door was indeed visible; smaller than the first, low, almost square, and let into a deep recess in the elaborately carved wall of gold.

Barefooted, in their socks, or some still in slippers, they reached this door. A little silence fell on them, as they inspected it. One man coughed, spitting blood. Another wheezed, with painful respiration. The smell of sweat and blood sickened the air.

"That's some door, all right!" judged Bohannon, peering at its dark wood, heavily banded with iron. "Faith, but they've got a padlock on that, big enough to hold the Pearly Gates!"

"It is only a question, now, of the key," put in Leclair, with French precision.

"Faith, _here's_ a trap!" the Irishman continued. "A trap, for you! And thirteen rats in it! Lucky, eh?"

"In Jananti Shahr," the memory of a sentence flashed to the Master,

"we do not anoint rats' heads with jasmine oil!" But all he said was:
"Light, here! Bring lamps!"

Three Legionaries obeyed. The flare of the crude wicks, up along the door, showed its tremendous solidity.

"A little of our explosive would do this business," the Master declared. "But it's obvious nothing short of that would have much effect. I think, men, we'll make our stand right here.

"If we put out all lights, we'll have the attackers at a disadvantage. We can account for fifty or more, before they close in. And--'Captain Alden,' sir! Where are you going? Back, here!"

The woman gave no heed. She was half-way to the entrance door, round the edges of which already torch-light had begun to glimmer as the attackers strained it from its hinges.

Amazed, the Legionaries stared. The Master started after her. Now she was on her knees beside one of the dead Maghrabis--the one killed by Janina. She found nothing; turned to the other; uttered a cry of exultation and held up a clumsy key.

Back over the floor of gold she ran. Her fingers held a crimson cord, from which the key dangled.

"Those two--they were guardians of this vault, of course!" she cried. "Here is the key!"

A cheer burst from the Legionaries. The Master clutched the key, pressed forward to the inner door. A terrible intensity of emotion seized all the survivors, as he fitted the key to the ponderous lock.

"God!" the Irishman grunted, as the wards slid back. The padlock clattered to the floor. The hasp fell. In swung the door.

Through it pressed the Legionaries, with lamps swinging, pistols in hand. As the last of them entered, the outer door collapsed with a bursting clangor. Lights gleamed; a white-robed tumult of raging men burst through. Shots crackled; yells echoed; and the sound of many sandaled feet, furiously running, filled the outer chamber with sounds of ominous import.

"_Ah, sacres cochons!_" shouted Leclair, emptying his pistol at the pursuers. The Master thrust him back. The door clanged shut; down dropped another bar.

Bohannan laughed madly. The fighting-blood was leaping in his veins.

"Oh, the grand fight!" he shouted. "God, the grand old fight!"

Confused voices, crying out in Arabic, wheeled the Master from the door.

This inner chamber, very much smaller than the outer, was well lighted by still more lamps, though here all were of chased silver.

At the far end, four dim figures were visible. Black faces peered in wonder. The Legionaries caught sight of giant simitars, of fluttering

white robes as the figures advanced.

"By Allah!" a hoarse shout echoed. "Look, Mustapha! The Feringi!"

In the shadows at the other end, the amazed Maghrabi swordsmen hesitated one precious moment. White-rimmed eyes stared, teeth gleamed through distorted lips.

These gigantic _mudirs_, or Keepers of the Treasure, had expected the opening of the door to show them the Feringi, indeed, but preceded by Bara Miyan and surrounded by men of Jannati Shahr.

Now they beheld the dogs of unbelievers all alone, there, with guns in hands, with every sign of battle. They had heard sounds of war, from without. Their dull minds, slowly reacting, could not grasp the significance of all this.

"The Feringi, Yusuf," cried another voice. "And they are alone! What meaneth this?"

"_M'adri_" (I know not), ejaculated still another. "But _kill--kill_!"

Their attack was hopeless, but its bravery ranked perfect. Their shouting charge down the chamber, sabers high, ended in grunting sprawls of white. Not half-naked like the low-caste Maghrabi outside, but clad in Arab fashion, they lay there, with Legionaries' bullets in breast and brain.

The Master smiled, grimly, as he walked to one of the bodies and stirred it with his naked foot. He swung above it a silver lamp he had pulled down from the wonderfully arabesqued wall.

"Four scimitars added to our equipment will be useful, at close quarters," he opined very coolly, unmindful of the dull uproar now battering at the inner door. "Pick up the cutlery, men, and don't forget the admirable qualities of the _arme blanche_!"

Himself, he took one of the long, curved blades. The major, Leclair, and Ferrara--an expert swordsman he had been, in the Italian army--possessed themselves of the others.

Bohannan whistled his scimitar through the air.

"Very fine I call it!" he exclaimed, with a joyful laugh. "Some little game of tag, what? And our Moslem friends are still 'it!' We're still ahead!"

"And likely to be, till our friends bring powder, mine that door, and blow it in!" The Master added: "We've still a few minutes--maybe more. Now, then--"

A shrill cry in French, from Lebon, drew all eyes away to the left of the small chamber.

"_Voila_!" the lieutenant's orderly was vociferating. They saw his distorted, torture-broken hand wildly gesticulating toward the floor. "My Lieutenant, behold!"

"In the name of God, what now?" Leclair demanded, scimitar in hand.

The silver lamps struck high-lights from that gleaming blade, as he turned toward his orderly. Never had he seen the man seized and shaken by excitement as at this moment. "What hast thou found, Lebon? What?"

"But behold--behold!" choked the orderly. Articulation failed him. He stammered into unintelligible cries. The Legionaries crowded toward him. And in the dumb stupefaction that overcame them, the roaring tumult at the door was all forgotten. The sentence of death hanging above them, faded to nothing.

Even the Master's cold blood leaped and thrilled, at realization of what he was now beholding as the silver lamps swung from out-stretched hands. Bohannan, for once, was too dazed for exuberance.

Only the Master could find words.

"Well, men," said he, in even tones. "Here it is, at last. We're seeing something no Feringi ever saw before--the hidden treasure of Jannati Shahr!"

CHAPTER XLV

THE JEWEL HOARD

Men do strange things, at times, when confronted by experiences entirely outside even the limits of imagination. At sight of the perfectly overwhelming masses of wealth that lay there in square pits chiseled out of the solid gold, most of the Legionaries reacted like men drunk or mad.

The hoard before them was enough to unbalance reason.

Leclair began to curse with amazing fluency in French and Arabic, while his orderly fell into half-hysterical prayer. Bristol--stolid Englishman though he was--had to make a strong effort to keep his teeth from chattering. The two Italians, one with an ugly wound on the jaw, burst out laughing, waving their arms extravagantly. Simonds shouted jubilation and began to jump about in the most extraordinary fashion. Wallace sat down heavily on the floor, held his lamp out over one of the pits and stared with blank incomprehension.

As for the major, he dropped to his knees, threw down his weapons and plunged his arms up to the elbows in the sliding sparkle of the gems. To have heard him babble, one would have given him free entrance into any lunatic asylum.

The only two who had remained appreciably calm were "Captain Alden" and the Master. But even they, as fully as all the rest, forgot the impending menace of attack. For a moment, even their ears were deaf to the muffled tumult outside the door, their senses dulled to every other thing in this world save the incredible hoard there in the golden pits before them.

Pain, exhaustion, defeat ceased to be, for the Legionaries. Ruin and the shadow of Azrael's wing departed from their minds. For, bring what

the future might, the present was offering them a spectacle such as never before in this world's history had the eyes of white men rested on.

Not even a man _in extremis_ could have turned away his gaze from the unbelievable masses of shimmering wealth in those square pits of gold.

Fairy tales and legends, "Arabian Nights," and all the mystic lore of the East never conjured forth more brain-numbing plenitudes of fortune, nor painted more stupefying beauty, than now gleamed up from those eight excavations hewn in the dull, soft metal.

"_Nom de Dieu!_" Leclair kept monotonously repeating. "_Mais, nom de Dieu!_ Ah, the pigs--ah, the sacred pigs!"

Disjointed words from the others--cries, oaths, jubilations--filled the low-arched chamber, mingling in the stuffy air with lamp-smoke and the dull scent of blood and dust and sweat.

Wheezing breath, wordless cries, grunts, strange laughter sounded. And, withal, the major's hands and arms in one of the pits made a dry, slithering slide and click as he kneaded, worked, and stirred the gems, dredged up fistfuls and let them rain down crepitantly, again.

The sight was one very hard to grasp with any concrete understanding, harder still to render in cold words. At first, it gave only a confused impression of colors, like those in some vivid Oriental rug. The details escaped observation; and these changed, too, as the swaying of the lamps, in excited hands, shifted position.

A shimmer of unearthly light played over the pits, like the thin, colored flames at the edge of a driftwood fire. Soft, opalescent gleams were blent with prismatic blues, greens, crimsons. Melting violets were stabbed through by hard yellows and penetrant purples. And here an orange flash vied with a delicate old rose; there a rich carnation sparkled beside a misty gray, like fading clouds along the dim horizons of fairyland.

The Master murmured: "It's true, then--partly true. Risa knew part of it!"

"Not all?" asked the woman.

"I hardly think the Caliph el Walid's gold was ever brought to Jannati Shahr," he answered. "Coals to Newcastle, you know. And these jewels are not all uncut. Some are finely faceted, some uncut. But in the main Risa spoke the truth. He told what he believed."

"Yes," assented the woman. Then she added: "Spartan simplicity, is it not? No elaborate coffers. Not even leather sacks. Just bins, like so much wheat."

"The shining wheat of Araby!"

"Of the whole Orient!"

They fell silent, peering with fixed attention. And gradually some calm returned to the others. At the door, too, the turmoil had ceased. No doubt the Jannati Shahr men, baffled, had sent for much gunpowder

to blow in the massive planking. That silence became ominous.

Still the Legionaries could take no thought of anything but the Caliph el Walid's hoard. As they stood, squatted, or knelt around the pits--pits about two and a half feet square and deeper than the deepest thrust of any arm--it seemed to them that bottomless lakes and seas of light were opening down, down below them into unfathomed depths of beauty.

Such beauty caused the soul to drink nepenthes of forgetfulness. Hardships, wounds, blood, pain, menace of death faded under that spell. That the Legionaries were trapped at the bottom of a vast rabbit-warren, with swarms of Moslem ferrets soon to rush upon them, now seemed to have no significance.

Tranced, "indifferent to Fate," the adventurers peered on greater wealth of jewels than ever elsewhere in this world's history had been garnered in one place. The liquid light of the hoard flashed strange radiances on their tanned, deep-lined faces, now smeared with sweat and dust, with powder-grime and blood. Their eyes were beholding unutterable rainbows, flashings and burning glows like those of the Moslem's own Jebel Radhwa, or Mountain of Paradise.

Each of these jewels--several million gems, at the least computation--what a story it might have told! What a tale of remotest antiquity, of wild adventures and romance, of love, hate, death! What a revelation of harem, palace, treasury, of cavern, temple, throne! Of Hindu ghat, Egyptian pyramid, Persian garden, Afghan fastness, Chinese pagoda, Burmese minaret! Of enchanted moonlight, blazing sun, dim starlight! Of passion and of pain!

On what proud hand of Sultan, emir, cadi, prince, had this huge ruby burned? On what beloved breast or brow of princess, nautch-girl, concubine--yes, maybe of slave exalted to the purple--had that fire-gleaming diamond blazed?

From Roman times, from Greek, from ancient Jerusalem, from the fire-breathing shrines of Baal at long-dead Carthage, perhaps, this topaz might have come. This sapphire might have graced the anklet of some beauty of old Nile, ages before King Solomon wielded the scepter, ages even before the great god Osiris reigned.

That amethyst might have been loot of the swift black galleys of Tyre, in joyous days when men's strong arms took what they could, of women or of gems, and when Power was Law!

Imagination ran riot there, gazing down upon those jewel-pits. In them lay every kind of precious stone for which, from remotest antiquity, men had cheated, schemed, lied, fought, murdered. The jewels showed no attempt at sorting or classification. With true Oriental _laissez-faire_, they were all mingled quite at random; these gems, any chance handfuls of which must have meant an incalculable fortune.

BOHANNAN BECOMES A MILLIONAIRE

Like men in a dream, after the first wild emotions had died, the Legionaries peered down into this sea of light. Smoke from the lamps rose toward the dim, low-arched roof. Blood from the Maghrabi's wounds slowly spread and clotted on the golden floor.

Without, a confused murmur told of resuming preparations to smash in the door. And through it all, the dry clicking of the gems made itself audible, as the major sifted them with shaking fingers.

"Well, men," the Master laughed dryly, "here they are! Here are the jewels of Jannati Shahr. Old Bara Miyan would probably have given us a peck or two of them, for Myzab and the Great Pearl Star and the Black Stone, if those hadn't been destroyed--"

"How do you know they've been destroyed?" the major cried. "How do you know but what we'll be rescued, here?"

"If the bombardment had been going to begin, I think we'd have heard something of it, by now. My judgment tells me there'll be no explosive dropped on Jannati Shahr.

"We've got to fight this thing through, unaided. And at any rate, we don't have to limit ourselves to a peck or two of jewels. We've got them all, now--or they've got us!"

The irony of his tone made no impression on Bohannan. His mercurial temperament seemed to have gone quite to pieces, in view of the hoard. He cried:

"Come on, then, boys! Fill up!"

And with a wild laugh he began scooping the gems, hap-hazard, into the pockets of his torn, battle-stained uniform. Jewels of fabulous price escaped his fingers, like so many pebbles in a sand-pit, and fell clicking to the golden floor. With shaking hands the major dredged into the pit before him, mad with a very frenzy of greed.

"Stop!" cried the Master, sternly. "No nonsense, now!"

"What?" retorted Bohannan, angrily. His bruised, cut face reddened ominously.

"Drop those jewels, sir!"

"Why?"

"Principally because I order you to!" The Master's voice was cold, incisive. "They're worthless, now. No make-weights! We can't have make-weights at a time like this. To think of jewels at such an hour! Throw them back!"

A flash of rage distorted the major's face. His blue eyes burned with strange fire.

"Never!" he shouted, crouching there at the brink of the jewel-pit. "Call it insubordination, mutiny, anything you like, but I'm going to have my fill of these! Faith, but I _will_, now!"

"Sir--"

"I don't give a damn! Jewels for mine!" His voice rose gusty, raw, wild. "I've been a soldier of fortune all my life, and that's how I'm going to die. Poor, most of the time. Well, I'm going to die rich!"

His philippic against poverty and discipline tumbled out in a torrent of wild words, strongly tinged with the Irish accent that marked his passionate excitement. He sprang to his feet, and--raging--faced his superior officer. He shouted:

"Sure, and I've knocked up and down this rotten old world all my life, a rolling stone with never enough to bless myself with. And I've gone, at the end, on this wild-goose chase of yours, that's led you and me and all of us to a black death here in the bottom of a damned, fantastic, Arabian city of gold!

"That's all right, dying. That was in the bargain, if it had to be done. Two-thirds of us are dead, already, a damn sight better men than I am! We've been dying right along, from the beginning of this crack-brained Don Quixote crusade. That's all right. But, faith! now that it's my turn to die, by the holy saints I'm going to be well paid for it!"

Bohannan, eyes wild, struck his heaving breast with a huge fist and laughed like a maniac.

"That's all right, you reaching for your gun!" he defied the Master. "Go ahead, shoot! I'm rich already. My pockets are half full. Shoot, damn you, shoot!"

The Master laughed oddly, and let his hand fall from the pistol-butt.

"This," said he quite calmly, "is insanity."

"Ha! Insanity, it is? Well then, let me be insane, can't you? It's a good way to die. And I've lived, anyhow. We've all lived. We've all had a Hell of a run for our money, and it's time to quit.

"Shoot, if you want to--a few minutes more or less don't matter. But, faith, I'll die a millionaire, and that's something I never expected to be. Fine, fine! Give me a minute more, and I'll die a multi-millionaire! Sure, imagine that, will you? Major Aloysius Bohannan, gentleman-adventurer, a multi-millionaire! That's what I'll be, and the man don't live that can stop me now!"

With the laugh of a madman, the major fell to his knees again beside the pit, plunged his hands once more into the gleaming, sliding mass of wealth, and recommenced cramming his pockets.

The Master laughed again.

"It's quite immaterial, after all," said he. "I led you into this. And now it's very nearly a case of saue qui peut. The sooner your pockets are full, to the extreme limit, the sooner something like reason will return to you. Jewels being of interest to a man at death's door--it's quite characteristic of you, Bohannan. Help yourself!"

"Thanks, I will!" Bohannan flung up at him, blood-drabbled face pale and drawn by the flaring lamplight. "A _multi_-millionaire! Death? I should worry! Help myself? Faith, I just will, that!"

"Anyone else, here, feel so disposed?" the Master inquired. "If so, get it over and done with. We've got fighting ahead, and we'd better quench whatever thirst there is for wealth, first."

No one made any move. Only Bohannan's mind had been unsettled by the hoard, to the extent of wanting to possess it. Now that death loomed, empty pockets were as good, to all the rest, as any other sort.

"You're all a pack of damned fools!" Bohannan sneered. "You could die richer than Rockefeller, every man-jack of you, and you--you don't want to! Sure, it's _you_ that's mad, not me!"

No one answered. They all stood peering down at him, their faces tense, wounded, dirty; their eyes gleaming strangely; the shadow of Azrael's wing already enfolding them. Then, a few detached themselves from the little group and wandered off into the gloom, away from the pits. Leclair muttered:

"I prefer loading my automatic, to loading my pockets! Odd, the major is, eh? Ah well, _a chacun sa chimere!_"

"Everybody's weapons fully loaded?" the Master demanded. "Be sure they are! And don't forget the mercy-bullets, men. These Arabs are rather ingenious in their tortures. They make a specialty of crucifying unbelievers--upside down. That sort of thing won't do, for us not for fighting-men of the Legion!"

Bohannan, laughing, stood up. Every pocket was a-bulge with incalculable wealth.

"Now I'm satisfied," he remarked in more rational tones. "I reckon I must be worth more money, as I stand here, than any human being that ever lived. You're looking at the richest man in the world, gentlemen! And I'm going to die, the richest. If that's not some distinction, what is? For a man that was bone-poor, fifteen minutes ago! Now, sir--"

A sudden cry interrupted him. That cry came from "Captain Alden."

"Here! Look here!"

"What is it?" demanded the Master. He started toward her, while outside the door sounded dull commands, as if the Arabs-now organized to effective work--were already preparing to blow open the last barrier between them and their victims.

"What now?" the Master repeated, striding toward her.

"_See! See here!_"

A WAY OUT?

The woman stood pointing into a black recess at the far end of the crypt. All that the Master could discern there, at first, was a darkness even greater than that which shrouded the corners of the vault.

"Light, here!" he commanded. Ferrara swung a lamp, by its chain, into the recess. They saw a low, square opening in the wall of dull, gleaming metal.

"A passage, eh?" the Master ejaculated.

"Maybe a _cul-de-sac_," she answered. "But--there's no telling--it may lead somewhere."

"By Allah! Men! Here--all of you!"

The Master's voice rang imperatively. They all came trooping with naked or slippered feet that slid in the wet redness of the floor. Broken exclamations sounded.

Seizing the lamp, the Master thrust it into the opening, which measured no more than four feet high by three wide. The light smokily illuminated about three yards of this narrow passage. Then a sharp turn to the right concealed all else.

Whither this runway might lead, to what peril or what trap it might conduct them, none could tell. Very strongly it reminded the Master of the gallery in the Great Pyramid of Gizeh, which he had seen twelve years before--the gallery which in ancient days had served as a death-trap for treasure-seekers.

That gallery, he remembered, had contained a cleverly hidden stone in its floor which once on a time had precipitated pilferers down a vertical shaft more than a hundred feet, to death, in the bowels of that huge, terrifying mausoleum.

Was this passage of similar purpose and design? In all probability, yes. Oriental ways run parallel in all the lands of the East.

Nevertheless, the passage offered a means of escaping from the crypt. And there, with the dead Maghrabi mudirs, the Legionaries could not stay. In a few minutes now, at most, the men of Jannati Shahr would be upon them.

"Faith, what the devil now?" exclaimed Bohannan, now seeming quite rational, as he peered into the cramped corridor. "Where to Hell does this lead?"

"Just where you've said, to Hell, it's far more than likely," the Master retorted. "Come, men, into it! Follow me!"

He stooped, lamp in one hand, simitar in the other, and in a most cramped posture entered the passage. After him came Leclair, the woman, Bohannan, and the others.

The air hung close and heavy. The oppression of that stooping

position, the lamp-smoke, the unusual strain on the muscles, the realization of a whole world of gold above and all about them, seemed to strangle and enervate them. But steadily they kept on and on.

The turning of the passage revealed a long, descending incline, that sloped down at an angle of perhaps thirty degrees. A marked rise in temperature grew noticeable. What might that mean? None could imagine, but not one even thought of turning back.

The walls and floor in this straight, descending passage were now no longer smooth, arabesqued, polished. To the contrary, they showed a rough surface, on which the marks of the chisel could be plainly seen as it had shorn away the yielding metal in great gouges. Moreover, streaks of black granite now began to appear; and these, as the Legionaries advanced, became ever wider until at last the stone predominated.

The Master understood they were now coming to the bottom of part of the golden dyke. Undeviated by the hard rock, the tunnel continued to descend, with here and there a turn. Narrowly the Master scrutinized the floor, tapping it with the simitar as he crept onward, seeking indications of any possible trap that might hurl him into bottomless, black depths.

Quite at once, a right-angled turning opened into a small chamber not above eight feet high by fifteen square. In this, silent, listening, the sweating fugitives gathered.

The temperature was here oppressive, and the lamps burned blue with some kind of gas that stifled the lungs. Gas and smoke together, made breathing hard. A dull, roaring sound had begun to make itself vaguely audible, the past few minutes; and as the Legionaries stood listening, this was now rather plain to their ears.

"This is a devil of a place for a multi-millionaire, I must say!"

Bohannan exploded. Simonds laughed, with tense nerves. One or two others swore, bitterly cursing the men of El Barr.

The Master, "Captain Alden," and Leclair, however, gave no heed. Already they were peering around, at the black walls where now only an occasional thread of gold was to be seen.

Five openings led out of this singular chamber, all equally dark, narrow, formidable.

"This seems to be a regular labyrinth, my Captain," said Leclair, in French. "Surely a trap of some kind. They are clever, these Arabs. They let the mouse run and hope, then--_voila_--he is caught!"

"It looks that way. But we're not caught yet. These infernal passageways are all alike, to me. We must choose one. Well--this is as good as any." He gestured toward an aperture at the left. "Men, follow me!"

The passage they now entered was all of rock, with no traces whatever of gold. For a few hundred feet its course was horizontal; then it plunged downward like the first.

And almost immediately the temperature began to mount, once more.

"Faith, but I think we'd better be getting back!" exclaimed the major.
"I don't care much for this heat, or that roaring noise that's getting louder all the time!"

"You'll follow me, or I'll shoot you down!" the Master flung at him, crouching around. "I've had enough insubordination from _you_, sir! Not another word!"

The stooping little procession of trapped Legionaries once more went onward, downward. The muffled roar, ahead of them, rose in volume as they made a final turning and came into a much more spacious vault where moisture gouted from the black walls. A thin, steamy vapor was rising from the floor, warm to the bare feet.

A moment the Legionaries stood there, blinking in the vague lamplight, glad of the respite that permitted them to straighten up and ease cramped muscles.

"No way out of _here_!" Bohannan grumbled. "Sure, we're at the end o' nowhere. Now if we'd only taken another passage--"

Nobody paid him any heed. The major's exhibition of irrational greed had lost caste for him. Even Lebon, the orderly, curled a lip of scorn at him.

All eyes were eagerly searching for some exit from this ultimate pit. Panting, reeking with sweat, fouled with blood and dirt, the doomed men shuffled round the vault, blinking with bloodshot eyes.

No outlet was visible. The vault seemed empty. But all at once, Bristol uttered a cry.

"Wine-sacks, by the living jingo!" he exclaimed.

"Wine-sacks--in a Moslem city?" demanded the Master. "Impossible!"

"What else are these, sir?" the Englishman asked, pointing.

The Master strode to the corner where he stood, and flared his lamp over a score of distended goat-hides.

"Well, by Allah!" he ejaculated.

"Sacrificial wine," put in Leclair, at his elbow. "See the red seals, with the imprint of the star and crescent, here and here?" He touched a seal with his finger. "Rare old wine, I'll wager!"

"Wine!" gulped the major, whose excitable nerves had been frayed to madness. "Wine, by God! Faith, but it's the royal thirst I have on me! Who's got a knife?"

The Master thrust him back with such violence that he slipped on the wet floor and nearly fell.

"You'll get no knife, sir, and you'll drink no sacrificial wine!" he cried, with more of anger in his voice than any of the Legion had yet

heard. "The jewels--yes, I gave you your fool's way, on those. But no wine!

"We of the Flying Legion are going to die, sober men! There'll be no debauchery--no tradition handed down among those Moslem swine that they butchered us, drunk. If any of you men want to die right now, broach one of those wine-sacks!"

His simitar balanced itself for action. The glint in his eye, by the wavering lamp-shine, meant stern business. Not a hand was extended toward the tautly distended sacks.

Bohannon's whispered curse was lost in a startled cry from Wallace.

"Here's something!" he exclaimed. "Look at this ring, will you?"

They turned to him, away from the wine-bags. Wallace had fallen to his knees and was scraping slime from the wet floor--the slime of ages of dust mingled with viscid moisture from the steam that, thinly blurring the dark air, had condensed on the walls and run down.

Emilio thrust down the lamp he held. There on the stone floor, they saw a huge, rust-red iron ring that lay in a circular groove cut in the black granite.

This ring was engaged in a metal staple let into the stone. And now, as they looked more closely, and as some Legionaries scraped the floor with eager hands, a crack became visible in the floor of the vault.

"Look out, men!" the Master cautioned. "This may be a trap that will swing open and drop us into God knows what! Stand back, all--take your time, now! Go slow there!"

They heeded, and stood back. The Master himself, assuming all risks, got down on hands and knees and explored the crack in the floor. It was square, with a dimension of about five feet on the edge.

"It's a trap-door, all right," he announced. "And we--are going to open it!"

"One would need a rope or a long lever to do that, my Captain," put in Leclair. "It is obvious that a man, or men, standing on the trap, could not raise it. And it is too large to straddle."

The Master arose, stripped off his tunic and passed it through the ring. He twisted the tunic and gave one end to the lieutenant. Himself, he took the other.

"Get hold, everybody!" he commanded. "And be sure you're not standing on the trap!"

All laid hold on the ends of the coat. With a "One, two, three!" from the Master, the Legionaries threw all their muscle into the lift. "Now, men! Heave her once more!"

The stone gave. The Legionaries doubled their efforts, with panting breath, feet that slipped on the dank floor, grunts of labor.

"Heave her!"

Up swung the stone, aside. It slid over the wet rock. There, in its place, gaped a black hole that penetrated unknown depths.

Steam billowed up--or rather, vapor distinctly warm to the touch. And from very far below, much louder boomed the roar of rushing waters. The Legionaries knew, now, what had caused the dull, roaring sound. Unmistakably a furious cascade was boiling, swirling away, down there at undetermined distances of blackness.

The boldest men among the little group of fugitives felt the crawl and fingering of a very great dread at their hearts. Behind them lay the labyrinth, with what pitfalls none could tell and with the Jannati Shahr men perhaps already penetrating into the crypt. Around them loomed the black, wet walls of this lowest stone dungeon with but one other exit--the pit at their feet.

The Master threw himself prone on the slippery floor, took one of the lamps and lowered it, by the chain, to its capacity. Smoke and vapor arose about his head as he peered down.

"Well, what is it?" demanded Bohannan, also squinting down, as he bent over the hole. "What do you see?"

"Nothing," the Master answered. "Nothing definite."

He could, in fact, be sure of nothing. But it seemed to him that, very far below, he could make out something like a swift, liquid blackness, streaked with dim-speeding lines of white that dissolved with phantasmagoric rapidity; a racing flood that roared and set the solid rock a-quiver in its mad tumult.

"Faith, an underground river of hot water!" ejaculated the Irishman with an oath. "Some river!"

"Warm water, at any rate," the Master judged, getting up again. A strange smile was in his eyes, by the smoky lamplight. "Well, men, this is our way out. The Arabs are not going to have any slaughter of victims, here. And what is more, they'll capture no dead bodies of white men, in this trap! There'll be at least ten skulls missing from that interesting golden Pyramid of Ayeshah!"

"For God's sake!" the major stammered. "What--what are you going to--do, now? Jump down that shaft?"

"Exactly. Your perspicacity does you credit, Major."

"Sure, you'll never catch me jumping!"

"Gentlemen," the Master said, in a low, quiet voice, "I regret to state that we have one coward among us."

CHAPTER XLVIII

THE RIVER OF NIGHT

The major's clenched fist was caught as it drove, by a scientific guard from the Master's right. The Master dropped his lamp, and with a straight left-hander sprawled Bohannan on the slimy pave. Impersonally he stood over the crazed Celt.

"Will you jump, voluntarily," demanded he, "or shall we be under the painful necessity of having to throw you down that pit?"

Enough rationality remained in the major to spur his pride. He crawled to his feet, chastened.

"You win, sir," he answered. "Who goes first?"

A dull reverberation shuddered the rock, the air.

"_Vive Nissr_!" exulted Leclair. "Ah, now our men, they attack the city!"

"I'm sorry to disillusion you," the Master answered, "but my explosive produces an entirely different type of concussion. What we have just heard is the blowing-in of the treasure-crypt door. There's no time to lose, now. Who jumps, first?"

"Wait a minute!" cried "Captain Alden." Her eyes were gleaming through the mask, with keen excitement. "Why neglect any chance of possibly surviving?"

"What do you mean?" the Master demanded.

"Those wine-sacks!"

"Well?"

"Emptied, inflated, and tied up again, they'll float us! It's the oldest kind of device used in the Orient!"

"By Allah, inspiration! Quick, men, the wine-skins!"

Himself, he set the example. Knife in hand, while Emilio held the lamp for him, he crumbled the seals on one of the goat-skins, then cut the leather thong that secured the neck, and quickly unwound it. He dragged the sack to the black pit and tipped it up.

With a gulp and a gurgle, the precious old wine, clear ruby under the dim light, gushed away down the steaming shaft that plunged to the River of Night.

"Oh, faith now, but that's a damned shame, sir!" Bohannan protested, rubbing an ugly welt on his brow. His voice was thick, dull, unnatural. Madness glimmered in his blinking eyes. "With the blessed tongue of me parched to a cinder! And wine like that! Here, sir--take a handful of diamonds, or whatever, and give me just one little drink!"

""Bristol! Restrain that man!" the Master ordered. "If you can't handle him, get help!"

As a couple of Legionaries laid hands on the major, another voice

spoke up. It was that of Ferrara, the Italian ace:

"The major is right, sir, in spite of all! Good wine in our throats would make death less bitter. 'We who are about to die, salute thee'--and ask wine!"

The Master peered sharply from beneath black brows. Discipline seemed crumbling. Now at what might be, perhaps, the last minute of his command, was the Master's word to be made light of? Were his orders to be gainsaid?

"No wine!" he flung at all of them, his voice tense as wire. "Who says we are about to die? Why, there may be a fighting chance, even yet! This underground river may come to light, somewhere. And if it does, it may bear us back to day, again.

"But the confusion of wine may just turn the scale against our getting through. No wine! We started on that basis. That's the basis we're going through on. No wine, I say--no wine!"

Murmurs answered him, but no man dared rebel. Discipline still gripped the Legionaries. The Master drove them to labor. "Come, quick now! Prepare a sack, apiece! I'll show you how!"

He set lips to the emptied skin, and with many lungfuls of strong breath inflated it. The leather thong tightly wrapped the neck. He doubled that neck over, and took more turns with the thong, then tied it in a tight square knot.

"Get to work, men!" he ordered. "To work!"

They obeyed. Even the major, brain-shaken as he was, fell in with the orders. The floor, all round the black pit, ran red with precious wine, a single cupful of which would have delighted the heart of the world's most Lucullian gourmet.

Up from that floor and from the jetty, steaming walls of the pit drifted ambrosial perfume that evoked visions of ancient vineyards where, under the Eastern sun, bloomy clusters of grape--mayhap even the very grape sung by the Tent-maker--hung ripening.

Still, none stooped to the mouths of the wine-skins, to taste. None drank from cupped palm. Dry-mouthed, hot, panting, the Legionaries still obeyed. And thus the rare wine of Araby ran guttering to the unseen blackness of the mystery river far below.

The Master, hands on hips, watched this labor; and as he watched he laughed.

"Whatever comes to us, men," judged he, "we are here and now doing great evil to the men of El Barr. My only regret is that we haven't time to return up through the labyrinth, to the jewel-crypt, fill the skins with jewels and dump them all down this shaft like the wine. These Moslem swine would then remember us, many a long day. Ah, well, some day we may come back--who knows?"

He fell silent, while the last of the skins were being filled and lashed. The last, that is to say, needed by the Legionaries. Ten in all, were now blown up and securely tied. But a good many more still

remained full of the rare wine.

With his simitar, the Master slashed these quickly, one by one.

"They took our blood," he cried. "We have taken theirs--and their wine, too. And have destroyed Myzab and the Black Stone, no doubt. Well, it's a bargain!"

"C'est egal!" exclaimed Leclair. "More than that, eh, my Captain?"

The Master returned to the shaft, his bare feet red through the run and welter of the wine on the stone floor.

"Now men," said he, crisply, as he flung down the pit his simitar which could have no further use, "this may be the final chapter. Our Legion was organized for adventure. We've had it. No one can complain. If it's good-bye, now--so be it.

"There may be a chance, however, of winning through. Hold fast to your goat-skins; and if the hidden river isn't too hot, and if there's head-room, some of us may get through to daylight. Let us try to reassemble where we find the first practicable stopping-place. If the Jannati Shahr men are waiting for us, there, don't be taken alive. Remember!

"Now, give me your hand, each one, and--down the shaft with you!"

Simonds went first, boldly, without a quiver of fear. Silently and with set jaw, he shook hands with the Master, clutched a distended wine-bag in both arms, and quickly leaped.

His body vanished, instantly, from sight. Steam and darkness swallowed it. Far below, a dull splash told of his disappearance.

Lebon followed, after having given his torture-twisted hand to his beloved lieutenant, as well as to the Master.

"Notre Pere qui etes aux cieux!" he stammered, as the pit received him.

Then went Wallace, Ferrara, and Emilio. Of these three, only the last showed anything resembling the white feather. Emilio's face was waxen, with staring eyes reflecting unspeakable horror, as he took the leap into the River of Night. But he went mutely, with no outcry.

Bristol, sheathed in imperturbable British aplomb, remarked:

"Well, so long, boys! This is jolly beastly, eh? But we'll meet on that beautiful shore!"

Then he, too, jumped into the black.

Leclair, inappropriately enough, leaped with a shout of: "Vive la France!"

Now only Bohannan, "Captain Alden," and the Master were left.

"You're next, Major!" the Master ordered, pointing at the inexorable black mouth of the pit, whence rose the thin,

wraith-spirals of vapor.

"I'm ready!" exclaimed the major. "Sure, what's better than a hot bath after the heavy exercise we've been having?" His voice rose buoyantly over the drumming roar of the mysterious, underground torrent. "Ready, sir! But if you'll only give me one wee sup of good liquor, sir, I'll die like an Irishman and a gentleman--of fortune!"

"No, liquor, Major," the Master answered, shaking his head. "Can't you see for yourself all the wine-sacks are cut?"

"Cut, is it? Well, well, so they are!" The major blinked redly. Obviously his confused mind had not grasped the situation. "Well, sure, that's a pity, now." And he fell to gnawing that tawny mustache of his.

"Come Major, you're next!" the Master bade him. "Take your wine-skin and jump!"

Clarity of mind for a moment returned to Bohannan. Gallantly he shook hands with the Master, saluted "Captain Alden," and picked up his wine-sack.

"It's a fine whirl we've had," he affirmed, with one of his old-time smiles, his teeth gleaming by the light of the silver lamp in the Master's hand. "No man could ask a better."

I'd rather have seen what I've seen, and done what I've done, and now jump to Hell and gone, than be safe and sound this minute on Broadway.

"Please overlook any little irregularities of conduct, sir My brain, you know, and--well, good-bye!"

Calmly he picked up his sack and without more ado jumped into the void.

"Now," said the Master, when "Captain Alden" and he remained alone. "Now--you and I!"

"Yes," the woman answered. "You and I, at last!"

The Master set down his lamp on the floor all wet with condensed vapor and wine. He loosened the buckles of her mask, took the mask off and tossed it into the pit.

"Finis, for _that_" said he, and smiled strangely. "You aren't going to be handicapped by any mask, in whatever struggle lies ahead of us. If you get through to the world, and to life again, you get through as a woman.

"If not, you die as one. But the disguise is done with, and gone. You understand me!"

"Yes. I understand," she answered, and stood peering up at him. Not even the white welts and ridges cut in her flesh by the long wearing of the mask could make her face anything but very beautiful. Her wonderful eyes mirrored far more, as they looked into this strange man's, than would be easy to write down in words.

"I understand," she repeated. "If this is death, I couldn't have dreamed or hoped for a better one. In that, at least, we can be eternally together--you and I!"

Silence fell, save for the shuddering roar of the black river, that rose with vapors from the dark pit. Man and woman, they searched out each other's souls with their gaze.

Then all at once the Master took her hand, and brought it to his heart and held it there. The lamp-shine, obliquely striking upward from the floor, cast deep shadows over their faces; and these shadows seemed symbolic of the shadows of death closing about them at this hour of self-revelation.

"Listen," said the Master, in a wholly other voice from any that had ever come from his lips. "I am going to tell you something. At a moment like this, a man speaks only the exact truth. This is the exact truth.

"In all the years of my life and in all my wanderings up and down this world, I have never seen a woman--till now--whom I felt that I could love. I have lived like an anchorite, celled in absolute isolation from womankind. Incredible as it may seem to you, I have never even kissed a woman, with a kiss of love. But--I am going to kiss you, now."

He took her face in both his hands, drew it up for a moment, gazed at it with a fixity of passion that seemed to burn. The woman's eyes drooped shut. Her lips yearned to his. Then his stern arms in-drew her to his breast, and for a moment she remained there, silently.

All at once he put her from him.

"Now, go!" he commanded. "I shall follow, close. And wait for me--if there is any waiting!"

He picked up one of the two remaining wine-sacks, and put it into her hands.

"Cling to this, through everything!" he commanded. "Cling, as you love life. Cling, as you share my hope for what may be, if life is granted us! And--the mercy-bullet, if it comes to that!

"Now--good-bye!"

She smiled silently and was gone.

The Master, now all alone, stood waiting yet a moment. His face was bloodless. His lower lip was mangled, where his teeth had nearly met, through it.

Already, a confused murmur of sound was developing, from the black opening of the passage that had led the Legionaries down to this crypt of the wine-sacks and the pit.

He smiled, oddly.

"Many a corpse has been flung down this _oubliette_," said he. "I hate to go, without emptying my pistol into a few more of the Moslem swine,

and dropping them down here to join my people. But--I must!"

He bent, gathered together the silver lamps left by his men, and threw them all into the abyss. Blackness, absolute, blotted the reeking chamber from his sight.

The faintest possible aura of light began to loom from the mouth of the passage. More distinctly, now, the murmur of Arab voices was becoming audible.

The Master leaped.

Far below, at the bottom of the pit, as the Arabs burst into the wine-vault, sounded a final impact of some heavy body striking swift water that swept it instantly away.

Then silence filled the black, rock-hewn chamber in the labyrinthine depths of Jannati Shahr.

CHAPTER XLIX

THE DESERT

The Desert.

Four men, one woman.

Save for these five living creatures, all was death. All was that great emptiness which the Arabs call "La Siwa Hu"--that is to say, the land "where there is none but He."

Over terrible spaces, over immense listening silences of hard, unbroken dunes extending in haggard desolation to fantastic horizons of lurid ardor, hung a heat-quivering air of deathlike stillness. Redder than blood, a blistering sun-ball was losing itself behind far, iron hills of black basalt. A flaming land it was, naked and bare, scalped and flayed to the very bones of its stark skeleton.

Heavily, and with the dazed look of beings who feel themselves lost yet still are driven by the life within them to press on, the five fugitives--pitiable handful of the Legion--were plodding south-west, toward the sunset.

The feet of all were cut and bleeding, in spite of rags torn from their tattered uniforms and bound on with strips of cloth; for everywhere through the sand projected ridges of vertical, sharp stone--the black basalt named by the Arabs _Hajar Jehannum_, or "Rock of Hell." As for their uniforms, though now dry as bone, the way in which they were shrunken and wrinkled told that not long ago they had been drenched in water of strongly mordant qualities.

Each figure bore, on its bent back, a goat-skin bag as heavily filled with water as could be carried. Strongly alkaline as that water was, corroding to the mouth and nauseous to the taste, still the refugees were clinging to it. For only this now stood between them and one

of the most hideous deaths known to man--the death of thirst in the wilderness.

The woman's face, in spite of pain, anxiety, weariness, retained its beauty. Her heavy masses of hair, bound up with cloth strips, protected her head from "the great enemy," the sun. As for the others, they had improvised rough headgear from their torn shirts, ingeniously tied into some semblance of _cherchias_. Above all, the Legionaries knew that they must guard their heads from the direct rays of the desert sun.

In silence, all plodded on, on, toward the bleeding sphere that, now oblate through flaming mists, was mercifully sinking to rest. No look of surprise marked the face of any man, that "Captain Alden" was in reality a woman. The Legionaries' anguish, the numbing, brutalizing effects of their recent experience had been too great for any minor emotions to endure. They had accepted this fact like all others, as one of a series of incredible things that had, none the less, been true.

For a certain time the remnant of the Legion dragged itself south-westward, panting, gasping, wasting no breath in speech. Leclair was first to utter words.

"Let us rest a little while, _mon capitaine_," said he in a hoarse, choking voice. "Rest, and drink again. I know the desert. Many hundreds of miles lie between us and the coast. Nothing can be gained by hastening, at first. All may be lost. Let us rest, at all events, until that cursed sun has set!"

In silence the Master cast down his water-bag, at the bottom of the little, desolate valley of gravel through which the fugitives were now toiling. All did the same, and all sat down--or rather, fell--upon the hot earth.

Very different, now, this land was from what it had seemed as they had soared above it, at cool altitudes, in the giant air-liner; very different from the cool, green plain of El Barr, behind the grim black line of the Iron Mountains now a dim line off to eastward.

The sprawling collapse of the Legionaries told more eloquently than any words the exhaustion that already, after only four hours' trek, was strangling the life out of them.

For a while they lay there motionless, unthinking, brutalized by fatigue and pain. With their present condition as an earnest of what was yet to come, what hope had any that even one of them would live to behold the sparkle of the distant Red Sea? Even though unmolested by pursuit from Jannati Shahr or by attack from any wandering tribes of the Black Tent People, what hope could there be?

Gradually some coherence of thought returned to the Master. He sat up, painfully, and blinked with reddened eyes at the woman. She was lying beside her water-bag, seemingly asleep. The Master's face drew into lines of anguish as he looked at her.

With bruised fingers he loosened the thong of his own water-bag, and tore still another strip from his remnant of shirt. He poured a little of the precious water on to this rag, lashed the water-sack tight

again, and with the warm, wet rag bathed the woman's face, brow, and throat.

Her closed lids did not open. No one paid any attention. No one even stirred. The cloth grew dry, almost at once, as the thirsty air absorbed its moisture. The Master pocketed it. Elbows on knees, head between hands, he sat there pondering.

In thought he was living over again the incredible events of the past hours, as they had been presented to his own experience. He was remembering the frightful, dizzying plunge down the black pit into the steaming waters of the River of Night--waters which, had they been but a few degrees hotter, would incontinently have ended everything on the instant.

He was recalling, as in a nightmare, his frenzied battle for life, clinging to the inflated goat-skin--the whirl and thunder of unseen cataracts in the blind dark--the confusion of deafening, incomprehensible violences.

He was bringing back to mind the long, swift, smooth rushing of mighty waters through midnight caverns where echoes had told of a rock-roof close above; then, after an indeterminate time of horror that might have been minutes or hours, a weltering maelstrom of leaping waters--a graying of light on swift-fleeing walls; a sudden up-boiling gush of the strangling flood that whelmed him--and all at once a glare of sun, a river broadening out through palm-groves far beyond the Iron Mountains.

All these things, blurred, unreal, heartshaking as evil visions of fever, the Master was remembering. Then came other happenings: a long drift with resistless currents, the strange phenomenon of the lessening stream that dwindled as thirsty sands absorbed it, and the ceasing of the palms.

Last of all, the river had diminished to a shallow, tortuous delta, where the Master's numbed feet had touched bottom. There he had dragged himself ashore, with his goatskin, far more dead than living. And there, for a time he knew not, consciousness had wholly ceased.

A dull, toneless voice sounded in the Master's ears. Bohannan was speaking.

"Faith, but it's strange how even the five of us found each other, out there in the sand," said the major. "What happened to the rest of us, God knows--maybe!" He choked, coughed, added: "Or to the boys with Nissr. God rest their souls! I wish I had a sackful of that wine!" After a long pause: "Don't you, now? What?"

The Master gave no heed. He was trying to ease the position in which the woman was lying. His jacket was off, now, and he was folding it to put under her head.

At his touch, she opened vague eyes. She smiled with dry lips, and put his hand away.

"No, no!" she protested. "No special favors for me! I'm not a woman, remember. I'm 'Captain Alden,' still--only a Legionary!"

"But--"

"If you favor me in any way, to the detriment of any of the others or your own, I won't go on! I'm just one of you. Just one of the survivors, on even terms with the rest. It's give-and-take. I mean that! You've got to understand me!"

The Master nodded. He knew that tone. Silently he put on his jacket, again.

The lieutenant's orderly, Lebon, groaned and muttered a prayer to the Virgin. Leclair sat up, heavily, and blinked with sand-inflamed eyes.

"Time to drink again, *_n'est-ce pas_*, my Captain?" asked he. "Drink to the dead!"

"I hope they are dead, rather than prisoners!" exclaimed the Master. "Yes, we'll drink, and get forward. We've got to make long strides, tonight. Those Jannati Shahr devils may be after us, tomorrow. Surely will, if they investigate that delta and find only a few bodies. They'll conclude some of us have got through. And if they pick up our trail, with those white dromedaries of theirs--"

"The sacred pigs!" ejaculated Leclair. "Ah, *_messieurs_*, now you begin to know the Arabs as I have long known them." With eyes of hate and pain he peered back at the darkening line of the Iron Mountains.

Bohannon, already loosening the neck of his goat-skin, laughed hoarsely.

"No wine!" he croaked, "and the water's rationed; even the stinking water. But the food isn't--good reason, too; there isn't any. Pockets full of gems!" He slapped one hard pocket. "I'd swap the lot for a proper pair of shoes and a skin o' that wine! Faith--that wine, now--"

The woman suddenly sat up, too, one hand on the hot gravel, the other raised for silence.

"Hark!" she whispered. "Sh!"

"What now?" demanded the Master.

"Bells! Camel-bells!"

"*_Nom d'un, nom!_*" And the lieutenant drew his gun.

The five fugitives stiffened for another battle. They looked well to their weapons. The Master's weariness and pain were forgotten as he crawled on hands and knees up the side of the little wady. The sound of distant camel-bells, a thin, far quiver of sound, had now reached his ears and those of the other men, less sensitive than the woman's.

Over the edge of the wady he peered, across a *_wa'ar_*, or stony ground covered with mummified scrub. Beyond, a blanched salt-plain gleamed hoar-white in the on-coming dusk; and farther off, the dunes began again.

Strangely enough, the Master laughed. He turned and beckoned, silently. The others joined him.

"From the west!" he whispered. "This is no pursuit! It is a caravan going to Jannati Shahr!"

Bohannan chuckled, and patted his revolver.

"Faith, but Allah is being good to us!" he muttered. "Now, when it comes to a fight--"

"Ten dromedaries--no, nine--" Leclair judged.

"And six camel-drivers," put in the woman, gun in hand. "A small caravan!"

"Hold your fire, all!" commanded the Master. "They're headed right across this wady. Wait till I give the word; then rush them! And--no prisoners!"

CHAPTER L

"WHERE THERE IS NONE BUT ALLAH"

An hour after sundown, four Legionaries pushed westward, driving the gaunt, mange-stained camels. In the sand near the wady lay buried Leclair and all the camel-drivers, with the sand smoothed over them so as to leave as little trace as possible.

Leclair had come to the death of all deaths he would have most abominated, death by ruse at the hands of an Arab. Not all his long experience with Arabs had prevented him from bending over a dead camel-driver. The dead man had suddenly revived from his feigned death and driven a _jambiyeh_ into the base of the lieutenant's throat. That the lieutenant's orderly had instantly shattered the cameleer's skull with a point-blank shot had not saved Leclair.

The four survivors, in addition to burying all the bodies, had buried the copper bars the caravan had been freighting to Jannati Shahr. They had saved the scant food and water of the drivers, also their clothing, slippers, daggers, long rifles, and ammunition.

Now, dressed like Arabs--the best of all disguises in case of being sighted by pursuers or by wandering Black Tent tribes, from far off--they were trekking westward again, riding four of the camels and leading the others.

For a week of Hell the failing beasts, already half dead of thirst when captured, bore them steadily south-west, toward the coast. Twice there rose spirals of smoke, in the desert distances; but whether these were from El Barr pursuers or were merely Bedouin encampments they could not tell.

Merciless goading kept the camels going till they dropped dead, one by one.

By the end of the fourth day only three remained. Lebon methodically

cut up every one that perished, for water, but found none in any stomach.

The fugitives sighted no oasis. They found no wady other than stone-dry. By day they slept, by night pushed forward. Day by day they grew weaker and less rational. The increasing nerve-strain that possessed them was companioned by the excruciating torture of their bodies racked by the swaying jolt of camel-riding.

But they still kept organization and coherence. Still, guided by the stars that burned with ardent trembling in the black sky, they followed their chosen course.

Morning heat-mist, noontide glare, wind like a beast with flaming breath, a sky terrible in its stainless beauty, an inescapable sun-furnace that seemed to boil the brains in their skulls--all these and the mockery of mirages that made every long white line of salt efflorescence a lake of cooling waters, brought the four tortured Legionaries close to death.

Awaking toward evening of the fifth day, the Master discovered one of the three camels gone--the one on which he had been riding with the woman, lest she fall fainting to the sand. With this camel, Major Bohannan had likewise disappeared. His big-shouldered, now emaciated figure in its dirty-white burnous was nowhere visible. Only prints of soft hoof-pads, leading off to north-eastward, betrayed the line of flight.

The Master pondered a while as he sat there, dazed, blinking at the desert all purple, gold, and tawny-red. His inflamed eyes, stubbly beard and gaunt cheeks made him a caricature of the man he had been, ten days before. After a little consideration, he awakened the woman and Lebon.

The verdict on Bohannan was madness, mirage, desertion.

For two days the major had been babbling of wine and water, been beholding things that were not, been hurling jewels at imaginary vultures. Now, well, the desert had got him.

To pursue would have been insanity. They got the two remaining camels up, by dint of furious beating and of hoarse eloquence in Arabic from the Master and Lebon. Once more, knowing themselves doomed, they pushed into the eye of the flaming west, over the savage gorgeousness of the Empty Abodes. In less than an hour the double-laden camel fell to its knees and incontinently died.

Lebon dismounted from the one surviving animal, and stepped fair into a scorpion's nest. The horrible little gray creature, striking up over its back with spiked tail, drove the deadly barb half an inch into the orderly's naked ankle.

The Master scarified, sucked, and cauterized the wound. Nothing availed. Lebon, in his depleted condition, could not fight off the poison. Thirty minutes later, swollen and black, he died in a frothing spasm, his last words a hideous imprecation on the Arabs who had enslaved and tortured him--a curse on the whole race of Moslems.

Shaken with horror, the woman and the man buried Lebon, loaded the

remaining water-bags, the guns and food on to the one camel and dragged themselves away on foot, driving the spent beast. Obviously this camel could not go far. Blindness had stricken it, and its black lips were retracted with the parch of thirst.

They gave it half a skin of water, and goaded it along with desperation. Everything now depended on this camel. Even though it could not carry them, it could bear the burden of their scant supplies. Without it, hope was lost.

All that night they drove the tortured camel. It fell more and more often. The Master spared it not. For on its dying strength depended the life of the woman he loved.

The camel died an hour before dawn. Not even vultures wheeled across the steely sky. The Master cut from its wasted flanks a few strips of meat and packed them into one of the palm-stick baskets that had held the cameleers' supplies. With them he packed all the remaining food--a few lentils, a little goat's-milk cheese, and a handful of dates fried in clarified butter.

This basket, with a revolver and a handful of cartridges, also the extra slippers taken from Leclair and the orderly, made all the burden the woman could carry. The Master's load, heavier far, was one of the water-skins.

This load, he knew, would rapidly lighten. As it should diminish, faster than the woman's, he would take part of hers. Thus, as best they could, they planned the final stage of their long agony.

Before starting again, they sat a while beside the gaunt, mangled camel, held council of war and pledged faith again. They drank a little of the mordant water that burned the throat and seemed in no wise to relieve the horrible thirst that blackened their lips and shriveled all their tissues.

"I think," the Master gasped, "we can make an hour or so before the sun gets too bad." He squinted at the crimson and purple banderoles of cloud through which, like the eye of a fevered Cyclops, the sun was already glowering. Already the range of obsidian hills ahead of them, the drifted sands all fretted with wind-waves, the whole iron plain of the desert was quivering with heat. "Every hour counts, now. Before we start, let us agree to certain things."

She nodded silently, crouching beside him on the sand. He drew an emaciated arm about her and for a moment peered down into her face. But he did not kiss her. A kiss, as they both were--some fine delicacy of the soul seemed telling him--would have been mockery.

"Listen," he commanded. "We must strictly ration the food and water. You must help me keep to that ration. I will help you. We must be careful about scorpions. Above all, we must beware of mirages. You understand?"

"I understand," she whispered.

"If either of us sees palms or water, that one must immediately tell the other. Then, if the other does not also see them, that is a mirage. We must not turn aside for anything like that, unless we both

see it. I am speaking rationally, now that I can. Remember what I say!"

Silently she nodded. He went on:

"Now that we can still think, we must weigh every contingency. Our only hope lies in our helping each other. Alone, either of us will be led away by mirages in a little while. That kind of death must be spared us. We both live or die, together."

She smiled faintly, with parched lips.

"Do you think I would leave you," she asked, "any more than you would leave me? The pact is binding."

He pressed her hand.

"Come," said he. "Let us go!"

Once more they got to their feet, and set out to south-westward, over a scorching plain of crumbling, nitrous mud-flakes. Laden as they were, they could barely shuffle one foot after the other. But blessed lapses of consciousness now and then relieved their agony.

Conscious or not, the life within them drove them onward, ever onward; slow, crawling things that all but blindly moved across the land of death, _La Siwa Hu_--"where there is none but Allah."

CHAPTER LI

TORTURE

How that day passed, they knew not. Nature is kind. When agony grows too keen, the All-mother veils the tortured body with oblivion.

Over blood-colored stretches swept by the volcano-breath of the desert, through acacia barrens and across basaltic ridges the two lonely figures struggled on and on. They fell, rested, slept a nightmare sleep under the furious heat, got up again and dragged themselves once more along.

Now they were conscious of plains all whitened with saltpeter, now of scudding sand-pillars--wind-_jinnee_ of the Empty Abodes--that danced and mocked them. Again, one or the other beheld paradisaical, gleaming lakes, afar.

But though they had lost the complete rationality that would have bidden them lie quiet all day, and trek only at night, they still remembered the pact of the mirages. And since never both beheld the same lake, they held each other from the fatal madness that had slain Bohannan.

Their only speech was when discussing the allurements of beckoning waters which were but air.

At nightfall, toiling up over the lip of a parched, chalky _nullah_ that sunset turned to amethyst, a swarm of howling Arabs suddenly attacked them. The Master flung himself down, and fired away all his ammunition, in frenzy. The woman, catching his contagion, did likewise.

No shots came back; and suddenly the Arabs vanished from the man's sight. When he stumbled forward to the place where they had been, he discovered no dead bodies, not even a footprint.

Nothing was there but a clump of acacias, their twisted thorns parched white. They had been shooting at only fantasies of their own brains. Now, even the mercy-bullets were gone.

Bitterly the man cursed himself, as he thrust the now useless pistol back into its holster. The woman, however, smiled with dry lips, and from her belt took out a little, flattened piece of lead--the bullet which, fired at _Nissr_ from near the Ka'aba, had fallen at her feet and been picked up by her as a souvenir.

"Here is a bullet," said she chokingly. "You can cut this in two and shape it. We can reload two shells with some of the Arab powder. It will do!"

They laughed irrationally. More than half mad as they now were, neither one thought of the fact that they had no percussion-caps.

Still laughing, they sat down in the hot sand, near the clawlike distortions of the acacias. Consciousness lapsed. They slept. The sun's anger faded; and a steel moon, long after, slid up the sky.

Next day, many miles to south-westward of the acacias, Kismet--toying with them for its own delectation--respite them a little while by stumbling them on to a deserted oasis. They turned aside to this only after a long, irrational discussion. The fact that they could both see the same thing, and that they had really come to palm trees--trees they could touch and feel--gave them fresh courage.

Little enough else they got there. The cursed place, just a huddle of blind, mud huts under a dozen sickly trees, had been swept clean some time ago by the passage of a swarm of those voracious locusts known as _jarad Iblis_ (the locusts of Satan).

Nothing but bare branches remained in the _nakhil_, or grove. Nothing at all was to be found in the few scrubby fields about the well now choked with masses of the insects. Whoever the people of this squalid settlement had been, all were gone. The place was almost as bare as if the sun's flames, themselves, had flared down and licked the village to dust and ashes.

All the sufferers found, of any worth, was a few handfuls of dry dates in one of the hovels and a water-jar with about two quarts of brackish water.

This water the Master discovered, groping half blind through the hut. Stale as it was, it far surpassed the strongly chemicalized water of the River of Night, still remaining in the goat-skin. It smote him with the most horrible temptation of his life. All the animal in his nature, every parched atom of his body shouted.

"Take it! Drink, drink your fill! She will never know. Take it, and drink!"

He seized the water-jar, indeed, but only to carry it with shaking hands to her, where she lay in the welcome shadow of the hut. His lips were black with thirst as he raised her head and cried to her:

"Here is water--real water! Drink!"

She obeyed, hardly more than half conscious. He gave her all he dared to have her drink at once, nearly half. Then he set down the jar, loosened the sack from his shoulders which were cut raw with the chafing of the thongs, and bathed her face with a little of that other water which, though bad, still might keep life in them.

"This may be an insane waste," he was thinking, "but it will help revive her. And--maybe--we shall find another, better oasis."

Out across the plain he peered, over the sun-dried earth, out into the distances shrouded with purple mists. His blurred eyes narrowed.

"Why, my God! There's one, now!" he muttered. "A green one--cool--fresh--"

The Master laid the woman down again in the shadow, got up and staggered out into the blinding sun. He tottered forward, laughing hoarsely.

"Cool--_fresh_--" The words came from between parched lips.

All at once the oasis faded to a blur in the brilliant tapestry of the desert that beckoned: "Come to me--and die!"

The Master recoiled, hands over eyes, mouthing unintelligible words. Back beside the woman he crouched, fighting his own soul to keep it from madness. Then he heard her voice, weak, strange:

"Have you drunk, too?"

"Of course!"

"You are not--telling me the truth."

"So help me God!" His fevered lips could hardly form the words. "There, in the hut--I drank. All I needed."

She grew silent. His conscience lapsed. They lay as if dead, till almost evening, under the shelter of the blessed shadow.

The rest, even in that desolation, put fresh life into them. At nightfall they bound up their feet again, ate the dry dates and again set their blistered faces toward the Red Sea.

The woman's basket was now light, indeed, across her shoulders. Not all her begging had induced the Master to let her carry the water-jug there. This, too, he was carrying.

All night long, stopping only when one or the other fell, they

ploughed over basalt and hornblende schist that lacerated their feet, over blanched immensities under the steel moon, across grim, black ridges and through a basin of clay, circled by hills.

Strange apparitions mocked and mowed before them, but grimly they gave no heed. This, they both realized in moments of lucidity, was the last trek. Either they must find the sea, before another night, or madness would sink its fangs into their brains. And madness meant--the end.

Their whole consciousness was pain. This pain localized itself especially in their heads, round which some _jinnee_ of the waste had riveted red-hot iron bands. There was other pain, too, in the limping feet cased in the last of the _babooches_, now stiffened with blood. And in the throat and lungs, what was this burning?

CHAPTER LII

"Thalassa! Thalassa!"

Another of those horrible, red mornings, with a brass circle of horizon flaming all around in the most extraordinary fireworks topped by an azure zenith, found them still crawling south-westwards making perhaps a mile an hour.

Disjointed words and sentences kept framing themselves in the man's mind; above all, a sentence he had read long ago in Greek, somewhere. Where had he read that? Oh, in Xenophon, of course. In _The Retreat of the Ten Thousand._ The Master gulped it aloud, in a dead voice:

"Most terrible of all is--the desert--for it is full-of a great want."

After a while he knew that he was trying to laugh.

"A great want!" he repeated. "A great--"

Presently it was night again.

The Master's mind cleared. Yes, there was the woman, lying in the sand near him. But where was the date-stick basket? Where was the last of the food? He tried to think.

He could remember nothing. But reason told him they must have eaten the last of the food and thrown the basket away. His shoulders felt strangely light. What was this? The water-bag was gone, too?

But that did not matter. There had been only a little of that chemicalized water left, anyhow. Perhaps they had drunk it all, or bathed their faces and necks with it. Who could tell? The water-sack was gone; that was all he knew.

A great fear stabbed him. The water-jar! Was that still on his back? As he felt the pull of a thong, and dragged the jar around so that he could blink at it, a wonderful relief for a moment deadened his pain.

"_Allah iselmak!_" he croaked, blessing the scant water the jar still

held. He realized the woman was looking at him.

"Water!" he whispered. "Let us drink again--and go on!"

She nodded silently. He loosed the thong, took the jar and peered into its neck, gauging the small amount of water still there. Then he held it to her lips.

She seemed to be drinking, but only seemed. Frowning, as she finished, he once more squinted into the jar with bleared eyes. His voice was even, dull, ominous as he accused:

"You drank nothing. You are trying to save water for me!"

She shook her head in negation, but he penetrated the lie. His teeth gleamed through his stubble of beard, and his eyes glinted redly under the hood of his ragged burnous as he cried:

"Will you drink?"

"I tell you--I have drunk!"

Slowly he tilted the jar toward the thirsty sands.

"Drink, now, or I pour all this on the ground!"

Beaten, she extended a quivering hand. They shared the last of the water. The man took less than a third. Then they set out again on the endless road of pain.

Was it that same day, or the next, that the man fell and could not rise again? The woman did not know. Something had got into her brain and was dancing there and would not stop; something blent of sun and glare, sand, mirage, torturing thirst. There was a little gray scorpion, too--but no, _that_ had been crushed to a pulp by the man's heel. Or had it not? Well--

The man! Was there a man? Where was he? Here, of course, on the baked earth.

As she cradled his head up into her lap and drew the shelter of her burnous over it, she became rational again. Her hot, dry hand caressed his face. After a while he was blinking up at her.

"Bara Miyan! Violator of the salt!" he croaked, and struck at her feebly. And after another time, she perceived that they were staggering on and on once more.

The woman wondered what had happened to her head, now that the sun had bored quite through. Surely that must make a difference, must it not?

A jackal barked. But this, they knew, must be illusion.

No jackals lived so far from any habitation of mankind. The man blinked into the glare, across which sand-devils of whirlwinds were once more gyrating over a whiteness ending in dunes that seemed to be peppered with camel-grass.

Another mirage! Grass could grow only near the coast. And now that

they had both been tortured to death by Jannati Shahr men and been flung into Jehannum, how could there be any coast? It seemed so preposterous.

It was all so very simple that the man laughed--silently.

Where had that woman gone to? Why, he thought there surely had been a woman with him! But now he stood all alone. This was very strange.

"I must remember to ask them if there wasn't a woman," thought he. "This is an extraordinary place! People come and go in such a manner!"

The man felt a dull irritation, and smeared the sand out of his eyes. How had that sand got there? Naturally, from having laid on one of those dunes. There seemed to be no particular reason for lying on a dune, under the fire-box of an engine, so the man sat up and kept blinking and rubbing his eyes.

"This is the best mirage, yet," he reflected. "The palms look real. And the water--it sparkles. Those white blotches--one would say they were houses!"

Indifferent, yet interested, too, in the appearance of reality, the man remained sitting on the dune, squinting from under his torn burnous.

The mirage took form as a line of dazzling white houses along a sea of cobalt and indigo. And to add to the reality of the mirage, some miles away, he could see two boats with sails all green and blue from the reflection of the luster of the water.

The man's eyes fell. He studied his feet. They were naked, now, cut to the bone, caked with blood and sand. Odd, that they did not hurt. Where were his babooches? He seemed to remember something about having taken some ragged ones from the feet of some woman or other, a very long time ago, and having bound his own upon her mangled feet.

"I'll ask the people in those houses, down there," thought he; and on hands and knees started to crawl down the slope of the dunes toward the dazzling white things that looked like houses.

Something echoed at the back of his brain:

"_You must ask her if this is real! Unless you both see it, you must not go!_"

He paused. "There was a woman, then!" he gasped. "But--where is she now?"

Realization that she had disappeared sobered him. He got up, groped with emaciated hands before his face as he turned back away from the white houses and stumbled eastward.

All at once he saw something white lying on the sand, under a cooking glare of sunlight. Memory returned. He fell on his knees beside the woman and caught her up in quivering arms.

After a while, he noticed there was blood on her left arm. Blood, in the bend of the elbow, coagulated there.

This puzzled him. All he could think was that she might have cut herself on her _jambiyeh_, when she had fallen. He did not know then, nor did he ever know, that he himself had fallen at this spot; that she had thought him dying; that she had tried to cut her arm and give him her blood to drink; that she had fainted in the effort. Some last remnants of strength welled up in him. He stooped, got her across his shoulder, struggled to his feet and went staggering up the dune.

Here he paused, swaying drunkenly.

Strange! The very same mirage presented itself to his eyes--blue sails, turquoise sea, feathery palms, white houses.

"By God!" he croaked. "Mirages--they don't last, this way! That's real--that's real water, by the living God!"

Up from dark profundities of tortured memory arose the cry of Xenophon's bold Greeks when, after their long torment, they had of a sudden fronted blue water. At sight of the little British consular station of Batn el Hayil, on the Gulf of Farsan:

"_Thalassa!_" he cried. "_Thalassa, thalassa!_" (The sea, the sea!)

CHAPTER LIII

THE GREATER TREASURE

New York, months later.

Spring had long departed--the spring of the year in which the Eagle of the Air had flung itself aloft from the Palisades, freighted with such vast hopes.

Summer was past and gone. The sparkling wine of autumn had already begun to bubble in the cup of the year.

Sunset, as when this tale began. Sunset, bronzing the observatory of _Niss'rosh_, on top of the huge skyscraper.

Two of the Legionaries--a woman and a man--were watching that sunset from the western windows of that room where first had been conceived the wonder-flight which had spelled death for so many a stout heart.

You could see great changes had come upon the man, as he paced slowly up and down the singular room, hands deep in the pockets of his riding-trousers. His hair was grayer, for one thing, his face leaner; a certain sinewy strength had come to him that had not been there before.

Some marks of suffering still remained on him, that not all of life could take away. His eyes looked deeper and more wise, his mouth more human in its smile. That he had learned to smile, at all, meant much. And the look in his eyes, as he glanced at the woman, meant vastly more. Yes, this man had learned infinitely much.

From a big, bamboo Chinese chair the woman was watching him.

Her eyes were musing, reminiscent. Her riding-costume well became her; and by the flush on her cheek you might have guessed they had both just come in from a long gallop together.

The costume gave her a kind of boyish charm; yet she remained entirely feminine. A kind of bronze mist seemed to envelop her head, as the dull-tawny sunset light fell on her from those broad windows. Near her riding-crop stood a Hindu incense-holder, with joss-sticks burning. As she took one of these and twirled it contemplatively, the blue-gray vapor spiraling upward was no more dreamy than her eyes.

"The invincible Orient!" she said, all at once. "It absorbs everything and gives back nothing. And we thought, we hoped, we might conquer part of it! Well--no--that's not done."

The man stopped his slow pacing, sat on the edge of the table and drummed with his fingers on the teak.

"Not at the first attempt, anyhow," said he, after a little thought. "I think, though, another time--but there's no use dreaming. Of course, it's not the treasure I'm thinking about. That was just a detail. It's the men. Good men!"

She peered into the incense-smoke, as if exorcising the powers of darkness.

"They're not dead, not all of them!" she exclaimed with conviction.

"I wish I could believe you!"

"But you must believe me! Something tells me some of our good chaps are still alive. All of them perhaps."

"Impossible!" He shook his head. "Even if they escaped the explosion, the Jannati Shahr devils must have massacred them." He shuddered slightly. "That's the worst of it. Death is all right. But the crucifixion, and all--"

"Cold reason paints a cruel picture, I admit," the woman answered, laying a hand on the man's. "But you know--a woman's intuition. I don't believe as you do. And the major--and that rumor we got from old Nasr ed Din, the Hejaz rug-merchant down on Hester Street, how about that?"

"Yes, I know. But--"

"How could a rumor like that come through, about a big, white-skinned, red-haired Ajam slave held by that tribe near Jeddah? How could it, unless there were some truth back of it?"

"He wandered away into the desert, quite insane. It's not impossible he might have been captured. By Allah!" And the man struck the table hard. "If I really believed Nasr ed Din--"

"Well?"

"I'd go again, if I died for it!"

"The pronoun's wrong. _We'd_ go!"

"Yes, _we_!" He took her hand. "We'd trail that rumor down and have Bohannan out of there, and the others too, if--but no, no, the thing's impossible!"

"Nothing is impossible, I tell you, in the East. And haven't we had miracles enough? After we were judged pirates and condemned to die, by the International Aero Tribunal, wasn't it a miracle about that pardon? That immunity, for your vibratory secrets that have revolutionized the defensive tactics of the League's air-forces?"

She smiled up at him, through the vapor. "It's the impossible that happens, these days! The soul within me tells me some of our chaps are still alive, out there!"

She waved her smoky wand toward the large-scale map of Arabia on the wall.

"But Rrisa," said he. "About the others, there's no sense of guilt. I feel, though, like a murderer about Rrisa."

"Rrisa still lives!"

He shook his head.

"The incense tells me." She insisted. "My heart tells me!"

"Allah make it so! But even if he is dead, he died like the others--a man!"

"In pursuit of an ideal. We all had that, a dream and an ideal."

"Yes. It wasn't the treasure, of course," he mused. "It wasn't material things. It was adventure. Well--you and I have had that, at all events. And they had it too. They and we--all of us--we changed the course of history for more than two hundred million human beings. And as for you and me--"

He turned, looking at the map. Then he got up from the table, went to that map and laid a hand on the vast, blank expanse across which was printed only "Ruba el Khali"--the Empty Abodes.

"It would wreck the whole structure of civilization if we told," said he. The woman put back the incense-stick into its holder, got up and came to stand beside him. "Imagine the horrible, vulture-like scramble of capitalism to exploit that dyke of gold! There'd be expeditions, pools, combines, wars--we'd have the blood of uncounted thousands on our heads!"

"It's not the treacherous El Barr people I'm thinking of. If they perished, as they would to the last man defending their gold, all well and good. But in case any of our men are still alive there, _they'd_ be butchered. And then, the destruction of gold as a medium of exchange, by its gross plenty, would wreck the world with panics. And the greatest catastrophe of history would lie on our shoulders. That is why--"

"Why the secret must remain here," she said, touching her breast.

"_But_!" he exclaimed, and turned and took a pencil from the table.

In a bold hand he wrote, across the blank white spaces of the map, these characters in Arabic:

[Illustration]

"_Nac'hna arivna_!" he exclaimed. "'_We know!_'"

A long silence followed. Both, with deep memories, were peering at those words, as the light slowly faded in the west over the Palisades. The man was first to speak.

"This secret is ours," said he. "I have another, that even you don't know!"

"You have kept something from--_me_?"

"Only until I have quite dared tell you."

"Dared?"

"It isn't the mere, simple thing itself. It's the symbolism back of it. Maybe even now I'm premature in telling you. But, somehow--"

He hesitated. This man of action, hard, determined, strong, seemed afraid.

"Somehow," he added, "you and I-have come so near to each other-and tonight, here in this room where it all started, we have seemed to understand each other so well, through the revocation of the past, that--yes, I'll show you--"

He thrust a hand into his breast-pocket and brought out a small leather sack. Startled, she looked at it as he drew open the cord. He took from the sack a wondrous thing, luminous with nacreous hues.

"The Great Pearl Star," she cried. "Kaukab el Durri!"

"Yes, the Great Pearl Star, itself!"

She looked in silence. Then she reached out a hand and touched it, as if unbelieving.

"Why, you never told me!"

"I had a reason."

"And--through all that inferno, when every ounce had to be considered--"

"I was keeping this for--you."

There were tears in her eyes as he laid a hand on her shoulder.

"For you," he repeated. "It was mine, but it is mine no longer. This

crown-jewel of Islam is yours, now--if you will have it."

"If I will have it!" she whispered. "There's only one thing in this whole world I more dearly long for!"

"I am offering you that, too," said the man, in a trembling voice. "I knew nothing of it, nothing whatever, until I came to understand what a woman really could be. I fought against it--and lost."

"It came to me not sought after and welcomed, but storming over the ramparts of my soul. Yes, I fought love--and lost."

"I understand that, too," she said.

"I put the Great Pearl Star in my breast, sacred to you. I said to myself: 'If we ever live through this, and I feel worthy to give this gem to her, I'll ask her to complete it.'"

"To complete it?"

"Yes. You see, one pearl was missing. The most wonderful of all. Now, as I clasp this necklace round your throat, the Great Pearl Star is completed."

"I--don't understand--"

"Ah, but I do! The missing pearl of great price--you are that pearl. In giving the Great Pearl Star to you, I make it whole."

"And I give it back to you, completed!"

Her head lay on his heart. His lips were on her hair.

"Completion," he whispered. "Peace, to the troubled heart. Peace, after the night that life has been to me. Peace, till the dawn!"

"Peace," she said, in the line of the ancient Arabic poem. "Peace, until the coming of the stars."

"Peace," he breathed. "It is peace until the rising of the day!"

THE END

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