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Percy F. Westerman**

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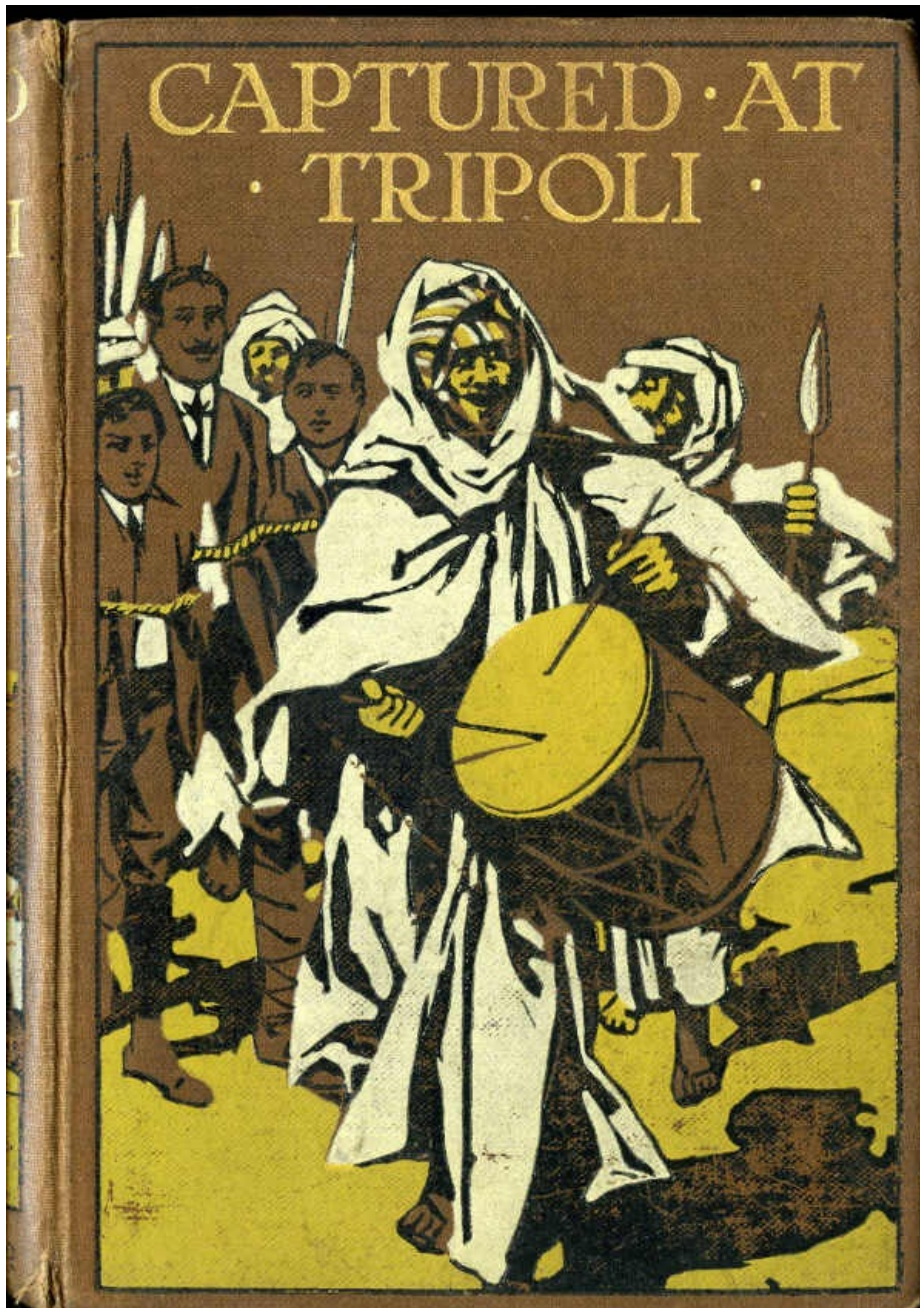
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Captured at Tripoli

BY PERCY F. WESTERMAN

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[Illustration: "WHY, IT'S THE RIVER!" EXCLAIMED GERALD" Frontispiece]

Captured at Tripoli

A Tale of Adventure

BY

PERCY F. WESTERMAN

Author of "The Quest of the Golden Hope"
"A Lad of Grit" &c.

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CAPTURED AT TRIPOLI

CHAPTER I

Off to the Seat of War

"WELL, we've seen something of the fun," exclaimed Hugh Frazer, as the last of the 89th Regiment of Infantry filed through the jealously-guarded gateway of the Naval Yard at Naples. "Come on, let's get back to the front, and we may see the transports leave the bay." Hugh

Hugh Frazer and his stanch companion, Gerald Kit-by, were staying with the former's parents at the Hôtel des Etrangers. Both lads had been spending their summer holidays in Italy, and were leaving for England at the end of the week. They ought to have been already at school, but a slight attack of malaria, which with the utmost impartiality had affected both boys, had prevented them from returning to Rossall at the commencement of the term.

Hugh, more generally known to his companion as "Rags", a nickname bestowed upon him by reason of his hot-headed impulsiveness, was fifteen years of age, tall, well-proportioned, and dark-featured. Gerald, on the other hand, was three inches shorter, slightly inclined to stoutness, and of a fresh, ruddy complexion. His face almost invariably wore a smile, with the result that his schoolfellows promptly dubbed him "Sunny Jim", a nickname that eventually was fined down to "Jim". He was six months younger than Hugh, and so even-tempered that he seemed eminently suited to his companion's impulsive and masterful nature.

Threading their way through the dense crowd of enthusiastic Neapolitans who still pressed round the now fast-closed gates, the two lads set off at a quick pace, in spite of the sweltering heat of that October afternoon.

"Look out, Rags!" shouted Gerald, pulling his chum backwards just in time to escape being run down by a motor car that, packed with officers of the Bersaglieri, was pelting down the Strada Marina at a break-neck pace. The lads drew back, and found themselves under the noses of a couple of mules, which a fluent-voiced Neapolitan cabby was urging in the opposite direction. Lustily tugging at the ropes that did duty for reins, the man succeeded in pulling up, to the accompaniment of a volley of abuse directed towards the cause of the obstruction. The sudden halt caused the sole occupant of the ramshackle cab to thrust his head through the open window in order to ascertain the reason for the delay, and to Hugh Frazer's surprise he recognized an old friend of his family, Arthur Reeves.

"Whoever would have thought of meeting you in Naples, Hugh?" exclaimed Mr. Reeves genially. "Jump in—your friend too, of course—and tell me as much as you can in less than a minute. My time's precious just now."

The two lads were not slow in availing themselves of the invitation, and the lumbering vehicle resumed its way.

When Arthur Reeves was in England, he lived in a bungalow not far from the Frazers' home at Shoreham, where he was a frequent and welcome guest. He was six feet in height, of fairly light build, long-limbed and thin-featured. He was partially blind in his left eye and nearly deaf in his left ear, but in spite of these defects he succeeded in passing the doctor in an examination for the Accountant Branch of the Navy. How he did it could never be satisfactorily explained, though he strongly asserted that it was sheer bluff. But he was "ploughed" in the educational examination, and took to journalism. By another supreme piece of bluff he succeeded in getting a post as war correspondent in one of our petty border wars. This was his bent. He did so well getting his "copy" through a good two hours before his rivals that his success was assured. In the Boer War he made the circulation of his paper increase by leaps and bounds, succeeding by more bluff in gaining exclusive information and adding to his fame. He came home with a splendid reputation, a touch of enteric, and a Mauser bullet wound in his left leg; but in spite of the fact that the left part of his anatomy was seriously crippled, his energy, resource, and marvellous descriptive powers made him in great request as a special correspondent. In this capacity he had been dispatched to the ends of the earth, often at a few hours' notice, always adding to his laurels; and, being a born linguist, he had a thorough knowledge of French, German, and Italian, and more than a smattering of Turkish, Arabic, Hindustani, and Swahili. Ten days previously he had been enjoying a brief but well-earned rest at Shoreham, after an exciting time in a revolution in

Central America; then, like a bolt from the blue, came the news of Italy's high-handed declaration of war against Turkey.

Reeves was ready within an hour of receiving a telegram from his chief. Wearing a worn yet serviceable suit of khaki, and light, strong boots and puttees, and carrying a small portmanteau containing his trusty Mauser pistol, fifty rounds of ammunition, writing materials, and a change of linen—the old war correspondent knew the importance of carrying but little impedimenta—he caused no small sensation amongst the scribes of Fleet Street. His visit to the editorial offices was also of brief duration, and, having secured his letters of introduction, and drafts upon the Bank of Italy, he caught the boat train from Victoria by just thirty seconds.

Two days later he was in Rome, presenting his credentials to the Minister of War. That high official was most urbane, and gave the correspondent permission to embark on any of the transports, "if convenient to the exigencies of military service". At Taranto no vessels were available; at Bari it was found that the last transport had left for the concentration base; at Brindisi the transport officers, charmingly polite, regretted that every vessel had already its full complement as allowed by State regulations. Arthur Reeves found that for once he had been fooled. He rushed to the telegraph office and wired to the Minister of War. After a tedious delay of three hours came the reply: "Regret; can offer no further suggestions". The correspondent was angry: he did not want suggestions—he wanted a passage to Tripoli. The rebuff only urged him to greater efforts, and without further dallying he took train to Naples.

Here again he met with the same polite apologies and regrets, while, to put the finishing touch, he was shown a recent order from the Minister of Marine forbidding transport officers to grant passages to civilians.

Arthur Reeves tried "bluffing". He produced the order from the Minister of War, and, arguing that a war correspondent was not a civilian in the accepted sense of the word, demanded that he should be given a passage. For once bluff failed. With deprecatory shrugs and reiterated professions of deepest regret, the naval officer superintending the transport arrangements replied that he was acting under the direct orders of his chief. Why not telegraph to the Minister of Marine?

But the Englishman would waste no more time. He determined to charter a steamer, regardless of cost, and proceed to the seat of war. Enquiries at the various shipping offices, however, elicited the same reply—all steam vessels were ordered to be held at the sole disposal of the Italian Government. At last one agent suggested a sailing craft. With the prevalent strong north-west wind the passage would be soon made. He had a swift felucca, the *Victor Strozzi*, which would be at the signor's disposal.

"Have her ready by five o'clock, then."

"Impossible, signor!"

The Englishman was obdurate.

"Five o'clock, or not at all."

The "patron" protested, but finally gave way, Mr. Reeves agreeing to the proposal that the *Victor Strozzi* should provision at Capri, where supplies had not yet reached war prices. The correspondent was on his way down to the bay when his conveyance nearly bowled over his young acquaintance Hugh Frazer and his companion.

Arthur Reeves was a man of few words. What he did say was brief and to the point. But he was a rare listener. The biggest bore in creation he would endure uncomplainingly, for in the torrent of vapid small talk he would never fail to pick up some information to add to his vast store of knowledge of men and matters.

"Sorry I didn't know before that you were staying in Naples. I should have liked to have had a yarn with your pater, Rags," he remarked. "Look here; it's not too late. Cut off back to the hotel and ask him, to come on board. Bring your chum with you. I'll take you across to Capri—you will enjoy it—and there are plenty of boatmen to run you back."

"I will," replied Hugh, as the cab came to a halt at the quay. "But where shall we see you?"

"I will be on board the *Victor Strozzi*. Get a man to row you off. Don't forget—five sharp, if you're coming."

"No one would think that you lads were recovering from a bout of malaria," exclaimed Mr. Frazer, as Hugh and Gerald, hot and breathless with running, burst into the loggia of the *Hôtel des Etrangers*. "What are you so excited about?"

"Whom do you think we met, Dad? Mr. Reeves! He's off to the front."

"What front?"

"Why, Tripoli, of course. He sent us to ask if we—that is you, Gerald, and I—could go with him a

part of the way."

"Bless my soul—go part of the way to Tripoli! Of course it's impossible. I should like to have seen him, though. Ask him up to dine with us this evening."

"He's leaving at five," glancing at the clock, the hands of which pointed to a quarter to three. "Besides, he's only going as far as Capri to-day."

"Oh, that's different!" replied Mr. Frazer. "That's only that little island out in the bay. Yes, you can go."

"But won't you go too, Pater?"

"I'm afraid I cannot. Signor Calasso has an appointment with me at six. By the by, what vessel is Reeves going in? Perfectly safe, I hope?"

"He didn't say," replied Hugh. "I remember that he mentioned her name. It was the——"

"*Victor* something," added Gerald.

"Not the *Victor Stroggia*, by any chance? She's quite a large steamer."

"That's the name," replied Hugh confidently.

"I always heard that Reeves would never let money stand in his way," remarked Mr. Frazer. "There's one thing—he has a sound Concern behind him. Well, if you're going, you had better be off. You have money with you?"

"About ten lire."

"Then take other twenty. You may not require that amount, but it is best to be on the safe side."

Bidding Mr. Frazer goodbye, the lads scampered off. At the quay they had no difficulty in finding a boat, for their appearance was hailed by a chorus of shouts from a score of watermen.

"To the *Victor Stroggia*, as fast as you can," said Hugh, addressing an old man who seemed less importunate than the rest of his fellows.

"*Si, signor.*"

The lads stepped into the high-prowed craft, and the boatman, turning his back on his youthful fares, stood up as he urged the boat towards the centre of the bay. There were nearly twenty large ships at anchor with steam up, while a fleet of smaller craft, mostly sailing vessels, lay closer inshore.

Amongst the latter was the *Victor Strozzi*, the felucca Arthur Reeves had chartered; but unwittingly Hugh and his chum were being taken off to the *Victor Stroggia*, a subsidized merchantman about to leave for the African coast.

Paying and dismissing their boatman, the lads threaded their way up the steep accommodation ladder, which was crowded with the relatives of the army officers, who, having bade their relations a long farewell, were slowly and reluctantly descending to the boats waiting at the foot of the ladder.

In the confusion, Hugh and his chum passed the quartermaster at the gangway unnoticed, and found themselves standing on the packed troop deck. The warning bell had already sounded, and the visitors were nearly all gone, but the grey-clad infantrymen, eager to take a last glimpse of their beloved Italy, were too engrossed to notice the two bewildered lads.

"Can you tell me where I can find Signor Reeves?" asked Hugh, in his best but execrable Italian, addressing a corporal.

The soldier, being a stranger to the ship, passed the question to a seaman.

"Signor Riefi? Ohé!" Beckoning to the lads to follow, the man turned and dived down a hatchway. Through the semi-gloom of a badly lighted alleyway Hugh and Gerald kept at the heels of their guide, till he stopped and knocked at the door of a cabin on the half-deck aft.

Receiving no reply, the man knocked again and opened the door.

"The signor is out; but if the signori will be pleased to wait, I will find him," said the sailor, and the next instant Hugh and Gerald were alone.

They waited and waited, but still no Mr. Reeves appeared. Presently came the dull thud of the propeller revolving.

Gerald glanced at his watch. It was a quarter to five.

"We're off, and we shall be at Capri before we've seen anything," he exclaimed. "I thought Mr.

Reeves was going to start at five? We should have been nicely sold if we had turned up sharp at the stated time."

As it happened, at that particular moment Arthur Reeves was standing on the deck of the felucca *Victor Strozzi*, with his glasses bearing on the shore, in the expectation of seeing his guests, while Hugh and Gerald, in Lieutenant Riefi's cabin on board the transport *Victor Stroggia*, were being borne rapidly southwards to the seat of war.

CHAPTER II

Under Fire

AN hour later Lieutenant Chigi Riefi, having completed his watch on deck, returned to his cabin. Both lads sprang to their feet in anticipation as the door opened, and the astonishment of the English youths and the young Italian officer was mutual.

The lieutenant began to pour out a series of rapid questions. Hugh, on his part, with his limited knowledge of Italian, was unable to follow his questioner, whose perplexity increased when he found that he had two foreigners in possession of his cabin.

But by degrees he calmed down, and, when in broken words Hugh explained why they were waiting there, the lieutenant told the lads that a serious mistake had occurred—far more awkward than it appeared to be at first sight.

"There is no Signor Reeves on board this ship," said Riefi. "It is against strict orders for any civilians, especially foreigners, to be on board. You must be brought before the captain at once. But do not be alarmed on that score; we can see that a real mistake has been made. Unfortunately, you must come with us to Tripoli. No doubt the Commander-in-Chief will have you sent back by the first available ship."

"But our friends—they will be in a terrible fright!"

The Italian shrugged his shoulders.

"*Corpo di Baccho!*" he exclaimed; "there will be many terrible frights before this affair is over. But stay here; I must inform the captain."

"We're in a hole," remarked Hugh dolefully, when the two chums found themselves once more alone.

"Never mind, Rags! We're here, and all the moaning in the world won't alter the case. Perhaps they will send a wireless message."

"I won't mind so much if they do. In fact, I would rather enjoy the fun. What will the other fellows say when they hear we've been to a real war—none of your public-school field days? Besides, Mr. Reeves will be there to give an eye to us."

"I'm afraid Mr. Reeves will have other things to attend to," replied Gerald. "But here they come, so stand by for a good wiggling."

The lieutenant returned, accompanied by the captain of the ship and an army officer; but, greatly to the lads' relief, the Italian officials treated them with every consideration. To their disappointment, however, the boys were informed that the *Victor Stroggia* was not fitted with "wireless"; but directly she came within signalling distance of any of her consorts thus provided, the news of their presence would be sent for transmission to Naples.

"You may go on deck if you wish," continued the captain, speaking slowly and distinctly, so that Hugh could follow him. "We will provide you with meals, and Lieutenant Riefi is willing for you to sleep on the floor of his cabin. But don't, for your own sakes, get into mischief."

Hugh thanked the captain on behalf of Gerald and himself, and when the officers had withdrawn, the lads lost no time in availing themselves of the permission to go on deck.

It was now nearly sunset. Away on the port quarter could be discerned the rugged outlines of the mountainous Italian peninsula. Astern, the island of Capri was a good ten miles off, while a thin column of smoke, standing out clearly against the bright sky, marked the position of the smouldering volcano of Vesuvius. Quite three miles ahead, four transports were ploughing steadily along, their funnels belching out clouds of flame-tinged vapour; while two more ships followed the *Victor Stroggia* at about the same distance astern.

Up to the present, being in safe waters, there had been no fear of interruption from the Turkish torpedo vessels which, according to Italian reports, had left the Golden Horn. Nevertheless, had a daring Turkish commander made a raid upon the struggling and unescorted transports, the result would have been disastrous to the Italian arms.

At night, however, precautions were taken against attack. The transports steamed with screened lights, silence was strictly enjoined, and the troops were forbidden to smoke. But nothing untoward happened, and when the two lads arose from their comfortable bed on the floor, and looked through the now open scuttle, they saw that they were still within sight of land—the island of Sicily.

Here was the transports' rendezvous, and under a powerful escort of battleships the fleet headed for the African shore; and just after sunrise on the following morning the lads had their first glimpse of the glaring white houses and minarets of Tripoli.

Suddenly a burst of cheering came from one of the transports. The shout was taken up by the other vessels, till the air re-echoed to the tumultuous roar. Tripoli had been bombarded. The powerful ordnance of the modern battleships of the Italians had been let loose against the crumbling brickwork and mud walls of the antiquated defences. A glorious victory! Adowa was avenged!

Already the town of Tripoli was in the hands of the victorious sailors and marines. The Italian tricolour floated over the forts, while several of the timorous inhabitants did not hesitate to display the red, white, and green flag from the flat roofs of their closely-barricaded dwellings.

"Mr. Reeves will be too late after all," remarked Gerald.

"It seems like it. However, I think the troops are beginning to disembark. I wish they would let us go ashore."

But no: to the lads' entreaties the Italian captain gave a polite yet firm refusal. No foreigners, other than accredited war correspondents, were allowed to land, pending definite orders from General Caneva, the Commander-in-Chief.

Four days passed. The transport, denuded of troops, still lay in the roadstead. Occasionally a few shots were fired by the Arabs and Turks, who had retreated to an oasis on the fringe of the desert, to which the Italian troops would reply by frantic volleys. But most of the time was spent by the invaders in throwing up earthworks and erecting wire entanglements; for, in spite of their numbers, the Italians did not treat their fierce and swift-moving foes with a contempt that other civilized nations have had to pay dearly for under similar circumstances.

Meanwhile, the lads had contrived to send a message to Hugh's parents at Naples, and, having fulfilled their obligations as best they could, they settled themselves wholeheartedly to making the best of their novel experience.

On the morning of the fifth day they were called from the cabin, where they had been temporarily installed, and to their delight found that Mr. Reeves was awaiting them on the deck.

"You're a fine pair of rascals," he exclaimed; "causing your people no end of anxiety!" The war correspondent had heard the particulars of their adventure almost as soon as the *Victor Strozzi* reached Tripoli. The news of how two English lads had evaded the Commander-in-Chief's express orders had spread through the fleet, the transports, and the army; and Arthur Reeves heard of it from a fellow correspondent directly he set foot ashore.

"The dad knows all about it by now," replied Hugh; "so he won't mind."

"He'll be glad to see you back," said Mr. Reeves grimly. "You are to return by the *Aleppo*. She sails for Brindisi the day after to-morrow."

"Hard lines!" ejaculated Hugh. "But since we've one clear day, couldn't you take us ashore? There's not much doing at present—I mean, you're not very busy, are you?"

"Not more than usual," replied Mr. Reeves meaningly. "However, if you promise not to get into mischief, I'll see what can be done."

In less than half an hour the war correspondent returned with the welcome news that the lads could go ashore as soon as they were able, with the proviso that they were to be under Mr. Reeves's direct supervision, and were not to approach within one kilometre of the firing line.

"That's fair and reasonable, you must understand," concluded their newly-appointed guardian. "The Italian officials are trusting you, and if anything goes wrong I must be responsible; so remember! Boys will be boys, I know; but don't betray the confidence that is placed in you."

Hugh and Gerald gave the required promise. A boat was lying at the gangway of the *Victor Stroggia*, and into this the three Englishmen stepped. As the boat shot under the stern of the ship, Mr. Reeves pointed to a small craft of about twenty tons, painted black, with felucca rig.

"That's the *Victor Strozzi*," he announced. "Not much resemblance between the two vessels, eh?"

"She's rather small to make such a long voyage."

"But perfectly seaworthy. She was as lively as a top. My bones haven't ceased to ache yet."

On landing, they were stopped by a sentry, who demanded the Englishman's permit. This was immediately produced. The man looked at it as if he understood, and returned the document.

"When I landed just after sunrise this morning I found that I had left my permit on board," said Mr. Reeves. "As I did not want to return for it, I gave the sentry the first piece of paper I came across in my pocket. That passed me all right; but what do you think it was?"

"An hotel bill?"

"Good shot, but not quite right. A receipted account for a hundred cigars!"

"There's not much damage done!" remarked Gerald.

"Disappointed, eh? It's a good job there isn't, or the natives wouldn't take things so calmly. Look at that benevolent old chap!" Mr. Reeves pointed to a tall Arab with an almost Hebraic cast of features, who, swathed in white from head to foot, was calmly sitting on an empty ammunition case and eating dates.

"He would be a nasty customer if rubbed up the wrong way; but the Italians have had the good sense and taste to respect the Moslem religion. Now observe that fellow, as docile as a cat in spite of his looks."

The second native was of a totally different type from the first. He was tall, lithe, and long-limbed, with negro features and a dark skin that contrasted vividly with the almost olive complexion of the other.

"He's an Arab from the desert, closely related to the Baggaras, who played the dickens with our troops when they broke the square at Tamai and El Teb. It's a marvel to me how the Arabs knuckle under so calmly. Frankly, I don't like the look of things, but it's not my place to offer advice."

Along the almost deserted streets stepped the war correspondent and his youthful companions. Every now and again a stretcher party would be met, one with their burden lying motionless and still, another with a soldier groaning and cursing in his agony: while from the distant desert came the rattle of musketry, punctuated by the deeper reports of the light field guns.

"Here we stop," exclaimed Mr. Reeves, as they gained a slight rise in the mimosa-studded sand. "You can see the firing line fairly distinctly, and we are less than a quarter of a mile from the supports. Take my glasses, Hugh, and you will bring the men within a few yards of you."

Hugh Frazer looked long and earnestly. He saw war almost face to face—merely a fringe of men firing from behind trenches, with smokeless powder, at an unseen foe.

"Is that all?" he asked disappointedly.

"Quite enough for you to see, Hugh," replied Mr. Reeves. "The other side of the picture is fortunately not visible."

"How about it, Rags?" exclaimed Gerald. "When are you going to give me a chance with those glasses?"

"Here you are, then." Hugh handed his chum the binoculars, and the next moment cried excitedly: "Look, Mr. Reeves, they've caught an Arab!"

Trudging across the sand came three Italian infantrymen. At a distance they looked very similar to English "Tommies" in their greenish-grey uniforms and tropical helmets; but on coming closer their rope-soled shoes, and gaiters, and rifles with long sword bayonets made the resemblance less apparent. Between two of the men walked a white-robed Arab, his hands tied behind his back, and his head held defiantly erect. The third soldier marched three paces in the rear.

This group formed but part of a long, straggling procession that seemed to increase in numbers rather than diminish, for men were falling fast, in spite of their shelter trenches.

"What are they going to do with that prisoner?" asked Gerald.

"Take him into the town and lock him up, I suppose," replied Mr. Reeves.

"There's another, and— Oh!" Hugh's words broke into an exclamation of surprise, and he pointed excitedly in the direction of a thick clump of palms less than a quarter of a mile to the right.

"A flank attack," replied Mr. Reeves calmly, although he realized that they were in a very awkward predicament; for out of the oasis poured a swarm of Arabs, mounted and on foot, racing at headlong speed upon the Italian rearguard. "Come along; we must place a safe distance between us and those fellows," he continued. "Make for that hollow. Don't show yourselves more than you can help."

"Is there any danger?" asked Gerald. The usual smile had left his face.

"Mistakes might happen. Those Arabs won't stop to question us, I fancy. Now, lie down."

A rapid glance in the direction of the town showed the war correspondent that all retreat was cut off. Even from the houses on the outskirts a ragged musketry fire was opened upon the totally unprepared Italians.

Like a whirlwind the Arabs fell upon the stretcher bearers. Two-handed swords and keen, broad-bladed spears completed the work that bullets had begun. Here and there the entrapped Italians, standing in little knots shoulder to shoulder over their helpless charges, fired rapidly upon their treacherous attackers; but, overborne by weight of numbers, they were literally cut to pieces. Then, having cut the way for a flank attack, the Arabs resumed their rifle fire upon the firing line of the Italians.

Slowly and surely the fierce sons of the Prophet were drawing nearer to the shallow defile in which Mr. Reeves and his youthful charges were lying.

The war correspondent was calm, but deathly pale. His thoughts were not for himself, but for the two lads whose idle curiosity had led them into the present danger. He could see by the massacre of the ambulance men that no mercy was to be expected of the lawless children of the desert. Barely twenty yards from where they lay grew a clump of prickly mimosa. The scrub might conceal two persons.

"Be quick, lads!" said the correspondent sternly. "Crawl to that bush and hide."

"And you?" asked Gerald.

"Never mind me; do as you're told. I can look after myself. Obey instantly!" There was such a menacing ring in Arthur Reeves's voice that the lads could not but do as they were ordered. Unseen they gained the scanty place of concealment, and, torn by the sharp spikes, contrived to crawl into shelter.

"It's a bare chance for the boys," muttered the Englishman, as he drew his Mauser pistol from its holster. "I'll shout to those fellows, but I'm afraid it won't be much use.... I hope my notebook will be found and sent home when this business is over."

Then, remembering that his chance would be slightly improved if he appeared to be weaponless, he thrust the pistol into the pocket of his coat, set his jaw tightly, and waited.

Already the Arabs were within a hundred yards. Their impetuous rush had been checked by the fire of the rear rank of the Italians and by the shrapnel fire from the guns of the fleet; nevertheless they came on dauntlessly, in the firm belief that Paradise would be their reward could they but slay an infidel ere they kissed the burning sand.

Suddenly Reeves saw a faint gleam of hope. Coming towards the wadi were an officer and three soldiers. By their red tarbooshes the correspondent knew them to be Turks. Evidently they had been prisoners, but had taken advantage of the confusion to slip away from their captors, and were making their way towards the oasis where the remnants of the Turkish garrison had taken refuge.

Springing from the shelter of the hollow, Reeves ran straight for the advancing Turks. A spluttering volley was aimed at him, till, realizing, in spite of their fanatical hatred of the Kafir, that there was a possibility of harming their fellow Moslems, the Arabs ceased to fire.

As for the Turks, being unarmed and seeing a Giaour rushing at them, they hesitated; but when they found that he was alone, and apparently unarmed, they faced the fugitive.

"Effendi, Effendi, I am English!" exclaimed Reeves breathlessly.

"An Englishman is a true friend of the Ottoman," replied the Turkish officer. "By the beard of the Prophet, I will befriend thee."

But the Turk had no easy task. Placing the correspondent between his men, he advanced, and shouted to the maddened Arabs to stay their hands. For a moment it seemed as if the fanatics were beyond control. Some swept past the officer and dashed at the hated infidel. Spearheads gleamed in the Sunlight; rifle barrels were pointed full at the Englishman's head, although the Turkish soldiers loyally obeyed their superior's orders, and attempted to interpose their bodies between the menacing weapons and their intended victim. Yet the Arabs hesitated. They failed to understand the meaning of the Turkish officer's solicitude. He spoke again, with vehemence and authority. The tension was relaxed.

The Arabs rushed off to find fresh victims, and for the time being Arthur Reeves was safe.

"Effendi, if you would break bread again you must come with us," said the officer. "This day the sons of the Prophet have tasted the fruits of victory. The soldiers of Italy have bit the dust. Ere night not one will be left upon the shores of Tripoli. But fear not. I swear by the Koran that your life will be safe."

The correspondent knit his brows in perplexity.

"Do not hesitate," continued the Turk earnestly. "Over yonder you will be safe, for in the oasis you will find Skilanda Bey, whose love for England passes understanding. To-morrow, or perchance the next day, you will be free to cross the sea, if so be one vessel of the Giaours be left in the roadstead."

"But I am not alone," replied Mr. Reeves. "I have two young comrades——"

"Italians?"

"No, English."

"Then let them also come and fear not. Quickly, lest harm befall them!" for a shell from one of the battleships had exploded barely a hundred yards from the spot where the Turks were standing.

"Hugh, come along," shouted Mr. Reeves. "Come along, both of you."

Without hesitation, though terribly frightened, the lads obeyed. From their place of concealment they had seen everything that had occurred, and even now were in doubt as to the intentions of their companion's supposed captors.

"We're in a mess, lads," remarked Mr. Reeves calmly, as the two boys, with their faces, hands, and clothing torn by the sharp spikes of the mimosa, came up to where he was standing. "We are practically prisoners of war. Goodness only knows what's happened to the Italian troops. They are still firing, I hear, but the sound seems to be dying away."

"Where are we being taken to?"

"To the oasis. The remnants of the Turkish garrison are there. I don't think we are in danger, although the situation is extremely awkward."

Escorted by the Ottoman soldiers, Mr. Reeves and his companions trudged across the hot sand, the lads shudderingly averting their faces as they passed the numerous motionless bodies of the slaughtered Italian soldiers. They were beginning to learn something of the dark side of war.

And now from the direction of the town the sound of firing began to increase. The Italian infantry were moving to the support of their comrades on the fringe of the desert; sullenly the Arabs gave way before them, and began to stream back upon the oasis.

Unfortunately for the three English prisoners there was no sign of Skilanda Bey and the remainder of the Turkish regiments. They had taken up a position fully two miles away, and were pushing home a counter-attack upon an Italian redoubt. This the Turkish officer learnt from a wounded compatriot.

"My place is with my regiment, Effendi," said he to the correspondent; "so I must leave you. But these three soldiers will stand by you. There is nothing to fear."

The next instant the kindly Ottoman was gone, and Arthur Reeves, not without misgivings, found himself and his charges in the midst of a horde of Arabs, with only the possibility of three Turkish privates saving them from indignity, perhaps death. Nevertheless, with the object of his life's work before him, the correspondent kept his glasses bearing upon the distant battlefield, keenly intent upon striking and unique copy for the *London Intelligence*.

Suddenly a shell, fired at a high angle from one of the battleships, burst fairly in the midst of a group of retreating Arabs, barely two hundred yards from the edge of a cluster of palm trees. The men broke into a run, leaving what looked like a smudge of dirty white garments on the dazzling sand.

Then another missile, hissing overhead, plunged into the oasis. This was quickly followed by a third. The Arabs lying under cover began to give way.

"That's good!" muttered the correspondent. "If this goes on we can make a dash for it. These fellows will pass well on our left."

Unfortunately another shell, falling on the flank of the now demoralized fugitives, caused them to swerve to the right, and, bursting through the scrub, they gained the oasis close to where Reeves and his companions were standing.

No sooner did they catch a glimpse of the hated Kafirs than, forgetting their panic, they surrounded the three Turkish soldiers and their charges. Once more spears and rifles were raised menacingly, while the Turks yelled their hardest in an endeavour to fulfil their superior's orders.

Thrusting his compatriots aside, a tall, brown-featured Arab, with a long black beard, grabbed one of the Turks by the shoulder.

"In the name of Allah the all-powerful, who are these infidels?" he shouted.

"They are Ingles, under the protection of Bimbashi Ali," replied the man. "These Ingles are

indeed the friends of the Ottoman."

"Nevertheless they may not be the friends of the true sons of the Prophet," replied the Arab, his dark eyes flashing. "Yet, since they be of a different tribe from yonder Kafirs, I will give them life. Seize and bear them hence."

In a moment Arthur Reeves was secured, his arms being bound behind his back with a leather thong. He offered no resistance—since resistance would have made matters worse; but in spite of this passiveness his clothes were torn from his back by his captors in their efforts to possess themselves of his watch, pistol, ammunition, and other effects. Hugh and Gerald fared much the same, the latter's watch being the cause of a tough struggle between a Baggara and a Tunisian Arab. Eventually the Baggara got possession of a badly-damaged timepiece, and the other man secured three pieces of a broken chain.

"Make the best of it, lads," exclaimed the correspondent, as cheerfully as he could. "They are not going to kill us."

"Silence, Kafir!" ordered the sheikh, dealing the Englishman a heavy blow across the mouth. "Walk, and that quickly, lest you feel the point of a knife betwixt your ribs."

Additionally secured by a camel rope, the three Englishmen began their march into a long and terrible captivity.

CHAPTER III

Prisoners

SURROUNDED by a horde of fierce Arabs, who, with drums beating and weapons waving, seemed more like a victorious host than a retreating army, Arthur Reeves and his young companions were forced through the brambles and scrub that grew thickly within the oasis. In the open the sun beat fiercely upon their bare backs and heads, for in the one-sided struggle all three had lost their linen-swathed hats.

Every now and again a bursting shell, falling wide of the Arabs, would urge them to increase their pace, for the sons of the desert had a deep respect for shrapnel; but at length, drawing beyond range, the fierce warriors lost their sense of fear, and began to beat their drums with renewed vigour, while taunts and threats—fortunately unintelligible to the lads—were hurled at the captives.

At length the party reached a fairly extensive clearing in the oasis, where quite a hundred black tents were erected, and camels, sheep, and goats were browsing on the short grass. Veiled women and scantily-clad children, raising a shout of welcome, ran to meet the returning warriors, carrying with them pitchers of water and kayoubs of dried dates and flour for their friends and relations.

Quickly the news spread. The Arabs will never acknowledge defeat to their friends: the unbelievers had been routed and slain, or driven into the sea. Not a Kafir remained betwixt the oasis and the great salt waters, save these three who had been brought in as a proof of the victory of the true followers of the Prophet. But the party could not conceal the fact that their losses had been heavy, and so to the shouts of joy were added the loud wailing and lamentation of the wives and kinsfolk of those who had fallen.

Yet, in spite of the great victory that the Arabs had claimed, the Sheikh Wadherim frequently directed his eyes towards the north, and kept his ears on the alert for the sound of approaching musketry. His camels, cattle, and sheep were gathered together; his goods and chattels were packed in bundles; his tents were ready to be struck at an instant's notice should occasion arise. At sunrise to-morrow, in any case, the long march across the desert to Wadi Tlat would begin, for the fierce Arab chieftain had fought—that being the main reason why he had obeyed the loose Turkish authority, and had led his tribe across the six hundred miles of desert. Now, having tasted of the joys of battle, and paid dearly for it, there was nothing to prevent him from returning to his desert haunts, where there was no fear of aggression from the hated unbelievers.

Still bound, Reeves and the two lads were placed in the centre of the encampment, with nothing to shelter them from the pitiless sun. Behind them, with a business-like, broad-bladed spear held across his shoulders, stood a tall, sinewy Arab.

"What will they do with us, Mr. Reeves?" asked Hugh, speaking with an effort, and then only after he had rolled his swollen tongue over his parched lips.

"Can't say. Hold us to ransom, most likely."

"It is hot, this sun," said Gerald.

"Tear my shirt sleeve off; it's nearly in rags already."

"Why?" asked young Kirby wonderingly.

"Never mind why. For one reason, I can't tear it myself."

Raising his bound wrists with an effort, while the correspondent rolled over in the lad's direction, Gerald gripped the fragment of thin flannel, and in another moment Reeves was without a sleeve, in addition to a backless shirt.

"Give me the piece. That's it. Now, lean my way," and the correspondent neatly placed the broad strip of flannel upon the lad's head. "Save you from sunstroke, perhaps. Now, Hugh, you take a strip from Gerald's shirt. It's in about the same first-class condition as mine."

But before Hugh could perform his part of the task, the Arab touched him on the shoulder with the haft of his spear, then spoke a few words to one of the crowd who were enjoying the spectacle of the captured Kafirs. The youth addressed evidently stood in awe of the custodian of the prisoners, for his broad smile vanished, and turning he ran swiftly towards the outskirts of the encampment.

In a few moments he returned with two broad leaves in his hand, which he offered to the man who had ordered him to bring them. Speaking rapidly, the latter commanded the youth to place them on the heads of the two uncovered captives.

Arthur Reeves caught the meaning of the Arab's words, but kept the news to himself. It was not pity that had prompted the man to act thus. A slave whose head has been turned by the sun would be worse than useless, for the Arabs, believing that a madman is under the special protection of Allah, make sure that he is well cared for, even though worthless from a commercial point of view.

So they were to be sold as slaves? If the worst came to the worst, Reeves thought, there was a means of escape, and he brought his knees together smartly. Yes, thank heavens! their savage captors had not entirely stripped off the clothing of their prisoners; and bound in the folds of his puttees was a small yet serviceable automatic pistol, no thicker than a tobacco pouch, while behind his left knee was a packet of fifty '22 cartridges, small, yet powerful enough to drive completely through a man.

Suddenly a sharp but distant buzz smote upon his ear. Several of the Arabs also heard the noise, and hundreds of dark-brown faces were turned skywards.



[Illustration: THE APPROACH OF THE MONOPLANE]

With a painful effort the correspondent turned his head and looked. At a good five hundred feet above the palm-tops a mono-plane was passing swiftly in an easterly direction. Reeves could distinctly see two men, one sitting behind the other. As for the Arabs, they were too astonished even to utter a sound. The spectacle of a giant bird with motionless wings bodily carrying off two men was too marvellous for words.

Presently the monoplane tilted slightly, and changed its course in the direction of the encampment. The lads gave a stifled exclamation of joy, but the correspondent knew that a fresh danger was in store for them.

"Lie down flat!" he exclaimed, throwing himself upon the ground.

Seeing the gigantic monster swooping towards them, the Arabs—men, women, and children—took to flight. Even the spearman who was in charge of the captives took to his heels and ran for the scanty shelter of the palm trees.

"Stand by to run for it!" exclaimed Mr. Reeves. "But don't move till I give the word."

The correspondent still kept his eyes fixed upon the rapidly approaching monoplane. One of the men in it did exactly what Reeves expected he would do—he leaned sideways and dropped a small bomb.

Five seconds later the missile struck the ground, and burst with a deafening report, throwing showers of sand in all directions. Two of the rearmost Arabs fell, and several of the sheep and cattle were literally blown to atoms; but, although small pieces of iron and plenty of sand swept

over the prostrate captives, Reeves and the two lads escaped unscathed.

"Now, run for it!" shouted the correspondent, for the monoplane was skimming over the palm trees, its crew evidently thinking that one bomb was enough.

Hampered though they were by their arms being tied by the camel rope, the fugitives made good progress. Could they but gain the shelter of that part of the oasis lying to the north of the camp, chances would be in their favour, since the Arabs had taken refuge on the southernmost side. But just as they were on the verge of the thick scrub Hugh stumbled and, unable to break his fall, crashed heavily upon the ground. This brought the others up, and as Mr. Reeves stooped to help the lad, as well as the hampered condition of his arms would allow, a loud shout told them that their flight had been discovered.

Escape was now out of the question. Surrounded by twenty Arabs, whose rage had been increased by the slaughter of much of their stock, and who imagined that that was part of an attempt by the Italians to free the three Kafirs, they were dragged back to the encampment, where they were beaten and kicked till the two lads, who barely knew what bodily pain was, were almost dead. As for Mr. Reeves, he took his punishment gamely, knowing that any resistance or sign of fear would make their captors take a keener zest in their work.

The attack upon the encampment made things worse for the three prisoners, for the Arabs, finding that they were still within range of their foes, immediately struck their tents, and before sunset the diminished followers of the Sheikh Wadherim were on their way southward to the distant oasis of Wadi Tlat.

It was with some semblance of military order that the caravan set out. Twenty or thirty white-robed Arabs, armed with modern rifles, led the way, perched in high-peaked and backed saddles upon the backs of ambling and rolling camels. Next followed the cattle and sheep, under the care of a body of men who—though Arabs by birth, religion, manners, and customs—were undoubtedly of negro descent. After them came the women and children, some seated on mules and horses, some afoot, with a sprinkling of men armed with long matchlocks as a bodyguard. Next more camels—not the swift hieries of the warriors, but those commonly used as beasts of burden—each with a large net-like sack slung on either side. Behind these came the three prisoners, on foot, while a guard of about fifty half-naked spearmen and flintlock-men brought up the rear.

Hugh and Gerald were already almost worn out by fatigue, pain, and despair. They realized that every step was taking them farther and farther from the sea, but whither they had no idea. Possibly it was better for them to remain in ignorance. At least, so thought the correspondent, who did his utmost to cheer his young companions, although he himself was filled with vague fears. "Poor, pampered youngsters!" he thought. "It's hard lines. But, if ever they get out of this mess, it will be the making of them."

After the going down of the sun the burning heat lasted for about an hour, while the sand was radiating; but soon the intense warmth gave place to a chilling coldness, till the three captives, but partly clad, shivered in the darkness. Yet at a steady pace of about three miles an hour the caravan continued on its way, steering its course by the stars. A distance equal to twenty-four English miles had to be covered before the next of the long chain of oases could be reached, and it was Sheikh Wadherim's intention to accomplish this part of the journey ere dawn.

Reeves pondered deeply as he trudged painfully on his way. His greatest anxiety was concerning his two young friends. What would happen if they were to be separated? Had he been alone he would not have hesitated to make a dash for freedom at the first opportunity. The farther the Arabs were away from the sea, the more lax would become their vigilance. A swift hierie, his automatic pistol, and half an hour's start, and he would back himself against the whole tribe. But with the lads this was not to be thought of. He was in honour bound to keep by them as long as was humanly possible.

In any case, the correspondent made up his mind that he would give no sign that he had a smattering of Arabic. A few unguarded words from his savage captors would doubtless prove of immense benefit to him in the future.

At about two in the morning a halt was called and a meal served out. The captives were given a small quantity of water in a gourd, a handful of maize, and a few dates—exactly the same as their captors, save that their portion was considerably smaller. In a quarter of an hour the sheikh gave the order to resume the march, and after the enforced rest the agonies of their worn bodies made the Englishmen wish that the halt had never been made.

"I say, Rags, isn't this fearful?" said Gerald in a low voice. "Only fancy, last night we were sleeping in comfort on the floor of Lieutenant Riefi's cabin. Now we——"

And, unable to complete his sentence, the lad manfully tried to swallow a lump that would rise in his throat.

"I can't go on much farther, Rags," he continued, after a lengthy pause. "My ankle's giving out."

"Lean on me if you can," replied Hugh; "I'm fairly fit." But even as he spoke his knees momentarily gave way under him.

"What's that? Can't keep up?" asked Mr. Reeves. "Here, let me give you a hand," and, adding to his difficulties by having to twist his bound hands, the elder of the two gripped Hugh by the arm.

"What will happen if we can't keep up?" asked Hugh. "Will they kill us?"

"I think not," replied the correspondent. "But don't talk about giving up. These fellows will rest all day."

Just then Hugh stumbled again, this time on his knees. His companions halted.

Out of the darkness sprang a gigantic Arab, and, using the octagonal butt of his musket with no sparing hand, he prodded the unfortunate lad with it till Mr. Reeves interposed his own body. Then the man slung his piece across his back, and, grasping Hugh in his sinewy, powerful grip, set him on his feet. But the lad, in spite of his efforts to walk, fell once more.

Meanwhile the rest of the caravan, avoiding the halting group, was passing by. Calling to one of his fellows, the Arab drew his knife—a keen, two-edged weapon, with a short wooden handle. Even in the starlight Reeves recognized the kind of knife; it was similar to those the Arabs used to hamstring the chargers of the 21st Lancers at Omdurman.

The blade glittered, flashed in the dull light, and sank—not in the lad's back, but through the thong that bound his arms; then, lifting Hugh like a sack, the man threw him into the high-pommelled saddle of a horse that another Arab had brought up.

Hugh's two comrades were still attached to him by the camel rope, one on either side; but this proved to be a blessing in disguise, as the two footsore captives were able to aid themselves by the tension of the cord.

Just before dawn the few trees that comprised the oasis of El Khor loomed up against the paling stars. Suddenly the men at the head of the column checked the camels, and brought their rifles to the ready. Reeves could hear the metallic click of the bolts.

Then the tense silence was broken by a voice exclaiming in Arabic: "Peace be between us!" to which Sheikh Wadherim replied: "There is peace between us." Instantly the Arabs discharged their rifles in the air, and urged their camels forward to mingle with the tribes already in possession of the oasis.

Utterly worn out, Hugh was lifted from his horse, and the three comrades in distress threw themselves upon the hard ground. In spite of the cramped position of their arms—for Hugh was again secured—they slept the sleep of utter exhaustion.

The correspondent was the first to awake. It was broad daylight, but the sun was not yet high enough to cause discomfort.

Standing in front of the three English captives were the Sheikh Wadherim and another Arab, evidently a person of importance.

"These, then, my brother, are the tokens of our victory over the unbelieving dogs?" asked the stranger.

"Aye, thanks be to Allah and Mohammed his prophet. We drove them even into the sea. Few escaped to tell the tale, and they were taken up by the houses that float upon the deep."

"'Tis a pity, brother, that more were not brought hither," remarked the stranger meditatively. "One, in truth, seems well able to do a day's work at the salt pans. As for the others, they are beardless boys. Are most of the men of the Kafir host thus?"

"Nevertheless, they are worth a good price, Abdullah. In a few moons they will be as strong and as willing to toil as the white unbeliever who was brought from the south. Take them at the price I ask—"

"Nay, Wadherim, I will have the man, and not the hairless youths. As you say, they will fetch a good price at Tlat—"

"But—"

The sheikhs moved on, still talking volubly. Reeves grasped enough to know the meaning of their conversation, even though he had the presence of mind to affect utter ignorance. He was to be separated from his two young companions.

CHAPTER IV

The Sheikh's Salt

THE Englishman looked at his sleeping comrades. The lads were slumbering deeply, too fatigued even to dream of their tribulations, which, indeed, were hardly begun. Separation was one of the worst things that might befall them, and, if possible, Reeves meant to prevent it. But

how? He racked his brains to think of a plan. Scheme after scheme rapidly suggested itself, only as rapidly to be passed by as impracticable. He strove to remember what rituals the Arabs observed when they swore blood-brotherhood. He would willingly claim relationship with the lowest of the tribe, could he by so doing keep the lads with him. At last a dim recollection of bygone days, a tale he had heard in his youth, flashed across his mind. "Give me the chance," he muttered to himself, "and I'll risk it!"

Presently Hugh opened his eyes, and groaned as the pain of his thong-tied arms recalled the desperate situation in which he and his companions were placed.

Without hesitation, and as if the action was perfectly natural to him, the lad moved till his body shielded his chum's face from the now strengthening rays of the sun.

"The youngster's learning his lesson, poor chap!" thought Mr. Reeves. "I remember him at home as a selfish, unthinking little prig. Already he's beginning to think of others."

The camp was soon astir. The camels, horses, and cattle were taken out to the wells—mere dipping holes of brackish water—and afterwards allowed to graze upon the scanty pasturage of sun-scorched grass. Ere the disturbed water had been given time to settle, a fierce-looking Baggara, armed with spear, short knife, and circular shield of hide, made the captives go to the wells and drink. Both lads remembered how careful Mr. Frazer had been to warn them about drinking unfiltered water. The fountain water of Naples was perfect nectar to this muddy liquid, but thirst compelled them to drink deeply in spite of their qualms.

"I wish we could place our hands in the pool," said Gerald.

"You'd be sorry if you did, my boy," replied Mr. Reeves. "The moisture would cause the leathern thongs to shrink, and they are quite tight enough already."

"Are we going to be kept long in this place?" asked Hugh.

"That I cannot say," replied the correspondent. "Perhaps only a day. The Arabs will make another march to-night, I believe."

Thoughts of the impending separation were still uppermost in his mind. He was torn by the vital question: Ought he to warn the lads? On the one hand, being prepared is forearmed; on the other, he was adding to their miseries by suggesting a situation that might not, after all, come off. It was like meeting trouble half-way. Then he recalled the sheikh's words, "the white unbeliever who was brought from the south". The south? What European was likely to have traversed the vast, trackless desert of Sahara from the south? Nigeria, the Cameroons, French Congo—all lie to the south; but was it possible that a white man could make that fearsome journey? But perhaps the south was a term used in a vague, elastic sense, and the captive referred to was a survivor of the prisoners of the Mahdi? Reeves determined to keep his ears open, and for the present he would say nothing to his young comrades about the conversation he had heard between the Sheikhs Wadherim and Abdullah.

"Look here, boys!" he exclaimed; "I may want you to do something. What it is I won't tell you at present, but you must act immediately I give the word. You understand?"

For a wonder, Reeves remarked, neither of the lads asked why. Both signified their readiness to comply with their friend's instructions.

On being brought back to the encampment, which was separated from the following of the Sheikh Abdullah by about a hundred paces, the captives were permitted to lie down under the shade of a tree. Their bonds were cut, and save for the camel rope they were comparatively free. But not for long. An old Arab, his face wizened into a thousand wrinkles, came up with a brazier full of burning charcoal, and a bag of tools slung at his left hip. Setting down the brazier, he fanned the flame into a fierce heat, chanting the while a doleful kind of tune. Presently he clapped his hands, and three other Arabs appeared, bearing light iron chains in their hands.

Each of the three captives was in turn fastened by the wrist, the gyves being riveted by means of bolts made red-hot in the brazier, the smith flattening out the rivets to the accompaniment of his dolorous chant.

"Well, this is better than a hide rope," said Mr. Reeves, after the man had taken his departure. "It gives us a certain amount of freedom, and the chains are not heavy. And, if the opportunity occurs, I believe I can snap them with very little effort."

"They seem rather strong," remarked Gerald.

"But still, I can manage it," replied his elder comrade confidently. "Now, be ready, for I think something is going to happen."

At that moment four armed men came up to the place where the captives were resting, and by suggestive signs made it clear that they were wanted.

Reeves set his jaw tightly as he arose and, with one of the lads on either side, accompanied the

guards through a part of the encampment to the tent of the Sheikh Wadherim.

The chief was sitting on the ground, with the Sheikh Abdullah on his right hand and a mop-haired Baggara on his left. In front of them were spread the remains of a meal—a bowl containing a sticky mess of boiled flour, honey, and dates, in which the men had apparently dipped their fingers in common; small brass cups containing strong coffee; and an earthenware basin half-filled with a brown substance which the correspondent recognized as salt. Having finished their meal, the Arabs were smoking.

At a sign from their captor the three Englishmen were made to stand in front of the sheikhs, about five yards from them. For a considerable time the Arabs regarded the captives in silence, as if taking stock of their physical condition.

"As you say, brother, the two beardless unbelievers look the better for their rest," remarked Abdullah, removing the stem of his hookah from his lips, and speaking in a low, guttural voice. "I do not gainsay you on that point, but still——"

He paused, and spread out the palms of his hands with a deprecatory gesture.

"There is no time to be lost," replied Wadherim. "I have sworn by the Prophet to reach the oasis of El Keifa ere to-morrow's dawn, otherwise I would be content to abide here and bargain with you. Not that it would make any difference. The full-grown infidel I will not sell without the others; perchance the two beardless ones would droop if taken from the one who, it seems, is their father."

"I have no work meet for these," said Abdullah, pointing to Hugh and Gerald. "Toiling in the salt lakes of El Sog would turn their brains, even as it did that of the unbeliever from the South. Nevertheless, Wadherim, I am indifferent. Either the man or none."

The other sheikh paused ere replying.

"Then I must ask half a score sacks of dates besides the gunpowder we agreed upon," he replied. "Abdullah, you were ever a hard man, but in this matter I must have my way, since you will have the best of the three."

The bargaining proceeded with considerable vehemence. Reeves realized that unless something were done the dreaded separation would become an accomplished fact, for the Sheikh Wadherim was wavering in his demands.

"Boys," he said in a low voice, "eat what I give you;" and ere the lads could comprehend the meaning of his words, the correspondent bounded forward, dragging Hugh and Gerald with him. The guards raised their spears and tried to intervene, thinking that the Kafirs were about to throw themselves upon the sheikhs; but, ere they could prevent it, Reeves had thrust his hand into the bowl of salt.

"Eat!" he exclaimed; and, to his satisfaction, both lads obeyed without hesitation, placing the salt to their lips, while he did the same.

Abdullah gave a shout of rage, and called to the attendant Arabs to secure the unbelievers; but the Sheikh Wadherim silenced him by holding up his hand.

"Peace be with you, brethren!" he exclaimed. "These Kafirs, even though they be the sons of Shaitan, have shown no little courage and cunning. They have partaken of my salt."

"Without your leave," muttered Abdullah.

"But they have claimed a right, notwithstanding, and I must acknowledge it."

The correspondent could hardly conceal his satisfaction. His ruse had succeeded. By partaking of the sheikh's salt he and his companions had, according to the custom of the Arabs from time immemorial, secured his protection, and nothing short of the shedding of blood by those who were under this protection could release the chief from his obligations.

As for the lads, unable to understand the significance of their action, they were beginning to feel the effects of the salt.

"Swallow it!" said Mr. Reeves sternly. "Swallow it! For Heaven's sake don't spit it out! I'll tell you why later."

Striving to conceal his bad temper, the Sheikh Abdullah stood up, grimly saluted the imperturbable Wadherim, and strode back to his encampment, followed by the Baggara, while the now more friendly chief clapped his hands as a signal for the three Kafirs to be removed.

"You see, Hugh, I heard we were to be separated," explained Mr. Reeves.

"Separated!" exclaimed both lads, in dismay. "When?"

"We were to have been, I ought to have said. But sneaking the sheikh's salt altered the case. I

don't think we shall be now. We may also be better treated, being sort of inferior guests of the sheikh. I only hope he won't put us under too much of an obligation, or it would be rather low-down to give him the slip."

"If we do, where can we make for?" asked Gerald. "There are miles of sand, and not a thing to guide us."

"Except the sun and the stars," replied Mr. Reeves. "But the time is hardly ripe to make an attempt yet. When we do, we must have a good chance of success. Failure would be worse than death."

CHAPTER V

The Sandstorm

As Arthur Reeves had predicted, the captives were now better treated by their Arab masters. The camel's rope was cut off, although the iron chains still secured their wrists; and when the camp was struck, and the march southwards was resumed, they were allowed to take turns at riding upon one of the baggage camels.

The two tribes parted peaceably at the oasis, with many shouts of farewell and firing of guns; but there was no doubt that had the followers of the Sheikh Abdullah been the more numerous, the disappointed bargainer would not have hesitated to take the desired Kafir from the Sheikh Wadherim's possession by force.

True to his vow, the latter reached El Keifa ere morning. This stage of the journey was not so tedious as the first day's, the distance being shorter, while there were two small intervening oases where halts were made under the light of the stars.

Here the Arabs rested for the following day, for the next stage, crossing a waterless tract of desert, where the only guide posts were the bleached bones of camels that had fallen out by the way, required at least forty hours to complete.

Just after sunset the laborious task commenced. The three captives had each been provided with a dirty, ragged *burnous*, which during the heat of the day protected not only the head but also the back. Already the upper parts of their bodies were getting accustomed to the sun. At first the skin burned a vivid red, but it soon acquired a deep bronze tint. Well it was that the captives at this stage were unable to make use of water for washing purposes, or their flesh would have been raw with the effect of the fierce heat.

Throughout the long night the march continued, and long before morning the lads, in spite of having a camel to ride between them—for Reeves firmly refused to avail himself of the animal—were almost crippled. Even the slow, measured, ungainly gait of the ship of the desert caused their bones to ache, till the alternate rests seemed to try them far more than tramping through the sand.

During the day the terrors of the march were intensified. Even some of the Arabs—hardy sons of the desert—had to fall out, although in every case a camel-man would chivalrously give up his beast to the sufferer and trudge patiently on foot. Many of the camels also sank upon the burning sand, never again to rise, while in the rear of the column gaunt vultures hovered in dreadful expectancy of a feast. The sheep and cattle, too, died in large quantities, till the Sheikh Wadherim began to think that he would arrive at his journey's end far poorer than when he set out for the seacoast to enrich himself with the spoils of the Kafir invaders. Strangely enough, the horses came off best. They were thoroughly seasoned, and could stand the hardships of a day's journey better than the camels, although had the distance been greater the conditions would have been reversed.

Before the sun was low in the heavens, the camel that the lads had been provided with was taken to assist a helpless Arab, and the Englishmen had perforce to complete the journey afoot—if they could. Mile after mile they trudged despairingly, without the heart to speak a word. To them there seemed no end to their trials. Ahead was the gently undulating desert, with its gruesome monuments of sun-bleached bones, but nothing to indicate the oasis for which the caravan was making.

Suddenly a warning shout came from the head of the column. Men began to dismount from their lofty steeds, and to run towards the baggage animals and the camels on which the women and children were seated. Others, with frantic cries, urged the already quivering animals to their knees.

"Cover your faces, boys!" gasped the correspondent, as he led them to the side of a prostrate hierie. "It's a sandstorm!"

The lads had barely time to grasp the situation. The air around them, almost motionless, was hot and oppressive; but less than three hundred yards away, and momentarily drawing nearer,

was a dark-brown pillar of sand, trailing away into a seething, ill-defined cloud.

Already the Arabs, drawing their *haiks* over their faces, were kneeling beside their steeds. The deathly silence was broken only by the startled cries of some of the younger children and the ever-increasing hiss of the wind.

Then the sandstorm burst. If one has ever had the experience of standing in the midst of a continuous shower of spray, and gasping salt-laden air into the lungs, the sensation can be faintly realized—only instead of spray it was sand-laden, burning, suffocating vapour.

For just half a minute the lads stood the terrible ordeal; then, in their desperation, they rose to their feet, only to be forced to the ground by the strong grasp of Arthur Reeves. There they lay, gasping like stranded fishes, for a space of nearly five minutes, till the correspondent's detaining grip was relaxed.

When the mist cleared from before their throbbing, blood-shot eyes, a strange sight met their gaze.

Some of the horses, half-buried in sand, were plunging wildly and snorting with terror.

Those of the Arabs who had managed to extricate themselves from the hot sand were endeavouring to release their less-fortunate comrades; while the half-buried camels remained in a kneeling position, with their long-lashed eyelids drooping over their large dark eyes, as if absolutely indifferent to the peril they had undergone.

Fortunately the storm had been of comparatively short duration, and the loss of life was in consequence confined to the cattle and horses. Some of the latter, in their terror, had fled wildly from the hot blast, and, being overtaken by it, had perished miserably, a few hummocks of drifted sand marking the places where they fell.

Ere the march could be resumed, a prolonged halt was called, and a fairly liberal amount of water given to men and cattle. Much of the baggage had to be abandoned, for want of sufficient means of transport.

At length the wearied men arrived at the oasis of El Tebat, where two more days were spent ere the march was resumed. Thence, after thirty days, following a widely-spaced chain of oases, the Sheikh Wadherim brought his tribe back to their native haunts of Wadi Tlat. With his men, and their wives and families, flocks, herds, and other possessions, he had journeyed to the sea in the belief that the followers of Mohammed would gain an easy victory over the unbelievers, and, rich in booty, would live at their ease in the fertile oases by the coast till the call of the desert would once again have to be obeyed. If his faith in the Prophet had been rudely shaken, the sheikh gave no sign of his bad fortune.

Wadi Tlat, situated on the southern border of the great Plateau of Ahaggar, was the name given by the Tlat River to the surrounding valley. The country, though rugged, abounded with coarse herbage, and nearly ten thousand nomads found means of subsistence in the district watered by the river and two of its tributaries.

What lay to the southward of the plateau none of the Arabs knew. To them it was a broad, trackless desert, peopled by the jinns or spirits of an evil world; and although the Tlat—usually little more than a series of shallow pools, connected at certain points of the river by a narrow stream fed by a lake up in the mountains—flowed in a south-westerly direction, none of the Arabs had the courage to follow its course beyond Bab-el-Jinn—the Gate of Evil Spirits—two bleak and massive rocks standing like giant pinnacles in the middle of a narrow gorge.

Here, at Wadi Tlat, full six hundred miles from the sea, Arthur Reeves, Hugh, and Gerald entered into a new phase of their captivity, far beyond the help of any European influence, and doomed, apparently, to lifelong slavery!

CHAPTER VI

The Escape

FOR several days the captives' lot, though hard, was not oppressive. Save for the fetters on their wrists, they were not subjected to bonds, nor were their movements restricted, within certain limits. Their work consisted in having to tend and water the camels, horses, and cattle, and to cultivate a strip of land on the banks of the river. Although, generally speaking, the Arabs are a nomadic race, and do not take kindly to husbandry, this fertile strip of ground offered too good an opportunity of cultivating maize to be ignored; and the work was delegated to the slaves, most of whom were of negro descent, while some were Arabs who, through offences committed against the tribal laws and customs, were reduced to compulsory servitude.

The Englishmen's clothing, long since in rags, was now barely enough to cover them; but, hardened to the sun's rays, the discomfort was less than they had anticipated. Reeves's chief

source of anxiety on this account was concerning his automatic pistol and ammunition, till, fearing that the ragged state of his clothing would reveal the precious treasure, he stealthily wrapped the weapon and cartridges in a fragment of sheepskin, and hid them under a rock at some distance from the camp.

The man's indomitable spirit seemed to buoy up the flagging energies of his two young companions; but although many plans were brought forward when the question of escaping was discussed, it was deemed prudent to wait events. The correspondent kept a marvellous control over himself, never once by word or gesture allowing the Arabs to suspect that he was fairly conversant with their tongue. Yet he failed to overhear any reliable information relating to the land that lay to the south of the Plateau of Ahaggar: to the Arabs it was almost a forbidden subject.

"It seems to me," he once remarked, "that our only chance of escape lies in making a dash to the south. This river must lead somewhere, unless it is lost in the sand. The fact that the country in that direction seems to be in disfavour with the Arabs is in our favour. Returning by the way we came is a physical impossibility. To the dangers of crossing the desert is added the likelihood of falling into the hands of another tribe, in which case our position would be far worse than it is at present."

"But where do you think the river leads to?" asked Hugh.

"I can only conjecture. Since we are on the highest ground of the great Sahara, it may be that the river flows into Nigerian territory. If we make the attempt, it will be no light task."

"Anything will be better than dragging out a miserable existence here," replied Gerald.

"As I have said before, we must not spoil everything by being premature," rejoined Mr. Reeves. "Still, we must not be content with discussing the matter; we must act."

By denying themselves a portion of their already scanty fare, the captives contrived to collect a store of provisions least likely to be spoiled by age. Two goatskin water bottles were also set aside by stealth, and, taking advantage of their daily excursions to the river, the Englishmen managed without detection to secrete their prizes in a small cave not far from the place where the pistol and ammunition were hidden.

One afternoon, as the three comrades were returning from their toil at the maize field, they perceived a tall, white-robed Arab approaching. He was bareheaded and his hair was shaved, denoting that he was an *imam*, or holy man. In utter ignorance of whom he was, Gerald incautiously allowed his shadow to fall athwart the stranger's path.

The *imam* stopped and cursed the unbeliever in the strongest terms he could lay tongue to; but the lad, not knowing what was being said, continued on his way with his companions.

"We've done it!" remarked Reeves. "That fellow is one of the priests of the tribe, and in some way we've offended him. Ten to one he'll make it hot for us with the sheikh."

The words were hardly out of his mouth when the rapid pattering of footsteps in the sand caused the captives to look behind them.

The "imam", considering himself deliberately abused by a son of Shaitan, was running towards his supposed insulter, knife in hand. The blade flashed in the air. In another moment it would have been buried in Gerald's shoulder had not Reeves, by throwing himself on the ground, caught the Arab by the ankles, capsizing him very neatly on the soft soil.

"Take the knife away from him, Hugh," shouted the prostrate Englishman. Ere the lad could seize the *imam's* wrist, however, the man kicked himself free, and rushed at the unbeliever who had thwarted him.

But the correspondent was not going to allow himself to be knifed if he could help it. Bringing his wrists together, he struck at the Arab with the bight of the iron chain. The *imam* attempted to parry the blow, but the supple links, falling upon his bare skull, brought him to the ground, this time with a thud. In tumbling, the unfortunate wretch fell upon his own knife, and, ere the Englishman could realize what had occurred, the Arab was dead.

"Look sharp, lads; scoop a hole in the sand and cover him up. If this is discovered we are as good as done for. I hope no one else saw this business.... Too late, by Jove! Look over there!"

Reeves pointed to the opposite side of the river, where three or four Baggaras were making for the encampment. They had seen the affair, and, taking to their heels, ran swiftly to carry the news to the sheikh. Fortunately the river at this point widened out to a fair-sized pond, and the men had to go some distance upstream ere they came to the ford.

"We must make a dash for it," continued Reeves, giving a swift glance around. "Make for the hgeries—they are behind those rocks."

All three broke into a run, stopping a moment at the hiding-place to retrieve the empty water

skins, provisions, pistol, and ammunition. As luck would have it, four of the beasts were saddled, having been made ready to bear the sheikh and three of the principal members of his family on a short journey to a neighbouring tribe.

The black slaves gasped with astonishment to see the three Kafirs running towards them, when they ought to have been in the fields. Still more were they astonished when they beheld Reeves unbuckle the girths of one of the animals and, with the saddle under his arm, climb into the saddle of another kneeling camel; and ere they could recover from their surprise, the three white men were urging their willing but unwieldy steeds towards the desert.

The fugitives could rely upon half an hour's start—five miles at the outside—and as the distance between them and the encampment of Sheikh Wadherim increased, they saw with intense satisfaction that there were as yet no signs of pursuit.

"Why are we going into the desert?" asked Hugh, after a while. "I thought you meant to follow the river?"

"So I should have, had we not settled the hash of that shaven-headed rascal," replied Reeves. "No doubt the Arabs, in their desire to avenge the death of their *imam*, will brave the terrors of the jinn-infested country. That's somewhat unfortunate for us but it cannot be helped. I mean to strike into the desert till just before dawn, then bear away to the south-west and rejoin the stream."

"We are without water," observed Gerald.

"True! Had we gone deliberately to work we should have taken steps to procure a supply. That makes us dependent upon the river in any case. I wish there was a breeze to cover up our tracks," and the correspondent pointed to six distinct, furrow-like lines in the soft, yielding sand.

On and on they rode, keeping their direction solely by the position of the now setting sun. At length the fiery orb dipped behind the almost level horizon, but still there was no sign of the expected pursuit.

"Perhaps they are still afraid of the jinns," said Hugh.

"Or it is quite likely that we are outstripping them," added Reeves. "We've taken the best hieries, and they are comparatively fresh. We've more than a fighting chance, lads."

It was soon night. The stars shone forth with fiery brilliancy, while the air was sharp, though not so piercingly cold as on the low-lying deserts to the north. For several hours hardly a word was spoken, and only the soft footfalls of the camels broke the silence.

"How shall we get rid of these beastly things?" asked Hugh at last, rattling his chain as he spoke.

"We must be content to wear the bracelets," replied Reeves. "When it is daylight I mean to try a few shots with the pistol on them. The only thing is that ammunition is scarce."

"I've a file," announced Gerald. "I saw one lying outside the tent of Azuf the blacksmith this morning, and so I picked it up. I meant to have told you before."

"Good!" replied Reeves emphatically. "As soon as we call a halt we'll begin operations."

"Haven't we gone far enough?" asked Hugh.

"Far enough?" repeated Reeves fiercely. "Not by any means. We'll be seen at daybreak, if not before, if we stay here."

On they plodded, keeping resolutely to the south-east. Once or twice Hugh fancied that he could distinguish the sounds of distant voices, but neither Gerald nor Reeves could detect any noises that could be put down to their pursuers.

At length, just before dawn, an intense blackness brooded over the desert. The stars withheld their light, and for nearly an hour the three fugitives were riding blindly, unable to ascertain in which direction they were going, but trusting to Providence to guide them from their taskmasters.

"Look here," exclaimed Reeves, pulling his hierie and turning towards his almost invisible companions, "this won't do! Goodness only knows where we are heading for. We'll make a halt till dawn, or until the stars are visible again. I only wish we had a watch. It can't be far off sunrise."

Descending from their lofty perches, the fugitives hobbled the camels and waited, the correspondent making good use of his time by filing away at one of the wristlets to which was secured Gerald's chain.

"Now then, Rags, you have a shot at it," he said, handing Hugh the file, and wiping the moisture from his brow, for even in the cold night air the exertion was trying and tedious. The lad took the file, and while Reeves steadied Gerald's wrist, Hugh worked manfully at the stubborn

metal.

So engrossed were they by their task that the dawn began to glimmer ere the fugitives were aware of it. Suddenly Reeves looked up.

"By Jove! we've been making a mess of it," he exclaimed, pointing to the glow in the sky. Instead of pointing to his left, he pointed in exactly the opposite direction. During the period of darkness they had completed a semicircle, and were making as nearly as possible straight for the direction whence they had come.

"Up with you!" he continued, as he set the example by unhobbling his hirie and climbing into the high-peaked saddle.

From his lofty perch upon the camel's back he glanced anxiously in a northerly direction. The sun was just appearing above the horizon, and in its ruddy light the Englishman saw a sight that made him mutter under his breath.

Less than a mile distant were their pursuers!

CHAPTER VII

The Fight in the Desert

URGING their steeds to the utmost, the three fugitives rode with set faces, resolving either to escape or to fight to the end. Recapture would mean far worse than death.

Grasping his pistol tightly in his right hand, and steadying himself with his left, Reeves turned in his saddle and took a swift yet comprehensive view of the pursuing Arabs. There were five of them, all fully clad in white, showing that they were the chief men of the tribe. Each had a gun slung across his shoulder, and by the length of the barrels the Englishman knew, to his satisfaction, that they were smooth-bore flintlocks, and not the modern rifles used by the Arabs on the coast. Gun flints are practically indestructible, and gunpowder can be manufactured by the Arabs under the most rough-and-ready conditions; but cartridges are comparatively scarce. Consequently, for all ordinary purposes—except in inter-tribal fights, when rapid firing is essential to success—the denizens of the desert prefer to husband their supplies of modern ammunition, and prefer to use flint.

"They are gaining slightly, I fear," remarked Reeves. "Still, we have a fighting chance. I wish we could take aim."

On they tore, pursuers and pursued, till at length one of the Arabs took a flying shot. The bullet fell short, knocking up a shower of sand barely forty yards behind the Englishmen. This was a certain sign that the intervening distance was diminishing.

"What's that ahead?" exclaimed Gerald, pointing to a small, black, pillar-like object in the sand a full mile away.

"It's a rock," replied Hugh.

"That's a blessing!" ejaculated Reeves, for his camel was beginning to show signs of having over-exerted himself. "I only hope there are no more of the brutes in ambush," he muttered.

There were two alternatives—either halting and making a stand in the open, or taking the risks that the rock already concealed more of the Arabs, and, if not, enjoying the advantages of fighting with their backs against a wall.

Reeves chose the latter. It was evident that flight was now out of the question, for, in addition to his hirie showing signs of fatigue, the lads' camels were almost at the end of their stride.

At length the fugitives drew up at the place they had selected, to make their desperate defence. It was, on closer acquaintance, a large mass of rock, sheer on three sides, and sloping steeply on the remaining front. The most active climber in the world could not hope, without climbing implements, to scale the perpendicular sides, which were quite twenty feet in height, and worn smooth by the action of sandstorms through countless ages. At the base of the fourth side there was a fairly wide trench, partly filled with drifting sand, a low wall of irregularly-shaped rock forming a breastwork about two feet in height.

"Couldn't be better!" exclaimed Reeves, as he slipped from his camel. "Be sharp; make these brutes lie down. Never mind that; it's over." This last remark was addressed to Gerald, who ducked his head as a bullet flattened itself out upon the rock a good six feet from the ground.

The camels, fortunately tractable and docile, were made to lie in the trench, while, to be perfectly sure that they would not stampede and leave the fugitives in the lurch, Hugh fastened their halters together.

"Now we're fairly comfortable," continued the correspondent, as he placed his reserve of cartridges by his side. "Those fellows won't keep firing long, I fancy. When they make a rush for it, wait till they are the length of a cricket pitch off, then let them have it with some of these stones. Ah! That was a close one!"

A bullet clipped the edge of his *burnous*, while two others knocked chips off the rock behind which the three fugitives were sheltering.

"We can stand plenty of that," continued Reeves. "I only hope they won't wait till the sun gets up, or we'll be baked in this hole."

Suddenly there was a dull thud, like that of a stone striking a sack of corn. One of the camels had incautiously raised its head, and had received a shot in the throat. It gave a strange sort of cry—half-groan, half-shriek—stretched its long neck on the ground, and closed its patient-looking eyes.

"That's awkward," remarked Reeves. "If this goes on, it will end in our having to tramp to the river." He spoke calmly, unwilling to alarm his charges, but the loss of a hirie could not be too highly taken into account.

For quite a quarter of an hour the Arabs maintained a desultory fire, holding their antiquated weapons with the utmost deliberation, and firing from a distance of less than one hundred yards. Reeves particularly noticed that the "missfires" were few and far between, the great breadth of the Arabs' flints emitting such a large spark that the priming rarely failed to take fire.

All this while the defenders lay low within their natural fortress. Reeves was unwilling to fire a shot in reply, lest the Arabs should fear to close, and instead ride off for additional assistance. That would have been fatal for the Englishmen. Stern necessity decreed that it should be a fight to the death for one side.

Presently the Arabs dismounted, and, leaving their camels without any attempt to secure them, worked their way round behind the rock.

Reeves gave a low whistle—a thing he always did when annoyed.

"They'll be able to rush us easier that way," he exclaimed; "but it can't be helped. Got plenty of stones? Good! Now, look out!"

The Arabs, still maintaining a respectful distance, continued firing, their bullets whizzing by the side of the rock, as if they meant to frighten the Kafirs before rushing in upon them. Cautiously Reeves and the two lads crept close to the base of their towering shelter.

"They'll close after the next volley," said the correspondent calmly. "See that fellow with the red belt? You tackle him, Rags. Gerald, you must have a shot at that amiable-looking gentleman with the grey beard. His spear looks particularly annoying. Now, keep cool; imagine you're bowling with your first eleven."

Three of the Arabs had divested themselves of the upper part of their clothing, and had accomplished what is termed in Scripture the girding up of their loins. The others made no preparations for the rush whatever.

Reeves was perfectly correct in his surmise. The Arabs do not take readily to the use of firearms, and the primitive instinct to close with their adversaries is still strong within them.

"Here they come!"

A volley, sounding almost like a single shot, whistled over the defenders' heads, or else the bullets flattened against the rock. Dropping their firearms, the men picked up their spears or swords, and, with a fierce yell, rushed with incredible velocity upon the apparently defenceless unbelievers.

Reeves let them come to within thirty yards of the rock.

"Not yet," he cautioned hurriedly, as the lads bravely stood up to meet their savage foes.

Steadying the muzzle of his pistol in the hollow of his left arm, the correspondent took careful aim full at the heaving chest of the foremost Arab, a mop-haired Baggara, who was brandishing a long, double-handed sword.

The pistol flashed; there was a report like the crack of a whip; but still the Arabs bounded towards the defenders.

Crack! Another shot. An Arab immediately behind the swordsman sprang up in the air and fell, and a second later the Baggara faltered, turned twice round, and dropped, still grasping his gleaming weapon.

Then the lads hurled their missiles. Hugh's stone caught one of the assailants full in the forehead, toppling him over like a second Goliath; but Gerald's aim was faulty, and his stone

whizzed handsomely by a tall, lithe spearman.

The next moment the two surviving Arabs, reckless in the heat of the fight, were upon them. Even as one leapt in order to deliver a fierce thrust with his keen, broad-bladed spear, Reeves fired full in his face. The man was killed instantly, but the impetus of his rush made him fall on top of Gerald, who was preparing to throw another stone. Unable to check his speed, the last Arab tripped over the body of his comrade; and before he could recover himself, Reeves shot him also through the head.

Exhausted by their efforts, it was some time before the victors could utter a sound. Now the fight was over, thirst began to assert itself.

"It turned out better than I thought," remarked Reeves, as he recharged his pistol. "It was a pretty close shave at the end. When I have time I must flatten the heads of these bullets. Beyond ten yards they are almost useless for stopping a man."

"We won't be hard up for arms now," said Hugh, "and camels as well."

"Water is what we most require at present," replied the correspondent. "No doubt there are a few skinfuls with the camels, and perhaps some of these beauties have a small supply on them. Let's see!"

A search of the bodies of the two men who had been shot at close range revealed nothing in the shape of water bottles. One man had, however, hampered himself with a small bag of dates, of which the victors took possession.

"You dropped that fellow pretty neatly with that stone, Rags," observed Gerald, as they made their way over to where the first three Arabs had fallen.

"Be careful!" cautioned Reeves, as the two lads approached the motionless body of the Arab whom Hugh had brought down.

Hugh was just on the point of asking why, when there was a general commotion as the Arab staggered to his feet and hurled his spear full at Gerald, who was leading.

Taken completely by surprise, Gerald stood stockstill. He would have been transfixed by the hurtling weapon had not Hugh pulled him violently on one side.

With a snarl the Arab drew his short knife and ran in upon the lads, who promptly took to their heels.

Finding that pursuit was impossible, the half-dazed man directed his attention to Reeves, who unwillingly, though actuated by stern necessity, was compelled to shoot him as he ran.

"That's an old trick," remarked the correspondent. "Many of our men lost their lives in the Sudan through Arabs feigning death. Now, let's look at these two. I am rather curious to see what happened." So saying, he led the way to where the Baggara swordsman and the second Arab were shot.

The Baggara lay on his back. Just below the left shoulder blade was a small puncture, while another was visible barely three inches lower down. Both shots had taken effect, but owing to their high velocity had failed to stop the man instantly. But the strange part was that the second shot, after passing clean through the man's body, and losing some of its rate of speed, had struck the Arab who was behind him in the forehead, causing instant death.

This man was carrying a small goatskin water bottle, but in his fall he had burst it, and the precious liquid was utterly wasted.

"Hard lines!" ejaculated Hugh, rolling his tongue in his parched mouth.

"We must see what the camels have on them," said the correspondent. "Be careful how you approach them; they might run."

"They are used to us," replied Hugh. "We've taken them to be watered many a time;" and uttering the Arab cry of "Lu-lu-lu", the lad made his way towards the spot where the five camels were standing.

"They won't move, you see," he continued, hastening his pace. "Look! two of them have water bottles slung from the saddles."

"Wait till I bring our two beasts out," called Reeves from a distance.

Either it was sheer obstinacy on Hugh's part, or else he failed to hear his elder comrade's warning, for without waiting for the already tractable camels to be brought out to entice the others, he advanced boldly towards the masterless animals.

Suddenly the five camels bolted, and in a cloud of sand were soon lost to sight.

Reeves bit his lip and said nothing. Hugh also was silent, but Gerald gave an exclamation of despair. The same fact was apparent to each of them. They were stranded in the desert, with only two hgeries between them, and not a drop of water to drink.

CHAPTER VIII

A Discovery

"IT'S no use staying here all day," remarked Reeves at length. "Gather up the provisions, and take a musket and ammunition apiece, and we'll make a dash for the river; it can't be much more than twenty miles off."

He spoke as naturally as he could, but twenty miles across a trackless desert in the full heat of the blazing sun was no light journey, especially when one must be afoot. Besides, the presence of the river might be purely conjectural; it might make a sudden bend to the west, and instead of tramping twenty miles, the travellers might stagger on till they dropped, and still not find water.

However, it was a course for actions, not words; and, having armed themselves, Hugh and Gerald mounted the two remaining hgeries, while Reeves walked between the animals.

But before they had traversed a hundred yards the correspondent stopped.

"Hand me that goatskin!" he exclaimed, and without a word as to his intentions he retraced his steps to the rock.

The lads gazed at him in astonishment, yet both were too utterly exhausted and parched to speak.

In less than five minutes the correspondent returned, staggering under the load of a distended water bottle.

"Drink" he said, holding up the skin for Gerald to take, "but be careful not to spill a drop."

Longingly Hugh watched his companion take a deep draught of the life-giving fluid, but patiently he waited his turn.

"And you, Mr. Reeves?" asked Gerald, as the correspondent carefully retied the mouth of the goatskin when Hugh had drunk.

"I've had some already. I had what was over; it was not much, but enough."

Both lads knew where the water had been obtained, although the idea had not previously entered their heads. Nature has provided the camel with unique means of carrying a large supply of water, which, until required, remains as fresh as can be expected; and, with the knowledge of this peculiarity, Reeves had deftly drawn the precious fluid from the dead hgerie.

Then the tedious, anxious journey was resumed. The sun, now high in the heavens, beat fiercely upon the white *burnouses* of the travellers, while the sand underfoot was so hot that Reeves could scarce place his feet to the ground, in spite of the fact that his well-made boots still stood the wear and tear of days in the desert. Yet uncomplainingly he tramped full five weary miles before Gerald insisted on giving up his camel to his elder.

Hour after hour passed without any sign of the hoped-for river. At length the ground, still sandy, though dotted here and there with masses of smooth, rounded rock, began to slope upwards, apparently without a break, for nearly five miles.

Reeves looked grave when he saw this. They were heading at right angles the supposed direction of the river, and the land was rising. The river could not possibly run uphill. Perhaps beyond—if not, the disappointment would be enough to crush even his powers of resolution.

Once again the agonies of thirst began to assert themselves, in spite of a frugal meal of dried dates, and soon it was with the greatest difficulty that they could move their swollen tongues in their parched mouths.

Shortly after noon Gerald was on the point of collapse. Only by passing a rope round the two raised portions of the saddle was Reeves able to keep his young charge from reeling and falling to the ground.

"We must halt for a while," he exclaimed. "Make for that rock over there, Hugh."

He pointed to a mass of stone that, leaning slightly, might possibly afford some shelter from the sun. The rock, resembling a Druidical pillar, stood about two hundred yards to the right of the direction in which they were travelling; but being the only object likely to throw a reasonable shade, the turning aside was advisable.

Gerald, on one camel, was leading, with Reeves walking slightly to the left flank, while Hugh's hirie ambled at some ten paces in the rear.

Suddenly Gerald stiffened himself in the saddle, and in a loud, croaking voice shouted, "Water!"

Hugh replied with a feeble cry of delight, but Reeves, although his hopes ran high at the announcement, thought that Gerald's exclamation was the outcome of a disordered imagination. In order to soothe the lad, however, he asked: "Where, Gerald?"

For answer the lad pointed to a long, low ridge of sand through which the rock protruded. Beyond was a dip, but from his level Reeves could not see over the crest as well as did the lad on the camel. From even a very short distance the radiation of the sand caused every outline to appear blurred and wavy, and the depression beyond the ridge was in consequence hitherto unnoticed.

"Why, it's the river!" exclaimed Gerald.

Reeves waited no longer, but, breaking into a stumbling run, pressed on ahead and gained the side of the rock. Gerald was right. In a narrow khor, or valley, flowed the stream. True, it was little better than a chain of shallow lakes connected by a mere trickle of yellowish water, but to the almost exhausted fugitives it meant life.

Forgetting their fatigue, the lads slipped from their saddles and staggered towards the nearest pool, while Reeves, stopping only to hobble the camels, made haste to follow them. Half a minute later the three were on their knees, plunging their heads into the tepid water, and taking copious draughts of the invigorating liquid.

"Steady, boys!" cautioned Reeves, knowing that an excess would be almost as bad as a lack of water; "there's plenty of time. Here we stay for the rest of the day."

"Are we safe?" asked Hugh.

"As safe as we can reasonably hope to be," replied the correspondent. "I'll bring the camels down, and while they are drinking we'll have a meal."

"Is this the same river as at Wadi Tlat?" asked Gerald.

"As far as I can judge, but it has made a fairly wide sweep to the south-west. I believe that had we kept due south from the spot where we were at sunrise, we should have struck the river within an hour or so."

"Perhaps it turned out for the best."

"That I do not doubt. We might not have found such an admirable spot to hold our own against the Arabs, and had those fellows caught us in the open, it would have gone hard with us. That reminds me—do you know how to load these guns?"

The lads shook their heads. They had both used rook rifles before, but these long-barrelled flintlocks were beyond them.

"I can't see the place for the caps," said Gerald.

"For the simple reason that percussion caps are not used," replied Reeves, taking up one of the muskets. "See this piece of steel on a hinge? I throw it back, and you see a shallow bowl underneath it. That is the pan. You've heard of the expression, 'a flash in the pan'? Now, first load the barrel with powder and ball, not forgetting the wads, and ram the charge hard home, so. Next half-cock the hammer, place powder in the pan, and cover it up again by the steel. To fire, full-cock the musket, take aim, and pull the trigger. The flint will draw fire from the steel, and at the same time throw open the pan. The spark ignites the priming powder in the pan, which in turn communicates, by means of a small hole, with the charge in the barrel. It's somewhat unreliable, for the flint may spark without igniting the priming, or the priming may flash in the pan without exploding the charge."

"How cumbersome!" remarked Hugh.

"But we are lucky to have them at all," replied the correspondent. "For nearly a hundred and fifty years our forefathers fought and won their battles with weapons acting in precisely the same manner as this. Consequently, if ever we are compelled to use these weapons in self-defence, we must remember their maxim: 'Never fire till you can see the whites of your enemy's eyes'. Now, boys, you had better snatch a few hours' sleep in the shade of the rock. I can hold out a good while, so I'll keep watch."

Both Hugh and Gerald protested that they were quite capable of taking the first watch, and that their elder was more in need of rest than they were; but Reeves sternly ordered them to obey.

In less than three minutes both lads were fast asleep, while the correspondent took up a position as much in the shade as possible, keeping a vigilant lookout across the seemingly

interminable waste of sand.

Once more he reviewed the situation. Here they were on the banks of a small, unknown river, with a vast tract of country, hitherto unvisited by Europeans, stretching southward—whither? Without proper equipment, ill-provisioned, and already weak with fatigue and meagre fare, how could he, let alone the two lads, hope to traverse the great, unknown desert? The river might prove to be one of those that eventually lose themselves in the sand or periodically dry up, or it might wax greater and stronger and join one of the immense tributaries of the Niger; but to return was out of the question. They must proceed, overcome their great difficulties, or in turn be overcome by them.

At length Hugh awoke, feeling considerably refreshed, and, after being warned that strict vigilance was imperative, took the correspondent's place while the latter snatched a brief but well-earned rest.

Presently Hugh was joined by his chum, and not until the sun was low in the heavens did they cease to maintain a careful and anxious lookout. But there was no sign of human beings. The Arabs, their fear of the jinns increased considerably by the non-return of their comrades, attempted no further pursuit.

All that night Reeves kept watch, lying with his serviceable ear near the sand in order the more readily to detect the soft footfalls of approaching camels, or standing at intervals to stretch his aching frame and to gaze into the starlit desert.

At daybreak the journey by the banks of the river began. In order to guard against possible surprise, the fugitives kept upon the ridge of hard-baked earth that followed the course of the stream at less than fifty yards from it. Without much exertion a steady pace could be maintained by the one who chanced to be afoot, while by taking turns at riding the camels a much greater distance could be covered.

For four days the course of the river was followed, without signs of any other human beings. Occasionally a small patch of scrub would be seen, but beyond that there was no herbage upon which the camels could feed. For their masters there was as yet sufficient for their needs; but Reeves, though outwardly sanguine, could not ignore the fact that the supply would last but three days more.

At the end of the fourth day, just as the fugitives were preparing to camp out for the night, Hugh pointed to a dark-brown object lying on the side of one of the sandhills.

"Is that a man?" he asked.

"It certainly looks like one," replied Reeves; "but if it is, he is certainly not attempting to conceal himself. Bring your muskets, lads, and we'll see what it really is."

They had to traverse a distance of nearly four hundred yards before the correspondent, who was leading, breasted the slope of the last hillock that lay between them and the object of their search.

"It was a man," announced Reeves. "The poor fellow has died, apparently from hunger and thirst."

The three Englishmen raised their head-coverings as they stopped by the side of the luckless traveller, of whom only a bleached skeleton remained. To the lads' surprise, the body, which was lying face downwards, was encased in a hauberk of chain armour, while at a short distance from the head was a steel helmet, with a short guard for the nose. Both helm and hauberk were slightly eaten away by rust.

"Why, it's the body of a mediaeval knight!" exclaimed Gerald. "I've——"

"Not so fast!" interposed Reeves. "The poor fellow was doubtless an Arab emir. As late as fifteen years ago we had Sudanese clad in mail, which, if not exactly that worn by the Crusader, was a good copy of it. It is commonly supposed that the Arabs obtained the use of chain mail from their Saracen ancestors, who, of course, adapted their Christian enemies' arms and mail to their own purpose. I'll turn the man over. Perhaps he may have something on of service to us."

So saying, the correspondent gently placed his hands under the hauberk and turned the skeleton on its back. As he did so he gave a grunt of surprise, for to the right breast of the rusty coat of mail was affixed a metal cross, made apparently of copper, but green with exposure to the air.

"It strikes me pretty forcibly that you are right after all, Gerald," he exclaimed. "But at the same time I cannot believe it possible, even taking into consideration the dryness of the atmosphere, that armour could withstand the ravages of the weather for seven or eight hundred years."

"There is a dagger," said Hugh, pointing to the hilt of a weapon that hung at the right side of the skeleton, the remaining portion being buried in the sand.

"It certainly looks like a misericord," remarked Reeves, drawing the rusty steel from its mouldy sheath. "See! the man wears a rich leathern baldrick. At one time he carried a sword—here are the fragments of a sheath; and, stranger still, he does not appear to have had firearms!"

"Why is it strange?" asked Hugh.

"Because an emir, even though clad in chain mail, almost invariably carries a pistol and powder-horn with him. This man has none. However, the mystery must remain a mystery, I fear. We can, at any rate, cover the skeleton with sand."

This was accordingly done; but as the Englishmen were about to return to where the camels were left, Reeves stooped and picked up the dagger.

"Every additional weight hampers us," he remarked, "but I think I will take this. It will be a memento, in case we return to civilization in safety."

"I wonder if the man rode a horse or a camel?" asked Hugh. "If so, are there any traces of it?"

"We may as well look around," replied Reeves. "Another thing that puzzles me is, why did the man die in the sand, instead of making his way to the river, which is less than a hundred yards off, and quite visible from here? However, carry on. You, Hugh, go ahead for a hundred paces; Gerald, you go to your left, but no farther than yonder hillock; I'll explore the rocks by the river."

Reeves had barely taken thirty steps when a shout from Gerald arrested his attention. "There's a cross stuck up on a sandhill," announced the lad.

Making his way in the direction indicated, Hugh having rejoined him, the correspondent found that the cross was in reality a big, cross-hilted sword, planted point downwards in a cleft in the rocks, which were covered to a depth of about a foot with drifting sand.

Pulling out the weapon, Reeves examined the blade. It was rusty, but not in such a bad state as the hauberk and helm, the frequent friction of the sand having kept the steel from being badly eaten away. The blade was about three feet six inches in length, perfectly straight except for three inches from the end, where it tapered sharply to a point. The hilt was of iron, devoid of ornamentation.

"It looks as if it were placed here for a purpose," remarked Hugh.

"It does," replied Reeves, "—as a symbol of faith. See! the cross shows towards the east. But we must be getting back. It will be dark in a few minutes."

And, bearing the sword with him, the correspondent led the way back to the bivouac by the river.

CHAPTER IX

The Mirage

WHEN the lads awoke on the following morning they were astonished to smell the appetizing odours of roasting meat.

The correspondent was sitting down, busily engaged in rubbing the sword with a piece of wet rag dipped in sand. Five yards away a fire burned dully in the sunlight, while across it a large piece of meat was supported on the long ramrods of the Arab guns.

"Killed anything?" asked Hugh laconically, after the customary morning greetings had been exchanged. Life in the desert is not conducive to good manners, although it may be to good fellowship. "I never heard a shot."

"No, you did not," replied Reeves dryly. "If you had, I trust you would have wakened instantly and stood to your arms. Unfortunately, I was compelled to kill one of our camels. The poor brute went lame. I feared as much yesterday, when I took them to the river to drink; this morning I found that it was a hopeless case. On the one hand, we've lost a good hirie; on the other, we've a good supply of meat and only one camel to feed, although where we are to get another meal for it goodness only knows. But set to, boys, and have a good breakfast. We've more than we can carry with us."

"What are you cleaning up the sword for?" asked Gerald, as he helped himself to a second slice of the savoury meat.

"Only to see what marks there are on the blade," replied Reeves. "So far I've been successful. There are three crosses, some writing in quaint characters which up to the present I have been unable to decipher, and the date."

"What date is it?" asked both lads in the same breath.

"Here you are—MDCCLXIX, or 1709. So that explodes the Crusader theory."

"Have you any possible explanation?" asked Hugh.

"Cannot say," replied Reeves; "but that will stand for the present. We've much to do before we can make another start."

By the time the remaining camel was loaded it was early noon; but the sun seemed not to affect the three Englishmen as it had during the earlier part of their wanderings. On a day's journey they invariably rested during the heat of the day; but as several precious hours since daybreak had already flown, Reeves decided that the customary halt should be for once dispensed with.

After about ten miles had been traversed, the party came to an abrupt halt. The river, never voluminous, entered into a swamp surrounded by low sandhills. There, as far as they could judge, it ended.

The three comrades gazed at each other in consternation. Although Reeves had previously prepared himself for a discovery of this sort, he felt the disappointment acutely; while the lads, who had been buoyed up by hope and the energy of youth, seemed absolutely "knocked out of time". Retreat was impracticable, a dash into the trackless desert was little short of madness, while to stay where they were was only to court death by starvation.

"We may as well make for the top of that sandhill," said Reeves at length. "Perhaps the river only filters through the sand, and appears again some miles beyond. Rivers do that kind of thing sometimes."

The hill that the correspondent pointed out was the highest of the chain surrounding the swamp, and about a mile from where they stood. It was a faint ray of hope, but in their condition the travellers were glad to grasp even the most shadowy plan that might turn disaster into success.

"Fill up that goatskin before we start," said Reeves. "More than likely we'll feel the want of water before we return."

Gerald took the bottle to the river, but in a few minutes returned with the doleful intelligence that it leaked so badly as to be useless.

"We ought to have kept it moistened. The heat has perished the leather," said Reeves. "Well, we must go without it. Meanwhile, sink it in shallow water; it may take up in time. Be careful to weight it, though, or it may be carried away."

Having done so, Gerald again returned, and the little party, carrying only their firearms, set out towards the hill, the hirie being left hobbled with the rest of the baggage.

As soon as the low-lying ground was traversed, the journey became heavy. Often the travellers were more than ankle-deep in the hot sand, while, as they came to the slope of the hill, they frequently found that their feet slipped back more than they gained. But by dint of great exertion they reached the summit of the hill.

Here the three stood spellbound. Beyond, the desert extended unbrokenly for nearly a mile, then the ground rose abruptly to a height of about four hundred feet. The summit of this hill was clothed in verdure, while above the tops of palms appeared the battlemented walls and towers of a large town. Some of the latter were flat-topped, while others were capped by conical roofs of bright metal that glittered in the sunlight. From the topmost turret floated a banner, but the distance was too great for the spectators to discern its device.

"Hurrah!" shouted Hugh. "We're saved. But what a strange sort of town to tumble against in the midst of the desert!"

"It looks more like a city in the fairy-tale books," said Gerald. "Let's push on at once."

"Steady, lads!" exclaimed Reeves. The man spoke as if lost in thought. "It may be that— Ah!"

Even as he spoke, the hill upon which the city stood appeared to be riven asunder. The walls and turrets oscillated as if shaken by an earthquake; then, as if wiped out by a titanic hand, the vision vanished, leaving only the trackless desert shimmering in the rays of the powerful sun.

"A mirage!" exclaimed the three simultaneously; then dismay once more overtook them, as they saw only the pitiless waste in front of them.

"Surely there must be a real town over there!" exclaimed Gerald at length, pointing in the direction of the vanished scene.

"Of that I have no doubt," replied Reeves. "A mirage is the reflection of a real object, but that object may be ten miles away, or it may be a hundred—or more. That sort of thing has often lured men to death."

The lads did not reply. Hugh was looking steadily at a point on the distant horizon.

"What's up, Rags?" asked Gerald.

"I believe I can see palm trees. There—more to your right. You are pointing straight at the place."

"So do I," assented Gerald, with no uncertain voice; then, as an afterthought, he added: "I hope it isn't a mirage as well!"

"What did you say?" asked Reeves, who was standing a short distance away.

"We can see palms."

"I believe you are right," was the response, "only I cannot be sure of it."

"Gerald suggested that it might be a mirage. If not, it's a clump of palms, right enough."

"We've had disappointments enough for one day," replied Reeves decisively. He had shaken off his meditative mood, and was now alert and resourceful. "We'll go back now and rest till tomorrow. At dawn we'll come here again, and if in the clear morning light the trees are still visible, we will then know that it is not a mirage. In that case we'll make a dash for it."

Turning on his heel, he led the way back to the river. In spite of Fortune's rebuff, he felt confident that a successful ending to their troubles and tribulations was in sight.

CHAPTER X

Challenged

TOWARDS the middle of the afternoon Reeves stood up, stretched his long limbs, and looked meditatively in the direction of the hill from which the three comrades had witnessed the mirage.

"Lads," he exclaimed, "I've changed my plans. We'll load up the camel, take a stock of water with us—that is, if the goatskin doesn't leak—and make for yonder hill once more. If the palms are still visible, I'll take a bearing, and as soon as it gets dark we'll make a dash for it. The stars will guide us."

"I'm game," replied Hugh. "But why do you want to journey by night?"

"We might find the oasis already occupied by someone else," replied Reeves. "In that case we could skirt the place without so much risk of being discovered."

"But what if there are no more oases beyond that one?" asked Gerald.

"Either there must be, or else we will not find anyone in possession of it. My own opinion is that it is the northernmost part of a chain of fertile land; and, moreover, I don't think we'll find Arabs there."

"What makes you think that?" asked Hugh.

"Cannot say," replied the correspondent. The lad had heard his elder speak thus before. He knew that Reeves had an explanation, but for some reason preferred to keep it to himself.

Within a very short space of time the hirie was loaded up—the leathern bottle held its precious contents very satisfactorily—and with eager steps the three travellers set out towards the sandhill.

In the slanting rays of the setting sun the clump of palm trees stood out clearly against the horizon. From the height at which the trio stood—about one hundred feet above the level of the desert—the distance could not be less than eleven miles. All doubts as to the palms' existence were at an end.

Setting two of the ramrods in the sand, so that they were in line with the distant oasis, Reeves waited till the sun dipped beneath the horizon, and the stars shone forth with the extreme brilliancy of the tropics.

"I've fixed it!" he exclaimed, after carefully checking his bearings. "Now, forward!"

Allowing their rate of progress to be two miles an hour, between five and six hours must elapse before they gained the hoped-for haven of rest, even if the desert presented no unlooked-for obstacles and there was no necessity to halt. Each of the party was to ride for approximately one hour, Gerald being given the first place upon the hirie.

Mile after mile passed without incident, till suddenly the travellers disturbed a number of large birds, which, uttering fearful cries, soared wildly in the air.

"That's good!" exclaimed Reeves. "The first birds we've met since we left Wadi Tlat. That shows

we must be nearing a place that is capable of supplying food to these creatures."

More than two-thirds of the distance was completed when a fairly dense scrub was encountered, clusters of prickly cacti impeding the already slow progress of the little band. The soil, too, instead of consisting of soft, drifting sand, began to become hard and sun-baked. All this told of the presence of conditions capable of supporting animal life.

"What's that?" asked Hugh, as a low rumble was borne to their ears. Reeves did not reply, but, loosening his pistol in the folds of his shawl, he bade his young companions see that their firearms were ready for instant use.

"Are they lions?" asked Gerald, after a while.

"Aye," replied the correspondent grimly, "and much too near for my liking. We may have to use our guns, but I don't want to, except as a last resource. Get off that camel, Hugh. You'll feel much safer on your feet."

Hugh instantly obeyed, yet somehow he felt as if he were much safer on his lofty perch. Nevertheless he half-cocked his cumbersome flintlock and marched beside Gerald. Reeves was walking on the right outside, slightly in advance of the others, while the hierie served as a screen from attack on the left.

Suddenly there was the rush of some heavy body, a dull thud, and a squeal from the camel as the poor brute was borne to the ground. The lads had a momentary glimpse of the flashing eyes of some enormous animal, which had struck down the hierie and was savagely rending its slender neck.

Reeves aimed at a distance of less than three yards with his long flintlock, but the weapon missed fire.

"Let him have it, lads!" he shouted; but both, though they presented their guns, could not fire. With a muttered exclamation the correspondent snatched the musket from Hugh and again took aim. This time there was a deafening concussion; but, without waiting to see the result of his shot, Reeves threw down the discharged weapon, and drawing his automatic pistol he sent four shots in rapid succession into the head of the groaning beast, which was still mauling the unfortunate hierie.

"That's done it!" he exclaimed, as the huge brute rolled over on top of its victim. "Look out, lads! There may be another about, so reload that musket."

But with the firing the roars ceased, and a great crackling of the brushwood showed that some if not all of the lions were in full retreat.

"He's settled the hierie for us," remarked Reeves, after vainly attempting to pull the dead lion off the camel's body. "It's tramp with a vengeance now. Take the water bottle and the dates, Gerald; they are what we require most at present."

"We've made enough noise to arouse every denizen of the place for miles around," he continued, as, well laden, the three proceeded on their way. "Why didn't you shoot the brute when I told you to?"

"I tried to, but I couldn't pull the trigger," replied Gerald, and Hugh answered in a similar manner.

"You were not lacking in courage," said Reeves. "You both stood up to it like born hunters. But do you know what you did not do? I'll tell you. You forgot to full-cock your muskets. Never mind now, but remember it in future. Many a man has done the same thing before to-day."

After a while the scrub gave place to coarse grass about a foot in height, while standing clearly against the starlit sky were the lofty outlines of the palm trees of the desired oasis.

"Not a word now," cautioned Reeves.

Treading as silently as possible, the three drew nearer and nearer the oasis. Several times they halted and listened intently, but no sound came to their ears save the soft swish of the leaves in the faint breeze.

All at once the silence was broken by a human voice, speaking in a strange mixture of Anglo-French.

"Stand, whoever you are, in the name of the overlord of Croixilia!"

"We are friends," replied Reeves, speaking in French.

"Throw down your weapons and advance, if you are what you say," replied the voice.

"Place your muskets on the ground," said Reeves in a low tone. "I don't think we need fear." Nevertheless, he retained his automatic pistol, though it was hidden from sight in the folds of his

shawl.

The three Englishmen advanced boldly towards the shadow of the palms, the correspondent being slightly in front of the others. A horn lantern was flashed in their faces, and in its gleam they could see the faces of their interrogator and the men who were with him.

There were five of them—short of stature, none being over five feet six inches in height, but broad-shouldered and strongly built. They were dark-complexioned, but in spite of their bronzed features it was evident that they were not of Arab or negro descent. All had short, carefully-trimmed black or dark-brown beards. As for their clothing, as far as the Englishmen could discern, they wore short-kilted skirts, and buskins of undressed hide, their bodies were clad in chain hauberks similar to that found on the skeleton in the desert, while on their heads were quilted caps, strengthened by bars of steel. One man had a pear-shaped shield slung across his back, two more had bows and quivers, and all carried short spears.

"Who are you and whence come ye?" demanded the man with the lamp, in the same strange jargon, which Reeves, fortunately, was able to understand.

"We are English, and——"

"English?" interrupted the questioner.

"From England, then," replied Reeves, thinking that the men did not grasp the significance of his answer.

"England? Is it possible? Remember, friends, the words of the wise monk André," exclaimed the man, turning to his companions.

"They speak somewhat according to our tongue," said another, who had walked across to the spot where the muskets had been placed. "But take heed; they have the weapons of the accursed infidels."

"They are indeed the arms of the Arabs who held us captive, but we have taken them from them in fair fight," replied Reeves.

"Then you have journeyed far and are wearied?"

"We are," assented the correspondent.

"Rest, then, till dawn," replied the man with the lantern. "Your weapons we must needs retain till we find you to be honest men. Rest in peace and fear nothing. Tomorrow we must take you to Sir Jehan de Valx, our overlord of Croixilia."

The leader of the party said a few words in an undertone to one of his men. The latter raised his spear in salute, and bade the three Englishmen follow him.

Less than fifty yards from the edge of the oasis were half a dozen tents, made, not of camel cloth, as are those of the Arabs, but of a coarse white linen fabric, and ranged in a circle. In the centre a fire glimmered darkly, for the embers only remained.

"Walter!" shouted the guide, and presently a man, clad like the others, except that a leathern jerkin took the place of the hauberk, appeared from one of the tents.

"Food and drink for these strangers, Walter," said the guide authoritatively. "Then see well to their comfort till the morning. I salute you—farewell!" and, raising his spear with a respectful gesture, he turned and vanished between the palm trunks.

Without a word the man Walter brought a portion of steaming lamb, a bowl of vegetables, a loaf of brown bread, and an earthenware vessel filled with wine. Knives, forks, and cups there were none. This appetizing fare he set down upon the ground, then retired as silently as he had come.

Even in the midst of their astonishment the travellers could not ignore the pangs of hunger, and soon they were deep in their repast, Reeves cutting the meat with the dagger, which he had also concealed in his sash.

"We have fallen upon a mediaeval race of Europeans. Of that there is not the slightest doubt," remarked the correspondent, when his hunger was partly appeased. "They have not even advanced to the use of knives and forks, sharing their meat in precisely the same manner as did our Norman and early English ancestors."

"Who do you think they are?" asked Hugh.

"Descendants of the Crusaders. A few weeks ago I would have ridiculed the suggestion, but, by Jove! it seems that the old legend is true after all. Well, they seem to treat us decently, so that's a comfort."

"I hope they will send us down to the coast," observed Gerald.

"No doubt they will if they can," replied Reeves, slicing off another portion of meat. "But it wouldn't be a bad plan to ask that fellow a few questions. Walter!"

"Try shouting 'waiter' instead," suggested Gerald, when the summons brought no response.

The correspondent called again, but still there was no reply. Then, considering awhile, he clapped his hands. The man immediately appeared.

"Tell me," said Reeves, speaking slowly and distinctly in English, "how is it that we find men of fair complexion living in the desert?"

Walter did not reply, but remained absolutely impassive, as if failing to comprehend the question. Reeves repeated his words in French.

"My eyes, my ears, my mouth are for use solely in my master's interests," replied the man, in the same strange dialect that the others had spoken, except that he used but a few words of French derivation. Reeves could follow the uncouth tongue with very little difficulty—the question of language troubled him but slightly. The two boys, being familiar with Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, found that Walter's speech was more intelligible to them than that of the man who had first hailed them, and who seemed to be a person of position. "Therefore," concluded the former, "I cannot tell you."

"I wish I had something to smoke," said Reeves to the lads. "A good meal without a smoke to finish up with is like a concert without the National Anthem—you feel as if something, is wanting." Then, turning to the man, who was still standing rigidly by the fire, he asked: "Can you let me have some tobacco?"

Walter shook his head. "I know not what you mean," he replied. "If sleep you require, these tents are at your service."

With a gesture Reeves dismissed him.

"They are centuries behind the times," he exclaimed. "Very interesting, but confoundedly awkward for some things. Well, lads, we may as well turn in. I think we may sleep without fear of interruption, which is more than we have done for some time now. To-morrow we may learn something more interesting."

In a very few minutes the lads were sleeping soundly, but Reeves tossed uneasily upon his soft couch. His mind was full of the strange characters and things he had met. The mediaeval weapons, the garbled language, the absence of the most usual table utensils and (Reeves sighed) tobacco—all pointed to a discovery that would fill the civilized world with astonishment. And he, Arthur Reeves, with the two lads, was to be the herald of momentous tidings! He would have given anything to be in telephonic communication with his editor for one brief hour.

He lay and pondered, until the easiness of his bed began to feel uncomfortable. Placing a blanket on the ground, he stretched himself upon the hard couch of Mother Earth, and in less than five minutes he was fast asleep.

CHAPTER XI

The Mediaeval City

THE sun was high in the heavens when the three comrades awoke. Throwing back the flap of the tent, Reeves slipped out. The other tents had been struck, and were already strapped to the backs of small, heavily-limbed horses, while seated on the ground were the five men who had challenged the trio on the previous night. They had divested themselves of their armour, and were engaged in polishing the closely interlocked rings of their hauberks.

The Englishman could not help noticing that, although their limbs were powerfully built, and their muscles stood out like lumps of polished stone, their feet were small and well-formed.

"Good morrow, stranger," they exclaimed courteously, when they saw that Reeves was astir; and the correspondent, not to be outdone, courteously replied.

"You asked Walter, our servant, questions concerning us," said he who had been the spokesman overnight. "We will tell you as much as is expedient. For the rest you must wait till you have seen Sir Jehan. What would you ask?"

"We are of the State of Croixilia," he replied, in answer to Reeves's question. "Concerning its history you may learn much later—if it be our lord's will. At this moment we are expecting an attack from our hereditary enemies, the infidel Arabs of the tribes that are known as the Kharili. For that purpose we have been keeping watch and ward on the eastern borders of our territory. This day our relief arrives, and we are free to return to the city for another month."

"What is the name of your city?"

"It is called Charleton, after Sir Charles de Wyke, who led our ancestors hither. But tell me how are worked these weapons that the infidels use. Beforetimes we have seen several, which have been captured in fight, and though they did us grievous harm in spite of the hauberk and helm, we could not find how they were shot, having neither Spring nor cord, even as our crossbows have."

"That I can explain," replied Reeves; but in spite of his careful and practical instruction the Croixilian seemed unable to grasp the principle of powder and shot.

"I would rather place my faith in an honest longbow than in that evil-smelling and thundering tube," remarked the latter, covering his ears as the correspondent discharged one of the flintlocks. "It was that noise we heard in the night, and we were fully expecting a horde of these men of Kharili to pour upon our outpost."

"We were beset by a lion."

"It wants indeed courage to cross the lion country at night," replied the man meditatively. "Even when we go thither—and that is rarely—twenty men with bows can scarce drive them off."

"These gave us confidence," said Reeves, tapping the stock of the musket. "And here, too, is a weapon that, though small, would pierce a hauberk like an arrow shot through yonder tent."

"Have a care!" exclaimed the Croixilian. "Tell it not to our overlord, Sir Jehan, or his anger will be aroused. He loves brave men, but the boaster he abhors."

"I do not boast," replied Reeves calmly. "If you will but place your coat of mail in front of that shield, I will prove my words."

"Try him, Garth!" exclaimed the others.

Without a word the man placed the hauberk against the trunk of a palm tree, propping it up by means of a pear-shaped shield, and motioned to the correspondent to perform his promise.

The buckler was of heavy wood, nearly an inch thick, and strengthened with plates of iron; while the mail was made of links of steel.

"Put the armour in front of the shield, Rags," said Reeves, as he threw out his ten notched cartridges and recharged with two pointed nickel bullets.

Standing at less than ten yards' distance, the correspondent raised his weapon and, without apparently taking aim, pressed the trigger. There was a faint flash, a sharp crack, and a very thin wreath of smoke.

"You have failed!" exclaimed the man Garth. "Your arrow, or whatever you call it, has not even struck the hauberk."

"If you were inside it you wouldn't be alive now," replied Reeves, striding over to the palm tree. "See!"

The look of incredulity on the faces of the Croixilian soldiers turned to one of blank astonishment when they saw that a link in both back and front of the hauberk had been severed as if with a cold chisel, while a small circular hole marked the passage of the bullet into the shield. Turning the buckler round, a jagged gash, caused by the bullet flattening against the steel, was disclosed. Pulling out his dagger, Reeves probed the tree trunk, and presently extracted the distorted lump of nickel and lead.

"By St. George, I crave your pardon, stranger!" exclaimed Garth. "This passes my understanding. Mail is useless against the weapon. But now you must break your fast, for it is a good five leagues to the city."

"Doesn't it seem wonderful?" remarked Gerald, as the three sat down to breakfast. "We have suddenly dropped back into the Middle Ages. Why haven't these fellows made progress, the same as the rest of the world?"

"Possibly they have—after a fashion," replied Reeves; "only, you see, their rate of progress has been slower. I should put it down to want of intercourse with other nations; consequently a sort of national stagnation has ensued. That is evident by the disbelief expressed by the man Garth, who seems quite a decent sort of fellow in spite of it."

"I wonder how they will swallow yarns about railways, aeroplanes, submarines, and wireless telegraphy, for example?" said Hugh.

"I would advise you not to spring these upon them all at once," replied Reeves dryly. "They might need ocular demonstration—then where would you be? But hurry up with your breakfast; they are waiting for us before they make a start."

Soon the cavalcade began its homeward journey, the soldiers riding horses rather higher than those on which the baggage was packed, while the three Englishmen were provided with steeds

resembling those ridden by the Croixilians. Reeves noticed that the saddle was very similar in construction to those used by the Arabs, but the stirrups were more after the style of Europe. Also he remarked that all the men wore a copper cross, which was affixed to the breast of the hauberk after the coat of mail had been donned.

The oasis extended for nearly a mile, giving place to a broad and deep ravine through which a river flowed with extreme violence, leaping over ledges and foaming betwixt jagged rocks in a manner that rendered it impossible for a horseman to cross.

"Whence comes this river?" asked Reeves.

"From the sand beyond the plain of Zachor," replied Garth. "It gushes up from a large lake; but there are men who say that it tunnels underground from the great desert of the north. Many of us have journeyed thither, but none have found these words to be true."

"We found a Croixilian lying dead in the sand close to the river of which you speak," said the correspondent. "See! here is his dagger."

Garth took the weapon and examined it carefully.

"Certain it is that this belonged to one of us," he exclaimed. "See the sign of the Knights of St. Peter, an Order to which all of us here present belong."

"How long ago did the man die?" asked Reeves.

"That I cannot say. For years past we have journeyed into the desert, and many of us have not returned."

"Why did they go?" asked Hugh, who was able to follow the conversation with tolerable ease.

"To seek a sign," replied the man briefly, and in a manner that showed that he was unwilling to enlighten his listeners further on the matter. "But here we turn aside. Were it a clear day we might be able to perceive the city from this hill; but ere we cross the river we must needs travel a long distance down the valley."

Between the river and the rocks that rose steeply on the north side of the valley ran a broad path, which ages ago had doubtless been formed by the action of the water, showing that the stream had been far greater than it was now. The cliffs, jagged and showing signs of volcanic agency on their higher parts, were smooth and rounded at their bases; while on the stiff mud that formed the floor of the valley tropical vegetation grew profusely.

"This river, if properly held, ought to keep back your enemies, the Arabs," observed Reeves.

"And would do so if it encircled Croixilia," replied their guide. "From this side we fear no foes, but from the east and from the west the infidels frequently appear in vast numbers."

"And where does the river flow to?" asked the Englishman.

"That also I cannot tell you," was the reply. "Away to the south for more than fifty leagues we have followed its course, but——"

The man stopped hesitatingly, as if speaking of some mystery; then, setting spur to his horse, he cantered on ahead to join the horsemen who were leading the cavalcade, leaving the three comrades to their own companionship.

Presently the cliffs on either side of the river began to converge, till they formed a gate or narrow pass barely fifty yards in width. Here the path plunged abruptly into a natural tunnel, where, in the sudden contrast from the glare of the sun, the Englishmen were unable to see a yard ahead.

"Pull up till we get used to the gloom," exclaimed Reeves, "or we shall be banging our heads against the solid rock."

Apparently the Croixilians realized the difficulty in which their guests were placed, for three of them dismounted and took the reins of the horses the Englishmen were riding. At length, after fifty yards or more had been traversed, a small, semicircular disk of white was observed in the distance. It was the end of the tunnel.

Five minutes later Reeves and his companions were blinking in the sunshine. They found themselves on the borders of an open plain, the river merging into a large lake that, although apparently not more than a mile in width, extended as far as the eye could reach. On the opposite side was a small stone fort, with loopholes fashioned in the form of a cross, like those for the use of crossbowmen in feudal castles.

Winding his horn, one of the escort blew a loud blast, and presently a boat shot out from behind a low stone quay. In it were four men with fair complexions, and, as they ran the boat ashore and leapt out, Reeves noticed that they, too, wore a device on the right breasts of their grey tunics, only instead of a cross this was the letter T.

Into the boat the travellers with their baggage made their way, the horses having to swim across; and, urged by the powerful strokes of the rowers, the craft shot out for the opposite shore.

During the voyage the cross-bearing men held well aloof from the T wearers, who, for their part, maintained a submissive silence. Reeves would have liked to ask questions, but the silence seemed contagious, and he held his tongue.

"Follow us carefully, riding one behind another," cautioned Garth, as the cavalcade resumed its way. "One step to the right hand or to the left means death."

The three comrades instantly complied, wondering what could be the reason for the extraordinary caution, for the land was flat, and composed, as far as they could see, of hard, sun-baked clay, with no sign of a path or beaten track of any description.

On and on they rode, for more than two miles, in a perfectly straight line. Reeves noticed, however, that the direction was maintained by keeping a solitary tree in line with a peculiarly-shaped crag, both being a long distance from the river.

Suddenly Garth, who was leading, stopped and dismounted. Grasping his short spear, and treading cautiously, he stuck it into the ground. It was like driving a sharp knife through a pie crust. The soil offered a temporary resistance, and then the spear-haft sank, almost as far as the hand that held it, without the faintest effort.

With a gesture of annoyance the Croixilian withdrew the weapon and drove it in at a different spot, this time with more caution. Here the soil was firm, and the spearhead had to be forced home.

Remounting, Garth now directed his course almost at right angles to the former path, the rest of the party following him closely. As the last man passed the spear he withdrew it, dismounting for the purpose of stamping down the hole in the earth. Gerald was the only one of the three Englishmen who witnessed this act, which was performed with stealth, and he resolved to tell Reeves about it at the first opportunity.

But the correspondent kept his eyes well in front of him, striving to detect some leading marks for the new direction. Presently he gave vent to a gentle chuckle. Garth was keeping the left side of an immense baobab tree in line with a small cleft in the cliffs that bordered the treacherous plain on three sides.

"Now, sirs, you are free to ride together," exclaimed the Croixilian, as he wheeled and rode past, towards the men forming the rearguard, in order to recover his spear. Though they were still on the sun-baked plain, Reeves had no hesitation in taking advantage of the permission. The idea of treachery seemed out of the question. Had the Croixilians wished to take advantage of them, they would have done so ere this; but Reeves could not help wondering where the soft crust ended and the firm ground began, since there were no signs that there was such a place.

"We should have been properly sold if we had attempted to cross the plain on our own account," said Hugh.

"I shouldn't have attempted it," rejoined Reeves. "Stick to the river would have been my plan."

"I hope we won't have to find our way back by ourselves," remarked Gerald. "I saw that the fellow who picked up Garth's spear seemed mighty careful to cover up his tracks."

"How?" asked the correspondent, and Gerald told him.

"H'm! Perhaps the caution was necessary, though not on our account," he observed. "However, I think I can find the path if we are put to it. But here is another remarkable freak of nature."

He pointed to the gap in the cliffs, which now assumed the appearance of the letter Z turned slightly askew. Hitherto a portion of this had been hidden by the great baobab, but now the opening of the gorge was fully revealed.

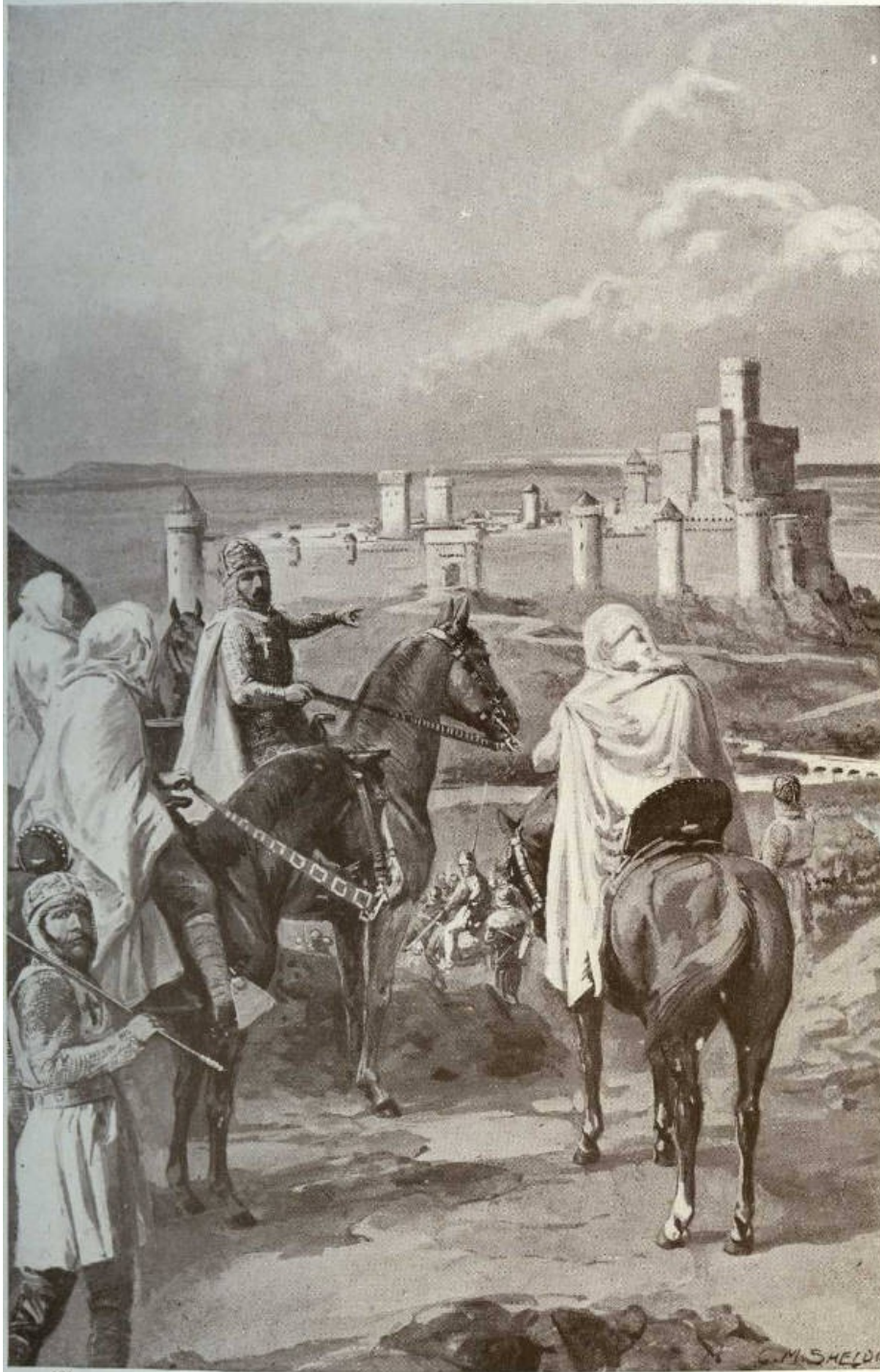
"Don't make a noise, as you value your lives!" exclaimed Garth, who again returned to lead the cavalcade. "A shout would bring rocks about your heads."

Owing to the peculiar formation of the gorge, it was impossible for direct light to enter from above, but the gloom was by no means so intense as in the tunnel on the other side of the river. The floor, too, was composed of soft sand, so that the horses' hoofs made little or no noise. Here and there the travellers had to avoid huge boulders that had fallen from above, showing that the Croixilian's caution had not been unnecessary. Throughout the length of this formidable pass the path ran steeply for more than a mile; then the walls of rock began to diverge, so that the sunlight streamed uninterruptedly upon the ground.

"The danger is now past, sirs," said Garth, "although this pass is still some distance in length."

Presently the horn was again blown, and in response a long-drawn note came from the extremity of the narrow way, and the Englishmen saw that nearly a dozen men were awaiting the

little cavalcade.



[Illustration: THE CITY OF CHARLETON]

"What news, my brother?" asked one of them, as the parties came together.

"Great news!" replied Garth.

"Of the accursed Moslems?"

"No; of these," he replied, pointing to Reeves and his companions.

The guardians of the pass were for the most part bowmen, clad in quilted coats; while two wore hauberks, and were evidently men of authority. All of them bore the distinctive sign of the copper cross.

"We must away, Gaston," said Garth, after they had conversed aside for some moments. "Sir Jehan will be right glad to see these," and he indicated his newly-found companions.

On breasting the next hill the lads gave an exclamation of surprise, and involuntarily reined in their steeds to take in the scene that lay before them.

Less than a mile away was a large town, perched on a steep crag. It was the city they had seen in the mirage.

"Yonder lies Charleton," exclaimed Garth proudly, pointing to the collection of battle-merited walls and towers. "Have you ever seen the like?"

"I have seen larger, but none so fair," replied Reeves, with a gallantry of which he had hitherto thought himself incapable.

"Yonder is the Mound of Pharamond, on which is built the palace of our overlord, Sir Jehan. To the left are the twin towers of St. George and St. Michael, which were all but overthrown when last the vile followers of the false prophet surged against our walls. Faith! I trust such times will not occur again, though it seems as if we may soon be called upon to defend our gates once more."

CHAPTER XII

Sir Jehan de Valx

FOR the remaining distance up to the chief gate of the city the land was given over to cultivation, enclosed cornfields, reminding the lads of their own country, predominating. Each plot or field was comparatively small in extent, and in each enclosure was a large pile of fuel.

"That is one of our means of defence," said Garth, in answer to the correspondent's question. "Each field is tended by two husbandmen. Should the signal be given that our enemies are approaching, the corn is to be cut and carried into the city. Should the time be insufficient, those stacks of fuel are to be fired and cast amongst the standing wheat, so that it may be consumed."

So well were the preparations for defence carried out that no trees were permitted to be grown within a mile of the walls, and all uneven ground that would afford a shelter to a lurking foe had been carefully levelled. Soon the great drawbridge spanning a deep moat was crossed, and, passing beneath the lofty rounded archway, Reeves and his companions found themselves within the capital of Croixilia. The streets, narrow but well maintained, were crowded with people. They took the greatest interest in the strangers who, though dressed in Arab clothing, were not Moslems but members of a great white race that none of the citizens had ever before seen.

All the houses were built in the modified Eastern style, the walls being of considerable thickness, the windows narrow, and the roofs flat. In every case the parapet was machicolated, thus turning the houses into a series of fortifications, and at the same time bearing silent testimony to the dangers to which this nation in arms was exposed.

At length Garth halted his men in front of the palace on the Mound of Pharamond, over which floated a white flag with a red cross—exactly the same as the banner of St. George. Then, bidding the Englishmen accompany him, their guide knocked upon the great brazen knocker.

Immediately the door was flung open, and the three comrades found themselves in the courtyard of the palace, where the green turf—so utterly unexpected in the heart of Africa—again reminded them of the shady lawns of the ancestral homes of England. Within the courtyard were men of all conditions—some armed, others having the appearance of merchants; for it was the Audience Day, and Sir Jehan denied admission to no one who desired to speak with his overlord.

Most of the persons present wore the copper cross, a few more wore the T-shaped device, while others sported a red cross with an additional bar above the horizontal line.

"Here is the guest chamber, where you can refresh yourselves. Water, also, and clean raiment are at your service," said Garth. "Afterwards Sir Jehan will be pleased to receive you."

Having bathed and clothed themselves in white robes, somewhat after the style of those of the superior Arab class, the Englishmen set to with a will upon tempting viands.

When they had eaten to their hearts' content, they waited till Garth again appeared.

"I have already announced your arrival, and the general audience is postponed," he informed them. "The overlord of Croixilia will see you at once. But be pleased to bring your arms with you."

Passing through a broad hall and up a wide flight of stairs, the Croixilian paused outside a lofty door, which was covered with rich hangings. Here two men, tall in comparison with their fellows, stood on guard, being completely equipped in chain armour and carrying enormous axes; while another, clad in black velvet, with a cap of maintenance on his head and a golden chain flung round his neck, demanded the names and style of the three strangers.

"Style!" remarked Reeves to his young companions, after he had given the official their names. "The nearest approach to style that I could boast of was my stylo. pen, and those rascally Arabs sneaked that. Now," he continued, dropping his banter, "keep your eye on Garth, and do what he does—unless he makes too great a fool of himself before this big pot."

The next instant the Englishmen found themselves in a spacious hall built of white stone and surrounded by aisles, which were separated from the main building by massive rounded arches springing from plain rounded pillars.

In the middle of the tiled floor was a fountain, out of which the water splashed melodiously into

a fern-grown pond. Here and there were heavy wooden benches, which formed the only furniture of the hall. At the farthest end was a dais, approached by seven stone steps; and on it, in a massive wooden chair, resembling the letter X, sat the overlord of Croixilia.

Sir Jehan de Valx was a burly man of middle height, dark-complexioned, and wearing a closely-trimmed beard, after the fashion of the majority of the men of Croixilia. He was dressed in a kirtle of dark blue, edged with ermine, while over his shoulders was a cloak of white samite, marked with a triple crown in red. He was unarmed, but held a short ivory rod in his right hand. Ranged on either side of him were about twenty men of rank, all wearing double-lined crosses similar to those Reeves had observed in the courtyard.

Marching with head erect up to the foot of the dais, Garth saluted, the movement resembling a military salute performed by both hands at the same time. Reeves and the lads did likewise, after setting their flintlocks on the floor.

"These, then, are the men from England?" exclaimed Sir Jehan in a deep voice. "Welcome!"

For nearly two hours Reeves kept the ruler of Croixilia engrossed with the story of their adventures in the desert and the wonders of Europe, particularly of Great Britain. Sir Jehan, Reeves noticed, used a language that corresponded with the Anglo-Norman tongue, subject to slight variations for which the lapse of time was responsible. (The lads were already making vast strides in the study of the Croixilian tongue, thanks to their fair knowledge of French and their interest in the works of Geoffrey Chaucer.)

Sir Jehan was deeply interested in the weapons of the strangers, especially in Reeves's automatic pistol. The correspondent begged to be excused the pleasure of giving Sir Jehan a practical exhibition of the pistol, on the reasonable grounds that the ammunition, if used, could not be replaced; but, on the other hand, he fired several rounds from the flintlocks at a number of stout planks, which were brought into the hall for the purpose.

"By St. Michael, if we had those weapons we should be more than a match for the Moslems!" exclaimed the knight. "Of what is that black powder composed?"

Reeves hastened to explain the nature of the ingredients, upon which Sir Jehan (after considerable difficulty, owing to the strange names) elicited from his councillors that similar minerals were to be found in the mountains of Kadir.

But when the correspondent proceeded to tell Sir Jehan of railways, steamships, telephones, and aeroplanes, the Croixilian's face showed unmistakable signs of disbelief, till one of the attendants reminded him of a prophecy uttered centuries before by a certain Peter de Calvador, that when men should fly and fiery carriages pass over the earth without being drawn by horses, the deliverance of Croixilia would be at hand.

At length the audience came to an end, Sir Jehan desiring Garth to regard the Englishmen as his honoured guests, and to provide everything requisite for their comfort; and, having taken leave of the head of the State, Reeves and his companions withdrew.

Before the day was done the Englishmen learned the history of this derelict European colony. The Croixilians were, as Reeves had anticipated, the descendants of Crusaders. Just before the capture of Jerusalem by Saladin, several English knights, with their wives, families, and followers, succeeded in stealing through one of the gates, contrived to pass with little loss through the weakest part of the besiegers' lines, and escaped southwards into Egypt. Here, finding that their retreat to the shores of the Mediterranean was cut off, they crossed the Isthmus of Suez, and took forcible possession of six large galleys. Even in the twelfth century the possibility of coasting around Africa was deemed an accepted fact, and that sorry remnant of the Crusaders ventured upon this dangerous enterprise.

But the voyage ended disastrously, all the ships being wrecked on the western shore of the Red Sea. For a long time the devoted band remained in the professedly Christian country of Abyssinia, till, influenced by a monk, they set out on a march to the interior, with the object of regaining the sea at the Pillar of Hercules.

After many privations the adventurers found themselves on the plateau of Khir. There, according to a vision that appeared to Peter the Monk, the march came to an end, until the signs at which Sir Jehan's attendant had hinted appeared.

Fairly accurate records had been kept of the history of the State of Croixilia, and according to the manuscripts there was an almost constant warfare between the Moslems and the Christians from the middle of the fourteenth century down to the present date. Nevertheless, the city of Charleton—named after its founder, Sir Charles de Wyke—was built and put into a good state of defence.

The Croixilians were divided into three classes: the knights—the direct descendants of the three leaders of the expedition—whose distinctive mark was the double-lined cross; the commoners, comprised of tradesmen, farmers, and artisans, all trained to the use of arms, their badge being the simple cross; and the serfs, who wore the letter T. This latter class was formed of persons who by sloth or by crime against individuals in the State had forfeited their rights of

free citizenship. Knights and commoners found guilty after a fair trial by their peers were relegated to this class, and on them the menial work of the State devolved. Once a serf, there was no chance of being restored to the former classes, unless through some valiant deed of arms. The outward sign of the serfs signified that a portion of the cross, representing honourable citizenship, had been taken away from them, leaving only the T-shaped device. A few crimes against the State—such as treason and rebellion—were punishable by death, as well as wilful murder, apostasy, and blasphemy. With these exceptions there was but one punishment for civil offences—a lifelong serfdom.

Thrice it was recorded that the Arabs succeeded in entering the town, and that on each occasion they met with a severe reverse in the streets between the battlemented houses, the last being in 1617. But since the use of firearms by the Arabs the scale was slowly turning in their favour. The Croixilians found that armour and personal courage were alike hopeless in an encounter in the open, and only the massive walls of the city prevented the extermination of the State at the hands of the Mohammedans.

Curiously enough, Croixilia made little progress compared with her parent nation. This was, as Reeves had suggested, owing to a lack of intercourse with other peoples. Firearms the men could not understand, printing was unknown, the domestic arts and crafts were still mediaeval. In short, the State was almost exactly in the same position as England was in the twelfth century—steeped in superstition and prejudice.

Yet it was kept fully alive by its military organization. Every man could use some weapon. The knights relied upon lance, sword, and mace; the commoners were expert in the use of the crossbow, longbow, and sword; while the serfs were armed with spears and short swords.

A few weeks prior to the Englishmen's arrival, a powerful combination of the Arab tribes lying to the east and west of Croixilia had threatened the city, and outposts were formed on all sides. The north side was fairly secure from assault, owing to the natural defences afforded by the river and the "plain of pitfalls", but in order to be warned of a possible junction of the enemy on that side, the Croixilian outposts had been advanced well into the desert; and it was at this station that the English fugitives had fallen in with Garth and his comrades.

For the next week or two Reeves and the two lads were received in daily audience by Sir Jehan, who began to realize that their knowledge of the modern science of war was an asset that would be of immense value to him in the threatened invasion.

For his part, Reeves readily consented to do his best for his entertainer. He realized that, with the Arabs holding the western plains, any attempt to follow the river would be hopeless; and until the way was clear it would be well to remain in comparative security in Charleton, rather than risk a tedious journey through an unknown and hostile country.

One of his first acts was to establish a powder factory, sulphur and saltpetre being found in the hills lying to the south of the city. Under direct supervision the serfs proved excellent and intelligent workmen, and soon Reeves had the satisfaction of knowing that there was a sufficient quantity of explosives to last throughout a protracted siege.

His next thought was to provide firearms. Up to the present the total number available amounted to four—the three flintlocks and the automatic pistol. For the latter only thirty-five cartridges remained, and, failing a proper capping machine, the correspondent realized that a further supply of ammunition was unobtainable.

He therefore directed his attention to the manufacture of flintlock guns; but here he was foiled. Although he took to pieces one of the weapons, and carefully explained the working parts, the artisans replied that the work was beyond them. Flints, too, were unobtainable, so Reeves decided to construct a number of small cannons, and mount them at convenient positions upon the wall.

This was accordingly done, for the Croixilians were fairly expert in bell-founding, and were able to construct moulds to the plans that Reeves drew for their guidance. Day and night the great wood-fed forges were kept constantly at work, till forty pieces of muzzle-loading, smooth-bore, firing a six-pound ball, were ready for use.

Still not satisfied, the indefatigable Englishman directed his attention to the manufacture of cast-iron shells, which were filled with a rough-and-ready fuse composed of thin folds of damp cotton sprinkled with powder.

The first experimental shot turned out disastrously, the shell bursting almost as soon as it left the muzzle. Three men were seriously wounded by the flying fragments, while those who served the gun were thrown into such a state of consternation that they could not be induced to come within twenty yards of the weapon.

"Well, Hugh," exclaimed the newly-appointed director of ordnance, "it can't be said that our shells are ineffective. I think I see what's wrong: the exploding of the charge in the gun drives the fuse into the bursting charge of the shell. I'll make allowances for that."

Next day, in the presence of Sir Jehan and his knights and most of the principal inhabitants,

one of the guns was again brought out for trial. This time Reeves and the two lads were obliged to do the work of loading and firing; but, dreading a repetition of the previous failure, even the correspondent felt "jumpy" when he applied the linstock.

There was a blinding flash and a deafening roar as the gun leapt backwards with the recoil. Anxiously Reeves watched the flight of the projectile, till at a distance of over a mile it burst with a loud detonation.

"'Tis full five arrow flights!" exclaimed Sir Jehan in utter astonishment. "The Moslems will fare badly if they appear before our walls."

"I hope to do better than that," replied Reeves; "but, since I cannot serve forty pieces of cannon, I must have assistance from your men."



[Illustration: THE SECOND GUN TEST]

"Assistance you must have," agreed Sir Jehan, and straightway he ordered some of the archers to man the guns. The fellows obeyed quickly, yet in evident anticipation of going to their doom; but after a few shots, finding that they were still unharmed, they warmed to their work, and soon showed great promise.

Still there was a lot to be done. The right amount of powder required to give the best results had to be determined, and sights to each gun fitted according to its peculiarities, some firing with less trajectory than others.

At length the warlike preparations were justified, when shortly after daybreak one morning the outposts on the eastern side of the Croixilian territory rode in with the intelligence that a vast

horde of Arabs was approaching.

CHAPTER XIII

The Moslem Host

INSTANTLY the city was in a state of orderly commotion. Men rushed hither and thither, each with a set purpose—the knights to don their armour, the commoners to arm themselves and run to their appointed stations on the walls, while the serfs issued through the gates to gather in the corn, which was now fit for the sickle. The latter, although having barely three hours to perform their task, worked so rapidly that when the advance guard of the Moslems appeared in the valley most of the corn had been gathered in. The rest was set on fire, and the serfs retired behind the walls. The five drawbridges were raised and the ponderous gates shut and securely barred, while behind the battlements the citizen army of Croixilia waited in orderly silence the advance of their hereditary foes.

On came the Moslem vanguard—mounted men, armed with long guns and spears, resplendent in the barbaric finery of the East. Cymbals and drums crashed in defiance, while under the waving green banners of Islam the fanatical warriors shouted death to the silent soldiers on the walls. Some of the Arabs, in pure bravado, galloped up to the edge of the moat and daringly discharged their weapons at their foes, till a well-directed shower of arrows struck down several and left the rest to ride back with loose rein, still shouting defiance at the Christian warriors.

Meanwhile their vanguard dismounted at slightly more than an arrow's flight from the walls, and awaited the rest of the Mohammedan host.

To the two lads the spectacle was fascinating, in spite of the possible peril that might ensue. It seemed as if there was no end to the number of the fierce besiegers. Bedouins mounted on horses or on camels, half-naked Baggaras armed with spears and circular hide shields, levies from the wilds of Kordofan and the hilly deserts of the Ahaggar, and negroes from the unconquered deserts of the Western Sudan—men representing all the tribes and nations of northern Africa had forgathered to crush the little, isolated State over which the hated cross of the Christians still floated proudly in the breeze.

Meanwhile Reeves had not been idle. Although several cannons had been placed on the walls on all sides, their positions carefully screened from outside observation, he had kept ten pieces in reserve, mounted on travelling carriages. These he had brought round to the probable point of attack, but strict orders had been given that no shot was to be fired until the Englishman himself gave the signal by discharging a cannon with his own hands.

True to their traditions to close with the enemy, the Arabs did not wait until their long baggage trains had arrived, but, forming in compact masses, began the attack.

Supported by the fire of nearly two thousand muskets, the spearmen advanced with the greatest intrepidity. Many of them bore roughly-constructed ladders, trunks of palm trees, and bundles of straw, for the purpose of bridging the moat and scaling the lofty walls—to conquer or die.

As the bullets whizzed overhead, or flattened themselves harmlessly against the stonework, the Croixilians lay behind the shelter of their battlements—the archers with their bows strung and their arrows lying close to hand, the crossbowmen with their powerful weapons bent almost to breaking-point, and the knights ready, with sword, axe, or mace, to sweep the invaders from off the parapet. Heaps of stone, bundles of flaming straw, great balks of spike-studded timber, and bowls of melted lead and hot pitch were in readiness to be hurled upon the heads of the reckless attackers.

Reeves felt that he could leave the defence of the walls solely to the knights and archers, while he gave orders for the artillery to be trained upon the still unsuspecting supports, who, firing from beyond bowshot, imagined that they could gall the defenders with impunity.

On and on came the storming-party, till the place seemed black with human beings. Still no shaft sped from the battlements. In an unswerving belief in their own power, the Baggaras, thinking that their foes were already demoralized, rushed with loud cries towards the walls. Already they were bridging the moat, and the fire of the covering force was compelled to cease, lest the bullets should do more harm to their friends than to their foes.

Calmly Reeves applied the linstock to his gun, the Croixilian gunners did likewise to theirs, and the roar of defiant voices was drowned by the thunder of the ordnance.

Before the smoke had drifted away, the artillerymen sprang to their pieces with sponge and rammer, as if brought up to it from infancy, loading with bags of grape shot so as to direct their fire upon the stormers.

Reeves gave a hasty glance to see the result of the first volley. The shells, magnificently aimed

and timed, had burst well over the dense masses of the main Arab army.

Totally unexpected, the sudden storm of shot wrought havoc upon the astonished foe, and in a disorderly rabble they fled, leaving hundreds of their comrades lying dead or wounded on the field. Nor did they halt until they had placed a good two miles between them and the walls, taking shelter in a deep and wide khor or valley on the eastern side of the plain.

But the fierce Baggaras, although they heard the crash of the artillery, were made of sterner stuff. In spite of volleys of arrows they succeeded in raising their ladders, some perishing miserably by fire in the ditch, while those whose heads appeared above the battlements were struck down by cold steel. Still they persevered, the shouts of "Allah" rising above the din of the combatants, until a second volley of artillery, coming from a dozen well-depressed muzzles, tore lanes through their crowded and disorderly ranks. That was more than the most fanatical Arab could stand, and in a few moments the panic-stricken survivors were fleeing to rejoin their already scattered main body.

"They'll clear out after this," exclaimed Hugh; "they had more than they bargained for."

"I quite agree with the latter part of your words, Rags," said Reeves, who was black from head to foot with burnt powder; "but I don't think they'll leave us in peace so tamely. They've learnt a lesson, and will no doubt profit by it."

The correspondent was right. Before night other large bodies of Arabs appeared, and, keeping at a respectful distance, began to form camps on all sides of the city.

"If they mean to starve us out they will have to wait a long time," said Sir Jehan, as he passed along the walls.

"For how long will the provisions last?" asked the correspondent.

"At least a twelvemonth, I hope, not taking into account the grain we can grow within the city."

"And water?"

"Enough to spare, unless——" Sir Jehan paused, then in a lower tone he continued: "Unless they discover the underground aqueduct from the hills."

Reeves gave a low whistle.

"I hope they won't," he replied bluntly.

"I'd give anything to have my binoculars here," he exclaimed, after Sir Jehan had passed on. "Those fellows are up to some mischief," and he pointed to the Arab encampment.

"What do you think they are up to?" asked Gerald.

"Something I've never known the true Arabs do before. They are actually entrenching themselves I believe."

"Well, what does that mean?"

"That they've someone with them who has been trained in a European army. Usually the Arabs are content to make a zariba of thorns, when they go to the trouble of making defensive works at all; but I would bet my bottom dollar that they are digging like fury over there."

Just before sundown a fierce musketry fire was opened upon the city on all sides, and by the relative positions of the puffs of smoke the correspondent knew that the enemy were firing in extended order. Nearer and nearer they came, and, although the fire slackened somewhat, it continued throughout the night, so that the defenders had but little chance of rest. Occasionally they would return the compliment with a round from one of the guns; but since the damage done upon the scattered line of riflemen would hardly justify the expenditure of powder, Reeves ordered the other gunners to stand by but not to reply.

"We must watch those rascals," he remarked to his young comrades. "Sir Jehan told me that on the last occasion when they appeared before the walls they succeeded in blowing in the north gate by dumping a bag of powder against it. To make sure that the stuff would go up, one of those cheerful Baggaras calmly stood over it and lit it with a torch. It shows what desperate fellows we have to deal with."

During the assault on the preceding night the Croixilians had not come off unharmed. Seven had fallen by spears flung by the stormers, while nearly twenty had been killed or wounded by dropping shots from the Arab sharpshooters; but up to the present the tide of battle was greatly in favour of the besieged. Nevertheless, Reeves did not feel particularly comfortable. His instinct told him that something was behind the unaccountable entrenching tactics of the enemy. Perhaps, also, they might, in the course of their excavations, come across the buried aqueduct. If that were the case, it would mean either a miserable death from thirst within the walls, or extermination in a desperate sortie from the doomed city.

At sunrise the correspondent ascended the Mound of Pharamond, and, climbing to the top of the highest tower, gazed in the direction of the largest hostile camp.

A confused babel of voices borne on the faint breeze told him that the Moslems were performing their morning devotions. As he waited and watched, a hush seemed to fall upon the invading host. Suddenly a white cloud of smoke burst from a sandhill, and a shell, shrieking well over the walls, exploded in one of the houses adjoining the marketplace.

Reeves ground his teeth. The Arabs were using a modern rifled gun! The situation was indeed serious.

CHAPTER XIV

The Dash for the Gun

ON returning to the walls the correspondent found that Hugh and Gerald, alarmed by the detonation, had risen hastily from their beds, and were awaiting him at their post. Sir Jehan, with several of his knights, was also present, while the streets were filled with panic-stricken women and children.

"What is amiss, sir?" exclaimed Croixilia's ruler breathlessly.

"The Arabs are paying us back in our own coin, I'm afraid," replied Reeves. "They've brought up a fieldpiece, from goodness only knows where!"

As he spoke there was another dull report, and a second shell whizzed over the walls, bursting in the centre of the marketplace.

"That was considerably lower than the first shot," observed Reeves. "They are trying the range. It will be a bad job when they begin to pound the walls; a few I I A houses won't matter so much, if the people clear out of them in time. The worst of it is, we are outranged and cannot reply."

"What are they firing with?" asked Hugh.

"I can't say for certain, until one of the shells fails to explode; then I may find a clue. But I should not be surprised if it were a Krupp gun."

"A Krupp!" exclaimed Hugh. "How could they get hold of a gun of that sort?"

"Unfortunately there are at least half a dozen derelict guns in the Sahara. When the Egyptian armies under Hicks Pasha and Baker Pasha in the 'eighties were wiped out, several of these weapons fell into the hands of the Arabs. Many were retaken in our subsequent campaigns, after they had been against us, worked by gun crews composed of captured Gippy artillerymen. No doubt this is one that was not recaptured."

"It's a pity it couldn't be recaptured now," said Gerald, as a third missile missed the parapet by less than a foot, swept an unfortunate archer from the wall, and fell in the middle of a deserted street without exploding.

"It must be, if we are to get out of this mess," replied Reeves resolutely; and, turning to some of the men who were standing by, he told them to fetch the shell, assuring them that if it were carefully handled no danger need be feared.

Presently the men returned, having accomplished their task. Reeves took the cylinder and examined it carefully. "As I thought—a seven-pounder Krupp," he remarked. "I wish we had earthworks instead of this mass of stonework. We shall find ourselves sliding down a mass of rubble before long I'm afraid."

"What is to be done?" asked Sir Jehan anxiously, as another shell, striking one of the flanking towers, knocked a hole in the masonry large enough to drive a camel through. "The walls will not stand the shock of these hell-designed missiles."

"We must endure it," replied Reeves calmly. "Even with a triple charge of powder our guns could not carry as far. We must endure it bravely," he repeated, "until the night."

"And then?"

"I hope to lead a body of men to capture the gun."

Having found the range, the Arab gunners proceeded to pound away at the same spot, their undoubted intention being to make a breach in the walls and gain an entrance into the city by means of the mass of rubble that threatened to bridge the wide moat completely. Seeing this, Reeves suggested to Sir Jehan that the soldiers should be removed from the immediate vicinity of the threatened wall, but at the same time be kept ready to defend the breach should the enemy attempt to carry it by assault.

The overlord of Croixilia, instantly acted upon this idea, and in utter helplessness the defenders heard and saw their vaunted walls being demolished by a persistent and well-directed shell fire.

Meanwhile Reeves set about finding volunteers for his hazardous enterprise, and when he had explained his plans there were plenty of brave men ready to bear their share in the sortie. Both Hugh and Gerald asked to be allowed to accompany him, but Reeves gave a blunt refusal. Finally he selected Garth and four others, all of whom had already proved themselves men of courage and resource during the first assault upon the walls.

The members of the forlorn hope were to ride as close to the Arab encampment as they could without much risk of discovery. Then they were to dismount, one man being left in charge of the horses, and make their way on foot up to the gun. Reeves explained carefully the mechanism of the breech block, in case he should be disabled. If possible, this all-important object was to be stealthily removed; if not, it was to be disabled by means of heavy blows with hammers.

The men were then to make their way back to the city as well as they were able, covered by a fire from the walls.

"I've spoken to Sir Jehan, lads," said Reeves, addressing his two charges. "If anything happens to me, he has promised by a solemn oath to do his best to send you into the protectorate of Nigeria, which, as far as I can make out, lies some seven hundred miles south-west of Croixilia. The river we crossed flows into that territory I feel certain."

"We hope nothing will happen to you," exclaimed both lads.

"So do I. If it does, it can't be helped. That gun must be silenced, or it will be all up with us within the next few days."

At sunset—the time of the Mohammedans' evening prayer—the firing ceased. The damage done was tremendous. Sixteen hours' incessant cannonading had made a breach thirty feet in width in the walls. Yet Reeves felt certain that the Arabs would not attempt an assault during the hours of darkness.

The Englishman had taken leave of his friends, and was about to join his comrades on their desperate errand, when one of the knights, Sir Oliver Fayne, stood in his path.

"I have a request to make, sir," he said. "Five hundred well-armed and mounted men are drawn up without. May we not bear you company and throw ourselves upon the infidels? In the mêlée that accursed gun might be carried off into the city."

Reeves did not reply. Here was a new plan, which promised well.

"What if five hundred men are slain, so the city be saved?" continued Sir Oliver anxiously. "The honour of the State and the welfare of our Creed demand the sacrifice. Deny me not, sir!"

"All right," replied Reeves. "But you've upset all my plans. I must make sure that everyone knows exactly what to do."

"Your plans need not be altered over-much," said the knight. "We shall ride on ahead and charge into the Moslem camp. You will then be free to harness horses to the gun and bring it back."

Hastily conferring with Garth, Reeves soon amended his original plan, and a team of eight powerful horses was requisitioned to accompany the original members of the desperate undertaking.

Shortly after midnight the drawbridge on the western side of the city was slowly and cautiously lowered, the chains having been wrapped in oiled rags to prevent them creaking. Across this Sir Oliver Fayne's five hundred horsemen passed, then at a walking pace made towards the distant camp, where the gleam of innumerable lights showed that many of the Arabs were feasting in their tents.

Without so much as a horse neighing, the Croixilian cavalry approached within two hundred yards of the Moslem camp, while Reeves and his comrades kept a short distance in the rear of the almost invisible mass of horsemen. The night was dark, and only the outlines of the tents served as a guide.

Suddenly a shot rang out from the enemy's lines, quickly followed by several more; but ere the echoes died away the ground shook under the hoofs of the charging cavalry, while the sound of the Arab volleys was drowned by the fierce Shouts of the Croixilian horsemen.

Like a whirlwind they sped over the intervening plain. Cold steel clashed upon gun barrel, and pointed lance met scimitar and ox-hide shield. Slashing and hewing right and left, the dauntless five hundred cut their way right through the centre of the Moslem camp, leaving the Krupp gun unattended save by the dead or sorely-wounded Egyptian gunners, who, under the fierce threats of their Arab masters, had been urged forward to man the formidable weapon.

Quickly Reeves and his men were upon the gun. The limber was found barely twenty yards to

the rear, and the horses were harnessed to it and brought up to the captured fieldpiece. After fumbling a little, the correspondent succeeded in connecting the trail to the gun carriage, and in less than five minutes the little band was on its way back to the city.

No need for silence now. Amid the exultant cries of the garrison, who, armed with torches and lanterns, had flocked to the gate and to the summit of the battlements, the captured trophy rumbled over the drawbridge, and was unlimbered and trained through the still open gateway. To his intense satisfaction, Reeves found that there were at least fifty rounds in the caissons. A shell was inserted in the breech and the block cleared, and the weapon was ready to fire upon its late owners.

But what of the gallant five hundred? Away in the distance the roar of battle still continued, waxing louder every moment. Long and anxiously the watchers on the walls gazed towards the Moslem camp. Darkness now brooded over the town of tents, save for the quick flashes of musketry. The lamps had been extinguished, either by the Arabs as they rushed to defend themselves, or else by the overturning of the tents.

"Here they come! Here they come!" shouted a hundred voices. "Keep open the gates."

Into the glare of the torches rode a Croixilian horseman, leaning over the neck of his foam-flecked steed. Even as a dozen hands gripped at the bridle of the exhausted animal, its rider fell from the saddle, half-dead from the effects of five deep wounds. Then came another, and two more, all grievously hurt.

Nearer and nearer came the sound of conflict, till Croixilian horsemen began to stream in through the gateway. Others, still fighting, followed slowly, being hindered by the press at the gate. Several, gripping at the throats of their foes, tumbled over the drawbridge. At length all those of the devoted five hundred who yet remained alive—barely one hundred and twenty all told—gained the city, with a horde of fierce Moslems at their heels.

It was now too late to close the massive gates. Reeves sprang to the Krupp gun, but ere he could loose its contents into the press the ponderous portcullis was lowered with a run, pinning half a score of fanatical warriors beneath its formidable prongs.

Some thirty or forty Baggaras, armed with spears or double-handed swords, remained within the city. With shouts of "Allah it Allah!" they dashed upon the defenders—to slay or to be slain.

Short and fierce was the conflict inside the gate. Many a hauberk-clad man bit the dust under the almost irresistible sweep of those desert-forged weapons; but numbers prevailed, and ere long not one living Arab remained within the city.

Now the archers were free to pour their volleys of deadly arrows through the bars of the portcullis into the surging throng without. Few of the Arabs had brought their cumbersome flintlocks with them, and even these could not be reloaded and fired in the press. Except for a few spears, thrown with terrific force, the Mohammedan fanatics were unable to reply. Galled from the walls, scourged by the arrows from the gateway, they broke and fled.

A hoarse cheer broke from the Croixilian ranks; but the shout of triumph was suddenly stilled by a voice shouting: "To the breach—the Moslems are upon us!"

CHAPTER XV

The Struggle at the Breach

LEAVING two hundred men to guard the gateway in case the Baggaras should rally, Reeves hastened to the breach, whilst Hugh and Gerald were told off to see that the guns mounted on the walls were directed against the Arabs who were devoting their energies to this part of the fortifications. Bringing up the Krupp at this stage of the proceedings would be futile. The correspondent realized, in spite of the fact that he had already loaded and trained the piece, that the manipulation of the time fuses of the shells was for the present beyond him; he must rest content in the knowledge that the enemy could no longer gall the city with impunity. There was still danger, however, and every available man was required to defend the ominous gap in the walls.

By the glare of the enormous wood fires, that had been lighted upon the battlements, Reeves could form some idea of what was going on. Already the Arabs, with their customary fanatical zeal, were throwing themselves upon the knights and archers, who, led by Sir Jehan in person, were performing prodigious acts of valour.

Slowly, yet surely, the Croixilians were being driven back. The knights, hampered for want of sword room, were gripped by the ankles by their ferocious foes, who did not hesitate to toss the bodies of their fellow-tribesmen upon the lanceheads of their mail-clad opponents. The archers, unable to loose their shafts for fear of hitting friend as well as foe in the mêlée, could only join in the conflict with their swords and spears. Groans, curses, and cries of pain, triumph, and dismay

rose on the night air, mingling with the sharp clash of steel, or the dull swish of swordcut falling upon hide shield or human flesh.

Drawing his pistol, Reeves forced his way between the ranks of the men who fringed the scene of conflict. Ten shots he fired, quickly, yet deliberately. None missed its mark. This temporarily cleared a path for Sir Jehan and his hauberk-clad men, and the tide of battle changed. Fighting with a superb courage, that even the Croixilians could not help admiring, the foremost of the Arabs were forced back till they were stopped by the press of those behind. Then, with a gigantic spring, the Moslems charged again, and the ebb of the fortunes of Croixilia began once more.

Having discharged his automatic weapon, Reeves discreetly slipped out of the throng, retired to a safe distance, and thrust ten more precious cartridges into the magazine.

"What's up with those guns?" he muttered impatiently, for on either side of the breach he could see the walls black with the soldiers of Croixilia. "Hang 'em! Why don't they open fire?"

But he soon saw that there was something to be done without asking questions, and once again he dashed into the press, checking the Arab rush as before.

"This won't do!" he exclaimed. "Twenty of my precious cartridges gone already, and no permanent good done! If the beggars press another attack as determined as this, it will be touch and go with us. Ugh, you brute!" This last to an apparently-wounded Baggara, who, leaping up from the ground flourishing a keen-bladed spear, rushed straight upon the practically unarmed Englishman.

Up went Reeves's pistol; but the son of the desert, once he is enjoying the lust of battle, cares not for a loaded firearm, let alone an empty one. Here was his chance to send an unbeliever on his path to the kingdom of Shaitan, and himself to an assured paradise.

Hurling his useless weapon at the Baggara, and missing his shock-haired head by an inch, Reeves threw himself into the approved boxing attitude. But ere the Arab's blade came within striking distance, a man threw himself bodily upon Reeves on his left or blind side. The Englishman, taken completely by surprise, staggered a good half-dozen paces, and finally, tripping over a dead archer, sat half-dazed upon the ground.

Even as he sat there he saw a great blade flash in the torchlight, and the Baggara, his hide shield and muscular chest shorn through by a single blow, fell lifeless.

"You could be ill spared, my brother," shouted a well-known voice, as Garth stooped and grasped the Englishman by the hand.

"Thanks!" replied Reeves shortly but nevertheless gratefully; and recovering and reloading his pistol he followed his comrade-in-arms once more into the fray.

Suddenly, with a terrific, ear-splitting detonation, two guns upon the wall sent their death-dealing charges of grapeshot into the thickest of the Arab assailants. The result was similar to that of a sharp scythe cutting wheat, and a double line appeared in the compact, howling, surging press. With redoubled shouts of encouragement and triumph the Croixilians swept away those of their foes who were immediately opposed to them, and before the discomfited Arabs on the outer side of the sloping bank of stone rubble could rally, they too were forced back across the choked moat. Now there was room for the archers, and from the walls, the houses behind the breach, and the deadly gap itself flights of arrows sped into the Moslem ranks. Once again the guns, reloaded with desperate haste, added to the carnage. This was more than fanatical courage could stand; the repulse became a disorderly retreat.

Many of the Croixilian knights besought Sir Jehan to let them lead the cavalry in pursuit, but to their entreaties he turned a deaf ear. Enough lives had been lost already, although not thrown away, and he knew the risk of following a fierce and wily foe too far into the open country.

But, though the attack had been beaten off, there was no rest that night for the harried and wearied defenders. Knights, commoners, and serfs all worked with a will, clearing the moat and piling up the dislodged masonry so as to form an efficient breastwork should daylight bring with it another desperate onslaught.

With the dawn the magnitude of the sanguinary conflict became visible. Within and without the breach the ground was covered with corpses, many lying in ghastly heaps. Outside the gate, which the Arabs all but succeeded in carrying, the carnage had been almost as great; while in the direction of the main Arab encampment a long line of dead men and horses showed how stubbornly the gallant five hundred Croixilian horse had fought in the endeavour to regain the city.

Perhaps the strangest view of all was that of the site of the hostile camp. Every tent had vanished, and only the sinister line of trenches and more still and silent bodies marked the former position of the foiled invaders. They had taken the opportunity afforded by the few remaining hours of darkness to strike their tents and beat a retreat eastwards.

It was the same with the other encampments. The Arabs, disheartened by their losses, had

once more fallen back from before the walls of the city that for centuries had defied their efforts.

"Whatever have you been up to, Gerald?" asked Reeves, as the two lads, powder-blackened, dog-tired, yet wild with delight, rejoined their comrade. Almost all the hair from young Kirby's face and head had been scorched off: his eyebrows were marked only by a few frizzled hairs, while his pate was as bald as a monk's.

"It's a wonder he wasn't blinded," said Hugh. "One of the guns apparently missed fire, and as he was placing fresh powder in the touchhole the stuff went off."

"It's nothing," replied Gerald. "We both managed to get one home at the same time."

"Lucky for us you did," growled Reeves approvingly; "but you were a precious long time about it."

"Couldn't do it quicker," replied Hugh inconsequently. "We had to push half a dozen of the niggers off the wall—not us alone, of course. Look here!" and the correspondent noticed for the first time that Hugh's right leg was bound round with a strip of linen.

"Oh, it's nothing!" the latter continued cheerfully; "only a slight cut from a knife—at least I think it was."

"And the Arabs were already on the wall?" asked Reeves, in astonishment. "Rather! They were trying to swing the guns round when we came up."

The correspondent said no more. He now realized how near to success the Arabs had been. Had those two guns been turned upon the defenders it would have been "all up". It was owing solely to the initiative displayed by his two youthful comrades that the green banner of the Prophet was not floating over the Mound of Pharamond, and the city in the hands of the Mohammedans.

After a hasty meal and a bath the three Englishmen were ready to accompany Sir Jehan to the site of the Moslem camp. The tents had been struck with great haste, as was made apparent by the articles left lying about in all directions; but everyone's attention was drawn to the silent story told by the wedge-shaped mass of dead bodies representing the gallant Croixilian cavalry and their formidable and far more numerous foes. The line of the fierce charge was clearly defined till it reached almost the centre of the camp, where the tent of the Moslem commander-in-chief had been pitched. Here the bodies of the hauberk-clad knights lay thickest, yet in a very small compass; and right in the forefront, with no less than seven honourable wounds, was the corpse of Sir Oliver Fayne. By the few survivors of the desperate enterprise it was told that the gallant knight had pledged his word to reach the Arab commander's tent or fall in the attempt, and indeed he had all but carried out the first part of his vow.

While Sir Jehan was gazing mournfully yet proudly upon the scene of this achievement, three mounted men, with loose rein and hot spur, came with the news that the retiring host had already placed five leagues betwixt them and the city, and that there were no signs of their rallying.

"That is indeed good news," exclaimed Sir Jehan. "We are safe from assault for some years to come, I hope."

"I shouldn't care to take that for granted," observed Reeves. "Even now their retreat may be a skilfully-planned ruse. Are there any more of our men following them up?"

"It is not necessary," replied Sir Jehan. "They have vanished from our territory for good and all. I ought—"

The ruler of Croixilia's words were interrupted by a crashing volley, delivered at less than a hundred yards' distance. Hugh's horse sank on its knees and flung its rider in the dust, while Reeves felt a bullet plough through his hair.

"Dismount and take cover," he shouted, and even as he was in the act of throwing himself out of the saddle he saw Sir Jehan leaning over the neck of his charger. Ere the correspondent or any of those around him could rush to the knight's assistance, the head of the Croixilians fell to the earth with a thud. Quickly Reeves turned him over. One look was enough. Sir Jehan de Valx was dead. Two shots had struck him, one passing through the temples, the other slightly above the heart.

But there was no time for grief. Springing from the cover of a shallow trench, above which the smoke of the volley still rose idly in the calm air, there came a body of at least thirty Arabs, who, with brandished weapons and loud shouts of fierce joy, bounded swiftly towards the astonished Croixilians and their English comrades.

The surprise was complete.

CHAPTER XVI

Sir Jehan's Successor

"To horse!" shouted Reeves, seeing that the assailants had dropped their firearms and were preparing to use cold steel.

Swiftly the Croixilian knights vaulted into their saddles, still undecided how to act. They scorned to flee from the threatened danger, and leave Sir Jehan's body to the insults of their barbarous foes; but, on the other hand, they were outnumbered by at least three to one, while some of their horses had been either killed or maimed by the one and only volley.

Meanwhile Hugh had taken advantage of Gerald's offer, and had perched himself behind his comrade, who was bestriding a tall and powerful hunter; while, with the greatest devotion, two of the Croixilians lifted the body of their late overlord and placed it across the back of one of their chargers.

"Ride as fast as you know how," exclaimed Reeves to the two lads. "That brute will bear you both quite easily. Bring help, and be quick about it, for we shall require it, by Jove!"

Although loath to desert their comrade, the lads obeyed, fully realizing that they could be of more service in bringing aid than in remaining by their threatened friends.

Then the two knights guarding Sir Jehan's body made their way towards the city as fast as they could walk, attended by four more, whose chargers had already been put out of action. Reeves, Garth, and four others, with drawn swords, prepared to hold the horde of Arabs in check.

To a certain extent the Englishman's comrades were at an advantage, being clad in chain armour; but their horses, being totally unprotected, were especially liable to be killed or hamstrung by the knives and spears of the Baggaras. On the other hand, Reeves had his trusty pistol, in addition to a long, straight sword with which he had provided himself.

There was barely sufficient distance to gather speed in, but unhesitatingly, with loose rein, the dauntless six rode straight at their foes. There was something so desperate, so ferocious, in their action that even the fanatical Arabs paused and began to give back.

But it was not the horsemen's intention to launch themselves into the thickest of their attackers. With superb command of cooperation they wheeled when almost within spear's length of the Arabs, then, spurring past their ragged front, cut several down, and put a respectable distance between them and the rear of their antagonists.

Here they slackened their pace and, adopting the role of fugitives, allowed the fleet-footed Baggaras to stream in pursuit, thus serving to increase the distance between the Arabs and the Croixilians who were bearing Sir Jehan's corpse towards the city.

The ruse was successful for a time, until some of the savage warriors, leaving their comrades, began to run after the dismounted knights. Then, circumventing the main body, Reeves and the five Croixilians made very fine swordplay with the detached Arabs till threatened by a hand-to-hand struggle with the bulk of their antagonists.

These tactics continued till it was seen that Hugh and Gerald were safe within the city, and that there was little possibility of Sir Jehan's bodyguard being cut off; then, with a final flanking charge, the gallant six sought to effect their escape.

This they had all but succeeded in achieving when a spear, hurled by a gigantic negro, buried itself in the flanks of Garth's horse. The brute staggered a few yards, then fell, throwing its rider; and before the others could pull in their steeds, twenty ferocious Arabs were upon the unfortunate Croixilian.

Now was Reeves's chance to make good use of his still fully-charged pistol. Urging his powerful horse up to the struggling mob, who in their eagerness to dispatch the infidel were hampering each other, the Englishman fired again and again, the bullets doing great execution in the dense throng of surging and swaying bodies.

Just as he was about to fire the last shot, a spear transfixing his left shoulder. The pistol fell from his nerveless grasp, but with his right hand he wrenched out the keen blade. The pain transformed him into a veritable berserk, and, ably seconded by his remaining comrades, he threw himself into the press, hewing right and left with his blade.

Suddenly his horse reared madly, struck down two Baggaras with its plunging hoofs, then fell backwards, crushing the Englishman between its body and those of two already dead Arabs. A dazzling glare of ruddy light flashed across Reeves's eyes, and he lost consciousness.

When he came to himself he was in a darkened room. He felt as weak as the proverbial rat, his limbs were powerless, while he was unable to utter a sound. For some time he lay wondering if he was alive, till, with an effort, he called out—so feebly that he hardly recognized his own voice.

Presently someone entered bearing a lamp, which he carefully shaded with one hand lest the glare should fall upon the wounded man. Reeves saw that it was Gerald.

"Better?" asked the lad, being absolutely at a loss to say something different.

"Aye," replied the correspondent, with a groan. "Where's Hugh?"

"Sound asleep. He's all right."

"And Garth?"

"Like yourself; cut up a bit, but mending."

"And the others?"

"Only two of them came out of the scrap besides Garth and yourself—both more or less dead."

"What's up with me?" demanded Reeves. "Not crippled for life, I hope?"

"Crippled for life! I should think not," replied Gerald. "I'll tell you, only you must not talk any more, but go to sleep. Doctor's orders, you know. You've a spearthrust through the shoulder, another through your right leg above the knee, a gash across your forehead, caused, I believe, by a kick from your horse, and half a dozen gashes of minor consequence on various parts of your body. That's cheerful; but you are doing well, so the doctor says. Now, obey orders!"

"One more question: how long have I been here?"

"Eight days," replied Gerald. "Now I must inform the doctor that you are awake."

Presently Sir Jehan's own surgeon—a man skilled in the use of herbs and in elementary surgery—entered, looked at his patient, and gave him a sleeping draught. In less than five minutes Reeves was sleeping peacefully.

"He'll do," replied the doctor, in answer to Gerald's anxious enquiries. "He is as full of vitality as a man can possibly be. In a week or so he will be himself again."

It had been a case of touch and go. But for the timely arrival of a strong body of horsemen, the gallant six would have been exterminated. As it was, the rescuers found only two sorely-wounded men, dismounted, fighting desperately back to back in the midst of a horde of Arabs.

Thus ended the greatest attempt of the Moslem power to overrun Croixilia. Both sides had lost heavily, but on the whole, in spite of the death of Sir Jehan, the Christians were the gainers. They had secured immunity from attack for many years to come, while a vast number of firearms—though but old-fashioned firelocks—were found upon the sites of the various sanguinary struggles. With these the Croixilians were able to equip four regiments, having now a knowledge of how the weapons were to be used; and possessing the means of making powder, they were able to hold their own against any enemy similarly equipped.

The loss of Sir Jehan de Valx was felt severely by all classes. He had been upright, a firm yet humane ruler, and far-seeing regarding the welfare of the State. Although his power was absolute, he was always ready to listen carefully to any complaints or suggestions from his subjects and councillors; yet he was not weak-willed, or anxious to attempt to please all parties. His will was law.

On the day following his obsequies his successor was proclaimed—his son, a lad ten years of age. During his minority, which, according to Croixilian custom, would last till he attained the age of sixteen, the government was to be vested in the hands of Sir John Cahars, a man in whom the fault of excessive caution was ever present. Sir John was far from popular, and lacked the iron nerve of Sir Jehan de Valx. But since it was their overlord's choice, the populace had no option but to accept his rule, although the outlook for the next six years was far from promising.

Thanks to the pure, bracing air of the plateau of Croixilia, Reeves made rapid progress towards recovery, and within a fortnight he was able to walk abroad.

All danger from the Arab invaders now being removed, and the vast territory to the south-west being declared free from their pertinacious rule, Reeves began to think it was time to take steps to bid his Croixilian friends farewell, and endeavour to lead his young companions to the coast.

At length the three wanderers appeared at one of Sir John's audiences, and Reeves signified his intention of leaving Croixilia at the end of the week. The acting ruler at first expressed his opinion that it would be impossible for anyone to go out of his territory without being killed by Arabs or by the negro tribes who dwell on the vast, unexplored lands beyond the desert.

"We have already passed through the worst part of our travels," replied Reeves. "By following the river we have a fair chance of achieving our object."

"Is it worth the risk to take these lads, even though they have proved themselves men, into those unknown dangers?" asked Sir John.

"It is worth the risk when home is their goal," replied Reeves. "They have counted the peril and are willing."

"Why not make Croixilia your home? You will have power, possessions, riches——"

"With thanks for your offer, we must decline," said the correspondent, and his companions showed their unanimity by signs of assent.

The acting head of Croixilia did not reply at once, but remained apparently lost in thought. At length, with a gesture of dismissal, he bade them Godspeed and farewell.

"I suppose he doesn't expect to see us again," remarked Hugh, as they gained the courtyard.

"I thought it strange," assented Reeves, with a laugh. "But I don't mind, and I don't suppose you do, so we won't trouble Sir John again. I shall be sorry to say farewell to Garth and many of the others."

"I'm afraid Garth won't be fit to see us off," said Gerald. "He has still to keep to his bed."

"It's a marvel he's alive," remarked his elder comrade. "But we must make the best use of our time, for there are plenty of preparations before we set out."

"How do you propose to go?" asked Hugh.

"By water, if we can get hold of some sort of craft. It's infinitely better than by horseback, and camels are not procurable here. Besides, if we encountered marshes and swamps, horses would be completely out of it."

"I hope we will be able to go by boat; it would be fine," replied Hugh enthusiastically.

"It would, unless——"

"Unless what?"

"We encountered rapids and waterfalls. You see, we are at a great height above the sea level, and it will be rather extraordinary if the river runs at an even rate throughout the whole of its course without making a dive of a few hundred feet. But we must face that possibility when the time comes."

That same night, as the Englishmen were about to retire, a captain of Sir John's bodyguard handed Reeves a letter. Opening it, the recipient read, to his great astonishment and indignation, that Sir John Cahars had given the greatest attention to his request, but, on the grounds that their presence was necessary for the defence of the State, and also that he had too great a regard for the three strangers, he was compelled to order them to remain within the city of Charleton.

"Well, I'm hanged!" exclaimed Reeves; then turning to the captain, Raoul Gare, he asked whether he was aware of the nature of the contents of the communication.

"Assuredly, sir," replied the officer, "since I have been commanded to obtain your paroles not to go beyond one league of the city gates."

"We give no parole," replied Reeves stiffly. "Tell your master that."

"Then I regret, sir, that my orders are to keep you within the limits of the Mound of Pharamond," replied Gare. "I am sorry, but 'tis my duty," and with a salute he withdrew.

CHAPTER XVII

The Flight from Croixilia

"Now, what's to be done?" asked Gerald. "We are prisoners to all intents and purposes."

"There are more ways than one of killing a cat," replied Reeves, tearing the letter into little bits and throwing them into the wide, open hearth. "We must take French leave, that's all. To-morrow I'll see Sir John and have it out with him."

But Sir John would not see the man his word to whom he had broken. He merely replied that the strangers must remain within the limits he had named until they gave the required promise. Reeves said something under his breath, and went to call upon Garth, whose quarters were in the same building.

The wounded Croixilian was visibly annoyed when he heard of the action taken by the acting ruler of the State.

"Sorry I am to have to bid you farewell," he exclaimed, "but 'tis for your wellbeing. Set by a store of such things as you can easily carry. Meanwhile I will speak with Captain Raoul Gare,

whom I know intimately, and we will see what is to be done. Bring your two young comrades to see me before you make the attempt; and remember, if you get clear of the city, take heed of the plain of quicksands. Go rather by the wild country to the south. 'Twill take longer, but the time will be well spent."

At length Reeves took his leave, promising to come again with his young charges. He did not think it necessary to tell Garth that he knew the secret path over the treacherous plain. But one thing was evident, Garth was a true comrade, and would do his uttermost to assist them in their attempt to leave the city.

The next morning Raoul Gare looked in on his rounds.

"Holà, comrades!" he exclaimed. "Want of exercise will stiffen your joints. There is nothing like skipping when your walks are limited."

Reeves deemed this a strange remark, till a thought suddenly struck him.

"Aye," he replied, "'tis a good idea. A small piece of rope will not come amiss."

That evening a soldier entered the Englishmen's quarters with a box under his arm, saying it was a present from Captain Gare. Directly the man had gone, Reeves prised the box open. Inside was a coil of three-inch rope sufficient to reach thrice the height of the battlements.

"That's half the battle!" he exclaimed, after he had explained to the lads the real reason for the captain's skipping rope. "They are fine fellows, these Croixilians. It's a pity to have to sneak off, but that brute, Sir John, has spoiled everything."

True to his word, Reeves took the lads to bid Garth farewell. It was a sorrowful party, for each man realized that each had risked his life in order to save the others', and they had been comrades in the field of battle in more than one fiercely-contested fight.

"The guard at the great gorge will not hinder you," said Garth at parting. "Much as I wish to do my duty to my country, there are times and places when tyrannical orders may be laxly carried out. When you leave the pass behind you, keep to the north, and ware the quicksands. Horses will be awaiting you. Show this ring to the men with them, and all will be well."

The same night Reeves, bearing one end of the coil of rope, scaled the chimney; three muskets, ammunition, and food were sent up after him, and soon Hugh and Gerald rejoined him on the flat roof. Beneath them, on the battlements, they could see the outlines of the sentinels, but the men's backs were resolutely turned towards them. A double length of rope was dropped, the bight being held by the masonry between two of the apertures in the battlemented wall. Down these lengths the lads swarmed, Reeves followed, and the rope was pulled clear, so as to serve for the purpose of descending the outer wall.

Five minutes later the wanderers had shaken the dust of Charleton from off their feet—for the last time, as they fondly hoped.

Their route lay betwixt the devastated cornfields, where no cover was available; but since the gates of the city were closed at night, no one was likely to be met.

At length they gained the entrance to the formidable gap betwixt the rocks, and here again, although lights shone in the guardhouse, none challenged them. In the gorge the darkness was intense, and the refugees had great difficulty in avoiding the stones that had fallen from above; but, maintaining perfect silence, they kept on their way, emerging from the sombre ravine as day was breaking.

"We may as well take proper precautions in case we are pursued when our flight is discovered," said Reeves, and, bringing his musket to his shoulder, he fired into the gorge they had just left behind them. The echoes of the report were drowned by a roar like thunder, as tons of rock came hurtling from the heights above.

"That will take them some time to clear, I expect," he continued, as he reloaded his clumsy weapon. "We've slammed the front door in our host's face. Now, we won't go south, but we'll try our luck with the quicksands."

The lads wondered why their companion had taken the trouble to carry the heavy coil of rope with him, but their curiosity was set at rest when Reeves proceeded to rope them together, leaving nearly thirty feet of "slack" between each.

This done, he began the perilous passage, walking backwards so as to be sure of keeping the leading marks in line; while Hugh and Gerald, holding the intervening lengths of rope fairly taut, followed in his footsteps.

On and on Reeves went, till after covering nearly a mile he stopped. "Here we turn," he exclaimed. "Now, mind how you go. Follow me very carefully."

"Shall I take the lead?" asked Gerald. "You must be frightfully fagged walking backwards all that way."

"I'd be glad if you would," replied Reeves gratefully. "My muscles are aching fearfully. There are the marks."

Once more the march was resumed, Gerald leading, Reeves in the centre, and Hugh following in the rear, the line of route being now at right angles to their former direction, and pointing almost straight for the little fort by the ferry.

Presently Hugh, who was growing familiar with the dangerous path, stepped a few inches from the centre. Then, with appalling suddenness, his feet slipped from beneath him. In his efforts to recover his balance his musket flew from his grasp and instantly disappeared from view, and only the strain upon the rope prevented him from sharing the fate of the weapon.

Fortunately Reeves preserved his presence of mind, and, instead of instantly running to the aid of his comrade, he kept the rope taut while he walked towards him. When about three feet off he stopped, and called to Gerald to come up as cautiously as he could.

Meanwhile Hugh was slowly sinking, in spite of the support of the rope. The suction of the sands was terrific. It was impossible for him to struggle. He could only keep as still as was possible, in spite of the agonizing torture of body and mind, trusting to the strength of his friends to haul him out of the treacherous snare.

Bracing themselves for the effort, Reeves and Gerald pulled with all their might. Hugh yelled. It was as if his legs were being torn from their sockets; but he remained anchored to the terrible quicksands.

"Mind you don't fall into the sands on the other side, Gerald, if he should come up with a jerk," cautioned Reeves. "Now, together!"

With a united and mighty heave, Hugh was dragged from a horrible yet certain death, while Gerald, in spite of the warning, wellnigh tumbled backwards when his chum, like a huge fish, was squirming upon the hard ground. So great had been the suction that the leather buskins with which Hugh had been supplied during his stay in Croixilia were wrenched from his feet, while from his thighs downwards the skin was inflamed and bruised in places as if he had been scourged.

In a few minutes he was able to walk, although the pain was intense; and, having resumed their relative positions, the three adventurers proceeded to negotiate the remaining portion of that hazardous pathway.

"We've a choice of boats, I see," said Reeves, as they drew up at the little stone quay. Moored to the wall were three craft, one the ferryboat in which they had crossed on their journey to Croixilia, the others being larger.

"There would be room for three horses quite easily," remarked Gerald, pointing to one of the bigger craft.

"There would be," assented Reeves. "It's almost a pity we didn't make sure of the horses; but it cannot be helped. We could not return without considerable risk, and I doubt whether we could lead horses over that pathway. I wonder where the ferrymen are? We are in want of food. Perhaps Garth's ring will help us."

The correspondent stalked over to the fort, and began to hammer at the door. It was unfastened, and flew open at the first blow. But the place was untenanted.

"Come here, lads; we're in luck," shouted Reeves.

On a board were six large rye loaves, six thick rugs, a bag of flour, a jar of salt, a square of canvas that would form either a sail or an awning at will, and a broad-bladed axe. Pinned to the sack was a paper on which was written, in old-fashioned characters and in the quaint dialect of Croixilia: "If so be you have decided to go this way, these are for your welfare".

"They evidently wish to show their good feeling, in spite of the fact that we sneaked out of the city," said Gerald.

"Yes; it's quite certain that without the aid of our unknown friends our difficulties would be tenfold," replied Reeves. "However, we had better get these things aboard without further loss of time."

When the last load was ready to be taken to the boat, Reeves folded the paper and put it in his pocket, while with a piece of charcoal he wrote the words "Many thanks!" upon the board.

"We cannot do more in that respect," he observed. "I might have written on the back of the paper, but we don't know into whose hands it might fall."

Reeves had already decided upon the boat that was to take them downstream. He chose the smaller of the two large ones, this craft being of fairly shallow draught, apparently of more recent construction, and easier to handle. The provisions were stored amidships and two short masts placed in position, the canvas being stretched tightly between them. As there was

absolutely no wind, this last was useless as a sail, but as an awning it provided good protection from the already powerful rays of the sun. There were four oars on board—long, heavy ones, weighted at the haft with lead to compensate for the disproportionate distance between the thole pins and the blade.

"Here is another type of mediaevalism," said the correspondent, pointing to the oars. "Almost the same as were used by the galley slaves of old. Oars on an African river seem out of place; paddles would be preferable under ordinary circumstances."

"How would they?" asked Hugh, who was engaged in cooling his aching limbs in the tepid water.

"In weed-encumbered water, such as we are likely to encounter. Here, as you see, the river expands, forming a fairly extensive lake, and vegetation is somewhat scarce; but I should not be at all surprised if we have to literally cut our way through the reeds and water lilies lower downstream."

Casting off the rope that held it to the quay, Reeves pushed the boat clear and dipped an oar, Gerald pulling at a second while Hugh steered. A few strokes sufficed to put a fair distance between the shore and the craft, and her bow was pointed downstream. In less than half an hour the ghaut-like crags at the upper end of the lake were lost to view.

CHAPTER XVIII

Reeves's Ruse

ALL the rest of the day the little crew took turns to row their craft downstream. Although there was no wind, and the heat made their exertions doubly hard, the current aided them considerably, its rate being about two miles per hour when once the river contracted. On the lake there was no appreciable drift, a circumstance that gave Reeves the liveliest satisfaction, since he had good reason to believe that no rapids would be met with for some considerable distance.

Just before sunset they anchored the boat in midstream by means of the long rope, tied fast to a heavy stone. Having made sure that their improvised anchor was not dragging, all hands set to to rig the awning for the night, fixing it so that it made a ridge tent instead of the flat surface that had served to keep off the rays of the sun.

As far as they could see, there were no signs of human inhabitants. The dense subtropical forests on either hand were teeming with animal life, gaudily-coloured birds predominating. The water, too, abounded with fish, which snapped eagerly at a bit of cotton cloth wrapped round a bent wire that Hugh employed as a fishing hook.

In a few minutes a dozen good-sized fish were floundering about on the bottom of the boat; but, fearful lest some of these should be poisonous, Reeves threw them all overboard, with the exception of three resembling dace, only much larger. These were cooked over a fire made upon a large flat stone, which had apparently been used for a similar purpose before, and were pronounced excellent.

Throughout the night, watches were set, this precaution being deemed necessary in spite of the isolated position of their floating camp; but, beyond the constant noise of the animal life in the forests, nothing occurred to disturb the slumbers of those of the crew who were not keeping a long and tedious vigil.

At sunrise all hands had a bathe, since there was no likely danger of being seized by crocodiles. The water was perfectly clear, and, greatly refreshed, the little party attacked their plain but by no means scanty breakfast.

While this was in progress, Reeves suddenly signed to his companions to keep silent, and, seizing his musket, took aim beneath the awning. Standing on the bank, at quite a hundred yards' distance, was a tall, graceful animal somewhat resembling the spring-bok of the Karroos. The creature seemed to have no fear, or, if it had, curiosity got the better of it, for it remained motionless, looking intently at the unusual sight of a boat upon the practically deserted river.

Reeves pressed the trigger, but the gun missfired. The animal inclined its head slightly at the sound, but did not attempt to bound away. The correspondent's second essay was successful, and with a quick, convulsive leap the creature fell dead.

"It seems almost a pity to shoot such a confiding sort of animal," said Gerald, as they prepared to heave up anchor and row ashore for their spoil.

"It does," assented Reeves. "I should not have done so, only that stern necessity demands it. We must have food, and not neglect any opportunity. If this river traverses a desert, we should be short of provisions before we were out of it unless we replenished our scanty larder."

The slaughtered animal was soon cut up, the best portions being taken on board and, with the exception of a piece of hind quarter, which was reserved for dinner, salted down. This done, the awning was adapted for its daily purpose, and the voyage resumed.

For five days the boat passed between the dense forests on either hand, halts being made at each midday for the purpose of allowing the travellers to stretch their legs ashore, in addition to the nightly rests in midstream. But on the sixth day the forests were left behind; then followed a vast extent of plain, in which the vegetation gradually yet regularly decreased until it assumed the appearance of thorns and scrub.

"We are verging on another desert, I'm afraid," said Reeves. "Luckily, the river shows no signs of decreasing in volume, so I think we can rely on its not losing itself in the sand."

About three hours after sunrise a welcome breeze dead astern sprang up, enabling the travellers to set the awning as a sail. The advantages of being able to dispense with the use of oars were quickly appreciated by the crew, who could now sit at ease, the boat being kept on her course by means of an occasional dip with the oar that served as a rudder.

"This is great!" exclaimed Hugh, as the boat, with wind and current, ran past the banks at a good six miles an hour. "A few days like this would mean a lot."

"We've much to be thankful for," said Reeves; "but, at the same time, if only I had something to smoke——"

He was interrupted by Gerald pointing to the right bank of the river. Standing on the rising ground that cut the skyline was an Arab, dressed in white, with a long gun slung across his back. The man was shading his eyes and looking intently at the strange sight of a boat, and the still stranger sight of a boat with a sail.

"By Jove, that's awkward!" muttered Reeves. "Don't take any notice. I hope the fellow's alone."

As he spoke, the Bedouin mounted his hierie, turned, and dropped behind the bank. A few minutes later came the dull report of a musket.

"He's up to mischief—that's to bring up the other cutthroats!" said Reeves. "Sling that bag of flour between the seats, and see to the priming of the muskets. I don't want to use force unless it is absolutely necessary."

The simple preparations for putting the boat in a state of defence were soon completed, Reeves steering well towards the left bank so as to place as great a distance as possible betwixt them and the threatened attack.

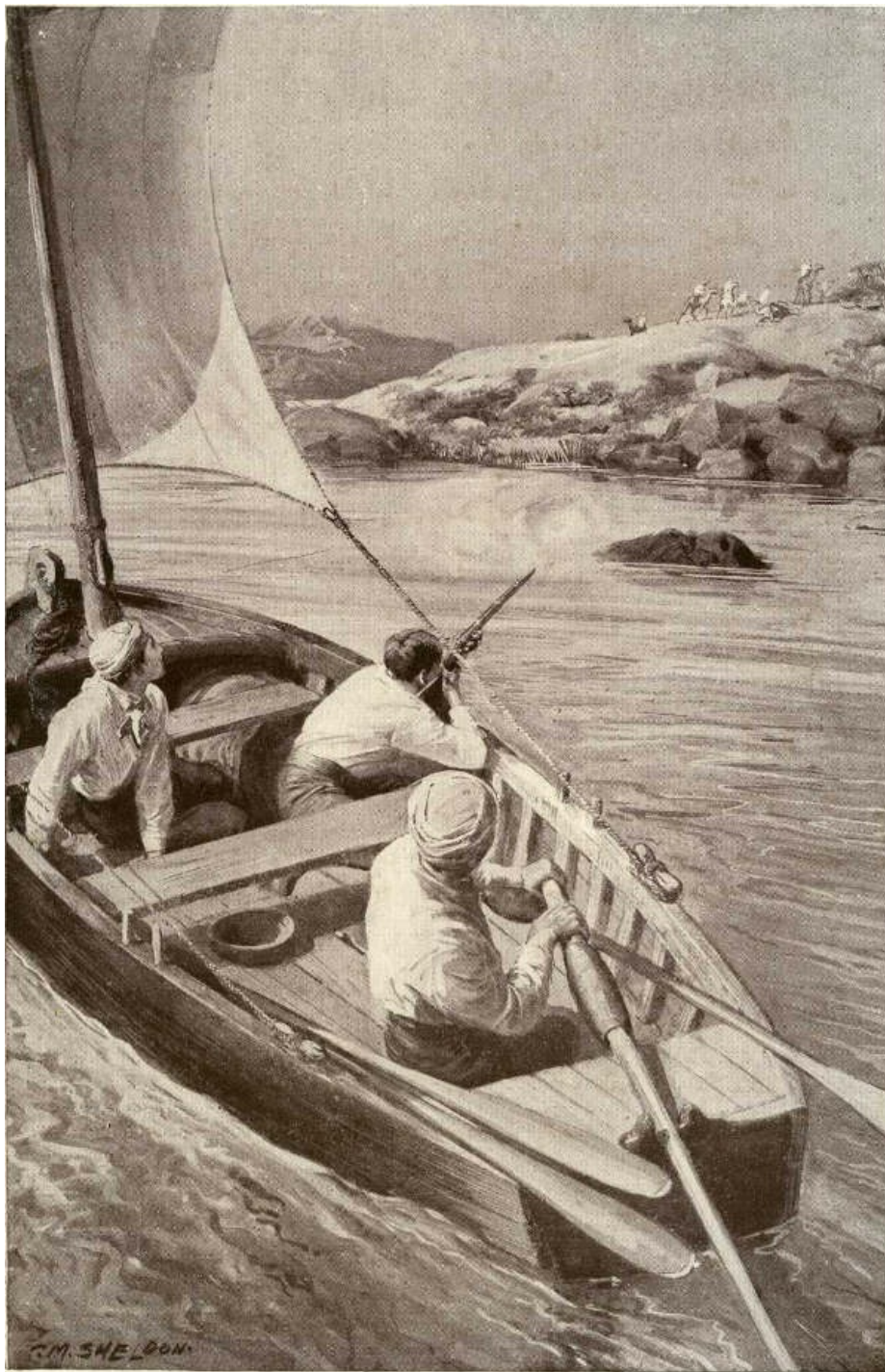
"That is as much as I dare do; we're in only five feet of water," he remarked. "I hope that it won't shoal, for if we ran aground going at this rate it might be very serious for us."

Nothing remained but to keep a bright lookout, and in a silence broken only by the swish of the bluff bow as it forced its way through the water the three Englishmen awaited events.

"There's someone's head!" exclaimed Hugh, as a white *burnous* appeared above the bank. "And another—a regular swarm of them!"

Barely a hundred and fifty yards away a dozen Arabs sprang up, waving their long-barrelled muskets and shouting to the strangers to stop.

"Sorry we can't—for your sakes," said Reeves grimly, under his breath; then, to the lads: "Lie down behind the sack; those gentry mean mischief."



[Illustration: A GOOD SHOT]

A shot whistled over the boat, followed by an irregular volley; then, setting their camels at a steady pace, the Arabs kept up with the boat, reloading their cumbersome weapons as they went.

"If they don't do better than that, we needn't worry," said Reeves, who was sitting aft, and imperturbably grasping the steering oar. "But keep down, you fellows; they may make a fluke and score a cannon."

Almost the next shot cut a long gash in the sail, while another knocked chips off the gunwale.

"This won't do," exclaimed Reeves. "Gerald, come aft for half a minute and steer. Don't show yourself too much."

Kneeling on the bottom boards, the correspondent took careful aim with his musket, and a camel promptly dropped, throwing its rider headlong upon the sand.

"One!" said the marksman calmly. "Hand me your musket, Hugh."

The next shot was also successful, bringing down the Arab who had discovered the boat. With that the rest turned and disappeared behind the sandhills.

"I hope that's sent them about their business," said Reeves, as he reloaded the flintlock. "Gerald, you're fairly light; swarm up the mast and say if you can see anything of them."

"They are riding as hard as they can in the same direction as we are taking," announced the lad from his swaying perch.

"All right; come down," replied Reeves. "They are going to ambush us, I fear."

Ten minutes later a rattle of musketry burst from the scrub on the bank, most of the bullets flying high or striking the water. Two, however, ricocheting, buried themselves in the boat's stout timbers. Without showing themselves, the Arabs disappeared, to take up a fresh position lower downstream.

"That's beastly annoying!" remarked Hugh. "If they carry plenty of provisions they may keep this game up for days."

"I thought all the Arabs went eastwards after the repulse at the breach?" said Gerald.

"These may be a few stragglers—I hope they are," rejoined Reeves. "We don't want to drift into a whole tribe of them. To-night I'll try to trick them. Fortunately there's no moon."

The breeze held throughout the day, but, in spite of the rapid and constant speed of the boat, the Bedouins hung on doggedly, firing from cover as quickly as they could. Little damage was done, however, beyond a few holes through the top strakes and splinters from the mast and gunwales.

As night came on, the wind showed signs of dropping.

"Are you going to bring up for the night?" asked Gerald of Reeves, who had relinquished the helm and was busily engaged in unstranding a piece of rope and encasing it in tallow from the animal they had shot.

"Rather; that's part of my ruse. The wind's falling very light, and our progress will soon be only that of the current, unless we row, and that will be too risky."

Directly it grew thoroughly dark, Reeves lit one of his improvised candles, which burned steadily in the almost still air. Its appearance was greeted by a shower of bullets from the indefatigable enemy on the bank.

"Stand by with the anchor, Gerald," said the correspondent. "Don't make more noise than you can possibly help. When I say 'let go', lower the stone as softly as you can."

"All ready!" announced Gerald from the bow of the boat.

Meanwhile the director of operations had wrenched up one of the bottom boards, and, lighting a second candle, stuck it firmly in the centre of the plank. Then, carefully screening the light, he dropped the piece of timber over the side of the boat away from the bank from which the Arabs were firing.

"Let go," he whispered, blowing out the first light.

The rough-and-ready anchor brought the boat round head to current, while the board, with its candle burning dimly, drifted downstream, the mark for nearly a dozen muskets.

"Now they can waste powder and shot as much as they jolly well please," exclaimed Reeves, as the sound of the firing grew fainter and fainter. "Luckily there are no King's prizemen amongst them, and fifty to one they won't shift that candle at a hundred yards."

The night passed without interruption, and daylight revealed no sign of the Arabs.

"I hope they potted that candle after all," said Gerald.

"Why, young wiseacre?" asked Reeves, laughing.

"Because if they did, they might imagine that they sank the boat, and would not trouble us further. If they find the plank at daybreak they will see through our little game and come back to look for us."

"That's one to you, by George!" exclaimed the correspondent. "I wish we had lowered the sail and rowed downstream, leaving the light behind us. But in any case it's too late now, and the fact remains that we have put the Arabs between us and our destination."

"Unless they've gone inland," added Hugh.

"Which I hope they have done," concluded Reeves.

Once more the favouring breeze had sprung up, and with the sail bellying out before the wind the boat resumed its course. Ten miles were reeled off in quick time, and the crew were beginning to congratulate themselves upon the success of their ruse when the now familiar sound of bullets whizzing about their ears told them that the respite had been but temporary.

There was something satisfactory, however, besides the waste of ammunition. The firing told Reeves that the Arabs had not increased in number, though their persistency began to cause him fresh uneasiness. Was it likely that the Bedouins would continue their apparently fruitless pursuit

if they had no possible chance of success?

CHAPTER XIX

The Perils of the River

THE correspondent's fear was only too well grounded. Just before midday an ominous increase in the rate of the stream betokened cataracts or rapids ahead. But, in spite of the accelerated speed of the boat, the implacable Arabs held tenaciously to their tactics of riding ahead and firing volleys from ambush. To reply would have been a waste of ammunition, for owing to the swirling of the current it was impossible for the crew to take a careful aim at their foes.

Reeves calculated that nearly five hundred shots had been fired at the boat without much damage being done; but at length one bullet did more harm than all the rest put together. Cutting through the halyards, it brought the sail down with a run, and the unwieldy craft swung round broadside on to the stream.

Without hesitation, Reeves seized another piece of rope and began to climb the mast. His appearance attracted a heavy fire, the bullets whizzing unpleasantly close. One grazed his ankle, and another cut the rope he was holding close to his head, so that he was compelled to descend without having achieved his object.

There was no help for it but to make use of the oars, and, cowering behind the rough-and-ready breastwork, the lads contrived to get the boat's head round, while Reeves recovered his breath before he essayed a fresh attempt.

Just as he was preparing to go aloft once more, he happened to glance ahead. To his horror he found that the river was about to traverse a narrow gorge, while the actual stream was encumbered with huge rocks, between which the water surged furiously.

Springing forward, the correspondent dropped the stone that served as an anchor overboard, paying out just sufficient cable to check the boat's way, the lump of stone bumping and scraping over the bottom of the river. The craft swung round, head pointing upstream, and by manipulating the long, steering oar Reeves was able to keep her fairly under control.

He had to stand upright—a target for the Bedouins' muskets; but, ignoring the danger, he kept his face turned resolutely towards the cataract, knowing that to strike upon one of those wicked-looking rocks meant total disaster.

The range, too, was decreasing, and with redoubled shouts the Arabs, thinking that the occupants of the boat were too busy to reply, sprang boldly from cover and, leaping from rock to rock, came as close to the water's edge as they possibly could. But Hugh was equal to the occasion. Ramming a handful of duck shot down the barrel of his musket he let fly at those of the Bedouins who were nearest to him. Maddened with the pain of a dozen slight wounds, three of the Arabs dropped their guns and literally danced, their shouts of anguish so alarming their companions that they bolted for cover.

The precipitous sides of the gorge prevented further pursuit; but the aspect was alarming enough, for the craft, in spite of the trailing stone, was darting through the boiling water with the velocity of a torpedo boat.

Bracing himself at the rudder, Reeves veered the lumbering boat as skilfully as he could, missing sharp, spray-flecked rocks by a handbreadth. Every now and then a vicious-crested wave would pour over the gunwale of the plunging craft, till the weight of water aboard began to make itself felt.

"Bale for all you're worth!" gasped Reeves, who was wellnigh breathless with the strain of holding the steering oar. "And look out for the powder. Keep it dry at all costs."

Gerald plied a wooden bowl as vigorously as he possibly could, while Hugh, holding on with difficulty, contrived to lift the bag of powder and place it on the small decked-in part of the bows.

For nearly ten minutes the nerve-racking ordeal lasted—Reeves afterwards said that it was one of the tightest places he had ever been in—while the distance covered in that time could hardly have been less than six miles. But the end of the gorge was now in sight. The wearied steersman gave an exclamation of relief, when, with a strange shudder, the boat swung round like a top, and, broadside on, drifted upon almost the last rock of the cataract.

By an almost superhuman effort Reeves succeeded in bringing the bows round; but it was just too late. The stern crashed upon the rock with a shock that threw the three occupants sprawling into the bottom of the boat, and the next thing they were aware of was that the craft was spinning slowly in the still agitated current, while the water was pouring in through the bottom or garboard strakes like a mill stream.

"Come for'ard, both of you!" shouted the correspondent, and whipping out his knife he cut the sail from the yard. Hastily rolling the canvas, he placed it over the damaged planks, which had the effect of considerably checking the inrush of water.

Then, rejoining his companions in the bows, he seized an oar, told Gerald to do the same, and kept the nearly water-logged craft on her course, while Hugh plied the baler.

They had now time to look about them. The gorge was left far astern, and the desert stretched for miles ahead and on either hand. The banks were now covered with coarse vegetation. Astern rose the mountains through which they had so wonderfully passed, and, looking at that formidable barrier, Reeves realized that they were far beyond the reach of their ferocious pursuers. The current, too, though swift, no longer surged madly between jagged rocks, but flowed silently, showing that the river had increased in depth.

"Now, what's to be done?" exclaimed Hugh, who had managed to get rid of most of the undesirable liquid ballast. "The water is still coming in."

"We don't want to be baling continuously for the next three weeks," observed Reeves. "We must risk it, and run the boat ashore."

"And trudge it?" asked Gerald dolefully.

"Oh no!" replied the correspondent. "It's not quite so bad as that, I hope. Unless I'm very much mistaken, those small bushes growing on the banks have their roots set in clay and not in sand. Clay is an excellent leak-stopper. I don't think we need fear a surprise visit from our late hostile friends, the Arabs; but we must take due precautions. While Gerald and I are plugging the hole, you, Hugh, had better go ashore and mount guard."

So saying, Reeves headed the boat towards the left bank, or the opposite one to that on which the Arabs had appeared. As the craft drew away from the middle of the stream the current became much less rapid, and by the time her bow grounded there was hardly any motion in the water at all. If anything, there was a slight eddy upstream.

As the correspondent had suggested, the soil on the banks was composed of clay, of a dark slate colour. While Hugh patrolled the bank, his comrades dug up lumps of the viscous earth with their knives and dumped them down on the hole. The actual aperture was less than two inches in diameter, but the planking had been fractured for nearly a foot on all sides of it. A few lumps were sufficient to check the inflow completely, but Reeves insisted on placing more clay over the weak spot, till a layer nearly a foot thick lay evenly over the damaged part.

"That's a good job done," said the correspondent. "A few hours' sun will bake the stuff as hard as a brick. It will serve as a hearth to light our fire upon."

"Then we don't require the stone," said Gerald, looking at the slab that did duty for cooking purposes.

"Don't we, by Jove!" exclaimed Reeves. "I think we do. Do you know how we were nearly smashed up?"

"By running on a rock, I suppose."

"Exactly! But why could I not avoid it, as I did the others? I'll tell you. The continual scraping over the rocky bed of the river chafed through the rope holding our anchor. We've still got most of the rope; this stone must be our new anchor."

For the next seven days the voyage continued almost without incident. On the eighth day the travellers found themselves on a vast lake, caused by the expansion of the river. So shallow was it that on several occasions the boat stuck hard and fast almost beyond sight of land; but by all hands jumping overboard and lightening the craft they contrived to get her off.

Just before sunset the boat stuck again, this time about three miles from the lower end of the lake; and in spite of the crew's hardest exertions she obstinately refused to budge. They tried to lessen her draught by placing her cargo all on one side, and then in the bow, in case she drew more aft than forward, but all to no purpose.

"Stand by for a spell!" exclaimed Reeves, who, like the others, was wellnigh breathless with his exertions. Stooping down, he stuck his knife lightly into one of the planks at the waterline.

A quarter of an hour later, ere they resumed their task, the correspondent withdrew the blade. The mark where it had stuck was three inches above the surface of the water.

"We may as well make ourselves comfortable for the night," said Reeves. "We may get off tomorrow, or we may not. For some reason, that I cannot explain, the level of the lake has fallen too much for us to expect to haul the boat off."

Throwing the improvised anchor overboard, as a matter of precaution, the wearied crew had supper.

Just before time for turning in, Hugh leant over the side, holding a candle in his hand.

"There's more water now!" he exclaimed. "Shall we have another shot at getting her off?"

"By all means," assented Reeves, "if you feel up to it; but we don't want to get her aground again in a worse position than she is in at present."

"I'll walk round and sound," said Gerald, and without another word he stepped over the side and paddled through the shallow water.

"It's deeper here," he continued, after a lengthy pause. "But there's a rock or a floating log just ahead. I'll soon see what it is."

"You come back!" shouted Reeves apprehensively; but the warning came too late. As Gerald trod upon the "log" it became suddenly and violently active, and, struck by an irresistible blow, the lad was hurled nearly ten feet before he fell on his back in the shallow water. Staggering to his feet, he ran blindly towards the boat, with a huge crocodile, snapping its powerful jaws, in pursuit.

With a mighty heave Reeves jerked the terrified lad into the boat—not a moment too soon, for, in addition to the reptile that had capsized the intruder upon its peace and quietness, at least a dozen of the brutes came floundering through the shallows from all directions.

"Stand by with the muskets!" cried Reeves.

But the caution was unnecessary. The crocodiles contented themselves with snapping their huge jaws and bringing their heavy tails down upon the surface of the water with a tremendous crash, and did not make any direct attack upon the occupants of the boat.

Although Reeves slept like a top, the lads kept awake the greater part of the night, expecting momentarily to see the snout of a crocodile appear above the gunwale, and wondering vaguely what would happen if, with their craft stuck indefinitely upon the sandbank, they attempted to wade over the wide shallows betwixt them and the distant shore.

CHAPTER XX

Running the Last Gauntlet

AT daybreak Hugh sat up. Gerald had fallen into a broken slumber, while the correspondent was still sleeping soundly. The lad was puzzled. When the boat stuck, her bows were pointing towards the setting sun; now they were inclined towards the east. He made his way forward. The craft rocked easily under his weight. A glance at the cable revealed the fact that the boat had floated, and was riding to the full scope of the anchor rope.

"We're afloat!" he shouted. Reeves was instantly awake, but Gerald muttered something about crocodiles.

"They have cleared off," exclaimed Hugh joyfully, "and we can clear off as soon as we like."

"How about breakfast?" asked Gerald drowsily.

"Breakfast had better wait till we get into deeper water," replied Reeves. "Heave up the anchor, Rags; I'll pole her along."

Very slowly the boat glided through the shallow water, the correspondent sounding with the oar. For quite a hundred yards the depth was uniform, then, with a suddenness that almost caused Reeves to lose his balance, the oar clipped into deeper water.

"Let go the anchor again!" he shouted. "There are at least twelve feet here. We must have struck the channel."

After breakfast the voyage was resumed; but although the halyards had been repaired and freshly rove, and the wind was fair, Reeves would not hoist the sail for fear of running hard aground again. An hour's steady pull brought them to the lower end of the lake, whence the river, now nearly a quarter of a mile in breadth, flowed swiftly in a south-westerly direction.

During the next three days the course lay betwixt sandbanks, with the apparently interminable desert stretching for miles on either hand. Two more cataracts were encountered. The first was shot with little difficulty, but the second, when viewed from upstream, presented a line of broken water extending from bank to bank, with rocks studded thickly across the bed.

So formidable was the aspect that Reeves ran the boat ashore, and, having secured her, the three travellers walked downstream to take stock of the latest difficulty. Here they found that, although powerful, the rapid kept an almost clear course close to the bank.

"Can we shoot it?" asked Gerald.

"I shouldn't care to try it," replied Reeves. "This little channel is not wide enough to allow any margin for sheering about. We must veer the boat through it."

Accordingly the cable was made fast to the foremost thwart and led ashore over the gunwale at a distance of about three feet from the stem. The boat was pushed off into the stream, and the three members of her crew, standing on the bank, held the rope.

Caught by the current, the craft began to drift downstream till the cable became taut. There she lay, held as steady as a rock, with the water hissing past her like a mill race.

Slowly the crew began to walk downstream, the boat preceding them and maintaining a uniform distance from the shore.

"Take it easily and keep your strength," cautioned Reeves; "she's not got to the worst part yet."

When the boat entered the cataract it took all their united efforts to hold her. Frequently they were dragged several yards, their heels cutting long furrows in the sand and clay; but by doggedly sticking to their task they succeeded in steering their craft almost through the foaming torrent. But without warning the rope parted, and the three men found themselves sprawling on their backs, while the boat glided aimlessly and rapidly downstream.

Springing to his feet, Reeves coiled up the severed portion of the cable and ran as hard as he could, his comrades following and wondering what would happen next. Should the boat strike a rock and fill, they would be hopelessly stranded, since their arms, ammunition, and provisions were on board.

But a special providence seemed to guide the derelict, and, untouched by any of the formidable rocks, it gained the deeper yet still swift-flowing part of the stream.

Without hesitation the correspondent took a magnificent "header" and swam for the truant; but ere he had covered half the distance a huge, slimy black mass rose to the surface. It was a hippopotamus!

The lads shouted, but Reeves had already perceived the danger. It was touch and go which of the two would reach the boat first. The swimmer did so by a short head, and as he clambered over the side the animal's teeth closed upon the gunwale. There was a scrunch as the powerful jaws wrenched the woodwork asunder, leaving a jagged gap two feet across.

The hippopotamus returned to the attack; but this time Reeves was ready for her. Seizing a gun, he held the muzzle almost against the animal's eye and pressed the trigger. With a hideous cry the brute dived, leaving a long crimson trail in the water.

Grasping one of the long oars, the correspondent laboriously urged the boat towards the bank, and ten minutes later the lads were safely on board. As they pushed off, Gerald pointed to an object floating downstream. It was the body of the hippopotamus.

"Not a bad shot for the flintlock," remarked Reeves. "The beggar deserved it. Luckily the danger to the boat is confined to the gunwale, but we must be careful if we encounter any more broken water."

At length the desert was left behind, and the river plunged into the midst of a dense forest. Day after day passed, with nothing to be seen but tall trees and a thick undergrowth. The heat, too, began to increase, while every night a thick, miasmal mist arose. Mosquitoes appeared in swarms, and so determined were their attentions that the faces and arms of the crew were masses of blisters. The enervating vapour began to tell on the lads after the bracing air of the Croixilian plateau, and soon a pair of more unhealthy-looking people could hardly be imagined.

Reeves was greatly worried. Without even the most simple remedies or drugs, the chances of warding off an attack of fever were greatly reduced; but the lads kept up their spirits wonderfully, knowing that every hour brought them nearer to civilization.

At length, in an opening in the forest, a village came in sight—a collection of miserable mud huts, thatched with palm leaves. Directly they caught sight of the boat the inhabitants ran down to the water's edge, where they stood gazing fixedly, with wide-open mouths, at the strange sight.

"If we meet with no worse reception than that, I shan't mind," said Reeves, as a bend in the river hid the natives from view. "One thing, they are not Arabs."

"What are they?"

"Negroes—possibly Hausas. It's a good sign, since we know that we are approaching Nigerian territory. I shall be very much surprised if this river is not a tributary of the Niger, in which case we ought soon to stumble across one of the trading stations of the Northern Nigeria Company."

After this riverside villages became numerous, but beyond undisguised surprise the natives

showed no sign of hostility until the boat passed a large stockaded town, in front of which several canoes were drawn up.

Here, as before, the natives rushed pell-mell to the bank, several of them holding up earthenware pots, while all of them shouted discordantly.

"They want to barter, evidently—another good sign. But we must not run any risk with these niggers."

Seeing that the occupants of the boat paid no attention to their shouts and gestures, the negroes began to beat tom-toms. This was a signal for a swarm of men armed with spears to rush for the canoes, and soon half a dozen "dug-outs", each urged by twenty paddles, were tearing downstream in pursuit.

"This looks bad!" exclaimed Reeves. "Stand by the steering oar, Gerald. Hugh, hand me up those guns."

In spite of the strong wind, that bore the boat along at a rapid pace, the canoes were steadily gaining, and the woods echoed to the monotonous war song of the natives and the rhythmical beat of the paddles.

Kneeling, Reeves fired a shot well above the heads of the men in the leading canoe. For an instant the paddlers hesitated, then with the greatest persistency redoubled their efforts.

"Rough luck!" growled Reeves. "I must wing some of them." Ere he picked up a second musket he drew his trusty automatic pistol and opened the magazine. Nine cartridges only remained.

Presently one of the negroes laid aside his paddle, and, standing in the bows of the canoe, levelled a huge gun that had once been the property of an elephant hunter.

Knowing that the charge might contain slugs, old nails, and a miscellaneous assortment of scrap iron, Reeves, who had no particular antipathy to a respectable bullet, ducked behind the transom of the boat, the lads having already taken refuge on the bottom boards.

With a resounding crash the elephant gun went off. Reeves instantly sprang to his feet to return the compliment, but the negro was no longer visible. His antiquated weapon had burst, sending him—a mangled corpse—into the river.

In the confusion the fugitives managed to gain a hundred yards; but the pursuers were not to be shaken off by an accident that is a common occurrence where "trade guns" are in general use. On and on they came, until within throwing distance, when a flight of spears was hurled with great precision, five or six being left quivering in the boat.

Reeves's reply was a charge of duck shot that put one canoe out of action. The others immediately diverged, and, forming into two lines, attempted to overtake the fugitives' boat on both quarters.

Hugh fired with successful results, while Gerald, handing a loaded musket to the correspondent, proceeded to recharge the first weapon.

But in spite of the initial success of the encounter the odds were greatly against the white men. With modern weapons the result would have been quickly decided, but the time taken up in reloading the flintlocks gave the blacks an advantage. They were closing again, and spears began to flash over the boat, or to sink deeply into her planking. Reeves realized that the time had come for desperate measures. Grasping his pistol, he fired seven shots in rapid succession into the crowd that manned the nearest canoe. The strange sight of a man literally pouring out a hail of bullets filled the negroes, with terror. Those who escaped the shots leapt overboard and swam for the nearest craft.

Again raising his weapon, the correspondent pointed it menacingly at the nearest "dug-out" on the other side. The effect was magical, for those who could swim jumped overboard, while those who could not cowered into the bottom of the canoe. The other canoes maintained a respectful distance, but had no intention of relinquishing the pursuit.

So far, good, Reeves thought; but what would happen when night fell?

"What's that?" exclaimed Gerald, as in a momentary lull in the shouts of the natives a distant *pop, pop, pop*, was borne to their ears.

Hugh and the correspondent listened intently for a few moments. The sound, whatever it might be, was coming nearer and nearer.

Suddenly Reeves raised a musket and fired into the air. Beyond a bend in the river the report of an answering shot reverberated between the tree-lined banks, while the rapid pulsation of an engine grew louder and louder.

The negroes heard the sounds too, and seized by panic they turned about and paddled upstream for dear life.

"We're safe, lads!" exclaimed Reeves, in a broken voice. "Look!"

Sweeping round the bend came a large white motor boat, covered from stem to stern with canvas awnings, while standing about a quick-firer in her bows were five or six blacks, dressed in a kind of zouave uniform—blue coats, red waistcoats, and baggy white trousers.

Almost before the three travellers could realize the turn things had taken, the launch was alongside, with the motor reversed to check her way. Under the canopy were two bronzed and bearded white men, dressed in soiled and creased white drill uniforms.

"Any damage?" asked one of the officers. "No? Good! Have a cigar. Come far?"

These questions, seemingly so commonplace after the trials and difficulties they had undergone, almost took the lads' breath away; but Reeves, knowing that the imperturbability of the Englishman abroad is generally a mask to conceal the emotions he is ashamed of betraying, merely accepted the proffered weed with a laconic "Thanks!"

The smoke—after his vain hankering for tobacco for months—raised him to the seventh heaven of delight.

"Come aboard; we'll tow you down to Nali," continued the officer. "My name's Jones, by the by. What's yours?"

"Reeves."

"Not the war correspondent!"

"What's left of him."

"By Jove, that's strange! Only the other day we had a batch of papers through, and I remember there was nearly a column devoted to your obituary."

"Very kind of the Press, I'm sure. Did they say what happened to me?"

"Only that an Italian airman saw the bodies of you and your two young companions lying in the desert, or in an oasis, rather. He dropped a bomb in the midst of the Arabs, and returned with the news. But how on earth did you manage to get here?"

It was a long story, and by the time that Reeves had finished his narrative the motor launch had reached the frontier post of Nali, seven hundred miles from the Gold Coast. Here good use was made of the telegraph, and by noon on the following day the *London Intelligence* came out with double-led headlines, announcing the safe arrival of their missing correspondent and the two lads, whose disappearance had been the subject of much anxiety and speculation; while the news of the discovery of Croixilia aroused so much enthusiasm that long before Reeves reached the coast he received nearly a dozen tempting offers for his services as a lecturer in the principal towns of the United Kingdom.

* * * * *

Three weeks later Mr. Reeves—the "mister" had been dropped when beyond the pale of civilization—and his two charges again set foot in their native land.

Gerald was met by his parents and taken north, but the correspondent accompanied Hugh to his home at Shoreham, where the meeting between the lad and his parents can better be imagined than described.

"Our deepest thanks are due to you, Reeves," remarked Mr. Frazer, when the two men found themselves alone. "Now it's all over, one can look more calmly upon the situation; and I cannot help noticing that Hugh has changed considerably."

"In appearance?"

"And in manners. Hugh was undoubtedly a selfish lad, but now he seems to realize that there are others in the world besides himself. This experience has been the making of him. Having to go without luxuries, for instance, though discomfiting at the time, makes one doubly appreciate them when——"

"When you return home," concluded Reeves, contentedly replenishing his pipe.

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