

The background of the cover is a watercolor-style illustration. A bright yellow beam of light descends from the top left, passing through an open book. The beam continues down to illuminate a globe of the Earth, which is partially obscured by white, fluffy clouds. The sky is painted in soft, blended colors of pink, purple, and blue. The title 'SWORD AGAINST ALL NATIONS' is written in large, bold, red, sans-serif capital letters, slanted upwards from left to right across the top right portion of the cover.

SWORD AGAINST ALL NATIONS

From his mouth
comes a sharp
two edged sword

with which to
smite the nations
Rev. 19. 15

A. O. Hudson

Albert Owen Hudson, 1899-2000



*Editor of the Bible Study Monthly
1935-1995 and author of many books...
He had a scholarly approach to Bible
study particularly Old Testament
history and prophecy concerning
God's Kingdom and the practical
outworking of God's purpose*

Published by the Bible Fellowship Union

SWORD AGAINST ALL NATIONS

A. O. HUDSON

We thank Marjorie Hudson for loaning us the original manuscript and for permission to publish it. It is now returned to her safe keeping.

Welling 1947.

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FOREWARD

In 1942 Albert Hudson wrote a series of articles entitled 'Jacob's Trouble' that appeared as a booklet later that year. There have been two editions and a reprint resulting in many thousands of copies being dispatched across the world. As expected when first published it has aroused a lot of interest as to how the kingdoms of this world will some day become the kingdoms of our God.

Albert was very interested in how Scriptures could be worked out in practical ways. He experimented with various media for preaching the Gospel and in the war years he wrote what has been called an apocalyptic novel entitled 'Sword Against All Nations', he carefully typed out the story and bound it in a very presentable manner. It was submitted to a Christian publisher but rejected, probably because its theology offered an opportunity for the unsaved to live again and be converted.

The book was put away and saw the light of day only once in half a century. Then in the year 2000 when Albert's huge collection of writings and notes were being sorted, the 'novel' came to light. Several well-wishers read it through and felt it should be published. It was believed that many who enjoyed Albert's ministry in print would like to have a copy.

Why wasn't it published earlier? In the immediate post-war years there were no resources for such a project. For 25 years Albert Hudson and his small band of helpers worked very hard to raise the circulation of the Bible Study Monthly from a few hundred to two thousand. Meanwhile the content of the novel became very much out of date. Albert always updated articles and booklets when they were reprinted. There were very great changes in that half of the century. Mechanical technology changed to a rapid advance in electronics (AOH was a brilliant electrical engineer) and international politics saw the ending of the Cold War. To update this novel would have meant that much of it would need rewriting. We shall not know, here, how Albert might have re-interpreted his story of Jacob's Trouble. It is published now as written except for several very minor changes. Albert's was a 'cockney

sense of humor' and he had rather a 'dig' at the socio-political stances of east and west as they were prior to the second world.

This book is a suggestion as to how God's kingdom will confront the nations of the world and how the principles of peace and righteousness will overcome the evil powers of selfishness and violence.

May God's blessing rest upon the project. May His kingdom soon come when "at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow, in heaven and on earth....and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father"

Chapter 1 THE CHAIRMAN MEETS HIS MATCH

"The man's a fool!" The Chairman glared round his circle of directors as if challenging contradiction. No one spoke.

"He's taken leave of his senses. Can't think what's come over him. Fully qualified man -- best negotiator we've got -- all the resources of United Citrus Fruits Syndicate behind him, sent out with full powers to buy the whole Palestine orange crop so that we can close the last gap in our scheme, and now calmly writes to say that it can't be done because some petty local Government official won't sell. Won't sell, forsooth! What's money for? What's the Foreign Office for? What does he think we've mortgaged ourselves up to the hilt to corner the citrus market for? To play oranges and lemons round the Board Room table, I suppose -- " He choked violently and was silent.

Colonel Redvers Collins, M.C., D.S.O., 'cleared his throat noisily. The gallant soldier, having served his country with some distinction in the days when Sir Herbert Plumpton was still at Eton, was by common consent accepted as being the right man to handle the Chairman in the latter's more difficult moments. He assumed his best air of combined deference and bluffness.

"Why not speak to him yourself, Sir Herbert?" he suggested. The Chairman regarded him moodily, and motioned the Secretary. "Get me Tel-Aviv" he ordered.

The Secretary picked up the audiovisor and dialed a number. He pushed the instrument to Sir Herbert and the latter waited for the visual pilot to light up. A head and shoulders appeared on the screen and he opened his mouth to speak, and as quickly shut it again upon perceiving that the features confronting him were not those of the man whom he had expected to see.

"Who -- who are you?" he stammered. "I want United Citrus. Where is Jevons?"

The man on the screen regarded him calmly for a moment. The Chairman gazed back, fascinated in spite of himself, feeling most oddly like a small boy caught out in some petty misdemeanor. The broad forehead and strong mouth betokened an individual of unusual attainments, and Sir Herbert, for all his irritation, felt singularly reluctant to display his usual overbearing manner. He watched the firm lips move slightly as a quiet, incisive voice sounded from the instrument.

"Your Tel-Aviv office has been closed down by my orders. Your audiovisor link has been connected to my office. Your Mr. Jevons has been expelled from the country and is on his way home."

"Office -- closed? Jevons -- gone?"

The other inclined his head slightly.

"Even so."

"But this is an outrage." The Chairman found his voice suddenly. "Do you hear, sir? -- an outrage." He half rose from his chair and thumped the table. "A law-abiding firm, of world-wide repute, to be treated in this abominable fashion; it's disgraceful. I won't stand it; do you hear, I won't stand it? I'll appeal to the Foreign Office. I'll -- I'll --" He panted for breath and sat down, his face purple.

The Secretary reached for the audiovisor and, twisting it toward himself, looked into the screen.

"May we enquire the reason for this somewhat high-handed action, Mr. -- er -- ?" he asked suavely.

The clear eyes looked straight at him.

"You have endeavored to purchase our entire orange crop for this year in order to force up prices to your own advantage. The production of food within the territories of the Royal Nation is to meet human need and not for the making of illegitimate private profit. You have abused

your privilege of trade with our nationals and we have withdrawn the privilege. We will not tolerate business dealings of your kind in the Holy Land. That is all."

There was silence in the room for a moment, and then the Secretary spoke again.

"You will realize, of course, that a serious view of this matter is likely to be taken in high quarters, and that a possibility exists of pressure being put upon you to reconsider your decision?"

"Nevertheless your Tel-Aviv office will remain closed and you will not do business with the Holy Land any more."

The Chairman snatched the instrument back.

"Look here, we will increase the offer Jevons made you by twenty five per cent!"

The other continued his level scrutiny.

"Fifty per cent, then, and that's my last word." "We are not interested."
"Don't you want the money?"

"We have other plans for the crop."

"May I ask" -- the Chairman weighted his voice with heavy sarcasm --
"how much money you expect your 'other plans' to bring in?"

"We do not plan to sell. We are going to give our crop away."
"WHAT?"

"The Western nations sadly need citrus fruit. The troubled times through which they have been passing press very heavily upon the masses of the people. The majority are unable to obtain the bare necessities of life. We have fruit. We have ships. We plan therefore to send our fruit overseas and distribute supplies freely where they are most needed."

"B -- but, man, you can't do that! You'll upset the basis of the whole economic system!"

A suspicion of a smile flickered across the countenance of the man on the screen.

"That might not be altogether a bad thing!"

The Chairman pushed the audiovisor across the table impatiently. "We don't seem to speak the same language. You talk to him, Villiers. I can't get sense out of him."

Young, athletic, and hard-headed, Hugh Villiers took the instrument and looked into the screen. His habitual cynical expression suddenly faded, and when he spoke it was with a note of respect in his voice that made his fellow-directors look across at him in some surprise.

"Our Secretary omitted to enquire your name, sir" he said. "Do you mind telling us?"

The calm eyes looked back at him.

"My name is Joseph. I am known to history as a son of Jacob and a one-time Chief Minister of Egypt. Since my resurrection from the dead and entry into office as a Prince of the Royal Nation I have assumed responsibility for the production, conservation and distribution of all food grown within the boundaries of the Holy Land. It is in the exercise of this authority that I have refused to ratify your proposals. It is useless for you to argue the matter. Our national affairs are conducted along lines of reverence for God and love for neighbor, and your plans and schemes have nothing in common with either."

The Chairman shuffled his papers uneasily.

"That's what Jevons said in his letter -- some balderdash about men like gods coming back from the dead and instituting a rule of righteousness under which all men were to live as brothers. Never heard anything

like it in my life -- bah!" He snorted with indignation. "Don't do that, Villiers", for Villiers had twisted the audiovisor so that the screen was facing the Chairman and Joseph's accusing eyes looking straight into his own. He got up and went across to the window, staring down into the street below.

The Secretary's voice broke the stillness. "There is only one course open to us, Mr. -- er -- Joseph" he said. "We shall be compelled to complain to the Foreign Office and have the matter taken up at the highest diplomatic levels. You will have to learn that a newly-constituted third-rate nation such as your own cannot flout with impunity the basic principles upon which world civilization is built and around which the policies of the western world are framed. In plunging into this foolishly precipitate course of action you have quite failed to take into account the very close harmony of outlook and unity of action which subsists, and rightly subsists, between the commercial and political leaders of the great bloc of nations to which we have the honor to belong and in whose counsels we play a not inconsiderable part. There is such a weapon in the armory of great Powers, you know, as economic blockade, and if you find that in your rash endeavors to effect an impracticable Utopian idealism for yourselves you have incurred the just displeasure of nations much more versed than you in the art of human government you will have only yourselves to thank. Don't do that, Villiers" for Villiers had turned the audiovisor again so that the Secretary was brought face to face with the man to whom he had been speaking. He broke off, somewhat disconcerted.

Joseph's voice commanded attention. "Your threats move us no more than do your bribes. We know that the challenge we have offered to your corrupt and collapsing system, built as it is upon deceit and injustice, fraud and oppression, is one that you will not dare to ignore. We know that you will employ every means within your power to crush our national polity and destroy our ideals. We have taken our stand and we are ready to take the consequences. Proceed, then, with your economic blockade and starve our people -- if you can. Invade us with your armies and your air fleets and annihilate our homeland -- if you are able. We shall not meet you with your own weapons; we shall not lift up arms in our own defense. We have placed our trust in God

and we have faith that He will defend us, just as He defended our forefathers in the days of Sennacherib and of Jehoshaphat. Consider your plans, then, ye merchant princes; and they shall not stand. Take counsel together, ye kings of the earth; it shall come to naught. A new era is at hand, a world order of love and righteousness, of justice and peace, and strive as you may, and as you surely will, against it, you will not prevail."

The pilot light went out suddenly and Joseph's features faded from the screen. The conversation was over.

The Chairman came back from his window. "Rubbish and tomfoolery" he declared. "The man ought to be a preacher, not a Government official."

The Secretary drew slow figures on his blotting pad. The Directors looked uneasily one at another -- all except Hugh Villiers. He sat, with his head in his hands.

"What's the matter, Villiers?" demanded the Chairman sharply. "Have you seen a ghost?"

"I think I have," came the rather surprising response.

"Pull yourself together, man. What do you mean?"

Hugh Villiers looked up. He spoke slowly. "My grandfather died twenty-five years ago. He was a great student of the Bible. I took little notice of his fancies, but he used to tell me of a coming day when evil was to be ended by the introduction of a new kind of universal king. Strangely enough, he always connected the inception of this queer all-righteous world with Palestine. 'Remember, my boy' the old man used to say, 'when you see, installed in Palestine, men who in appearance, personality and intellectual acumen are infinitely superior to any men whom you have ever known; when those men emerge as princes of a nation which begins to order its life after the principles of truth and justice and fair dealing, dedicated to the service of God and trusting in God for national defense; when those men are accepted in that land as

the old patriarchs and heroes of Israel returned from the grave, heed what they say, for they will be the leaders of the new world order which is to abolish sin and bring in everlasting righteousness."

"Well?" queried Sir Herbert testily.

Villiers looked at the audiovisor reflectively. "Today -- I have seen -- such a man; God help me." He buried his face in his hands again.

The Chairman got to his feet. "You're mad -- like Jevons. I adjourn the meeting, gentlemen. I'm going across to the Foreign Office. I won't stand it."

They heard him stamping noisily along the corridor. A wrathful voice floated up from the stairs.

"Rule of righteousness! -- All men brothers! -- Bah!"

Chapter 2 THE CHALLENGE IS TAKEN UP

"Stop that noise, Pop, and c'm'n listen. This is hot news!"

General "Ike" Hoskins lowered his violin and looked aggrievedly at his daughter.

"Say, honey, am I as bad as all that; and in front of our guests'n all?" he enquired plaintively.

Sadie looked up from the television, dark eyes twinkling mischievously. "Nope, Pop, not really. But this is important. They're putting Woodford on to give us the low-down on the Middle East situation."

"Then why the heck didn't you say so at first?" demanded the General. "You know that I've gotta keep up-to-date with that line of business." He looked round toward his two guests, sprawling at ease in their armchairs. "You buddies all right for this?" he asked, receiving in reply two affirmative nods. He pulled up another armchair and sat down next to Momma, comfort -- ably knitting but alive to all that was going on.

"There, that's got it" announced Sadie. She left the TV and crossed over to perch herself on the arm of the chair which was occupied by the younger of the guests. "We're going to convert you, Fred" she said lightly to its occupant. "You sure are going to hear things tonight!"

Fred Parker looked up at the pert face above his own. There was an under -- current of seriousness in his voice. "Maybe I shall convert you instead, Sadie" he replied. "There's more in this than you realize, you know."

"Now don't you get all religious, young man" came the hearty tones of his fellow-guest from the depths of the opposite armchair. "There's only one way of dealing with this business -- lead and cold steel. If only I were twenty years younger I would be in it like a shot."

"There you are, Fred" said the girl. "You hear what Colonel Collins says. He ought to know!"

"Even Colonel Collins will have to admit that there are some things proof against lead and cold steel, or any other weapons of man's devising" came the reply. "He will "

"Now don't you two men get arguing" interrupted Momma placidly. "It's far too hot."

"As a matter of fact, Redvers, old pard" broke in Pop, anxious to divert the subject, "I was saying to a buddy --." He stopped abruptly as the voice of the announcer came upon the air.

"We ask your attention at this minute to an important announcement that is to be broadcast to the nation by Secretary of State Wilson Woodford who will explain the Foreign Department's reaction to recent developments in the Middle East and the Government's decision with respect to action. We have joined every radio station from coast to coast on the hook-up, and we ask you to give your careful attention to the Secretary of State right now. Ladies and gentlemen, Mr. Wilson Woodford."

Pop leaned across to his guests in a confidential manner. "Good man, Woodford" he whispered. "You've got no one like him your side of the water."

"S -- sh" whispered Sadie, as a smooth, passionless voice commanded attention. She swung round on the chair arm to listen.

"It becomes my duty to speak about a serious threat to those principles which are held dear by the nations comprising the Southern Confederacy of Free Peoples. You all know that there has grown up within the past two decades a system of administration in the Middle East that has gradually usurped the functions of legitimate government over the territory between the Suez Canal and the Euphrates. You are all aware that this vast area, formerly largely desert, is now inhabited by a people which has been drawn from every part of the earth, men

and women who have by dint of strenuous endeavor built for themselves a productive and highly organized homeland. I have but to mention the Euphrates Canal, by means of which ocean liners can now travel as it were overland from the Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf; the Lake Urfa Irrigation System; the Tadmor Wheat Belt; the Sinai Forest; the Lebanon Vine Country, to name but a few examples of the marvelous achievements they have effected in recent years. And you would think, would you not, that a people so industrious and intelligent would be only too anxious to share the fruits of their labors with nations less fortunately placed. You would assume -- and be justified in assuming -- that such a favored country would throw open its gates to the normal processes of trade, that you yourselves, upon whom the unavoidable distresses of the times have borne so heavily, might enjoy at least a moiety of the fruits and produce of that favored land. You who are farmers, you could very reasonably expect to acquire some of the superb specimens of farming stock, of flocks and herds, that roam in their thousands over those smiling grasslands, wherewith to vitalize the degenerate strains which are all that are left to us in these difficult days. You commercial men, upon whose business acumen and foresight the prosperity of the nation depends, you could surely anticipate promising opportunities of agreements respecting the oil of Idumea, the mineral wealth of Southern Sinai, the glassware and pottery ware, the superb textile and fabrics, unequalled anywhere in the world of North Syria, the vast harvests of agricultural products which that fertile soil brings forth every year. You would all expect these people to share their good fortune with you, I say, and you would all be wrong. I repeat that; you would be wrong. For this people is not as are other peoples. It is a people arrogant, haughty and selfish. They esteem themselves as better than other men, a race apart, especially chosen by the God they worship for the reception of all that life has to offer, that they might live to the full though all the world do without and starve." A note of restrained indignation crept as it were unbidden into the speaker's voice. "They would have ordinary men and women starve, mark you, rather than break down the wall they have erected between themselves and the remainder of humankind. And to we who are statesmen, upon whom the care of the widow and orphan depends, upon us devolves the duty, a stern, heart-searing duty it may be and must be at times such as these, of taking action to

redress the balance and enforce the establishment of that justice and fair dealing which Nature herself demands must subsist between those that have and those that have not."

Mr. Woodford paused. The television screen showed him reaching for a glass of water on the table before him. Pop chuckled.

"Good old Wilson" he said. "Trust him to put it over just right."

The Secretary of State extracted a white handkerchief from his breast pocket, flicked an imaginary speck of dust from an immaculate sleeve, carefully replaced the handkerchief, and faced his audience again.

"Some of you will be saying at this moment 'Woodford is distorting the facts. Do we not know that this self-styled 'Royal Nation' has engaged in a world-wide free distribution of foodstuffs and other commodities to necessitous nations? Do not their ships ply the high seas, taking the surplus of their harvests, the products of their textile factories, to peoples whose own lands are sterile, whose own industries have broken down? Are there not cases where small nations, bankrupt themselves and unable to produce their own necessities, would through inability to pay for imports have literally starved to death had not the Royal Nation come to their rescue with free gifts of food and materials and machinery? Does Woodford know all this?'" The speaker made a gesture of contempt. "Yes, my friends, Woodford does know all this. And he also knows, what so many of you fail to perceive, the motive that lies behind this apparent altruism. You will notice, if you please, that I use the word 'apparent'. I use it advisedly. I will not worry you with a discourse on economics. I will give you one -- just one -- example of the practical effect of this free gift system which is espoused by so many of our own apostles of social reform as constituting the one and only solution to the world's troubles.

"Bit long-winded, this Johnny -- what?" remarked Colonel.

"Good man though -- " began Pop. He was silenced by a "s -- sh" from Sadie. The speaker resumed.

"I refer to the modern State of Western Antarctica. You will all recall the establishment of this State a decade ago, when over a space of three or four years some half million people were induced to emigrate to that inhospitable land by one of our big mining corporations under promise of well-paid jobs and a prosperous life. The difficulty of working the mineral deposits existing under the ice proved to be so great that the corporation eventually ceased operations, and being under no legal obligation to transport the emigrants to the various lands from which they had come, left them to their own devices. Under the spur of necessity, these people began to develop a large-scale canning industry, and appealed to us for extensive assistance in food and supplies to tide them over the first few years. Our commercial magnates investigated the matter and made them a sound business proposition which, while admittedly obligating them to a very low standard of living and intensely hard work, did at least put their national economy on a sound business footing and assured them of a permanent market for their products. We felt that these people, living as they did adjacent to the rich fishing grounds of the Antarctic, could make a very useful contribution to our national food supplies at very little cost to ourselves. They protested at the terms of the agreement, but, as we pointed out, business is business, and they could either accept the terms as they stood, or starve. There is little doubt that they would have accepted had not this 'Royal Nation' stepped in and undertaken to supply them with such foods, textiles and materials as they could not produce for themselves, free of all cost, for a term of three years. By the end of that period Western Antarctica had attained a standard of living almost equal to that obtaining in our own country, and any possibility of our obtaining advantageous trading agreements was gone." Wilson Woodford paused, dramatically, one forefinger pointing in an admonitory fashion. "When you open your tin of canned herring this evening, remember that if this self-righteous nation in the Middle East had not interfered with our legitimate trading enterprises you would now have been getting that fish at next-to-nothing prices. That, my friends, is the outcome of this system of free gifts for the needy. And that, my friends, is why the Government, acting in your interests, has decided to bring this wild experiment to an end and compel these misguided people to conform their national policies to the general world system. We shall not be severe with them; we desire

nothing but to live on terms of peace and amity with all; but we shall certainly demand that the individuals they have chosen for their leaders, these flagrant imposters who claim to have been raised from the dead, who have assumed the names of legendary figures of long ago, shall be publicly discredited and removed from office. We shall require an administration that will work in concert with our own and we shall expect extremely favorable trade concessions and agreements."

"How shall we effect our intention? We are, of course, a civilized community; we shall not apply military measures against this people. We propose to wage an economic war against them. We shall blockade their coasts, arrest their ships on the high seas, intercept their trade routes, and endeavor, by all legitimate peaceful means, to bring them to their senses. At the same time I must admit that notwithstanding our reluctance to the adoption of more severe measures, we have been compelled to frame our plans in concert with an active military invasion which is being planned by the Federation of Northern Republics. As you well know, our Northern allies have not the same repugnance to military action as have we, and they propose an investment of the territory in question on its northern and eastern sides. Their object is the same as ours; we must not quarrel with them if their methods differ, but congratulate each other upon this added assurance of the speedy accomplishment of our joint intention."

"One word more. There are individuals from the nations comprising the Southern Confederacy who do not share the Government's reluctance for military action. It would be manifestly unfair to deprive these enthusiasts of the opportunity to make characteristic contribution to the cause we all have at heart. An international force, to be known as the Southern Army of Liberation, has been formed and whilst the Government accepts no responsibility for the conduct of this force it will at least take no measures calculated to hinder its operations. I understand that the Southern Army of Liberation, working in unison with the Federation of Northern Republics, will take up its position on the south-western frontier of the so-called 'Holy Land'. With the whole world thus arrayed against that land, there can be little doubt that unconditional capitulation will be a matter merely of days, and with

that capitulation a social experiment fraught with grave danger to every established civilized institution will come to an end. I thank you for your attention.'

"Well now, did you ever hear the like?" commented Sadie, gently ruffling Fred's hair with her fingers. "To think that those people should do all that to us.

"Lead and cold steel; that's what they want" grumbled the Colonel. "Eh, Ike, what do you say?"

"I guess you're right, partner" boomed the General. "We're setting one or two surprises ready for 'em, anyway." Fred Parker raised his eyebrows in polite enquiry, and the host turned to his daughter. "See here, Sadie" he continued, "does this young man friend of yours know just how I figure in this outfit?"

"Well -- no. I guess I hadn't told him" admitted Sadie a trifle sheepishly. "That's just too bad. I suppose you kinda figured he might not be so keen on your Pop being Commander-in-Chief of the Army of Liberation?" "No -- is that so, sir?" asked Fred, looking up in surprise.

"Yep, sirree. I've got special leave of absence from the Regular Army for three months whilst I indulge in this little adventure, and then, back into harness again. Are you going to join me -- I could find a job for an active fellow like you?"

Fred was silent, watching Sadie's trim foot swinging nervously to and fro. Sadie was silent too, looking down from her perch at her friend's grave face.

"Say 'yes' and go, my lad" encouraged Colonel Collins. "If only I were twenty years younger -- "

"So you said before, Colonel" interrupted Sadie tartly, her voice on edge. Momma looked up. "Don't lose your temper, Sadie" she said quietly.

Fred cut in quickly to retrieve the situation. "No, sir" he replied. "I shall not accept your offer. You are on a losing side, you know."

The General removed his cigar and leaned forward. "Losing side" he echoed, astonished. "What do you mean, lad?"

"I mean" said Fred deliberately "that these people are relying upon God for their defense and that he will not fail them. The Bible -- "

"Good heavens, young man, you are not going to quote the Bible to us" cried the Colonel. "That went right out a century ago." He leaned back and laughed heartily.

Fred flushed red, but held his ground doggedly.

"You will find, Colonel, that this very conflict is foretold in the Bible; it is the occasion of Divine intervention for the ending of sin and evil. You are not fighting against men, you are fighting against God, and your attempt will be in vain. Far better would it be for you to stand clear of it all."

Colonel Collins leaned forward. "Listen, boy" he said. "That crowd cost me the loss of a cool fifty thousand in a business venture that would have paid me handsomely had it come off -- and I was not the only one either. I intend getting my own back on 'em, and the man who pays them out for me in lead and cold steel gets my support."

Sadie slid off the chair abruptly. "Let's go walking, Fred" she invited. "there's questions I want to ask you."

The General looked after the pair as they disappeared together through the doorway. "I guess I'm not too easy about Sadie getting interested in that fellow" he grumbled. "He's putting ideas into her head."

Redvers Collins grunted contentedly. "Don't worry, Ike. A few weeks on and all his theories will go up in smoke and your Sadie be her own sweet self again. Now look here, there's a young friend of mine back

home has the same grudge against this lot that I have. He wants some active service. Can you fit him in?"

Pop lit another cigar. "Does he mind going to Egypt?"

"Hugh Villiers will go anywhere."

"All right. I'll fix him with the invasion army under Gonzalez. He'll get all he wants with him."

Chapter 3 HOSTILITIES BEGIN

The steady drone of the engines filled the interior of the plane with pulsating sound, upon which the voices of the two men in the bomb-aiming cabin, superimposed, made but little impression. As they talked they could see the dark head of Fernandez clearly outlined against the window of the pilot's compartment, moving slightly now and then as he manipulated his controls, and beside him the red hair of Ginger, the most daring navigator of the squadron. An ill-assorted pair, these, but comrades together in many a tense situation, and by common consent well fitted to lead the squadron in this, the opening attack upon the Royal Nation.

"A great adventure, this, is it not, my friend?" observed Antonio, idly looking through the window at his side. "See, there is the blockade fleet. How proudly the ships ride at anchor. How certain it is that none of the enemy can escape!"

His companion joined him at the window. The plane forged its way through a sea of blue -- the clear sapphire of heaven above and around, a vast vault in which the squadron appeared to be suspended, motionless; a deeper blue below where the glasslike waters of the Mediterranean rose up on all sides, bowl-like, to meet the circle of the sky. On the eastern edge of that bowl, directly ahead of the planes, emerged a line of black specks, warships drawn up in array, grim in their purpose of cutting off all communication between the Holy Land and the world outside.

"It seems incredibly foolish to me, Antonio" he replied as they stood side by side, gazing, "that we should be equipped with such out-of-date planes and ships. This ancient craft" and he tapped the window frame contemptuously "was built for slow-speed local passenger traffic at least thirty years ago. Those battleships" he indicated the nearing fleet by a finger on the window "were built when atomic energy was in its infancy and do not possess one single modern weapon among them -- not even a rocket -- thrower. It seems fantastic to me that we should be sent out to start a war with such obsolete equipment."

Antonio half turned and watched the steady flight of the following planes before replying. All manned by excellent crews, they kept their distance with precision, and the illusion of absolute steadiness in a frame of blue was complete. He half smiled, a slow, crooked smile, and turned back, facing the other.

"Ah, but you do not understand, my friend" he said. "This is no ordinary war. These people have no army and no navy, no air fleets, no modern weapons, no -- what do you call it -- effective defense against us at all. And it is not desired that we desolate and destroy this beautiful land, only that we occupy and take all its beautiful things for ourselves. And because our modern weapons are so completely destructive, it is decreed by those who give us our orders that we shall have old-fashioned weapons that cannot do much damage but will amply sufficient be -- oh yes, amply sufficient -- for the achievement of our purpose."

"Antonio" came the voice of Fernandez from the communication speaker "what is it that makes you so certain the enemy have no weapons?"

"But, of course, Fernandez, my friend, it is known that the people of this sunshine land have renounced the use of force and trust in their God to deliver them from danger."

"I do not believe it. In my native Mexico a man who believes in God is thought to be a very foolish man, and there are not many such. I cannot imagine a whole nation that believes in God. Such ideas belong to many centuries ago -- but in this enlightened day -- never. Shall I tell you what I think?"

"Please do, Fernandez."

"Then I shall so do. I think that these people have developed some very secret weapon which gives them confidence, something very unlike any that we have heard of before, and that in this confidence they await our attack."

Antonio, his eyes fixed on the sea below, pondered for a few minutes. The plane continued its steady progress, the iron hands of Fernandez on the controls rippling and flexing ever so slightly as he operated the mechanism in obedience to the murmured instructions of his navigator beside him. The battleships were plainly discernible in details now. A thin line of land appeared on the forward horizon.

"But, Fernandez" said Antonio at last "if that is the case, is it not exceedingly unwise that we should be sent out with such ancient planes?"

"Not a bit of it" cut in Ginger, joining in the conversation for the first time. "This is part of the scheme for checkmating any secret weapons they may have. If they have in fact devised any such thing, it will be on the assumption that we would attack with atomic powered planes at fifty thousand feet. So we come in obsolete planes at one thousand feet, upset all their calculations, do what we want to do and get away safely."

There was a sudden sideways jar on the framework of the plane. The machine rocked a little and the horizon tilted as she banked slightly. Fernandez busied himself with his levers and shot a quick glance at the instruments. Ginger looked round.

"What was that, Fernandez?"

"A south wind coming off the African coast. It does get very hot as it traverses the Nile valley and sweeps northward at a high velocity. We did catch the front wave. What is our elevation?"

"Twelve hundred feet."

"So I did think. it has forced us up a bit. It is an erratic wind. It is a pity that it has sprung up just now."

"It won't affect our course, though."

Fernandez flashed one of his rare smiles at his friend. "We are too near the objective of our flight to fail, Ginger. The only force that might disturb us would be the Levanter, and the sky is too clear, it is the wrong time of year, and we are too near the coast, for that."

Antonio's voice came over the communication speaker. "What is the Levanter, Fernandez?"

"It is an intensely cold north-easterly storm wind that blows down over the sea from the Lebanon mountains at certain times of the year, if it happens to coincide with the hot African wind that has just hit us it produces a raging typhoon that may last for many days. Only at this end of the Mediterranean can it happen."

"I did read" said Antonio reflectively "in the book that is called the Bible of a man called Jonah who was in a ship in this very spot where now we are, which was caught in such a typhoon and all but wrecked, and when the sailors had thrown Jonah overboard the storm ceased and the sea was calm."

"Then if the Levanter strikes us, Antonio" said Fernandez gravely, with a sly wink at Ginger "we shall throw you overboard and all shall be well with us. Now stop talking and connect me to the squadron. I have something that I would say to them."

Antonio, slightly aggrieved, turned a switch and sat down, holding to the sides of his seat. The plane was still rocking slightly and Fernandez busied himself with his controls, a little frown of displeasure creasing his forehead. He prided himself on his steady flying.

"One thousand feet; fleet, five miles; land, twelve miles" said Ginger mechanically. Fernandez nodded in acknowledgement. The low, flat coast of Palestine was plainly discernible, and the rolling highlands of Judea rising in the background. To the left the sheer promontory of Mount Carmel rose up into the air, and behind it, in the distant haze, the sugar-loaf form of Mount Tabor could be dimly discerned. Glints of reflected sunlight dead ahead indicated the beautiful city of Tel-Aviv.

"Listen to me, all of you" commanded Fernandez suddenly. "You have already had your briefings in detail. I repeat to you the main points that there be no misunderstanding. And there must be no failure; you understand that. We are approaching the enemy coast. You will remember that destruction is to be confined absolutely to the stated objectives. In no other place is damage of any kind to be done. After we have passed the fleet, division three of the squadron will fly direct to Tel-Aviv, and destroy the city utterly. Your bomb load is adequate for this task. You will then fly at roof-top level and machine-gun the people until your ammunition is exhausted. You have your instructions how to do this in such a fashion that repairs may be easily executed when our forces have occupied the land. The effect of your operation must be to make the Canal only temporarily unusable. Division one, under my leadership, will destroy the harbor and port of Haifa.

"I give you one personal word of warning. It is not anticipated that there will be any kind of defense against our attack. All the same, be on the lookout for signs of hitherto unknown forms of defensive weapons. Do not allow yourselves to be taken by surprise. Adios, and good luck."

The blockade fleet was now right below the squadron. Ginger murmured a word, Fernandez executed a quick movement, and the plane, banking steeply, turned northward. As she did so Ginger touched his pilot's arm and pointed forward, eyes registering a question.

Fernandez looked in the direction indicated, and his brows narrowed. High above the snow-capped peaks of Lebanon, blotting out the deep blue of the sunlit sky, a huge black cloud was rising menacingly. In its fantastic wind-swept shape it looked like a huge monster rearing up to spring upon its prey. Even as the two observers watched, the cloud enlarged and began to overspread the mountains until it stretched as far as the eye could see. The dazzling white of the high peaks became shrouded in mist and the vivid green of the valleys enveloped in dark shadow. The drone of the engines changed to a deeper note and the plane shuddered as though apprehensive of what was to come.

"It is the Levanter" shouted Fernandez in answer to Ginger's unspoken question. "Never have I known it at this time of the year. We shall be able just to get to Haifa and do our work, and then we must turn and run before the wind back to our base." He barked a curt order over his communicator and each plane's engines roared a response as speed was increased to the uttermost limit.

"I do not like this" said Antonio suddenly. He was watching the fierce heavy mass rolling like a sable curtain outspread before them and threatening to engulf them in its folds. Along its crest strange formations appeared, almost like chariots and horsemen advancing to battle, captains galloping along the line to give commands to their men. Like a mighty army advancing, the black clouds rolled on, overspreading the sky and blotting out the sunlight. Inside the plane it was dusk, like evening, and Ginger switched on the lights above his instrument board. Glancing hastily backward, he could just see through the murky gloom the outline of the following planes, still faithfully keeping their positions in the formation.

A squall of sudden rain struck the aircraft. The sounds of its beating on the sides of the fuselage and tattooing on the wings was as the staccato of machine-gun fire. In a moment the plane wag enshrouded in a sea of grey, and visibility was reduced to nil. Ginger switched on the forward radar. The screen lighted up and showed the coast on the right and the fleet well away to the left. Almost dead forward lay the quays and warehouses, the great docks and oil refineries, of the port of Haifa. He switched on the rearward radar and watched the remaining planes following, not with such precision as formerly but still relentless in their purpose.

A voice, intense with urgency, spoke suddenly from the communicator. "Number seven -- my radar has failed and I am flying blind! Give flying instructions." Ginger looked quickly into the radar and saw the blinded plane lurching erratically from side to side. He spoke with vehemence; "keep steady you fool, keep steady", but even as he spoke saw it plunge and crash into its neighbor. Antonio swung round in alarm as the cabin was filled with a blinding radiance,

illuminating the driving rain outside and showing up the mountains in sharp relief. There came an ear-splitting explosion as the colliding planes' bomb loads blew up with terrific force. Fernandez fought to keep his plane under control as she pitched and tossed; there came another flash and another explosion as a third plane, hit by flying wreckage, followed its companions down to the sea below, and then the calm voice of Fernandez sounding through the communicator: the division will reform and continue its flight to Haifa".

The beat of the rain ceased and the gray curtain outside gave place to a semi-darkness which dimly revealed the sea below and the driving clouds above. Haifa, not many miles away, was brilliantly illuminated - the main roads and the long quays could be clearly discerned. Fernandez' face was set and grim. "They know that we come" he muttered to Ginger "and see how they scorn us. More sure am I than ever that they have some new defensive weapon upon which they do rely."

An eerie, long drawn- out moan, low-pitched at first, then rising to a scream, filled the air and vibrated through the machine. "What's that?" asked Ginger in sudden alarm. Fernandez did not reply. He was gripping hard at his levers. face pale and set. Antonio half rose from his seat, loosening his grasp on the sides as he did so, and next moment found himself in a heap at the end of the machine, his companion on top of him. Ginger, peering forward into the darkness, had just time to see the cloud-wracked sky swing over his head as the plane appeared to collide violently with some celestial barrier and mount, with a hideous jar, almost vertically into the heavens. He picked himself up from the confused heap into which he had fallen with his companions and began to climb, with difficulty, back to his place, the plane pitching and tossing violently the while. Halfway along he was thrown with force against the window through which Antonio had been gazing only a few minutes previously, and, clinging tight and panting with his face against the opening, drew back instinctively as a dark shape flashed by with a roar. He had to bring his benumbed mind to heel before he could realize what it was, another plane, hopelessly out of control, racing down to its doom. He staggered backward as a downward dive of his own machine brought him slithering along the

gangway to his seat. The gale outside stormed and raged as he clung tight and painfully forced his way into his accustomed position.

"Where are we?" yelled Fernandez above the growing tumult which was making ordinary speech impossible.

Ginger made an attempt to get his bearings. The plane, staggering and shuddering, nullified his attempts to read the radar. The needles of his instruments oscillated to and fro and for some while he did not reply.

"What is the matter?" queried Fernandez impatiently.

"I cannot read them -- you must keep her steady" shouted Ginger in response.

"I do the best I can -- this wind, it is ten times worse than anything I have ever known."

"We seem to be further away from the coast." "I am not surprised. This wind, it is forcing us backwards."

"You are right. I can see the blockade fleet in the radar. We are nearly over then again. We shall never make Haifa at this rate."

"Shall we ever make base again?" moaned Antonio from the rear. He was white and shaking.

Fernandez looked round. "Antonio, you are --" The sentence was never finished. There came a dull thud and it seemed as though a mighty giant had grasped the plane, lifted her out of her course, and was urging her onward at terrific speed. Ginger looked up; the clouds in the heavens were whirling around the circumference of a huge circle at frightful velocity. The few planes still in the air were being dragged in their wake like helpless captives of some giant celestial roundabout. Fernandez sat grimly at his post, fighting to keep his craft on an even keel. He shouted to Antonio "Communicator!"

Antonio crawled to the switch and pressed it. Fernandez raised his voice in a well-nigh hopeless endeavor to make it heard above the fury of the storm.

"Attention all machines. We are in the circle of the tempest, and traveling around the edge of the cyclone. Planes will break formation and work their way toward the center. You will find calm air there. We will ride the storm, reform, and continue our flight to Haifa."

Ginger had been staring in one direction for several seconds. "Fernandez" he said at last "there's a patch of blue sky over there."

Fernandez looked. "That is our immediate goal. With care we shall get to it."

The sun shone brilliantly through the tremendous hole in the storm clouds, which raced round as though striving to break in. A few ragged edges of white cloud showed on the brink of the circle. The darkness beyond was thick and black but within that circle all was quiet. And not more than five hundred feet below them, in the centre of the circle, the flagship of the blockade fleet lay at anchor, shining in that brief patch of sunlight.

"We are low, Ginger, more low than we should be. I will climb up now into this bright sky."

The conflict of the elements around them was lessening. The storm still raged with unabated fury, but the plane had reached the calmness of the center. Fernandez tilted his machine and commenced climbing into the daylight.

A small, black speck, dropping with incredible swiftness toward the upward laboring plane, shooting forward unhesitatingly as though with settled intent. growing larger every moment . . .

"I knew it" shrieked Fernandez. "It is the secret weapon. What is it, Ginger, what is it?" He pulled at his controls in sudden panic, his

habitual self-command completely deserting him. The sweat stood out in big drops on his brow.

The plane stalled, lurched, gave a sideways plunge, and tipped her nose downward. While her pilot desperately wrought she dived, heading straight for the flagship. The officer on the bridge saw the peril; he barked harsh, hurried words of command into his speaking tube. Agile figures hurried over the decks to positions of duty. It was to no avail. The airplane came down from the heavens like an express train, crashed into the ship's superstructure, and with a shattering roar blew into fragments. Another explosion followed as the ship's magazine responded, tearing a gaping hole in the side of the vessel, a hole into which the sea rushed with a noise like thunder. The ship quivered and listed, slowly sinking at one end; as men hurried to lower boats she slid quietly into the green depths.

And the black eagle that, storm-swept from the coast, had swooped down upon Fernandez' plane as upon a haven of refuge, denied the resting-place it had sought, folded its flight -- weary wings and sank down to float, lifeless, upon the heaving waters.

Chapter 4 EVIL FROM THE NORTH

The air was drowsy with the hum of insects. The afternoon heat lay like a heavy blanket over mountain and valley. Away in the woods it was cool, but up here on the bare hillside the sun beat down fiercely, and rendered more inviting than ever the silver coolness of Lake Ufra, stretched out far below like a gleaming crescent, curving between the gaunt peaks until its sinuous course was lost to sight in the far northwest.

Nicolas Siderov stopped writing, laid down his pen, and looked up. From his little table, set in the open air in front of the lines of tents, he watched a solitary eagle flap its way lazily across the valley below. He lost the creature to sight against the dark background of the pine trees on the opposite mountainside, and his gaze rested instead upon the shining masonry of the great dam at the head of the lake, the barrier which, thrown across the river a decade ago, had created this vast sheet of water, two hundred and thirty miles long and in some places as much as ten broad. This project it was that had made the Euphrates Canal a practical possibility, given to Syria and the Northern Desert its much needed water and electric power, and made the great Wheat Belt one of the agricultural wonders of the world. His eye surveyed the curving roadway which traversed the crest of the dam, and the pink and white limestone control towers from which the giant water gates were operated. He saw the still blue of the water in the two intake pools and the straight lines of the aqueducts leading to the power stations many miles downstream. From his exalted position they resembled two narrow ribbons flanking the white patch of foam, at this elevation appearing to be absolutely motionless, but which he knew to be the swirling Niagara of the River Euphrates, escaping from its prison in this Turkish lake and hasting to its more placid flow through the Syrian plains and onward through many hundreds of miles of fertile country, eventually to lose itself in the tropic seas.

The Field-Marshal smiled grimly. He was recalling the parting words of Vladimir Stansilav, Chief Marshal of the Federation of Northern Republics, at the time he had set out on his mission.

"Nicolas Siderov", he had said, "I have entrusted to you the responsibility for striking the first blow at this upstart nation. It will be the decisive blow. You have never failed in any mission that you have undertaken. You will not fail now. Go, and carry out your instructions." He had gone out exulting from the Chief Marshall's presence, for the honor of executing this commission had been coveted by more than one Field-Marshal. and he, Nicolas Siderov, was by no means the senior among them. And now he had his opportunity. By a series of swift, decisive moves he had put himself into a position where at one touch of a button he could bring irretrievable ruin upon a people whom he hated -- bitterly because they worshipped God, and he, with all his heart and soul, supported a system of thought which had no use for God. He looked at his watch, stood up, turned, and made his way into the little hut behind him.

The three officers sprang to attention as he entered. He returned their salutes perfunctorily and picked up some papers that were lying on the table. "Any news?" he asked abruptly.

"Syrian field headquarters wishes to speak to you, Field-Marshall" returned one of the officers.

"Get them" barked Siderov to the orderly in the corner. The soldier manipulated the knobs and dials, and passed the audiovisor to his superior. A uniformed figure appeared on the screen.

"You want me?" queried the Field-Marshall.

A hard, motionless voice answered him from the instrument.

"The first detachment of invasion tanks went by at twelve o'clock. Divisions are passing strictly according to plan. The entire force will have left the mountain roads within another ten minutes. All Euphrates bridges in the plain area are held securely and heavily guarded. The plan to cross the river simultaneously at all points will be carried through without a hitch. There is no sign of opposition on the part of the local population -- it seems that today is the occasion of

some local festival and all the inhabitants of the lowlands have repaired to the district of El Sinjar for their celebrations."

The Field-Marshal laughed mirthlessly. "A pity. I would have liked to have drowned them all: the flood will not reach the level of El Sinjar. But they will be effectively marooned there. At any rate, our object will have been achieved." His tone changed abruptly. "Have you made it clear to every divisional commander that any tank which is not in the hill country by six o'clock will not be in a position to participate in the triumphal entry?"

"They all understood that."

"Good. I do not mind losing men; I do not mind losing equipment -- much. But I have told the Chief Marshal that I can complete this operation without the loss of a single man -- and I require of you that my

promise be kept."

"I understand Field-Marshal "came the submissive answer. "We are carrying out your instructions to the letter."

"Good -- anything else?"

"One thing. The plan for the destruction of the Canal Entrance and the port of Haifa by the Southern Army of Liberation, yesterday, was not carried out."

"Why not?"

"The attacking squadron ran into a storm eight miles off the coast and crashed on the blockade fleet. All the planes were lost and over half the ships sunk. Those that remained afloat were so badly buffeted by the storm that the blockade has been temporarily called off and the ships have sailed for their base to be repaired and re-fitted."

The Field-Marshal was sarcastic. "Have the Southern Powers never flown planes in a storm before?"

"This was no ordinary storm."

"That is the bungler's excuse. The Southern Powers should have provided in their plans for storms, ordinary or extraordinary. There can be no excuses for failure; you understand me, Lieutenant, no excuse for failure."

"No, of course not, Field-Marshal" came the submissive reply.

"Very well then. You will remember that, as you carry out your part of our plan. It is a pity that our allies have blundered and that the Canal Entrance is still intact, but I will devise an operation that will succeed in what they have failed to accomplish and entrust you, Lieutenant, with its execution. You will not fail."

"Er -- yes, Field-Marshal."

"One word more, Lieutenant. Is your advance headquarters located as instructed?"

"With precision, Field-Marshal; fifty feet above the calculated level of flood waters."

"And your observation post?"

"One hundred miles south of here, at the head of the lower Euphrates valley. They will report the successful passing of the flood waters to me and I shall pass the information to you."

"Are both posts unobserved by the enemy?"

"So far as we know, both posts are undetected and we have not been subject to any interference."

"Good. I do not wish to hear your voice again until I hear it telling me that our work is completed."

Siderov slammed the instrument down and turned to his officers. "Have the calculations been checked and re-checked?"

"Checked and re-checked in accordance with your instructions, Field-Marshal."

"Do you find any error or cause for question as to their infallibility?"
"None whatever, Field-Marshal."

"Give me the details again, then."

The senior officer pulled his chair up to the table and turned over several papers covered with figures.

"The invasion force is to be completely clear of the Syrian plain by six. It is required that in order completely to paralyze the enemy's transport and communication system from the moment that the invasion starts the North Syria power stations shall be out of action by six also. With the lake at its present level the destruction of the dam will release three hundred and fifty million tons of water down the valley, and upon taking all known factors into consideration we find that it will be three hours later that the head of the flood will reach the power station at Jerablus, flooding them to a depth of twenty feet and enforcing their shutdown. Half an hour later the power stations at Beth Barah will suffer similarly. By six o'clock, four hours after the destruction of the dam, the flood will have reached the Syrian foothills and vary in depth from twenty to fifty feet over the entire plain. The highest level of the water should be reached at about eight o'clock, after which it should begin to subside as it finds its outlet through the Euphrates channel. We estimate that it will take six to seven weeks for the plain to drain completely. The power stations will not be greatly damaged but it will require a great deal of slave labour to rebuild the dam in order to get them into commission again."

"The slave labour will be forthcoming" observed Nicolas Siderov grimly. "We shall have to do something with the existing population when we put our own people into the land."

Captain Ivansson looked at his watch. "It is one o'clock" he remarked. "We have exactly one hour to wait."

Siderov motioned the three officers. "Come with me" he ordered. All three rose and followed him into the open air. He paced slowly up the hillside to a small eminence where three technicians were busy around an arrangement of batteries and wires. From a pole near by, two more wires ran, suspended from other poles, straight down the mountain toward the distant dam. At each pole, as far as eye could see, a guard of four armed soldiers was posted. There was no other human being in sight.

The three engineers straightened themselves and saluted as the Field-Marshal approached. He strode up and examined the installation closely, standing back then to obtain a clear view of the dam below. "Is all in order?" he asked.

"All is in order, Field-Marshal" replied the senior of the three. "At the time appointed you have but to press this button, and the dam will be destroyed within twenty seconds."

"What precautions have you taken against failure to operate when required and accidental operation before it is required?" asked Siderov brusquely.

"We have chosen a closed circuit system on two physical wires, Field-Marshal" came the ready reply. "A radio control is liable to be neutralized by the enemy should they hit on the wave-length; an open circuit is liable to refuse operation at the critical moment by reason of bad contact or the introduction of high resistance on the line; the breaking of a closed circuit is simple and cannot fail to be effective at the required moment."

"And suppose something happens to break your circuit before the due time -- some interfering tribesman cutting the wires in order to pilfer them, for example?" returned Siderov.

The engineer looked hesitantly at Captain Ivansson. The Captain turned to his superior.

"I have men stationed at each pole, within sight of each other, for the whole length of the route" he said. "In addition I have a chain of men posted at four hundred yards distance on either side of the line, and a strong force immediately available should trouble threaten at any point. As a final precaution, I have a televiewer operator constantly scanning the line from end to end. It is impossible for anything to happen to the wires."

Siderov nodded approvingly. "You have done well. It remains now for us to wait this last hour, and then -- prff --" he snapped his fingers. "I shall give myself the pleasure of capturing this so-called Holy Land by the flick of one finger -- so."

As he spoke the apparatus behind him jarred and rattled. He swung round instantly.

"What was that?" he demanded.

"An earth tremor, Field-Marshal" explained the engineer, feeling over his wires and terminals. "They are common in these mountains."

Another tremor came, vibrating the ground under their feet. A shower of small stones rattled down the slope and came to rest on a projecting terrace just below the camp.

The engineer looked up dubiously. "We'd better look out for flying boulders" he said. "I've seen men killed by them before now." Even as he spoke a third tremor, more distinct than the others, rocked the ground under their feet. Another shower of stones slid past the group, and far up the mountainside a cloud of dust showed where some loose pieces of rock were commencing a meteoric descent into the valley

below. On they came, leaping and bounding from point to point, sometimes coming to rest but more often gathering increasing force and momentum in their headlong descent. Now and again a piece, flying through mid-air, would chip a bough or cluster of twigs from a tree, continuing its course whilst the sprig of foliage fluttered helplessly to the ground. It was one such rock, larger than its fellows, that struck a young pine tree squarely on the trunk, two feet from its base. The tree snapped with a loud crack, heeled over, swayed a little as if uncertain which way to take, and then crashed across the two control wires fifty feet away from the watching men.

Nicolas Siderov heard a frantic cry behind him; "Stefan -- the wires". He was conscious that the three engineers had realized the significance of the happening and sprung as one man to rush toward the menacing tree, but he knew also that their efforts could be of no avail, for even as the cry sounded in his ears his keen eyes had seen the slender strands part and sag helplessly to the ground under the impact of the tree and he knew that nothing could save the dam. His gaze traveled swiftly to that wall of masonry in the valley, and for what seemed an eternity, although he knew that in reality it could only be a few seconds, he waited to see the result of the calamity that had come upon his scheme.

Black lines zig-zagged down the shining wall. The structure seemed to quiver as if trembling with apprehension, and then with a thunderous roar a dense cloud of dust and debris ascended high into the sky, completely obscuring the dam and all its outlying buildings. The pall hung in the air for a few seconds; when it began to subside the watchers glimpsed an angry white patch beneath its murk, and as the finer dust drifted away down the valley, borne like a cloud on the soft wind, they saw that the centre of the dam had disappeared. Through the breach rushed a raging torrent, whipped up to white foam, pouring over all obstacles and already flooding the narrow valley as far as the eye could reach.

Nicolas Siderov was running hard to the communications hut. The orderly was at the door, staring with frightened eyes at the desolation wrought in the valley. "Advance headquarters, quick" shouted the Field-Marshal as he approached. The orderly disappeared

immediately, and as his superior entered the hut was holding up the audiovisor with the Lieutenant's enquiring face already visible upon it.

"An accident has happened and the dam has been destroyed before its time" panted the Field-Marshal. "The lake is emptying itself down the valley now. Where is the tank force?"

Sudden alarm showed itself in the Lieutenant's face. "They will be engaged in the Euphrates crossing. They cannot escape from the plain in time. They will be caught like rats in a trap."

"Cannot you radio them instructions to make for high ground?"

"There is no high ground in all the plain. Did you not tell me yourself that according to your calculations no part would have less than twenty feet of water?"

Siderov flung down the instrument and rushed outside, as though hoping that by some miracle the water would have ceased flowing. The torrent still surged through the great gap and the valley was a sea of tumbling waves. Captain Ivansson stepped up to him.

"Field-Marshal, is it not possible to reach the trapped crews by plane?"

The Field-Marshal faced him somberly. "How many planes would it take, and how long, to evacuate forty thousand men? And what of the four thousand tanks, the pick of our equipment? I would rather lose the men than the tanks."

The Captain flushed, but stood his ground.

"Nevertheless we must do something, Field-Marshal."

Siderov turned round and rushed back into the hut. The Lieutenant could still be seen on the screen, waiting.

"What planes have you at advance Headquarters?"

"We have no planes here, Field-Marshall. It was not anticipated that the need existed."

The agitated man flung down the instrument and left the hut. At a signal the sergeant of the guard stepped up, stood to attention, and saluted smartly.

"Give the air crew orders to have my private plane ready in ten minutes for a long flight."

The man saluted again and strode away. Siderov turned to Ivansson. "How long will it take for the planes to reach the scene from our nearest airfield?"

The Captain considered. "Our nearest troop-carrying planes are at Trebizond. It means a hazardous flight over rough country. Six hours at the least, Field-Marshall."

"By which time they will be of no use." He walked again to the edge of the terrace and stood angrily watching the pouring maelstrom of water below. He was still standing there when the sergeant of the guard approached him, clicked his heels smartly, and saluted.

"The plane is ready, Field-Marshal."

Without a word, he turned and walked across to the leveled grass patch where the machine was standing. His three officers followed him mechanically. The propellers were already turning slowly and the pilot was in his cabin. Siderov turned as he was about to climb into the plane.

"You, Ivansson, will come with me" he said. "The others will remain here until we return."

The plane ran forward smoothly and took off. The two officers on the ground watched it turn, wheel away from the mountain-side, circle low over the ruined dam as if inspecting the damage, and then rise high as it took its course down the valley in the wake of the rushing

flood waters. They exchanged glances and commenced to walk back to their hut.

Despite the magnitude of the disaster, Captain Ivansson found himself surveying the changing landscape with intense interest. The plane was traversing a broad valley flanked on both sides with rugged mountains piled one on top of another until the snow-capped peaks of the highest stabbed into the clear blue sky. The lower slopes were thickly forested, serried ranks of magnificent pines and firs alternating with masses of green oaks. Lower down in the shrubberies he could see the vivid colors of the rhododendron thickets for which this country was famous. Here and there between the trees, half-way up the slopes, he glimpsed the shining water in the two aqueducts which ran to the power stations farther down. The broad channels were now visibly emptying with the failure of the supply from the lake and he could visualize the consternation that must be reigning in those great stations and the chaos existing in the commercial area of the Holy Land as the mighty turbines ceased to revolve, the electricity supply failed, and all the massive machinery employed to operate the Canal locks used by the ships of the Royal Nation came to a standstill. Down on the level lands in the bed of the valley, where normally the River Euphrates carried the excess water from the lake into the fertile fields of Mesopotamia, he saw a raging flood, never less than half a mile wide, carrying trees and bushes on its surface, tumbling and leaping in its tumultuous passage to the plain. And his mind sobered as he thought of the vast array of ruthless men there who had set out with determined purpose to harry and ravage a peaceable people, secure in the belief that their way was being made safe for them by the stoppage of all enemy means of transport. He thought of their inevitable destruction by means of that very monster which they had planned to let loose and which had now so prematurely escaped its bounds.

The plane flew on steadily, studiously following the winding course of the valley, dropping continually lower and lower to the level of the plain. From time to time the pilot ascended to pass over some low-lying jutting hill around which the defile made its way; Ivansson noted with interest how the aqueducts in such cases tunneled right through the hills, hundreds of feet below the ground, and he was conscious of a

grudging admiration for the industrious people that had conceived and carried through this vast engineering project. At other times the plane swooped low to pass between sheer precipices of naked rock where the flood, pent up, boiled and foamed furiously as it sluiced its way through to less restricted channels. And then, suddenly, the mountains opened out, and fell away on either side, giving place to low, gently rounded foothills, and the aircraft emerged into the North Syria plain.

Nicolas Siderov leaned forward and shot a quick word of command to the pilot. As if in response, the plane began to climb steeply in wide spirals, and with each successive circle Ivansson could command a progressively wider view of this celebrated plain about which he had heard so much. From the valley out of which they had just emerged the river meandered away to the left, joining, in the far distance, the wide ship canal from the Mediterranean on his right, a canal which met the river, turned southward, and was lost in the distant haze. The white buildings of the four giant power stations were clearly discernable, shining in the bright sunlight, and around them the network of roads and electric railways which served this industrial area of the Holy Land. Immediately below him a gigantic silver fan, spreading outwards from the foot of the valley, showed where the flood waters were already submerging the plain. He drew his binoculars from their case and focused them upon the river. Crowded on both sides of each of its many bridges he discerned hundreds of tanks, mingled together in inextricable confusion. The news of the premature demolition of the dam had apparently been radioed to them from advance headquarters and it was plain to see that all orders and discipline had been thrown to the winds in the desperate effort to escape. Tanks jammed the roads; tanks were discernable in the fields endeavoring to take short cuts; and all the time that inexorable silver fan was slowly enlarging itself and swallowing up more and more of those frantically moving black dots. Away on the distant horizon lay the Syrian mountains, the haven of safety which those tanks would never reach. Ivansson handed his binoculars to his Field-Marshal. Nicolas took them without a word and gazed long and silently at the melee spread out below. Abruptly he handed them back and said curtly, "There is no hope!"

"There is no hope" agreed Ivansson wearily. "We may as well go back." In normal times, he thought bitterly, neither he nor any of his brother officers would have dared suggest such a thing to Nicolas Siderov. But these were not normal times. He was beginning to wonder what it all meant.

Absorbed in his thoughts, he must have failed to hear Siderov's order to the pilot, for he suddenly became conscious that the plane was flying northward again, heading for the mountains and the return home. It came to him suddenly that this was the first time he had ever known Nicolas Siderov to turn his back upon an enemy. He looked up in sudden alarm to find the eyes of his chief fixed upon him.

"Bjorn Ivansson" said Nicolas "of what are you thinking?"

Ivansson flushed but did not reply.

"I will tell you of what you are thinking" continued the remorseless voice. "It is that never before, in the course of a long series of campaigns together, have you and I turned our backs upon the enemy before he is defeated -- and, moreover, before we have even set eyes upon him!"

Ivansson looked over the flooded plain. "What does it mean? How could it have happened?" he heard himself asking.

The silence following his question was so prolonged that he looked up again at his companion's face. The look of perplexity in the Field-Marshal's eyes was one that the Captain had never seen before. He waited, fearing.

"I -- do not know" said Siderov at last. "Never before have my plans miscarried. Never before have I lost a battle. But never before has Nature herself conspired against me to rob me of my lawful gains." There was a note of fear in his voice. "That tree -- it was a million to one chance. Such a thing would not happen once in a thousand years -- and it must happen to me." His voice shook a little. "Yesterday, a storm destroyed the Southern air fleet and saved Haifa. Today -- this . . .

What is going to happen next? Ivansson, what is going to happen next?"

Chapter 5 THE MAN IN WHITE

"You have done exceedingly well, you may go!"

The sergeant saluted formally, turned on his heel, and left the tent, barely troubling to conceal the grin on his face as he did so. As the sound of his squad's retreating footsteps died away the occupants of the tent heard a burst of coarse laughter.

General Pedro Gonzalez smiled -- an ugly, repulsive smile, showing white teeth and thick lips under a heavy black moustache. He leaned back in his seat and allowed his heavy gaze to rest upon the forms of two girls who sat loosely knotted to the crudely improvised chairs in the corner.

"Yes, exceedingly well" he mused aloud. "If the land which we are shortly to occupy boasts many such women as you we shall immensely enjoy our conquest -- is it not so, Major Pierre?" he concluded, turning his head.

Pierre Arnot was idly turning the pages of a book. He looked up on being thus addressed. "But yes, my chief" he answered, "although it is to me also important that the wine of the land be at our disposal in sufficient quantities also."

"You are too fond of the wine, Pierre" observed Gonzalez. "It will one day be your undoing."

"That is only the case when the wine is bad" rejoined Pierre. "And they tell me that in this favored land the juice of the grape is food fit for the gods."

"Then we may even seduce Major Villiers from his rigid allegiance to his beloved whiskey" ruminated the General, lazily turning his head to the other side.

"Whiskey is the only thing fit to drink in this cursed climate" said Hugh Villiers shortly, without lifting his head from the writing upon which he was engaged.

"You are bad-tempered again, Hugh" murmured Gonzalaz gently. "Is there nothing we can do to restore your habitual serenity of mind? Or has our company become so distasteful to you that you would rather be away from us?"

Villiers swung round. "Forget it, Gonzalez" he said more affably. "It's this continued inaction getting on my nerves. We've sat here on the frontier a whole fortnight now with no apparent reason why we should not move forward and yet no word comes. The men are getting jittery and no wonder. How much longer are we to stay here?"

Gonzalez drew idle patterns on the papers before him. "Why the hurry, Villiers? For myself, I find Egypt very pleasant. The time will come when we must leave this camp and march at the head of our polyglot army, our desperadoes of all nations, into the land to possess it; but we are not going to run any needless risks. There have been disasters to those that have preceded us; you know that. And meanwhile let us enjoy the flowers that grow by the wayside." He lifted his heavy eyes to the two girls again. "Do you see, señoritas, the magic of your presence has converted that hard-bitten soldier, Pedro Gonzalez, into a poet." He roared with laughter at his own sally. "Pedro Gonzales, poet, upon only a few minutes acquaintance. What will your magic not have done to him after a longer sojourn under my humble roof?" He indicated the spread of the tent with an expressive movement of both hands.

The elder of the two girls -- the dark haired one -- spoke.

"Please let us go, General Gonzalez."

The General opened wide his eyes in feigned astonishment.

"But, my dear young señoritas, are you so tired of our company after so short an acquaintance? Will you not stay with us until we can give you more tangible evidence of the pleasure we have in your society?"

The girl looked at him straightly.

"Your men were guilty of a base action in seizing us as they did. In our own land you could not have touched us. We crossed the frontier to bring back to you one of your men we found injured in the woods. We had tended his injuries, perhaps saved his life, and brought him back to his own comrades without fear. We have done you no harm, only good. Why do you treat us thus?"

Gonzales was toying with his pencil again.

"You are prisoners of war, my dears -- our first prisoners of war -- and" Letting his eyes rest upon her finely molded features "very lovely captives at that. How foolish we would be to let you go. Moreover" his tone became suddenly harsh "we wish to learn from you something of the defense measures which your people are taking against us." His voice changed again, and was caressingly gentle. "And if you will tell me truthfully just wherein your defense lies, then I will release you both and give you safe conduct back to the frontier." He watched both his prisoners through narrowed eyelids.

The girl spoke slowly. "I will tell you, then, wherein lies our defense." Arnot stopped his idling and Villiers his writing, to look up and listen. The soft voice went on. "We trust absolutely and completely in the Lord our God, who is the Savior of those that believe. We have no weapons, no armaments, no means of meeting you in the way to which you are accustomed, and we would not use them if we could. We have challenged, not only your wicked economic system which has brought such untold misery to man, but your rule by force which also has brought misery to man, and we have followed the example of our fathers of old who cried unto the Lord in their trouble, and he heard, and delivered them out of their distresses."

Gonzalez had flushed darkly as he listened. Now he looked up.

"You mock me senorita. You do not expect me to believe this?"

"No, General, I do not expect you to believe it. Nevertheless it is true; and its truth you will discover is due time."

"What do you have to say to this, Major Arnot?"

Pierre smiled broadly.

"I think it is the most beautiful ideal, General, but of course, our little friend here is romancing. Belief in God -- ah, it is so charming and old fashioned; it speaks of the days when the world was young; but now" he threw his hands in an expressive gesture "for very old people and very young children, yes, but for men who have to face reality, why, no, no, no. We must accept the fact that there are wicked men in the world, General. like you and I" he chuckled heartily.

"And you, Major Villiers?" pursued the General.

Hugh spoke softly, his eyes averted.

"I have heard something about this before. I do not believe it. Sometimes I have wondered. I have my own reasons for joining in this -- enterprise, General Gonzalez, as you well know. When I did so I smothered my doubts. When I learned of the disasters at Haifa and Lake Urfa I wondered if there might be something in this idea of Divine deliverance after all. He seemed to be speaking to himself more than to the others. "But no -- how can there be? A nation has become obsessed with an idea; that is my belief; and a couple of coincidences have strengthened that idea; that is all." He jabbed his pencil on the paper savagely and broke the lead.

Gonzalez smiled again -- unpleasantly.

"Your logical mind, Villiers, is clear as ever, despite the colossal amount of whiskey you have consumed recently. It is clear, is it not, that we do these lovely senoritas a -- what do you call it? -- a good

turn, by holding them as captive guests at our pleasure instead of sending them back to a country obsessed with unwholesome ideas?"

The younger girl whitened suddenly. She struggled to turn her face towards her companion. "Miriam -- they are -- are they going to -- ?" Miriam's eyes were serene, her voice inexpressibly gentle.

"Courage, Tamar. The Lord our God, he will deliver us in His own time and way."

Gonzalez laughed maliciously. "He will have his work cut out to get past my soldiers. Do you not know that we have in this camp the toughest band of ruffian cut-throats that was ever gathered together as one army?"

Miriam looked at him. "We know it well. We were taken prisoner by them and compelled to endure their insults for three hours before you ordered us to be brought before you."

The General was on his feet instantly in mocking contrition.

"Senoritas, a thousand apologies for such dastardly treatment. We shall have a parade tomorrow morning, you shall pick out the men responsible and they shall be severely punished. You will like that, will you not?"

The grave eyes regarded him steadily.

"No, General, I do not blame the men so much. They do but follow the example of their leader. He is the greater ruffian."

Pedro's eyes flashed fire. His lips curled in an ugly snarl as he stepped in front of the fearless girl, with arm upraised to strike. Arnot and Villiers both sprang from their corners. Pierre laid a hand on the General's arm. "No, Gonzalez, one does not strike women!"

The General, breathing heavily, stepped back a pace, rather ashamedly recovering his self-control. "No, Pierre" he said, "one does not. But one

punishes them; is it not so?" He looked at the two girls and his ugly smile came again. "We shall enjoy the company of these lovely ladies, you, Arnot, and you, Villiers, and I myself. But there are three of us and only two of them. It was most remiss of my men not to capture a third also. How shall we divide the spoil?"

Villiers, head bent over his writing, said nothing. Pierre Arnot, his face flushed with excitement, spoke hurriedly.

"Shall we cast lots between the three of us, Pedro?"

The General frowned in displeasure, and Arnot hurriedly corrected himself. "Of course, General, perhaps the right thing would be to recognize your authority by offering you the first choice and allowing Villiers and I to cast lots for the other?"

Gonzalez smiled. "An excellent plan" he assented.

"You can leave me out of this" said Villiers shortly.

The General swung round, astonished.

"Why this sudden passion for righteousness, Major Villiers?"

"I'm making no claim to righteousness. I'm as big a blackguard as the rest of you -- nearly. But I said you can leave me out of this." He was still curt.

"Hugh, my boy" said the General conciliatorily "you are by no means yourself today. I tell you again, it is the whiskey -- too much of it. Do you not remember what it is that inspires your presence here with our gallant army?"

Hugh Villiers raised his head and looked his chief squarely in the face. "I came out here because some people swindled me out of fifty

thousand pounds and finished my commercial career for me, and I meant to get my own back on them, That is still my intention. I mean to

make them suffer tenfold and I mean to do what I can to help smash this Utopian idea of running the earth for human need with its insistence that every man shall share in the world's work for the common good. I've not had to work for my living yet and I don't intend to start now, while I have a flair for the financial transactions that will bring me in all the money I want. But I'm not here to wage war on innocent women and children. And although I've sunk pretty low, I still have some shreds of decency left in some directions."

"Thank you, Major Villiers" said Miriam softly.

He avoided her eyes. "Don't thank me; I'm not worth it. And I'm out to smash your nation."

General Gonzalez looked on amusedly. "We are deeply interested in your sermon, Sir Galahad" he observed sarcastically. "You have, of course, considerably eased the situation for our friend Arnot here. May we take it that despite your strong feelings in the matter you will not interfere with our own -- er -- amusement?"

"You can do as you like" replied Villier indifferently. "Only leave me out of it, that's all." He stood up and reached down a bottle and glass.

"Then all is settled amicably" said Gonzalez in high good humor. "Arnot, I choose the dark one. She reminds me of the beauties I left behind in my native Seville. In her society I shall forget the rigors of this hard campaign and imagine myself home again. And you may have the fair one."

He strode across the tent. The two girls faced him unflinchingly.

"Are you sure, Tamar?" asked the elder one.

"Quite, quite sure" replied the other. "I know that He will deliver -- how, I know not. But He will!"

There was a strange look of triumph in Miriam's eyes. "You hear, Pedro Gonzalez" she said as he halted in front of her. "You can have no power

at all against us except it is permitted of God; and in no wise will He permit you to harm us while we maintain our faith in Him."

"I shall be most interested, senorita" came the mocking reply "to see how your God will deliver you out of my hands. In the meantime permit me to test the matter -- so --" He bent towards her, podgy finger extended to touch her.

There was a sudden commotion at the door, and the sergeant tumbled, rather than walked, through. Gonzalez swung round angrily and rather shamefacedly at being caught at an undignified moment.

"What do you mean by coming in like that?" he thundered. "Did I not give command that under no circumstances are we to be interrupted this evening?"

The man pulled himself up and saluted clumsily. It was plain that he was terrified.

"Pardon, General. But this is urgent. The Commander-in-Chief has arrived."

"Commander-in-Chief? What Commander-in-Chief? Am not I Commander-in-Chief of this army? What nonsense is this?"

"No -- I mean yes, General. I mean -- it is the White Plane. It has landed in the middle of the camp." The man turned appealing eyes to Arnot as if for help.

"White Plane?" shouted Gonzalez furiously. "What are you driveling about? Have you gone mad? What is all this about a White Plane?"

"There's nothing to be concerned about, Gonzalez" said Villiers quietly from his corner. "One of the silly superstitions that are rife in the camp concern a white airplane which is said to fly over at times, approaching from the frontier and disappearing in the same direction. The gunners let fly at it every time it appears but although their shells envelope it completely in smoke they cannot hit it, from which the story has arisen

that it is a living plane endowed with immortality. No responsible officer has ever seen it; probably it's an optical illusion; we never counted it as of sufficient importance to report it to you."

Gonzalez' anger had abated. "You can go" he said to the sergeant. "But next time you come in here with any such ridiculous story you will be put in irons."

The man stood, irresolute.

"Yes, General" he said. "But -- the Commander-in-Chief. He is on his way to this tent."

Gonzalez lost his temper. "Get out" he roared, and made as if to strike his subordinate.

The tent doors parted and a tall figure stepped in.

Hugh Villiers, in his corner, caught his breath. Once before had he seen such a man. Tall, well proportioned, of magnificent physique, he made the other men in the tent appear like miserable caricatures of humanity by contrast. The eyes were piercing and commanding, set beneath rather bushy eyebrows, the mouth and chin unusually strong and resolute, the nose long and sensitive, the forehead high and intellectual. The whole impression was that of tremendous vitality and strength of will, a man born to be a leader of men. Villiers noted, somewhat wonderingly, the unusual uniform; a pure white loose tunic with long, loose sleeves, tucked comfortably into rather close fitting trousers, also white; and white sandals. Upon the left breast of the tunic there glittered a small six-pointed gold star; apart from the star there was no decoration or color of any kind. "The stranger's hair was dark, luxuriant and curly, and when he moved his hands the rippling muscles betrayed great physical strength.

General Gonzalez faced the intruder with astonishment. Twice he opened his mouth to speak and twice no words came. Inwardly he was a raging tempest but some inexplicable influence seemed to restrain his ability to give vent to his feelings. He became conscious of Pierre Arnot

and the offending sergeant watching him oddly. Somewhere behind him were Villiers and the two captive girls; he found himself wishing most strangely that something would happen, such as the unexpected collapse of the tent upon their heads, to resolve a situation which he found himself unable to fathom and quite incapable of handling. He, Pedro Gonzalez, accustomed to dominate men by sheer brute force of personality, never at a loss for a word to turn a situation to his advantage, found himself facing a man whose own personality was striking him dumb.

At last -- it seemed a century, as if time had been standing still -- he found his voice.

"Who are you? -- How did you get into the camp? -- What do you mean by entering my tent unannounced?" It was a weak, puny voice. Surely that was not his! It must have been Arnot speaking on his behalf -- yet he had had Arnot in his line of vision whilst the voice had been audible and he had not seen Arnot's lips move. Villiers, then. Somehow he knew that it could not be Villiers. Who then? Himself! It came to him as a shock that the weak, trembling voice he had heard had been his own. But that was not his voice. That was not the voice of Pedro Gonzalez. What had happened to him? What witchcraft had been perpetrated on him? Dim memories of the dark stories of his childhood in Seville began to trickle into his mind, of the demons that could draw a man's soul out of his nostrils and leave him a weak, shuddering echo of his former self, without will-power or vitality. He felt icy cold all over and his teeth began to chatter. The floor was trembling under him; or was it his knees refusing to bear the weight of his body? He was shaking as if with an ague. Had this man drawn the soul out of him? Impossible; there was no such thing as a soul. But perhaps this man was a demon; that could not be, for he was white, pure white, and demons were black; black as hell. Arnot and the sergeant were looking at him even more strangely now; he could see them only as through a misty haze, against which the face of the man in white stood out clearly and strongly. It was a long time ago that he had asked this man some questions. He had forgotten what they were now; it was so many years ago; no, it could not be, for the man's lips were moving in reply. It could only have been a few moments ago. What was the man saying?

He must hear the words; it was supremely important that he hear the words. What was he saying?.

Arnot, on the other side of the tent, and standing just behind the man in white, watched the changing expression on his General's face with growing horror. He had once seen a man go mad under the stress of great fear and as he watched he lived through that experience again. He, too, waited for the answer to Gonzalez' demand, and heard the quick, immediate response, spoken by the man in white in decisive, commanding tones.

"Release those girls."

Pedro Gonzalez turned a wondering, childish gaze upon the two captives, and smiled, a foolish, fatuous smile. "Our captives" he said. "Pretty flowers by the wayside. But we are three and they are two. So Villiers has renounced his claim. A noble fellow Villiers. Let me introduce my friend Villiers."

Like a thunder clap came the command.

"Obey!"

Pedro Gonzalez shambled across to the two girls and endeavored with fumbling hands to untie their bonds. In two paces Villiers was at his side, dexterously loosening the knots and freeing the captives of their restraining cords. His strong hands gently lifted them to their feet, and he stepped back to his corner, watching.

The man with the gold star turned to Gonzalez, slobbering in his chair. "Pedro Gonzalez" he said sternly "You have laid violent hands on the Lord's anointed, and the Lord has visited His judgment upon you. Your own black heart, and your own evil mind, and your many dark crimes, have broken your mental powers when confronted by a force that you do not understand; and now you will be capable of your wickedness no more." Ignoring the others, he turned to the girls. "Come" he said, and motioned them towards the door.

Villiers stepped forward, urged by an impulse he could not fathom. "Before you go" he said "tell me who you are."

The stranger turned and regarded him calmly. "I am Joshua, who was captain of the armies of Israel when at the first they entered this land. In those days I led those who conquered it with the sword. Today I direct those who defend it in the power of God, against which the sword shall not prevail." He turned abruptly and followed Miriam and Tamar out of the tent. The four men heard their footsteps dying away over the hard sand, and waited in silence. A minute passed, and then the sound of an airplane taking off. Arnot pulled aside the tent door and revealed the ghostly lines of tents outside. The moonlight showed the outline of a white airplane, speeding in the direction of the frontier. He let the curtain fall and looked, first at the General, vacant eyed in his chair, and then at the sergeant, still standing in the doorway.

"What is the meaning of it all, sir?" asked the sergeant, his features a study of perplexity.

Arnot looked at the General again. "God knows" he replied tremulously. Villiers was pouring himself a stiff drink. "You've just about spoken the truth there, Arnot" he observed.

The Major's nerves broke. "What the devil do you mean, Villiers?" Hugh surveyed his glass reflectively for a moment before draining it at a gulp. Deliberately he faced his colleague. "Only God does know."

Chapter 6 THE ARROW THAT FLIETH

"Phew; it is hot, here in the desert. Can there be any place hotter than Jebel Shuba on a summer night?"

Wu Chen smiled, slowly and crookedly. "It will be a great deal hotter, twenty minutes from now, in the fair city of Jerusalem. Is that not so, Jamil?"

The third occupant of the hut, busy with his handwheels and indicating instruments, did not reply. Major Chen lifted his slant eyes to the face of his brother officer.

"They sleep securely, now Rhiza" he said, "and they know not that it is the sleep from which there is no awaking. What a pity it is that we cannot penetrate their dreams to tell them so" and he smiled again.

"This little slingstone of ours will penetrate their dreams all right." It was Jamil's voice, from behind the range-finder. He was adjusting his knobs and levers, eyes fixed upon the swinging pointers of the range dials.

"May it end the campaign" breathed Rhiza Abdullah fervently. "I have had enough of it. I want to go back home and find a cool place under one of my olive trees."

"If it doesn't end the campaign it will end us" went on Jamil. "Stanislav makes no allowance for mistakes and he has no mercy for bunglers." Wu Chen's cold scrutiny was on the speaker.

"Then we shall check your range setting very carefully, Jamil, my young friend, for I too wish to depart for my home in peace and with some compensation for the hardships I have suffered in this arid desert."

Rhiza got to his feet and opened the hut door, revealing the starlit sky outside. "Have no fear, Wu" he murmured. "When our rocket has descended from the skies, meteor-like, upon Jerusalem, wiped out

those pestiferous princes to a man, leveled the city with the ground, and torn the vitals out of the Holy Land, you will be able to bask in unimagined luxury and take your fill of every indulgence for which your sinful heart has ever wished."

Wu was still smiling coldly. "Then if that is so, I have it in that same sinful heart to feel sorrow for the inhabitants of the land, for my indulgence will be comprehensive and unrestrained."

Jamil looked up from his work. "Major Chen" he said crisply "I have set the range. Will you please check it?"

The other dropped his cynical banter and walked round the end of the of the table to the mechanism. He stood, coldly efficient, taking in every detail of the intricate arrangement of controls. The needles of the range dials were now perfectly steady.

"Range, three hundred miles" he muttered to himself. "Maximum elevation, ninety-five miles. Direction nineteen degrees north of west. All quite correct, Jamil. Now let me see the televiewer."

His subordinate touched a switch and the screen lighted up, revealing the loveliness of Jerusalem by night. The pale moonlight gleamed on the white walls of the buildings, and the House of Prayer stood out on Mount Moriah, a palace of other-worldly beauty. The courses of the streets could be plainly traced by the lines of lights, and a myriad pin-points twinkled where windows shone forth their radiance. In the foreground, flanking the sides of the screen, loomed the dim shapes of two cypresses, lone guardians of the city's peace.

"Very, very beautiful" said Wu Chen slowly "but how much more beautiful when we sit here and watch that picture change before our eyes into a lake of fire, its leaping tentacles reaching up into the very sky as if to drag God down from his throne into its depths. Tonight, my friends, we shall witness the end of a city which has been besieged and captured twenty times and utterly obliterated twice in its long history of nearly five thousand years, and has risen again every time. But now there will be no rising again. This is the end." He snapped his

fingers and returned to his seat on the other end of the table. "Check it for yourself, Rhiza" he ordered curtly as he sat down.

The other officer made his way in turn to the machine and stood silently examining the controls. "For how long will the rocket travel, Jamil?" he asked.

"Five minutes exactly" replied the youth. "The clock dial on your right there will start to tick over at the moment I press the firing button, and when it touches the figure five, if you keep your eyes on the televiewer you will see the landing of the rocket."

The major continued his silent scrutiny. "Perfectly in order" he announced at length. "We have but to wait now for the time to fire." He returned to his seat and the two officers sat side by side with their eyes fixed upon the apparatus.

The audiovisor spoke, suddenly and distinctly. "Captain Jamil Yao" it said.

Jamil swung round on his swivel chair and leaned over the table behind him. Recognition flickered into his eyes as he saw the face looking out at him from the panel of the audiovisor. "Ha, Marco" he said "What is it that you want?"

The audiovisor spoke again. At what time does your firework go off, Jamil? We here at El Hejer have our televiewer trained on Jerusalem and we are waiting for the great sight."

"Not many minutes now, Marco. I will tell you when I am about to send it on its long journey. Now tell me, what is it like at El Hejer tonight?"

"It is hot, Jamil, and the sand of the desert is whirling in clouds outside. But we are comfortable in here, more comfortable than will be the people of Jerusalem presently -- and a malicious chuckle accompanied the words.

Jamil, bending close to the instrument with his back turned upon his firing apparatus, did not see the scorpion that emerged from beneath the table and began to climb towards the top. The officers, sitting on the other side with their vision obstructed by the machine itself did not see it either. Jamil continued his conversation with his friend and the scorpion attained its object. Major Abdullah turned to his companion.

"The decision to dispense with radio control of the rocket, is it wise, think you?" he asked.

Wu Chen folded his hands over his tunic and leaned back in his chair, eyes still fixed upon the range-finder.

"It is wise, my friend" he replied slowly. "We do not know just what devices these people have at their command and we cannot afford to risk the possible diversion of our projectile. Suppose, after it was in the air, it was diverted from its course and fell on one of our oilfields in the south? The prospect does not bear contemplation." He thought for a moment. "No, my friend, the decision to rely upon a gravity rocket is a wise one. Once in the air there is no power in earth or heaven that can change its course. Our range-finder here" and he indicated the machine "is of unquestioned accuracy. You and I, independently of each other, have checked that it is set correctly. Our camp is well guarded against surprise attack and we in this hut are quiet and undisturbed, and will be until our work is finished. Nothing" -- and he smiled evilly as he repeated the word -- "nothing can prevent the total obliteration of Jerusalem within a very few minutes from now."

The scorpion had climbed upon one of the range-finding wheels. Industriously seeking a foothold, it clung to the rim of the wheel and sought to draw itself over the top. The delicate wheel moved slightly under its weight and rotated a little on its spindle, dropping the scorpion back onto the table. Nothing daunted, it wriggled over and commenced to climb again.

"Two minutes to go, Jamil" warned Rhiza, eyes upon his watch. Jamil raised his hand in token of acknowledgment and continued his

conversation. The wheel had twisted again and once more dropped the scorpion, but the little creature persisted still.

"Did you ever read about the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, Wu?" asked Rhiza suddenly. His companion looked stolidly ahead. "I have never heard of these places" he said. "Where are they and what happened to them?"

"Where they stood matters not, for they are there no longer. As to what happened to them, you will get a tolerably good impression when you look into that televiewer presently. They were destroyed by fire from heaven." "Then Jerusalem shall be as Sodom and Gomorrah" observed Wu. "There is a scorpion on the floor at your feet, Jamil."

Foiled in its attempts to scale the machine, the intruder had fallen to the floor and was now making its way towards the wall. As it came into his line of vision, Jamil picked up a heavy ebony ruler and dealt it one swift blow. He kicked the still writhing body into a corner, and turned again to the audiovisor.

"Thirty seconds, Jamil" came the warning voice from behind. Jamil waved his hand again. "Marco" he said "I must leave you. Watch your televiewer and in five minutes you will see -- what you will see!" He swung round abruptly and fixed his gaze upon Wu Chen, one finger searching for the firing button, upon which it rested with gentle pressure.

The Oriental sat with eyes upon his companion's watch, his lips slowly framing a word. There was silence in the hut.

"Now!"

The word was barely a whisper.

Jamil's finger pressed hard. The ground rocked very slightly, there was a rush of wind, a muffled roar, and a series of short, sharp explosions; then silence. Rhiza got up, opened the door, and stood looking out into the night. An orderly came up and saluted.

"Rocket launched and all correct, sir" he reported.

"Good" said Rhiza. He closed the door and came back. "Now we can gather around the viewer in comfort -- good heavens, Jamil, what is the matter with you?"

Wu Chen swung round. Jamil stood upright before the range-finder, eyes starting out of his head, face white as a sheet. With one shaking finger he pointed to the dials.

"The -- the setting!" he stammered.

With one hand Rhiza was beside him. His face took on a look of incredulity. "But -- but it can't be" he exclaimed. "We both checked the dials, and watched them all the time."

Wu Chen pushed him aside and bent to examine the apparatus closely. "The direction has been altered by ninety degrees" he announced. "Jamil, Jamil, what have you done?"

"I -- nothing?" exclaimed the younger man. "You yourselves were watching all the time. I was out of reach of the machine while I talked with Marco --

"We were on the other side" interrupted Wu. "No one else was here. It could only have been you -- " He raised a face red with rage.

"No, Wu" said Rhiza quietly. "He could not have touched the machine from where he sat, it is a mystery that must be enquired into later. The range was correct when we examined it and Jamil has not touched it since."

He turned abruptly. "Jamil, where is that rocket going to fall?"

"In the desert somewhere, I suppose" replied Jamil despondently. "We shall be fortunate if Stanislav does not shoot us for this." He moved a

pointer over an illuminated map and made certain adjustments. "Good G -- "

"Wu Chen interrupted his exclamation. "What is it, Jamil, what is it?"

"That rocket is going to fall on El Hejer." He rocked slightly on his heels as he spoke.

Rhiza put out a hand to steady him. "In the middle of the oilfield. The whole area will be devastated. Jamil, are you sure?"

The other indicated the map with its pointing dial needles. "See for yourself." He turned wearily away and slumped down at the table, head buried in his hands.

They examined the apparatus, silently, unbelievably. "It cannot be so, and yet it is so" said Rhiza dazedly. "Wu, what have we done?"

Wu turned quickly to the audiovisor and dialled rapidly. The enquiring features of Marco appeared on the panel. Wu spoke quickly, without introduction or explanation.

"Get out of the town without delay, as many as you can. The rocket has been diverted and will fall on El Hejer. You have three minutes left. Hurry."

Consternation came to Marco's features. He disappeared at once and the panel showed only the background of his control room with its shining levers and illuminated dials. Wu turned round to the others. Jamil was still sitting, sprawled across the table. Rhiza was slowly and deliberately manipulating the televiewer apparatus. "What are you doing, Rhiza?" asked his superior irritably.

"I am getting El Hejer. We may as well watch the result of our bungling."

A murderous light gleamed in Wu Chen's eyes. He restrained himself with difficulty and moved over to Jamil, shaking him violently by the shoulders.

"Pull yourself together, Jamil. Tell me, is there nothing that can be done?"

The lad looked up hopelessly. "Nothing. Had it been radio directed we could have guided it. As it is, the brute is beyond our control. You made one mistake just now, Major Chen."

"You dare to say that to me? Explain yourself"

"You said that no power in earth or heaven could prevent the destruction of Jerusalem."

"Well?"

"You should have confined your certainty to the powers of earth."

"For that remark" said Wu Chen deliberately "you will be placed under close arrest as soon as I can summon the guard."

"I am likely to have two fellow-prisoners when Stanislav hears about this night's work" replied Jamil indifferently. He rose and pushed Rhiza away from the televiewer without ceremony. "Here, let me do that." With practiced touch he manipulated the knobs until the screen showed the derricks and buildings of a busy oilfield; the calm clear moon serenely looking down upon the feverish activity of men going about their various tasks; trains and wagons moving along long lines of railway, and in the foreground the enormous bulk of the pipeline which carried the oil eastward and then northward to the Northern Republics. There was no apparent disturbance in usual routine; no sign of panic or confusion; evidently, thought Jamil dully as he watched the scene, Marco had not found it possible to warn more than a few immediate associates before making off in what was assuredly a vain bid for safety. In any case there was not a chance; the rocket would devastate an area five miles across and the resulting holocaust would

almost certainly set in motion a chain of oil well fires which would not die out until the whole vast oilfield had been destroyed. He found himself wondering whether, after all, this was not a frightful dream from which he would presently awake, to find that the events of the past few hours had all been chimeras of his mind, and that in fact the fatal day for which they had been preparing so long had not yet dawned. But even as his mind raced, the cold voice of Wu Chen, harsh and ragged with fear, fell upon his ears and he knew that this was reality.

"How long, Jamil?"

"About thirty seconds" responded Jamil dully. Drawn by a common instinct, the three men gathered round the little screen, gazing fascinatedly at the busy picture, the twinkling lights and glowing fires, the moving shapes of men and engines, the gaunt derricks stabbing into the sky, the majestic slopes of the distant mountains, the calm quietness of the moon sailing steadily onward across the heavens, shedding her silver light over all below

A vivid, orange glare that blotted out the picture and caused each of the three men to jump backwards momentarily; an inky blackness standing out from the televiewer like a sable oblong of darkest night. Then a wreathing and twisting of red shapes, snakelike, darting things; and in a moment the picture was restored, outlined in living flame, each well a fountain of cascading fire that rose and fell, twisting and scintillating with terrifying brilliance. New spear points of red, springing up one after another, rapidly filling in the background, added lurid horror to the scene, until the whole plain, stretching back to the foothills of the distant mountains, was a vast lake of fire. The blazing wells threw up livid fountains that tipped and poured showers of meteor-like fragments into the maelstrom below. The thick black smoke rolled upwards into the skies and the moon veiled her fair face as if in mortal anguish.

"This is terrible, terrible" muttered Rhiza. "What will become of us?" He moved over to the audiovisor and as he did so it spoke suddenly. "Jebel Shuba wanted by Khaniyah" it said.

Rhiza pressed the button mechanically and a face appeared. "Major Abdullah" went on the voice "There is a tremendous conflagration in the El Hejer oilfield. Must have been struck by lightning. Seems as if the whole district is ablaze."

"I know. We did it."

"You -- what?"

"Our rocket went astray, and landed on El Hejer instead of Jerusalem."

"But -- but -- " The man at the other end was obviously speechless. While Rhiza regarded him grimly his face suddenly disappeared from the screen, as though he had been violently pulled away by someone. In a moment he was back again.

"Major Abdullah, we have got to evacuate this town immediately. It seems the fire has spread underground and the whole area is going up in flames. It is a fearful disaster; the field will be unworkable for years." He disappeared abruptly and Rhiza turned again to his colleagues. He saw the rage smoldering in the eyes of Wu and the stark horror in those of Jamil, and smiled cynically.

"And what do we do now, gentlemen?" he enquired.

Jamil looked up suddenly. "Do you believe in angels, Major Abdullah?" he asked irrelevantly.

"So far as I am aware, Jamil, no. But why do you ask?"

"Neither did I until tonight. But now I do."

"Why so, Jamil?"

The lad looked again at his machine. "Only a messenger from God could have altered that range. He twisted one wheel only -- the directional control -- and twisted it by only one turn. Just the amount

needed to make all the difference and drop the rocket on El Hejer instead of Jerusalem. I have heard that because this people have put their trust in their God, that God will protect His own, and I did not believe it. Now I do."

"It is to be hoped that the Devil will be equally solicitous for his own, then" observed Rhiza dryly "for we three stand in need of some protection." "What do you mean?" demanded Wu, his voice on edge.

"I mean" said Rhiza deliberately "that the only place in the whole wide world where we can be safe from the vengeance of Stanislav is inside the territory of the Royal Nation -- and the frontier is two hundred miles away." "We have not one small chance" asserted Wu.

"None whatever" agreed Rhiza cynically.

Jamil got up from his chair with a shrug of defeat. "Will you excuse me for a moment, Major Wu?" he asked deferentially.

Wu made a gesture of assent. Jamil disappeared into the inner room at the rear of the hut. Rhiza, moodily studying the dials of the range-finder, stiffened suddenly at the sound of a shot. His eyes met those of his brother officer, and together they rushed into the other room. Jamil lay on the floor, the revolver still grasped in his right hand.

"Quite dead, Rhiza" murmured the other, turning the body over with his foot. "In my opinion, Major Abdullah, my friend, that Jamil has taken the sensible course. Better now than at the hands of Stanislav's thugs. What say you, my companion of a thousand battles?"

Rhiza nodded. "We have failed. There is only one penalty for failure in the Northern Army." He led the way back again. "You are right, Wu. We will anticipate the inevitable."

The two men grasped hands. "We shall not meet again" said Wu.

"You will not sit under your olive trees any more and I shall not see the almond blossom in springtime again. I go with one regret, that I have

not seen the destruction of that accursed city. My dying moments are embittered by that thought. May a more fortunate man succeed where I have failed." He put the revolver to his right temple and fired, slumping at once to the floor. He did not move.

Rhiza, about to follow suit, stopped as a thought struck him. The televiewer screen was still livid with the angry colors of the blazing oilfield. He stepped across, revolver in left hand, and with his right commenced to manipulate the viewfinders. Presently the fiery valley faded away and in its place there appeared the calm beauty of Jerusalem again.

"Inviolable -- secure" he breathed softly as he gazed upon the peaceful scene. "It is the will of Allah -- Allah whom I rejected. No man can fight against Him.... They say that Allah is merciful -- but how can I, expect mercy? I can only hope."

He looked at the revolver reflectively, raised it, and counted, slowly, "One two ... three...."

Chapter 7 PANIC IN THE DESERT

"Field-Marshall Paul Stern, sir!"

The two men sprang to their feet as the sergeant held aside the tent opening to admit a tall, powerfully built figure clad in the uniform of a Northern Republic officer. The newcomer swaggered in, came to a standstill, clicked his heels and returned their salutes. For a moment there was silence, each taking stock of other. The silence was broken by the Field-Marshall himself.

"You are Major Pierre Arnot and Hugh Villiers" he stated, in rasping guttural tones. "Which of you is which?"

"My colleague is Major Villiers" replied Pierre "and I am Major Arnot."

"So." The Field-Marshall nodded. "You have been notified that Chief Marshal Stanislav has agreed to my assuming control of the Southern frontier invasion force until your own General Hoskins can reach Egypt?"

Pierre Arnot nodded. "We have received instructions to that effect, Field-Marshall."

"Good. You will therefore carry out my orders implicitly until that time. What is the condition of General Gonzalez?"

Villiers spoke, shortly and almost surlily. "Unchanged. He seems completely to have lost his reason. He exhibits the mentality of a child." Paul Stern's cold eyes were turned full upon him.

"You will tell me the true story regarding his loss of reason!"

Villiers stiffened. He had conceived a violent dislike for this overbearing bully. "The full story was transmitted to General Hoskins" he said coldly, "and we understand that it was passed to you for your information."

The Field-Marshal snorted. "If you refer to that fantastic tale about a man in white and a white airplane" he returned "I will say at once that I do not believe in fairy stories. You will please give me the details you did not put in the report and the true cause of your General's insanity."

"The report was fully detailed" said Villiers shortly. "We have nothing to add."

The Field-Marshal turned. "And you, Major Arnot? Do you support your colleague?"

"But yes" replied Pierre. "The circumstance was so strange, so incomprehensible, what could we do but state the facts just as they happened, incredible though they appeared?" "You both saw this mysterious stranger?" "But yes!"

"Why did you not arrest him?" The question was shot out with icy coldness.

Villiers and Arnot looked at each other. Arnot took upon himself to answer. "But we could not

Stem interrupted him. "Could not? One unarmed man in the midst of an army, and you could not arrest him? Are you mocking me, Major Arnot? If so, take care! I am not to be trifled with."

Villiers spoke up. "There was some mysterious influence about him, call it magnetism of his personality if you like, or what you will" he said "but it is literally true that in his presence we all were bereft of will power. He could -- and did -- do as he liked and the spell or whatever it was did not seem to break until we heard his plane soaring away."

The steely blue eyes of the Field-Marshal were fixed upon him. "If it were not that I have such good reports of you" he said "I would say that you are a fool. Fortunately, I do not need your assistance in arriving at the root of the trouble. My own eyes tell me all that I wish to know." His hand indicated the empty wine bottles and overturned glasses that lay in various places in the tent. "You officers have been

consuming a great deal of liquor since you have been in Egypt, is it not so?"

"We have drunk a fair quantity" admitted Hugh, looking with some dismay at the collection which had accumulated.

"So, as I came through the camp I observed the appalling lack of discipline and order that prevails. It is perhaps fortunate that your General has had to be replaced. I shall see to it that General Hoskins finds a very different camp on his arrival. Now do you see, Major Arnot and Major Villiers, from whence your fantastic imaginations have sprung? There never was any man in white. You have all consumed so much liquor that General Gonzalez has drunk himself into insanity and you two officers have been seeing things that had no existence in reality. That is all!"

The hot blood surged up into Villiers' face, but he held himself under control.

"In that case, sir" he said quietly "Arnot and I had better resign our commissions forthwith."

The Field-Marshal eyed him stiffly.

"Major Villiers, you are for the present under my discipline. You will not resign your commission. I have work for you to do." He was silent for a few moments, as if considering. "I sent you a radio message yesterday, instructing you to be ready upon my arrival for dispatch at a minute's notice upon a special mission."

"That is so, sir" returned Villiers.

"Are you ready?"

"I am."

"Good. Now listen carefully. The Northern Republics experts have been investigating the probable causes of the undoubted disasters both

threes have experienced during this campaign. Apart from the premature failure of the Lake Ufra Dam, the reason for which we know, it is considered that most or these apparently inexplicable happenings are due to the employment by the enemy of a hitherto unknown form of high-frequency radio interference, influencing in some way, locally, the various forces of Nature -- wind, tide, solar radiation, and so on. Do you follow me?"

"Sufficiently well, sir" replied Hugh.

"Good. This theory fits the observed facts. Now considerations into which I need not enter incline our experts to believe that the center from which this interference is radiating is located in the town of Rehovoth. Do you know where that is?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. The nature of the plant capable of emitting such radiation is entirely unknown, but from its effects it is clear that it must be housed in a building or buildings of large proportions. It should not be difficult to find. Do you still follow me?"

"In short, sir, you require me to go into enemy territory, locate this plant and blow it up!"

"Precisely, Villiers. And directly you have achieved that end, the armies gathered on the southern, western and northern frontiers will drive in, confident that whilst the plant is out of action no untoward event will occur to frustrate our designs. You will carry a portable radio and will report to General Hoskins here the moment you have executed your design. He will relay instructions to all other field headquarters and the invasion will commence simultaneously upon all fronts. You must make your way back to our lines as best you can."

"Never fear about that, sir" observed Villiers, "I'm only too glad to make a start. I am ready to go as soon as I can find a suit of civilian clothes."

For the first time Paul Stern smiled. "You need not search. A truck is waiting outside to take you to the frontier. In it you will find a radio set, a supply of concentrated XX explosive, and a set of clothing such as people of the land wear. Change as you go along. Once past the frontier you will use your own wits to reach Rehovoth. Go, and do not fail."

Villiers saluted smartly, turned on his heel and left the tent. Arnot listened to the truck being started up, and heard it drive away, with some misgiving. He did not relish being left alone with this martinet.

Paul Stern swung round upon him. "And now, Major Arnot, your attention, if you please."

Pierre stood to attention. He did not answer. The Field-Marshal went on.

"The morale in this camp is disgraceful. Never have I seen a body of men so apparently frightened out of their wits. We of the Northern Republics expected the Southern Army to be well-trained, well-disciplined, a credit to the lands from which it was to be drawn, but here" he spat on the ground in disgust "I find nothing but the dregs of all nations. But even riff-raff can be disciplined and trained. These men, they look as if they would desert on the slightest provocation. You will tell me, Major Arnot, the reason for all this."

Pierre blinked his eyes nervously. He wished more than ever that Villiers was with him -- Villiers with his characteristic common sense and matter-of-fact outlook. He was not at all sure how he was to explain the situation to this passionless, ruthless autocrat. He was not at all sure, after all, that there was not something in what the man said

--

"Come, Major Arnot" came the rasping voice. Pierre, recalled to the immediate present, swallowed hard and hurriedly responded.

"But of course, Field-Marshal, it is the inaction playing upon the nerves of the men. They know not what awaits them when they cross

the frontier, and the mystery of it all, the absence of any apparent military preparation on the other side, it gives rise to strange stories, and the men are credulous, they will believe anything. There is much excitement in the camp just now because a soldier dreamed a dream --

"

"Dreams" echoed the Field-Marshal scornfully. "Are you going to waste my time talking about dreams?"

Pierre looked nervously over his shoulder. "But this is no ordinary dream, Field-Marshal. It has made a profound impression in the camp." "Proceed then -- be brief."

"It seems some of the men were discussing the campaign and the strange setbacks that we have received. One of them slept that night and dreamed. He dreamed that he was standing by the side of one of the Pyramids -- they are not far from here, Field-Marshal, just on the other side of the Nile -- and he beheld a great door swing open in the side of the building and out of that door emerged Anubis the jackal-headed god, and Thoth the scribe of the gods, with the head of an ibis, and Usiris himself, and other strange and grotesque gods too numerous to mention. And the man who dreamed heard a great voice saying "Let us drive these vile men out of our ancient land and cast them into the darkest shades of night." And when he heard this he awaked in terror and behold, he was bathed in cold sweat. And when he told this dream to his comrades the story ran like wildfire through the camp and now the men are apprehensive that some great calamity is about to befall them."

"Rubbish" exclaimed Paul Stern impatiently. "The man had probably been exploring the tombs of the Kings to do a little robbing on his own account and the tomb-paintings had settled on his mind. You will wipe out this superstitious talk at once, Arnot. Any man found spreading or discussing such ideas is to be taken out and shot without mercy. Do you understand?"

"But, Monsieur le Field-Marshal -- " stammered Arnot.

"Do you understand?" thundered the other.

"Of course -- yes, yes, I understand. Your orders shall be carried out faithfully."

"Good. If there are any failures, and I hear any more of these ridiculous stories, it will be Major Pierre Arnot who will be shot. Do you understand that?"

Yes, Field-Marshal."

"Good. Now what is that unseemly noise that is going on outside?"

Arnot listened. There was certainly an unusual commotion in progress. Running footsteps and men shouting; he could hear motor trucks being hurriedly started up and driven off. He stepped quickly to the tent door and pulled aside the flap.

The camp was in indescribable confusion. Men were pouring out of the tents and crowding on to vehicles which moved off hurriedly without waiting even for the men who were climbing their sides. Some had seized horses and mules and were attempting clumsily to mount and ride them; the vast majority, unable to obtain any means of transport, were walking, stumbling and for the most part running, following the lurching trucks, away out of the camp, south-east into the wilderness. A babel of voices, a confused shouting fell on his ears as he stared in amazement at this undisciplined rabble in full flight.

A staff car wheeled round and came to a stop. At the wheel was the sergeant of the guard. He pushed open the door and fell, rather than climbed out. He came running up to Pierre at the tent door.

"Major Arnot, come with me, sir," he begged. "I have got this car for you and I -- there is time to get away, but we must be quick."

Pierre, looked about him uncomprehendingly, tried to speak sternly. "What is the meaning of this? What is going on in the camp? Where are the officers?"

"The officers have already gone" the man said sullenly "and none of us are staying. This place is accursed -- "

"Stand up and be a man" commanded Arnot. "Call out your guard and stop this panic. I give you ten minutes to restore order."

The sergeant broke out into impassioned protest. "We are all going. The gods are coming. It is all true. They are coming up out of the Nile and we must get away while there is time."

Two men, unreasoning panic written on their faces, saw the empty car standing and began to climb in. The sergeant dashed back, furiously expostulating. They argued, waving their arms and pointing across the desert toward the river.

"There they are" shrieked the sergeant, his eyes starting out of his head. "See for yourself, Major Arnot, and come with us while there is time. The gods of Egypt have come out of their graves to take vengeance upon us."

Pierre swung round and felt his blood freeze in his veins. The sun was sinking over the Nile in a blood-red haze. Below the haze, down by the river, showing up plainly against the flat desert sky-line, he saw gigantic walking figures, marching in slow procession. Anuhis he saw, the Thoth, and then the winged symbol, the solar disk with its eagles' wings, he beheld take flight and disappear into the heavens, becoming lost in the radiance of the setting sun. Onward they moved, as though setting out for war, and as the horizon became more and more filled with those marching figures, constantly changing their shape and appearing to move ever nearer and nearer to the camp, Pierre Arnot became suddenly conscious of a nameless horror that pervaded his whole being and filled him with an overpowering desire to get away, anywhere away from those silent marching figures that had come back from the past to cleanse their land from its intruders.

He felt the sergeant pulling at his sleeve and urging him toward the car. The stream of fleeing men was stronger than ever; the whole camp

was in a tumult and men were flinging away their possessions and impediments in order to continue their flight untrammelled. Pierre Arnot lost his head; he raced blindly for the car and as he did so was pulled up by a rough grasp at his arm. The Field-Marshal had come out of the tent and halted his mad rush.

"Major Arnot, what is this?"

Pierre shook himself free. He was desperate. "Look, man" he cried, pointing with a shaking forefinger at the distant shapes passing and repassing on the horizon. "It is true. The gods have come forth for vengeance. We must get away."

The Field-Marshal looked and his scornful expression deepened. "What!" he said derisively. "Is that all? Have you never seen a sandstorm before? Your avenging gods are nothing but sand-pillars, whipped up by the wind and carried across the desert! Major Arnot, I order you -- " He turned, but Arnot was no longer there. The car in which he sat wedged with the sergeant and two other men was already twenty yards away, driving furiously in the wake of the refugees.

"Arnot, I command you, come back" shouted the Field-Marshal, but his voice was drowned in the shouting and confusion. He stood, purple with fury, as the car receded, and then turned on his heel to face the surging crowds, vainly endeavoring by word and gesture to stem the flood. A truck, driven recklessly and crammed with men, bore down upon him. He stood with arm upraised in mute command to stop. Too late, he realized that the driver had no intention of obeying. He tried to jump clear, putting out his hand as if to push away the mudguard level with his chin. He felt the sand-encrusted tyre rasping down the front of his uniform, clawed wildly at the air with both hands, felt the hard ground rise up and strike him with terrific force at the back of the head the truck gave a ponderous lurch, righted itself, and continued its headstrong career, out of the camp, away into the wilderness. And the gods of Egypt marched on.

Chapter 8 MISSION OF DESTRUCTION

" Next stop Rehovoth!"

The rail car moved out of the little station and glided along the smooth metals at gathering speed. Hugh Villiers leaned back comfortably and turned his attention again to the passing scenery. "What a crazy war this is!" he thought to himself. "Here we have all the military resources of the world at our disposal and cannot get past the frontier with them, yet I can calmly stroll across without any formalities and travel as freely as any citizen of the land. Outside, the besiegers are enduring all the inconveniences and hardships of a long campaign, whilst inside, life appears to proceed as usual and no one would imagine that a war is on."

"Have you seen today's 'Bulletin', friend?" enquired his fellow traveller, proffering a folded paper with a smile. Villiers thanked him and scanned the pages with detached interest. "That's another thing" he thought. "I speak in my own language and nobody thinks it strange. When I talk their lingo my accent must reveal that I am not one of them; it seems to make no difference." His eyes strayed over the paper and he sat up suddenly to see a picture of the Ufra Dam, with the yawning gap left by the explosion, and hundreds of workers swarming over it.

"A fine picture of the Dam" remarked his companion, following his eyes. "They expect to have it in service again within twelve months."

Villiers looked up in astonishment. "Are they rebuilding it already?" he queried incredulously.

The other man looked slightly surprised.

"Why, yes. I thought everyone knew that. The Northerners left the mountains after the disaster, having no further object in remaining, and since under the terms of our agreement with the Government of New Anatolia we are responsible for the maintenance of the Dam and

all associated works in their territory our people went up there at once."

Hugh sat silent, scanning the news items in the paper. They dealt entirely with the day-to-day events of the nation's life. He could find no reference to the war, and singularly enough little reference to crime. He grew more and more thoughtful as he read on.

"Thanks" he said briefly, handing the paper back. "There doesn't seem to be much there about the war."

"The war?" His companion seemed at a loss. "There isn't much to say about it, is there? We have known for years that it must come; we have prepared ourselves for it and our defense is sure; it is just a matter of resting in absolute faith, come what may, and the victory is ours."

"And if you -- if we -- lose faith?" asked Villiers in an elaborately casual tone, looking out of the window again.

"Then we lose everything. Without faith God cannot deliver. If our faith fails our enemies will triumph. But the words of Ezekiel give us assurance that such an eventuality will certainly not happen this time."

"Of course" agreed Villiers, having not the slightest idea of what the man was talking about. He felt that he was getting on dangerous ground and he began to pay more obvious attention to the world outside. And this continual talk of faith was beginning to unsettle him -- as was also the fact that he had penetrated nearly two hundred miles into Royal Nation territory without discovering a single sign of defensive weapons or even that a war was in progress at all.

The character of the landscape was changing. He had hoarded the rail car at El Shur, the little town at which the Royal Nation railway system turned from Northern Sinai to wind its way southward into the mountains where Mount Sinai itself reared its massive precipices. From El Shur he had been carried through the noble forests of the Sinai plateau -- El Tih -- forests which were no more than thirty years old and yet already clothed the hitherto arid table-land with a mantle of

living green. From thence he had been speeded across the wide farmlands of the Negev and observed with increasing wonder the prosperous homesteads with their colonies of bronzed and happy workers busy in the fields, and the irrigation canals and reservoirs skillfully arranged to catch the seasonal torrential rains which constituted this land's only source of water. He saw here the fields of melons and cucumbers for which the Holy Land had become famous. At a little station called Hazeroth the railway had crossed the water pipe line which had been built in the earliest years of the Negev's development to bring water from Gaza, still in use, but no longer so essential as then to the country's needs. Then the car had stopped at Kadesh and near the station he had seen the magnificent marble memorial, ranking as one of the finest pieces of architecture in the world, which had been built only a few years previously to commemorate the Divine deliverance of Israel at the time of the Exodus. In common with some of the other passengers he had gone to inspect the famous monument while the rail car waited. His knowledge of Hebrew stood him in good stead as he looked at the inscription, set in letters of gold on a finely polished panel of red Sinai granite. "Know ye, all ye nations" he had read "that in this place fell the bodies of those who believed not, who wandered in the wilderness forty years and perished without seeing the Land of Promise, because their faith did not hold. And know ye, all ye people of the Most High, that from this place the Lord led those who went in under Joshua, that they might serve the Lord their God in their own land in righteousness and peace. And know ye, all men, that in the last great day of the kingdoms of this world, when the Assyrian shall rise up against the holy people for the last time. he shall be broken out of hand, for the faith of the people shall not fail them, and they shall possess the land for ever." Hugh Villiers had walked back to the rail car with serious face; he had not looked at a Bible since he was a small boy, and his knowledge of the Old Testament history was almost nil; but fragments of his long since dead grandfather's words began to obtrude themselves into his mind, and he found himself wondering if, when he got to Rehovoth, he would still be as keen to carry out his mission as when he had started.

And now both Kadesh and the farmlands had been left behind and he was amongst the orange groves and vineyards of the Rehovoth country and he gazed with increasing wonder at the huge clusters of grapes and the massive orange and grapefruit trees. The sight of these latter reminded him of his lost fifty thousand pounds and he set his teeth, telling himself that he was not going to allow sentiment to interfere with his revenge at this late stage. And so the rail car ran into Rehovoth.

Hugh Villiers looked about him with keen interest as he strolled through the little town. The wide, tree-lined streets, the well-built, comfortable houses, each set apart from its neighbor in its own trim garden, the well-planned and tasteful public buildings, all conspired to present an impression of spaciousness and leisureliness that stood out in sharp contrast to the ugliness, the sordidness, and too, the frantic haste characteristic of the western towns with which he was acquainted. Here everybody seemed to be on friendly terms; the greeting "Shalom" -- Peace -- was heard at almost every step. He had the word addressed to his own self upon more than one occasion and at each repetition the task upon which he was engaged became more distasteful to him. He tried to tell himself that he was not going to harm these people as individuals; the change of administration which he and his sought to enforce would not change their individual lives nor effect the amenities of their beautiful town: but even as he thus reflected he cursed himself for a liar and a hypocrite, for he knew perfectly well that the triumph of the West and North would mean to these people the destruction of their peaceful existence and their way of life, if not things much worse. And he found it necessary to summon to his aid all his old unreasoning hatred of this land and its people. and the memory of his financial losses, to steel himself to go forward with his project. He sat at a little round table outside a cafe sipping rich orange juice and watching the passers-by going to and fro. He envied the robust health of the young men, bronzed from their work in the orange groves, and followed with his eye the lithe walk of their fair companions, a medley of light skins and golden-brown skins, of fair hair and auburn hair and dark hair. He caught himself thinking most oddly of the dark-haired girl in the tent and of the softness of her voice when she spoke. He wondered where the man in the white airplane

had taken her and her companion and it came to him suddenly that of course she must be somewhere in this favored land and he found himself speculating as to whether he might come across her on his way back to the frontier; and that he pulled himself up and told himself that he was a blithering fool and had better get on with his duty, and he got up abruptly and passed out into the street.

It was getting on towards evening and he began to feel that he would not find the place he sought without making a few judicious enquiries. From the rail car as it entered the town he had seen that no building of any size existed in the immediate surroundings; the place stood in a sea of orange groves and the building he sought must be in the town itself if it existed at all. He wandered through one street after another without feeling that he was making progress. The town library interested him on account of its size but he soon satisfied himself that it was entirely devoted to its legitimate purpose, and as the sun began to sink in the west he found himself in a little pleasure garden of slopes and terraces built on a hillside overlooking the town. He leaned on an ornamental balustrade and scanned the buildings, trying to pick out any that he had missed, and it was whilst he was thus engaged that a stranger took up his stand beside him and uttered the now familiar greeting "Shalom".

"Shalom" answered Hugh Villiers mechanically.

"How do you like our beautiful town?" asked the newcomer softly. "I can see you are a stranger here. I passed you several times as you strolled around sightseeing."

Hugh stole a cautious glance at his companion. He saw a young Palestinian with a fresh, open countenance and guileless eyes. He was dressed in the blue shirt and khaki shorts affected by so many of the orange grove workers, and in his curly black hair was twined a wild flower of some kind. A country lad, simple and unsuspecting, decided Hugh. He would go fairly carefully, but he might be able to get something useful out of him.

"I am a stranger in these parts" he admitted "and the town is very beautiful, as you say. I am more interested in the buildings though."

"Professional interest? Are you an architect?" asked the lad.

"Something in that line" lied Hugh. "The library struck me as a very fine place of architecture."

"And the hospital too" exclaimed the lad enthusiastically. "It is one of the finest in the country. And have you seen the Museum? The outer walls incorporate pieces of the building stone of every kind that is found in the world."

"Must give a patchwork effect, I should think" observed Hugh. I must look at that tomorrow."

"Not patchwork at all, friend," rejoined his companion. "The design is such that every piece harmonizes perfectly with every other piece. If you are an architect you certainly must not leave Rehovoth without viewing it closely."

"I certainly will not" Hugh promised. "I can see another building which I appear to have missed today, that tall square building with what looks like a white marble dome in the center, over there, surrounded by gardens. I can just see people going in and out."

The lad looked and smiled with pride. "Ah, that is the House of our Defence!" he said.

"Your what?"

"That is where the power goes forth to keep our land inviolate from our enemies. We of Rehovoth are playing our part in the defense of our land and from that building, day and night without ceasing, there goes out a force that our enemies can never understand and never imitate, a force that overcomes and renders powerless all their efforts to destroy us." He was speaking as though to himself, but now he turned round to

Villiers with a disarming smile and added "You understand me, don't you?"

"Of course I do" said Villiers "but I must be going. Shalom" and before the lad could reply he had departed, walking quick, hurried steps to a secluded part of the garden where he could sit and think.

"So Stern was right" he reflected, idly plucking the blades of grass that stood upright between his feet. "There is a force they are using to frustrate our moves, and that building down there is the control station for that force." He watched the red rays of the dying sun flicker and gleam on the white building with its rounded dome, and knew that the brief Palestinian twilight would shortly be merged into the blackness of night. He followed with his eyes the people still entering and leaving the mysterious building, and wondered what they were doing. It must take a number of people to operate this plant, he decided; probably they worked shifts and he was witnessing the changing of a shift. Well, that was the last shift that would enter that building. Oddly enough, he was disappointed. He had heard so much of the faith these people had in their God for their defense and seen so much to corroborate their oft-asserted claim, that the discovery of concrete evidence that they were in fact employing physical means of defense had come to him as a shock -- a deeper shock than he at first realized. He felt disillusioned, saddened, almost as though an old friend for whom he had respect and esteem had suddenly turned out to be quite unworthy of that regard. He got to his feet wearily and began to make his way down the hillside.

It was some time before he could locate the building he had seen from the terraces, and then he came upon it quite suddenly. People were still going in and out, and it came to him that many of them did not seem like scientific technicians at all -- they appeared to be from all walks of life, men and women, young and old, but it may be, thought he, that the nature of this plant required a numerous staff and all the populace were doing their bit to help; in any case nothing much mattered now; he would blow the place up and whether or not he reached the frontier safely would not matter a great concern to him. He walked around the building, an easy proceeding since nobody took any notice of him, and

decided that the rear side, which was the most deserted, would be the best place to plant his explosive. He would have to wait till nightfall since it was necessary to dig a hole about two feet deep and lay his charge within it, and he could not afford to run the risk of detection. He took careful stock of the apparent dimensions of the building; he would have to measure out sufficient of the explosive to ensure complete destruction. He patted his pocket to make sure that the two little canisters were still there; felt for the clockwork timing mechanism which, buried with the charge, would set it off ten minutes after he had released the trigger, thus giving him time to get clear, and decided that whilst light lasted he had better find a suitable place in which to hide whilst waiting for the charge to go off and from which he could radio back to the camp in Egypt the success of his mission. He caught himself hoping that General Hoskins had arrived; he had no desire to meet Field-Marshal Paul Stem again.

The darkness fell suddenly, as it does in the Middle East, with Villiers sitting under some hushes in the middle of the area of heath that he had discovered outside the town. He had carefully noted the way by which he had come, anticipating no difficulty in retracing his steps to the control house under cover of darkness. But he was rather disturbed at the intense blackness of the night -- a feeling that was replaced by one of assurance when he looked up and perceived that the control house was brilliantly illuminated and would offer no difficulty on that score.

He pulled the package out of his pocket and began emptying the contents of the two red canisters into the blue one to which was affixed the clock-work timer. There was not a sound to be heard and before darkness fell he had satisfied himself that no human being was in the vicinity, and he worked on in leisurely and methodical fashion.

He closed the canister lid carefully and secured it. He wound up the clockwork slowly and deliberately, and, holding the dial close to the light of his miniature electric torch, carefully shielded beneath his jacket, set the timer to ten minutes. It only remained now to put the charge in position, press the trigger, get back to his position on the heath, and wait for the explosion.

His momentary depression had passed and he stood up with a feeling of elation. The long-nursed resentment came uppermost again. "This, you self-righteous gang of hypocrites" he muttered, surveying the dim outline of the unsuspecting town "is for my fifty thousand pounds. Tonight we settle the score." He moved forward impetuously toward the lighted building which was his goal, put his foot in a tree-root, and fell headlong. As he fell he was conscious that he had pressed the trigger and then his head struck an outcrop of rock jutting from the ground and he knew no more.

Hugh Villiers came to himself wondering vaguely what had happened. He sat up, putting shaking hands to his head and felt the warm, sticky blood. He looked toward the still lighted building and recollection came flooding into his mind, and with it instantly the realization that the clockwork was functioning. Desperately he strove to get to his feet to look for his bomb. Reckless of discovery, he flashed his torch in all directions, the while he held his aching head with his free hand. He found the canister at last, lying near the rock which had rendered him unconscious, and as he picked it up he saw that the pointer was nearly hack at the starting-point of the dial. Nothing, he realized in a flash, could stop the explosion taking place in a matter of seconds.

Strangely enough, his first reaction was one of relief. This settled the problem so far as he himself was concerned. He had made a mess of life and it was just as well that he was making his exit without doing any more damage. He could at least go to wherever he was going without the crime of mass murder to answer for. It couldn't be long now -- another few seconds at the most

But concurrently with the rapid working of his mind the instinct of self-preservation motivated an equally rapid movement of his body. Not for nothing had Hugh Villiers been one of the best discus throwers as a schoolboy at Harrow. His right hand had grasped the heavy little canister firmly, whirled it around his head and hurled it with immense force in a long trajectory over the heath even whilst his mind had been reconciling him to instant death. Mind and body came into synchronism together and he dropped down behind the very tree

which had been the cause of his undoing and buried his face in his arms

A searing, blinding flash which raced up the vault of heaven and lighted up the countryside in bright relief, showing every bush and tree on the heath as a black shadow, revealing Rehovoth below, a town of brilliant walls and white-hot roofs; a shattering, rending crash that shook the earth and rolled, reverberating around the distant hills; an irresistible force, a giant with grasp of infinite strength, taking hold of Hugh Villiers, hugging him, crushing him, forcing him backwards and downwards, through an infinity of space, into the bottomless abyss, into the darkness for ever.

"And because that little boy always believed God and served him faithfully he became a great man, and they called him Samuel, the greatest of the Judges of Israel. That is the end of the story dear, and now you must go to sleep."

The soft voice slowly penetrated Hugh Villiers' consciousness as thought and memory began to return. He tried to move and could not. He tried to open his eyes, and after an ineffectual flicker or two of the eyelids he found that he could see something of his surroundings. He was lying in a bed -- a clean white bed such as he had not experienced for many weeks. Immediately in front he could see a table laden with lovely flowers. Beyond that, another bed; he could not see whether that was occupied or not. Above him, a cool, cream washed ceiling, and behind him, from the sensation of subdued daylight, he surmised there must be a window covered with a sunblind. He tried to turn his head to the left but it hurt him and so he desisted.

For a moment he lay still, trying to decide what had happened.. He had escaped from the explosion with his life; that much was evident. How such a miracle could have happened was quite beyond his comprehension; the heat engendered by the explosion must have scorched to death everything within a radius of a hundred yards. He remembered throwing the bomb but he could never have thrown it anything like that distance. He closed his eyes and winced as a sharp tremor of pain shot through his right arm.

There was a movement to his right and Hugh automatically opened his eyes and turned his head in that direction. He found that he could do that without pain. He saw more beds -- evidently he was in a hospital, but where, he could not hazard a guess. And at a little distance from him, her back toward him, a girl in a neat cream-colored frock adorned with gray embroidery was busy at a cot wherein lay a small boy. "That," thought Hugh to himself "settles that. I did hear the voice and this is real." He moved in bed and the movement was followed by another spasm of pain which caused him to draw in his breath sharply. The girl heard him and turned immediately.

"You have come round at last" she said quietly, coming towards him. "You have been deep down in the valley, of the shadow, but by God's mercy you will come back." She shook her dark hair and smiled down at him encouragingly.

Hugh stared as if incredulous of the evidence of his senses. "You" he whispered. "Here?"

Miriam smoothed the bed cover with a practiced hand. "I belong here" she said simply. "I was on holiday in the Forest when your men -- when you saw me."

Hugh was silent for a moment. Then "Where am I?" he asked weakly. The busy hands were softening his pillow. "In Rehovoth hospital. We brought you here as soon as we found you. I really ought to tell the doctor that you have recovered consciousness."

She moved lightly away and picked up an audiovisor that stood on the table. Hugh listened to the soft inflections of her voice although he could not distinguish the words. Presently she came back.

"The doctor will be over to see you as soon as he is free. Meanwhile you had better go to sleep."

"Tell me first" he begged, "what has happened? How did I get here?"

The girl's eyes had gone suddenly grave. "I think Major Villiers" she replied "you had better first tell me how you came to be on Renovoth Heath last night and what you know as to the cause of that explosion."

Hugh felt the slow blood creeping into his temples and cheeks, How could he tell this guileless girl of the mission on which he had been engaged. Desperately he began to rack his brain for an explanation.

"Major Villiers" came the level voice from above him "it is much easier to tell the truth than a lie, and so much more satisfactory." He looked up quickly to find her candid gaze fixed full on his face, and as her eyes met and held his he knew that he must tell the truth in all its naked ugliness.

"I came" he said slowly "to blow up the radio station from which you have been conducting your defense against us."

"To blow up -- what?"

"The radio station."

"What radio station?"

"The building from which your scientists are sending out the high-frequency radio waves which are causing the various disasters to our forces."

Her eyes were still fixed on his, but her face had taken on an expression of sadness.

"Major Villiers, will you never believe? -- There is no such building in Rehovoth, nor yet in all the land of the Royal Nation!"

"I mean" said Hugh deliberately "the square building surmounted by a white dome and surrounded by gardens, into and out of which people were continually passing and repassing yesterday."

She looked at him as if he had taken leave of his senses. "That is our Beth-el, the House of God, where we go to pray for our country's safety. Whatever made you think that was a radio station?"

Hugh flushed with annoyance.

"A young fellow on the hillside told me so."

"I am sure he did not."

"He told me that day and night you were in that building and that from thence proceeds a force that we cannot understand but is an infallible defence against our invasion. It was such a building that I was instructed to locate and demolish."

Miriam looked at him incredulously for a moment and then broke into a peel of silvery laughter. Hugh flushed even deeper.

"I don't see what you are laughing at."

She came back to him, suddenly grave. "I ought not to have laughed Major Villiers, for it is a tragic thing that you have done. Do you not realize that you informant was right -- but you did not understand? It is the power of prayer, the power of faith, that is the mighty invisible force our enemies cannot understand and that is going to frustrate all their devilish schemes. Over all this land, day and night, men and women, all of us, go in turn to pray to our God for the defense of our nation and homeland: the voice of prayer is never silent. That is why we shall triumph and all your plans come to nothing. Will you never believe, Major Villiers?"

Hugh said nothing. His brain was in a whirl.

The girl said softly "I was in there myself yesterday evening."

The man looked up sharply. The movement gave him pain but he needed it not.

"You?"

She nodded. "Yes, I went to pray for the deliverance of our country from all who would do her harm."

Hugh's face was white. He spoke thickly. "And I -- was outside -- trying to -- blow it up." He shut his eyes as if to shut out the evil vision, and groaned within himself.

A sound made him look up. Miriam had left the bedside and was seated at the table, her head buried in her outstretched arms, sobbing quietly. Her hair fell confusedly over her slight shoulders.

Villiers could bear it no longer. He whispered her name. "Miriam, Miriam, come here."

The girl took no notice. Her sobbing continued.

He spoke again, urgently. "Miriam, if you don't come here I shall get out of bed and come to you."

She stood up instantly and came towards him. Her face was composed but her eyes were swimming.

"You must do no such thing. Lie still."

"What are you crying for, my dear?"

She looked at him squarely. Her lips trembled.

"Why do you hate us so?"

Hugh drew in his breath and closed his eyes again. Before him there rose up as in a vision the scenes of his past life; his early days when he was taught his prayers at his mother's knee; the long talks with his grandfather when the old man told him of the golden days of God's coming Kingdom on earth; his public school days and the rapid shedding of that early faith under the influence of the modern

humanistic atmosphere of school and social life in which he found himself; his entry into business and discovery of his talent for successful financial speculation; his growing disregard of truth and mercy, and the well-being and happiness of others, and finally the career of extravagance and dissipation that had led him at last, tired of life and possessed of an insensate desire for revenge on the nation that had brought his business career to an end, to throw in his lot with the Southern Army. He saw himself in a light in which he had never seen himself before. His own weakness and vileness and folly came up before him, and he writhed in spirit as he thought of the wasted opportunities, the impoverished physique, the mental powers turned to base ends. From the anguish of his soul there was forced a bitter cry -- and he knew not that he had uttered it aloud -- "They told me of Jesus and His ways, and of God and His promised Kingdom, but I have spurned them and strayed from the path. How can I find my way back?" Through the darkness he heard the cadences of a soft voice, as from a great distance "Repent -- turn from your evil ways -- believe in the One Who is the Savior of all men -- and live." He opened his eyes to find Miriam still looking down upon him and in her eyes an expression of tenderness such as he had never seen before in man or woman.

"I am not worthy" he said brokenly. "I have wasted my life. How can I come to God now?"

The answer came, still softly, but supremely confident. "God knows you better than you know yourself He has been working to bring you to this point. Have you never heard of the Prodigal Son, of the young man who went away from home and wasted his goods, and when he came to himself, returned to his father and his father went out with rejoicing to meet him? Go forth and put your hand into His hand, and He will lead you into peace."

Hugh surrendered. He said, simply, "Lord, I believe." He sensed rather than felt, the girl kneel beside his bed and place her hand over his, and in the wonder of that experience he prayed, easily and naturally, to the God who hears all prayer.

It was thus that the doctor found them, as he walked briskly in to see his patient. Jacob Friedman was no stranger to such scenes; he moderated his pace and knelt quietly beside Miriam. He prayed for the injured man, for his recovery to health, and for his full conversion to the ways of God. He prayed for the defense of the nation, and the fulfillment of the Divine promise that it should become a light to the nations, to declare God's salvation to the ends of the earth. He prayed for the Divine Kingdom, for the light of the knowledge of the glory of God to cover the earth as the waters cover the sea, and when he had prayed, he rose, drawing Miriam gently up with him, and stood looking down at Villiers.

"And now, young man" he said, eyes twinkling, "give an account of yourself. How are you feeling?"

"I feel" said Hugh quietly "as if I have come into a new world and all things are become new."

"Capital" said the doctor. "The finest specific for a rapid recovery to health is to get the mind right with God, You have done a lot of damage to yourself but by God's good grace and the devoted attention of our ministering angel here" he shot an affectionate glance at Miriam "we shall soon have you on your feet and ready for service."

"Service?" queried Hugh, with uplifted eyebrows.

"Of course" replied Jacob breezily. "God doesn't accept a man without giving him something to do. You can take it that your life has been saved for a purpose, young man, and your job now is to get physically and mentally fit for that purpose."

He was examining Hugh rapidly as he spoke, removing and adjusting bandages and dressings, giving short, concise instructions to Miriam in the form of asides. Hugh closed his eyes' to take in the full implication of the doctor's words. It suddenly came to him that he could never go back to camp now; the old life was out of the question. It was improbable that he would be allowed to stay here. He felt singularly

reluctant to return to the cities of the West. He opened his eyes again. Miriam was no longer there. A thought struck him.

"How long shall I be here, doctor?"

The doctor regarded him critically.

"If you keep your present frame of mind and don't worry, about ten days or a fortnight, I should say. After that you should be pretty fit. You were rather badly knocked about in that explosion and you have got some nasty burns, but we have some methods and treatments that are far more effective than anything you have in the Western world." He stood back and surveyed his patient. "Yes, I should say a fortnight from now, quite easily."

Another thought struck Hugh.

"How did I come to be found? It was pitch dark at the time" he said. The doctor pulled a chair across and sat down.

"It was by the mercy of God you were not blown to pieces" he said. "What was that explosive you were playing with?"

Hugh pondered. "I suppose there's no harm in telling you. I realize now that you have no need to fear any of these material weapons. We call it "XX". It is compounded according to a secret formula and is tremendously concentrated."

"I should say it is. Do you know what you have done up there on the Heath?"

"No; what?"

"Made a crater seventy-five feet deep and nearly five hundred feet across."

"It would have been twice the size" mused Hugh "had the explosive been buried. I threw it away from me and it must have gone off in the air." "How did you come to explode it up there?"

"Fell over a tree-stump and knocked myself out. When I came to, the time limit was nearly up. I never expected to survive. How was I found?" The doctor looked serious.

"When the explosion happened none of us in Rehovoth had any idea of the cause. A party went straight up to investigate. It was apparent to them that some enemy agent was responsible; obviously none of our own people would go about blowing up common land like that. We rushed up searchlights and sent out an appeal for volunteers. Half Rehovoth was up there in the crater looking for what might be left of you."

"And where was I discovered?" asked Hugh with interest.

"Underneath a big tree. By great good fortune -- or, more accurately, by the overruling providence of God -- you had darted behind a tree which stood between you and the focal point of the explosion. The blast and the radiant heat passed you by on both sides -- your arms are both severely burned -- but the tree saved you from the full effects. The blast forced the tree over and embedded it in the soil halfway down the crater with you underneath. Your little nurse here, Miriam, spotted one arm projecting and then we got busy."

"How did you get me out?"

"We had to rig up two derricks with blocks and tackle to raise the tree. When we had it up a couple of feet Miriam crawled underneath, dug the earth away with her hands and pulled you out. Under God, you owe your life to that girl, Villiers."

Hugh was silent. His mind had gone back to a time not so long since when a soft voice was saying to him "Thank you, Major Villiers" and he had smothered his feelings and callously left the speaker to her fate without further interference. The resolution which had been dawning

in his mind for some minutes took shape and he put the past firmly out of his mind and addressed the other man.

"Doctor, I want to tell you something."

"Fire away, then."

"Here and now, as far as this day, I am irrevocably dedicated to the service of God. If in any way I can serve the interests of this Royal Nation, I am ready so to serve. I renounce my allegiance to the forces of evil and I am ready to learn whatever it is that I must be taught in order to share the faith and the obligations of the people of this land."

"Well said, lad" cried the doctor heartily, rising and placing his hand upon Villiers' head. "You will never regret it. You will find your faith sorely tried; things will not be easy; but stand by your profession and you will come through"

Hugh stirred restlessly. "Will you tell me something more about this nation and its ideals, doctor? I am almost totally ignorant of them. I realize that now. I feel that I must make up for lost time."

The doctor leaned forward and felt his patient's pulse.

"You have had about enough emotional stress for one day, Villiers" he responded. "I will give you a brief outline -- a very brief outline -- and we will have a longer talk tomorrow." He leaned back in his chair, gazing through the sunblind to the outside world. After a moment his eyes came back to Villiers' face.

"How much do you know of the Divine interventions of mankind?" he asked abruptly.

"Very little" admitted the other " and I should be ashamed to admit the fact, for my people were God-fearing people and did their best in my childhood to teach me the things they thought I ought to know."

"What do you remember of their teaching?" persisted Friedman.

"My mother's father used to tell me as a small boy that. God, in the execution of His plans for bringing evil to an end in the earth, would in the end of this age cause to be gathered in the Holy Land a people qualified to be the earthly missionaries to mankind during the period of His Kingdom on earth. He called that period the Millennium. To this people would come the heroes of Old Testament history, raised from the dead, to guide their destinies. The people of the earth, jealous of this new nation's prosperity and righteous standards, would combine to destroy them and their land in possession. The regathered nation would place its trust in God and He would deliver them in His own way, reveal to them their long-expected Messiah, set up His Kingdom over all the earth, abolish death and evil by a process of universal persuasion and conversion, and bring everlasting righteousness. All of which I listened to at the time and later on dismissed as fantastic nonsense."

Friedman drummed his fingers on the side of the bed.

"There isn't much I need add to your outline except to say that some of those things have already come to pass and the nations of the earth are now raging against us. Is that plain to you?"

"Perfectly plain."

The doctor stood up. "And the rest of the program will follow as surely as night follows day. The Kingdom of God on earth is about to be revealed, and all flesh will see it together. I must go, . We will have another talk tomorrow."

He went round to the little boy's cot, stood looking at the sleeping form for a moment, turned on his heel and went noiselessly out, passing Miriam at the door. The girl came across to Villiers' bed.

"You must go to sleep now, Major Villiers."

"Not yet, Miriam. I want to talk to you."

"Major Villiers, "The tone was severe, but the girl's eyes were roguish. "I am your commanding officer now, and you will obey my orders. Go to sleep."

"Can I have a drink first."

"Well" the roguish look intensified. "We have no whiskey in the Holy Land, but I can offer you some very fine orange juice. You have a professional interest in oranges, have you not?"

He sighed happily. The thought of his lost thousands was not troubling him now. "I had. But I am only interested now in their nutritive value. Bring me your strong potion, and then I promise you I will go to sleep."

Chapter 9 PRISONER OF WAR

A long low line of sand appeared on the far horizon, a ribband of yellow dividing blue sea from blue sky. Colonel Collins removed his pipe from his mouth and used it, wavering somewhat uncertainly, as a signpost.

"Egypt, Ike" he commented briefly.

The General leaned back comfortably in his seat. "Say, is that so?" he drawled lazily. "Looks all flat sand to me!"

The plane was racing towards the Delta. From the height at which it was traveling the outlets of the Nile could begin to be discerned, and behind the fringe of yellow sand an increasingly broad area of vivid green. The colors showed up startlingly clear in the bright sunlight. Away to the left a greyish blur marked the waters of Lake Menzaleh.

The two men puffed away in silence, comfortably cool at this height in their tropical uniforms. Ike Hoskins looked thoughtful.

"Looks as though it might be kinda hot down there" he opined at last. Redvers Collins removed his pipe again.

"Egypt can be darned hot when it likes" he said expressively, and then, as an afterthought "but it's up to you to see that we don't stay there long. It's cooler in Sinai and the Negev -- more trees."

Hoskins reached for the decanter. "We move out soon as we hear from Villiers. That's a smart lad you sent me, Collins. Pity I had to put him under that scoundrel Gonzalez, but what could I do?" Gonzalez had raised most of the troops for the investment force and I had to give him the leadership. I needed a ruthless man for the job, and by golly I've got him in Gonzalez." He poised the decanter above a glass, delicately, for the plane was swaying slightly, and poured himself out a drink.

"You mean you had got him, Ike" observed the Colonel, interestedly following his companion's evolution with the decanter.

"Well, yes, I guess you've bounced me there. Funny business Gonzalez going off his rocker like that. Must have been the heat."

"If the Egyptian whiskey is no better than it was in the old days" ruminated the Colonel "I should put it down to that."

"Well, anyway, Redvers, old pard, I'll not be sorry to take over myself and get a move on things. This Egyptian invasion force has been standing still too long for my liking. I'm going to make things hum. You mark my words; you and I are going to be in Jerusalem in less than a week."

The pilot turned and bent to his speaking tube. "We land in five minutes, sir" he said.

"O.K., buddy" came the hearty reply. "Radio them to have lunch ready."

The sea had long since receded from sight and the plane was passing over a network of green fields bordered by narrow irrigation ditches and intersected by white roads and the dark-colored lines of railway tracks. Every now and again one of the branches of the Nile, flowing out to sea, came into sight over the horizon, passed rapidly under the plane and vanished into the distance. Even as the General spoke the green began to be interspersed with patches of dull brown, and then the plane was over the desert again, traversing the wide sun-baked level which ended only at the banks of the Suez Canal.

The pilot's voice came again. "No answer from the camp, sir" he reported laconically.

"Never mind lad" boomed the General's voice. "We'll catch them on the hop and see just what they're up to. I'll be interested to meet this fellow Stern" he continued, turning to Collins. "They say he's nearly as much a man of iron as Stanislav himself. It's to be hoped he's got the force into some semblance of order during his short term of control."

The plane had been descending steadily, heading for the white lines of tents that could now be plainly discerned on the ground below. The General was busily engaged in lighting a fresh cigar when his hand was jerked as the machine abruptly leveled and swept across the camp and out into the plain beyond. The sun flashed into his eyes as the pilot began to turn a wide radius preparatory to coming back.

"Hey, boy, what the heck are you up to!" he shouted in surprise. The pilot's level voice came back, unruffled.

"Something fishy down there, sir. With your permission I want to investigate before touching down."

Both his passengers peered out.

"Looks a dandy camp to me" ventured the General. "What's the matter with it."

"It's deserted, sir. Not a sign of life."

"By heck, you're right" roared the General. "There's nobody there. D'you see that, Collins? There's nobody there. What's the meaning of it? I ask you, what's the meaning of it?"

Colonel Collins considered. "I should say, Ike, that Villiers must have done his job earlier than was expected and 'item has moved up to invade enemy territory."

"But why didn't we know, Redvers? Stern would have radioed us -- unless, maybe, the camp radio has broken down."

The pilot's voice came again. "I don't think it can be that, sir. The camp has been evacuated in a hurry. There's equipment of all sorts lying about anyhow."

The plane was flying low now, circling the camp in wide curves, and the truth of the pilot's observation was very manifest. On every side material lay about in hopeless confusion. Tents were overthrown, cars

and trucks standing where they had collided one with another; helmets and other articles of accoutrement strewed the ground. But of life there was not a sign.

"What d'ye make of it, Collins'?" asked Hoskins in bewilderment.

"I -- don't know, Ike" replied the Colonel slowly. "I've seen a lot of camps in my time, but never one that looked like that it beats me" he confessed.

"There's something moving" said the pilot suddenly. "Look, sir."

Far below, in the broad open space that marked the center of the camp, they saw a capering figure, moving erratically in small circles, appearing to wave its arms and gesticulate violently. Whether it was signaling the plane, or not, they could not decide -- the distance was too great to determine. But the moving figure continued its mad dance, apparently unmoved by the lack of any response from the plane above.

The General came to a swift decision. "Put her down, lad" he instructed briskly. "We shall never solve the problem up here. We'll take a chance on it; but keep your eyes skinned when you get out, that's all."

Without a word the pilot responded to the order, the plane glided earth-wards, touched lightly on the baked ground and ran smoothly to a stop. For a moment the three men sat still; nothing happened; then the pilot opened his door and leaped easily to the ground below. Somewhat stiffly, the General followed him and finally Colonel Collins, with a certain amount of difficulty and puffing audibly, lowered himself to terra firma. They stood, looking round.

"Well, here we are" observed General Hoskins "and where do we go from here?" He turned round sharply at a quick ejaculation from the pilot. The solitary figure they had seen from the plane was running towards them. He was dressed in the uniform of a ranker in Gonzalez' army and as he came up he waved his arms and executed little turns and skips and capering hops. The pilot went out to meet him, and the

man was jabbering violently as the two came back together. He stopped before the General but made no attempt to salute.

"Stand to attention, man" roared the latter. "Where's your salute to a superior officer? Do you want to see the inside of a guardroom?"

The man threw back his head and laughed wildly. "No officers here" he cackled. "All gone. I was in the guardroom. They left me in there when they came. I broke out afterwards." He looked round and laughed again.

"You'd better go, before they get you. They won't touch me; I'm mad" and he shrieked loudly with demoniac glee.

"The man's stark, raving mad" said Colonel Collins. "What in thunder's happened'? And who are 'they'?"

"Beats me" confessed the General. He looked doubtfully at the pitiable figure before him.

The pilot stepped forward. "If you will allow me, sir" he suggested "I'll take him away and talk to him on the quiet. I might get more out of him on his own; he's a bit scared at the presence of officers."

The General gave an affirmative nod, and they watched the pilot lead the demented soldier away and heard his quiet, persuasive voice rising and falling, and the other man's broken tones coming haltingly in response. Presently the pilot came back, his face perplexed.

"Can't make much out of it, sir" he reported. "He babbles about being locked in the guardroom and a lot of giant monsters marching across the desert to drive out the army. He seems to connect it up with a man in a white airplane who appeared from nowhere and then the army quit, officers and all."

"What does he mean by 'quit'?" queried Colonel Collins incredulously. "Does he mean they just ran away'?"

The pilot glanced at the scene of disorder around him. "It looks like it, sir" he said.

"But they can't have done" declared the General emphatically. "Armies don't run away for nothing."

"Monsters. White airplanes" muttered Colonel Collins almost as if to himself. "Remember Villiers' report, Ike?"

"I'm trying not to remember it. I just couldn't understand that report, Collins. It didn't make sense."

"Villiers isn't given to romancing, Ike. And here's another man talking about white airplanes. There must be something behind it. You're right; men don't run away from nothing. Something funny has been happening in this camp, Ike. Two lunatics, monsters, white airplanes, and an army that's disappeared into thin air -- by all the powers. It just doesn't add up." He pulled out his pipe and absent-mindedly began to fill it.

The pilot had excused himself and disappeared. Now he came back.

"Will you step this way for a minute, sir?" he enquired respectfully. In silence the other two followed. The madman was still capering about on the ground.

They stopped outside a tent. On the ground lay the body of a man. He was quite dead -- some weighty object, probably the wheel of a heavy vehicle, had passed right over his face and rendered it completely unrecognizable. But it was the uniform at which the two officers stared. It was the uniform of a Field-Marshal of the Northern Army.

"Great heavens" ejaculated General Hoskins. "It must be Paul Stern. It can be no other. Killed in his own camp. Stanislav's right-hand man. Stanislav will go crazy with rage when he hears about this." He looked about him helplessly. "I wish I knew what's been happening here" he concluded irrelevantly.

"Can we do anything with the body, sir?" ventured the pilot diffidently. General Hoskins eyed the crumpled heap dispassionately. "Leave it to the jackals" he decided. "I'm not turning grave-digger at my time of life. And I'm hanged if I know what we are going to do next. Let's find something to eat; I'm famishing."

They turned to walk back to the plane. "Do you believe in that white airplane story, Ike?" asked Collins as they went.

"Of course not, Redvers. Why do you ask?"

"I only wondered. Take a look behind you."

The General swung and looked. High up in the sky, hardly to be discerned but growing rapidly larger as it swept towards them, was a white airplane!

Ike Hoskins threw up his hands in a gesture of despair and sat down on a wooden box that, fallen or thrown to the ground, had burst in the middle and ejected part of its contents, which lay in profusion around it. The damaged box creaked ominously under the General's not inconsiderable weight, but he took no notice.

"Anything can happen now, boys" he announced resignedly. "Ike Hoskins isn't going to be surprised at anything more ever at all."

The white plane came down silently and taxied across the ground to within a score of yards of the watching group. It stopped, a door swung open, and an active, stalwart figure leaped out.

They watched him walk with quick, firm steps across the few yards of sand that separated them. He was dressed entirely in white.

As he came up to them Colonel Collins noticed that on his left breast glittered a tiny six-pointed gold star. The General had risen; he found sitting upon a box that threatened to go to pieces at any moment inconsistent with such dignity as he felt could be mustered under the circumstances.

The newcomer came right up to them, and stopped. "You, he stated simply, in rich, vibrant tone, "are General Hoskins, Commander of the so-called Southern Army of Liberation."

The General felt vaguely uneasy. Usually at no loss for words, he felt distinctly at a disadvantage in the presence of this unusually compelling personality. He tried to tell himself that it was only the influence of Villiers' report, and that there was nothing to be afraid of in this man before him; he certainly was not going to allow himself to be browbeaten into ignominious submission as had Gozalez and his officers; but even as his thoughts tookshape he was conscious of a feeling of doubt. There was something so different about this man.

Uneasily he said, aloud, "You are right, stranger. I am Ike Hoskins. And who are you?"

"I am Joshua, Commander-in-Chief of Royal Nation Defense. You are my prisoner, General Hoskins!"

"The heck you are" replied the General wonderingly "and you have the colossal nerve to come into my camp -- What? he roared, as the significance of Joshua's second statement suddenly penetrated his mind. "What did you say about prisoners?"

Joshua regarded him sternly. "You have chosen to make unprovoked war upon us. One of the hazards of war is the risk of being taken prisoner. You have taken that risk and have incurred its penalty. You and your companions must regard yourselves as prisoners of war and obey my orders." He regarded them steadily for a moment. "Please take seats in my plane, immediately."

"I'll never -- " began the General wrathfully. Joshua looked him straight in the eyes. For a moment neither spoke, then the General shifted uneasily.

"Well, if you insist -- " he began weakly. Joshua made no reply but turned to look at the demented man, still hovering on the outskirts of

the little group. "Bring that poor creature along too" he said to the pilot. "We will put him in hospital and get him right again" and Colonel Collins, looking silently on, marveled at the depth of compassion that had suddenly suffused the clear voice.

Without another word the man in white had turned and was walking back to his plane. The pilot, close behind, was leading the madman. Collins and Hoskins looked at one another. "Better go. Ike" said the Colonel. "We're up against something bigger than we can understand, and anyway" looking doubtfully around "there's nothing to stay for here."

Silently the General turned and fell in beside his friend. Together they tramped in the wake of the others, arriving to find them already installed in capacious and comfortable seats. Hoskins climbed up first and then turned to help the Colonel up. The door closed: they had hardly settled down before the plane was in the air and circling for direction.

Redvers Collins looked interestedly about him. Joshua was sitting in the front of the plane, next to it's pilot. Unlike his chief, the latter was dressed in a loosely fitted suit of green, his mass of dark curly hair showing up in vivid contrast above. He chatted easily and freely with Joshua, and Collins noted with some surprise that they addressed each other by name in a spontaneously free and familiar fashion. There was evidently no differences in rank in the Royal Nation forces, thought the Colonel with a faint feeling of displeasure.

"Where are they taking us, d'ye think?" asked Hoskins of their own pilot. The young man looked out at the rapidly passing panorama and turned to the General. "We are almost at the Suez Canal, heading east, sir" he said. "Evidently we are being taken into the Holy Land."

Joshua left his seat and came along the plane, sitting down opposite to his passengers. His manner was genial and pleasant, his eyes friendly.

"You will find our method of treating prisoners of war a little different from your own traditional procedure" he began. "It will be for you to say whether it is more effective."

"What d'ye mean?" asked the General uneasily. "You're a civilized people, I hope? We shall be treated according to the rules of war, surely?"

The Commander-in-Chief smiled. "Come, General. You know the principles for which we stand. We do to our neighbors as we would they do to us. Have you never read your Bible?"

The General looked embarrassed. "Not much in my line" he confessed. "Been a soldier all my life, y'know."

Joshua smiled again. "I was a soldier -- of your kind -- once." He looked reminiscently over the spreading desert below them, the straight blue line of the Suez Canal cleaving it in two. "It was in this very territory below us that I served my apprenticeship. But I read my Bible -- as much of it as we had in those days -- and through that came to see, at last, the utter futility and iniquity of war waged as you wage it."

"A soldier, eh?" The General brightened up. He liked to talk to one of his own trade. Perhaps this man might turn out to be quite a decent fellow after all. "And how long ago was that?"

"About thirty-five hundred years. It was at the time of the Exodus from Egypt" came the reply.

"Oh -- er -- I see" mumbled the General. He was quiet for a time, looking at Joshua rather warily out of the corner of his eye as though not sure what he was going to do next.

Redvers Collins seemed ill at ease. He pulled his pipe out of his pocket, fingered it nervously, put it back, and then pulled it out again. "Do you mind if I smoke?" he asked of Joshua. "My nerves want a bit of steadying."

An understanding smile flashed across to him. "By all means, if it helps, Colonel Collins. We shall not be able to replenish your supply of tobacco -- we do not use the fragrant weed in the Holy Land -- but you will find the general atmosphere very conducive to a calm and contented frame of mind."

The Colonel paused, pipe in hand and lighted match poised in mid-air.

"In the middle of a war?" he asked incredulously.

Joshua threw back his head and laughed. "Don't you understand, Colonel Collins, that our faith that God will be our defense makes this war, as you call it, very much a one-sided affair? You will presently see for yourself that our national life is going on in measurably the same way as in normal times, except that our shipping routes have been temporarily cut by your blockade."

The Colonel got his pipe going to his satisfaction, and puffed meditatively for a few moments.

"You said you were a soldier thirty-five hundred years ago" he said at last. "Do you really mean that?"

"Of course. I do not make statements that are deliberately untrue." "No, no. Of course not" agreed the Colonel hurriedly. "But -- er -- dash it all, man, do you really expect me to believe it?"

The clear eyes were sympathetic. "You will believe it before many days are out, Colonel Collins."

Redvers Collins looked thoughtful. "See here" he said. "Do you happen to know a fellow named Joseph who says he lived thousands of years ago and has come back from the dead? Something to do with food production in your country, I believe."

"He is my very good friend, Colonel. You will meet him before very long."

The Colonel took out his tobacco pouch, considered for a moment, and returned it to his pocket. "I'm saving that" he declared. "My nerves are going to need a lot of steadying in the next few days."

Joshua glanced out of the plane. "We have crossed the frontier" he announced. "I want you to pay special attention to the country-side from now on.

General Hoskins had been growing increasingly restive and now he spoke with some impatience. "See here, Commander-in-Chief or whatever you are" he said "I guess we've got to accept the fact that we're your prisoners. Up to date you win on points. You've killed one of our Generals, driven another crazy, and taken me prisoner. How the heck you've done it, I don't know, but it's done. Now what are you going to do with us?"

Joshua was still watching the panorama spread out below. He spoke slowly, and as he spoke he brought his eyes round until he was looking directly into those of the other.

"General Hoskins, as Commander of the Invasion forces it is very desirable, from your point of view, that you have an intimate knowledge of the land you are trying to invade. We propose to give you that knowledge. We are going to show you our country, its agriculture and its industries, its cities and its villages, its people and its products, and when you have seen all that we can show you we are going to return you to your own people and leave you to continue your offensive -- if you wish. We are going to show you the utter futility of your mad attempt to fight against God -- but the decision as to whether you continue the fight or not must rest with you, and you alone."

His quiet voice ceased.

The General turned a thunderstruck face to Collins. "Redvers, old pard" he said "Tell me truly, am I Ike Hoskins or am I not? Is this fairy land or the world I know? Or am I going crazy like Gonzalez?"

Redvers Collins looked down at the scene below. The sun shone warmly on a green plain studded with the red roofs of houses and covered with myriads of black and brown specks, the vast herds of cattle for which this country was famous. To the south the land rose steeply toward the heights of a lofty mountain range. This was clothed with a warm mantle of living green, the outskirts of a vast forest. For a long time he gazed without speaking, and when he turned, he lifted serious eyes to his companion's face.

"Ike, old friend", he said "look down there. This is fairyland all right. And you're not going crazy. I heard what you heard. It doesn't fit your military strategy and they didn't teach it me that way at Sandhurst. But if this feller is going to show us all he's got and then turn us loose to use it against him -- well, then -- " he paused.

"Well what" enquired Ike irritably.

"Well" said Collins slowly "I should say, Ike old chap -- that you and I are -- batting on a sticky wicket -- that's all. Dammit, my pipe's gone out again." e fumbled in an embarrassed manner for his matches.

Joshua relieved a tense moment. "Will you allow me to tell you something about the country over which we are passing" he invited pleasantly. "The territory immediately below us is given over almost entirely to stock farming. It is from here that we derive the bulk of our milk and butter products, wool and hair for our clothing industries, and so on. We eat but little meat in the Holy Land; what we do require comes from here also. A fair amount of fruit and vegetable farming is carried on, and much of the produce is exported to needy countries."

The Colonel turned his eyes to the north. "There's the old Sinai railway" he exclaimed. "Traveled over that many a time in the old days. And there's El Arish, by Jove -- but its changed a lot."

Then others interestedly regarded the little town with the broad blue of the Mediterranean in the background. "It is a flourishing holiday resort now" observed Joshua. "You will see several new towns along the line presently, all devoted to the needs of holidaymakers from all over the

Holy Land. Of course our railway system is a great deal more extensive than in the days when you campaigned in this district, Colonel Collins."

A thought struck Ike Hoskins and he asked, elaborately casual, "How would one get to your towns farther north by land from Egypt, Commander?"

Joshua glanced at him. "If you mean by rail, General, it all depends on your starting point. You must be perfectly familiar with the line below us which follows the coast from Egypt and connects with the main line in Syria and New Anatolia."

"Yes, yes" responded the General "but I mean -- well, say we were coming from the camp by rail or road instead of by plane, and wanted to get to a place like, say, well, Rehovoth, for example?"

"From Phegium-el-Khel camp one would cross the Canal and pick up a car on the Southern Sinai line which runs eastward to Kadesh, thence north to Beer-Sheba and Renovoth. There is a service of through cars. Why do you ask, General Hoskins'?"

"Urn -- just curiosity" mumbled the General. He seemed ill at ease and avoided the candid, questioning gaze of Joshua. He was relieved when a door at the rear of the plane opened and a pleasant-faced girl appeared, interrupting their conversation with a word of apology and proceeding to fit up a small table between their chairs and to lay it as for a meal.

"You must be hungry, all of you" observed Joshua in explanation "and I have arranged therefore that you should lunch on the way to Jerusalem."

"That's uncommonly good of you, Commander" responded the General gratefully. "All this excitement had made me forget we lost our lunch at El Khel but now you come to mention it I do feel peckish. What do you say, Redvers?"

Collins made no reply. He was looking out of the window, pulling absent-mindedly at his pipe. Ike Hoskins plucked at his sleeve. "How about lunch, pard?" he insisted.

The Colonel turned round slowly, a look of perplexity on his face. "What I can't understand" he said, addressing himself to Joshua, "is how you got back."

"How I got back?" echoed the other in polite enquiry.

Colonel Collins took his pipe out and stabbed the air with it in emphasis. "What I mean is this" he explained. "Of course I know all about the stories of Christ raising from the dead -- Lazarus and so on -- and without ever thinking much about it, for I'm not a religious man, I always took it for granted; but all that was thousands of years ago and it's a very different thing to be confronted now with a man who tells me in cold blood that he has come back from the dead. And what I want to know is: how did you do it?" He stopped almost shamefacedly, as though entrapped into making a confession he had not intended to make.

Joshua was looking out of the window, apparently thinking deeply. He felt Collins' eyes fixed upon him and turned.

"Do you believe in God, Colonel Collins'?" he shot out abruptly.

"Why -- er -- yes, I suppose I do. Never thought much about it really, y'know" came the somewhat confused answer.

"You do believe, at any rate, that there is a kind of life after death, even if you are unable to give a philosophical reason for your belief?" pursued his questioner.

"To be sure I do. I'm no theologian, but I can't think somehow that death is the end of everything."

"So that some time after your own death you expect to reappear in a body adapted to the environment in which you find yourself?" persisted his interrogator.

"I suppose so." The Colonel was busy with knife and fork. "I don't want the twelve stone odd I've got now though. It's too susceptible to lumbago." He appeared to find the food on his plate of more than usual interest. "But I must say harps and trumpets aren't much in my line either. My training was in the cavalry, not the regimental band. And I still have a sneaking regard for the smell of moist earth which I would miss up there on the golden floor." He was busy with knife and fork again.

Joshua smiled tolerantly. "You will find things very different to that when the time comes, Colonel" he said. "But if you believe that there is a God of Whom you owe your present life and form, and further that you will by His power live again after death, can you not see that just as God clothed you with the body you now have, so in the resurrection, perhaps long after this body has returned to its dust, He can clothe you in a new body?"

"I suppose you are right" agreed the Colonel. "I take it you're trying to tell me that God gave you a new physical body and kind of put your life back into it?"

"Something like that" responded Joshua. "It certainly was not the old body; that one bore the scars of many battles and anyway was no approach to the physique which I now possess."

"I can see that, by golly. But what were you doing in the meantime? All those years, I mean. If this Exodus business was thirty-five hundred years ago you must have been lying about somewhere a pretty considerable time, if you understand what I mean."

The other smiled again. "If I tell you that to me the whole period was a sleep and that the moment of my resurrection was to me as the moment after I closed my eyes in death, would you understand?"

"That certainly does fill the time" admitted the Colonel. "So the old carcass went to the worms thirty-five centuries ago and God just fixed up a brand new body for you to wake up in when the time came. It sounds logical enough but it takes some believing. What do you think of it, Ike, old man?" he diverged unexpectedly, turning round to the General, who was eating a good lunch with an obviously bad grace.

Hoskins looked up. "What do I think of it?" he barked. "I'll say it's all baloney. I say this, Commander" he continued, turning to Joshua "I've gotta hand it to you boys for the way you've put it over. Raised from the dead to lead the nation; did anybody ever hear the like? You deserve to get away with it; by heck, you do. Don't think I'm blaming you; you've got to the top by sheer audacity and originality. What couldn't we have done with you in our own country: Mystery to me is how your people ever took it all in. I guess they must be easy. But listen, Commander" -- his good humor was returning as he steered the conversation into more normal channels -- "when this little business is over, if you get away without being lynched you come and see me and I'll see you fixed all right. Ike Hoskins isn't one to bear ill-will to a defeated enemy." He put down his glass and leaned back with a sigh of satisfaction.

A glint of humor lurked in the Commander-in-Chief's eyes. "The occasion is not likely to arise, General" he said, "but I can certainly guarantee that your sentiments are reciprocated."

Ike beamed expansively. "That's a cute little town over there in the trees" he observed. "What is it called?"

Joshua glanced over his shoulder. "That is Rehovoth, the center of the orange country."

"The heck it is!" The General looked across at Colonel Collins and met his warning glance. Heedlessly the General rushed on. "Looks a quiet little place; suppose nothing untoward ever happens there?"

"Not as a rule, General. We had a mysterious explosion there one night three weeks ago."

"You don't say? No damage done, I hope?"

"Only to the perpetrator of the explosion, General Hoskins." The voice had grown cold and stern, and the General felt uneasily that the easy familiarity which had been growing up between them had vanished. Once more he felt afraid of this man who could be so unbending and then in a moment become like a being from another world, commanding obedience.

Colonel Collins leaned forward quickly, a sudden expression of concern upon his face. "Was he h -- " he commenced, but Joshua had excused himself and gone forward quickly to the pilot. They could hear him conversing quietly with the youngster and presently the plane changed direction once more and began to fly due east.

"So he got there all right, Redvers" said the General in low tones. "Wonder what went wrong. Did he find the place and blow it up or did he bungle it?"

"I'm more concerned about the lad" confessed Collins in a worried voice. "I like that boy and it'll go hard with me if anything's happened to him."

"That's all in the game, buddy" returned the other. "I want to know if he's blown up that radio station. Wonder how we can find out?"

"If this feller says no damage was done it looks as though he failed to blow it up." asserted Collins thoughtfully.

"Anyway it seems that Villiers did find what he was after and at least had a go at it. So we were right. This defense by faith story is all moonshine, d'ye see?"

"Maybe you're right" grunted the Colonel. "But I wish I knew what has happened to young Villiers."

"We've got to get to Rehovoth, Collins" persisted the other, heedless of his companion's concern. "Somehow or other we've got to give this guy the slip and get down there to see for ourselves. That station has got to be located and destroyed; we shall never get going until we have done that."

The Colonel was gazing out of the window. "Look there, Ike;" he said. Together they peered forward. The plane had climbed considerably during the last few minutes and was now flying at five thousand feet. The land was higher too, and the scene below them was one of rugged hills and lofty peaks. They were traveling parallel with the course of the main road and a main line railway, both showing evidence of heavy traffic. Road and railway pointed invitingly together to the distant horizon, and as the General gazed he saw what had already attracted his friend's attention, the outskirts of a magnificent city outspread on the very highest levels of the mountains before them. The plane was rapidly drawing near, and Hoskins was, for once, temporarily bereft of speech as he gazed upon that beautiful creation of soaring towers and marble palaces. He let his eyes rest upon the green parks and gardens, the wealth of trees in the streets, the shimmer of clear water here and there. The plane had climbed still higher and now the whole of the city was spread out to view, cradled in the tops of the mountains, surrounded on all sides by shining walls of pink limestone, broken here and there by magnificent towered gateways through which main roads passed to run straightly over the hills until they were lost in the far distance.

Hoskins spoke, and his voice was unusually hushed. "Say, that's a swell city" he murmured. His words had in them almost a tone of reverence. "Looks like as if it belongs to fairyland; doesn't fit this old earth, somehow." Joshua came along the plane at that moment and his eyes lighted up as he caught the last words. "Do you know what city that is, General?" he asked softly, and Colonel Collins, looking up at him suddenly, caught a glimpse of the light in his eyes. The General looked confused, as though abashed at being surprised in a moment of weakness. "I sure do not, Commander" he said "but by heck, I've never seen a finer. What place is it?" He was still gazing, as though enthralled at the majestic buildings beneath him.

Joshua was silent for a moment; then, "That is Jerusalem, the city of the great King, the city of peace; capital city of our land and destined to be one day the capital city of the earth." His words came reverently.

"Is that -- so?" was the slow answer. Ike Hoskins turned from the window and lowered himself into his chair. "We are planning to destroy that city" he said, still slowly, drumming his fingers on the table. He looked toward Joshua, standing easily in the center of the cabin, looking down upon him.

"Why don't you give in now, Commander?" he urged, almost pleadingly, "and save that lovely place from what is coming to it. You've got all the world against you; you must know you haven't got a chance. You're a reasonable guy; let's get down to terms here and now and I'll go back with the agreement in my pocket."

Joshua turned. "And you, Colonel Collins? What do you say?"

The Colonel's eye was roving over the panorama below. He saw the University, the most notable seat of learning in the world since the failure and dispersion of the older Western universities. His eyes roamed over the spacious courts and building of the Temple and the Beth-el, sat like a golden jewel in the midst of the city. He watched the groups of dots that were men and women, thronging its stairways and porches, on their way to prayer for the preservation and defense of their country. He looked beyond the further side of the city, and down in the valley he could see the blue waters of the Dead Sea -- dead no longer, but alive now with the multitudes who visited the pleasure resorts on its shores and dotted its waters, alive with the great fertilizer extraction works at its northern and southern ends, alive with the activities surrounding the finely designed power stations on its western banks, where sea-water conduits from the Mediterranean, forty miles away, emptied their shining load, first to generate electricity for farms and dwellings, and then to add their quota to the chemical-laden waters from which the land drew rich supplies of fertilizing salts. He brought his pipe out and deliberately began to fill

it. "I'm reserving judgment" he said thoughtfully. "I want to see a bit more of this country before I say anything else."

Joshua smiled. "You are a wise man, Colonel Collins. And now, will you both get ready to alight? We're over the airport and will be landing almost immediately."

They had crossed the city and the pilot was describing a wide curve calculated to bring him back over its northern outskirts. A wide carpet of green, flanking the northern wall, lay below them. The plane descended steadily, the green carpet came up to meet it, and almost imperceptibly the motion ceased and they were on firm ground.

The girl who had cared for their meal came forward from the rear cabin, opened the plane door and dropped lightly to the soft turf, standing then by the open door. Joshua followed, equally nimbly. He turned to extend a helping hand to the General, balancing somewhat uncertainly on the step. "I bid you welcome" he said evenly, "welcome to Jerusalem, the City of Peace."

Chapter 10 MISSION OF PEACE

"I have got to leave Rehovoth Miriam."

The girl looked up, startled.

"Leave Rehovoth? But why, Hugh?"

Her companion did not answer at once. He was looking across the pleasant garden toward the houses of the town, nestled between the dark foliage of the trees. The first place in the world where he had known true happiness, he mused; a place to be forever remembered. He looked down at the girl by his side and met her questioning eyes, and held them.

Four weeks in Rehovoth had made a wonderful difference to Hugh Villiers. The old hard eyes, the cynical demeanor, were gone, their place taken by a frank, confident expression that well fitted 'the healthy glow of his cheeks and the strong, easy walk. His rapid progress to recovery had surprised even the optimistic Jacob Friedman, and now he looked fit and well -- more so, in fact -- than ever he had been in his old days at school.

"Tell me, Hugh" urged the girl again. "What has happened? Why must you leave Rehovoth?"

"Did you imagine I would stay here for ever?" he asked teasingly.

His companion considered. "I don't know that I thought about it much" she confessed. "I just accepted the fact that you were here and left it at that."

He looked away from her questioning eyes. "I have been asked to undertake a mission into enemy territory on behalf of the Royal Nation." He spoke slowly.

She drew in her breath sharply. "That means danger. Oh Hugh, will you take it?"

He looked down at her again. "Would you have me refuse?"

Her voice was low but clear. "I would be very sorry if you did refuse."
"Then I am more than ever glad that I have accepted."

Her voice was low still. "What have you to do?"

He began to pace the grass. "I must execute a commission that involves a journey through the Northern forces' lines on the eastern frontier, to make a personal contact that is very important. But why do you say it means danger? If I am one of the Royal Nation will not the same protection be over me that has been over you?"

She stirred the gravel with her feet. "Only if your faith holds firm, Hugh. It is a newfound faith, as yet untried. If it breaks down; if, when you are away from us, you change your mind -- there is the danger, Hugh."

His face was grave. "I think I see what you mean. My professed faith means nothing until it has been put to the test and found worthy."

"That is so, Hugh."

His mouth set in hard resolution. "Then the sooner I get away on my mission and prove myself the better. After all, I owe the Nation some recompense for the atrocious mess I made of Renovoth Heath. Are you coming down to the Council House with me? I have to collect my final instructions, and then be off."

She laughed and linked her arm in his. "You won't bungle this mission like you did the last, will you, Hugh?" she questioned teasingly. "The Northern forces might not be so agreeable about it as we have been."

"I am pretty certain they would not" he responded grimly, and then, glancing at the graceful figure by his side "and their company would by no means be so congenial as I have found in this town."

She colored slightly and made no reply.

"Miriam" began Hugh impetuously. The girl hastily interrupted him. "Hugh, you do realize the significance of your mission, don't you?"

"Why, yes. It will be a tricky job getting through the Northern forces' lines, but I have done that sort of thing before. Then I have to make my way to an old boy going by the name of the Emir Ibrahim, persuade him to stand fast by his agreement with the Royal Nation despite the Northerners' pressure -- something to do with irrigation canals, Miriam -- and get back again with his answer. Simple enough really."

"Unless anything happens to cause you to lose faith. Do you realize, Hugh, that if that occurs, you will never come back?"

"Never come back?" He echoed her words, sobering.

"You see, Hugh" insisted Miriam, "you have quite sincerely given yourself to the service of God and the Royal Nation and you are certain in yourself that you believe. But everything here is conducive to belief. Not until you have believed against the apparent failure of the things that are seen, not until you believe, and continue to believe, because you know God, and because that you know that God is true, and that His promise cannot possibly fail, will your faith be of the kind that adds its quota to the defense of our country. Not until then can we know that you are truly one of us."

"I see" said Hugh slowly. "I must prove myself on the field of battle. Is that it?"

Miriam stole a sideways glance at his serious profile. "That is it" she said, and added simply "I think that must be why they have chosen you to go." His jaw was set obstinately. "I shall go, and I shall return, Miriam.

If I fall into the hands of the Northerners, well, I shall remember the stories of your own ancient history when men trusted in God, seemingly without hope, and were delivered." A thought struck him

and he spoke in a lower tone. "I shall remember the day I saw you for the first time. That shall give me all the fortitude I need, Miriam."

She was crying now. "It isn't that" she whispered, shaking her dark hair. "You will be brave enough in that way, Hugh. That isn't the danger." He was perplexed. "What is it then?"

She lifted her face, solemn in its earnestness. "Suppose when you are away there, beyond Euphrates, away from the Holy Land, suppose evidence is brought to you, evidence that seems absolutely conclusive to you, that the enemy has begun to achieve his designs and is conquering the Holy Land? Suppose it seems to you that despite the rightness of our cause, that cause is lost, that God has failed in the end to deliver. Would you believe then?"

He stood still, the light of a new understanding dawning in his eyes. "I -- see" he said slowly. "I have to believe because I have witnessed with my own eyes the reality of Divine deliverance. I have believed on the evidence of my own senses. Now you are telling me that that is not sufficient. I have got to believe, not because I see that God is saving, but because I know that God will save!"

She nodded. "You have to believe first in earthly things, Hugh, but after that you must believe in heavenly things."

He was thoughtful. "You have asked a hard thing, my dear. I must see all that I have witnessed and heard dissolve into chimera, and say, 'Nevertheless, I believe because God is true'. I do not know that I can ever reach that height, Miriam."

"Then" she said sadly "you will never return to Rehovoth."

He looked at her across the short distance that separated them. "By the grace of God" he said, "I will build my faith. I will return." In two swift steps he was by her side and had taken her two hands in his own. "Will you pray for me?" he asked.

"Every day, until you return in safety" she whispered.

His grasp tightened.

"Miriam, I want to ask you a question."

Adroitly she slipped out of his hold and turned to look over the parapet of the bridge.

"Not now, Hugh. When you come back!"

He had followed her and gently turned her to him again. "This is an important one, Miriam. I want to take the answer with me. It will give me strength."

Her clear eyes looked unflinchingly into his. "You must not ask me your question until you come back. You must go, and return, in the strength of God, and in that alone. And you must know to -- " she hesitated a little and then went on in lower tones "that my life and my whole being is given over irrevocably to the service of God and of the Royal Nation, and until I know of a surety that you will likewise be standfast I cannot" -- she faltered and buried her face in her hands -- "I cannot answer your question."

Villiers' voice was low. He bent his head toward her so that his lips almost touched her hair.

"Do you know what my question is, Miriam?"

He could just hear her muffled reply.

"Yes, I know what your question is."

He was silent for a moment; then "and I may ask it when I come back'?"

He took the two soft hands gently into his own, held them for a moment, and then, as gently releasing them, turned and strode quickly away. At the bend in the pathway he stopped and looked round. She was standing where he had left her, looking after him. His gaze

lingered for a moment, and then the trees obscured her from his sight as he moved away, turned and walked smartly down the woodland pathway, across the road and up to the broad drive leading to the Council House.

Jacob Friedman met him at the door. "Come along, lad" cried the breezy doctor. "They are waiting for you."

"And who may 'they' be?" enquired Hugh as he walked with his guide across the entrance hall with its paving of colored marbles and its magnificent paintings of stirring events in the Nation's ancient history. "Do you know, Jacob" he broke off irrelevantly as his eyes fell upon them "I am learning as much about the Nation's past by looking at the wealth of paintings as you have in Rehovoth as by other means."

"That is what they are for" observed Friedman. "We try to harness every form of art to the end of instructing our citizens in the story of our glorious past and the prospect of our still more glorious future. As to your question -- well, here we are. You will soon know now." He pulled aside a curtain and Hugh found himself in the audience chamber.

Accustomed to quick and accurate observation, Hugh had time in the first moment of his entry to sight the magnificent tapestry adorning the end of the room and depicting the town of Rehovoth at its foundation several generations earlier. The work had been done by some of the earliest settlers in their old age and presented to the town as a memorial to the early endeavors of the pioneers. Hugh found himself marveling at the change which had taken place -- the first settlement was a well-planned and attractive little colony but as Hugh thought of the town he had come to know in the past few weeks he became conscious of a feeling of amazement that so much could have been accomplished in so relatively few years. A thrill of pride ran through him as he remembered that he too was now a citizen of this Nation and he followed Friedman across the room toward the tapestry, noting as he did so the golden words emblazoned high up near the ceiling "Except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it."

Two men were sitting in easy chairs. They both were dressed in the white garments which Hugh knew by now distinguished the Princes of the Nation. Each wore the tiny six-pointed gold star, the insignia of their office. The man on the left raised his eyes and Hugh gave a start of recognition. It was Joshua!"

Joshua rose and came forward, extending his hand in greeting. "We meet again, Hugh Villiers, my friend" he said quietly "and under infinitely happier circumstances, praise God." His eyes were warm and friendly, and his handgrip firm and sincere. Hugh felt instantly that he was in the presence of a leader whom he could trust implicitly, and would be proud to serve.

He looked interestedly at the other man as they all seated themselves. Of the same apparent age as Joshua, of an equally splendid physique, he gave the impression, not so much of tremendous physical vitality as did Joshua, but of a vast reserve of calm intellectual strength. In his eyes there shone the vision of the prophet, and Hugh felt within himself that here was a man whose store of wisdom and knowledge was vast indeed. He too had greeted Hugh in the same warm unconventional way, and now Joshua leaned forward with a word of explanation.

"Prince Daniel has come to Rehovoth today especially to see you, Hugh, and to give you the necessary information connected with your mission. And then you will tell me should you wish to withdraw from your undertaking. You must pursue this venture in full faith, or not at all." He smiled and leaned back in his chair.

Daniel spoke slowly, his eyes fixed upon Hugh.

"It will be no news to you that the Northern Forces Command has concentrated an enormous number of men upon our eastern frontier, that is, along the whole length of the eastern bank of the Euphrates. Now that of itself does not concern us; if we maintain our faith they will never do us harm, even if they should succeed in crossing the river into our territory, which is unlikely. But we are concerned about our friend and ally, Emir Ibrahim of the Arabic Coalition. For many years,

ever since the troubles between our people were satisfactorily settled, Emir Ibrahim has ruled the country east of the Euphrates. He is an enlightened and upright man, but with the Northern forces occupying much of his country he is in the difficult position. They are putting pressure on him to intercept our supply of water from the Mesopotamian irrigation system, and since the destruction of the Urfa Dam we are almost entirely dependent upon that system for our supplies in the Wheat Belt. We want you to make your way to Emir Ibrahim's capital at Asshur, on the upper Tigris, talk with him fully and frankly, tell him what you know of the progress of events since the world opened war upon us, and reinforce his shaking faith to the best of your ability. Obtain his assurance that the water supplies will be maintained, and return to us with that assurance."

Daniel moved over to the table and returned with a folded packet. "Here is a map of the district you must traverse, some essential information regarding your journey and a letter of introduction to the Emir. The Northern forces are operating suppressors on our audiovisor wave-lengths so that we have been unable to talk with him direct, but that letter will be sufficient. Do you speak Arabic?"

"I'm afraid not" confessed Hugh.

"Confine yourself to Hebrew, then, whilst in friendly company. You will find everyone understands that. If you fall in with any of the enemy you will know best in what language to talk to them. Now go -- and may the power of God protect you in all danger and bring you safely back. You are a citizen of the Royal Nation -- whilst you maintain your faith and trust you cannot fail."

Hugh left the building with Friedman. The kindly old doctor shook hands with him heartily as he climbed into the plane that was to take him to the eastern frontier. "Stand by you decision, lad," he said earnestly. "Remember, this thing is true. No matter how fantastic and fanciful it may seem to you when you get away from us -- and it may very well take on a dream-like aspect then, you know -- hold fast to your new-found faith and remember that we here in Rehovoth are

waiting for your return -- one of us especially"; and his eyes twinkled mischievously.

"Thanks, Jacob, friend" returned Hugh, looking down from the cabin. "I owe a great deal to you, and -- I shall not forget" and then the plane was in the air and he saw Jacob no more.

Perhaps it was as well for Hugh that the next few hours afforded him little opportunity for thinking of the town and the friends he had left behind. The plane dropped him a mile from the Euphrates and not far from Deir-el-Zor. He was in the middle of the great Wheat Belt and in consequence homesteads and human beings were few and far between. He followed a narrow irrigation canal until he came to the river itself, rolling sluggishly onward between its great retaining banks. It was only when he reached the edge that he realized the river was now in fact a giant canal; he ransacked his brain to recall what he had read in former years of the mighty engineering project which now enabled the largest ocean-going ships to traverse this splendid waterway all the way from the Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf. For a long while he lay in the waving grass at the river's verge and viewed through his field glasses the opposite bank, twelve hundred feet away. That side, he knew, marked the territory of the Arabic Coalition, and on that side were encamped the many thousands of the Northern Republic's soldiers, and he must make his way through the belt of land occupied by those soldiers without being seen, or his mission would be frustrated at its outset. So he lay, watching and pondering, whilst the sun passed overhead and sank in a blaze of glory in the west, and it was when Hugh Villiers rolled over on his back and viewed that golden radiance flooding the land which he now owned as his, and thought of Rehovoth and all that had happened there, that a new feeling found its way into his heart and he closed his eyes and prayed to his God, prayed for strength and guidance in the task that lay before him and the safe return to those he loved. And as the rim of the sun sank below the wheat fields and the golden glory gave place to grey twilight he slipped gently into the flowing waters and swam with swift, decisive strokes to the other side.

Chapter 11 TREACHERY

The General stopped in his tracks, irresolute.

"I don't like it, Redvers, "he declared.

The Colonel stopped too and eyed his friend doubtfully. The General was certainly not looking too good.

"You're loosing your grip, Ike" he concluded at last. "This country is getting you, like it's got me."

"It's not that, Redvers, old pard -- " The General broke off suddenly, as Joshua, conscious of the delay, turned and came back to them. "Is something the matter, General?" he enquired.

Ike Hoskins looked sheepish. "Well, not exactly, but -- to tell you the truth, Commander -- I feel a bit squeamish about meeting this President of yours. Ought to know better, I suppose, but -- is it really necessary, d'you think?"

Joshua smiled slightly. "A man of your distinction, General Hoskins, can hardly be allowed to leave our country without having been received by its President. Moreover, now that you have seen all that we can show you, he will want to know what you think about it."

"If he hopes to find me converted" grumbled the General "he'll be mighty disappointed. All right, Commander, lead on. If it's got to be done, let's get it over."

Joshua resumed his quick walk along the carpeted corridor. At the end he pulled aside a heavy curtain and motioned his companions to enter. It was the General who went through first. As he did so he was briefly conscious of a spacious, sunlit room, simply furnished. Opposite the door by which he had entered there stretched a wide, lofty window, commanding an extensive view of the streets and buildings of Jerusalem backed by the rising ground of the Mount of Olives, and the green cypresses massed over the crest of the Mount reaching their soft

foliage into the clear blue sky. In front of the window there was a large, flat-topped desk, and behind the desk a white-clad figure, now in the act of rising from his seat to welcome the newcomers.

The General's gaze went instinctively to the small gold star on the left breast; then the owner of the star had come forward without formality or ceremony, a smile of welcome lightening the apparently habitual gravity of his face. Even in this land of splendid physical types, and judged moreover by comparison with his own brother-princes, the President bore the stamp of physical and intellectual leadership. His eyes, clear, grey and candid, pierced the General, as the latter thought to himself, like rapiers. And yet they were warm eyes, glowing with friendliness and feeling, as though their owner had understanding and sympathy for all men on the earth everywhere. The mouth too, was smiling; and the smile was sincere; it was one to inspire confidence. But there was a firmness about that mouth too, as though its owner had seen and experienced for himself what men could be and could do and would not suffer them to thwart his purpose. The General suddenly realized with something of a shock that he was in the presence of a man of steel -- not a ruthless, implacable tyrant like Vladimir Stanislav, but one nevertheless whose will was inflexible and who possessed a confidence and a source of hidden strength that the Northern leader had never manifested; nor yet any other man whom the General had ever known. A swift doubt shot through his mind, and try as he might, he could not repulse it. Who were these men, anyway, possessors of such undoubted superiority of intellect and physique over ordinary mortals? Even in their own land there were none to approach them; beside his own countrymen they would appear like gods made flesh -- if there were such things as gods. There was no doubt they were beloved of the people; the nation as a whole was solidly behind them; they were quite evidently in full possession of the reins of power and not likely to lose them. And he had not, even now, solved the secret of their influence nor how they had kept the country's defenses intact against their enemies' assaults. He grew more irritable as the conundrum worried his mind and he realized that in a few moments he must speak to this man. It was with gathering bellicosity that he faced the keen eyes looking into his own.

"General Hoskins" -- the voice was rich and pure, and almost caressingly gentle; but the undercurrent of firmness was there. Oddly though, words that he had heard as a very small boy, where or how he knew not, came unbidden into his mind. "What went ye out into the wilderness for to see? -- a reed shaken by the wind? A prophet? Yes, and I say unto you, more than a prophet." This man, he thought to himself, must be more than a prophet -- he shook himself impatiently and endeavored desperately to break the spell that seemed to have settled upon him since coming into this room. Collins, he noticed was looking at him oddly, and Joshua too, with a look in his eyes almost of sympathy. Sympathy for Ike Hoskins, he thought angrily. What in the heck was the matter with him? He tried again to look with something of his old assurance at the man before him; encountering once more the keen scrutiny of those grey eyes, he faltered and gave up the attempt.

"You are about to return to your own people" the calm voice was saying. "I asked Joshua" -- a smile of rare understanding flashed between the two Princes -- "to bring you to see me before you leave that you might tell me whether, after all that you have seen in our land, you are now persuaded that your campaign against us is hopeless."

The General paused a moment before replying. He felt better now -- in some indefinable way this man had put him entirely at his ease without any degree surrendering his manifest control of the situation. The General tried to remember that he was the principal representative of the Western world in this land and that it would never do to display weakness. He must assert his position and hold it. He tried to look militant -- he hoped he was succeeding -- as he stood stiffly erect before the supreme leader of his country's enemies.

"Before we talk, Mr. President" he boomed "I must know who you are, you know me; Ike Hoskins, soldier. We, over there" -- he jerked a thumb in the direction which he devoutly hoped was approximately due west -- "have heard a lot about you in recent years, but no one has ever been able to say who you are or where you came from. All we can find out is that this country has a President who knows how to run things, but of you yourself we know nothing, not even your name.

You've even got our best newspaper men beat!" He stopped and relaxed a little, breathing heavily.

The President regarded him thoughtfully. He seemed to be weighing up the pros and cons of a situation.

"It matters little who I am personally" he said at last. "I am but a voice, to encourage and exhort the people of God in their struggle for freedom; a herald, to declare the coming of the better day wherein my Lord Christ will rule in judgment and justice even for ever; a messenger to prepare the way of the Lord and make his paths straight. But there is no reason why you should not know my name. I am John the Baptist."

The General stood, open-mouthed. "John the Baptist" he echoed incredulously. "But -- but you can't be. He -- lost his head years ago. I remember reading about it when I was a boy." He looked about him a little uncertainly and sat down heavily on the nearest armchair. Collins, he noticed dully, was in the act of behaving similarly.

John smiled. "That is no reason why you should lose yours, General. I assure you that I am he." His smile faded into gravity tinged with sadness. "Perhaps, General, if you had continued your reading into manhood you would not stand where you stand today. But of that more soon. Tell me now, what has your sojourn in our land taught you?"

The General cleared his throat uneasily. He had not expected so direct an approach, even although he had long since discovered that the hypocritical politeness and evasive diplomacies of the Western world were entirely absent from the councils of this land. He had found these men transparently sincere and truthful, and he had found the fact most disconcerting. As he looked at the President, now, he became conscious once more of that secret misgiving that had possessed his mind at times during these past few weeks.

"Well, I'll say, Mr. President" he heard himself saying "that you sure have shown me a lot of wonderful things. Yes, sir, you have built up a

marvelous country and you deserve credit for that. You can tell the world Ike Hoskins says so. But as for persisting in this mad philosophy of yours; why, no, sir! You'll have to cave in. You just can't run the world on love. You may have got things as they are by sheer force of personality, but even you, Mr. President, will have to hand in your checks one day, and after they've shoveled in the earth what is going to become of this fantastic experiment of your?"

John regarded him in silence for a moment. "Will you not believe, General Hoskins, that the time of life has come, that I and those with me have returned from the grave to die no more? Do you not know that Christ died that all might eventually live, and that the time has now come, and it is at hand, for those that are in their graves to hear His voice, and come forth, some to the resurrection to life, and some, General Hoskins, to a resurrection of judgment?" The quiet voice had become suddenly stern and the General fidgeted, embarrassed.

"I don't know what you mean" he said uneasily. "I have never heard before of men rising from the grave and I certainly never heard of men who lived forever. But I'm no whale on theology; I'm a soldier, and I do know that somehow or other we've got to stop this whole business. It's too fantastic for words." He stirred restlessly in his chair. "Do you mind if I walk about a bit, Mr. President. I feel kinda restless." He got up and went over to the window, standing there and gazing down upon the city.

John's voice followed him. "Do you know of any other country in the world where so much has been achieved in so short a time, where the people are so happy and prosperous, where crime is practically unknown and personal liberty so great?"

"Well, no, I guess I don't."

"You visited our University here in Jerusalem. You went into the village schools and saw the children at their lessons. You saw our research students at work in the scientific institutions at Haifa and Beth-sepher. Have you ever seen, in all the world outside, such a

passion for education, such a desire to seek the truth for the truth's sake?"

"We don't believe so much in education nowadays" said the General sullenly. "Puts ideas into people's heads. Makes 'em dissatisfied with their station in life."

"From what I know of the Western world, I do not wonder" responded the President gravely. "You must remember that your system of education based altogether upon human self sufficiency, and ignoring God, produces men and women intent upon using their knowledge only for purely selfish purposes -- to gain wealth, advancement, or power. It is a case of each for himself and the devil take the hindmost, and the result is strife and anarchy. Our teaching places God and the worship of God in the centre, seeks to instruct men and women in the way of life which is the Divine ideal for every man. The whole purpose of our training is to inspire the student with the desire to live his life as God intends it shall be lived, in the service of his fellows and in the willing acceptance of all the obligations of citizenship; and to show him how to do so. Our people accept the unpleasant tasks of life willingly, because they perform them as a service to God and their neighbors. Yours have to be compelled. That is the difference."

"Maybe you're right" mumbled the General. "But it must be a heck of a strain living up to these high falutin' ideals. Wouldn't like to try it at my time of life; too much of a shock."

Collins broke into the conversation in the endeavor to save his friend further embarrassment.

"See here, Mr. President, we've seen no police and no army since we've been here, and in all the educational institutions your people showed us we found no police college and no army school. Why is that?"

"Naturally, Colonel Collins, in a land which has no need of army or police force we need make no provision for training or recruitment."

"You don't really mean to tell us that crime is non-existent in this country?" The President looked at his puzzled face sympathetically.

"For many years now we have experienced only petty delinquencies and quite often the offender is repentant of his misdeed almost immediately it has been committed. Such violations of our code of conduct are tried by local courts in each village or community, and the case is not closed until the offender has acknowledged the justice of the sentence imposed and has willingly accepted it. The pressure of public opinion which is so heavily weighted in favor of righteousness has as profound an effect in that direction as does the public opinion of your own lands in the opposite direction."

"It sounds all right, the way you put it" grumbled the General, coming back from the window "but it's all mighty incomprehensible to me."

"And what of our industries and our engineering achievements?" enquired John, addressing himself now to Collins.

"That tunnel in Syria through which you let the Mediterranean Sea into the Jordan to generate electric power is a stunner" said the Colonel. "But what I want to know is, where does all the water go?"

John smiled. "It runs into the Dead Sea and is there evaporated by the heat of the sun. There is nothing to prevent the process going on for ever."

"Unless we succeed in smashing up the intake, instead of bungling the job as our airmen did at the start" suggested General Hoskins. He had taken up his stand at the window again.

"No plane ever built could have weathered that storm" observed John quietly. "The stars in their courses were fighting against you."

The General opened his mouth to reply, and suddenly checked himself, standing rigid. His eyes, turned toward the street below, registered, in succession, incredulity, amazement, and then determination. He swung round and came back to the group round the

desk, endeavoring with scant success to suppress visible evidence of rising excitement.

"I guess you'll think me mighty rude, Mr. President" he boomed "but do you mind if I take a turn around the blocks while you talk to Collins here? I feel I want some air. Say half-an-hour, maybe?"

John regarded him calmly, an unfathomable look in his eyes.

"Certainly, General Hoskins" he replied. "Go, by all means."

The General was almost through the door as the last words were leaving John's lips. He walked briskly along the corridor and across the ante-room, nodded familiarly to the custodian at the outer door and hurried down the wide marble steps to the level of the street below. More than one questioning glance was turned towards his uniform as he threaded his way through the crowds, but he heeded nothing in a very manifest haste to reach his objective. Crossing the wide square which lay in front of the President's Council Hall, he turned up a side street and entered a door a few yards along. An attendant looked up enquiringly as he strode in.

"I want Mr. Bodenheimer" he barked at the youth.

"There is no one of that name in this building."

"The heck there is. I was looking out of the President's window and I saw him come in here. Short man, stout, peculiar walk. Guess I'd know it a mile off!"

"That is Mr. Nadab. He went upstairs just now. You'll find him on the fourth floor. The lift is down."

About to move in the direction indicated, the General checked himself and looked again toward the attendant.

"Say, what is this joint anyhow?"

"Joint?" The lad looked puzzled.

"Place, Building. What goes on here?"

"Export trade, this is the commercial office building. Mr. Nadab has the fourth floor. He is something to do with textile exports."

The General was already inside the gate. "Fourth" he said briefly. The lift shot upwards and he found himself standing alone in a carpeted corridor. Behind closed doors he could hear the murmur of voices. He looked about him uncertainly, and choosing the door from behind which the murmur appeared to proceed, he rapped smartly. The voices stopped suddenly, and there was silence.

A door farther along the passage opened, and a suave young man looked out. His eyes grew rounder as he surveyed the General's burly figure and he stepped out into the corridor, closing the door carefully behind him. "Er -- shalom" he said uncertainly. "Can I help you?"

"Good afternoon" returned the General. "I want to see Mr. Nadab. I know he's here; I saw him come in."

"I'm afraid we know no one of that name" said the suave young man, a trifle anxiously. "If you would state your business I could find out if someone will see you."

"See here, young feller" roared the General, completely forgetting that he was not at present in his own country "cut that out and tell Bodenheimer his old pard Ike Hoskins is around here and stops here until he sees him." The stentorian voice echoed along the corridor and the suave young man visibly wilted.

"I'm afraid -- " he began helplessly, and broke off as the door upon which the General had at first knocked was flung open and a rotund figure bounced out, literally dancing round the wrathful soldier.

"Ike, my dear boy" enthused the newcomer, beaming upon the object of his attention, "where have you come from, what are you doing here,

and how did you find me out?" He turned in a swift aside to the suave and now considerably relieved young man. "It is all right, Maurice. This gentleman is a trusty friend of mine, and -- he is with us." Maurice murmured a conventional word of apology and discreetly melted back into the doorway from which he had emerged. The rotund one was half pulling, half pushing the weighty frame of the General into the room, talking excitedly the while. "But why are you here?" he was asking. "We thought you were on the Southern frontier and we have greatly puzzled been that you had not yet made an effort to reach us here and settle this troublesome business for good and all." They had crossed the outer room by now and Hoskins followed his friend through another door opening upon a large office in which, seated round a table, were a dozen men, looking, as the General instantly noticed with a feeling of wonder, more frightened than any men he had seen in many months. They were certainly the first he had met in this Holy Land to betray any feeling other than that of quiet confidence. Pushed into a chair by his excitable guide, he looked up to find himself the cynosure of all eyes. The rotund one was speaking again, addressing the company at large.

"This, gentlemen, is General Hoskins, Commander of the Army of Liberation. How he got here and what he is doing here I do not know, and I will ask him to enlighten us, but in the meantime let me tell you that he has been a good friend for many years and that his coming here today is a most fortunate event for us -- most fortunate indeed." He beamed around the table and sat down, mopping his brow with a gaily colored handkerchief. A thought struck him and he looked up again and toward the General. "And while I have it in mind, my friend Ike, please to remember that in this country my name is not Bodenheimer; it is Nadab. There are reasons." He assumed a mysterious air and waved the General to proceed.

"There's not much to say, I guess" began the visitor. "My pard Collins and I got ourselves captured by a guy named Joshua and were brought here for a kind of Cook's tour of the country. After that we are to be taken to the coast and sent out by plane to the blockade fleet to rejoin our people. Seems all crazy to me, but this guy Joshua doesn't seem to worry about letting us go. I was having an interview with the President

and from his window I spotted Bodie here crossing the square and diving into this building. So I followed. But tell me, Larry, what in thunder are you boys doing here? You don't belong to this Royal Nation crowd, I'll take a bet. I can see it in your faces."

Bodenheimer took it upon himself to reply. He leaned forward earnestly.

"You see before you in this room, Ike" -- his tone was lower and considerably less excited now -- "a circle of Holy Land business men who are planning to sabotage the present Administration from within. Do not think we want to see this land destroyed; far from it; we find life here exceedingly pleasant, and business can be brisk -- oh yes, very brisk indeed once certain hindrances have been removed. And we look to you and to your friends the Northern forces to remove them for us. And we will play our part -- oh yes, a very essential part. We -- "

"The trouble with you, Nadab, is that you talk too much" interrupted a harsh voice from the head of the table. "Listen to me, General Hoskins. You say you have been on tour in this country. Then you have seen and heard something of the apparent immunity enjoyed by this people on account of their alleged faith in God." Ike nodded. The speaker went on. "Frankly, we don't believe it. As hard-headed business men such nonsense does not enter into our calculations. But we have been obliged to recognize the facts. Both your forces and the Northern forces have been unable to effect an entrance. For reasons which are not apparent you have not succeeded in getting across the frontier. Now we are not at all keen on experiencing a full-scale invasion. Upsets the country; not good for trade. But we do want to get these Princes of God, as people call them, out of office and out of the way. They have stopped all our most profitable lines of business and virtually killed our export trade. Edward Jevons was fool enough to defy them and he got himself expelled from the country. We had the good sense to lie low and wait for better times; that is why we are here now -- "

"Now it is you that is doing the too much talking" interposed Bodenheimer, jumping up and down in his seat excitedly. "The long

and the short of it is, my friend Ike, that we have found a way of getting your invading forces across the frontier -- "

"The heck you have?" boomed Hoskins in surprise. The others sh -- shd him to silence and the tall dark man at the end went across to the door and looked out into the corridor. They heard him retracing his steps across the ante-room and watched him resume his seat.

"All right" he said briefly.

"It is necessary to be discreet" explained Bodenheimer.

"Sorry, pards" said the General a little shamefacedly. "More used to the camp than the office, y'know. But this about getting across the frontier?" The harsh-voiced man resumed.

"We have found a community of farmers on the Euphrates frontier, near the south side of the Syrian plain, who do not share this so-called faith in God -- provided defense. They farm the land and count themselves members of this Holy Nation because, like us" and he laughed softly "it pays them well to do so. They keep within the laws, even more so than we do ourselves; at least they do not get found out" and he laughed again. "And so they find life very good, there in the Syrian plain, even as we do here in Jerusalem, at least when our trading methods are not being interfered with by the Administration. And so we have found much in common with these simple farming folk. We have found, too, that they are afraid" he paused impressively "deadly afraid, of the Northern soldiers who line the opposite bank of the river, even although those soldiers have not as yet been able to cross, or at least have not made the attempt at that particular point. And in all the land those are the only people we can find, with rare exceptions, who are afraid." He stopped and looked at Hoskins as if expecting comment.

"Well?" asked the General irascibly.

"Do you not realize what that means?" The question shot out. "I'll buy it" responded the General. "What does it mean?"

"This" came the answer. "It means that the psychological barrier of whatever it is that seems to hold the invading forces in check at all other points does not exist in the village of Chats-magor. It means that with a little careful internal planning the Northerners could cross the river there and march straight upon Jerusalem."

The General sat, thunderstruck. "By jiminy" he said at last "I see the idea. We can concentrate all our forces there and march right in. Bit of a bottle-neck, though" he went on thoughtfully. "Take a long time. Don't like that aspect of it. But once in, we could mop up the land in style."

Bodenheimer made a gesture of dissent. "No, Ike, mine friend" he said. "We want not the land mopped up. We want you to march on Jerusalem, capture and dispose of these Princes, set up a business Administration on the Western model, and leave us to restore the national economy on acceptable lines. That is what we want you to do; and with our help you can do it."

Hoskins leaned back in his chair and put his finger tips together. He was all attention now.

"Explain yourself" he demanded curtly.

The room was very quiet. The men around the table were quiet too, almost as though they were desperately anxious that their visitor should miss nothing of their spokesman's words. Bodenheimer himself seemed ill at ease, although his voice was confident.

"We are concentrating in the village of Chats-magor all the people we can find who are at all uncertain about the outcome of this campaign. They are few in number; so many in this land have staked their all that their God will save them. We do not know exactly what it is that defends the land, but we cannot but admit that the people's mental attitude has something to do with it. So, without knowing just what it is that we do, we try to concentrate the doubtful and the fearful at one point in the expectation that in a manner we frankly do not understand

it will make possible a successful invasion at that point. Is that clear, my friend Ike?"

"Guess I don't understand a word you're talking about" grumbled the General. "But carry on; maybe you'll say something presently that a soldier can understand."

"Now that is one thing. But we have to ensure that once you are in the country you reach and surround Jerusalem before the Princes can escape. News travels fast, and long before you have covered the three hundred miles from the frontier to the capital they can have moved to another place and all our plans miscarry."

"And how do you expect to keep them sitting pretty until I come to pluck them?" demanded the General.

Bodenheimer smiled triumphantly. "Leon here"; he bowed to the harsh-voiced man at the head of the table "is a man with ideas. He said 'Let us play upon their superstitions. By no means shall we overcome them'. And that is what we do. There is to be a great service of intercession in Jerusalem at which the Princes will gather with representatives of the people from all over the land to pray to their God for final deliverance and the removal of the enemy from their frontier. Now this service is planned to last for three days. It will be announced at short notice, and once it is commenced" -- he stopped and looked narrowly at Hoskins -- "once it is commenced, friend Ike, they cannot and in all conscience will not leave Jerusalem until it is over. Now do you see?" He leaned back with satisfaction.

"I don't see, by heck" growled the General. "It makes no sense to me at all. They can have their service for a month if they like. What difference will that make to me?"

Bodenheimer looked disappointed. He leaned forward again.

"Do you not perceive, friend of mine, that if you marshal your forces on the other side of the river and wait until we send you a message that the intercession has begun, you have three days in which to enter

the land, get your motorized detachments at least to Jerusalem, surround the city and capture these upstart rulers even whilst they are in the middle of their prayers. They are so far committed in what they have told the people that they would not dare to flee even although they knew the city to be in danger of capture."

Ike Hoskins sat up suddenly. A great enlightenment dawned in his eyes. "By heck, Bodie" he said deliberately "you boys sure have it all worked out. Neat, by all the powers! Can't go wrong. We'll do it!" He got up from his chair in gathering excitement. "We'll do it, boys, and we'll make this l'il old city look like Thursday week by the time we're through -- "

"One moment, General." The harsh-voiced man had interrupted him. "Don't forget that we shall still be here, will you?"

Hoskins looked at him. "I don't follow, pard."

"What you do with the people of the land and their property is no concern of ours, but we want to ensure that we, with our property and our commercial interests, will escape unscathed."

The General looked dubious. "What do you suggest, pard?"

The harsh-voiced man was deliberate. "The commercial business of the city is centered mainly in the south-west sector. Our private residences are for the most part in the south-west suburbs. We propose to concentrate our families and friends in that section and look to you to ensure that no physical damage is done to that quarter."

General Hoskins showed his relief. "That will be easy. Leave it to Ike Hoskins and it's as good as done. I guarantee you all a safe conduct." He stopped as a sudden thought crossed his mind. "That is, if I get to the Syrian bridgehead with my boys before Stanislav's men get through. Can't be responsible for them, y'know."

Bodenheimer looked up quickly. "That is our fear, Ike, my friend, and that is why we are so glad to see you here this day. We do not want the

Northerners to get here first; we fear they will be as ruthless with us as we know they will be with the people of the land. We do not trust them and we want you to be here first."

"I'll do my best" promised the General. He got up again and looked around him. "I'm due to be taken out to the blockade fleet next week. I can get a plane to the Southern frontier and find out what has happened to my army. I should be in Syria within a fortnight with some kind of force, if I can square Stanislay." A shadow of doubt crossed his features. "Anyway, I shall be there even if Stanislav's men are ready to cross and I will see you boys all right."

Relief and approbation showed itself in every face and Bodenheimer took him to the door, talking volubly the while. "When this is all over, friend Ike" he was saying "we shall entertain you to a celebration dinner and there will be practical evidence of our gratitude for all that you have done for us.

Adieu, my friend Ike. We shall meet again under more auspicious circumstances. Be on the riverside opposite Chats-magor a fortnight from now. Our messenger will find you and give you the signal for the advance."

The suave young man emerged from his door and came smoothly to the General's side. "If you will accompany me, sir" he murmured, "I will take you to an unfrequented door from which you can slip into the street and mingle with the crowds unnoticed."

"In this uniform, boy" expostulated the General. "Don't you know that wherever I go in this country they stop and stare at me like I was a free show. People here don't seem to know what soldiers look like."

Maurice permitted himself a discreet smile. "It is a long time since they have seen any, sir" he observed. "Perhaps they will become more accustomed to them in the near future."

The General turned an appraising look upon his companion.

"You seem a smart guy. How do you account for the manner in which these people are holding out against us?"

The faintest tinge of a very superior kind of disdain manifested itself upon the other's face.

"A series of coincidences, sir; that is all."

"Coincidences, huh." The General was thinking of his lost army. "Take some mighty big coincidences to explain some things I've seen!"

The disdain became more pronounced. "We live in too enlightened an age to believe in the supernatural, sir. The people of this country are deluding themselves. It is a delusion that will ultimately turn out to our advantage. This is the door, sir. Good afternoon, sir."

Chapter 12 SEEDS OF DOUBT

Hugh Villiers thoughtfully regarded his host, the while he sat sipping his coffee. A fine-looking man, he was thinking. Not up to the standard of the Royal Nation Princes -- they were definitely in a class by themselves -- but a type that could but rarely be matched in the now decadent Western world. Hugh was beginning to realize what the materialistic civilization in which he had been brought up had done for him and his fellows. It had deprived them, not only of their spiritual birthright by reason of its contemptuous disavowal of moral standards and belief in God; it had taken away their physical birthright also, and the virility and vitality of Western men was fast being drained away as godless generation succeeded godless generation. It was only after spending these few days in the Arab capital of Asshur that Hugh saw the Middle East as a world apart, a world that still rendered due acknowledgement to the spiritual in man, and reaped the logical result of that acknowledgement in a healthy and satisfying way of life that the Western world had not only lost but had forgotten ever existed.

He leaned forward respectfully. The Emir was speaking again. His soft cultured voice was a pleasure to hear, like music, thought Hugh.

"As I was saying, my brother, I have received up-to-date reports from all my provincial representatives, and they serve to confirm the fears I have already expressed to you. Despite the good feeling that exists, and I trust will always exist, between the President of the Royal Nation and myself, I am compelled to think first of my own country's welfare. These Northern barbarians under their uncivilized leader Stanislav" -- he spat, contemptuously, and strangely for a man of his culture, upon the ground, at mention of the hated name -- "have occupied my land and hold it for the time being in a grip of iron. They do not molest us nor loot our possessions -- much -- " His eyes grew somber. "They tell me that their quarrel is only with the Royal Nation and that when they have attained their objective they will withdraw from my territory. Whether they will keep their promise or not I cannot say. I do not trust them. But in the meantime I deem it expedient to do nothing that may bring down their vengeance upon the heads of my people. It grieves me" and his eyes were warm with sincerity as he uttered the words "it

grieves me greatly that I must stand by and do nothing to help my brother Jacob in the day of his calamity, but -- it is the will of Allah. Whether He will intervene to save the Royal Nation or not I do not know; but as for me, I cannot help." He paused, as if reflecting. Hugh waited in silence. Presently the Emir resumed.

"You ask me to promise that the water supply in the Euphrates will be maintained at full summer level without fail. I cannot give that promise. I will do my best, but you must reconcile yourself to the fact that at any time the supply may be interrupted without notice. The Northern forces have not realized as yet the extent to which our water is flowing into the Canal and our people will not tell them. Neither have they attempted to control the regulating sluices for themselves, for they do not understand them. But when they discover the true position they will come to me with a demand that the sluices be closed, and I -- I shall have no option but to obey."

Hugh leaned forward earnestly. "Emir Ibrahim" he urged "can you not take your stand upon their admitted unfamiliarity with the control technique and refuse to divert the water? It must be a tremendously complicated business to direct such a great volume of water elsewhere. What can they do if you do refuse?"

The Emir regarded his guest gravely.

"Have you ever heard of Hulagu Khan, friend Villiers? Do you know what he did to this country?"

"I am afraid not" admitted Hugh. "My knowledge of history is sadly deficient."

"In the thirteenth century of this era, the irrigation system built by Sargon of Agade over four thousand years previously was still in repair and functioning. Mesopotamia, for untold centuries the granary of the world, was a fertile and smiling land, even though many of its old glories had departed. Then, in the year twelve hundred and fifty-eight, came Hulagu the Mongol, a barbarian and a heathen like Stanislav" and he spat again. "Because he could conquer the country in

no other way, he pulled down the dams, destroyed the sluice gates and regulators, leveled the canal banks and let loose the water over the land. From that day, over seven centuries ago, until recent times, when our people, and the people of the Royal Nation, with much toil and labour, rebuilt the dams and gates, excavated the canals, harnessed the waters, the land remained desert in summer, water-logged in winter. You see it now, my brother. You saw it as you traveled here, a land rich and fruitful, giving life and happiness to many simple folk. Can you blame me if I will not risk repetition of the desolation that came with Hulagu?"

Hugh was silent, racking his brain for an argument. He felt as though the fate of the Royal Nation depended upon his own action in this extremity. Somehow it seemed terribly important that he win Emir Ibrahim over into definite avowal of the Royal Nation cause, even although it involve this people in the fortunes and perhaps the fate of the Royal Nation. At all costs, thought Hugh desperately, the sluices must be kept open. How was he to buttress the wavering loyalty of this obviously sympathetic ruler?

"Emir Ibrahim" he said, leaning forward again in his chair. "What can I do to convince you that there is a power greater than all the accumulated might of the investing forces, a power that is nullifying their every attempt to effect an entry, a power that can only be of God, and because it is of God, is invincible? I have seen this for myself, and I know. I was one who came up against this land, an unbeliever; I have been forced to believe. If only you too could bring yourself to believe, you could afford to snap your fingers at these Northern invaders." He stopped suddenly, a little abashed at his own temerity.

The Emir looked thoughtful. "I know, Villiers, perhaps better than you do yourself, that there are such spiritual forces. You are of the West; I am of the East, and we of the East understand these things so much better than do you. We are not so materially minded. It is because we Easterners have this deeper understanding of the supernatural that I am skeptical."

"Skeptical -- of what?" asked Hugh quickly.

The Emir looked him full in the face. "Skeptical of the soundness of the Royal Nation's position. They have staked all upon their faith. That Allah can save them I do not doubt; but will He; will He?"

"Surely, having followed His command and eschewed all material forms of defense, they are right in expecting Him to defend them?" urged Hugh warmly.

The other shook his head slowly. "There is a saying in your own country, Hugh, 'the Lord helps those that help themselves'. It is the teaching of the Koran that the true believers must fight to establish the true faith with fire and sword. In the Last Day Allah will execute judgment upon the wicked with fire and sword. If John and the others are indeed the prophets of old raised from the dead, as they claim, why do they not lead their people out to war? Allah would go before them and give them victory; of that I am sure. His power, added to theirs, would speedily annihilate the enemy. Villiers, believe me, it is that which is protracting this long drawn out campaign. The weeks have lengthened into months, the Holy Land is cut off from the nations. It has tremendous internal resources but it cannot continue like this indefinitely. They have right on their side and the right must one day triumph; but they themselves must show confidence both in the rightness of their cause and the power of the God they worship by striking a blow in their own defense. You are a soldier, Villiers. You understand these things. Do you not agree with me?"

"Once I would have agreed with you whole-heartedly. But I have seen strange things of late, and now, I am not so sure."

"Your hesitancy tells me that you are not so sure of the other position either, Villiers. You are not yet fully persuaded yourself about the infallibility of this passive defense, are you?"

A surprise of self-revelation came to Hugh and he was silent for a moment. "I believe you are right" he admitted at length. "Over there" and his gaze went through the window across the wide fields in the direction of the Holy Land "it seems so logical and certain. But, if so,

"his voice was low; he was speaking almost to himself "why the delay? Why does deliverance fail to come? And yet, those inexplicable disasters; how else can they be explained, if not by Divine power?" He raised troubled eyes to his host's face.

Ibrahim spoke again. "Allah is mighty in power and very merciful to His people. I believe that He has intervened to show that power, and to establish His people's confidence. But until they go forth to war in confidence of His power He will not finally deliver. Villiers" he had risen and was looking down upon the younger man, his voice intense with feeling "this rabble will not be destroyed until your people have come out as did their ancestors under Joshua, with the high praises of their God in their mouths and great swords in their hands, to join with their blood brothers the sons of Ishmael in ridding our joint lands of this menace which threatens us. Take that message back to your people; tell them that the Emir Ibrahim esteems them and respects them as brethren and friends, but that he is sore grieved at their inactivity in face of a great danger. Let us join together to chase these barbarians back to the lands whence they have come, and so take up again our ways of peace, secured for us by our right hands. Unless they do this, Villiers -- " he broke off, considering.

"Unless -- ?" prompted Hugh respectfully.

His host looked at him again. "Unless they do so, I greatly fear the enemy will make his way into the Holy Land, may even take the Holy City, holy to us as well as them. Somehow, in some way, Allah will compel them to face the issue."

"If the invaders set foot in the Holy Land the whole basis of defense by faith will have crumbled. I do not believe it will ever happen" said Hugh deliberately. "It would be the end of everything."

The Emir made a sign and two attendants came immediately to his side. "Ponder over my words" he said gently. "Go back to your people and do your best for them -- and when they are ready to take up the sword be assured Emir Ibrahim and his thousands will be ready too; but until then we must remain spectators of your agony, unable to help

you in your hour of trial. Perhaps you can help them, Villiers, you with your Western outlook and military training. Go now, and do not forget."

The two men grasped hands warmly and Hugh was conducted swiftly out of the audience chamber. His mind was a whirl; he was barely conscious of the words being spoken by his escort. The man was a tall swarthy Arab of dignified mien, evidently a trusted servant of Emir Ibrahim; it was clear that at this moment he was troubled.

"It is the wish of the Emir, your Excellency, "he was saying as they made their way down the steps of the Palace "that you reach your own country in safety. But there is danger and you must know that your presence here in Asshur has been observed by the agents of the Northern forces, and they are suspicious. For that reason your journey must be unobtrusive. The Emir has accordingly arranged that you shall travel by merchant barge through the navigation canals until you reach the Euphrates."

"Through the canals? That means slow progress, surely?" asked Hugh in some surprise.

"Slow, yes, but safe. You will be in the care of a trusty captain who will know when and how to conceal you should the necessity arise. You will enjoy the journey, and you will see aspects of our country denied you when coming overland."

They were among the city crowd now, threading their steps between the passers-by and making their way toward the docks. No one took any notice of them; Hugh's attire was virtually indistinguishable from that of his companion and neither was likely to be mistaken for other than a minor Government Official going about his lawful business.

"This is a fine city" remarked Hugh as they went, more for the sake of making conversation than for any other reason. They were passing the Marduk Memorial as he spoke.

"It is indeed, praise be to Allah" returned the Arab enthusiastically. "This memorial here" and he waved his hand towards the flamboyant structure, ornate with its carvings of mythological figures and its gold-tipped pinnacles of white limestone "took five years to build and cost a great deal of money."

"What does it commemorate?"

"The completion of our irrigation system, which is the source of our country's prosperity. In ancient tradition, you know, the god Marduk built the first dams and restrained the untamed waters. The story of his conflict with them is enshrined in one of the oldest poems in the world, the enuma elish, written at least five thousand years ago." They were standing and viewing the imposing entrance to the great building. "I have seen pictures of those carvings before" said Hugh.

"That is very likely. They represent traditional scenes in the story of Marduk."

"And the golden plates set in panels around the lower part of the building?" interrogated Hugh.

"They contain the whole of the enuma elish engraved in Arabic character. One day, Excellency, you must return to Asshur and view all that our beautiful city has to show you. We cannot daily now: Captain Omar is waiting to leave the dock basin."

Recalled to a sense of his immediate duty, Hugh walked on with his escort, along the broad boulevard from the Marduk Memorial to Central Square, with its gardens and playing fountains, past the Great Mosque and the throng of entering and departing worshippers and through the industrial and mercantile quarter, until finally they came out upon the riverside and stopped before a tall building, stepping then into the entrance vestibule, crowded with people moving to and fro in the discharge of their business interests.

"This is our transport headquarters" explained Hugh's guide as they ascended the broad steps. "In order to throw any possible spies off the

scent we are entering here as Government officials and I am taking you to a private part of the building. There you will change into the attire of a barge hand and he conducted through a secret passage which communicates with a dockside inn frequented by the barge captain. You will leave the inn in the company of Captain Omar ostensibly as a member of his crew, and board the barge with him."

"You are taking a great deal of trouble on my behalf" said Hugh gratefully.

"We can but do our best" his guide responded simply. He had pushed open a door as he spoke and Hugh, passing through, found himself in a carpeted corridor at the end of which, in a small, cozily furnished room, he was introduced to a burly Arab seated at a table poring over a sheaf of documents.

"This is Captain Omar, your Excellency" explained Hugh's escort. "He will see you safely across our land and within sight of your own."

Hugh liked the look of the man. He gave an impression of dependable solidarity, and when, half an hour later, having negotiated the secret passage and sat awhile in the inn by the dockside whilst Captain Omar completed his preparations, he emerged into the sunshine with his new guardian, he was looking forward with some anticipation to the voyage.

"Once aboard the barge, Pasha Villiers" the Captain was saying "you need keep up no pretence. My men are all trustworthy and you may remain on deck and make the best of your journey. It may be necessary at times for you to be concealed whilst we pass through locks and regulators where Northern Forces' soldiers may be congregated, but I have provided a place in the bows where you may lie under cover in such case in perfect safety."

Hugh thanked him. He was eager to commence his homeward journey and glanced hopefully at each laden barge they passed as they walked along, impatient to get aboard and be off. Beyond the dock basin he could see the broad sweep of the Tigris, shining in the sunlight, its

waters bright with colored sails of the city pleasure-boats. At another time, he told himself, he would have liked to stay awhile in this city, so bright with exuberant life, but not now. He wanted to get back to Rehovoth.

The Captain stopped before the gangway. The seaman standing at its entrance gave a sign of recognition and stood aside to let them pass aboard. Hugh followed Captain Omar, looking about him rather self-consciously as he did so; but nobody took any notice of him, and presently he found himself chatting quite easily to the other as they stood watching the mooring ropes being cast off and the steersman taking his place at the wheel. In another moment the throb of the motor somewhere below deck fell upon his ears, and the heavily laden vessel moved smoothly away from the quay wall and turned toward the open river. Hugh saw several men leaning over the railings and gazing after the retreating boat, and then they became too small to distinguish and he turned to the Captain.

"I know nothing of your canal system in this country" he observed. "Where are you going and where do I leave you -- and what do I do then?"

The Captain did not speak for a moment. He was watching, with practiced eye, the progress of his vessel through the narrow dock entrance into the river. Another barge came perilously close; the steersmen adroitly maneuvered their respective charges through the available space and then the motor speeded up as the craft passed into the mile-wide Tigris. Captain Omar turned to Hugh.

"I must beg your pardon, Pasha Villiers. It is always a little trying getting out of that channel easily. Once in the river we have plenty of room." He paused a little and looked downstream. Hugh looked too and caught his breath at the beauty of the vista. The morning sun shone brightly on the water, turning it into a dazzling sheet of silver, a sheet that was flanked in the foreground by the white buildings of the city and away to the south wound a sinuous course between fiat, rich golden cornfields that stretched to the horizon in every direction.

Several miles away, on the left, he could see the massive tower-like stone pylons which flanked the entrance to the Nahrwan Canal.

"Beautiful, is it not?" said Captain Omar gently. "I never tire of this view -- and I see many lovely sights on the waterways of this our country." He paused again, and turned his eyes toward his companion. "My instructions are to land you near the Holy Land frontier. Just exactly where we shall do so depends on the disposition of the Northern forces massed along its length and it will not be until we reach Lake Aggur that I will decide. I shall be able to get information there that I lack at present."

"How long will the journey take?" asked Hugh.

"About eight hours. Our departure has been timed so that you have the cover of darkness for the final stage of your journey."

The great pylons were becoming more clearly visible now and Hugh could see the waterway between them. He noticed that the barges in front were all heading for the Canal.

"Do we not follow the river?" he asked.

"All shipping takes the Nahrwan Canal" was the reply. "The river broadens out below here into a long lake -- sixty miles long -- created by the dam which is the key to our entire irrigation system. The Canal runs parallel to the lake and the river for over four hundred miles, almost all the way to the Persian Gulf, and by diverting all shipping to the Canal, which is maintained at a constant level, we can use the lake as is required by the needs of the irrigation channels."

"But we surely do not go down to the Persian Gulf?" interrogated Hugh quickly.

The Captain smiled reassuringly. "We leave the Nahrwan when we reach Marduk's Dam, sixty miles downstream, and then cross the lake above the Dam, entering Archous Canal on the other side. That takes us into Lake Aggur, which is our irrigation control lake, and from there

the Arachtu Canal, also leading in a south-westerly direction, brings us to the Euphrates."

"You seem to have a lot of canals. What do you mean by Lake Aggur being the irrigation control lake?"

"It is situated in a natural depression which is almost the geographical centre of our land. We have built -- or rather, rebuilt -- two main canals going north-west and south-west to the Euphrates, and two more, north-east and south-east to the Tigris. By means of regulating sluices in these canals we are able to take excess water from one river and divert it to the other as and when required, using the lake itself as an enormous storage reservoir. The prosperity of our land and of the Holy Land depends upon this conservation of the river water. A considerable amount goes into the Holy Land Wheat Belt. You have been there, of course?"

Hugh nodded. "I crossed it on my way here. It's stupendous!"

The Captain smiled again. "The Northerners will make short work of it if they succeed in effecting an entrance to your land. And now, Pasha Villiers, you must excuse me. I have work to do." He pressed Hugh's arm lightly and was gone.

Left to his own devices, Hugh sauntered around the deck, chatting now and again with members of the crew and gazing with interest on the rapidly changing scene around him. The canal traversed a mildly mountainous region, the wooded nature of the hills making them appear higher than they were in reality. At times the barge moved in the heart of a deep cutting through which the water made its leisurely way; then it would emerge into gentle valleys across which the waterway ran between embankments built high above the level of the surrounding land. He could see the fields and trees stretching for miles, and the white roofs of an occasional village. The town-planning, he thought, was not so good as in the Holy Land; here there was a closer approach to the Western custom of building relatively congested groups of dwellings with long stretches of apparently uninhabited country lying in between. But there was certainly an atmosphere of

calm and peace which was conspicuously absent from his own world, and he wondered idly, as he reclined comfortably on a coil of rope in the stern, whether these near neighbors of the Royal Nation were receiving as it were by reflection something of the peace and confidence possessed in such supreme measure by the inhabitants of that blessed country. The sun was pleasantly hot and the throbbing of the motor had a soothing effect; he must have dozed, for when he suddenly opened his eyes the sun had passed its zenith and they were no longer in the Canal. The barge was crossing the great lake formed by the Marduk's Dam, and not more than a quarter of a mile away on his left he could see the long wall, sluice gates and towers that marked the Dam itself, the greatest structure of its kind in this land of many dams.

The barge had almost finished the crossing. Quite near, and straight ahead, appeared the entrance to the Archous Canal. Hugh rose and went forward, gripping the rail and peering forward into the far distance, a distance into which the canal, driven straight as a die, seemed to pierce without ever coming to an end. The land was flat now, and monotonous. The never-ending seas of yellow grain, the stereotyped villages, each with its grove of date-palms, began to irritate him and he moved restlessly about, longing for the end of the voyage. The people here seemed prosperous enough, they seemed contented enough, but there was something lacking, an indefinable lack that he could not at first trace, something that stamped them as different altogether to their neighbors in the Holy Land. He watched the crew, placidly going about their tasks, and suddenly it came to him, they were not conscious of a mission; they accepted the good things in life which their land brought them and enjoyed them for themselves but there was no urge to make use of them for the blessing of others. He recollected that he had never heard of these people, as he had heard of the Royal Nation, sharing their bounty with the distressed of other nations. And suddenly he was conscious of an intense longing to get back to Rehoveth.

The hum of the motor stopped and the vessel slackened its pace. More slowly it drifted inward to the canal side. A stranger, standing on the bank, leaped lightly on board and conversed earnestly for a few

minutes with Captain Omar. He leaped as lightly back again and waved his hand in parting salute. The barge gathered speed and forged its way ahead once more. The Captain came along the deck toward Hugh.

"We approach Lake Aggur, Pasha Villiers" he said in a low tone. "I am informed that the Northern forces are stationed at both the inlet and the outlet to the Lake and it is possible that they may challenge or even board my vessel. I want you therefore to conceal yourself here" -- he indicated a pile of goatskins stacked upon the deck -- "and remain there until I give you the word. I will either come myself or send a man to give you your instructions, but it is possible that you will have to leave my boat without my stopping to put you off, if I find that I am being watched."

"How can I do that?" asked Hugh dubiously.

The Captain spoke slowly and thoughtfully.

"It will be nearly dark when we reach the other side of Lake Aggur and enter the Arachtu Canal. Forty miles farther there is a small town called Khan Nasiriyah. The Euphrates is only five miles away across country at that point. Provided nothing occurs between now and then to require a change in our plans I shall bring the vessel close to the right shore and slow down as much as I dare. You must watch your opportunity and leap on to the bank. It is soft grass and you will not suffer injury. Have you a compass with you?"

"Yes" said Hugh

"Good. Make your way in the darkness in a due westerly direction. There will be several irrigation canals over which you must swim if you cannot find a nearby bridge. There are no villages and no human habitation. The Northern forces are camped at intervals along the Euphrates at a distance of about one mile from the river. You should be able to elude them without much difficulty. The river is a thousand feet wide but there is very little current -- as you know, it is really a giant canal -- and you should be able to swim to the other side with ease.

Once across the river you are in your own territory and you will be safe."

"I do not know how to thank you" said Hugh. He turned and began to examine his hiding place.

"There is no need" replied the Captain gravely. "There is not one of us who would not do as much, and more, to help rid our joint countries of this locust plague that threatens us. In case it is not decreed that I see you again, Pasha Villiers, I wish you good fortune and success in your journey." He turned abruptly and walked away, and Hugh climbed into his refuge, feeling oddly depressed at the Captain's manner.

It was not long before he had made himself quite comfortable with a tiny aperture forward through which he could observe the onward progress of the boat without himself being seen. The end of the canal was in sight, with the broad waters of Lake Aggur stretching beyond. The fields and the trees gave place to a cluster of white buildings and concrete walls on both sides of the channel and Hugh realized that they had entered the regulation sluices. The machinery was unfamiliar to him and from his confined position he could see very little of what was going on outside, but from the movements of the barge it was evident that they were in some kind of lock and descending to a lower level. Evidently the lake water was at a different level to that in the canal. There was shouting and voices raised in argument, a tramping of feet across the deck and a moving of heavy boxes; then the Captain's voice was heard giving a sharp order and the barge commenced to move forward again. Hugh looked cautiously out and saw that they were in the Lake and steering straight for another set of regulation sluices on the opposite side, just discernable in the distance. There seemed to be no other craft on the lake, at least within his limited range of vision, only myriads of waterfowl disporting themselves on its calm surface or wheeling about in the air. The farther shore appeared merely a flat line on the horizon, tinged the eternal yellow of the all-prevailing corn, with squat buildings and lofty white pylons of the Arachtu sluices jutting up in sharp relief against the blue sky. Even as he watched, the sun sank swiftly to the horizon and the blue began rapidly to change to grey. Hugh was perfectly familiar with the short

twilight of these latitudes and he knew that within a few minutes it would be dark.

Somehow those pylons, massive concrete towers, glowing pink now in the last rays of the dying sun, loomed ever larger as the barge ploughed the calm waters towards them, fascinated him. They seemed as if they symbolized his entrance again into his adopted land. This was the last lap, he told himself; a few more hours and he would be across the Euphrates and on his way to Rehovoth. It came to him suddenly that he was thinking more about Rehovoth and Miriam than the discharge of his mission -- obviously he must first go to Jerusalem and render his report. And at that he fell to wondering how much of his eagerness to get back to Rehovoth was due to his desire to be again with Miriam and to protect her; protect her, from what? Was she not already protected far more effectively than ever he could defend her? He had thought so when he set out from Rehovoth and left her standing there by the trees, confident that he would come back. But somehow he felt uneasy now; he had seen the Northern forces at close quarters, had realized as never before the grim tenacity with which they were maintaining their siege, and he had bethought him of the ruffianly army he had left behind at El Khel in the care of Paul Stern; and he was conscious of a flutter of apprehension. What if the Emir Ibrahim had been right and some outward action in support of their inward faith was in fact required of the Royal Nation? "That Allah can save, I do not doubt" the old man had said "but will He, will He?" These resurrected Princes were wonderful men and he was prepared to follow them to the death, and their powers of leadership and administration in civil affairs were unparalleled; but they had lived their lives at a much earlier time in the world's history and Hugh wondered if they really did appreciate the implacable wickedness of modern man. Surely nothing like it had been known in their days! "The Lord helps those that help themselves!" The words had such a solid, common-sense ring about them; surely that must be the way. "The high praises of God in their mouths and a two-edged sword in their hands", it sounded such an eminently satisfactory combination of heavenly and earthly force. Surely nothing could stand against that? Might it not be that John and the others were a little too idealistic in their approach to the problem; not sufficiently apprehensive of the physical facts? And if

that should be so, would they not eventually bring disaster upon the Royal Nation, a disaster that would involve Rehovoth, and Miriam he wrestled with the problem and wondered dully why it seemed so much more involved and intricate than when he had lain in hospital at Rehovoth listening to Miriam's soft voice and the bluff tones of Jacob Friedman telling him of their faith in the ultimate outcome

"Shalom!" said a soft voice at his elbow.

Hugh's mind came back to the present with a snap. He looked round cautiously, it was nearly dark outside but he could just make out the figure of a man, dressed like himself in an Arab waterway worker's clothes, crouching at the entrance to his refuge.

"Who are you? What do you want?" he asked softly, wondering rather at the man's use of the Royal Nation greeting, not usually heard in this Arab land.

"I have come from Captain Omar to warn you" replied the stranger. "The Northerners have learned that you are on this boat and are waiting to intercept you in the Arachtu Canal. Your plans will have to be changed."

"What have I to do?"

"We are about to pass through the Arachtu sluices. As soon as we have cleared them the boat will, for fifty yards, traverse a narrow channel flanked by concrete quays roughly level with the deck, before entering the main stream of the canal. It is not safe to slow down the boat or make any outward difference to normal routine. You must watch your time and as soon as we leave the illuminated area around the sluice gates you must jump to shore in the dark. The quay will not be more than four feet away from the side of the boat. Make your way quietly in the opposite direction to a point three hundred feet from the end of the channel. Hide there in the long grass. Within fifteen minutes a barge will come down the Arachtu from the other direction, and veer in to shore, slowing down as it does so. You will hear a call "Shalom". Answer softly with the same word and you will be taken aboard and

concealed. The barge is bound for Habbaniyah; it will take you back into Lake Aggur and up the north-west canal -- the Saklawiyeh -- and drop you at a suitable point from which you can accomplish the rest of your journey without danger. Is that quite clear?"

"Perfectly clear. But who are you? I do not remember having seen you on the boat today."

"I am one of Emir Ibrahim's intelligence men and I joined the boat at the Archous sluices. Captain Omar knows me well and he sent me to you. Shalom" and in a moment he was gone.

Hugh felt disturbed and depressed. This business was not going to be so easy as he had thought. He supposed that it was inevitable that his presence in this land would have been observed at a time when all strangers must necessarily have been suspect, but it was galling to have got so far and now be compelled to turn back. He wondered rather why the Captain himself had not come to tell him this; it was dark and they were still far from shore. He could not have been observed unless there were traitors among the crew and that, he had been assured, was not the case. He wished he knew what he ought to do. If only there was someone of whom to ask counsel, Joshua, or Jacob Friedman, or even Miriam. Somehow he knew that Miriam, were she here at this moment, would tell him exactly where to get the guidance he needed; but for the life of him he could not think now what she would be likely to say. His thoughts ran on, and presently he became conscious that they were in the regulating sluices and he grappled more desperately with his problem. He looked out cautiously for Captain Omar, but he was engaged with men who looked suspiciously like Northern soldiers and Hugh drew in again. And then the boat was gliding quietly out of the lock and the lights were left behind and Hugh knew that he must decide. His fingers felt a coin in his pocket and a flash of the old dare-devil life came back. "Heads I jump, tails I don't" he muttered, and spun the coin within the confined space of his prison. It was some seconds before his groping fingers found it in the darkness; when they did, he felt the outline of the head and without more ado scrambled out of his hiding-place and looked about him.

None of the crew was in sight; the night was perfectly dark. On his right he could see the narrow quay wall that hounded the channel, only a few feet away. And he saw, too, that they were almost at the end of the channel; the dark waters of the main canal were right ahead, glimmering in the starlight. There was only just time. He measured his distance, took a deep breath, and leaped.

"So far so good" he muttered to himself as he scrambled to his feet. The barge was already out of sight in the darkness, although he could still hear the soft throb of its motor. The night was perfectly quiet -- the lighted area around the sluice gates was a hundred yards away and he could see men moving about, but they were busy with the preparations for receiving another boat that was apparently waiting to come through. He turned and began to make his way silently in the direction he had been instructed to take, counting his paces as he did so.

The other boat passed, heading southward, and the sound of its motor died away in the night. Hugh looked at his watch; ten minutes had elapsed. A faint sound invaded the quietness, resolving itself presently into the now familiar "chug-chug". Hugh sat up in the grass and waited. The lights of the north-bound barge appeared and Hugh concealed himself again. It was traveling very slowly and unusually near the bank. As the headlight passed him and he was shrouded again in the blackness a soft voice came across the water.

"Shalom!"

"Shalom" called Hugh quietly and stood bolt upright at the water's edge. The voice called again.

"Jump!"

Hugh jumped, and found himself grasped by two pairs of strong hands. Before he had time to glimpse his rescuers' faces he found himself being turned about and almost frog marched along the boat and thrust under a heavy pile of skins.

"Keep quiet and invisible" whispered a voice. "We are at the sluice and the Northerners are on the watch."

Hugh lay still. He waited impatiently whilst the familiar procedure was gone through and the barge emerged into Lake Aggur. He expected that once in the quiet waters of the Lake he would learn more of his new hosts and listened for footsteps that might be approaching his refuge.

Something was being pushed under the coverings, pressing into his side. It seemed to be a tin plate of food. He realized that he had not eaten since midday and suddenly felt hungry. "Thanks" he murmured softly to the unseen ministrant.

"Eat" commanded a voice "and remain concealed until I come for you." Hugh murmured words of acknowledgement. There was no reply and it was evident that the man had gone. He did not speak like an Arab, thought Hugh as he devoured the food, and he found himself wondering if people of other races joined this Arab Coalition as so many other lands had joined the Royal Nation. It had not seemed so during his visit; most of the men he had seen had been Arabs, but somehow he did not think that those whose voices he had heard on this vessel were of that race.

He took out his pocket torch and cautiously examined his compass. The boat was heading north-west. "If I am landed somewhere near Habbaniyah" he thought, "I shall be nearer to Jerusalem than if I had kept to the original plan. Maybe this is going to be for the best after all." He lay still while the boat negotiated the Saklawiyeh sluices and as it began to forge up the Canal he listened to the motor and hoped it would not be long now before he could land again and trust to his own efforts. He tried to recall what he knew of the geography of the country and estimated that the Saklawiyeh was probably fifty miles long so that he was likely to be off the vessel within another three hours and that would still leave him sufficient hours of darkness to reach the frontier unobserved and get into his own land. So his thoughts ran on, the while the motor throbbed steadily and the rippling splash of water flowing past the bows formed a background of soft sound.

He must have slept, for he woke up with a start and a consciousness of something abnormal. For a moment he could not place it and then he realized that the motor had stopped and the barge was drifting under its own momentum. He lifted the covering slightly and peered forward; they were approaching a wayside loading station, brilliantly illuminated in a circle of powerful light. Evidently the barge was due to make a call here, thought Hugh. He dropped the curtain and settled down to be quiet as the boat drew alongside the little quay and came to a stop. Men boarded the deck and there was shouting and laughter. The dialect was strange to Hugh; it was not Arabic and like nothing he had heard before. Heavy footsteps were clamping about and there was more shouting, apparently to men on the quayside.

The coverings were suddenly flung aside and a light flashed into Hugh's face. "Good evening, Major Villiers" sounded a mocking voice in his ears. "Captain Omar will be considerably perturbed to find that he has lost his passenger, the more so since he will have no idea when and where he lost him. We trust that you enjoyed your journey on our supply barge, and that you will still more enjoy you stay with the Northern Investment Force.

Hugh got slowly to his feet. The men surrounding him were soldiers of the Northern Army, and standing behind them was the man who had accosted him on Captain Omar's barge. Revelation came to him.

"Very neatly done" he commented scornfully. "And what happens next'?"

A man who was obviously the officer in charge stepped forward,

"You are my prisoner" he said shortly. "We are under orders to report to General Headquarters immediately we have you in custody. In the meantime we have prepared a room for you in a very substantial blockhouse we have built which we fondly imagine is proof against all the boasted prayer of all your comrades of the Royal Nation."

And it was then that Hugh Villiers realized, too late, that the Counselor he had sought when on Captain Omar's vessel had been beside him all the time. He had quite forgotten that guidance in times of indecision could always be his in answer to prayer.

Chapter 13 THE DEFENSES BREACHED

Vladimir Stanislav looked round the table with cold, passionless eyes. The younger man, standing erect at the other end of the room, flinched slightly.

"Gentlemen" came the steely, incisive voice "you have heard of Field-Marshal Siderov's explanation of the mishap at Lake Urfa. The operation which was to have been the first, and last, in our annexation of the Holy Land has failed, and he has told you why it failed. I have no doubt that you have been given the correct explanation."

The assembled officers sat silent. A little more color came into Siderov's cheeks and his posture became less rigid. The merciless voice went on.

"I do not propose to ask your opinions on the matter, gentlemen. Neither do I propose to pass censure upon your unfortunate colleague. He asked for the honor of conducting this operation. His request was granted. He failed." He paused for a moment. "I am not interested in the reason. And I have no use for failures." He made a sign with his fingers and two stalwart guards moved forward from the shadows. "Take him away -- and shoot him."

The unfortunate man's face blanched and he leaned forward in impassioned entreaty as the guards grasped his arms. "But -- but, Chief Marshall" he stammered. He twisted his head desperately over one shoulder as he was being marched towards the door. "I beg of you" he cried in panic. "It was not my fault -- let me explain -- " The Chief Marshal's cold eyes looked straight forward to the wall opposite; he made no movement, gave no sign. Siderov, still protesting, was dragged through the door. The half-dozen men seated around the table heard his feet scraping across the pavement outside. The sound stopped; there was silence for half-a-minute. Then came Siderov's voice again, raised in frightened entreaty, an entreaty that was cut short suddenly by a sharp report. A few moments passed; the door was flung open and an officer strode in, coming to a smart halt. He saluted.

"Your instruction, Chief Marshal, has been carried out." He stepped back a pace, and waited.

Stanislav did not move. His eyes looked straight through the speaker into space. His lips framed three words.

"You may retire!"

The officer saluted again, turned on his heel and marched out. The door closed behind him.

The cold eyes swept the room.

"Gentlemen, you have achieved a succession of failures unparalleled in the history of the Federation. A campaign that should have been concluded within one week has run into months and all your military experience has proved inadequate to deal with the resistance offered by your opponents. You have failed to penetrate your enemy's defenses and failed to find out of what his defenses consist. You can show no valid reason for not being in full command of the land and you have not as yet succeeded in crossing its frontiers." His impersonal stare grew steely. "I shall not forget. In the meantime I have decided to bring the campaign to an immediate conclusion by assuming personal command of the forces in the field. You will cross the frontier tomorrow and advance upon Jerusalem."

No officer dare look at another; all waited for enlightenment. The grim voice went on.

"You, all of you, have entirely failed to take into account the peculiarities of the situation and act accordingly. You have found yourselves confronted by hitherto unknown forces and you have contented yourselves with attacking them in your traditional manner. You have not analyzed the characteristics of enemy resistance in such a fashion as to discover the weak point where attack must be made." He paused a moment, and then went on, more slowly. "I have been in field headquarters for twenty-four hours only and I have already discovered the answer to your problems."

No man moved, but an atmosphere of suppressed excitement seemed immediately to pervade the room. Stanislav glanced at the stalwart guard, imperturbably erect by the door.

"Bring the man Issachar!"

The guard saluted and disappeared. Ten seconds followed each other, slowly; the door opened and the man reappeared, accompanied by a medium-sized and distinctly frightened-looking individual, attired in the characteristic garb of the Royal Nation. The newcomer stood at the end of the long table, twisted his fingers together and assuming an attitude of abject obeisance.

"Your village?" interrogated Stanislav sharply.

"Chats-magor, on the other side of the river, Excellency" replied the man tremblingly.

"You are a member of the Royal Nation?"

"Yes, Excellency."

"What is the secret of the nation's defense against us?" The question shot out.

The man trembled visibly. He looked away from the keen, cruel eyes facing his own. "I do not know, Excellency."

"You do not know, and you, a member of the nation?" The voice was icy cold. "Have you heard it said that there is no defense but their faith in their God to deliver?"

The answer was low. "Yes, Excellency." "Do you believe that?"

"No, Excellency."

"Why not?" The question was curt.

Issachar looked round the room helplessly. His voice took on a more furtive tone.

"I do not believe in God."

"Do the people of your village believe in God?"

"No, Excellency."

"So they do not believe there is any defense against my forces?"

The man was clearly more frightened than ever. "No, Excellency. We shall offer no resistance. We -- do not agree with all that our leaders do and say in Jerusalem. We are -- "

Stanislav interrupted him. "Then why do you stay in the land?"

The man's eyes came back to his interlocutor. "It pays us to do so. So long as we obey the laws we are not molested. And the land is very rich."

"Do you know the roads to Jerusalem well?" "Yes, Excellency."

"Will you lead my forces to Jerusalem in such fashion that they do not come in contact with any people of the land who do believe in this supernatural defense?" Stanislav paused, and then, as an afterthought, grimly, "You shall have your reward!"

A look of cupidity mingled with relief came into the man's eyes. He stood a little more erect.

"Yes, your Excellency. I can lead them through the Wheat Belt and right up to the city walls without passing through any populated districts." Stanislav glanced at the guard.

"Take him away; treat him well."

For a moment there was silence in the room, a silence that was broken by the metallic voice of the Chief Marshal.

"You all are familiar with the preposterous claim of these people that their mythical unseen God is protecting them in consequence of their faith. You all have commonsense enough at least to know that that claim cannot possibly be true. But you have pitted yourselves against the unknown defense with your own weapons and made no attempt to fight this people with theirs." He paused a moment, and his cold gaze swept the assembled officers, mercilessly, contemptuously. "If their resistance, successful so far, is based upon some psychological force which, for all we know, they may have discovered, and that psychological barrier is what holds our forces on the river, then" he snapped his fingers "why did you not explore the possibility of finding a section of the community where that condition of mind does not exist, and probe that as the weak point in the defense. Did any of you think of that?"

There was silence. The officers looked at each other; none at Stanislav. He regarded them grimly before proceeding.

"The moment I arrived here yesterday I instructed you, Field-Marshal Berdoff, to collect a number of local labourers and ask them a question. What was that question?"

The Field-Marshal pushed back his chair and rose.

"You ordered me to ascertain whether any place existed on the other side of the river where the God of the Royal Nation was not worshipped, Chief Marshal" he said stiffly.

"And what did you find out?"

"That such a village does exist."

"And what did I then order you to do?"

"To bring a leading inhabitant of the village before you."

The cold eyes gave the officer permission to resume his seat. The hard voice went on.

"You have seen the man for yourselves, gentlemen. You have heard him say that his village will offer no resistance to our troops. Whatever is the nature of this mysterious defensive force -- and we shall discover the secret for ourselves within the next few days -- it has no potency in the frontier village of Chats-magor. The road into the Holy Land is open through that channel. We march tomorrow!" He stood up abruptly and made his way out of the room.

Von Berdohff came up to him as he stood on the steps, surveying the wide expanse of flat country at his feet, the winding Euphrates in the middle distance and the green fields of the Holy Land beyond. "About the other prisoner, Chief Marshal?" he enquired hesitantly.

Stanislav's eyes were still upon the distant view. "Let him witness the invasion in progress and the failure of his hopes -- then shoot him."

Von Berdohff saluted, stepped back, turned and strode away. His lips were curved in a cruel smile beneath his heavy black moustache. He tramped arrogantly between the rows of flat buildings comprising the encampment, turned right and left once or twice, and emerged in front of a fortified and strongly built blockhouse with heavily reinforced doors. The guard on duty saluted smartly and a senior officer came hurriedly out of a side door and stood as if waiting for orders.

"Conduct me to the prisoner" commanded his superior brusquely.

The two guards fell in behind and the officer unlocked the door, preceding Von Berdohff inside. The party tramped steadily through corridors and stopped before another door. One of the soldiers unlocked it and threw it wide open, glancing within before standing aside to allow the Field-Marshal free entry.

Hugh Villiers looked up indifferently from his seat as the other walked in. "You are wasting your time, Berdohff" he said. "I am telling you nothing; only what I have told you before."

"That the Holy Land is invulnerable and we shall never cross its frontiers; is that the story still?" sneered the other.

"That is the story still, and always" replied Hugh wearily. He closed his eyes as he spoke.

"Not always, my all-too-sure young friend" mocked his tormentor. "By this time tomorrow our forces will be in the Holy Land and your idealistic theories will be shown up for the hollow shams that they are."

Hugh's eyes were still closed. "You are talking rubbish, and you know it. I wish you would go away and leave me in peace."

"We shall leave you in peace, never fear" came the taunting reply "but only after you have had the mortification of seeing with your own eyes the defenses down and our forces in. You will have time to reflect on the fate that will befall your new-found friends of the Royal Nation before -- "

Hugh sprang to his feet.

"What are you talking about, you devil?" he cried.

The cruel smile broadened into a malevolent grin.

"Only that we have, at last, discovered the true secret of the defenses and have made all the necessary plans to be outside the walls of Jerusalem within four days from now."

"You lie, and you know it!" retorted Hugh.

Berdohff's lips tightened ominously. "For that remark, my friend, you shall pay. Tomorrow at dawn you will see with your own eyes whether

I lie or not. You will believe the evidence of your senses." His face dull red with rage, he turned and walked out of the cell; the door clanged, and Hugh was left alone with his thoughts.

He sat, hands clasped between his knees in an attitude of supplication, grappling desperately with the nightmare that assailed him. The words of Emir Ibrahim came back to him, the old man's insistence that the Royal Nation must take to the sword to defend the righteousness of its cause; that God might even suffer the land to be invaded if the people failed thus to rise to their duty. Hugh had no illusions about the results of successful invasion; he knew the Northerners for what they were, and his heart failed him as he thought of the lovely country and peaceful villages of the Holy Land at the mercy of these bloodthirsty ruffians. The serenity of Rehovoth came into his memory, and Miriam's features swam before his eyes; at that time he raised his hands in passionate entreaty. "O God, not that" he prayed aloud. "Defend her -- spare Thy people; save Thy land." He wondered dully if his faith was going to fail; the words of Berdohff had had such a confident ring about them; somehow Hugh knew that the man was not speaking without solid foundation for his statements; but it was unthinkable that the invaders would ever cross the river. He stopped and a sudden thought struck him. Of course, it would be alright; some convulsion of Nature would occur at the critical moment and frustrate their plans just as it had done in past times. The invasion from the south had seemed a foregone conclusion and then, most unexpectedly, the menace seemed to have been removed. No invasion had taken place and no soldiers had been seen anywhere near the Southern frontier. Rumours were that they had panicked and drifted southwards to become absorbed by the people of Africa. He was feeling better now; he really ought to be ashamed of himself. His faith had been weak, lamentably weak. That man Berdohff had taken him off his guard, but he was strong again now. There would be no invasion in the morning; and in due time he, Hugh Villiers, would regain his freedom in some way and make his way back to Jerusalem, and John -- and Rehovoth, and Miriam. His thoughts lingered tenderly with her as, somewhat comforted, he stretched himself upon his pallet and drifted off into sleep.

Consciousness returned with the sound of heavy footsteps clamping along the corridor outside. Hugh sat up, rubbing his eyes and wondering if it was morning already. It seemed but a minute ago that he had lain down. The heavy lock shot back and as the door opened he got to his feet.

The officer of the guard appeared; behind him Hugh could see two of his men. "Follow me" he ordered curtly. Hugh obeyed mechanically, wondering what awaited him at the end of the march. In silence the four tramped through the long corridors, eventually emerging into the open air. Four more guards joined them and Hugh marched in the centre with a feeling of heightened expectancy. The fresh morning air was cool and pleasant; the sun had evidently been risen for some little while and had already dispelled the morning mists; its rays were beginning to warm the scented air. There was a singing of birds; as they passed the clumps of tall grass which stood between the buildings he could hear the chirp of grasshoppers.

They came out upon the top of an eminence commanding a wide view of the south-western horizon. The soldiers halted smartly and Hugh cast his eyes across the outspread panorama below. And as he did so his heart died within him. In the middle distance lay the winding Euphrates, serenely blue between wide fields of gold and green. Across that shimmering glory of color there sprawled a foul black blotch, a surging, jostling crowd of men and vehicles, at this distance a seemingly infinitely slowly moving mass. A wide bridge had been thrown across the river, and the multitudes were converging on that bridge, squeezing their way across and fanning out again on the other side. From the confusion over there a black stream emerged, winding its way across the green fields of the Holy Land to lose itself in the far distance. The great trek must already have been in progress for several hours; it had evidently started long before daylight; and now as Hugh gazed, his stupefied brain repeatedly tried to take in, and as repeatedly refused to accept, the realization that the invasion of the Holy Land had at long last been achieved. A viper slid out from beneath a rock, paused uncertainly, and as silently slithered away into the long grass. Two bitterns alighted on the ground and strutted about before taking fright at the silent group and flying off. Hugh heeded them not; his

eyes were fixed upon that turgid, sluggish stream that lay like a dark shadow across the sunlit green of his adopted country.

Von Berdohff broke the silence. "A pretty sight, Major Villiers!" he commented.

Hugh did not answer.

"It would appear that your God has been taken unawares. Or is it that His powers, adequate to hold off the Southern forces, are insufficient when matched against the strength of we Northerners?" Hugh remained silent and the big man strode up and with the back of his hand struck him across the face. "Answer me, you dog" he shouted.

Hugh fought for words. His head swam and throbbed. he had never really believed that the troops would get across the river but now he could see with his own eyes and there was no longer room for doubt. Without let or hindrance the thousands of armed men were pouring into the Holy Land. Of resistance there was no sign; physically there could be none. The people were unarmed and untrained, for they has been taught to place their trust in God and give no thought to the manner of their defense. Only trust, they had been told, and the enemy would not prevail. They had trusted -- he had seen for himself how fully and completely they had trusted -- and now, after all the prayer and supplication that had gone up from all over the land, after all the mighty disasters that had befallen the investing forces in so many inexplicable ways, after every evidence had been manifest that the nation's faith had been justified by results -- this Hugh Villiers looked down at the seething swarm below and felt weak and ill.

Berdohff's voice penetrated his thoughts again.

"So. You are speechless still. You have seen the folly of your ways. How mistaken a man you were to change your allegiance when you went into the Holy Land! What would you not give to be an officer of the Southern forces again! Your dreams and your ideals have vanished in smoke, and nothing is left but the bitter realization that you have staked your all on the wrong side -- and lost." He came closer to the

silent man before him. "I have orders from the Chief Marshal to execute you here and now. But if you will agree to join us in our crusade against these people who are now our spoil and prey, and tell us all that you know about their leaders, why then" -- he paused to give his words full weight -- "why then, it is very possible, I would say almost a certainty, that the Chief Marshal will rescind the order and accept your allegiance. What do you say, Major Villiers?"

Hugh raised heavy eyes to his opponent's face. The ironical voice went on.

"See, the fields and trees, how green and pleasant they are in the warm sun! This land into which we are entering, how rich and fruitful it is, and how well provided with every indulgence that conquering men could possibly desire! You are young yet, Major Villiers, and the grave is dark and cold. You have cast one lot and it has failed you; not to every man is it given to enjoy a second chance. You may yet retrieve your somewhat damaged fortunes. Major Villiers, you can join my staff and in me you will find a superior who will not object to you enjoying the fruits of conquest. Will you accept?"

The hillside was very quiet. Even the hum of insects and the twittering of birds had died away, as if waiting for his answer. The guards stood, nonchalantly leaning on their weapons, listening with only detached interest. There was a cynical smile on the face of the Field-Marshal. Down below the black swarm streamed over the bridge.

"No" said Hugh at last. His voice lacked conviction.

Von Berdohff looked into his captive's eyes. "You are uncertain of yourself, Major Villiers. Are you sure it is not mere obstinacy that drives you to decline my proposal? A pity, you know, to throw away your life for a mere whim. And you could be useful to us; that I do not deny." A thought struck him and he peered more closely into his victim's face. "It may be, Major Villiers -- I do not know, but it may be -- that you have special friends in the Holy Land whom you would wish to save from the consequences of defeat. A woman, perhaps --" He smiled evilly as he saw Hugh flinch suddenly. "Our troops are

liable to run amok, you know. We cannot always control them so strictly as we would. Now if you undertake to point out to us the leaders and notabilities who are responsible for the organization and administration of this country, why then -- " and he spread out his hands in an expressive gesture "we will by no means overlook the value of your services. It will be an easy matter to arrange for the safety of anyone in whom you are particularly interested and give them safe passage in your company out of the country. There are quieter, and shall we say, safer places in the world than the Holy Land. What do you say, Major Villiers?" He smiled again and waited for the answer.

It seemed to Hugh that the quiet of a moment ago was gone for ever. A shrieking of ten thousand demons echoed in his ears and stabbed into his very brain. The face of his tormentor leered before him, huge and menacing, blotting out his field of vision, overpowering him with a sickening sense of evil. He felt his resolution giving way and he fought desperately for control. The gnawing fear of unimaginable horrors soon to come upon the land and the people he knew, now, that he loved, bore him down as by an overwhelming weight. The sun seemed to have receded from the sky and all its warmth had vanished, leaving him alone in the midst of a vast emptiness. Curtains of darkness, falling one after another across his eyes, smothered him in a cold blackness of despair from which there was no escaping. He thought of Miriam, waiting for him away in Rehovoth, and shivered. Groaning aloud, knowing not what he said, inarticulately, almost inaudibly, he prayed for strength to withstand the temptation that was come upon him and for faith to believe. Half-forgotten words, heard in the House of God at Rehovoth, flickered into his mind and he repeated them in the anguish of his soul. "Out of the depths I have cried unto thee, O Lord. In my distress I called upon the Lord, and cried unto my God; he heard my voice out of his temple, and my cry came before Him"

He became conscious of a sense of returning warmth. The shrieking of the demons had died away into a soft murmuring, the murmur of the wind rustling the nearby trees. The sun shone out in glory; in that dazzling splendor his eyes lost sight of the grim officer before him and traced a gently moving white shape, a graceful form that lived and moved and smiled upon him. His eyes met other eyes, eyes of love and

trust, and his ears heard Miriam's voice, soft, earnest. "Suppose when you are away there, beyond Euphrates, away from the Holy Land, suppose evidence is brought to you, evidence that seems absolutely conclusive to you, that the enemy is at last achieving his design and is conquering the Holy Land. Suppose it seems to you that despite the rightness of our cause, that cause is lost, that God had failed in the end to deliver. Would you believe then?"

He could see her now, standing there by the bridge in the garden, her slender foot twisting and turning in the gravel, and her sweetly serious voice like music in his ears. "Not until you have believed against the apparent failure of the things that are seen, not until you believe and continue to believe, because you know God, and because you know that God is true

"I do not know that I can ever reach that height, Miriam

"Then -- you will never return to Rehovoth

Never return to Rehovoth?

"By the grace of God, I will build my faith. I will return.!"

He shook his head as a man awaking from sleep and looked with unfamiliar eyes around him. The sun was shining warmly down, birds and insects together lifting voices of praise and thanksgiving for the blessing of life. Down in the valley the long procession continued; in front of him the massive form of Von Berdohff, eyebrows lifted enquiringly.

"No" said Hugh shortly.

The dull red crept across the other's face. "You say 'no', you fool?" He queried incredulously.

"I said 'no', and I mean 'no'" said Hugh. "You can shoot me if you like; my God will protect my loved ones and I will tell you once again, and

once for all, Von Berdohoff, that God will defend His Own. If you are rash enough to go into that land, and go to your own destruction."

"We will see about that" answered the other. "Meanwhile you will go to yours without any doubt. I have wasted too much time with you already." He turned to the guards. "Tie him up, put him against that wall, and shoot him. And be quick."

The men, glad of an excuse for activity, leapt forward. In a matter of seconds Hugh was standing, helpless, twelve inches in front of the wall, looking into the muzzles of four rifles that pointed inexorably in his direction. He glanced quickly to the right and left; escape was quite obviously out of the question. And it was going to be a matter of seconds now; he could see that. For a moment his gaze flickered upward, as though half expecting to see the white airplane outlined against the blue, speeding to the rescue, but there was nothing, nothing but the brilliant sun blazing down from the sky, and far below him, that black stream still wending its slow way across the fair green of the Holy Land. He closed his eyes, and most oddly seemed to hear the wrathful, once familiar voice of his old Chairman, Sir Henry Plumpton, as he thumped the table in his characteristic way. "You're mad, like Jevon." Had it all been madness, he wondered, and was it all really true, and was he, Hugh Villiers, at last going to die? He could taste the evil whiskey of Egypt in his mouth, and the memory seemed to conjure up a vision of a sweet, pale face framed in a mass of dark hair; he could hear a soft voice saying "Please let us go, General Gonzalez." Again he sensed the feeling of shame that had swept over him that night when in his insensate hatred of all that had to do with the Holy Land he had smothered his first impulse to go to the speaker's defense. The wind ruffled his hair and carried to his senses the sweet scents of grasses and flowers, and he was on Rehovoth Heath again, and it was night, and he was staggering uncertainly in the fresh night air waiting for the explosion that he had thought was going to end his life; and that brought his mind back to the present with a jolt. How long drawn out was this final ordeal! Surely it must have been a hundred years ago since they stood him against this wall, and now they were going to shoot him, and God had not come to deliver. He had believed and he had maintained his faith but still God had not come to deliver! It was

too late now; he knew how swiftly his mind must have raced through those past scenes of his life and that he could have been there only a few seconds; the sands had all but run out. The word to fire would come in a moment; he flung back his head and with face upturned to the skies shouted to high heaven the immortal words of faith: "Though he slay me, yet will I trust him"-- The inert body slumped to the ground and was still; the cry had ascended into the highest of all courts and had been recorded before the Lord of spirits

The sun shone warmly upon the quiet hillside. Down in the valley the great bridge was deserted; the black torrent had passed over, its rearguard long since merged into the haze of the distance. Two great vultures circled slowly overhead and alighted, a dozen yards from the still form. They squatted, motionless, wings folded, eyes unblinkingly regarding the object of their attention. So they remained, silent and patient, while fifteen long minutes measured out a leisured span. Unfolding their huge wings, the two creatures flapped slowly away. The afternoon wore on, and the sun began to sink in the west, the insects and birds became quiet, and the tree-shadows lengthened. A soft rustle, and the vultures were back again, a little nearer this time, waiting their hour. Slowly the minutes passed; and as the rim of the dying sun touched the distant tree-tops there came a soft breath of wind, tempering with its coolness the heated ground. The watching birds craned their necks, examining more attentively the body lying up against the wall. As though by mutual consent they moved further forward toward their intended victim. The leading one, within two paces of its goal, stopped in its tracks abruptly, peering forward suspiciously. Its companion halted too, watching. A moment's keen scrutiny; as though taking fright the two great creatures soared swiftly into the air and away, screeching their chagrin at their disappointment.

The Arab peasant, plodding through the long grass at the foot of the hill, looked up as they went. He seemed to be cogitating. With a slap on his donkey's flanks he turned the animal out of its course and commenced to climb. As he topped the rise he saw the crumpled body where it lay. He made his way towards it and halted at a little distance, watching. The donkey pulled at its halter in the endeavor to reach the

green grass just out of reach. Loosing his hold, the peasant went forward and stood, looking down at the pale face.

Chapter 14 FAITH IN THE CRUCIBLE

"Gee, old pard, I sure am sick to see you laid out like this!"

Redvers Collins twisted round in bed and gazed up at his visitor. His face was pale and wan.

"It's the old heart, Ike. Had a bit more than it can stand, these last few weeks. S'pose I shouldn't have come on this campaign at my time of life. Ought to have know better." His voice was weak.

"Guess an old war-horse like you couldn't keep out of it." The General's tones were sympathetic. "C'd've knocked me down with a feather when they told me you'd been taken to Rehovoth Hospital. How long d'you figure to stay here?"

The patient moved his head resignedly. "Six Weeks, the doctor expects. Says it's a wonder I didn't peter out altogether, heart in the state it is."

The General looked serious. "To heck with six weeks. We gotta get you out at once, Redvers. I'll see about an ambulance in the plane for you."

Collins shook his head. "Rather stop where I am, Ike. Good doctors here -- I shall be well looked after."

The General glanced round hastily to satisfy himself that no one was within earshot, and bent down to his friend. "Listen, Redvers, old man" he whispered urgently. "We gotta get away, quick. That guy Stanislav has crossed the northern frontier and his mechanized units are advancing on Jerusalem right now. I tell you I don't trust him and best thing we can do is quit, see? This John Baptist fellow has put a plane at our disposal and we can go soon as we like."

The Colonel was lying quiet, curiously still. The other looked down at him in sudden apprehension. "You all right, buddy?" he questioned in some alarm.

He could just hear the faint response. "Did you say Stanislav had crossed the frontier?"

"Yep, sirree. He's beat us to it and I don't like the look of it. But what's your trouble?"

"So -- there's nothing in -- the idea -- of their faith saving them -- after all?"

The General seemed to be bewildered. "You don't mean to tell me you were falling for that stuff, buddy?" he asked reproachfully.

The answer came slowly. "No -- o -- ; I suppose not. I only wondered, that's all. It seems a pity." He was silent again.

Hoskins fidgeted a trifle impatiently. "Guess I'll see about that ambulance" he said shortly and turned as if to move away.

The Colonel held up a protesting hand. "Ike" he entreated.

Ike came back. "What is it, old pard?" he asked a little more softly.

"Ike, I'm not leaving here. Stanislav or no Stanislav, I'm taking my chance with these people. They're looking after me well and I'm not leaving them. You get along right now, maybe we'll meet again when this is all over."

"To heck with that." The General was perturbed. "I can't leave you like this, Redvers. I brought you in on this band-wagon and by golly, I've got to get you out."

"I'm staying here, Ike." There was more firmness in the Colonel's voice now. "You don't want a sick man on your hands and I shall be all right here. And -- in any case -- there's nothing to go back for."

The General leaned closer. "I knew there was something the matter. You're worrying about young Villiers. You had a kinda soft spot for him way back there. But what's the worry? Haven't I told you a dozen

times you'll find him among the boys waiting for us? Sure, he got away from here and back to our own forces somewhere. Don't worry about him; he can take care of himself."

Redvers shook his head. "You're altogether wrong, Ike, Since coming here I've found out what happened to him."

"You have, by the powers? That's mighty fine. Where is he now?"

Collins was silent for a moment. "He blew himself up by accident and was brought to this hospital. He became a convert to this nation's beliefs and went off on a mission to the other side of Mesopotamia for them."

For a moment there was silence, then the General snorted. "A renegade. eh? Well, I guess you don't have to bother about him any more, Redvers."

The Colonel made a feeble gesture of dissent. "That isn't all, Ike" he said "and I was fond of that lad, remember."

"Well?"

"Before you came in I was twiddling about with this radio here." He indicated the neat little receiving set mounted within easy reach of his right hand. "I got on to one of the service wave-lengths that we and the Northerners have been using. Apparently the people in this country don't trouble to listen to our military messages -- they just don't seem to be interested. I overheard a conversation between two of Stanislav's officers." He looked up into his friend's face. "Anyone around here, Ike?"

Hoskins looked over his shoulder perfunctorily. "No one, Redvers. Go on.

Collins was having evident difficulty in framing his words. His hands plucked at the coverlet and Hoskins bent over him in some anxiety.

Neither of them heard Miriam glide noiselessly in and begin to busy herself with the flowers on the little table behind the General. Redvers spoke. "Ike, I heard them mention Hugh Villiers' name."

"Well, what if they did? I'm not interested in Hugh Villiers any more."
"Ike, they've captured him -- and they've shot him!"

There was a slight sound, as of a swift-drawn breath, behind the General. He turned at once, and with quick presence of mind plunged forward and caught the swaying girl. He staggered slightly, and stood, supporting her unconscious form.

"Holy smoke, Redvers" he ejaculated in consternation. "What do I do about this?"

Collins was trying to raise himself in bed. At that moment Jacob Friedman entered the ward. Taking in the situation at a glance, he crossed the room in a flash, lifted the General's burden from his arms, and with rare tenderness laid her carefully down,

"What has happened?" he asked abruptly, busy with restoratives. "Must be the heat" boomed the General. "She flopped right out on me while I was talking quietly to Collins here."

"Working too hard" commented the doctor briefly. "Here she comes."

The color had begun to flow into the white cheeks and Miriam opened her eyes. She struggled to rise but Jacob urged her gently down.

"Lie still, my dear" he said with wondrous softness. "You'll be better presently."

Recollection returned and her lips quivered. She looked up at the kindly face above her.

"Jacob, they've shot Hugh!"

He looked at her keenly. "Now what nonsense is this? No one has done any such thing."

"It's true! Colonel Collins has just told the General so."

Without a moments hesitation Jacob picked the girl up as he would a child and carried her out of the ward. The other men were silent, Redvers Collins betraying in his face the intense concern he was feeling, the General, for once at a loss for word or action. The doctor came back alone.

"Colonel Collins" he said quietly, "will you tell me exactly what you know about Hugh Villiers?"

"I listened in to some of Stanislav's men this morning and heard them talking about him. It seems that he was captured behind their lines, refused to talk, and was executed." The Colonel was finding it difficult to talk.

Friedman drummed his fingers on the little table.

"If it is true, I am sorry. We must wait to see if it is true."

"They seemed sure enough about it themselves" said the Colonel wearily. He closed his eyes and turned his head away. Jacob shot him a swift professional glance and then turned to the other man.

"You had better leave him now, General Hoskins. Your plane is waiting to take you to your own people, and your Northern -- allies -- are within twenty miles of Rehovoth."

The General took a hasty look at his friend. "Good-bye, Redvers, old pard" he said hurriedly. "Soon's I'm back with the boys I'll come straight here and see you fixed up all right." There was no reply from the other; after a moment he turned and softly followed Jacob Friedman through the door, casting a hasty glance backward as he did so. Collins was lying still, with closed eyes.

The minutes passed. The Colonel moved his head slightly and opened his eyes as the roar of a plane taking off fell upon his ears. He listened as it receded into the distance, straining his hearing until he could sense it no more. He lay quietly for some time, thinking. The afternoon sun shed a mellow light over the room and his eyes roved to and fro, taking in every detail of the trim ward. From a distant part of the building he could hear the faint clatter of plates and dishes; outside in the grounds someone was singing a happy song with a lilting refrain. His eyes remained serious and thoughtful.

The door opened and Miriam appeared. She approached his bedside and he saw that she was composed, although pale. Her eyes were dark with tragedy, but the Colonel noted the firm set of her lips.

"I am sorry to have made such an exhibition of myself, Colonel" she said

"But I am better now." She turned aside and began to resume her work with the vases of flowers.

"Sit down, girl" commanded the Colonel brusquely and peremptorily. She turned, effecting surprise. "Your voice is getting stronger, Colonel. We shall have you up and about in no time at this rate."

"Don't divert the issue, girl. Do as I tell you!"

She crossed over quietly and sat down. For a moment he regarded her grave profile without speaking. Then, more softly, "You know Hugh Villiers?" "Yes", simply.

"Is he a friend of yours?"

"Yes" The color suffused her cheeks.

"Urn." The Colonel was watching her closely. "I suppose you patched him up after he'd muffed his job?"

"I was on duty at the time."

"I see." He was thinking deeply. "Had he thrown in his lot with you people?"

The girl leaned forward earnestly.

"Colonel Collins, believe me, he had become truly and sincerely converted to our way of thinking and had declared himself a convinced believer in the Lord Jesus Christ. He had renounced his old life utterly and completely and counted himself a citizen of the Royal Nation."

"Then, in that case" said the Colonel deliberately "why didn't they send one of your white airplanes to save him?"

The girl buried her face in her hands. It was a full minute before she replied, and when she did, her soft voice quivered. "If Hugh is dead" she said quietly "it can only be because he lost faith, away there in Mesopotamia. I told him before he went" -- the tears were running down her cheeks now -- "that his faith was new and untried; he said he would not give way. I prayed for him, day and night, that he might not fail. He was so sure of himself, here in Rehovoth; but our God requires of us steadfastness in adversity and implicit trust even in the face of death. Having once set our hands to the plough there must be no looking back."

"Then, if that is the size of it" asserted the Colonel "they have not killed Hugh Villiers."

She looked up instantly.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean" said the Colonel "that if Hugh Villiers was honestly persuaded of the rightness of your cause wild horses would not induce him to abandon it. I've known him a lot longer than you have, my dear. His father was my best friend and I knew Hugh when he had to be

nursed." He looked at Miriam reflectively. "That was before your time. And if he's told you that he is sticking to this nation and its ideas, then I'll stake my oath he has done so, even to looking down the muzzle of a rifle. I'm not sure yet" and he glanced keenly at the girl by his side "I'm not so sure yet that there's anything in this passive defense idea of yours -- not to the extent that it's infallible anyway" he amended hastily "but if it does turn out that you people are right, well then, I shall expect Hugh to be walking through the door again yet." He blew his nose vigorously and was silent.

Miriam rose from her chair. "You have given me strength and hope" she said softly. "Thank you." She turned away as Friedman entered the room. "The plane is about to leave, Miriam" he said in a low voice. "Are you ready?"

"Quite ready" she smiled back at him. "Good-bye."

"And God bless and keep you" the old doctor returned, gripping her hand. She glanced over her shoulder at Colonel Collins and smiled again as she went out of the room.

"What's in the wind, doctor?" demanded the patient. "I'm not having anyone else to nurse me save that girl, y'know."

Jacob came over to the bedside. His manner was serious.

"You will have to for the next few days" he said. "Miriam has gone on a special mission to Jerusalem."

"Special mission! Slip of a girl like that! Haven't you got any men?"

The doctor stood regarding him, considering. "She has gone at her own request. Stanislav has surrounded the city and there is to be a great service of prayer and supplication for final deliverance. Representatives from every part of the country are being flown in over the heads of the besieging army. Miriam is one of five from Rehovoth. We realize that the situation is critical and we are looking to God for the deliverance He has promised."

The Colonel drew a deep breath. "I wish I could believe it. It would make everything so much easier."

Friedman looked down at him. "Why not believe, Colonel Collins? Surely what you have seen would convince any ordinary man?"

"I'm not an ordinary man" grumbled the Colonel. "I've spent all my life on the barrack square and in the field, pumping lead into heathen savages and generally keeping the old flag flying. I've seen too much of the seamy side of life to take easily to your gospel of love and peace. I only wish I could -- " He ended abruptly and looked at Jacob as though trapped into making a confession.

"I wonder if you do believe, after all, unknowingly" mused the other. "What do you mean?"

"You are staying with us, are you not?"

"As long as you'll have me."

"Despite the presence of the Northern troops in our land?"

"What's that to do with it? I'll be all right with you."

"Even though our faith is our only defense -- and yours?"

The Colonel was silent for a moment. "You've caught me there, doctor" he said slowly. "I don't really believe you are going to lose out, hopeless though your position seems to be. That chap Joshua was right. He said I'd change my ideas on a lot of things before I left here." He glanced up at the wise eyes looking down into his own. "I'm not a religious kind of man -- maybe that will come -- but I'm seeing this thing through on the spot and if you people are wrong after all, well, I'll take what's coming to me like the rest of you."

Jacob's reply was forestalled by a voice -- a harsh, metallic voice -- from the loud speaker.

"People of the Royal Nation" it said. "We, the soldiers of the Northern Federated Republics, are encamped around your capital city of Jerusalem. Resistance is hopeless and we call on you to surrender. If you say, as we know you will say, that you trust in your God for safety, we ask, who is that God that will deliver you out of our hands? Has He ever delivered any other nation out of our power? You all are familiar with the growth of the Federation, that we have absorbed nation after nation until now we control half the world. Be well advised, therefore, to comply with our demands, for if you do not, destruction awaits your land and death its people. Listen carefully whilst we dictate our terms.

"The city of Jerusalem shall be given up unconditionally and all who are in it will surrender. Your leaders, the self-styled Princes of the Nation, shall be arrested and handed over to us. They will be put to death. The city will be evacuated and destroyed. The rest of the land will be unharmed but you all will hold yourselves ready for transfer to other parts of the Federation's territories as and when instructed. Resistance will be punished by death.

"One word more. The worship of God is expressly prohibited. The penalty for any attempt to engage in acts of worship, to pray or incite prayer, or to acknowledge by speech or in writing any degree of belief in God, is death." The speaker paused, as if to give effect to his words, and into that pause was injected a calm, measured voice, a voice whose timbre bespoke confidence, a voice that heartened and inspired.

"Hear, O Israel" it said. "Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and Him only shalt thou serve."

The first speaker broke in again, angrily. "Give no heed to the interruptions of your rulers from Jerusalem. Their day is done and within forty-eight hours their bones will lie on the hillsides of Judea, picked clean by your own vultures. Ye citizens of Jerusalem, we command you, open the gates and come out to us with your submission."

The clear tones answered.

"Let not him that girdeth on his harness boast himself as he that putteth it off!"

A short pause, and then the hard, merciless voice returned reply.

"So be it, ye people. You are appointed to fire, to pillage, to death. Tomorrow,, at this hour, we advance to the attack. There will be no mercy. You are our spoil and our prey, and there is no God that can deliver."

The voice ceased abruptly. Collins looked at Friedman.

"So that's that, doctor. What now?"

Jacob was standing at the window. The room was very quiet. It seemed impossible that only a few minutes ago that raucous voice had shattered the peace of the afternoon with its dire threats of carnage and destruction soon to come. It was inconceivable that this bright, sunny day should hold such dark menace for the people of the land. But the voice had been real enough; the menace, too, was real and immediate. What would the reaction of the people be?

"What now, doctor?" insisted the General.

Friedman turned. He spoke slowly, but his voice had in it a strange ring of triumph.

"What now, Colonel? Why, stand still, of course, and see the salvation of God!"

Chapter 15 BETWEEN THE PORCH AND THE ALTAR

"O Lord, hear! O Lord, hearken and do: for we do not present our supplications before Thee for our own righteousness, but for Thy great mercies!"

The clear voice died away into silence and Miriam lifted her bowed head. From her place at the end of the great building she could see the upstanding figure of John with his arms raised to heaven in a passionate entreaty. A deep-throated "Amen" was welling up from the vast throng of worshippers, a volume of sound that trembled around the tall columns and ascended, to lose itself in the haze of the lofty dome, three hundred feet above their heads. John was standing, still, with his companions, Joshua and Joseph, erect and motionless on either side of him. Behind the three leaders were ranged the other Princes, clad in white, each wearing his glittering star; and before them the great concourse that had gathered from all corners of the land to join heart and voice in this, the final supplication for deliverance.

A deep hush settled upon the assembly. It was the time for personal, private prayer, and each heart had entered into communion with the Most High. None doubted that the prayer would be answered; they all had planned and builded for many years past knowing that this day would surely come to test their work, and had striven so to fortify themselves in faith and confidence that when the crisis broke they would not be found wanting. And now the day had come upon them and they knelt together, in the knowledge that their relentless enemies had encircled their beloved city and cut them off from the surrounding countryside, shut up, as one of Stan Slav's Field-Marshalls had exultantly proclaimed over the radio, like birds in a cage.

Miriam's eyes, upraised in entreaty, sought and found, unconsciously, the shining words above the immense east window behind the standing Princes. "As the mountains are round about Jerusalem" she read "so the Lord is around His people, henceforth and even for ever." The golden characters scintillated and flashed in the sunlight streaming upon them through the south windows, and something of their radiance seemed to touch the heads of those quiet men, standing so

serenely confident, up there on the dais at the front of the assembly. They look almost like gods, thought the girl, and reproached herself quickly for the thought, bending her head to pray the more earnestly for the safety of her land and its people. Her mind strayed, and pictured a motionless figure lying in a vaguely defined field somewhere beyond the Euphrates, one who would share in the joy of the coming deliverance, and her lips trembled; she summoned all her fortitude and prayed too for strength for herself.

The sweet sound of the harps broke the stillness, and voices, upraised in the tuneful strains of Israel's age-old song of supplication and hope. So often in the past days the sons of Jacob, hard-pressed by their enemies, had shouted out the challenge and avowal of faith. Now it rose again, trembling upon the air, and few of the listeners but were thrillingly conscious of its significance. The position was, outwardly, hopeless; but God had not forsaken them. This was to be the time of the Royal Nation's triumph; after this day the Holy Land would dwell in peace and safety forevermore.

"My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? Why art thou so far from helping me? O my God, I cry in the daytime, but thou hearest not; and in the night season, and am not silent."

A strange beginning to a psalm of faith, thought Miriam, as she listened. How many, in times past, had completely misunderstood its tragic cry, not knowing that here was a great avowal of belief in God's ultimate deliverance even though the believer should first pass into apparently hopeless death. She lifted her head to listen for the reply, coming from the other end of the building.

"But thou art holy, O thou that inhabitest the praises of Israel. Our fathers trusted in thee, they trusted, and thou didst deliver them. They cried unto thee, and were delivered. They trusted in thee and were not confounded."

Again that plaintive cry from the singers at the front.

"All they that see me laugh me to scorn. They shoot out the lip, they shake the head, saying 'He trusted on the Lord that he would deliver him; let him deliver him, seeing he delighteth in him!'"

The biting sarcasm of the taunt shouted from beneath the music of the harps. The challenge died away into silence and once again rose the answer, calm and serene, even although burdened with a deep undercurrent of urgency.

"Be not far from me, O Lord, O my strength, haste thou to help me. Deliver my soul from the sword, my precious one from the power of the dog. Save me from the lion's mouth."

Harps and organ united in a triumphant chord, resounding through the building, the singers' voices blending harmoniously in a final stanza of a steadfast faith and confidence.

"Ye that fear the Lord, praise him; . . . glorify him; . . . and reverence him For he hath not despised the afflicted, neither hath he hidden his face from him; but when he cried unto him, he heard All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn unto the Lord; and all the kindreds of the nations shall worship before him For the kingdom is the Lord's, and he is the ruler among the nations."

The melody died away, and the girl, looking up from her place, saw John stride forward to the edge of the dais. The silence was intense; every eye in the vast building was fastened upon him. He spoke; his voice carried clearly and distinctly to the farthest corner.

"My brethren" he said, and smiled; that winning smile which endeared him so to these who accepted him President of their homeland. "My brethren, the crisis is upon us, and the test of our faith. We are beset on all sides by our enemies and the enemies of God. Like our ancestors of old, we are entangled and closed in; and words that were spoken to those ancestors then I am going to repeat to you now. 'The Egyptians that ye have seen today, ye shall see them no more again for ever.' This is the final trial that is to come upon our people, and its outcome will be glory." He paused for a moment, as if reflecting. "Glory for

ourselves, and glory for all the world. The Kingdom of God is ready to come upon earth; the King is about to be revealed, with all his holy ones. He waits for one thing, one thing only." He paused again. "He waits for the triumph of our faith. We have come thus far; we are as yet unscathed. He has promised to deliver. Shall we fail Him now?"

A low, soft, deep-throated "No" murmured through the assembly.

"Our enemies have surrounded the city. When Sennacherib the Assyrian warred against this land in the days of Hezekiah the king, he boasted 'Like a bird in a cage I shut him up in his royal city of Jerusalem.' But Hezekiah trusted in God, and the heathen king never opened the door of the cage. So, my brethren, we, besieged as we are, shall be delivered, and the invader go the way whence he shall not return." His eyes swept the assembly. "There shall not fail one word of all God's good promise, for what He hath said, that He is well able to perform. In quietness and in confidence shall be your strength -- so shall ye be saved."

He made a sign, and immediately every head was bowed in prayer. John's voice rose in supplication.

"O Lord God of our fathers, art not thou God in heaven, and rulest not thou over all the kingdoms of the nations? and in thine hand is there not power and might, so that none is able to withstand thee? Art not thou our God, who didst drive out the inhabitants of this land before thy people, and gavest it to them a habitation for ever? And they dwelt therein, and have built thee a sanctuary there for thy name, saying 'If, when evil cometh upon us, as the sword, judgment, pestilence, or famine, we stand before this house, and in thy presence, and cry unto thee in our affliction, then thou wilt hear and help.' And now, behold, the children of the nations are come to cast us out of our possession, which thou hast given us to inherit. O our God, wilt thou not judge them; for we have no might against this great company that cometh against us, neither know we what to do; but our eyes are upon thee?"

The entreaty died away into silence, the lofty dome above the worshippers' heads whispering back the soft echoes of those last

words. "Our eyes are upon thee" whispered the echoes. "Upon thee . . .
. thee", And the answering "Amen" slowly followed the prayer upward
into the courts of Heaven.

John had risen. He stood now, supremely confident, smiling again. His
voice came to them, clear and strong. "Thus saith the Lord God unto
you 'Be not afraid or dismayed by reason of this great multitude, for
the battle is not yours, but God's. Ye shall not need to fight in this
battle. SET YOURSELVES, STAND YE STILL, AND SEE THE
SALVATION OF THE LORD YOUR GOD, O JERUSALEM!"

*Had God heard? What would He do?
Quietly, confidently, they waited*

Chapter 16 THE SWORD OF THE LORD

Vladimir Stanislav stood upon a rocky eminence and surveyed the scene before him. The ground sloped away steeply into the Valley of Hinnom, filled now with armed men awaiting the signal for the assault. Upon the other side of the valley rose the proud walls of the city, gleaming rose pink in the bright sunlight, surmounted by tier upon tier of buildings, leading the eye upward by regular stages to the crowning glory of the Temple on Mount Moriah. The Holy of Holies at the topmost point, the House of Prayer a little to the west, the stairways and colonnades and courts, stood out clearly against the blue sky.

The group of officers, standing at a respectable distance, watched, alternately, first their chief and then the slow procession wending its way past them, just a little way down the hill. For hours now it had been going on, that trek of exultant men and women, prosperous looking men and women for the most part, coming forth from the South-West Gate and tramping steadily past the Northern forces' siege control headquarters to the waiting troop-carriers. Ever and anon one of the huge planes would take off with a roar and a rush, bearing a load of travellers into the far east. Just so often another of the flying monsters would come back, hurtling down from the eastern sky, settling on the landing field farther down the valley, there quickly to fill up again and take flight once more to its distant destination.

Bodenheimer was looking anxious. He stood still a little apart from the officers, watching that moving procession with critical eyes. It was twelve hours ago now that he and his confederates had opened the South-West Gate by means of a trick and admitted the Northern forces -- twelve hours ago, in the quiet and darkness of the night. He had felt jubilant at that, the climax of his secret mission, in company with Leon, to the Northern headquarters the day before. The agreement had seemed satisfactory enough. They were to collect all of their persuasion, with all their movable possessions, into the south-west sector and at the agreed hour open the gate. They would move out and the invaders would move in. They were to be conducted in troop-carrying planes to the nearest point in Northern occupied territory --

Hebbaniyan on the Euphrates -- and from there to Asshur the Arab capital. They would be comfortably accommodated until the campaign was over and they could then return to take up their interests and properties under the new

Administration. There were a good many of them, for they had gathered within the walls of Jerusalem all of their frame of mind from all over the land, but Field-Marshal Berdohff had gone into all the facts and figures and was confident that his huge fleet of planes could effect the actual transfer in a few hours. And now for ten hours past the winged giants had been ascending and descending over the air-field where the refugees were congregated. The long procession was nearing its end -- already the last ones had left the city walls -- and the transaction was almost completed, and strictly according to plan; but still Bondehiemer was not at ease in his mind.

If only Leon had remained with him -- Leon, whose dark, saturnine visage masked a cool, calculating mind that left nothing out of account and rarely made a mistake. It might be that he could put his finger at once on the cause of Bodenheimer's uneasiness and dispel it for an instant. At any rate he would know what to do if there was in fact any cause for apprehension. But Leon had made an excuse to go in one of the earliest planes with the others and it had fallen to Bodenheimer to remain with his foreign allies until the evacuation was complete. And now he felt that he would be heartily glad when it was over and he too was safe in Asshur. He distrusted these grim-faced soldiers and feared their implacable ruthlessness. He felt that once they had had their way with him they would as easily mete out to him and his the treatment they were boasting would soon be meted out to the people of the city. And he was uneasy now because the calm confidence of the people he had deserted had made him begin to doubt, at least, whether in fact the Northerners would indeed capture the city. He had never taken this national ideal seriously nor found occasion to consider if there could be any possibility of supernatural intervention, but now, as he looked upon those stately Temple buildings, gleaming so serenely in the sunlight, there came a stab of something inside him as though he was being called by his ancestors of ancient days. He suddenly remembered that he too was of lineal descent from the men who built

the first Temple on that hill; his imagination took him back three thousand years and he saw, not Stanislav, but a tall, bearded Assyrian standing on that rocky knoll, gazing at the city that he was destined never to enter, and Bodenheimer shivered in the hot sun.

He looked up suddenly. Von Berdohff was standing before him. The man was smiling unpleasantly and he felt a new shiver of apprehension run down his spine. He waited, silent.

"The evacuation is complete" said the Field-Marshal. "Your friends will very soon be commencing the longer stage of their journey."

"Longer?" echoed Bodenheimer in puzzlement. "But Asshur is not far from Habbaniyah!"

"Asshur?" repeated the other, as if comprehending, and then, as though understanding had dawned. "Oh, yes. Of course, we omitted to tell you.

"Plans have been changed."

"Plans -- changed?"

"We are taking your friends to the Western Gobi. We need labour for the salt mines" said the other brutally.

Bodenheimer felt the blood draining out of his face. "The -- salt mines -- of Gobi? But -- but -- our agreement -- "

The other waved his hand airily. "The agreement has served its purpose. The land is ours -- there is no room for you here now."

"But -- I implore you -- " He felt near to weeping. "It means certain death -- in those horrible mines."

"The death toll is pretty heavy" admitted the other carelessly, "but we have plenty of replacements now that we have captured this land.

They will all follow you, in time." He turned on his heel abruptly and was gone.

The apostate stood, stunned. His tortured mind refused to grasp the significance of the words he had just heard. His eyes, fixed upon the gleaming Temple on the opposite mountain, saw nothing of the scene before him; his vision showed him only a tragic procession of helpless captives wending its hopeless way into that frightful region whose terrors, known only to him by heresay, were even so appalling beyond description. Desperately he tried to think; obstinately his mind refused to function. The shock he had received had rendered him incapable of movement or speech. He could only stand, an embodiment of utter misery and despair.

Von Berdohff glanced at the motionless form as he stopped in front of the camp radio apparatus. "Perhaps our friend here will now start praying for deliverance" he remarked jestingly. The other officers roared with laughter at his sally, stopping suddenly at a sign from Stanislav, still standing a little apart. Von Berdohff strode up to him and came to a smart halt in front of his chief.

"The position?" came the curt interrogation.

"Unchanged, Chief Marshal" replied Von Berdohff. "The detachment that has occupied the South-West sector is still finding it mysteriously impossible to cross the civic boundary into the remainder of the city. The South-West sector has been completely cleared of its inhabitants and the occupying troops are waiting. Your instructions?"

"What is the city population doing?"

"There is a great assembly in their Temple praying for deliverance. People in the streets are doing the same. We can see them through our field televiewers. Of active preparations for defense there is no sign."

"They will be praying to me for deliverance presently" said Stanislav grimly "and with no better result than they appear to be getting from their God." His cold eyes swept the panorama before him. "It is time to

end this farce" he said dispassionately. "You know what to do, Berdohff. Go!"

Von Berdohff saluted and strode back to the radio. The officer sitting at the little table manipulated a switch and held up a microphone. Berdohff spoke.

"Armed forces of the Northern Federated Republics, attention" he ordered. His keen eyes travelled over the valley and noted the almost instantaneous merging of jostling, moving crowds into orderly motionless groups, each listening attentively at the nearest field speaker. He waited a moment, and then spoke again. "The final stage of our campaign is about to be undertaken. You are to advance upon the city and capture it at one blow. At the word of command each detachment will make its way with all speed to that part of the city wall which has been allocated to it and perform its assigned duty with efficiency and celerity. The city will be entered at all points. Remember the instructions you have already had. Resistance is to be met with death and that without mercy. Those who submit are to be taken prisoner and sent out of the city for transport into exile. Within the city confines you may ravage and pillage at your pleasure. The Princes of the nation, wherever found, are to be taken alive and brought before the Chief Marshal. You will be given two days in which to enjoy the fruits of your victory and you will then be recalled in order that the city and its Temple may be methodically leveled to the ground and destroyed. Be ready; the Chief Marshal himself will give you the order."

Stanislav turned slightly and spoke. His curt, clear tones brought every man in the vast concourse to a position of rigid attention.

"This day" he said "the worship of the God of heaven comes to an end. Let the people of this land take notice that today the national existence of the Royal Nation has ended. Your lands and your cities, your farms and your factories, your bodies and your souls, belong to me. I am your god. Your possessions I take for myself, your lives you will wear out in forced labor until death releases you from your misery. I defy your God to interfere; let Him remain in His heaven and not come

down to challenge me upon earth. Men of the Northern Republics, advance to your lawful prey."

There was a demonic roar as the armies of men sprang to action and stormed towards the city walls. Of the people within the city there was no sign. The warm sunshine flooded over the whiteness of deserted gateways and towers and reflected the pink sheen of the walls. The army had been encamped at perhaps a quarter mile distance at every point and the narrow space between the detachments and the walls was now growing visibly less as the leading columns drove their armored vehicles at breakneck speed toward the allotted points. Behind them came the masses of men on foot, running hard, eager for the plunder that was to be theirs as soon as the walls had been leveled. There was still no sign from the city; the gates were closed but they were not gates built for defense and could be forced open in an instant. The walls were lofty and impressive but had been built to define the city boundaries and not to keep out an enemy and would present no material obstacle to the onward rush -- a series of short, sharp explosions and they would be piles of rubble, easily surmountable. The watching officers smiled gloatingly in anticipation of the next few minutes' events. The daring challenge of Stanislav must have been heard within the city, for the inhabitants could easily tune in to the Northerners' camp radio and surely many of them must have done so. They would certainly see the mad rush of desperate men below their walls and know that the end was now only a matter of time. Despite all their confidence and prayer their God had been unable to deliver them; impotent even to manifest His displeasure at the bold words of the Chief --

"Gott in Himmel" shrieked Berdohff. "What is that?" His brother officers swung round and followed his pointing finger, a finger that was shaking like an aspen leaf. The five men stood, transfixed, staring, the blood slowly draining out of their faces.

Across there, on the other side of the valley, they saw the Temple quivering in the glare of a blinding radiance, a radiance which was spreading upward and outward from the Holy of Holies where it stood proud and erect on the top of the hill. Stairways and walls showed up

in sharp relief against the golden glow that suffused the courts and buildings. A blindingly white fan of living fire was unfolding itself from the midst of that searing light, a brilliancy that paled the sun and smarted the eyes of the men who watched. Slowly it extended its range, soaring aloft, covering the deep blue of the sky with a curtain of shimmering steel, white-hot, dazzling, throbbing and burning itself into those watching eyes. Berdohff, looking round at Stanislav, saw with amazement that the Chief Marshal's shadow, cast long in front of him by the afternoon sun, pointing towards the city, had reversed itself and was now pointing in the opposite direction, behind him. The shadows of the trees and bushes had turned back upon themselves similarly. The mysterious radiance, brighter than the sun, had overpowered the light of that orb and sent it into temporary eclipse.

A shriek from Bodenheimer recalled him to his immediate surroundings. The wretched man had thrown himself to the ground and was writhing as if in mortal anguish. They heard his voice, sharp with terror. "It is the Sh'kinah, "he sobbed, "the glory of God come out of His place to destroy His enemies, as it did in the days of old. I did not believe it; never did I think mine eyes should behold it. And now it will destroy me, for I have betrayed the people of the Lord." He staggered to his feet and showed the horror-stricken officers a countenance distorted by fear and rage. "Hear this, ye sinners, The indignation of the Lord is upon all nations, and his fury upon all their armies. He hath utterly destroyed them, he hath given them to the slaughter. Behold, his sword shall be bathed in heaven; it shall come down upon the people of his curse, to judgment." An ashy pallor overspread his face; he dropped to one knee, fought for breath, and slumped, heavily to the ground.

Berdohff walked across and turned the inert body over with his foot. "Dead" he said briefly. "Heart failure." He turned again, with fear-shadowed eyes, to regard the menacing brilliance across the valley.

The advance had slowed down and a deathly hush had settled over the scene. Men were halting, irresolute, and here and there were beginning to fall back. The dazzling glory had reached the walls of the city -- Jerusalem was almost hidden as by a wall of fire round about her, its

searing focus in the place where Berdohff knew the Temple stood. And then the fiery flood began to spill over the walls and battlements, reaching out darting tentacles as though threatening to grasp those barbarian invaders in the valley, splashing over like gigantic cascades of living flames. Cries of terror wafted up to the watchers on the hillside from the depths below. The advance began to resolve itself into a visible retreat

"Men of the Northern Republics" came the iron voice of Stanislav through the speakers "the advance will continue." Faces could he discerned in the distance, looking up towards him. He stepped forward, standing on the very edge of the steep slope, and raised his right hand towards heaven in a gesture of defiance. "This day" he cried in a voice that could be heard by every listener in his mighty army. "I, Vladimir Stanislav, defy the God of this land, and the power by which this city has been defended. By my own might and my own right hand will I drive God back into His heaven and exile Him from this earth. I, Vladimir Stanislav -- " He stopped abruptly.

Bardohff looked at his Chief curiously. He was strangely tardy in withdrawing his arm from its erect position. He was unusually still -- he had left his sentence unfinished, too. The silence had lasted a few seconds but in the emergency of the moment, with that nameless terror still advancing outward from the city walls to meet the irresolute host, the seconds seemed like hours. Berdohff crossed to his leader.

"Chief Marshal -- " he began anxiously and stopped suddenly. Never before had he seen rage in his Chief's cool, passionless eyes; certainly he had never seen fear. Now he saw both. And that right arm remained upright, jutting out as it were from a body that was motionless as a rock. Only the eyes lived, and moved, and burned....

"Mein Gott" burst out the Field-Marshal "Stanislav is paralysed. He is turned into a statue." Too late, he realized that his words had been caught by the camp radio and repeated to the whole army. He swung round almost as the words left his lips. He sensed, rather than perceived at that distance, the stupefied reaction of the men to his ejaculation; immediately, with no more than a backward glance at the

pursuing glory, the thousands of men began to run, frantically, indiscriminately, to get away from that fearful unknown that threatened to overwhelm them.

"Johann! Ivan!" he urged hurriedly. "It is a rout. Come, we must stop this panic and restore order." He was already plunging down the rocky hillside and after a moment's hesitation his four subordinates followed, stumbling and tripping on the uneven ground as they strove to keep pace with their leader. Von Berdohff panted out hurried instructions as they separated, each with the object of finding responsible officers in the midst of that mad melee with whose aid they might restore some semblance of discipline.

The panic flight continued. The valley of Hinnom was a surging sea of uniforms, men of all ranks endeavoring frantically to get away, none having regard for other than personal safety. Inevitably the living stream converged towards the south-east, where the Hinnom Valley merged with that of the Kidron and the land fell away to where the River Kidron pursued its rushing course downward into the Dead Sea fifteen miles away. Already the advance guard, trying to cross the river, was floundering in the flood, and bodies were being swept, helplessly, down the rapid stream. By far the greatest number remained on the bank and were making their way as rapidly as they could down the precipitous slopes towards the sea, gleaming dark blue below them in the distance. None knew why they took that course or questioned whither it would lead them; they only knew that this was the easiest avenue of immediate escape from the fiery terror that menaced them from the city walls. And so, without reasoning, they walked and ran alternately, men trying to clamber on crowded vehicles that lumbered past them, being knocked down and run over in the process, falling by the wayside, begging for mercy, unheeded

It was late in the afternoon when Von Berdohff climbed wearily back to the control headquarters on the hilltop. Johann and Ivan were already there, waiting for him. Of the other two officers there was no sign. He dragged himself painfully over the tumbled boulders on the brow of the hill and came upon them. Together the three men stared into the deserted valley. A few stragglers could be discerned here and there,

wounded and maimed men, endeavoring slowly to pick their way along, making for the south-east. Of the thousands who had surged through that valley earlier in the day there was no trace. The host was down in the flat lands near the shores of the Dead Sea, in the inhospitable stretch that had never been reclaimed or cultivated by the Royal Nation even though so near to their capital city. Now it offered, if not a haven of refuge to the fear-stricken army, at least a place where they were no longer in sight of the fiery menace that had destroyed their confidence and driven them away in blind panic.

Berdohff turned away from the view. The glory that was upon the city seemed to have lost something of its terror. The walls and buildings were still shining with its brilliance and his eyes still smarted when he looked at the dazzling radiance of the Temple. But somehow he felt that they would be safe on this hilltop across the valley -- the mysterious fire had not proceeded beyond the city walls. He knew now that he would never approach those walls and effect entry into that city. He thought, oddly, of the man he had shot out there at the Euphrates crossing, and his assertion that if they were rash enough to enter the land they would never come out of it again; and, strong man though he was, he shivered. He thought suddenly of Stanislav and turned around.

The paralyzed giant was still there, motionless, his gesticulating arm still held up to heaven in an absurd posture of defiance. Berdohff took a half step toward him, and stopped, undecided. Ivan was by his side. The two men's eyes met, questioning.

"We must do something" said Ivan. "Come, my chief"

Together they walked across, Johann close behind. They could see that Stanislav was alive. His eyes met theirs in a stare of recognition; moreover, there was a mute command to act. Berdohff thought for a moment.

"Chief Marshal, you must excuse us" he said loudly, hoping that Stanislav still retained his power of hearing. "We are going to free you from this position."

They did not know whether he had heard. The paralysed man gave no sign. Berdohff took hold of the outstretched arm gently and endeavored to move it down. It was as rigid as a rock.

Ivan came to his assistance. Together they tried to move the Chief Marshal from his position. The still body, motionless as a statue, defied their efforts. Johann came up on the other side and the three men exerted all their strength. They could as easily have shifted a mountain. Panting, they desisted.

Berdohff made a sign and the other two followed him out of earshot of Stanislav. "What does it mean?" he asked of the others helplessly.

Ivan was looking across the valley at the shining city. "He -- defied God" he said at last.

"Do you, then, believe in God?" asked Berdohff, not brusquely, but almost childishly.

Ivan regarded the object of his gaze for a long time. "Until today -- no" he said. "But I have seen -- strange things -- today."

"Look" interjected Johann tensely. The other two swung round.

A huge vulture was circling low overhead, in the act of descending on Stanislav. Its hideous dark shape gave the impression of an evil spirit. It alighted clumsily upon the top of his helmet, furred its wings lazily, bent over his face, and commenced pecking at his eyes.

And at that the nerve of Von Berdohff broke, and with a cry of horror he turned and ran, ran as he had never run before, ran followed by his equally terror-stricken companions, ran as if pursued by a horde of demons, down the steep slope to the south-east, in the wake of the army he had striven so vainly a few hours earlier to rally, ran anywhere to escape that hideous sight he had witnessed on the top of the hill.

* * * * *

"This hell -- snow; will it never cease?"

Ivan had stumbled along beside his chief without answering. He mechanically brushed away the black, oily flakes as they fluttered down in front of him and settled on his uniform.

"We shall not come out alive" moaned Johann from the rear. He was hauling himself painfully up the hillside by clutching at the branches of trees and shrubs.

"Look, there is the city!" declared Ivan suddenly.

The three men emerged from the undergrowth and stood gazing. The terrible roaring that had pursued them for so many hours was dying down now, but the darkness was still complete and the sky obscured by dense black clouds of smoke, drifting across, slowly, to the west. They had been making their way through forests and across fields and rivers in the blackest of darkness with no means of guidance; now they had come out on the top of this hill their eyes blinked at the radiance of that peaceful city. Dark though the night was, every detail of those buildings stood out in golden light, a city of fire set in a frame of blackness. Berdohff looked, and shuddered.

"We cannot get away from it" he said. "Shall we ever escape?"

Ivan turned round and looked back at the way they had come.

From where they stood they could see clearly the tremendous conflagration down there in the plain. They had almost been engulfed in it themselves. In their precipitous flight from what had been Stanislav they had followed the course taken by the panic-stricken army; they had come out upon an eminence overlooking the flats on which the army had gathered, and even as they looked, the ground had trembled under their feet and they had seen the quick æams cleave the surface of the plain amongst those men and columns of smoke and fire arise. They had seen the sea foam and boil, and ascend

to the heavens in vast clouds of steam. They had seen the thick, dark bitumen forced up through the waters into the sky and descend like black rain, igniting as it fell and reaching the earth in a hail of crimson fire. They had seen the sulphur streams run burning along the ground, vivid serpents of orange and red, and they had heard the appalling thunder of the terrific explosion as the pent-up subterranean forces, that had lain dormant, gathering strength, since last they were let loose in the days of Sodom and Gomorrah, burst forth in all their fury to overwhelm and consume that concourse of alien barbarians that had dared to enter and defile the land.

Berdohff had quickly seen that there was no hope for the army. Continuous earthquakes were rending the plain with a thousand crevasses, each one becoming a gash of spouting fire, and the remnants of the army were hopelessly trapped between the fire from above and that from below. He knew that none could possibly survive. It was necessary to think of his own and his companions' safety; as the dense smoke clouds swept over the sky and blotted out what was left of the fast fading daylight, and the thick, heavy rain of half-burnt bituminous oil began to fall about them, he barked a sharp order and the three men turned to retrace their steps, climbing and going toward the west. They had to rely entirely upon their sense of wind direction, for they had no other means of guidance and there was no light by which to see, only that ominous red glow behind them which told of the inferno into which they themselves had all but entered. So it was that after alternately climbing and descending they found themselves upon the top of this crag from which they could once more see the Holy City.

Ivan was looking about him, trying to peer through the darkness. Suddenly he plucked at Berdohff's sleeve.

"I do not like this place" he said shudderingly. "Let us go."

Without a word Berdohff led the way down a sloping path and began to skirt the rising ground of another hill. Johann had been fumbling in his pocket. Now he held out his hand with a cry of triumph.

"I have found my compass!" he announced. "Take it, Field-Marshal, and guide us away from here."

Von Berdohff took the little object with a grunt of relief, and held it close to his eyes.

"I cannot see" he said wearily.

Ivan had been looking at the rising ground on their right.

"It seems to be lighter on the horizon over there" he observed. "Let us climb a little higher; you will be able to see better."

They climbed steadily, silently. The sky above the hill grew lighter and the skyline showed an increasing radiance. They went a little farther and all three realized simultaneously that the cause of the phenomenon was the radiance of the Holy City, behind the hill, lightening the sky above it. The skyline was now clearly marked, every tree and bush along its course showing up in sharp relief.

Johann stopped suddenly and gripped Ivan's arm. "What is that?" he queried, teeth chattering.

Clear and stark upon that skyline, a grotesque black silhouette against the golden glory, they saw Stanislav, almost a speck on the horizon at that distance, but plainly discernable. His right arm was still held aloft, his frame still motionless, in that absurd posture of defiance.

"I wonder; is he still alive?" voiced Johann.

No one spoke for a moment.

"If he is -- and he knows we have deserted him -- and he recovers?" muttered Ivan.

"If the vultures have left his sight -- or his reason" rejoined Johann.

"Stay here, both of you" commanded Berdohff peremptorily. They saw him stride up the hill, taking his revolver out of its holster as he did so. He disappeared into the darkness and they waited.

Presently a movement on the skyline attracted their attention. It was Berdohff, coming into view again as he neared the golden light. They watched him walk up to Stanislav and stop as though facing him. Then he moved as though passing round and behind the paralysed form. They saw him raise his right hand; the roar of the eruption down in the valley still deafened their hearing but suddenly they saw the erect figure crumple up and fall to the ground. Berdohff stood back, and after a moment disappeared. They guessed he was on his way back. Stanislav they could not see any more.

It seemed an age; it could not have been more than ten minutes, and the stalwart form of Berdohff loomed up out of the darkness.

"Stanislav is dead!" he announced briefly.

They did not dare to question him. Ivan noted that the revolver was back in its place. He exchanged a glance with Johann and they fell in behind their leader.

"Where are we going, Berdohff?" asked Ivan. He marveled within himself at his own easy familiarity with the Field-Marshal. Such a mode of address would have been impossible a day ago.

"We shall make for Egypt, traveling by night" came the reply. "It is a hundred and fifty miles and we shall do it in five days if we can keep ourselves from being observed. Egypt is our nearest refuge now."

"And after that?" queried Johann.

"For my part, I shall go to the other end of the earth" burst out Berdohff explosively. "I shall get as far away as I can from this terrible God.

They heard him sobbing to himself as he stumbled onward through the undergrowth. They followed him, wondering.

Chapter 17 DAWN

They sat together on the flat roof top, against the parapet, quietly talking. The buildings of Jerusalem stood about them, ghostly in the early morning darkness. Here and there lights gleamed, and from the street below came the subdued murmur of milling crowds passing and repassing, their joyous exclamations and cries of greeting coming up sharply to the two watchers above. The cool night breeze gently ruffled the girl's hair; she sat, hand clasping his tightly as though she would never let it go.

"I hardly realize it yet, Hugh." Her soft voice was like music in his ears and he sighed with contentment. "You have come back, alive and well, and I had thought that I would never see you again." She was suddenly silent.

"Did you not believe, Miriam?" he teased her gently. "Did you have so little faith in me that you were ready to believe I had failed?"

Her grave eyes were turned towards him.

"How near did you come to failure, Hugh?" she whispered. He was serious immediately.

"Very near, Miriam." For a moment he was quiet, reflecting. "You were right. Over there;" he looked across the roof-tops to the east "things did seem different, and at times, I wondered." His eyes met hers. "I went down into the valley; but the Shepherd was with me, and by the grace of God I believed. And He delivered."

"Tell me; how did it happen?" asked the girl.

"So far as I can conclude, the firing party was a singularly inefficient one. All their bullets missed, although they must have passed pretty close. Even so, it is inconceivable to me how they could have bungled so badly at such close range, unless" -- and he looked up reverently -- "the hand of God was in it. Then evidently a piece of stone from the wall behind me, struck by a bullet, chipped off and hit me on the back

of the head. I went down like a log and they left me, thinking I was finished. I recovered consciousness three days later in the hut of an Arab peasant. He had taken me for one of his own people and tended me assiduously until I was able to sit up and talk. After a couple of days I was able to set out for Jerusalem, not much the worse for wear." He smiled down at her reassuringly and pressed the small hand that lay in his own.

And you were at the service of Intercession?" asked the girl.

"I arrived just before it was due to commence, in one of the planes bringing attendants at the assembly from the villages of Esdeaelon. I had to see John and report the result of my mission, although the progress of events had made that matter no longer of any importance." He smiled a little ruefully. "They told me that you were here in Jerusalem, but by then it was too late to find you before the service."

"You did not lose much time afterwards!" Her eyes were tender. "Do you realize, Hugh, that the siege is ended and we are delivered?"

He turned slowly, without answering at once, and looked towards the Temple on Mount Moriah. The Sh'kinah was still there, shining out from the Holy of Holies. Its first blinding radiance had given place now to a gentle, effulgent light, a golden glow that irradiated the buildings and streets without glare or brilliance. It seemed as though some quiet spirit of peace was in there, keeping guard over the trusting city. And the sound of happy voices rising from the streets in no wise did violence to that impression of quietness, and serenity, and -- yes, something else. Hugh wondered what it could be, then it came to him; it was expectancy. They are expecting something, he mused; what could it be? He turned back to the girl at his side.

"Delivered -- yes!" He voiced the words slowly, reverently. "There will be no more interference with the Royal Nation. It will proceed on its peaceful way, unmolested -- and you and I, for the rest of our lives -- "

"The rest?" Miriam interrupted him. "Do you not understand, Hugh, that the time of real life is to come and that death will soon be a thing

of the past? Do you not know what we are expecting now what all the people are waiting for?"

He looked down at her, whimsically. "I have such a lot to learn yet, Miriam. You have been waiting and looking for this for years past; to me it is all new. What is going to happen now?"

"We wait" breathed the girl softly "for the revelation of our King in glory and in power to establish His Kingdom on earth. The enemies of that Kingdom have been overthrown; nothing intervenes. We expect the revelation hourly."

"And when He comes?" queried Hugh.

"The laws of the Lord will go forth from Jerusalem to all the earth, and men everywhere will give heed, and turn from their evil ways, and live." She breathed the words softly.

"So the Royal Nation is going to follow up its victory by bringing peace upon earth -- "

" -- and goodwill to all men" finished Miriam, looking up into his face,

How long they had been sitting they knew not. They only knew that they had become conscious of a stillness, a dying down of the murmur of sound that has been ascending from the street, a great hush. Instinctively they looked towards the House of Prayer. The Sh'kinah was lifting, moving across the valley, leaving the Temple and guiding the eyes of all who watched in the direction of the east. The radiance that had clothed the lofty buildings was dying away and being renewed over there on the eastern side of the city, upon the slopes of the Mount of Olives. The dark green trees took on a thousand scintillating points of light; the smooth turf shone with golden fire. A mighty silence descended upon the city multitudes as they saw the cloud of glory settle and rest upon the hallowed hill.

Above the skyline of the Mount, behind the golden glow of the Sh'kinah, appeared a wavering finger of pinkish light, stabbing the

blackness of the night sky. It flickered for a moment, and was joined by another.

"Sunrise" whispered Miriam. "The sun will be up in a few minutes."

They watched as other points of light pushed their way up from behind the hill. The eastern sky was full of flickering fingers. White and pink, they climbed the sable curtain and joined together in broad patches of color. Like the arrows and spears of an advancing army, broad shafts of daylight sped upwards and raced towards the zenith. A movement on the gallery surrounding the great dome of the House of Prayer caught Hugh's attention. It was the white-robed figure of Nathan Benaron, lineal descendant of a long line of High Priests. He had ascended to the gallery directly the Sh'kinah had departed. He was peering intently towards the east. Now he raised his silver trumpet. They caught the glint of light on its long slender stem as he raised it to his lips.

Miriam sprang up, lips parted, eyes shining with excitement. Hugh got up more slowly, conscious of a dawning wonder. He felt the girl's tight clasp on his arm, and he drew her more closely to him as the long-drawn-out silver note floated across all Jerusalem.

"Look" breathed Miriam.

The eastern sky unrolled itself into a flaming sea of brightness. White, and pink, and green, and gold, blossomed and opened into splendid array. It seemed almost as though the waiting Sh 'kinah was rising up to meet the oncoming dawn. Dazzling rays from behind the Mount glanced upwards and touched the multitudes of fleecy white clouds with edges of gold.

There came a great cry from the watcher on the balcony.

"BEHOLD!"

"Miriam -- those clouds" whispered Hugh, awed in spite of himself. "I have never seen anything more beautiful."

"Clouds, Hugh -- or -- angels?" breathed the girl. The man stood rigid. The great voice from the balcony reached across to them again.

"BEHOLD, O PEOPLE -- THY KING COMETH UNTO THEE!"

A mighty cry burst forth from the watchers in the city. The glory of the east had covered the heavens and lighted the tops of the buildings with its splendor. That lone watcher, high up above the people in the streets, could be clearly discerned. He had laid aside his trumpet and was standing, arms held out as if in greeting.

"Miriam" whispered Hugh urgently. "What does it mean? What is happening?"

She turned her eyes full on him and stood, serene and confident, in the morning light. "As the astrape, the bright shining, cometh out of the east, and shineth even unto the west, so shall also the coming of the Son of Man be" she quoted softly. "That is what it means, Hugh."

Hand slipped into hand, they turned together to face the oncoming vision. The skies were full of light. There seemed to be a sound of heavenly voices, a chorus of angels, around and about them. Their eyes could not bear the dazzling glory; they sank, reverently, to their knees, heads bowed, hands clasping hands tightly. And as thus they knelt, rapt in adoration, hearts beating fast in expectancy, there came a thunderous shout from the crowds in the streets below.

"HOSANNA TO THE SON OF DAVID: BLESSED IS HE THAT COMETH, THAT COMETH IN THE NAME OF THE LORD!"

The End

The Bible Fellowship Union

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