IT WAS Withers' fault. He should not have allowed his imagination to run riot over several sheets of notepaper which he had stolen from the company office.

This in itself was bad enough and dangerous enough, but he made matters worse by dragging Curialo into the mess, and Curialo, for once in a way, was almost blameless.

Withers, of course, had no real intention of deserting, although more than once he had flirted with the idea. At one time or another nearly every man serving in the ranks of the French Foreign Legion does wish he could get out of it, but two minutes' careful consideration of the risks involved usually cures most troopers of their longing for freedom.

A deserter does not stand a dog's chance. Military policemen, Arabs and civilians are leagued against him. If they can catch him they receive a fat reward; he goes to prison. In South Morocco, along the fringes of the desert, the water points are guarded and the trails are unceasingly patrolled. There is also the ever present menace of the djich, the rebel band, which, if it lays hands on a deserter, will not bother to claim any reward. It will carve him up with considerable skill and leave him to die, spreadeagled and gutted, with a bellyful of stones and prickly pears.

Nevertheless, if by some lucky fluke, after terrible hardships, he struggles out of the desert and reaches the cities of the coast, hawk-eyed gendarmes will be looking for him at every railroad station and on every dock. The system works well: not one deserter in a thousand can get clear away.

Now Withers knew these things, and
he had no desire whatsoever to spend the rest of his days in a military prison camp. His object in writing that letter to his Aunt Martha was twofold—in the first place he wanted sympathy; in the second he wanted cold, hard cash.

Neither money nor sympathy are to be found in large quantities in the Legion. They are, in fact, almost nonexistent. The pay of the rank and file is twenty-five centimes a day, which works out at about one cent in American money. Sympathy is something else again. The average Legionnaire is about the most hard boiled, hard mouthed, hard drinking customer to be found on the face of God's green earth. If he is afflicted with any tender emotions he manages to conceal his feelings with great skill. Whenever he is feeling low he waits until pay day, gets drunk, fights the town patrol, and wakes up, cured, in the guard room.

Withers himself when sober was not noticeably sentimental, and his fondness
for his Aunt Martha was in direct ratio to the size of the postal orders which that long suffering and gullible woman sent him from England.

The names he called her whenever her donations amounted to less than ten shillings were indecent. He could swear in English, French and Arabic, which goes to show that a man may learn a good deal more in the Legion than the mere business of shouldering arms.

Instead of swearing at his aunt, Withers should have been tearfully grateful, for she was the one and only relative of his who still condescended to keep in touch with him. She wrote regularly once a month, gave him news of the happenings in and around the Mile End Road, told him about her boarders and her rheumatism, and never failed to enclose a few shillings pocket money for her wayward nephew.

For several months, however, her gifts had been shrinking more and more. From ten shillings the postal orders had dwindled to eight, from eight to six, from six to five. The tone of her letters showed a corresponding change. She was growing cold and distant, and more than once she bemoaned the fact that a bright young fellow like her nephew Albert should be wasting his life fighting for "them Frenchies." She went even further and hinted that, probably, he had become so French himself that he never would come home.

Justly alarmed by these symptoms, Withers decided to take heroic measures to wring his Aunt Martha’s heartstrings and to find once again the way to her purse.

Unfortunately he reached this decision one Sunday morning after he had spent his last sou, and Curialo’s last sou, on red canteen wine. They were both feeling mellow and drowsy. Curialo sprawled on a bench with his hands in his pockets, his képi dragged down over his eyes, and a cigarette dangling out of the corner of his mouth.

The canteen was almost deserted. An old-timer, resting his head on the table, snored rhythmically. Behind the counter the Widow Clamart dozed over her crochet work. The only living things which displayed any signs of activity were the flies. There were swarms of them everywhere—on the tables, on the ceiling, in the old-timer’s beard. The drone of their wings filled the air. Out of doors the parade ground, flayed by the incandescent rays of the sun, was empty and quiet. Fort Hammadi sweltered in the heat.

For a while Withers kept up a desultory flow of conversation, but no one, least of all Curialo, wanted to listen to him.

"Orkright," he said at last, turning his back upon his neighbor. "Don’t talk, if that’s the way you feel. Gawd knows I don’t care. I got letters to write, I ‘ave. ’Ere’s a good chawnee ter bring my correspondence up to dyte, as they say, and don’t disturb me, yer big galloot, once I get started. It ’ud be just like you—butting in at the wrong momint."

"Who’s it to this time?" queried Curialo, speaking sardonically out of the corner of his wide mouth. "Another jane?"

"My Aunt Martha, that’s who," declared Withers, drawing a wad of crumpled sheets from his trousers pocket.

"She’s a blasted, penny pinching ‘ound, she is, and no mistake. But I got an idea, matey. You wait. It ought to be worth five pounds, this ’ere idea."

"That’s twenty-five bucks, ain’t it? I’ll tell the world you’re a cockeyed optimist, Bert. That old gal—"

"Don’t you go saying anything against my Aunt Martha," Withers ordered truculently. "Many’s the bottle of wine you’ve guzzled, thanks to ’er. All she needs now is a little prodding. You watch. I’ll prod ’er to a queen’s tyste."

He wetted the end of his pencil and settled down to work, elbows spread far apart, his nose nearly touching the paper. Curialo finished his cigarette and went to sleep. Half an hour later he was aroused by a violent dig in the ribs.

"’ERE," chuckled Withers, his thin face wreathed in smiles. "You listen to this,
matey. This is prime, this is. It's rich. Five quid, I said. Gor'blimey, it's more likely to be ten, maybe more. Fair coining money, she is, the old 'ag. She won't never miss it. This 'ere—" he patted the finished letter—"it's a stroke of genius, as the poet says. Just the sort of thing she loves. 'Lor', she'll be in tears afore she's through reading it."

By that time Curialo was wide awake and angry. His ribs ached, and the canteen wine had left a dubious taste in his mouth. He was thirsty, but the only liquid refreshment he could look forward to until the next day at noon, when he would draw his half liter ration of wine, was brackish well water.

"And you woke me up to tell me that," he commented, scowling darkly. "I ought to knock you for a loop. You poor nut, that old dame ain't as easy as you think she is. She's wising up."

"But you listen to this," urged Withers, holding up a grimy forefinger. "This is different. It come to me out of the clear blue sky. Hinspiration as you might almost say. Ten pounds—"

"Fifty bucks! What for would she give you fifty bucks?" jeered Curialo. "She knows you spend it on hooch. Why, that's one thousand two hundred and fifty francs. Forget it, Bert. She'll probably send you fifty cents and a letter full of wisecracks. That's her speed."

WITHERS chose to overlook this disparaging comment. He picked up the pages of his letter, sorted them out and, after clearing his throat, he explained:

"It begins like this: 'Dear Aunt Martha—'"

"No," Curialo said firmly. "You don't. I know it by heart. 'Dear Aunt Martha,' " he recited, giving a frightful imitation of the Cockney's sing-song voice. "'Opin this finds you as it leaves me under shot and shell, surrounded by flying bullets, but not yet wounded, thank God and King George V, though it may happen at any moment—'"

Withers sat bolt upright and thrust out his chin. His round, bulging eyes flashed fire.

"Don't you sneer at my way of writing letters," he cried. "That shot and shell appeal, it's clever that's what it is. But this time—"

"This time you'll shut up. Quit it, Bert. Be reasonable. You ain't got enough money to mail the doggone letter. What's the use of making a song and dance about nothing? It's too hot. Just take things easy."

"Or right! Strike me blind, if I don't. That's a bawgin, and when the money comes through I'll find somebody else ter tyke out on a spree."

Curialo yawned and closed his eyes. He slumped back against the whitewashed wall.

"Go right to it," he assented. "You're a better man than I am if you can stage a wild party in this dump. Every goddamned joint in Hammadi is out of bounds." He reopened one eye and stared sourly at the Widow Clamart. "That's the only woman in Hammadi we're allowed to look at. And she's a mess. What's the good of money in a place like this? So long, Bert; I'm going to sleep."

Again Withers prodded him in the ribs. "Women ain't everything," he pointed out. "Now this 'ere letter it's a masterpiece. When you've 'eard it you'll 'ave to admit—"

"I don't want to listen to your letter," roared Curialo, aroused at last to violent action. "I want to sleep. I want to be quiet. You make me sick. The whole army makes me sick." He caught Withers by the scruff of the neck and jammed his head down on to the table. "Eat your damn letter," he shouted. "Chew it, slobber over it, but for the love of Mike, leave me out!"

Withers squirmed violently. Distressing sounds came from the back of his throat.

"Leave off! 'Ere! Blast you! Leave off, I say!"

The disturbance dispelled the Widow Clamart's lethargy.
“Assez!” she commanded. “That will do, band of baboons. I will not allow fighting in the canteen. I shall report you to the orderly-sergeant. Stop it. You will chip my mugs.”

Curialo’s ill humor switched abruptly from Withers to the canonnière.

“I’d like to break every bottle in the place,” he told her. “What do you put in your wine, you ancient witch? Coal tar? Or is it kerosene? My throat’s on fire.”

A vehement altercation then ensued. Withers, forgetting his grudge against Curialo, shook his fist at Madame Clamart.

“Borgia!” he cried. “Specimen of a poisoner! Who knows how many poor men have died of drinking your wine of the most abominable?”

The gray bearded veteran joined in the fray as a matter of principle, without knowing what it was about. The Widow Clamart was not popular. Her wine was cheap, bad and weak. But she was more than able to take care of herself. Her voice was as shrill as the blast of a calliope; her manner was aggressive. She pitched into her customers with shrivish venom and almost drowned them out.

The row was at its height when a shadow fell across the threshold. Some one beat a tattoo upon the door.

“Attention!” bellowed the orderly-sergeant. “À vos rangs! Colonel’s inspection!”

The angry voices died away. Withers, Curialo, the graybeard and the Widow Clamart leaped to their feet and stood rigid. A great silence filled the room. Only the flies, indifferent to man made laws, buzzed about with unabated ardor.

Into the canteen strode Colonel Meluche, commanding the Hammadi Garrison, a long, lean, stoop shouldered man with a hatchet face, a rimless monocle and a beautifully curled mustache. Behind him marched the orderly-sergeant with an open notebook in his hand and a worried, expectant look in his eyes. Behind him came the regimental adjutant, a beefy, perspiring man, armed also with a notebook and a pencil. Closing the line of march came the orderly-sergeant, bristling with a sense of his own importance.

“Ah, Monsieur le Colonel,” simpered the Widow Clamart. “Good day, Monsieur le Colonel. I trust Monsieur le Colonel is not incommode by the excessive temperature we are having.”

The colonel unclasped his hands, which he held folded behind his back, and touched the vizor of his cap with two fingers.

“Madame—” he bowed—“the weather? This isn’t hot. You ought to have been with us in the Hoggar. Eleven—no, twelve years ago.” He glanced slowly around the room. “Looks clean in here. Meticulous. Congratulations!” Again he brought his monocle to bear on the lady. “I heard a great deal of noise when I came in. Shouting. Have you any complaints to make, Madame Clamart?”

Her eyebrows went up and up until they met her hair. She shook her head and shrugged her shoulders.

A noise as of shouting? Surely Monsieur le Colonel must have been mistaken. She never had to make complaints against any of her brave boys. They had hearts of gold. They never gave her the least trouble (she knew which side her bread was buttered on); they were far too considerate ever to quarrel with her.

Of course—here she smiled knowingly—she had been bandying a few words with Messieurs Curialo and Withers just as the colonel arrived. Words of the most amicable—an exchange of opinions about minor matters.

“It sounded like a fight to me,” the colonel broke in. “Don’t shield them, Madame Clamart. I object to such weakness. I’ll drill some decency into their thick skulls.”

He turned and glared at the two troopers.

“I will not tolerate this sort of thing,” he rasped. “I heard you braying all the way across the parade ground. Hyenas! Apes! Must I put the canteen out of bounds before you learn to behave decently?”
This particular remark did not seem to call for an answer. They stood as though turned to stone, staring past the colonel, as the regulations prescribed, “at an imaginary object at a distance of approximately ten meters.”

The colonel looked them over item by item, starting in at their képis and working slowly downward. All at once, out of the tail end of his eye, Withers saw that the officer’s glance was riveted on the sheets of note paper lying before him on the table. His heart rose up in his throat and choked him. He felt hot, then cold; beads of perspiration rolled down his cheeks; his knees shook. At last, in desperation, he tried to distract the colonel’s attention.

“Begging your pardon, mon Colonel,” he began in a strained voice. “Far from us was the idea of disputing with Madame Clamart! Indeed, I was but asking her for a stamp. I wanted to mail this letter of mine.”

As he spoke he tried to gather up the scattered sheets and to palm them out of sight. But the attempt was wholly unsuccessful.

“Har!” exploded the colonel. “Do you always preface your purchase of stamps by such names as Borgia and poisoner? Don’t lie to me, species of an infamous cretin. And who gave you permission to write a letter on government stationery? Put that down! Let go that letter! At once!”

Pop eyed, open mouthed, gasping, Withers still clutched at the buff colored sheets.

“Obey the order of your commanding officer!” thundered the adjutant. “Are you deaf? Drop it!”

WITHERS let the pages slither out of his fingers. For a long moment a heavy silence weighed down upon the room, when the colonel snapped:

“How did that government stationery come into your possession? No lies now. I want the truth.”

A smile, meant to be ingratiating, but which only managed to be ghastly, struggled across Withers’ countenance.

“I found it, mon Colonel.” He made a vague gesture with his arm. “Blowing about in the courtyard behind the office. Just blowing about.”

With the tip ends of his fingers he contrived to brush the sheets off the table on to the floor, out of sight.

The colonel eyed him coldly. Withers tried to look like an honest man with an easy conscience, but the effort was painful to behold. His Adam’s apple pumped up and down, and his ears, which were large, turned a bright, flaming red.

“Thief,” summed up the colonel. “The stores are being pillaged. Adjutant Flaquard, I shall hold you responsible for this leakage.”

The adjutant squared his shoulders and muttered something in his mustache. The look he gave Withers was charged with menace.

“But,” the colonel went on, “that is beside the point. I am curious to know what kind of correspondence goes out into the world on our official notepaper. Hand me that letter at once.”

“Mon Colonel, it is strictly private,” Withers blurted out. “It is a letter to a close relative. A confidential missive, mon Colonel.”

“Adjutant Flaquard,” ordered the colonel. “Pick up that letter and hand it to me.”

The adjutant did not have to be told twice. Down he plunged beneath the table. He retrieved the scattered sheets, bunched them neatly together and handed them to the colonel with a triumphant—

“Voilà, mon Colonel!”

“Family matters,” Withers protested faintly. “Sacred family matters. Mon Colonel, you can’t read that. If you had a sweetheart—”

“I haven’t,” said the colonel. “Five days pack drill. I don’t like to be reminded of my lost youth.” He screwed his monocle into his eye and spelled out, “‘My dear Aunt Martha.’ Oh, it’s in English. Are you English?”
“Yes, *mon Colonel*, and what’s more I’m proud—”

“Well, today, my man, you’re a Legionnaire. Ten days pack drill instead of five for having forgotten that you are a Legionnaire. A funny people the English. Is your Aunt Martha your sweetheart?”

“She brought me up, *mon Colonel*.”

“Made a rotten bad job of it. Now stand still. I have studied English. I shall not have to ask you to translate.”

“You’ll break a woman’s heart if you read it!” Withers insisted. “It’s not meant for other eyes than hers.”

“Twelve days pack drill instead of ten. Government stationery was not designed for private correspondence. One more sound out of you—” the words came like bullets—and you’ll go to prison for twenty-eight days. You understand? Silence.”

Withers stood mute. The cells at Hammadi were ten feet underground.

Before he reached the end of the first paragraph a frown appeared between the colonel’s eyes; before he turned the first page he was livid with rage. By the time he reached the signature he was ready to froth at the mouth.

“This is terrible!” he exclaimed. “This is monstrous. You little jackal, I have caught you in the act—red handed. The pair of you!”

Until that moment Curialo had taken only a mild interest in the proceedings. He came back to earth with a jolt.

“Yes,” snorted the colonel. “Both of you. Pigs! Gentlemen,” he added, addressing his alarmed escort, “listen to this. I shall translate this man’s atrocious English into French so that you may judge for yourselves. Here, remember, is a Legionnaire writing to a relative in a far country. He addresses her as his Aunt Martha. He begins with a preamble expressing the hope that she is in a state of health called a roseate condition. He himself, he says, is in very poor health. He is starving—a month has gone by since he has tasted meat. Exhausted though he is by privations, he has had to go into action nine times during the past four weeks. An inhuman colonel has caused the battalion to be butchered. Only twenty men of the original battalion survive! What hecatombs, messieurs! How appalling, is it not? But it is all here in black and white.”

He shook the letter in Withers’ face.

“Rascal! Good-for-nothing rascal! How dare you write such filthy lies?”

Before Withers could open his mouth the colonel shouted:

“Not a word! Don’t pretend that I have distorted the things you have said. I shall translate literally:

I can stand it no longer. Why should I fight the Frenchman’s battles? I can not forget that I am a fragment of the ancient boulder (whatever that may mean). I must leave the Legion or else I shall make a noise like a frog.

“But let us proceed. He says he is determined to make a dash for liberty. His friend Curialo is with him. This Curialo, it appears, is an American from New York. He too loathes the Legion and the abominable brutalities of the sergeants. He is a rough diamond, this Curialo, and, blood being thicker than water, this evil pair of imbeciles intends to escape from our clutches at the first opportunity, whatever the cost may be.”

“I’d like to point out—” began Curialo.

“Ten days pack drill,” reported Colonel Meluche. “There follows a paragraph describing the author’s longing to see again the dear visage of his aunt and to set tooth into one of her delectable steak-and-kidney pies. God willing, he will soon have the pleasure of going to church with her some Sunday morning. And now, gentlemen, we come to the main portion of this astounding document.

“You will be interested to learn that the oasis of Hammadi is lost in the midst of an ocean of burning sand. Aunt Martha can not imagine what it is like. It is not sand such as one finds on the Margate beach. There is more of it. It is hotter. In fact, it is a desert. Hammadi
stands in the heart of this arid wilderness — two hundred miles from anywhere.”

A titter greeted this humorous remark. The captain smiled; the adjutant clapped one hand over his mouth; the orderly sergeant was convulsed with silent mirth. The colonel frowned. His underlings became grave and silent once again.

“It is no laughing matter,” he declared. “This scoundrel now reaches the climax of his lubrication. He points out that he is without a penny to his name. So is Curialo. They are paupers. Without money they can not escape. They must have at least twenty-five pounds sterling to enable them to hire a trustworthy Arab who will guide them safely to the coast, where they intend to stow away on board a foreign ship. He has confidence in his aunt. He begs her to send him the money by return mail, otherwise he will certainly be dead. If she loves him she will not send a penny less and as soon as he reaches London he will work his fingers to the bone to repay the debt, plus six per cent. interest.

“And that, messeurs, is the gist of this lengthy, ill written, ill advised, utterly abominable letter. It concludes with kisses.”

Carefully he folded the letter, ran his thumbnail along the creases and slid it into his breast pocket.

“So this is the private letter dealing with family matters,” he commented, bending over and peering at Withers as though he were watching a worm on a pin. “It all depends, I suppose, upon one’s point of view. In my opinion it is the most disgraceful thing I have ever read. You have slandered your chiefs, cast mud upon the flag you serve and promised to desert at the first opportunity. What, if anything, have you to say for yourself?”

Withers licked his dry lips. His manner became confidential and friendly.

“You mustn’t take it that way, mon Colonel,” he declared. “Maybe I did lay it on thick, but that doesn’t mean I’m not satisfied. On the contrary! Only a few moments ago I was saying to Curialo, ‘Curialo, I ask you, could one find a better commanding officer than ours anywhere in Africa?’ and he said—”

“Liar!”

“What I said in that letter was meant only for my aunt. It’s not what you might call official. No, sir. All I was after was a bit of money, a few francs to—er—celebrate Curialo’s birthday.”

“Rotten to the core,” sneered the colonel. “No wonder your nation is called perfidious if it can breed such creatures. Money! For its sake he is willing to befoul everything he should hold sacred. It is foul! It is degrading. And what shall we say of this other Russian who is willing to share in the spoils?”

“It’s all news to me,” Curialo asserted. “Hypocrite!” Colonel Meluche was growing angrier and angrier. “Son of hypocrites. Dollar chasers. For gold you would sell honor, decency, self-respect. Pah! You are not fit to wear the uniform of the Legion!”

But he did not know what to do. No punishment is laid down in the code militaire for Legionnaires who merely express the intention of deserting. He could not even charge them with conduct prejudicial to good order and military discipline. He would have liked to have them court-martialed, but the case against them was too slim, and the advocate general might take exception to the way in which the evidence had been gathered.

Nevertheless something had to be done about it.

“Captain Chousson,” he inquired of the orderly officer, “that culvert over the Argoub road at Kilometer 5 hasn’t been fixed yet, has it? No? Something ought to be done about it. Our guests will be leaving some time this afternoon. Send these two men out to repair it at once. I don’t care how hot it is out there. It may sweat some of the viliness out of their bones. And they’ll both do twelve days pack drill. That ought to be punishment enough. Orderly Sergeant, march them away!”
AN HOUR later they reached the culvert spanning the Argoub oued. It stood in the middle of a flat, shadowless plain covered with stones and clumps of bluish gray alfalfa grass. Southward the palm trees of the Hammadi oasis thrust ragged heads over the crest of a low ridge of sand. Northward, twenty miles away, a range of hills was warped askew by the heat haze. The rest was empty, sun baked desolation.

"Down tools," ordered the sergeant, "stand easy!"

He marched over to the culvert and inspected it with military thoroughness. Several blocks of stone had fallen out of the arch. The roadbed sagged ominously. It needed the attention of a corps of expert stone masons equipped for the job with cement, lime, props and the customary tools of their trade.

Curialo and Withers were armed only with one shovel, one pick, and a crowbar thrown in for good measure by the quartermaster-sergeant.

This lack of adequate equipment did not bother the sergeant. In the Foreign Legion he had been trained to rely on sweat and brawn instead of new fangled mechanical contrivances.

"It is quite simple," he declared. "An easy job. You’ll build up a pillar beneath the right side of the arch to prop it up. The left side is still sound. Choose large blocks of stone and make it good and strong. Then you can shovel some dirt into the cracks in the roadbed. It’ll hold until the rains anyway. Peel off your tunics and get to work. It’s ten to two. I’ll be back for you at five; if you loaf on the job you’ll sleep in the cells."

He stood for some minutes on the top of the bank, watching them roll great boulders through the sand in the bottom of the oued. Sweat poured off their brown backs. Looking at them toil in that glaring white pit was enough to make him feel hot and limp.

"Put some life into it, salopards!" he called out. "Don’t be afraid of dirtying your hands. Big stones, I said, not pebbles."

He laughed derisively as they strained and shoved, struggling for a foothold in the loose sand, where at every step they sank ankle deep.

"I wish you luck!" he jeered. "You want to desert, do you? Here’s your chance. I’m not going to stay here and stew all afternoon. There’s a bottle of white wine waiting for me at the mess. I’ll call for you at five. If the job isn’t finished—cells. Salut!"

His mind was untroubled as he hurried back toward Hammadi. He was morally certain he would find the prisoners at the Argoub culvert when he returned. They had no food, no water, no money. Zenaga, the nearest well, was thirty kilometers away. They did not have a water bottle between them. Before sundown, whether they worked or not, they would be gagging with thirst.

He swung down the road without once turning back—and as soon as he was safely out of sight, by mutual consent, the two troopers stopped work.

A long moment went by. Withers looked at Curialo—a look full of doubt, suspicion and anxiety.

"Ot, ain’t it?" he said for the sake of saying something. "Fair raising blisters on me shoulders, this sun is."

"You louse," said Curialo, twisting his mouth sidewise. "Blood’s thicker than water, is it?"

He took a step in Withers’ direction.

Withers backed away three steps.

"Don’t do nothing you’ll be sorry for later on," he admonished. "Don’t you get nawsy, do you ’ear? Gor’s truth, ’ow was I to know I’d pinch that there letter? Don’t you come no nearer, yer big galoot, or mark my words I’ll meet you more than ’alfway."

Curialo took a long step forward, whereupon Withers scrambled up the embankment and pounced upon the crowbar, lying on top of their tunics by the roadside.

"Nah, then," he announced defiantly. "Come on, if yer wants a row. Hi’m waiting. Me back’s to the wall, as the saying is. The whole blooming world’s
against me. Even you what ought to 'ave better sense."

Curialo’s anger subsided. It was too blindingly hot to fight.

"It’s O.K. by me, Bert," he chuckled.
"No rough stuff. It’s a tough break, that’s all. Quit playing Horatio and be yourself."

"Who’s ‘Oratio?"
"You know—the guy on the bridge,

“And up spake brave Horatio
With a face as bold as brass...

“Something about fighting thirty thousand men. I forget. Take your big feet off my tunic. I want a cigarette.”

Withers dropped the crowbar. They sat down on the culvert, their legs dangling in space, and shared the last battered cigarette Curialo fished out of his pocket.

"There’s times," observed Withers, "times when, Gor’blimey, I’d like ter be out of this. Clean as bold as brass. It’s more than ‘alf true what I said in that there letter. Think of being in London now. September, ain’t it? Fog on the river, and wet streets—Lor’ lumme! Think of walking into a pub and ordering a pint of beer! And talking your own lingo—and making a bit of money—and taking your girl to a show of a Saturday night! No more saluting—"

Curialo sat with his elbows on his knees, staring down at the shimmering sand.

"Yep," he agreed, "maybe. But give me New York. Hell! What’s the use? It can’t be done. Lil’ old New York. I’d give ten bucks to be there now. Anywhere, uptown, downtown. Gosh, you could put me down in Brooklyn and I wouldn’t have a kick coming. Damn you and your fool ideas!" He spat neatly between his swinging feet. "Twelve days extra drill. Bert, I’ve had a skinful of the Legion. I’m sick of forming fours. I’m sick of this damn sun eating into my skull. My brain’s going soft."

"Same ‘ere," approved Withers. "Ow much service ‘ave you got anyway?"

"Ten years and eight months. More than enough."

"I been in ten and six months come October. Wonder why I signed on again? Yer gets in a sort of rut, as the saying is.” His mind hopped back to the stormy session with Colonel Meluche. "Perfidious, huh! Me, what’s been wounded four times. Perfidious!"

"And I’m a dollar chaser. Yep, I’ve had more than enough, and there’s no way out."

They grew gloomier and gloomier. Their faces grew longer and longer. The charred butt end of the cigarette hung limp in the corner of Curialo’s mouth. He did not bother to relight it.

All at once Withers stirred and looked over his shoulder in the direction of Hammadi.

"Ark!" he said sharply. "Ear anything?"

The faint, far off throb of an engine beat against their ears. A pillar of dust, blotting out the green tree tops, was rolling swiftly toward them.

"Car coming," grunted Curialo.

"Them blokes what stayed with the colonel lawst night. Blooming tourists."

His tone was charged with contempt. "Must be balmy to come cruising around out ‘ere when they could be cool and comfortable at ‘ome."

Deep in thought, Curialo watched the dust cloud hurry onward.

"Bert," he said, tapping Withers’ shoulder, "the culvert ain’t safe. That car’s traveling fast. If it sticks to the middle of the road it’s going to spill over. We got to flag those birds. They’ll have to stop. Get me?"

The same idea was stirring at the back of Withers’ mind.

"Can you ‘andle a motor car?" he inquired. "Drive it, I mean?"

"Drive anything on four wheels. Used to drive a truck. Leave it to me."

THEY struggled into their tunics and ran down the road, waving their arms. The car, an open, custom built model with a long, tapering bonnet of glittering aluminum, slithered to a standstill.

Two gentlemen all dressed in white
occupied the front seat. They wore pipe clayed helmets adorned with brightly colored puggarees. On the running boards, within easy reach of the passengers' hands, a brace of rifles were fastened in metal clips.

Never before had Curialo or Withers seen such a luxurious, high class vehicle. It stank of money.

The travelers smiled brightly. They had been dined and whined by the officers of the Hammadi garrison and their hearts were full of gratitude, not only toward that one group of officers but toward the entire French colonial administration which had spared no pains to make their trip enjoyable.

They were no common or garden variety of tourist. Mr. Stanislas Swiecinski, the driver, was part owner and star leader writer of Warsaw's leading morning paper. His companion was none other than the brilliant pen and ink artist, Mr. Ladislaw Razovich. They belonged to that privileged class which is persona grata with colonial ministers.

When they applied for permission to visit the wastelands of North Africa they had found their way magically smoothed for them. Politics may have had something to do with it. The long headed officials at the Quai d'Orsay may have looked upon the trip as good propaganda. Whatever the ulterior motives may have been, word had gone forth to every post along their carefully planned route to make their visit a pleasant and memorable one.

They had seen everything there was to be seen from Rabat to Beni-Abbes, from Sfax to Alger. Now they were headed northward, out of the desert. In two more days their automobile would be slung on board ship and the trip would be over.

They were delighted, whatever the pretext, to stop and talk to any stray soldiers they happened to meet. Soldiers were particular friends of theirs.

"Good day to you, my friends!" cried Mr. Swiecinski, a large, hearty man with a curly black beard. "What is it that we can do for you?"

The original intention of the so-called friends had been dastardly. They had meant to take possession of the car, pitch the rightful owners out and make a headlong dash for freedom. On second thought, however, Curialo decided against immediate violence.

"Go easy," he cautioned in a hoarse aside. "Mind them guns, Bert. We'll hop a ride."


"The bridge is on the bum," explained Curialo. "Hug the left side or you'll ditch the bus."

"Thank you, my friend," beamed Mr. Swiecinski. "We were warned. But what efficiency! What thoroughness! This is a significant incident. Razovich, mon cher, you see what I mean; no detail, however small, is neglected. Here is a bridge, a ten-meter span, a bit of masonry lost in the heart of a desolate wilderness, but it is watched, guarded, repaired."

He talked so well, and he talked so much, and his accent was so strange that Curialo and Withers could only gaze at him in wonderment.

"You," Mr. Swiecinski went on, indicating the troopers with an outflung hand, "you, my friends, have good cause to be proud of the uniform you wear. You epitomize an epoch, the bridge guard at — at what? Has the bridge a name?"


"Bridge guards at the Argoub oued. Yes, I see it. I grows on me. It is worth expanding into a whole chapter. Razovich, could you make a rapid sketch of the scene? No romance. Stark facts. Desert, a desolate ravine, emptiness. Two men in soiled working clothes."
Mr. Razovich was not quite as enthusiastic as his employer. He had been studying the troopers through his smoked glasses, and it seemed to him that there was something fishy about their behavior. What, he wondered, had the tall, gaunt ruffian meant when he told his companion to "mind them guns"? Why were they hanging about so close to the car?

"I can remember the details," he promised. "It's quite simple. I don't like to sketch in this light. It's bad for the eyes. We ought to be getting on, I think, if we intend to reach Kreider tonight."

"True," agreed Mr. Swieciński. "We, my friends, thank you again. Thank you!"

"Hold on a minute," urged Curialo. "Going north, are you?"

"Alas, yes. We are leaving this wonderful land . . ."

"We're going north too. Our time's up. How about giving us a lift?"

"Why, we'll be delighted. How far are you going?"

"Oh, up the road a ways. You see, we're in charge of this section and there's another section we ought to look at today."

"Sort of road engineers, that's what we are," added Withers. "Lor'lumme, there's times when we're away for days on end as you might say. Miles, we travel. Why, only last week—"

"Do you always go about like this?" Mr. Razovich inquired acidly. "Without equipment? Nor even a tent? No water?"

"Our stuff's up the road," Curialo broke in before Withers had time to think of a suitable answer. "We've got quite a camp."

Mr. Razovich leaned over and whispered in his neighbor's ear. They conferred for several minutes in their mother tongue. Mr. Swieciński's ardor was considerably dampened.

"Are you quite sure Colonel Meluche will not object?" he inquired, turning to Curialo. "Colonel Meluche is such a splendid man. I should not like to—er—interfere with his arrangements."

"Would he send us out here if he didn't trust us?" retorted Curialo.

"True," admitted Mr. Swieciński. "Very well. Mount upon the running board. Let us hurry."

"And you are leaving your tools behind?" commented Mr. Razovich, peering through the black lenses of his glasses. "Do you not need your tools?"

"We'll pick 'em up on the way back," Curialo assured him. "Nobody's going to steal 'em."

The car rolled forward. It crept across the culvert without mishap—and it went on creeping. Mr. Swieciński was loath to step on the gas. He averaged a bare twenty-five kilometers an hour. The miles slipped away one by one.

"You can go faster if you like," Withers volunteered as he clung to the framework with one hand on Mr. Razovich's rifle. "We'll 'old on or right."

Mr. Swieciński appeared to be more than ever dubious.

"Is it much farther?" he inquired.

"Far?" grinned Withers. "Gor'blimey, mister, just as far as you like. We ain't never going to stop."

The cat was out of the bag at last. Mr. Swieciński applied the brakes with so much force that the car skidded sidewise in the feathery dust.

"I do not comprehend," he snapped. "Have we been tricked?"

"Take your hand off that rifle!" ordered Mr. Razovich, trying to push Withers off the running board. "I had my doubts from the very first. You are trying to desert."

"We are," agreed Curialo, "and if you're wise—"

"No!" cried Mr. Swieciński. "I do not want to listen. Certainly not! After the way in which we have been treated. I will not hear of it. You must get down. Your officers are splendid gentlemen. I can not be a party to any such conduct. Get down."

A silent struggle was going on between Withers and Mr. Razovich for possession
of the rifle. The struggle became more violent and less silent as the seconds went by.

“Bandit!” stormed Mr. Razovich. “Foul pig of an Englishman. I command you to—”

Thereupon Withers, who was tired of being called foul and perfidious, slugged him on the point of the jaw. He went over sidewise, colliding heavily against Mr. Swieciński. The latter made a wild sweep at Curialo, missed and fell forward on to a large, hairy fist which crashed against his right ear and draped him, dazed, over the steering wheel.

“Ho, yus!” exclaimed Withers, hauling his victim out of the car. “I’m a foul pig of an Englishman, I am. I’m a dirty foreigner. I been called names like that for the pawst ten years. Fair fed up on it, I am. That’s why I’m deserting. I’m going ’ome too, same as you are. Ain’t that a fact, matey?”

“I’ll say!” agreed Curialo, who was thinking of something else. “Listen, Bert, what do we do with these coots? We can’t tote ‘em all over Africa with us.”

“Put ’em in our uniforms and dump ’em down somewhere not too close to Hammad. They like the army and the officers, so they says. Orlright, let ’em have a taste of it in a blockhouse cell. Gor’blimey, let ’em find out what it’s like to epitomize a blooming epoch.”

“Shameless rascal,” sputtered Mr. Razovich.

“Strip!” ordered Curialo, a mean, hard look on his face. “No back chat. Right down to the skin.”

“I refuse!” declared Mr. Razovich. “I will not submit to the indignity. Not one stitch—”

“Snap out of it,” drawled Curialo, nursing the rifle in the crook of his arm. “If we leave you here you’ll croak. It’s twenty kilometers to Zenaga. You’re soft. You couldn’t make it. I’ll give you one minute to make up your mind.”

Half an hour later Curialo, all dressed in white, with a sun helmet crammed down over his eyes, slid the gears into first and stepped gently on the gas. Twelve cylinders purred smoothly beneath the aluminum hood.

“Baby doll!” he crooned, rubbing his shoulders against the burning hot leather. “She’s a peach. Watch her, Bert. Bambino!”

The car leaped like a thing alive.

“Going ’ome!” chortled Withers. “Blimey! ’ome!”

Overcome by his emotions, he blew his nose in one of Mr. Razovich’s handkerchiefs.

In the back seat, among the bags and the camp equipment, the rightful owners of the automobile lay side by side, securely bound and gagged.

Late that night, three hundred kilometers to the north, on the outskirts of a small village they were hoisted out and released.

“I won’t damage the bus,” promised Curialo. “She’s a bird. You’ll find her at Casablanca or Rabat. Make it Rabat. The governor-general is sure to want to see you and tell you how sorry he is.”

“And when you writes your book,” added Withers, “put in a chapter about military prisons. Tell ’em about the vermin and the moldy bread. And don’t forget to give my compliments to Colonel Meluche. But I’ll be ’ome by then, Gor’blimey! England. Going ’ome like a blooming toff. Gawd, talk about swank! Silk underwear! Some clawss, eh, what, matey?”

FORTY-EIGHT hours later the staff of the Grand Hotel Continental at Oran was thrown into a flutter of excitement by the unheralded arrival of two very distinguished guests.

The manager received them in person for they were too important to deal with such obscure persons as room clerks. He supervised the triumphant entry of their vast automobile into the hotel garage; he dirtied his hands helping to unload their mound of valises, kit bags and suitcases. He did not demean himself by asking his guests what kind of accommodation they
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wanted: only the very best was good enough for them.

They were wafted into the one and only elevator in the hotel.

"Suite A," the manager told the red coated attendant. "The presidential suite."

The elevator creaked and shook its way upward. It stopped at the second floor. Valets and chambermaids lined the way. The manager walked ahead of the guests with his hands clasped across his stomach and his head tilted slightly on one side.

He flung open a door.

"Suite A," he announced, as though he were throwing open the gates of heaven. "If the messieurs will be so kind as to give themselves the trouble of entering—"

The messieurs entered. Thick carpets covered the floors. On the carpets were thrown even thicker rugs. The furnishings of the suite, which had once been occupied by a genuine president of the republic, were sumptuous. The drawing room was a symphony of red plush and gold. There were coaches deep enough to accommodate a president and his entire cabinet.

"Gorblimey!" exclaimed the so-called Mr. Razovich, stunned by his surroundings.

"Monsieur spoke?" inquired the manager.

"Let us now see the bedroom," said Mr. Swiecinski, treading heavily and deliberately on his companion's toes.

"The bedrooms," corrected the manager, rubbing his hands together with unctuous satisfaction.

There was an ivory room and a blue room, with vast double beds of mahogany and brass in the best Empire style. Gilt clocks stood on the mantelpieces; there were reading lamps by the beds, and pier glasses, and a coiffeuse, and heavy draperies, and Eighteenth Century prints on the walls.

Then there was a white tiled bathroom full of nickel plated pipes and glittering mirrors.

Even Mr. Swiecinski was impressed by the bathroom.

"Hot water?" he inquired.

The manager gave him a rather condescending look. He turned on a faucet. Out gushed a stream of boiling water.

"Voila!" he announced. "Monsieur may bathe and repose himself from the fatigues of his long journey. One has read in the papers of the magnificent trip monsieur has accomplished. One comprehends that monsieur desires a bath. And now if I may be permitted to show monsieur one more thing I shall retire. Monsieur no doubt wishes to rest before he attends to his numerous engagements.

He led the way back to the drawing room and opened the French windows.

"The view," he explained, stepping out onto the balcony. "Incomparable, messieurs. Unique!"

He spoke proudly as though the view had been specially designed for the benefit of the guests occupying Suite A. It was very fine indeed. The hotel was situated on the brow of the cliff overlooking the old town and the harbor. From the balcony, as Mr. Razovich tersely phrased it, one could almost spit down into the funnels of the steamers at dockside. The docks were not particularly romantic, but the sight of them was calculated to warm the heart of any right thinking imperialist. Wheat bags stood in stacks as high as houses; there were whole streets of wine casks waiting to be sent to France to be sold as vintage Burgundy; there were unnumberable barrels of olive oil which, after a brief sea voyage, would acquire new labels and a better social standing.

Farther on, near the mole, there were pyramids of Welsh steam coal and a squat tank with the word "Mazout!" painted on its flank in letters twenty-feet high.

Beyond the mole, as smooth and as hard as a sheet of blue steel, lay the Mediterranean. Out at sea a ship trailed a smudge of black smoke across the sky.

Mr. Swiecinski gripped the iron railing of the balcony with both hands—gripped it so tightly that his knuckles stood out
white against his sun blackened skin. He inhaled a great lungful of air.

“Ships!” he commented. “Dozens of ’em. It’s a big port all right.”

“Lor’lumme!” whispered Mr. Razovich, overcome by the same emotion.

The manager stared at them curiously. The view, of course, was all very well in its way, and he found their admiration very flattering, but he had expected them to be more blasé, more sophisticated.

“To the right,” he explained, “you perceive the hill called Mourdjadjo. Midway up the slope stands the old Spanish fort built in 1732. The modern fort is lower down the slope behind those trees—”

His guests were not listening to a thing he said. They could not take their eyes off the shipping in the harbor. Their behavior puzzled him. A faint shadow of a doubt crept into his mind. He was used to sizing people up at a glance, and somehow these gentlemen did not fit in with any of his preconceived notions.

The big one, Mr. Swieinski, certainly did not look like a great newspaper proprietor whose editorials were quoted by the entire European press. The short man, the round eyed, snub nosed creature had none of the earmarks a successful artist ought to have. They were very young to be so famous, and there was something very queer about their clothes. The sleeves of Mr. Swieinski’s coat were several inches too short. Across his shoulders the coat was so tight that it seemed about to burst apart.

Mr. Razovich, on the other hand, was so loosely clad that his garments threatened to fall off. At times his chin vanished completely inside a starched collar which was beginning to wilt. His necktie, a gaudy blue-and-crimson confection, bulged out of his vest and climbed up toward his right ear.

Of course they were foreigners—Poles—which might possibly account for their queerness, but their behavior was bizarre to say the least.

They spoke a strange brand of French—so strange that it gave the manager, who was very refined, cold shudders. Had he not been dealing with such distinguished men he would have said that they spoke the language of the gutters. And when they reverted to their native tongue he could not help noticing that it had unmistakable affinities with English.

He was full of doubts, but he did not for one moment allow himself to be anything but urbane and tactful. When he thought of the great car resting in the hotel garage he was ready to forgive everything—clothes, language and behavior.

“I trust the apartment will be to your liking,” he purred, after having given his guests ample leisure to inspect the ships. “If so, messieurs, I shall leave you—”

Mr. Swieinski came out of his trance. “Ca va,” he agreed. “It’ll do. Say, what kind of boats are they down there?”

The manager shrugged his shoulders. He regretted his lack of knowledge, but his interest in shipping was restricted to the comings and goings of passenger carrying vessels. There were only freighters in port at the present moment.

“Yes, but what kind of freighters?” insisted Mr. Swieinski. “Any foreigners among ’em?”

“At present, no. Most of our exports go to France. We—”

“Never mind statistics now. That boat out there—” he jerked his thumb in the direction of the smoke smudge—“is it coming or going?”

“It would seem to be approaching. Yes, it is approaching. Monsieur is interested in the movement of foreign ships?”

Mr. Swieinski looked at him thoughtfully. There was a cold, hard glitter in his eyes.

“If anybody asks you,” he retorted; “tell ’em you don’t know. Of course I’m interested,” he added scornfully. “You’d be interested too if you’d been away from the sea as long as I have.”

“He’s crazy about it,” Mr. Razovich declared. “He’s like a child when he gets near salt water.”
IT OCCURRED to the manager that it was strange for a Pole from Warsaw to have such a passion for the ocean and for seven thousand ton tramp steamers, but he wisely refrained from any further comment.

He breathed a sigh of relief when he stepped off the balcony into the room. For some inexplicable reason he no longer felt safe in the company of his distinguished patrons. Gentlemen of their social standing had no right to have such work hardened hands, nor ought they to look so lean and determined. They made him feel like a lamb, a young and juicy lamb, frisking about with a pair of wolves. The balcony was much too high. He saw himself twirling through space and landing with a bone crushing thud on the glass veranda of the café. It was an absurd thought, but he could not drive it away.

He trotted across the room toward the door. With his hand on the doorknob he paused and made one final, deferential bow.

“If there is anything you need, gentlemen, the staff is at your disposal,” he pointed out. “Laundry service, valeting, refreshments.”

Mr. Razovich draped the loose folds of his coat across his chest after the fashion of a Roman senator wrapping himself in his toga.

“Send up a couple of quarts of champagne,” he ordered with a flourish. “And some caviar.”

“At this time of year caviar is not to be had. If I may make a suggestion—”

“ Needless! There being no caviar let us have some nice ham sandwiches.”

“And some cold chicken,” supplemented Mr. Swiecinski, “and a box of cigars.”

“The best in the house,” urged Mr. Razovich. “I got a jaded palate, as the saying is.”

The manager, more stunned than ever, let himself out of the room.

No sooner had the door closed behind him than the two distinguished guests tottered over to the couch and collapsed, their shoulders heaving.

“Gor’blimey!” sputtered Withers, when he recovered his breath. “Ow about it, matey? Champagne and cold chicken. ’E was fair dazzled, ’e was. Couldn’t believe ’is ears.”

“Presidential suite,” choked Curialo. “If they catch us, Bert, it’s ten years in the cooler. We got about fifty francs left; that’s all. I spent the rest on gas at Saida.”

“And a clawsey trip it was orrright. Gendarmes saluting us and lending a ’elping ’and. I ain’t worrying about nothing. There’s the blooming ’arbor. It’s full of ships. This time tomorrow night we’ll be out at sea. We’re going ’ome, matey. It’ll be good to see a cloud again. Bracing, that’s what it is, the weather in England.”

“Not so fast,” grunted Curialo. “Wait till we find a ship. No good trying to sneak on board a French boat. And we can’t afford to hang around here for long. If they spot us the jig is up. I got my doubts about that slick guy. He was sort of suspicious toward the end.”

“We look orrright, don’t we?” protested Withers. “Why, we acted like a pair of toffs. Why should ’e be suspicious?”

“We didn’t high hat him enough, I guess. Say, I’m wondering about that ship out there. Where’s she at now?”

They went back to the balcony. The ship was nearing Oran. She was small and squat and black, but she was still too far out to sea for them to distinguish either her name or her flag.

When the waiter came in to set up the table for their light luncheon they were pawing through their bags. They were so busy that they hardly noticed his presence, and he was still in the room, uncorking the champagne, when Withers found what he was looking for—a pair of binoculars.

They rushed back to the window. For a moment they were silent; then Withers cried out:

“Gor’struth, she’s English. Star of Cardiff. See’er! Look, matey, look! She’s flying the old red rag.”
Tears dribbled down the sides of his nose.

Curialo snatched the binoculars away from him and cursed at the time he had to waste readjusting the sights.

"You're dead right," he exulted. "Bert, I hand it to you. This is the first time I ever got a kick out of seeing that flag. We'll let bygones be bygones. Shake!"

They shook hands; then, falling into each other's arms, they danced wildly about the room.

"The collation is served," the waiter observed, dodging out of their way. "Shall I pour the wine?"

"You're still here, are you?" exclaimed Curialo. "Sure, pour anything you like. Have one on us. Allez, beat it! Get out of here quick!"

The waiter fled.

They drew up, panting.

"Yer big blighter," cautioned Withers, "you'll give the whole show away. Act more 'igh toned. Who ever 'eard of offering a blooming waiter a glass of champagne?"

"We should worry!" gasped Curialo. "We're sitting pretty. That boat—what's her name? Star of Cardiff—she'll be alongside in an hour. We'll finish this hooch and beat it. You can talk turkey to the skipper. Limey to Limey. Lay it on thick, see?"

"Leave it to me," Withers assured him.

"Gor'blimey, 'e'll be offering us 'is own blooming cabin before I'm through."

He pulled a bottle out of the cracked ice and poured champagne into the glasses. It frothed over on to the table cloth. He kept the bottle upended until the glasses were brimful and the table cloth sopping.

"Goodbye to the Legion!" cried Curialo, holding up his glass. "Ten years of it. Here's looking at you, Bert. Drink her down!"

"And fill 'em up again!" chorused Withers, who was too excited to stand still. "'Ere's to good old London Town in a fog on a Saturday night. 'Ere's to the old tram cars and the Blue Boar by the East India docks! 'Ere's to 'ome, matey! We're going 'ome!"

BETWEEN drinks they went to the balcony and stared at the incoming freighter to make sure it was still afloat. It passed the lighthouse at the end of the mole. A whiff of white smoke eddied above its smokestack. Seconds later the shrill blast of its whistle reached their ears.

"She's in," said Curialo. "We'd better be moving."

"And didn't she come in pretty?" said Withers. "Neat, I calls it. It tykes a blooming Briton, it does, to 'andle a boat like that. A nytion of sailors, that's what we are. Britannia rules the waves, as they say. You never saw—"

"What the hell do you expect him to do—ram the mole or come in backward? I'll buy you a flag when we get to London. Never mind that now. Listen, Bert, ring that doggone bell. Order a bottle of hard stuff. Cognac. I need a last shot before we start out. My legs are all shot. It won't take ten minutes to reach the docks."

Withers rang the bell. A minute went by. Two minutes. He rang again. The Star of Cardiff had reversed its engines and was edging in alongside the coal wharf.

A knock came at the door of the apartment.

"Come in," they both shouted simultaneously.

The door opened.

"Bring me—" began Withers; then he stopped dead.

On the threshold, instead of a valet de chambre in a green baize apron, stood a smart young staff officer with a row of medals on his chest and a look of mild astonishment on his handsome face.

Withers' lower jaw worked spasmodically, but no coherent sound came forth. All he could say was "Caw! Caw! Caw!" like a crow.

"What's wrong?" inquired Curialo, who was leaning out over the railing of the balcony. "You ain't being sick, are you?"

"Caw!" said Withers, pawing at his collar.

Curialo turned about. He too spied
the officer standing in the doorway. For one split second he was tempted to take a flying leap at the intruder’s throat. Before he had time to act, however, the officer spoke:

“Pardon me,” he said in a most amiable manner, “but have I the honor of addressing Messieurs Swieciński and Razovich?”

“Exactly,” agreed Curialo. “This is my friend and colleague, Mr. Razovich. I am Mr. Swieciński. Won’t you come in? Pray do come in. Allow me to close the door.”

“Enchanted to make your acquaintance,” the officer went on. “You will excuse the informality of my call, I am sure. You see, the management of the hotel reported your arrival to police headquarters only a few minutes ago.”

“Oh, did he?” commented Curialo, his eyes narrowing down to thin slits. “Well, what of it?”

“Impudence, that’s what I call it,” snorted Withers, slowly recovering his wits. “Shameful interference with our rights!”

“Not at all,” soothed the officer. “You do not follow me. It is quite regular. Police control, you know. The management is compelled to report its guests.”

“The minute they arrive?” inquired Curialo. “I am astounded!”

The officer was as smooth and diplomatic as only young staff officers can be. Unperturbed by Curialo’s outburst, he stood in the middle of the room peeling off his gloves.

Everything was so simple and straightforward, he assured them. All sorts of people came to Oran. Many of them were undesirables. The police had to be on the alert at all times.

“Never before have I been classed as an undesirable alien!” Withers broke in, thrusting his chin out over the rim of his collar. “Never!”

“Ah, but that is not the point.” The officer smiled. “Not at all. The general much appreciates the thoughtfulness of the hotel management. He might not have had the pleasure of meeting you had it not been for this providential telephone call. He was planning to leave Oran tomorrow morning on a tour of inspection, but he cancelled the tour as soon as police headquarters got in touch with us.”

“That’s just too bad,” sighed Curialo.

“He is very anxious to meet you,” explained the officer. “Of course he realizes that after such a long trip you want a little privacy and rest. His invitation will reach you through other channels tomorrow morning.”

What he did not say, however, was that his own hurried visit was due to the fact that the management had urged the police bureau to verify the identity of its guests without delay.

“The dear general!” cried Withers. “I’m looking forward to the pleasure of meeting him—tomorrow.”

The officer cleared his throat. He too had the gravest doubts as to the identity of these extraordinary individuals. Why, for instance, were their heads close cropped? Why were their fingernails in such a shocking state? They were foreigners. At Hammadi, where they had last been entertained, there was a garrison of the Foreign Legion—

“There is just one small formality which, I am sure, you will not mind complying with,” he said casually. “You know how hidebound officialdom can be. There’s so much red tape. Would you mind showing me your passports, please, so that I may make a note of their numbers? It won’t take two minutes.”

For the space of a heart beat the two distinguished guests stood rooted to the ground. Withers turned a pasty gray. His arms hung limp at his sides. He gazed helplessly at Curialo—and he thought he saw Curialo’s right eyelid flutter ever so slightly.

“Eh bien!” said the officer, and his tone was sharp. “I am waiting.”

“A thousand pardons,” drawled Curialo. “I am trying to remember where I put my passport. Razovich, dear friend, you are more orderly than I. Your pass-
port is in your pocket, is it not? Show it to the officer while I am hunting mine.”
With trembling fingers Withers extricated the document from an inside pocket. He laid it on the table.
“Thank you,” snapped the officer.
He opened the passport and skimmed rapidly through the pages until he found the photograph of the bearer.
“As I thought,” he exclaimed. “This is not your passport. The game is up. You—”
His voice strangled in his throat.
Curialo, stepping in behind him, had thrown a handkerchief over his head, around his neck. At the same time Curialo drove one knee into the small of his victim’s back.
“Snap out of it!” he whispered. “Quick, Bert. Go for his legs. Don’t let him squirm. No noise.”
A strangled cry burst from the officer’s lips. Curialo twisted the handkerchief a little tighter. The cry died away.
In five minutes it was all over. Bound, gagged, a pillow case of genuine linen tied over his head, the officer rested as comfortably as possible on the bed in the ivory room.
“Lor’lumme!” commented Withers, wiping his hands on his trousers. “That was a near squeak orlright. ’Struth, I thought it was all over. Matey, you mark my words, we got to get out of ’ere, and the sooner the better, says I.”
“You said a mouthful,” grunted Curialo. “We’re going. Wait, though. I got a hunch. Stand back behind the door.”
He took a small bronze statuette off the mantelpiece and shoved it into Withers’ hand. “Grab hold of this. Now go on talking as though you were talking to that guy. Say something about how pleased you’ll be to take tea with the general. Get me?”
“Ain’t you smart!” applauded Withers, swinging the statuette at arm’s length. “You got a ’ead on you and no mistyke.”
He broke into loud French, “Ah, oui, Monsieur le Captaine. But yes, we shall be charmed to meet the general. We have heard so much about him!”
Curialo opened the door. In the corridor, leaning against the wall, stood a gendarme, his arms folded across his chest. He sprang to attention as soon as he heard the sound of voices.
Curialo beckoned to him.
“Your officer wishes to speak to you,” he explained. “Step this way will you?”
“Bien, monsieur,” said the gendarme.
He hurried into the room.
“Colonel Meluche, at Hammadi, is a particular friend of ours,” he heard Withers saying. Then the base of the bronze statuette struck the base of his skull and he heard no more.
Curialo caught him as he fell.
They laid him on the bed in the blue room. He was bleeding profusely, so, to avoid damaging the bedclothes, they put a bath mat beneath his head.
“’E ain’t dead, that’s one good thing,” observed Withers. “Gawd knows, I let ’im ’ave it proper. But yer cawn’t kill a gendarme that way. ’E come to just before I popped the pillow case over ’is ’ead. ’E gave me a dirty look orlright.”
“Let me tell you something else,” Curialo pointed out. “If we’re caught now you’ll wish you were dead. It’s life for the pair of us. Maybe Guiana if the prosecutor has his way. I crave to set foot on the Star of Cardiff. All set, Bert? Let’s go.”
They caught up their sun helmets and tiptoed to the door of Suite A. The passage was deserted. Curialo locked the door and slipped the key in his pocket.
“The back way for us,” he cautioned. “That louse of a manager’ll be on the lookout in the lobby.”
They went through a swing door marked “Service” and clattered down two flights of iron steps. Midway down the last flight they passed a chambermaid who gave a squeal of surprise as they rushed by. They came out into the kitchens. A white capped chef and several Arab assistants stared at them. A potbellied janitor barred their way.
“Guests should use the main entrance,”
he said severely. "I must ask you to go back—"

"Not these guests," retorted Curialo. "We're going out this way to avoid publicity, see?"

"My orders."

"If you don't get out of my way I'll flatten you out," rasped Curialo.

The porter stepped nimbly to one side. They tumbled out into the street. High overheard they heard angry shouts. Looking up, they saw a man standing on the second floor balcony gesticulating frantically. A pillow case hung around his neck, and a towel fastened to one of his wrists flapped like a flag. People were stopping to stare at him. A moment later he was joined by another man in a green baize apron. They both yelled in unison, but the noise of the heavy drays and the trolleys on the Boulevard Seguin smothered their voices.

Odd words drifted down:

"Stop! Assassins! Two—deserters—Stop!"

"It's 'im," muttered Withers. "It's that there officer."

"Keep right on going," Curialo said between his teeth. "Don't look up. He's pointing our way. Step out, but don't run. Easy does it, Bert. Just stroll along."

They reached the corner. Glancing over their shoulders, they saw that the fat janitor had waddled out into the middle of the street. He too was yelling and waving his stumpy arms about.

Before any one thought of pursuing them they were safely around the corner, mingling with the slow moving throng which filled the sidewalk in front of the café of the hotel. The aperitif hour was in full swing. The little marble topped tables were packed and jammed. Musicians dressed in scarlet tunics sawed away at the Cavalleria Rusticana. Arab bootblacks ducked in and out of the crowd, banging their brushes on homemade boxes.

Everybody seemed carefree and happy, for the sun had gone down behind the gaunt shoulder of the Mouriadjo, and a cool breeze was driving the stagnant air out of the city streets.

With difficulty, at a snail's pace, Curialo and Withers elbowed their way past the café. They trod on people's feet. They were cursed venomously by music lovers who did not want to be disturbed. Some one called Withers a "dirty little imbecile." His sun helmet was knocked askew. He did not even bother to turn around.

They came at last to the broad Place d'Armes, flanked by the officers' club and the city hall and a bank. A wide avenue led downhill. They caught one glimpse of the sea, stained crimson by the setting sun. Down they went in long strides. The road was full of traffic; trolley cars and decrepit automobiles and donkeys staggering beneath the weight of great baskets, and drays drawn by half a dozen straining horses whose slipping hoofs struck sparks off the cobbles.

It seemed endless. It was endless. It took them at least fifteen minutes to reach the bottom of the hill and the narrow, crooked streets of the old town. They lost another quarter of an hour hunting for the coal wharf. When they asked their way people gave them intricate directions they could not follow.

They could not get away from the long, windowless wall of the customs warehouse. Twice they bumped into the same policeman close to the same gate.

"By heck!" said Curialo. "I'll ask him how to get to this damn coal wharf."

"Oh Lor'!" was all Withers could say. "Oh Lor'!"

The sergent de ville took pity upon the two foolish foreigners whom he mistook for shore going sailors. Their sun helmets amused him. They were crazy, of course, but then all foreigners were crazy. He was quite sure they were drunk.

"The coal wharf?" he repeated, speaking in a loud voice. "Mais, mon Dieu, it is not difficult to find. Straight ahead until you come to the wine docks, then left—but no, maybe you could not find it. I am going that way myself. I will put you on the right road; have no fear."
So, sweating with anxiety, they ambled along with the policeman for a mile or more. His pace was slow and deliberate. He talked endlessly about footling things—politics, reparations, the rate of exchange, intventional debts, the high cost of living. Every so often he stopped dead and held on to the lapel of Withers’ coat while he drove home his arguments.

A dozen times they were on the point of braining him, but each time he walked on again just before their self-control gave way.

AT LAST over the top of a wall they caught sight of a mound of coal. They heard the rattle of winches and the imprecations of a foreman reviling an unseen labor gang. A gateway opened before them.

"You see," laughed the policeman. "It is not so hard to find."

Curialo slipped a two-franc piece into his hand.

"Adieu!" said the policeman. "A safe journey to you both!"

A dockguard stuck his head out of a window as they passed in at the gateway.

"What ship?"

"Star of Cardiff," stammered Withers. The window banged shut.

Their knees were so weak that they had to walk arm in arm to keep from staggering.

Night was closing in. Overhead arc lamps crackled, shedding a blue-white light over the black sheds and the black roadway. The Star of Cardiff was unloading more coal. Cranes dropped huge bins into the bowels of the ship and hoisted them out shrouded in flying dust. The gnome-like figures of Arab laborers moved about in the twilight.

A flimsy gangplank lay between the wharf and the ship.

"We’re there!" exulted Withers. "Gor’blimey, matey, we done it. Me ’eart’s pounding fit to bust. Going ’ome! I can fair smell it or’ready!"

"G’wan," said Curialo in a shaking voice. "Get up there and do your stuff."

The gangplank sagged beneath their weight.

"Hi, there!" a voice called out. "What do you want, monsour? ’Alt! Who’re you after?"

The voice belonged to a stocky, thick set man in a sleeveless blue singlet, who was lounging against the railing near the top end of the gangplank. He had a bushy, iron gray mustache out of which stuck a short clay pipe. A disreputable cap was pushed onto the back of his head.

"What cheer, matey!" cried Withers. "’Ow’s London Town these days? Can we come aboard. We’d like to ’ave a few words with the captain."

"Skipper’s ashore," grunted the sailor. "You cawn’t come aboard without a pass. Got a pass?"

"No, but—"

"Then you’ll have to step down. Nobody’s allowed aboard without a proper pass and that’s all there is to it."

"It’s urgent," insisted Curialo, shoving Withers up the gangplank. "If the skipper ain’t on board how about the first mate?"

"Him?" The man took the pipe out of his mustache and spat down the side of the ship. "He’s got his hands full keeping an eye on them wild bannies down in the hold. We don’t allow nobody on board without a pass."

Withers edged up a step closer. His foot touched the iron plates of the Star of Cardiff.

"We got to come aboard," he pleaded. "It’s a matter of life and death. The skipper, ’e’ll understand when ’e sees us. I’m English, I am, and my mate ’ere ’e’s from New York."

The watchman came and planted himself squarely in front of the gangplank. He slammed the crosspiece shut. In his right hand he held a length of lead piping.

He laughed a most unpleasant, derisive laugh.

"Think I’m balmy?" he demanded. "Think I’m going to let a pair of bleeding dockrats come aboard? I seen the likes
of you before. 'Op it! Get off that there gangplank!""

"Gor'blimey! I'm trying to tell you—"

The watchman rattled the lead pipe on the handrail.

"'Op it!" he repeated. "I wasn't born yesterday. Dockrats! We had one come snooping around last trip at Brindisi, it was. To hear him talk you'd think he was a blooming angel. Yus, and he went ashore with the second mate's gold watch and two bottles of Scotch. Step back!"

"You got us wrong," Curialo put in. "Listen, brother, there's twenty years staring us in the face if we're caught."

"I thought as much as soon as I clapped eyes on you. I'm an 'ard working man, I am, and I don't want to truck with law breakers."

"You poor saphead, we ain't broke no laws. We're deserters. Get me? Deserters from the Foreign Legion."

"Legion of the damned," corroborated Withers. "Come a thousand miles, we 'ave, out of the blooming desert—and 'ere's a fellow countryman kicks me in the fyce, as you might say."

"That's a hot one," jeered the watchman. "Deserters! And from the Foreign Legion! Haw-haw! You can't pull my leg."

Withers stared wildly about. Night had closed in thick and dark. Overhead the long arms of the cranes swung forth and back like the fingers of some giant hand closing in upon him. There was a crash of coal spilling out of the bins, a rattle of shovels down in the hold. Steam hissed from the valve near the top of the funnel. The lighthouse at the far end of the mole swept the harbor with its dazzling glare, now white, now red. The whole world was black and evil and merciless.

"Gor'blimey!" wailed Withers. "You cawn't turn us down like this?"

"I'm telling you for the last time," the watchman warned then. "Yer can't come aboard without a proper parss. I don't care what you are. Get off the gangplank."

"We're going," agreed Curialo in desperation. "Tell me one thing. Where the hell is the captain at? When'll he be back? We got to get hold of him. Understand. Got to!"

The watchman relented a trifle as soon as he realized that they were not going to try to blarney their way on board.

"Skipper's been up to the consul's, most likely," he vouchedsafed.

"Where's that at? Uptown?"

"Ask me another. Ain't never been ashore here, not beyond the pub just across the gates."

"When'll he be back?"

The watchman winked.

"Round about four in the morning, I should say. We're due to sail at five. He's a gay dog, he is."

"We can't wait that long. Every damn policeman in Oran will be looking for us before that time. They're looking for us right this minute."

"Desperate, ain't you. Well, I can't help that. I got orders same's everybody else. We don't want no trouble with the Frogs. They're bad enough as it is. Still, I don't like to see two blokes stranded in this blasted country, no matter what they done. Go find the Old Man and tell him your tale. It's ten to one he's at the Bar de Bristol. Bristol Bar that means in their lingo. You can't miss it. It's got pink curtains in the window."

"What's his name?"

"Brand. Charles Brand. You can't mistake him. He's got a red face and little blue eyes and he's middling fat. He'll be dressed in a blue suit with a couple of medals on his jacket. If I was you I'd go quick. There's a couple of police officers coming this way—"

THEY did not wait to find out what else he might have to say. One leap carried them off the gangplank into the black shadows thrown by the cranes. Crouching low, they watched the gendarmes march by.

"There's nothing else to be done," grunted Curialo. "We can't stay here. We'll have to find that skipper."
The coal yard seemed to be alive with shadowy figures. Whichever way they turned they stumbled upon Algerian laborers, or white foremen, or port officers. At every encounter their hearts stopped beating, but no one questioned them.

They found the Bristol Bar without difficulty. It was brightly lighted. The pink curtains were unmistakable. They pushed open the glass door and stumbled in. The place was crowded with ships' officers. The air was blue with smoke. It stank of whisky, cheap perfume and fried onions. Waitresses in short black frocks, their faces rusted with paint and powder, bantered playfully with their customers.

They found Captain Brand sitting on a bench against the wall at the back of the room. Four beer bottles were lined up in front of him on the table. Beside him sat a scrawny, olive skinned maiden with lustrous eyes and a slight mustache. She had one arm around the captain's neck. With the tip ends of her fingers she was tickling his ear. He appeared to find the sensation agreeable. There was a dreamy look on his brick red countenance.

The dreamy look disappeared, however, the moment Withers opened his mouth.

"Yes, that's me," he growled. "My name's Brand. What do you want?"

They stated their case bluntly, omitting nothing, making no attempt to add any fancy touches. The plain, bald facts sufficed.

Captain Brand's first reaction was unfavorable. The fact that they spoke his own language made no impression upon him. He had been at sea long enough to know that a sailor, though he may not have a girl in every port, is sure to meet at least one down-at-heel fellow countryman trying to bum a free ride or to cadge a few drinks.

"No," he said, shaking his head from side to side. "No, no, no, no. I can't do anything for you."

But they went on talking and by degrees he was impressed by their evident sincerity. They did not beg or whine. They did not ask for money. They were willing to work at any job which would land them somewhere outside of French territory. Nor did they look like drink sodden wharf rats. They were as lean and hard as nails.

Brand reached a decision two seconds after they had spoken their last word.

"That settles it," he declared. "Twenty years is a long time to spend in prison. Too long for young fellows like you. In your boots I'd have done the same thing, and I'm a sober, God fearing man. I'll take you with me."

"You mean it, sir?" breathed Withers, steadying himself against the edge of the table. "You'll take us along—back to England? 'Ome?"

Brand nodded.

"Sit down," he ordered. "You look green, the pair of you. A drink will do you good. Certainly I mean it. You're coming with me."

They sat down heavily. Words failed them. The best they could do was to grin foolishly at the old captain. He ordered four more beers. Their teeth rattled against the glasses as they drank.

"Now then," he said abruptly, "we've got to do things properly. I don't want trouble with the port authorities, or the consul or my owners. I'm going back ahead of you and I'll tell the watchman to let you through. Give me a five minutes' start. I don't want to know you're on board my ship until she's at sea. We'll just have one more beer and I'll leave you. Hey, girlie—" he clapped his hands to summon the waitress—"three more of the same."

"And me?" interposed the dark eyed siren sitting beside him. "You leave me so soon? You do not fallow me anozier drink? You go away?"

"I am going away," the captain said gruffly. "Take your arm from around my neck, hussy. I'm a sober, God fearing man sore beset by temptation. Allez! Begone!"

She gave Curialo and Withers a dark and scornful look.

"You leaf me for zose men," she sneered. "Desairtairs!"
“I’m leaving you,” he told her, “because I’m a married man with three children. Don’t tempt me further. I’ll buy you no more drinks.”

“You no come back? I wait for you, mon gros?”

“You’ll be wasting your time. Trot along. I want to talk to these friends of mine.”

She flounced away from the table, holding her chin high in the air.

Left alone, the three men finished their drinks. The captain paid the bill and buttoned up his double breasted jacket.

“Y’understand,” he summed up, “in five minutes. You won’t be stopped this time, and once you’re on board the whole French army can’t drag you off.”

He swung out of the café without looking back.

“Ever been to England?” inquired Withers, digging Curialo in the ribs. “You wait! Even the rain is sort of friendly in England. And the mornings at this time of year are a bit nippy. Makes you feel alive, the cold does.”

“Four more minutes to go,” grumbled Curialo, staring up at the clock. “I wonder can I get a passport for New York in England? Say, prohibition must be something fierce, but I don’t care. Bert, I don’t care if I never have another drink as long as I live. You’re dead right, we’re going home. And once I get there—”

“Ces deux là!” cried a shrill voice close behind them. “There they are the pair of them. Deserter from the Foreign Legion!”

They jumped to their feet and spun around. The dark-eyed siren, her fists on her hips, laughed in their faces. Beside her stood two policemen with revolvers in their hands. Chairs scraped on the sanded floor. Fifty pairs of eyes were turned upon the culprits. A dead silence settled over the café.

“Perceive the dirty English,” laughed the girl. “Yes, pigs of English, pigs of Yankees. I listen to their talk. They would have escaped. Brigands! They stole an automobile. They tried to murder a French officer. Swine! But I shall get the reward. I shall receive five hundred francs instead of the drink that fat hog did not buy.”

One of the policemen crammed his gun against Curialo’s ribs.

“Not a move!” he ordered. “I’ll drop you if you bat an eyelash. You won’t escape this time, salopard! Put your hands up—high!”

There was nothing else to be done. They raised their hands shoulder high. The second policeman brought out a pair of handcuffs linked together by a thin steel chain. He snapped one of the bracelets on Curialo’s left wrist and fastened the other one on Withers’ right wrist.

The girl, no doubt, to show her patriotism, smacked Curialo’s face.

“Remember me when you’re breaking stones at the bagne,” she jeered. “I hope you rot when you get there.”

“Thank you,” he drawled. “You are a perfect lady.”

Whereupon the policeman clouted him over the back of the head with the barrel of his revolver.

“Shut your mouth, salopard. You’ve done all the talking you’ll do for some time to come. We’ve got orders to shoot if you so much as raise a finger. Get on, the pair of you. Out you go!”

The café was no longer silent. Indignant Frenchmen booted and whistled. One gallant gentleman carried away by his emotions struck Withers across the mouth. Some one else kicked Curialo’s shins.

They stumbled out of the café beneath a barrage of curses, squirting siphons and the dregs of wine glasses.

“Look there, Bert,” said Curialo. “I ain’t going back. I’m through.”

Withers, whose mouth was bleeding, gave him one long look. He squared his shoulders.

“Orright, matey,” he agreed. “Say when.”

As soon as they reached the pavement one policeman came up and caught hold of Curialo’s arm.
“This way,” he barked. “Turn left.”
Curialo lurched awkwardly against him.
“Alors quoi!” he demanded angrily.
“Drunk, are you? Stand up, I tell you. You aren’t hurt. Wait until the prison guards have had a crack at your thick skull, you’ll find out—”
Curialo’s fist crashed against his face.
He went down heels over head. Simultaneously Withers swayed forward and landed a savage kick in the pit of the other policeman’s stomach.
Then they were off, tearing down the dark roadway, over the cobbles and the railroad tracks toward the gates of the coal wharf.
A great bellowing arose. The customers of the Bar de Bristol, who had assembled on the threshold to speed the foul deserters on their way, spilt out into the street.
Smack! A bullet whizzed past Curialo’s ear. He dodged sidewise, dragging Withers after him at the end of the chain.
A dozen shots rang out. Withers let out a yelp.
“Gor’blimsey, I been ’it!”
Blood ran down the back of his neck from a graze above his right ear.
“Never mind that now,” panted Curialo. “Keep moving.”
Deer could have moved no faster, but the mob at their heels was traveling like the wind. A bare ten yards separated pursued and pursuers as they fled through the gateway on to the wharf. A guard hurried out of the darkness. He never knew what hit him. He was down and trampled underfoot before he could open his mouth.
The ten yards narrowed down to eight.
Ahead the Star of Cardiff loomed up, towering high above the dock. In the bows a score of men were gathered. As one man they opened their mouths and yelled:
“Run! You’ll make it!”
The leading gendarme fired again. He missed, and at the same moment a hunk of coal caught him in the chest. He sprawled full length on the ground.
Withers and Curialo reached the gangplank with two yards to spare. They bounded up it and rolled over onto the deck. The crosspiece slammed shut.
Captain Brand, very much the sea dog, with his hands in the pockets of his jacket and his cap cocked over one eye, confronted the infuriated mob.
A policeman tried to duck beneath the handrail. He was pushed back firmly and none too gently.
“Those men—they are my prisoners!” he shouted. “They are criminals, bandits of the most dangerous!”
“I don’t know what you are saying,” Brand told him, “and what’s more I don’t care. I’m master of this ship, and I’m under British jurisdiction on these decks. I’m not going to allow you or anybody else to turn my ship into a monkey house.”
The policeman spoke no English.
“What do you refuse to surrender the prisoners?” he demanded.
The gendarme and his self-appointed posse backed away.
“You are interfering with the proper course of justice,” he shouted from the dock.
Captain Brand leaned nonchalantly against the railing.
“All right, Mr. Turner,” he sang out.
“Carry on.”
The rattle of the winches drowned out the gendarme’s voice.
“Gor’blimsey!” croaked Withers. “Hit’s all over. We’re e’ed for ’ome this time. I’m bleeding like a stuck pig and, Lor’lumme, I don’t care!”
And there the matter ended.
The French, who knew from past experience that they could not hope to lay hands on deserters once the latter reached foreign territory, waited until the follow-
ing day before they lodged a protest with the consular authorities. The consul expressed the right amount of regret and pigeonholed the protest. Nothing could be done, for the Star of Cardiff had sailed unhindered punctually at five o’clock that morning.

Three weeks later she ran into fog off the Goodwins.

Shivering with cold, Withers and Curialo sat outside the galley peeling potatoes. Their teeth chattered and their fingers were purple.

“Gor’struth,” said Withers after the first shattering roar of the foghorn died away. “Ere she is—the blooming fog.

Cold! Cripes, it fair eats into the marrer of yer bones, don’t it? And to think that at Hammadi, right this very minute, the sun is shining bright. It’s a crime, that’s what it is, this ’ere climate.”

Curialo turned up the collar of his coat. He stamped his feet on the glistening deck.

“Yes,” he grunted. “It’s a hell of a note. We didn’t have such a bad time at Hammadi, all things considered.”

“Lor’!” exclaimed Withers, giving him a startled look. “You don’t think we made a mistyke, do you?”

The blast of the foghorn covered Curialo’s unprintable answer.