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While Bugles Blow!

GALAXY
P R E S E N T S

The Lieutenant Gets a Problem

THERE is, *mon Lieutenant*,” said Sergeant Germaine, saluting, “a disturbance in town.” The Lieutenant glanced up from his report and looked steadily at Germaine for the space of ten seconds.

“What kind of a disturbance?”

“Schmaltz was just out and he said Berbers were pouring into the public square. I thought it would be a good idea to take a squad and a Hotchkiss—”

“You’re not paid to think,” said the Lieutenant. “What good would a Hotchkiss and a squad do against a few thousand Berbers?”

Germaine’s bristly beard bobbed up and down as he sought for words. He had a horrible idea of what the Lieutenant was about to say and do.

“Some gunner,” said the Lieutenant, “might get excited and shoot a Berber and then where would we be? You know, Sergeant, that it would take a week’s fast marching over the Atlas for any part of the main command to reach us.”

“*Oui, mon Lieutenant*,” said Germaine. “Too well I know that. I have nightmares about it.”

“We cannot start something we cannot finish.”

The Lieutenant rose from the desk, buttoned his tunic collar, picked up his riding crop and put his kepi on his

head. He gave the sergeant a crooked grin. An impulsive, devil-may-care fellow, this lieutenant, thought the sergeant, but a fighter. Every inch of his six feet a fighter. *Shaitan*, said the Arabs and Berbers, had molded the Lieutenant's brain; angels had fashioned his face.

"I'll go down and see what the trouble is, Sergeant."

"No!" cried Germaine. "They might mob you and kill you and then where would we be?"

"What would you do if I did get killed?" said the Lieutenant.

"I'd . . . I'd take every mother's son in this fort and rip the heart out of every Berber in Harj. That's what I'd do."

"Oh, no, you wouldn't, Sergeant. You'd stay right here in the fort, try to get a man through to the main command and get help. Those are your orders. Sergeant, I was given sixty Legionnaires and I was told to hold Harj for France. Those orders apply to you."

Germaine shifted uneasily from one foot to the other. Big and strong, he had one allegiance only—to the Lieutenant, and to hell with France or anything else.

"The main command," said the Lieutenant, "took Harj and we garrison it. If we are killed, they take Harj again which would cost an unreasonable number of lives. No, Sergeant, if anything should happen to me, you stay here at your post and let the main command do the thinking. Lieutenants, after all, are very cheap."

He went toward the door, but the sergeant blocked his way. "You must take a revolver at least, *mon Lieutenant*."

"I might shoot somebody with it. If I appear down in

Harj without side arms they will think me very brave. If a squad appeared they would think that we are afraid of what might happen to us. And anyway, Sergeant, this is so much dramatics. Probably they were getting ready for prayers and Schmaltz would certainly know nothing about *that*."

The sergeant grinned. The Lieutenant went down the steps and across the compound to the gate of the ancient fort. The sentries saluted as he went through and wondered greatly at the Lieutenant's lack of side arms.

Newly conquered Harj was a bomb with a lighted fuse. No roads led to it from the north. It was isolated and dangerous. The main command, unable to spare men enough to keep communication lines open all the way across the Atlas, had thought it wise to at least make a gesture at holding the place. Lieutenants were cheap. Sixty Legionnaires were cheaper.

A suicide post.

A glory or a grave-maker.

Harj was a good-sized city, teeming with tribesmen from the hills, Arabs from the lowlands. Its face was baked by the desert, its back, like a man before an old-fashioned fireplace, was chilled by the high, looming Atlas. Fertile and rich, the possible occupation of it was well worth a lieutenant and sixty men.

The Lieutenant passed the Berbers and Arabs in the crooked streets. They saluted him and he gave some slight attention to those who looked prominent or who wore a cleaner, better turban or a more stiffly embroidered djellaba.

They seemed, when he faced them, friendly enough, but

behind his back they were hard and silent. They did not like a conqueror, these free sons of the mountains. They marveled that they allowed themselves to be held by one officer and sixty men. They failed to understand that the beating they had taken from the main column would be instantly repeated if anything happened to the garrison.

An old, bearded man, walking with a limp, dressed in rags, carrying the nose of his race carefully hidden in the hood of his dirty djellaba, came abreast of the Lieutenant.

“*Monsieur*, my name is Ibn Batuta. You . . . you must excuse my appearance, though I am really not so rich as the caïd pretends, but . . . you understand, Lieutenant, that one must be very careful amid these infidels. . . . I ask but little, *mon commandant*. I am a poor man, but, that is, if you should happen to need a few thousand francs. . . .”

The Lieutenant nodded. The old man smiled and drifted slowly away and, when the Lieutenant was far enough ahead, began to follow him.

The Lieutenant paused in the public square and looked about him. Battlements made a black Grecian pattern against the steel blue sky. Minarets reared curious heads and glittering half-moons far above the town.

Men were gathering somewhere near. The Lieutenant could hear a sharp, buzzing clamor near at hand. Suddenly a voice stood out, crying in Shilha, “How much am I bid? How much for this lovely article? Ah, you will beggar me. Such a bid is not worthy of you. . . . Come, how much? . . .”

The Lieutenant stepped around the edge of a garden wall

and saw that an auction of some sort was in progress in the marketplace. The shifting patterns of color in the crowd attracted him and he moved nearer.

The outer fringe, glancing backward, hurriedly made way for him and then closed behind him. Without any actual effort of his own he was rapidly propelled toward the front. Out of respect for him, in spite of the jam, they left a circle some ten feet in diameter about him.

He stood there, looking up at the stone block, crop under his arm, square-topped, straight-billed hat rakish upon his head, breeches and medals and tunic and braid putting the best dressed about him to shame.

His face was alert and interested. A sparkle of humor was deep in his gray eyes. A Frenchman would not have done this, but he was not French. A man afraid of his post and security would scarcely have allowed himself to be so surrounded and blocked off from all possible help, and the Arabs and Berbers knew, thereby, that he was a brave man.

The auctioneer had several cages behind him, shut off from view by long drapes, and the Lieutenant was far from guessing their contents until the next article was brought out to be sold under the hammer.

It was, the Lieutenant saw with a shock, a woman.

"And this choice article," bellowed the auctioneer, stomach shaking up and down every time he uttered a word. "How much, my brothers, how much? See! She is perfect in every detail. She is one of the finest women those devil-begotten Jeppas ever bred. And, my brothers, despite their low fighting

qualities, not one of us will deny that the Jeppas breed excellent women!"

The crowd thought this very funny and laughed excessively. The auctioneer was in fine form now. For a moment he had lost their interest due to the Lieutenant's coming.

"I guarantee, my brothers," roared the auctioneer, "that this woman is perfect in every detail. She is beautiful and untouched. How much am I bid?"

The Lieutenant's thoughts did not show on his face. He was thinking that France did not allow this any more and that, indeed, the practice was thought to be totally extinct. But Harj was not conversant with the laws of France and the Lieutenant was hardly in a position to inform them that this was against the law of a country they had never seen and of which they had only heard the vaguest rumors.

An offer came from the crowd.

The girl, standing there stripped before this barrage of eyes, hung her head. Her hair was long and brown and fell so as to partly hide her delicately featured face. Her eyes, blacked with kohl, flicked upward every few seconds to look at the men who bid for her.

"A rotten shame," thought the Lieutenant.

Offers were buffeted about. The auctioneer bellowed and roared, told funny stories, extolled the virtues of Jeppa women and finally brought a bidder up to a good price.

The money was paid on the spot. The big-chested, hairy-faced Berber took his merchandise. The girl, to the Lieutenant's surprise, went willingly enough.

“And now!” cried the auctioneer. “We have the best of the lot. I have here a jewel, a flame-colored flower, worth a sultan’s ransom. Untouched, pure as spring water, brought up in the harem, the very harem of Kirzigh himself. She is the finest of all. When she looks at you, you think two moons have risen. When she sighs you think the gentle breezes have cooled your brows. When she talks you think that nightingales have swarmed down from the heavens. She is a gift of Allah, more beautiful than the houris themselves. Her waist could be encircled with the smallest hand. A glimpse of her face and figure would pull a dead man from his shroud. And her hair! It is the color of the dawn, of the evening. It is the color of silk beyond value. It is a crown of molten gold flowing across her milk white shoulders. My brothers, gaze upon this woman and be confounded!”

He threw back a drape, dramatically bringing forth another article.

The Lieutenant had, until now, thought that this was just some pat speech of the auctioneer’s. The Lieutenant had seen many, many Arab and Berber women. Some of them were very pretty, yes, but not like this one.

My God, no!

She was all the auctioneer said and more, and the Lieutenant began to think poorly of the auctioneer’s oratorical abilities.

She was beautiful, but the mention of it made that word pale and insipid.

In all his life, in magazines, on the screen, the Lieutenant had never beheld such a face or such a figure.

Her hair was golden red, her eyes were clear and alive and gray. She looked down into the crowd as though she gazed upon so many mangy camels.

The crowd said not a word. Not one man there breathed for the space of a dozen heartbeats.

Suddenly an engulfing roar soared skyward. They slapped each other and slapped themselves and laughed and cheered and howled with pleasure.

The auctioneer, conscious that he had done something great, puffed up considerably, stroked his beard and waited for them to grow quiet.

The girl was haughty and unafraid. It was her voice which struck the crowd into silence.

“What one among you dares make a bid for Morgiana, Buddir al Buddor, daughter of the Caid?”

They gaped at her. Never in the history of Harj had a woman captive had the courage to speak from the auction block.

“Why don’t you bid?” she cried. “Look at me. I am beautiful. I am worth ten thousand pieces of gold. Buy me as you buy a camel or a barb. Bid, beasts, and show me which one among you wants me the most.”

For seconds nothing sounded but the clattering of palms in the public square. Then a stately Berber stepped forward and cried, “One hundred pieces of gold I bid for the honor of breaking that woman’s spirit.”

Another voice roared, “Two hundred pieces of gold.”

A third cried, “Three hundred.”

The first bidder, stroking his beard, looked up at the girl thoughtfully.

She called to him. "Am I not worth it? Will you not bid five hundred, you malformed ox? Bid and show them, and then I'll show you which one of us is broken first."

The Lieutenant was still dazed. His heart was beating queerly and gave little bumps every time her white teeth flashed. Then he tried to catch hold of himself. This was no way for the conqueror of Harj to act. No way at all.

He felt something press against his side. His fingers closed on a terrific weight. He glanced down.

Just as though some spirit had come to him unseen and had departed without noise, he found himself possessed of a big sack. It jingled.

"Bid!" cried the girl. "Buy me for a bargain at ten thousand pieces of gold. Ah, you're afraid. Afraid I might tear your eyes out of your heads and pluck your beards, hair by hair. We'll see about that. Bid!"

The Lieutenant raised the bag to shoulder height. The auctioneer stared blankly at him and at the sack.

The Lieutenant threw the money to the block. The bag broke and gold scattered over it like a torrent of sunlight.

The auctioneer's helpers dashed forward and scooped up the wealth. To their practiced eyes, it amounted to some seven or eight hundred pieces of gold.

The crowd cheered. In the middle of a nightmare, the Lieutenant stepped up, took the girl's hand in his own and tried to pull her away with him.



*The Lieutenant threw the money to the block. The bag broke
and gold scattered over it like a torrent of sunlight.*