



O'Connor laughed as he lunged

Solomon's Caves

Was he madman or magician, this mysterious chieftain of the African desert who ruled the treasure caves that fighting Terrence O'Connor and the wily cockney, John Solomon, sought to penetrate?

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LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

TERRENCE O'CONNOR, fighting Irish ex-soldier, was ready to head an armored car expedition into the African desert south of Tunis when he quarreled with one of the financial backers, Count Philippe Delisle, and bashed the wealthy Frenchman in the jaw. O'Connor, about to be arrested in the street shortly afterward, is rescued by a nondescript little cockney, John Solomon,

who knows the expedition's plans. Refusing to explain his interest in the affair, he urges O'Connor to proceed. The two of them, accompanied by Janet Carson, daughter of a scientist who was to have made the trip, and by three faithful assistants, Sergeant Larache, ex-Legionnaire; Joulak, an Algerian, and Palissy, a one-eyed rascal from Paris, reach the Golden Well, in the uncharted mountain country.

This story began in the *Argosy* for August 15.

It is here, according to a map and manuscript uncovered by O'Connor, that a fabulous treasure has been concealed for hundreds of years in a cave. O'Connor, on night watch, is accosted by a helmeted figure in coat of mail who calls himself the Emir Al Mansur and tells O'Connor he has been alive for many centuries. Magic forces, unseen hands, seem to obey his every command. As a gesture of his power, the emir has invisible hands strangle O'Connor. The latter fights back, but is powerless, nor can he see any physical being near him except Al Mansur, who laughingly commands the spirits to desist.

O'Connor goes with him into a gorgeously decorated series of caves in the near-by hill, where he sees ancient books of great value, but no treasure. The emir offers him some of the books if he will depart. Later, O'Connor gains his freedom, but cannot find his way out of the caves. He sees Palissy brought in as a captive.

O'Connor discovers that all of the occupants of the caves are not "unbodied." There are numerous guards, dressed after the fashion of the emir. As various of these guards try to take his life, the Irishman cuts them down with the blade of Damascus steel he finds in one of the rooms. He finally gets back to his friends, after discovering a caravan of Arabs, crazed with hashish, in a near-by declivity.

CHAPTER VIII.

AL MANSUR'S SECRET.

IT was rapidly approaching sunset. Joulak had gone up the steep climb to the unseen path above bearing food for himself and Larache, and orders to await word from O'Connor.

The latter, after a draught of cold water from the Golden Well, had talked long and rapidly, while Solomon puffed at his clay pipe with emotionless countenance, and Janet Carson listened, wide-eyed. In proof of his story of what had happened to him, O'Connor displayed the splendid gold-inlaid helmet with its heron's feather, and the beautiful blade, which Solomon now held across his knees. He omitted nothing of what he had seen and experienced.

"And now, Janet, will ye be getting that grub Joulak left ready?" he concluded. "Like a good girl! Faith, I'm tired as the divil. Did Al Mansur send ye out the bale of manuscripts?"

"No," she responded, rising. "Palissy was off scouting. We heard several shots, but the sergeant could find no trace of him. So he's safe enough, eh?"

"Probably drunk by now," and O'Connor laughed.

In a moment she was back with a cloth, which she spread on the sand, and plates; the simple supper of stew and bread was quickly before them.

"This 'ere sword," observed Solomon, "was made in Damascus nine 'undred year back, and no mistake neither. Emeralds in the 'andle. Well, sir, you've got something there!"

"Aye," said O'Connor. "And we've got to make plans here and now, John. With Larache up there, we have an entry to the cavern—if we want it." His keen, eager features tightened with grave decision. "Make no mistake, you two; this is no child's play! We're up against a pack of madmen, for one thing, with a leader who may be either mad or sane. And how many of these fanatic guards he has, I've no idea. I'd like to send Janet back with the first car to Fort

Aumale, but it'd be devilish unsafe for her to try it alone, and we can't spare a man if—"

"Enough of that, Terrence," she cut in swiftly, her eyes ablaze. "I don't know what John will decide, but I'll speak for myself right now. This thing is horrible, incredible, ghastly! I'm not backing out of it; and I can use a weapon myself, remember. It's our duty to step in and wipe out these loathsome creatures if we can do it."

O'Connor's brows went up quizzically. "You? Shoot to kill?" he said.

"Absolutely," she rejoined calmly. "These things aren't men; they're beasts, worse than beasts! Killing them means no more than killing snakes."

"Well, John?" O'Connor faced the pudgy little man. "You've got the clearest head of us all; I'll leave it up to you. If we didn't have this passage that gives us a clear way right into the heart of things, I'd say it was rankly beyond our abilities; but as it is, we have a fighting chance to clean up the place. You make the decision, however. Remember, it'll be a stiff job."

Solomon took the old clay pipe from his mouth.

"I says yes, just like that," he said.

THEY were both startled by the swiftness of his response, and its assurance. He knocked out his pipe, sighed wheezily, and continued.

"It's like this, sir and miss; we 'ave the chance we won't never 'ave again," he said. "As for danger, that's neither 'ere nor there. Life's just one danged danger after another, if we only knew it, as the old gent said when 'e took 'is third. It's like you say, miss; this 'ere is a pack o' wild beasts, and a werry good job it is if they're wiped out. But we 'ave to do it quick, afore Delisle gets 'ere with 'is caravan."

"You think he's on the way?" asked Janet. Solomon nodded, and applied himself to his meal.

"Then that's settled," said O'Connor. "I'll have to have an hour of rest; to tell the truth, I'm about done up—must be getting soft."

"No, sir," said Solomon. "It's that 'ere sherbet you ate. It's 'ad hashish in it, most like. Now, what are you after in this 'ere place? What I want, is to see the whole danged thing wiped out, just like that. You, sir?"

O'Connor laughed. "Why, that as much as anything. And loot, if I can pick up some."

"I'm not altruistic either," said Janet Carson, a trifle bitterly. "What we hoped to find here, we'll never see, of course. But there are manuscripts. Those are my loot."

"You'll get 'em," said Solomon, looking blankly from one to the other.

"See here," cut in O'Connor. "What's your idea about all this magic and so forth? About his yarn regarding the well, and the disembodied ones, and so forth? I tell you, those invisible fingers were real as the devil!"

"I 'as me own notions, sir," said Solomon placidly. "But it's werry 'ard to make sure. I'd say it was about 'alf and 'alf."

"Half and half what?" demanded Janet.

"About 'alf real and 'alf not. It's werry easy to be mistook in your judgment, as the old gent said when 'e found the butler a-kissing of the 'ousemaid." Solomon fished in some hidden pocket and produced a little red morocco notebook. He began to turn the pages, and O'Connor caught sight of that same very neat, small writing.

"What's that, John?"

"Me accounts, sir. I try to keep me

accounts all shipshape. This 'ere is an old account book I fetched along, and it's been a mortal long time open, too."

"Accounts?" said O'Connor amusedly. "With whom?"

"With a gent by the name o'Skoboloff, sir. Prince Ivan Skoboloff, 'e used to be, and a werry interesting man, too. Slipped out of me 'ands, 'e did, when I 'ad 'im nipped, and that was a long time back. I knowed 'im in Egypt," went on Solomon, laying aside the notebook and taking out his knife and plug. "A great student, 'e was; of oriental magic and such like, and werry rich afore the revolution lost 'im everything. I've seen 'im mesmerize a whole crowd in the street, just like that, but 'e was a bit balmy all the same."

"Hypnotist! I never thought of that," said O'Connor, with a low whistle. "And you think he's our Emir Al Mansur, do you? But there are things—"

"I know, sir," interrupted Solomon. "It's like a sick man as can't be diagnosed by the doctors; you 'ave one symptom 'ere, and another one that knocks it all of a 'eap and disproves it. Well, sir, if I was you I'd start in to slap 'ot bullets right into 'im and any of 'is ruddy gang you meet, and the quicker the better, says I. Sorry I am to say it, but I can't climb that 'ere 'ill. I'll 'ave to stop 'ere and watch the cars."

"Eh?" said O'Connor quickly, though he perceived that Solomon was right. "But you'd not be safe here, John—"

"Safer than I would up yonder, most like," and Solomon chuckled. "You get your bit o' sleep, sir. It's a growing dark now, and I 'ave a bit o' work to do yet."

There was a low whistle from up above. It was hard to see anything,

for now it was indeed growing dark, the sun having dropped from sight while they talked.

"That you, Joulak?" called O'Connor.

"Yes, my captain. One man. Larache got him."

"Good. Find the way down now, before it's entirely dark, and be ready to guide us back up to the path in an hour."

O'Connor rolled up without another word, and fell into a sound sleep almost at once.

HE wakened in an hour, automatically, with the old campaign trick of setting his brain to wake him like an alarm clock. For a little he lay quiet. All was dark; the moon would not be up for some time. He caught a whiff of Solomon's tobacco-smoke, heard a low voice.

Something had come into his mind as he wakened, perhaps induced subconsciously. Solomon had brought the little red notebook—why? Not by chance, certainly. He reviewed their first meeting; that was chance, most surely—yet was it wholly chance? Solomon was in Algiers to meet Professor Carson, and that was assuredly not chance at all, but inside information of some sort. And the perfection with which everything had moved for Solomon—

"Faith, I'm beginning to smell a rat in all this!" murmured O'Connor, and sat up. In the starlight, he could see Solomon and Janet Carson sitting to one side, talking. He rose and sauntered over to them.

"Will ye tell me one thing, John?" he said abruptly. "How much of all this did ye know or suspect from the start, eh? Out with it, now."

Solomon chuckled wheezily. "Them as asks questions gets less'n they asks,

I says—just like that, sir! If I was you, I'd look ahead and not back. It don't never pay to look back, as the old gent said when 'e buried 'is third."

"So!" O'Connor laughed softly. "You're a strange man, John, and you have your own way of doing things, eh? Do you expect Delisle to come here?"

"Yes, sir, and before werry long, too."

"Let me draw one thing to your notice—that caravan I saw in the valley. There's some way here, some other caravan track, that we didn't find."

"I expect as 'ow there's 'alf a dozen, sir," said the placid, wheezy voice. "This 'ere place is in touch wi' Tunis, Tripoli and the Libyan country, mind. And if I was you, sir, I'd look around in them 'ere caves for a radio room."

"Good idea," said O'Connor. "Undoubtedly there is one. Has it struck you that there's nothing to prevent this gang from using airplanes? Delisle might use one to get here."

"Right you are, sir."

Joulak appeared, and saluted.

"All ready, cap'n. I can lead you up to the path. I've dismounted one of the machine rifles; if you can manage a couple of the drums we'll make it."

"Good," said O'Connor. "Two pistols each, and spare clips. Is that armor ready for me up above?"

"Yes, my captain."

Joulak went to the cars.

"If we only had a dozen or so grenades, now," said O'Connor, "it'd be grand!"

Solomon moved, started to speak, and checked himself. Janet rose.

"I've one pistol, Terrence, and that's enough. Spare clips, too. Well, John, we'll say good-by and good luck—"

"To arms!" It was Joulak's voice,

low and piercing. "Some one moving up the ravine!"

O'CONNOR darted to the car and snatched out a rifle. Listening, he could hear a click of stones; then came a voice, cursing.

"Ha! That *salopard* Palissy!" grunted Joulak. Almost at once, Palissy called to them.

"*Hola*, comrades! I'm alone. Don't shoot. Are you there?"

"Come ahead," rejoined O'Connor, and heard a surprised path.

"He's drunk," said Joulak confidently. "He always swears in Arabic when he's drunk—"

The vague shape of a man appeared, emerging from the little ravine to the right of the fork. Evidently Palissy had come from the same cavern entrance where O'Connor had entered; therefore he had been sent out by the emir.

Striding along unsteadily, he presently came to the cars and sat down.

"*Pouf!* That's strong liquor they have in there!" he exclaimed. "Thought I'd never find the cursed path. So you're here, captain? They're hunting you like dogs in there. Saw that girl, did you? *Diantre!* She's a girl for you! If Joulak ever got in that place—"

"Shut up your drunken talk!" snapped O'Connor angrily. "Get to business."

"Right, *mon capitaine!* Well, I'm serving this accursed Al Mansur now. I've got a pocket filled with gold pieces here somewhere — Napoleons, real ones! You understand, captain—"

"I understand," said O'Connor. "Get on with it. They let you out?"

"Yes. I'm drunk, as you might suspect. Half a dozen of them are waiting back there, up the ravine; with

rifles. Al Mansur thought he had hypnotized me; but what the devil! I've seen that trick worked before now. You can't hypnotize a man who's drunk. *Kif* works just the other way. Take hashish, and you're an easy victim. I drank so much liquor that the hashish they gave me didn't work, and I spilled most of it anyhow. My shirt's all green inside with the cursed stuff—"

O'Connor groaned. "Confound your tongue! What are you here for?"

"To see if you're here, to trap every one else, and to return like a dumb sheep. I'm to persuade you that O'Connor is safe and will return to-morrow. I was in the radio room, and the emir was trying to receive a message, but something was wrong with the apparatus. He doesn't want to wipe you all out until to-morrow night, for some reason. He hasn't many men here; from something he said, I think most of them went to El Agurt to meet Delisle and join the caravan there."

"Ah! Now we're getting somewhere!" exclaimed Janet eagerly. "You were right about the radio, John!"

"Joulak, you son of the devil, gimme a cigarette," said Palissy. "Thanks. Trust me, captain, I've fooled them. Aye! I've had *kif* in my brain long ago; I'm an old hand at that work. Drown it with plenty of liquor that's my motto. I'd better be getting back to that girl, too—"

"Wake up!" snapped O'Connor. "Listen to me. Don't go back in there unless you're sure you can play the game."

"Trust me," and Palissy laughed. "I can be more useful there than here."

"Correct. Go back and say nothing's been heard from me, but the others are here. They will remain

camped, hunting for you and me both. Understand? Let on as if you'd fooled them completely. Here, take this pistol and shove it out of sight."

"Understood," said Palissy.

"Can you tell me where that radio room is?"

"What the devil! I'm no human map. It's somewhere close to my own room, where the girl is waiting for me to get back. That's all I know."

"Get back, then, and play your part. If you hear any shooting, watch your chance to join us."

"Eh?" said Palissy. "You can get back in?"

"Never mind about that; I'm taking no chances on your brain being picked by that rogue. Get in your head what I've told you, and stick to it. I'm not here and haven't been seen."

"Right." Palissy came to his feet, none too steadily. "He thinks you're doped and have fallen asleep in some nook or corner. Eh, Joulak! If you had a glimpse of the girls in there, you'd fight like the devil to change places with me! Where's that old rascal Larache?"

"None of your business," said O'Connor. "Get going."

Palissy saluted and disappeared.

"What do you think of it, John?" said O'Connor.

"You 'andled it properly, sir," Solomon said promptly.

"Not afraid to stop here alone?"

"Not me, sir. I 'ave the other automatic rifle if so be as I needs it."

"Then—luck to you. Joulak!"

THEY shook hands with Solomon, and a moment later struck off into the darkness after Joulak. O'Connor had the electric torch he had found in the passage, and Janet carried another and larger one. Each

of them carried one of the heavy cartridge drums, while Joulak bore the rifle. O'Connor had slung the naked scimitar about his neck on a thong.

To reach the ledge above was no easy matter. As they climbed, O'Connor chuckled at thought of Palissy. The one-eyed scoundrel had plunged into his part with an enthusiasm that stopped at nothing, enjoying all the sensual gratifications of Al Mansur's earthly paradise, but craftily side-stepping its dangers. Not idly had Terrence O'Connor picked his men.

With a final heave and scramble they were somehow up on the path, where they set down their burdens. O'Connor's light picked up the huddled corpse of Fortesque, and clicked off again. Joulak located the mailed shirt, which reached to the hips, and he got it over his head.

"All ready?" he exclaimed. "No lights; they might be seen. I'll lead. Afraid, Janet?"

"Of what?" came her cool voice.

O'Connor laughed and reached for her hand; he felt a quick, firm pressure as her fingers clasped on his. Something passed between them, wordless, ecstatic. It came to him suddenly, like a flash, what a comrade she was, what a quiet, dependable, poised character was here at his side; no loud chatter, useless words, amazed exclamations, but a quiet tenderness cloaked by her efficiency. His fingers tightened on hers—then he strode out and was making his way along the path in the starlight.

Presently he came to the ledge, the other two following him carefully. There was no sign of Sergeant Larache. He strode along until he could discern the dark opening against the darker cliff, then he took a look over the edge, and made out the glimmer of a fire down below, and the grunt and

champ of camels. The caravan was still there.

"*On ne passe pas!*" came the low voice of Larache.

"All right, sergeant."

Larache emerged from the shadows. He laughed a little.

"I took you for one of 'em, captain. A relief showed up; I got him."

"Take his mail shirt, if you like," said O'Connor softly. "We're going in; and it won't ward off bullets, but may come in handy."

Larache assented and disappeared. O'Connor found the corpse of the man he had killed, and retrieved the helmet. As the other two came up, Larache emerged again, struggling to get into the linked shirt. Joulak set down the automatic rifle and panted out a low jeer.

"Hello, legionnaire! The tin-soldier legion, eh? You'll wish you didn't have that thing on when we get in, if Palissy told the truth about the girls and liquor!"

"Eh? Where is Palissy?" said the sergeant.

"Inside, drunk as a lord. Here's an extra pistol I brought you. Then you can carry this cursed automatic rifle. I'll take the drums."

"Fair enough," said O'Connor. "Ready, sergeant? Janet, you bring up the rear. No more talk, men."

He plunged into the passage, sending a thin pencil of light ahead.

CHAPTER IX.

TRAPPED!

O'CONNOR had but one plan: to come upon Al Mansur as soon as might be, and test out his boasted invulnerability.

He no longer feared the invisible

hands, now that he suspected what he had to fight against in them. Solomon had hinted at the truth, even Palissy had guessed it—probably after his one experience of the unbodied ones, which O'Connor had witnessed.

"Some form of hypnotism, right enough," concluded O'Connor. "That devil suggests the idea, if any one faces him as I did; the subject feels the hands, believes they are there, gets panicky, and fights with his muscles instead of with his brain. He's fighting himself all the time—clever, that! I don't wonder this fellow Skoboloff could set himself up as a king among these Arabs. His natural abilities, his unscrupulous cruelty, and a bit of ventriloquism could go far. What an inhuman devil he must be!"

He thought of the girl Miriam and her eyes, of the madman in the rocky bowl, of the huge blacks he had seen; and a flame danced in his brain. Undoubtedly, too, Fortesque had not been the only renegade in this outfit. Skoboloff might well dream of setting himself up here just as the Senussi had done over eastward in the Libyan desert. With Delisle and the dope syndicate behind him, he had little to fear so far as the French were concerned—or had he? Was it possible that Solomon—

"Devil take it, what a blind fool I am!" thought O'Connor angrily. "That explains everything, of course. He evaded the issue very neatly, but it looks clear enough now. He's working on this job for the government—no wonder he had a letter in his pocket that made the police blink hard and quit! And not a soul guessed he was anything but a wheezy little old cockney; nobody would guess it. That's exactly how he could get away with it!"

Something of the genius that must

be Solomon's unfolded itself before his mind's eye, in a swift but fleeting glimpse. Almost at the same instant his physical eye caught a gleam of light ahead, and he snapped off his torch. Barely in time, too. A lantern came bobbing around a turn of the passage. The bearer held it up high, and O'Connor caught a glitter of chain mail. He reached back and touched Larache, who was close behind.

"Halt; I'll take him."

Flash light in his left hand, curved blade in his right, O'Connor strode forward with no attempt at concealment. The guard was alone, and as he heard the steps and peered ahead, O'Connor switched on his light and flung the ray directly into his face, half blinding him. The light showed a shaven face, thin and wolfish, snarling at the light.

"Is that you, cap'n?" came a voice in English, echoing and reverberating along the narrow passage. O'Connor was startled, until he recollected that this must be another renegade.

"Yes. What is it?" he demanded, purposely lifting his voice so that the booming echoes would distort it in the other's ears.

"Switch off that damned light, will you?" came the response. "Al Mansur wants to know why in the devil you haven't returned. You'd better get back in a hurry. There's no sign of that Irishman anywhere."

"Tell Al Mansur that I killed him. I'll be along and report as soon as I get a wound in my arm tied up."

Plainly, the other suspected nothing amiss from the reverberating voice, and must have caught the gleam of O'Connor's mail shirt despite the blinding ray. He turned, barely ten feet distant.

"Yah!" came his jeering response. "Going in to have a word with your

girl and smoke a pipe first, are you? Better shake a leg, or there'll be another cap'n of the guard. Al Mansur is in a damned bad humor—"

"Give him my message, blast you!" thundered O'Connor, and the other departed at a run. Chuckling, the Irishman turned to his companions. His voice cut at them softly but sharply.

"Follow on with your light. I'll wait for you."

HE departed hastily after the renegade, whose shuffling footsteps filled the little corridor with sounds that drowned out all else. He caught sight of the lantern bobbing ahead and slowed his pace. Despite the temptation to get this scoundrel out of the way, it was better to let him go on with the message and appease the anxiety of Al Mansur on two heads. Search for O'Connor would then be halted, too.

A twist of the passage, and light showed ahead, the running figure of the guard briefly illumined by it. That was the barred opening, of course; O'Connor halted, kept his eye on the bobbing lantern. The door there swung open, the guard again lighted up by the lamps in the outer corridor—then his figure was gone.

Coming to the opening, O'Connor halted, peered into that chamber where he had seen Al Mansur talking with Palissy. At first he thought it empty; then he saw that two of the half-naked blacks were at work, letting down the lamps on their chains and refilling them with oil. O'Connor held up his hand warningly, as his three companions approached down the inclined passage. One of the blacks was speaking in an Arabic dialect.

"Move faster with those lamps, imbecile! The master has ordered us to

the Red Chamber to question the Frenchman—"

"Time enough to start him screaming," responded the other dully. "First orders come first. Give me the oil."

O'Connor beckoned as the others paused, drew back from the opening, and passed on. When he came to the door in the end of the passage, he halted.

"So!" growled Larache grimly to Joulak. "You, and your talk of girls and liquor! Le Borgne won't be having so much fun, if those black devils spoke truth."

"Bah! The one-eyed can take care of himself," said Joulak. "He's no baby—"

"Cut out the talk," ordered O'Connor. "Don't start shooting unless we must, for they have some alarm signal that sounds through all the caverns. Ready!"

He flung open the door and found himself again at the end of the other passage leading out to the hollow of the madmen. At his side was the second door. No guard was in sight here. He jerked open the other door and stepped into that same room filled with books and manuscripts where he had slipped away from Miriam.

The room was empty, the hanging lamps still burning. Amazement seized upon the others at sight of this place; Janet Carson darted to the table, plunged eagerly at the manuscripts. There was no time to be wasted, however; O'Connor drew her away and passed on through the other chambers, following the way he had come with Miriam, trying to get back to Al Mansur's room and the corridor leading out of it.

In this he failed. After five minutes he realized that he was wandering aimlessly through the huge cavern cham-

bers, completely off his course. Nearly every one of the great rooms had a door or curtained way, besides the connecting archways between. All were empty; some were lighted only by one lamp, others by a dozen. This bewilderment was maddening, for at the very moment Palissy might be under torture. He had not entirely fooled Al Mansur, obviously.

In desperation, O'Connor turned to the first door he struck. The others were following him, staring all about them, marveling at everything in sight. When he pulled open the door, he found that it opened directly on a lighted corridor; whether the one he sought, was impossible to say. O'Connor halted sharply in the doorway, glanced over his shoulder.

"To me, Joulak!" he said quietly. "Some one coming."

THERE was a sound, as Joulak set down the drums of cartridges.

O'Connor drew back into the doorway. To his right, the passage continued for some distance before turning; but to his left, eight feet distant, was a sharp angle. The shuffle of feet came to him, and a voice babbling shrilly in some dialect he did not understand—whether in abject terror or in drunkenness, he could not say. Then came a savage growl in Arabic.

"On with you, son of Sheitan! Faster with him, Achmet; put your knife into the dog! We're off duty as soon as we're through with him. By Allah, I have better things to do than waste time on animals!"

A howl reëchoed. Three figures turned the corner.

A guard strode in the lead. Whatever work he had been at, its nature was plain; blood was spattered on his arms, and the sword in his hand

dripped crimson. The second guard, behind him, was also an Arab, and dragged along by a cord a shrieking wretch—a half-naked man of Negroid type, with blood streaming down his face. His eyes had been put out.

"Steel, Joulak!"

O'Connor stepped out. Quick as he was, swift as was the sweep of his Damascus blade, the Arab sprang lithely aside, swept up his own steel, met and parried the stroke. A yell of startled alarm burst from him. Joulak, knife in hand, came from behind O'Connor and hurled himself upon the second guard.

The Irishman had his hands full. The black-bearded Arab before him was a splendid specimen of manhood, and handled his blade with all the magnificent skill that made his people the first swordsmen of the East. As the two faced each other, as the blades clashed and clanged, everything else was forgotten by them both. O'Connor's thin, eager features blazed hawk-like from beneath his helmet, and a laugh touched his lips—but his eyes were very wary.

The blades rang out; the stamping feet lifted a thin, impalpable dust from the rock; the pantings and sharp curses of the two were gasped out in hot breath. A sharper clang, and O'Connor staggered as the other blade drove in on his steel helm. The dark, wild face opposite him blazed in exultation, but O'Connor laughed.

The laugh was drowned by a fearful shriek. The blinded wretch, flinging out his arms, caught the Arab about the waist. The guard caught out a dagger in his left hand and drove it into the miserable creature, then sprang clear and drove in at O'Connor. His voice leaped up.

"Allah! Allah Akbar!"

The Damascus blade flamed up and out—a curious blow, not drawing in after the manner of white men, but striking straight out in Japanese fashion. The razored steel touched the left wrist of the guard; that hand, lopped neatly away, fell to the floor, still clutching the poniard. A hoarse cry, a rush of blood—O'Connor struck again, swift as light, and his edge went home at the base of the neck. The guard swung around and flung out his arms. Then his knees were loosened and he pitched forward with a crash.

O'Connor drew back, wiping the sweat from his eyes, panting a little. Yet it had all passed very swiftly, in a wild and desperate burst of energy. Joulak was just rising from the body of the second guard, red knife in his hand. The blinded wretch was coughing out his life at one side.

"Come along," panted O'Connor, with a curious glance at Janet Carson. A smile came to his lips, a grim smile, for he saw that she stepped past the dead men without a second look; yet her pinched nostrils, her compressed lips, showed that it had not been simple to thus come face to face with reality.

JOULAK got the drums and, at a guess, O'Connor led the way past the angle whence these men had come. The corridor stretched ahead for twenty feet or more, then angled again. Two doors were in sight.

"Good stroke, captain," commented Larache, at O'Connor's elbow. "Remember when you beat that Italian chap at Oran, for the Médaille d'Afrique, with sabers? You used the same stroke then. An odd push to it."

"Japanese," said O'Connor. "Old Papa d'Estragues of Sidi-bel-Abbes perfected it and taught it to me. If we—listen!"

He halted. A rolling, thunderous sound was coming along the corridor—the tramp of feet, the tumultuous chatter of voices. No one or two men were coming, but a crowd. In a flash he saw that this was no place or time to open up with the automatic rifle; that would be sheer waste of their best ace. Better to slide out of the way, wait until they discovered Al Mansur or his guards in force—

"In there—quick!"

O'Connor pointed to the two doors. He advanced to one; it held against him. The other three crowded in at the second doorway. He drew back, flung himself desperately against the holding portal. The ancient wood cracked. Rolling thunders of noise were upon him; at any instant the approaching crowd would be around the corner. Another desperate thrust; this time the wood gave way with a crash.

He staggered in, caught the door and thrust it shut behind him. Outside swept past the pound of feet, the shrill laughter of women, the shouts of men; whatever debauchery was forward, it would be shocked soon enough into silence, he thought grimly, when they came upon the three dead men in the corridor beyond.

He took a step, intending to turn about and regain the corridor. Instead, everything seemed to give way beneath him.

He went crashing headlong in the darkness, amid splinterings and the smell of rotted ancient wood, and struck heavily, with stunning force that jarred every inch of his body and left him momentarily stunned, the breath knocked out of him. He heard Larache calling his name, distantly and faintly, but was unable to respond. Then silence.

Another odor came to him—the un-

mistakable damp feel of water. He heard a rustle, then a plunge. Things were moving here in the darkness. He heard a gasping breath.

That galvanized him into action. Fortunately he had pocketed his electric torch before meeting the guards; he fumbled for it, found it unbroken, sent a ray of light around him. A species of cold terror shot into his brain, as the ray struck upon water, darkly welling, within a foot of him. And in the water, a face; the face of a madman, knife between teeth, glaring at him with frenetically rolling eyeballs.

Abruptly, the face dived and was gone from sight. O'Connor caught a glimpse of a naked figure slipping away, vanishing in the water.

CHAPTER X.

THE TREASURE OF THE CAVES.

VERY carefully, O'Connor sat up, sent the light ray shooting around. Fresh amazement seized upon him. The expanse of water seemed very large. He had only been saved from going into it by something that lay here at the very edge, blocking his way. He threw the light upon it, and caught his breath.

It was the headless body of a naked black.

O'Connor rolled away with a shiver of disgust, saw his Damascus blade at a little distance, and picked it up. He was on an inclined plane of stone, which sloped down to the water. From the look of the stone at the edge, he imagined this place must be extremely old; perhaps a reservoir of some sort. The water seemed some thirty feet across, stretching out into the darkness.

But how had he come here?

Close by him lay fragments of old carven wood, rotted and smashed. The light ray flashed up and around. There, ten or twelve feet above him, he discerned a great mass of wood, much of it broken. It appeared to be some sort of balcony, through which he had gone with a grand smash.

"Larache! Janet!"

No answer came from his call, which volleyed back in weird echoes from the irregular roof of stone. He swept the water with his light, and saw nothing of that wild, mad swimmer. He could guess why the body of the black was headless, and what horrid work the madman had been about when disturbed. A shiver of disgust and horror seized upon him.

"By the saints, what a hell-hole this is, all of it!" he muttered. "Mad creatures like rats, feeding on human flesh—devil take it all! Let's see how to get out. The others have gone. Perhaps they had to make a dash for it, or weren't sure that I'd popped in at that door above. No getting back that way, anyhow."

He found that the sloping, ten-foot-wide ledge of rock ran on beside the water for twelve feet or so, then ended abruptly in a door.

Approaching it, O'Connor felt an idle curiosity at all the doors and woodwork in these caverns. Ancient they must be, indeed. Then he recalled that historically the desolation of North Africa was a modern thing.

In ancient times it had been the richest province of Rome; under the Vandals it had continued as the granary of the world. Even the first tide of Arab conquest had not appreciably harmed it. The second tide, the great hordes of half-civilized Arabs pouring up out of the Egyptian deserts, had like a locust-cloud destroyed everything in

their passage, even to the civilization of their own race and people. From that day, northern Africa had been a desert. And according to the documents he had found, these caves of the Kefra *massif* had been utilized at exactly this period.

Impatience gripped him as he recalled what might be happening even now to Palissy in the ominously named Red Chamber.

He came to the door and tested it. It was held securely in place by massive wooden bars, and was covered with iron plates; but the bars and the door itself were rotted away to a mere shell, the iron plates were smears of red rust. When O'Connor thrust his foot at it, he kicked clean through.

In two minutes he had destroyed enough of the door to gain passage. There was a rush of foul air, but the ray of light darted into a wide chamber with high roof. Drawing back, he lit a cigarette and then pressed through the smashed door.

Instant astonishment seized him, held him motionless. Here, clearly enough, was one chamber that Al Mansur had never found in all his boasted five hundred years of occupancy—in reality, perhaps five or six years. It was evident, by all indications, that this room had never been touched since it was sealed up. Perhaps no one had burst through the wooden balcony before this night—apparently the only way of gaining access here.

DIRECTLY before O'Connor, set against a squat round pillar of rock, was a life-sized Byzantine crucifix, the figure of carven ivory, the cross itself a glory of mosaic and solid gold, studded with gems. At one side were half a dozen huge sealed chests. On them, on rock shelves about the

walls, and heaped below the shelves, was a treasure such as O'Connor had never glimpsed or dreamed in all his years of adventuring.

Church ornaments, vessels, furniture, for the most part; reliquaries, icons, lamps, chalices. Other things, now mere piles of dust and rot. Arms and armor of all descriptions. Two great earthenware jars six feet high; he approached them curiously, tipped one over, found it empty. Probably they had contained wine.

The massive chests attracted him, for here was certainly the treasure of the caverns, missed by Al Mansur. The irony of it was tremendous. There was the man, wrecking the brains and lives of other men, creating a miniature Hades and heaven, for the sake of wealth and power—when here all the while was more wealth than he could ever hope to amass by cruelty and evil.

Then remembrance of Palissy, of what he was about, roused O'Connor.

He flung the light around. Nowhere was there any sign of opening. The place had but the one exit and entrance. Somehow he must reach that rotted balcony, if he were to regain the corridors above. He glanced around swiftly, went to one of the great earthenware jars, and tested it. Not too heavy—

Rolling it from its place, he managed to lift it, staggered with it to the door, smashed down the frame. A moment later he had the huge jar underneath the hole in the balcony. Up through this he tossed the Damascus blade, then carefully clambered to the rim of the jar. It rocked beneath him, but held. He rose erect, within reach of the beams, and studied them for a long moment, pulling away the ends of rotted, splintered planks.

Then, pocketing the flash light, he wagered everything on a spring upward, and won.

The woodwork swayed, cracked ominously, threatened to go down—but held as he drew himself across it. He got to his feet, took out his torch and retrieved his curved blade. Then, gingerly, he crossed the edge of the broken space to the door, forced it open, and was out again in the passage.

There was no sign of his companions.

He had expected none. He had no idea of how much time might have elapsed since his plunge into the darkness, but in any case they could not have delayed for him, risking the loss of everything.

O'Connor strode on down the corridor. His helmet had gone long since, but no matter; he could not hope to pass for one of the guards in the distinct light of the soft lamps. A white figure appeared ahead, and he strode on toward it.

Abruptly, he recognized the girl Miriam, running. Her black hair was streaming, and about her body whipped tattered fragments of her thin robe, smeared with blood. She halted at sight of O'Connor and stood staring at him blankly, trembling with terror.

"Miriam!" he exclaimed sharply. "Lead me to the Red Chamber—quickly! You understand?"

"Yes, lord," she assented, evidently without recognition. "But—but *he* is there—"

"Lead me, at once," cut in O'Connor. "You will not be harmed."

"The bodyless ones!" she whimpered. "They protect him—"

"Obey!"

O'Connor's imperative command broke her weakened will. Without further protest she turned and led him

down the corridor, stopped before a door and opened it. He followed her into another but more dimly lighted passage. A long, gasping shriek sounded from somewhere ahead, ending abruptly. She came to a halt.

"There, lord—at the end! I dare not go—"

O'Connor pushed her aside and pressed on. The shriek told clearly of devil's work going forward in that Red Chamber. There was no time to lose, if Palissy were to be saved!

CHAPTER XI.

IN THE RED CHAMBER.

AT the end of this passage was a wide opening upon which converged other corridors, but now there was no mistaking his objective. From a door, half ajar, came a glare of reddish light and the sound of voices. That of Al Mansur broke out sharply.

"Tighten up the ropes! I'll have the truth out of him, by Allah!"

"You dog from hell!" snarled the voice of Palissy in Arabic, and then emitted a flood of imprecations. O'Connor, hurrying forward, shifted the blade to his left hand and jerked out his automatic.

He shoved the half-open door aside, and stepped into the Red Chamber.

Upon the floor, almost at his feet, lay a distorted corpse. Directly before him was Al Mansur, in splendid silken garments, directing two half-naked blacks who were trussing the stripped figure of Palissy upon a rack. No one else was in the place. Lamps emitting a scarlet glare hung from the ceiling, and a brazier of charcoal glowed dimly; to right and left were implements of torture.

O'Connor laughed a little as he threw up his pistol. Al Mansur swung around, and O'Connor fired at him point-blank.

"See if your spirits will stop hot lead, Skoboloff!" he exclaimed, as the man went staggering backward.

Two shots more, reverberating like thunder in the cavern. Coolly, he fired none the less rapidly, deliberately shooting each of the blacks through the head, and then swung around to make certain of Al Mansur.

To his amazement, the man had disappeared.

Palissy was yelling at him frantically. O'Connor darted to the rack and with the scimitar shore through the cords. The one-eyed man spat an oath at him.

"You didn't kill him! Blast it, captain—"

"Eh? I let him have it over the heart," said O'Connor. The other laughed as he got clear. "Are you hurt?"

"Not to speak of. Let him have it over the heart, did you? Well, why d'you think I'm here, eh? Because I shot him twice through the heart—and you know I don't miss, me! All it did was to stagger him a bit."

"Devil take it!" exclaimed O'Connor, in stupefied realization. "Why didn't I think of that, now? He wears a bullet-proof vest, of course. If I'd only shot for the head! I tried to make sure of him—"

Palissy intervened. "That's it, captain. I remember now hearing some of them tell how he'd stand up and let his men shoot at him with rifles, to show that bullets wouldn't hurt him. *Diantre!* If we'd only plumped for the eye, eh? Well, we'll know better next time. He slid out the door yonder. They thought you were dead."

"Sober, are you?" demanded O'Connor.

"Sober," repeated the other, rubbing his wrists and grimacing. "The devil suspected something wrong when I reported. Oh, I was sobered up quick enough! They've killed two or three of their own chaps."

"You've no weapon? Take my pistol. I've another. Here's a fresh clip. Now get out and find that radio room!"

"Eh? Where are the others, Lachache and—"

"I've lost 'em," snapped O'Connor angrily. "March, blast you!"

"Thanks for giving me a hand, captain," said the one-eyed rascal. "I need clothes, but they can wait. Yes, I think I can find the place—come out by this doorway over here. The room has half a dozen. You can get to this part of the caverns from anywhere."

"Hurry, then, before Al Mansur sounds the alarm!"

PALISSY, fortunately, had so far undergone no actual torture, except for a few blows from the fist of Al Mansur, which troubled him not in the least. He darted across the chamber, with a kick at the two blacks as he passed them, his lean, scarred body looking like an evil sprite in the reddish glare. Jerking aside a curtain, he flung open a door, and O'Connor followed him out into a lighted corridor.

"Come along—I'm sure of it now!" Palissy swung off to the left.

So far no sound of alarm, and O'Connor wondered if after all Al Mansur might have been pierced by the bullet, if he had dragged himself away to die in some corner. No such luck, was his bitter reflection. Then Palissy halted and tested a door on

the right—carefully swung it open. He peered in, grinned, and beckoned O'Connor.

At this instant came the alarm—the thin, strident sound sweeping through all the passages as though electric gongs were being rung. O'Connor cursed at the sound of it, and flung forward through the doorway.

A radio chamber, indeed, was this; a huge room with high vaulted roof, wireless equipment standing about on all sides. The center of all this was a huge table bearing a Marconi set; evidently of great power. Two men were at the table, wearing headphones, conferring together. The alarm signal had just startled them. One was taking a pistol from a drawer at his hand. Both were fairly young—Arabs, thought O'Connor in the one swift glimpse he had of them. Probably French trained, as they wore khaki instead of Arab robes.

He never learned more, for Palissy shot both of them down with cold certainty. One fell, the other twisted about, screamed, jerked up his pistol. Palissy's third bullet took him between the eyes, and he moved no more.

"Destroy everything in sight," said O'Connor, and darted to the table.

His quick glance had already taken in the typewriter there, with a half-written message on the platen—something had just been coming in when the alarm sounded, it seemed. Palissy dragged one of the fallen men aside.

"In a moment, captain," he rejoined, and began to strip the man. "I can smash things up better when my bare pelt is covered—"

O'Connor disregarded him, seizing the message that was half written and holding it to the light of the overhead lamp. It was comprehensive, and he perceived that it was the decoding of

a long and apparently meaningless message typed on the top portion of the sheet, wherein the names used had been concealed in sending.

Have just received telephonic message from Delisle, at Tunis. He is *en route* to join you by avion. Has ordered me to send caravan from El Agurt without him; will do so immediately. Full electrical equipment ordered has been received and packed for camel transport. No inquiries or questions. Wire from Paris headquarters transmits warning in regard to man named Suleiman, who is possible agent of governor general, given full authority to investigate—

There the message ended. That the latter portion referred to Solomon, there could be no doubt whatever.

"The electrical equipment will be a bit late," and O'Connor chuckled as he pocketed the paper. "Faith, we stopped this from reaching Al Mansur, anyhow. Maybe we can pick up some more information here."

He leaned over the desk and began to rummage through everything in sight, but found no further messages. He came upon a complete code-book, however, and also a list of names and addresses in a frame, obviously those of the syndicate and its agents. This he exultantly tore away from its frame and pocketed.

MEANTIME crash upon crash had resounded through the chamber, as Palissy plunged into the work of destruction. Instrument board, batteries, everything in sight was being relentlessly smashed and hammered. Then came a sharp hiss of warning, followed by an excited voice.

"Fortesque! That you? Damn it all, where have you been? There's—"

O'Connor straightened up and swung around. A guard had just en-

tered. The voice, the English speech, showed that here was the same renegade he had encountered in the outer passage.

The man stared at him in stupefied astonishment.

Palissy's automatic cracked from one side. To the sharp report, the renegade threw both hands to his face and pitched over.

"Slap in the eye, captain!" came the jubilant exclamation.

"Right," said O'Connor coolly. "Let's clear out of here now. Can you find Al Mansur's headquarters?"

"More or less," said Palissy, coming forward. "I'm not at all sure about it, but I can make a try. That place is close to the big central cave, after you come in from the main entrance. A large gallery leads out of the hall. The cursed place is like the spokes on a hub, with the one large gallery, and I think the chief's headquarters are off that gallery. I can find my way there, with a bit of luck. Look here, captain! I just happened to think about that girl of mine, Miriam. Those devils grabbed her, along with me—"

"She wasn't hurt particularly. I imagine she broke away from them," said O'Connor. "I met her, and she guided me here. She will be all right. Why? Interested in her?"

"Name of a black dog! You said it, captain," exclaimed Palissy, unwontedly serious. "I want to find her again."

O'Connor gave him a hard look. "Why? You scoundrel, you'd better think twice what you're about. I'm no Al Mansur, let me tell you—"

"Eh? I'm honest about it. *Sacré bleu!* Give a man credit, can't you? Drunken fooling with the girls is one thing; but devil take me, captain, I'm honest about it! And I put in my word for her right now, with you."

"Agreed," said O'Connor. "Provided she's the same when we all get this mess cleared up, and your honest intentions don't suffer any change. I am not sure about either event. Right now you pocket that extra gun and carry on."

Palissy grinned and saluted.

"Thanks, my captain. I'll take the lead."

The alarm signal had by this time died away. Through the corridors rolled a dim confusion of sound, amid which it was possible to distinguish nothing coherent; it seemed as though every one in these underground habitations must all be crying out at once. Yet they saw no person until they came suddenly upon a striking evidence that Al Mansur's magic was still powerful upon his subjects.

A shot rang out ahead of them, and about a turn of the passage appeared one of the black Sudanese, naked to the waist, swinging a scimitar at the empty air around him. His eyes bulged, he dodged and struck as he ran, panted shouts and exclamations burst from him. The invisible hands of the bodyless ones were clearly at work upon him.

O'Connor shouted at him as he came close, but the black appeared not to see him. Instead, a frenzy came upon the glistening figure; his steel whirred and sang about him on all sides. With a sudden leap and spring, he was upon the Irishman—who, half suspecting some ruse, knocked the flailing steel aside and struck the life out of the black man.

They passed on, intense disgust seizing upon O'Connor for what he had done; yet no choice had been given him.

"I know this turning, captain!" exclaimed Palissy abruptly, from behind.

"We're close to the gallery now—what's that?"

THROUGH the reverberating din that filled the passage there pierced sharper, louder crepitations—the unmistakable sound of shots. Another turn ahead, and the passage widened out as they approached it. A thrill shot through O'Connor; everything was drowned by a sharp burst of staccato noise, the acrid odor of powder gases came to their nostrils. He knew the automatic rifle was at work, somewhere ahead.

Comparative silence fell. Then, without warning, pandemonium broke loose. Just as they reached the angle in the passage, it was filled before them with a frantic, rushing mass of men, screaming shrilly in blind panic. No guards or blacks—Arabs, they seemed, perhaps the men of the caravan encamped outside. O'Connor never knew for certain.

With a rush, they were upon the two figures, pouring upon them headlong. O'Connor struck out desperately, fired shot after shot from the pistol in his left hand, heard the reports of Palissy's automatic. He was swept aside like a leaf on an ocean wave. About him were wild faces, waving knives, clubs. A blade shattered on his mail-shirt. Some one seized his legs and brought him down.

They poured over him, stabbing, kicking, striking, in a wild tide seeking only to flee away and be gone. And through the tumult rose again the staccato, stammering stutter of the automatic rifle.

Somewhat, O'Connor got to his feet. His Damascus blade was gone, but he had the pistol and two shots cleared a way for him. He burst through the last of that frenzied tide and went

staggering on into the wider turn of the passage.

Dimly he realized why the Arabs had fled. Bullets were striking all around him here, ricocheting from the walls with wild whistles, screaming past in the air. Flying feet had stirred the dust of ages so that everything seemed smoky, blurred to the sight. O'Connor tripped over a body and came to hands and knees. Palissy had vanished, borne away in the rush.

Horror gripped him as he peered ahead and saw the scene there.

Here was the wide gallery described by Palissy, perhaps twenty feet across, shooting straight ahead on a slight incline to a great central hall with lofty dome. Fifty feet away, where the gallery entered this high hall, was a surging swarm of figures. A shot or two cracked out, no more. O'Connor had arrived too late.

The automatic rifle had jammed. In the soft glow of the lamps, a score of men were just sweeping over the three against the angle of the wall—guards and Negroes, with a few Arabs. Shots rang out. Sergeant Larache was gone. Joulak fought there, pistoling the foremost as they rushed him, then doubling up in convulsion as bullets tore into him. He was gone, too.

O'Connor leaped up, slipping a fresh clip into the pistol. He caught sight of a trim shape in khaki lying to one side, and lost his head completely. With a hoarse yell of fury, he ran forward, emptying his pistol into the crowd of them. Al Mansur was there somewhere, for his powerful voice was echoing amid the din.

It was sheer madness, this rush of his. Instead of breaking before him, they turned and leaped for him like a pack of wolves. The pistol was empty, and he had no chance now to reload.

They were upon him, struck him like a wave breaking on a rock as he tried desperately to gain that khaki figure lying beside the jammed rifle.

He won forward foot by foot, fighting them bare-handed in berserk rage, as knives clashed and thudded against his mail-shirt. A huge black leaped bodily upon him, gripping him about the neck, the reek of the oiled body rank in his nostrils. O'Connor smashed blows into the black frame again and

again, a red mist before his eyes; the others were in about him, clutching at him on all sides, dragging him down by sheer weight.

He was gone from sight at last. For an instant he reappeared among them, reddened fists hammering—then he was gone again. The mass closed in above him. For a little it heaved and eddied, then gradually quieted.

Al Mansur came striding up to the place of victory.

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK.

Long Tom

ONE of the most famous pieces of ordnance in the possession of the United States is Long Tom. Almost forty years ago it was returned to this country by Portugal after seventy-nine years' service in Castle Santa Cruz, in Fayal, the Azores, where the recent mutiny of Portuguese troops occurred.

The ancient gun is a forty-two-pounder. Once a part of the armament of the French battleship *Hoche*, when that vessel was taken by the British in 1798, the gun was sold to John B. Murray of New York who happened to be in England when the prize was stripped. The new owner brought the gun home and tried to sell it to the United States government, but it was rejected.

Then Murray, by a contract with the Emperor of Haiti, fitted out three vessels of war in 1804 to serve against France and the gun was on one of them. After the repulse of the French, Long Tom was brought again to New York and lay idle until 1812. It was then mounted on a small brigantine privateer, the *General Armstrong*.

This vessel was commanded by Captain Samuel Chester Reid who had a crew of ninety officers and men, all anxious for a brush with the British. At noon on September 26, 1814, the *General Armstrong* put in at Fayal for water. That night a British fleet closed the port.

But the Americans would not surrender. The little privateer fought the entire fleet until its commander beached it in a sinking condition. Then from the shore the Americans continued the fight, inflicting on the enemy, during a week's hostilities, the almost incredible loss of three hundred men in killed and wounded, and losing only two killed and seven wounded on their side. Long Tom was responsible for the most of the British casualties.

Finally the British fleet sailed away for New Orleans.

Charles Adams.