

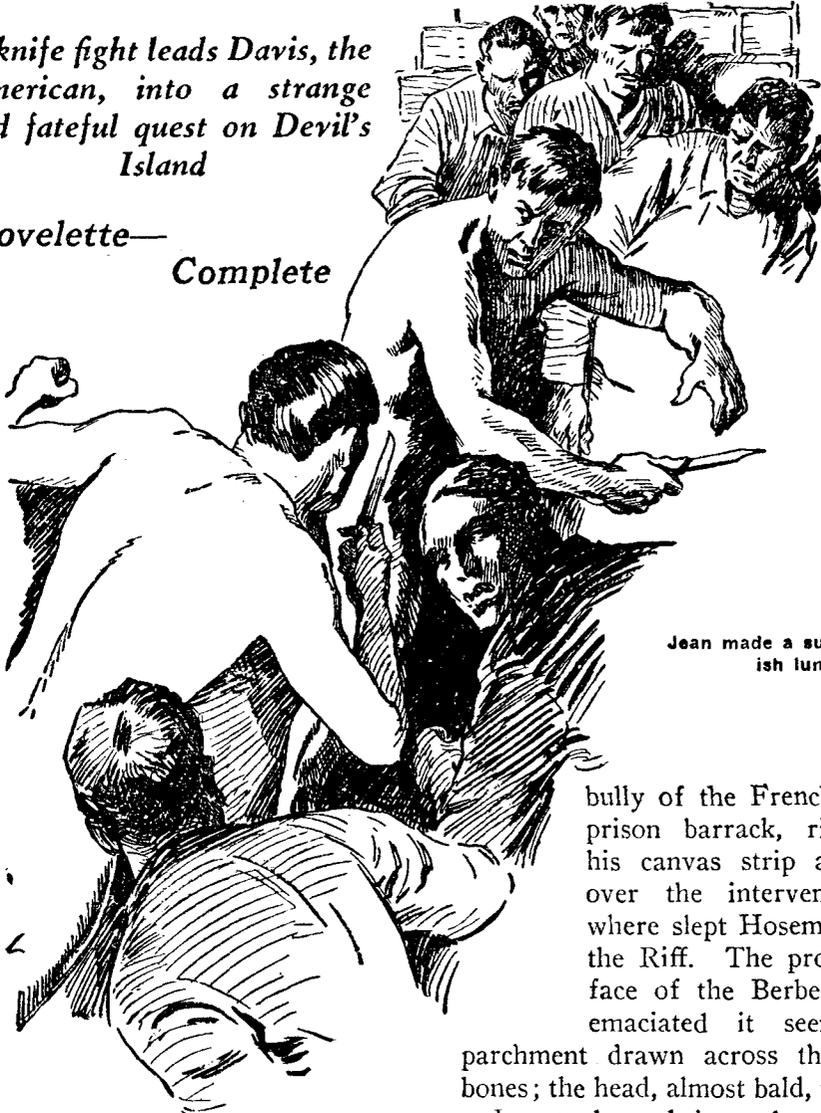
# The Sacred Sword

By TOM CURRY

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*A knife fight leads Davis, the American, into a strange and fateful quest on Devil's Island*

Novelette—  
Complete



Jean made a sudden tigerish lunge

## CHAPTER I.

### KNIFE FIGHT.

**A**CROSS Davis' big form fell elongated black shadows that broke the rectangle of brilliant moonlight. He lay, watching Jean,

bully of the French Guiana prison barrack, rise from his canvas strip and bend over the intervening cot, where slept Hosem ben Ali, the Riff. The proud, dark face of the Berber was so emaciated it seemed but parchment drawn across the jutting bones; the head, almost bald, was back.

Insects buzzed in and out of the thick bars, taking toll of men who yearned for such freedom. It was hard to stir in the clinging heat; in Guiana it was every man for himself, and there was no reason for Davis to interfere.

Davis could not guess then what his

sympathy for the sick Riff would mean: robbery, murder, peril that he would be unable to guard against, the stirring up of a hatred that would follow him to the bitter end. Yet there remained in the American vestiges of his former manhood, and the trait that forces the strong to aid the weak.

A weak light bulb shone between the bars at the end of the room, glinting on the steel blade in Jean's paw, as the Frenchman searched the folds of Hosem's covers. The sick man woke from his fitful rest, groaned; Jean raised the dagger with a muttered threat. Davis leaped up, seized Jean's wrist, bent it back.

"*Nom de nom*—" swore Jean, breaking back against the canvas; "but I'll rip out your guts, American!"

The man they fought over was too weak to resist; he fixed bright, ebony-black eyes on Davis, his defender. It was pity that made Davis step between the *zéphyr* and his victim, though he knew such a move meant trouble—Jean was stupid, brutal, loud.

"Let him alone, I said," growled Davis.

Other *bagnards* in the long line of forty strips—across the six-foot aisle were others—had been wakened from troubled sleep by the row. None save the strongest dared oppose Jean, several had died for it. So far Davis had managed to avoid him. Jean lowered his bull head. "*Bien*, Davis, you've asked for it. Come on, you know the rules."

Davis squared his shoulders. "Give me a knife," he ordered. Prisoners, gathered around, hoping something might befall Jean, who was making life miserable for them. One thrust a blade into Davis' hand, gave him a slap on the back, toward the lavatory at the end. There such battles took place in

the dead of night, ending with death for one of the combatants. In the morning the *surveillants* would find a slashed corpse, and no one could say anything about it. Jean was survivor of six such affairs.

The lavatory was dark, but convicts brought two hand-made lamps, condensed-milk tins filled with kerosene, bits of cloth for wicks. The flickering flames lit bare stone walls, showed Jean, tattooed chest heaving, stripped naked—no blood must be found on the victor—crouched, eyes red with rage. As soon as Davis had taken off his clothes Jean advanced.

Guiana, with its murderous sun, fever, bad food and water, had not yet shattered Davis; in Africa he'd been hardened. Sanguine by nature, he'd never given up hope of escape. In Guiana was no present, only remembrance that tortured, and ephemeral hope. All those there were either physical and mental wrecks, waiting for death, or, like Davis, husbanding resources till the time came to strike for freedom.

JEAN stood a moment, as though hesitating to attack, to throw Davis off guard. He made a sudden tigerish lunge, his knife ripping up at Davis' belly. Davis, having witnessed the other fights, was ready for this, leaped aside, passing so close to Jean he could have plunged his blade into Jean's back.

"*Sacré nom!*" swore Jean.

He whirled, lunged again, his point missing Davis by an inch, powerful forearm cracking on Davis' wrist, whipping Davis' dagger from his grip. As it clattered on the stone, Jean uttered a triumphant cry, sprang in to kill him. But Davis caught the raised arm, threw his weight on it, twisting it

behind Jean's neck, bending him double; with an upward wrench he broke Jean's grip, disarming him. The *zéphyr* rolled out of the hold and they clinched, sweating bodies strained. In the yellow beams of the unsteady lamps their contorted faces and bulging muscles pictured the efforts they made.

Davis suddenly fell away, landed on his spine; Jean came tumbling over him as Davis yanked him, threw him heavily against the jagged stone wall. Jean rose, tried to reach his knife; Davis hit him in the chin, snapping back his head. As Jean was straightened by the blow, Davis hit him in the belly. Rage burned hot in the American as he battered the bully back, hitting him under his clumsy guard or through it. Not until Jean's face was a pulp did the Frenchman collapse, smashed, bleeding. He lay still, glaring up. Groggy from the exertion, Davis picked up the knives; a contented sigh ran through the spectators as Jean awaited death.

Davis stood over him. "Keep away from the sick one and me," he ordered. "That's all." And turned to leave.

Murmurs of protest arose, a man caught Davis' arm. "Slit him. Open his belly!"

Davis shook his head, returned to his bed. He threw himself down, turning on his side, and saw that his neighbor's bright eyes were fixed on him. Jean was carried in. "Take him to the other end," ordered Davis. "Keep him away from here."

When finally the barrack had quieted. Davis heard a low whisper calling him. He rose, picked up a water jug, held it to the Berber's thin lips. But the dark-faced man said, "No!"

"What is it, then, Hosem?"

Hosem ben Ali drew his long brown hand from under his dirty blanket, spoke French with thin, dry accent,

hardly enough life in him to articulate. "Don't let that *kelb roumi* touch me!" he gasped. He thrust a roll of bank notes into Davis' palm.

The money made Davis' heart leap. With it he could escape. Not through the murderous jungle strangling them on three sides, nor along the treacherous coast in a frail cockleshell, but in style. Painfully as he had scrimped, he had managed to save but a few francs; now he had a fortune.

"But you need this yourself, Caid."

The thin form stiffened. "You know me?"

"I was in Morocco."

Hosem shuddered. "Morocco! If I could but die there. In the *djehad*, the Holy War, I was a mighty man, the chosen of Mulay Mohammed Abd el-Krim—" He stopped suddenly.

"I can't take your savings," Davis growled.

"It's nothing. You saved me from that Christian dog—you're not French?"

"American."

"Good. Keep the money, for when I die it will only be stolen from me. I don't fear death, I've been true to the Faith. Yet, each day I can hold on, perhaps I'll see *him*."

"Who, Caid?"

"My son, Hassan. If only he'd come! If I should die before he comes, you—"

**H**OSEM closed his eyes. Now Davis understood the meaning of Hosem's eager glances each time the gate opened—he was waiting for his son. Davis put the francs in a secret pocket, meaning next morning to hide them more carefully when he could.

Hosem ben Ali had been carried on

a stretcher to the dormitory three days before, dumped on the cot. He was but one of the numerous nationalities over which France held sway: Riffs from Morocco, Algiers; Javanese, East Indians; Africans from the desert and Madagascar; white, brown, yellow, black men who had fallen foul of France's laws. Davis had given the Riff water, tried to ease him in small ways. Hosem had silently watched him. Davis understood that the caid had been brought over from the dread Devil's Isle, in the storm-tossed sea off the Guianan coast, where men went mad in their little stone huts.

Dawn broke with the sudden glory of the tropics. But in the midst of this beauty was only ugliness for the prisoners.

They rose wearily, waiting for guards to open the gates so they could resume their forced labor in jungle, river and ditches.

Jean scowled at Davis from the far end of the room. On the edge of his cot, Davis looked at Hosem. The old Riff's cheeks were ashen, his breathing so faint it did not stir his blanket. His lips moved, his hands raised weakly; Davis bent over him.

"Stay after the others go," whispered the Riff.

Locks turned; two keepers in solar topee and white uniform, Ruby pistols at their sides, umbrellas in hand, appeared.

The *forçats* filed out, Jean among the first.

Hosem began whispering to Davis: "I don't dare delay longer. Your hand shall be the instrument—Great is Allah and Mohammed his Prophet is also great—Take this, guard it with your life."

Davis curiously scanned the small paper Hosem pushed on him. It con-

tained a series of penciled numerals in Arabic—Hosem ben Ali, though a Riff, was educated, more religious than most of his kind.

"What shall I do with this?" Davis asked.

"Give it to my son Hassan, along with my Koran."

Then Davis glimpsed at the gate the brutal face of Jean. But Hosem ben Ali gripped him, pulled him close. "The day will come when Allah will reward you," he gasped. "*La Illah Illah Allah*—" His breath was coming in terrible gasps.

"Careful—here's a guard," Davis warned, placing the hand which held the paper on Hosem's. "It's Commandant Rabat, and Jean—"

Hosem quivered as life shot back into his frail body, impelled by spirit greater than death. He snatched back the paper from Davis and covered his face with his blanket.

**J**EAN, leading a French keeper, came toward them. Commandant Rabat crossed the dormitory, caught Davis by the throat, throwing him back across the cot.

"Give me the paper," he ordered impatiently.

"What paper?" snarled Davis—he hated Rabat.

"Don't let him lie to you M'sieu' le Commandant; I saw the Riff pass him that map," cried Jean. "*Oui*, I saw—"

"Shut up, *bagnard*. Search him, see what he has."

With malicious pleasure Jean stepped to Davis, who kicked at him. Rabat flushed, whipped out his Ruby. "It's my order!" he shouted. "I'll shoot you if you resist, Davis."

Davis knew Rabat, most brutal of men; he had a short temper, liked to show off his all-powerful authority

over the cowed convicts. He had killed more than one, and it would give him nothing but pleasure to shoot another. Jean was searching Davis, and the *zéphyr* was skillful, for he knew just how prisoners hid the contraband francs they kept. He found the wad of money Hosem had given the American.

Rabat snatched it, growled, "Prisoners may not have cash."

Davis shook with fury. To strike a guard was punishable by death, but he tried to get at Rabat. Rabat cocked his gun, snapped, "But the paper—where is it?"

"I can't find it," Jean confessed, as Davis subsided under the gun.

"Look in his knapsack, on the shelf, in the cot."

Rabat raised the blanket from Hosem's face. "This is ready for the bamboos," he growled. "He's dead."

Pity for the old Riff struck Davis; yet at the same time he was almost envious, for death was at least a release. Hosem lay stiff, lips tightly clenched, head back. Rabat went through Hosem's pockets and bag, but found no cash, nor the paper. He turned to Davis and Jean.

"You two swine get a barrow, take this to the cemetery," he ordered, and Davis heard his repressed breath whistle through his curved nose. Rabat seemed to be trying to hide excitement. When Davis picked Hosem's Koran from the narrow shelf, Rabat snatched it from him, ran quickly through the leaves.

"Why'd you try to take that?" Rabat demanded suspiciously.

Davis shrugged. "Simply to read a prayer for him," he replied.

Rabat laughed, flung the sacred book at Davis. "Go ahead, then, bring the barrow, fool. You too, Jean—*vite*."

Jean led the way to the yard, and they found an old wheelbarrow. At the convict factory they picked up a wooden box for a coffin.

"I'm going to beat your head off for squealing," Davis growled at the *zéphyr*, as they started back to get the body.

"You won't get a chance," Jean replied. "You got yourself in a pretty kettle, losing that paper. Yes, it's something important Rabat's after, let me tell you. That Hosem was leader of a great tribe that fought under Abd el-Krim when the Spaniards were thrown back, and France forced to wage a great war against the Moslems."

Davis wheeled the barrow into the barrack, where Rabat awaited them. Rabat motioned silently to the corpse, watched as they loaded it on; he kicked both convicts to hurry them out.

They wheeled Hosem through the gate, to the dirty streets of St. Laurent du Maroni. Across the river lay Dutch Guiana. Prisoners in gangs or alone on errands passed to and fro; the single-storied huts teemed with blacks, mulattoes, Chinese, strange mixed breeds who stared with contempt on white convicts.

Entering the bamboo-circled graveyard where open holes awaited the daily supply of dead ones, Davis took a final look at the stern, lined face of Hosem ben Ali. There was no terror in Hosem's expression, only relief; he had gone to join the Faithful in the Groves of Allah.

Davis took the Koran from his pocket.

Not being able to read the Arabic lettering, he looked silently at it as a rough gesture.

There was a deep line of puzzled concentration in the American's tanned brow; he had been as yet unable to

think clearly, ponder on the mysterious disappearance of that paper.

## CHAPTER II.

### THE STRANGER.

**I**N the sweltering barrack once more, they found Rabat had left. Jean stayed away from Davis, fearing another punching, though he took care to display the handle of a new knife. Davis lay on his strip, covered his face with his arms.

But he had no rest; a keeper came, ordered Jean and Davis to the Commandant's quarters across the courtyard. Rabat scowled at them, curtly shoved Jean aside, stepped to Davis.

"Come," he cried in a very loud voice, "where did you hide that paper Hosem ben Ali gave you, Davis? *Vite*—I've no time to waste on swine."

Davis' hatred for Rabat for having robbed him, against the French for sending him to die in Guiana, was greater now than ever. He shook his head, not daring to open his lips lest he express what he felt, drive Rabat to murder. But that was what Rabat seemed to want; he smashed a hand to Davis' mouth. Jean grinned, pleased to see the blood spurt from his enemy's lip. Davis trembled violently, white-hot anger burning him; as Rabat followed him in, driving him back against the wall, he could hold himself no longer. He hit Rabat in the jaw with all his force.

It was an offense only death could pay for. Rabat, reeling back, went purple, shook until Davis thought he was having a stroke; then he whipped out his gun. Davis, head up, waited for the bullet.

The sudden opening of the door stopped Rabat.

"What goes on here?" demanded the man who had entered.

Davis turned slowly. The newcomer was a Frenchman, tall, lean, in whites; his face intelligent, magnetic. There was something fine about him, as though he belonged in another world to the brute Guiana; his quick black eyes were shrewd, held a fire lacking in most men. Davis had never before seen him.

"What is it, Rabat?" he demanded again. "Why are you beating this poor fellow?"

Rabat slipped the Ruby back into its holster. "He's just a *bagnard* dog," he replied thickly. "He hit me."

Davis had no idea of receiving mercy; the least he could expect would be years of imprisonment in the solitary pits of Ile St. Joseph, if not death.

"You shouldn't be so tough," the tall man said severely. "You *surveillants* have no pity. Why were you beating him?"

"M'sieu' le Colonel, he's hidden a valuable paper and won't say where it is."

"A paper?" the colonel repeated in surprise. "What is this paper, then, something necessary to the prison?"

"No. I was questioning him politely, and he struck me—Jean will swear it."

The colonel looked sympathetically at Davis. He said, "Rabat, take this Jean and wait outside. I wish to speak alone to this man."

**R**ABAT, face still burning, slammed the door. The tall Frenchman turned to Davis. "Sit down," he ordered gently, and drew cigarettes from his pockets, gave one to the American.

"Perhaps you don't know me. I'm

Colonel Paul de Parien." His musical voice was easy, no sharp edges to it. He sat close to Davis, smoked as though with a comrade. "These guards are brutal," de Parien continued. "That's one reason I'm here, to investigate conditions, and I wish to hear your story in full. But first tell me what is this paper about which Rabat makes such a fuss."

Davis, brows drawn as he listened, suddenly laughed. De Parien's face clouded for a fleeting instant. "To hit a guard is a grave offense, Davis. But I can get you off, provided you're willing to help me." He put long, delicately powerful fingers on Davis' arm. "And I want to help you, too. I see we understand each other."

"Where are you from?" demanded Davis.

"Paris."

"The Parisian sun is then as strong as that of Guiana—or Morocco, for instance? You're brown as a Berber."

"Yes, I've spent much time in Africa," de Parien replied innocently.

"It was a lucky break for me you chanced to be standing so close to Rabat's door just now."

De Parien's eyes narrowed. At last he said, between his teeth, "All right then. Tell me where that paper is and I'll have you pardoned."

Davis sucked in his breath sharply. "You can protect me from this mad dog Rabat? He has power here."

"*Certainement.*" Eagerness crept into de Parien's voice.

"You know why I'm in Guiana—for attacking an officer in the Legion, while on war duty? It happens he was one of Rabat's friends, and Rabat knows."

"Never worry about this Rabat," de Parien replied.

"I understand M'sieu' le Colonel

was just now playing a little game with me," Davis went on. "Well, I'm playing a game too—life or death for me. Rabat will kill me for that blow, if I don't die otherwise. Will m'sieu' pardon me if I say I don't trust Frenchmen—of course, you're a different type from these keepers."

"That's understood. And the map?"

Davis looked again into those quick, brilliant eyes. They told him nothing. "Map," he repeated. "You wish the map Hosem ben Ali gave me, is that it? *Alors*—I hid it in my empty oil tin, on my barrack shelf."

A veil lifted from de Parien's eyes, and immense relief broke over his face, fierce joy. With a sharp cry, without looking again at Davis, he sprang to his feet and dashed out.

Rabat stepped in at once, approached Davis.

"Stand up," he bellowed. "Now he's finished with you, you'll answer to me for that blow." He slapped Davis across the mouth.

Davis slipped from the chair, put it between the guard and himself.

Rabat continued, "I'm sending you to St. Joseph, the black cell. De Parien can't help you, won't do it."

"I see that," replied Davis.

"You're the sort of insubordinate who hits his superior," continued Rabat furiously. "You nearly killed my friend in Morocco."

THEY were facing one another, Davis waiting for the end, Rabat gloating, when de Parien burst back into the room. "Is this your lamp tin, then?" he asked, thrusting an empty can under Davis' eyes.

Davis nodded.

"There's nothing in it," cried de Parien. "Didn't you tell me the paper was hidden in this?"

"Yes. And m'sieu' told me he'd protect me from Rabat. Both of us are liars," Davis replied.

De Parien gestured in disgust.

"You fool! I was so anxious to get the paper I forgot you for the moment. Simply say where Hosem's map is, I'll keep my word."

Davis shook his head.

"I'm afraid M'sieu' le Colonel is simply a Rabat Frenchman after all."

De Parien took a step toward him, long hands working convulsively; for a moment Davis thought he meant to hit him. Then de Parien bit his lip, turned to Rabat.

"You say you carefully searched the Riff's clothes?"

"Yes. Also the American's."

"And found—"

"Nothing."

"Except my money, which you stole, Rabat," Davis said.

"Shut up," Rabat shouted. "Prisoners may not have money; it'll be kept for you."

"On tap in your pocket," snarled Davis.

Rabat started for him; but de Parien impatiently stopped him.

"It was a map, then, that the Riff gave you?" he asked.

Davis shrugged, said nothing.

"It must have been a map," de Parien continued. "Perhaps, Rabat, the *bagnard* hid it, then retrieved it." He stepped to Davis, searched him, found Hosem's Koran, skimmed through its pages. "Nothing," he cried. "This book belonged to the Riff?"

"Yes," answered Davis.

De Parien threw the book down with a curse. "You refuse to say what happened to the paper?"

"I really can't say," Davis replied. "And, after all, if there is a map and

I could tell where it is, the fact remains it isn't mine to give nor yours to take."

De Parien stared at him a long moment, then shrugged. "Call the guard, Rabat. Maybe the black cell will jog his memory."

Rabat, pleased, shouted an order, and a uniformed guard, Lebel rifle in hand, saluted from the doorway.

"Take the American to the block-house," ordered Rabat.

"Bread and water," added de Parien. "Naked, chains, a hard board."

Davis squared his shoulders.

De Parien closely watched his face. "Doesn't contemplation of the punishment change you?"

"No."

De Parien said, "*Eh bien*, Davis. Go back to work."

Rabat protested angrily. "This will ruin the discipline of the prison, M'sieu' le Colonel! I—"

The stern negative in de Parien's eyes stopped the commandant.

Davis took Hosem's Koran from the table, went through the corridor, past the guards, to the hot courtyard, and out the gate of the big prison.

### CHAPTER III.

#### NEW HOPE.

ST. LAURENT was a prison town. On the outskirts, at the river sawmill, gangs of convicts labored in the broiling sun. Men with the black-stenciled numbers on their frowsy uniforms were a common sight; so were *libérés*, those who had completed prison terms but were condemned to remain for life in French Guiana. There were tawdry little stores, lordly Negroes, Chinese.

Davis quickly picked his way through the dirty Avenue of Palms, stopped at a dingy whitewashed house and slipped in. He tapped on a paint-peeled door at his right, and a cheery American voice called, "Come in."

Opening the door, Davis stepped into the littered bedroom. A young man in white trousers and shirt and slippers rose to greet him. He was American. He smiled at Davis, flashing large white teeth. Empty whisky bottles stood on the bare table near his cot. Under the tan of his skin there was a pasty color; his blue eyes, while full of sparkle, were deeply underlined with dissipation.

"Hello, Davis," he cried. "Sit down, have a drink. How'd you manage to get away at this time of day?"

Davis sighed heavily, sank into a rickety wicker chair, accepted a drink. "I'm in the soup, Hanson," he said.

Hanson shrugged, grinning his merry, infectious smile. "You've been in it a long while," he replied.

"Yes. But now I've bucked Rabat, and he means to kill me. They've taken all my money."

"What's it all about?" asked Hanson.

Davis told his friend of Hosem, the paper, how he had struck Rabat, of de Parien. Hanson whistled. "You're right, boy, Rabat won't forgive you for socking him. But d'you know where this paper is, what it is? Seems to me if you do you can play it for a pardon, since this de Parien evidently has a lot of power."

"I don't know exactly what the paper says," answered Davis. "It's written in Arabic, you see. And I'm not sure what Hosem did with it—but, thinking it all over, I've come to the conclusion I can make a good guess."

"What's that?"

Davis shook his head, jerked his thumb back over his shoulder. The boarding-house walls were thin. Hanson undersetood.

"Well, take it easy," Hanson cautioned. "Rabat's a tough customer."

Davis was very fond of his friend. Hanson had been an aviator, working for a Dutch company that flew planes along the northern coast of South America. But drink had cost him his job. He was on the beach now, was almost broke, due to his taste for whisky. However, it didn't seem to worry him; he was always merry and ready to cheer a fellow countryman. Davis had met him weeks before when Hanson hurriedly left Dutch Guiana after a scrape. Hanson's comradeship had buoyed him up, helped him endure Guiana.

**A**FTER a short visit with his friend, Davis went to the gang cutting logs on the Maroni. He kept expecting Rabat to come for him, arrest him, toss him in the guardhouse to await trial for the crime of striking a guard. But the noonday rest came, and he was locked in the long barrack with his mates to wait till two o'clock to resume work.

He lay on the cot next the empty strip where Hosem ben Ali had died. He missed the old Riff, who had tried to pay him for his kindness, yet had made prison worse for him. Now he must begin again, save franc by franc, for escape. Hope was hard to renew.

Usually there was a belote or dice game among the prisoners, but to-day they gathered around Davis, questioning him excitedly.

"It's said you hit Rabat," one said. "How is it you're still alive, *hein?*"

Davis replied, "Don't know. Maybe I haven't got away with it yet."

"Rabat wants a treasure map you took from the old Riff. What's all this about?"

Davis closed his lips, showed he wouldn't talk. They left him. Such news would travel like wildfire through the prison, through the town.

At two, leaving to fall in with his work squad, Davis passed Commandant Rabat, but the latter didn't even look at him. Strict guard was not kept of prisoners in the town squads. A man might easily slip away, start a break for freedom through the jungle. He might hide on the outskirts of St. Laurent till dark and cross the Maroni to Dutch Guiana, or float down to the sea. And this went on without cessation, convicts running off only to be brought back for punishment or to die in the jungle or sea.

Trailing after the work gang in the streets, Davis bumped into Colonel de Parien, immaculate in whites and sun helmet, smoking a cigarette in the shade of an awning. De Parien looked cool in spite of the heat; his sharp features were clean, tanned; he recognized Davis as the American drew back.

"*Comment ça va?*" he asked kindly. "How goes it?"

"*Ça va bien*—it goes fine," replied Davis sarcastically. "I expect a long vacation on Joseph."

"Don't worry concerning this morning. I now have no need of the Riff's map. The thing is *fini*. Forget it; I've told Rabat not to punish you, Davis."

"A thousand thanks. And my money?"

"Oh, money? I'd have paid you plenty for that paper."

"It's too late, then?"

De Parien's eyes searched his; they saw the rugged, determined face, topped by bleached hair, ran down the powerful frame clad in faded prison

uniform to the bare, strong feet, not missing the scarred, dangerous hands of the fighting man.

"Yes," he said slowly. "Too late, Davis."

"After all," Davis drawled, "Hosem's treasure belongs neither to you nor to me. *Au revoir.*"

He passed on slowly, head bowed.

Turning the next corner, he found his friend Hanson waiting for him. The young flier seized his ragged sleeve. "Davis! I've been waiting to speak to you. I got a swell break, in the mail this noon. My family came into some money, sent me five hundred dollars."

Davis' heart leaped. Hanson had promised to help him, if possible. He waited eagerly. •

"When you're through work this afternoon, come to Ah Lee's café at the edge of the jungle. I'm going to help you out," Hanson continued. He pressed Davis' hand.

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## CHAPTER IV.

### FREEDOM.

**J**UST before the guards came to return them to the prison, Davis slipped away from the work squad, hurried to Ah Lee's little café on the outskirts of town. Hope had come back to him, and life ahead, with freedom from Guiana near, was once more interesting. For his friend Hanson he felt great affection.

Ah Lee was a bland old Chink. In the front of his saloon was a large bar; through a short open passage was a back room fitted with tables, the thick bush pressing against one wall. A green parrot screamed in a palm by an open window.

Hanson was waiting for him in the

rear, rose quickly and led him to a seat. They were alone there in back.

"I have the money," the flier began, patting his pocket. "I'm going to give you a couple of hundred, Davis, which should take you away."

"It will," Davis replied. "I'm sure Rabat's only waiting for a chance to kill me."

"Now, listen," Hanson went on, his face set. "From what you told me this morning, this Riff chief, Hosem, must have passed you a treasure map before he died. You said you might find it. Wait," he went on, as Davis opened his lips, "here's how I feel, Davis. I'll just spend this dough for liquor, be on the beach again. But there must be a fortune hidden in Morocco, and we'd be fools not to try for it. What do you say?"

Davis bit his lip. "Hosem's dead," he replied. "But, after all, Hanson, he told me to give the paper to his son Hassan, I've expected to hear from this Hassan ben Hosem. And it wasn't a map, you see, just Arabic writing."

"I see." Hanson's face was grim. His fingers drummed on the table top. "Tell you what," he said, "I'll stake you to your escape. You can't hang around here much longer, because Rabat may take it into his head to kill you. Tell me where the paper is, and I'll get in touch with Hassan, the son, when he comes."

Davis shrugged. "You've been a good friend," he answered. "But I'm not certain if the paper's where I've guessed."

Davis broke off, shuffled his bare feet on the wood floor. It was growing dark; Ah Lee, bringing in another drink for them, silently lit an oil lamp to dispel the evening shadows as night blotted out the forms of the trees outside.

When the Chinaman had left them alone again, Hanson asked quickly, "Where do you believe this paper is, then?"

There was a side door close by them. It opened suddenly, and a man stepped in. Davis looked up, startled, as did Hanson.

"What do you want?" growled Hanson.

"Just sit where you are," the newcomer ordered in French, with a thick German intonation. In his hand he held a Lüger automatic as he coolly surveyed them. He was in whites, white coat, army breeches, legs in puttees; his rounded head was topped by a solar topee.

"If you're one of de Parien's men," Davis snapped, "go ahead and shoot. You won't get anything out of me."

"De Parien?" repeated the German. "He's not here? I did not know he was in Guiana. We made sure before entering that no one watched this building. And I'm not one of his men. You're Davis, the American, are you not?"

He stepped in suddenly, seized Hanson's wrist, snapped the gun the aviator had drawn, from Hanson's clasp, and dropped it in his coat pocket, still with no sign of excitement. As Davis cursed, the Lüger came up, and he ordered:

"Still quiet, please."

**A**LWAYS keeping an eye on them, he backed to the side door, spoke in guttural tones. A second man stepped in. He was a magnificent creature, taller than the slim German, taller even than Davis, who stared at him with open lips. The handle of a dagger protruded from his leather belt, which also held a holstered pistol; around his black hair was a cloth band.

His nose was curved, powerful, lips thin, drawn tight across a stern mouth. His eyes were bright as twin stars, and they held Davis, for they were the eyes of Hosem ben Ali, the dead Riff.

"Hassan!" Davis gasped. He rose, stepped forward.

"You know him, then?" the German asked.

"I knew your father, Hassan ben Hosem; he died beside me in prison. He hoped you'd come before he died."

"It was the will of Allah I should be too late," Hassan replied. He was aloof, haughty, of a different race.

"I'm Baron von Steub," the German said, bowing from the waist to Davis. "I see you're in sympathy with us. We made sure neither de Parien nor his spies watched this place before we entered. You're sure he's in Guiana? We thought him still abroad."

"He's in St. Laurent," Davis declared. "Who is he?"

"De Parien? He's Chief of the French *Service d' Intelligence*. You didn't know? We're in great danger, for the secret service would like to finish us. I heard of you, Davis, that you'd known Hosem ben Ali; that he gave you a map before he died; it is the talk of the town. You were pointed out to me, and I've watched a chance to speak to you. You'll help us, then? It's said you received from Hassan's father the information we've tried so hard to obtain, for which we've come from Morocco. It was always impossible for Caid Hosem to communicate with his son by letter, because of de Parien and his spies. I'm chief of staff of Hassan's armies, his personal aide."

Hanson's face gleamed white under the lamp. "Be careful, Davis," he warned. "Don't let them flimflam you!"

Von Steub slapped his hand to Han-

son's mouth. Hassan stepped in, drawing his curved knife. They were businesslike, cool, so matter of fact Davis didn't divine their intention till almost too late.

Hassan ben Hosem had already raised the dagger.

"You can't," Davis cried, seizing the Riff's powerful wrist.

Hassan frowned, pulled loose, knife still up.

"Wait," begged von Steub. "Davis, this man may be one of de Parien's agents. De Parien's clever. Already we've disposed of two French agents who trailed us in Dutch Guiana—our plane, ready and waiting to carry us back to Venezuela, where we can in safety await a ship, is on the Kruger plantation right across the river. We're in danger of arrest, secret arrest, and we can take no chances."

"You can't kill my friend," Davis said flatly. "He's no pal of de Parien's. If you hurt him, you'll never get that map."

Von Steub turned to Hassan. "You comprehend, Caid?"

Hassan nodded.

"Hold the gun, *chef*," continued von Steub. "At least, we can tie this fellow up. Come, we have no time to waste; we came ourselves, since we could trust no one else in so vital a matter."

Hanson's fists were clenched. But he allowed them to tie him, gag him.

"You may fly with us in our amphibian," von Steub said to Davis. "There's room. Our boat's close by here, and straight across the plane waits, filled, ready to go."

Escape again was offered Davis.

"I'll need some civilian clothes," he said eagerly. "Also a spade. The Chink will sell them to us."

"Good. We'll put this man in the

jungle a short distance," von Steub said.

He picked up Hanson, lowered him through the window and dragged him into the bush a short distance so he was hidden from the building.

Returning, he leaned on the case-ment, said "Come this way. It's better we're not seen."

**S**T. LAURENT'S main street was lit, but by back ways they worked around the prison where the convicts were locked in for the night. The graveyard, broken by hundreds of mounds, was so crowded with the dead their bodies were laid over former graves. It was deserted at that time of night. Davis, carrying the spade, wearing a wrinkled white suit, led the way.

"Here," he said at last; "here's your father's grave, Hassan."

The Riff chieftain bowed his head. Davis set to work, throwing back the soft earth, while the two waited. He worked fast, sweat pouring off him in the hot night. The moon was rising, and the less light the better. Finally his spade struck the wood coffin containing Hosem ben Ali's remains. Waist-deep in the pit, Davis pried loose the cover.

Hassan stared down at the wasted features of his father.

"Allah akbar," he murmured. "*Sultan el-islam djfer.*"

"Your father gave me the paper for you," Davis explained, looking up. "But as he passed it to me Commandant Rabat came into the barrack, tipped by his spy Jean. I suppose your father knew Rabat wanted that paper, so he snatched it back from me, and covered his face with his blanket. I was as mystified as any one else about where that paper had gone to. It

wasn't till much later, when I had time to think it all over, and put myself in your father's place, that I figured out what he'd done with it. He put it in his mouth—I heard his teeth click—and tried to swallow it, died in the effort—"

Suddenly Davis, staring at the jaws of the corpse, broke off. Now, instead of the firm set, they were loose.

Hassan and von Steub were both eagerly bending over, looking down.

"It's not here," Davis said. "I—I was sure I'd guessed right, but—"

Suddenly lights blinded them, harsh orders in French came to throw up their hands.

Von Steub cursed, reached for his Luger; he had drawn it, cocked it, before Rabat's voice bawled, "Fire!"

Davis was down in the grave; bullets ripped into von Steub, and he crashed, the Luger exploding harmlessly as he fell.

De Parien leaped in, followed by Rabat and a dozen black soldiers. Hassan ben Hosem had no chance, but he pulled his pistol and fired; his bullet passed through de Parien's topee, struck a soldier in the mouth, killing him.

Rabat raised his Ruby, pulled the trigger again and again, sending four heavy slugs into Hassan's exposed breast. The proud Riff, preferring death to capture, fell beside his German friend.

Threateningly, de Parien covered Davis, who crouched in the grave. The American shrugged, held up his hands. Flares were lit, the graveyard brightly illuminated.

"Come out of there," ordered Rabat, and, when Davis had climbed out, he rammed the muzzle of his pistol into Davis' belly and laughed. "The fun's over, American."

De Parien climbed down into the grave, began quickly to examine the dead man. The first place he searched was the mouth.

"Not here," he screamed.

**A**GAIN they roughly went through Davis' pockets and those of Hassan and von Steub, still warm with departing life.

Rabat slapped Davis. "To the blockhouse," he said furiously. "Now you'll get all you've asked for!"

"Wait," growled de Parien, eyes wild. "Wait, Rabat. I must have that paper. It should have been in the corpse's mouth. But it's not. Davis, tell me the truth, for God's sake!"

Davis shrugged. "I thought it was there, also. Since it's not—well, it's as big a mystery to me as to you."

"You see, he's useless, M'sieu' le Colonel," Rabat growled. "Let me have him."

"Not yet," de Parien snapped. "Come, bring him along."

As they left the graveyard, a figure hurried up to de Parien.

"Did you get it?" It was Hanson, Davis' friend.

As Davis realized that Hanson was with de Parien, a cold streak hit him. He gasped; he had not suspected Hanson. De Parien led them to a near-by house, went into a large room opening onto a patio filled with palms and tropical flowers.

"Wait outside, Rabat," ordered de Parien.

Hanson, face set, took a chair near by. De Parien shut the door after the commandant, turned to Davis. "I'm going to tell you the whole story, American," he said gravely. "I came here from Morocco, beat von Steub and Hassan by a day, on their trail. It isn't money I'm after, Davis, but a

symbolic sword, for France, my country. I've worked for years trying to solve this mystery. I must find it, this Sacred Sword.

"It's blessed by Allah, and is said to have been carried by Mohammed. It has cost France thousands of lives, billions of francs, and will go on doing so till it's found, destroyed by us. Each time there's a Holy War this accursed Sword is at the bottom of it. Abd el-Krim, who defeated Spain and turned all the fury of his fanatics on my country, last waved it. When we finally routed him after much bloodshed and misery, his aide, Hosem ben Ali, took the Sword in an effort to save it from capture.

"Surrounded by our troops, Hosem buried it with his own hands somewhere within a mile-circle in the Mid-Atlas mountains of Morocco. He hid treasure, too, jewels and money, but it's the Sword we must have. The Mohammedans regard it as an order to war. Hassan, Hosem's son, was only a boy in 1925 when the last Riff war took place, never saw his father again after we transported Hosem here to Devil's Isle. But all Hassan needed was this Sword to bring millions of Moslems rallying to him for another Holy War.

"Forty thousand Frenchmen in Morocco against forty million Moslems! It took us three years, a nation's ransom, the lives of many men to beat Abd el-Krim. And this is the blind end of the trail I've followed, after that Sword. We had Hosem shut away on the islet where none could get to him. But when he grew sick I decided to play a dangerous game. His son had tried before to contact him through agents. Then Hassan and von Steub set out for Guiana themselves. I had Hosem

placed in the common barrack, to make it look easy to them, sure I could intercept their messages. Rabat, the fool, claimed that stupid Jean would spy for me—I dared not show myself, since Hosem knew me. Now I'm blocked, and the Sword still exists!"

De Parien strode nervously up and down. It was plain he was very patriotic, put his country above himself. Lack of sleep had drawn his face, ringed his eyes. "Help me, Davis," he begged.

"You tried to flimflam me," the American growled. "First it was Jean, then Rabat, then yourself. For that I'd forgive you. But you bought over my one friend in the world, Hanson. He crossed me for you, de Parien."

**H**ANSON stepped forward. "Davis, I was broke; hadn't a cent.

De Parien followed you to my place, then found out I was your pal. He offered me plenty if I'd get your secret. Well, I thought that was best for both of us. De Parien was watching from the prison clock tower, with a pair of binoculars; he saw us go into Ah Lee's, but he missed Hassan and von Steub, as they entered after dark. But he came to the café, traced me to the spot where von Steub left me, and, when I told him you'd asked for a spade, guessed at once you must be on your way to the graveyard."

"Yes, I too believed then that the paper was hidden in the Riff's mouth," de Parien said. "I should have thought of it before. It was stupid of me not to. The first place such a prisoner as Hosem would think of disposing of such a paper would be his mouth, chew it up, swallow it—"

Davis suddenly uttered a cry. "I think I have it," he said.

De Parien seized his sleeve. "What? If you can find it for me, I swear on my honor to have you freed from Guiana."

"Call Rabat, then. He was alone with Hosem's body while we went for a wheelbarrow. Now I recall he acted strangely when we returned. He would have thought of the mouth, as well."

De Parien strode to the door, flung it back. "Rabat!" he called.

The Commandant came along the corridor from the street, slowly entered.

"You want me?" he asked, face expressionless.

"I want the paper you stole from between the teeth of Hosem ben Ali," de Parien snapped. "Give it to me."

There was a fierce struggle of eyes between the two Frenchmen. Then the Commandant shrugged, reached in his pocket, tossed a folded paper on the table.

"There it is," he said. "But it means nothing, it's senseless. I had it translated."

With a cry de Parien leaped to the table, picked up the paper. "Sura xxv. 34—x. 19.—lvii. 7—" he read aloud. Suddenly he raised his eyes, frowning. "But this is no map. It's a series of notations from the Koran, the Holy Book of Moslems."

Rabat laughed. "M'sieu' le Colonel's so clever at deciphering," he sneered. "Get a Koran, as I did, and you'll find the whole thing is senseless. The treasure—if there is one—remains hidden."

"It was more than treasure," returned de Parien sternly. "Do you think I'd come all the way from Africa, lie, steal, kill, for money?"

Davis reached in his pocket, drew out the Koran Hosem had given him. "Wait, de Parien," he cried. "The

Caid begged me to give this book to his son along with the paper!"

De Parien snatched the Koran, looked again at the paper. Then he uttered an exclamation of joy, threw himself at the table and began writing, one word at a time. "I've got it now, Davis," he gasped. "Hosem has marked with a faint dot each word on the page designated on his paper. Without both together, either is useless. The dead Caid's message is mine—'One — hundred — paces — from the oasis of Jeka—face the Ka'ba—dig—when the shadow—of the date palm falls—'"

**W**ITH a curse, Rabat leaped forward, snatched up the Koran and paper. "Give them to me," he snarled. "They're mine, de Parien. I had the paper first. I'm going to get that treasure, and I want credit for finding the Sword. I'm sick of this damned life in Guiana, and this will make me rich—"

De Parien, flushing, sprang to his feet.

"You stupid fool," he cried, "you can't get away with that!" His hand swept to his pocket, reaching for a gun.

Davis started in. But Rabat had a knife, the handle concealed up his uniform sleeve, the blade behind his palm. He drove it swiftly into de Parien's belly, shoving upward toward the heart.

Hanson and Davis saw the chief of secret service reel back, blood staining his white tunic.

Rabat withdrew his dagger, turned on the two.

"As for you, Davis," he said quickly, "you'll die for this. The guillotine will get you for stabbing de Parien."

"You dirty liar!" gasped Hanson.

"Shut up," Rabat ordered coolly.

"I'm in absolute command here. My word will be taken above both of you, never fear, when I say Davis killed de Parien."

Outside, in the street, were Rabat's black soldiers. Between were two closed doors. Davis exchanged a swift glance with Hanson. Then, without a word, they both leaped for Rabat.

They were on him in an instant, Davis' powerful hands at his throat, choking off his cries, of which only a few short ones escaped before Davis got his grip.

The knife in Rabat's hand slashed across Davis' arm, tearing it open, but the convict paid no attention, never relaxing his hold. An instant later Hanson had hold of Rabat's right wrist, and, with a vicious jerk, had pulled it way up behind his back.

Rabat kicked, fought mutely; his eyes bulged as Davis put on the pressure, shoving him back against the wall, shaking him so his head beat into the plaster. His face grew purple, horrible choking sounds issuing from his lips.

Hanson, eyes wild, had the knife. As Davis held the Commandant in a grip of iron, Hanson began to stab him, again and again, with the dagger that had killed de Parien.

Davis' fury against his enemy, against the man who had tried to ruin him, seemed to communicate itself to Hanson, his friend. Without speaking, Hanson twisted the knife in Rabat's body until the Commandant fell, a lifeless mass, to the floor.

Breathing swiftly, they stood staring down at the body. Rabat was dead.

Hanson bent over him, searched his tunic. He drew out money, rolls of francs.

"That's waht he took from me," Davis muttered thickly.

"Take it. Come on, we've got to get out of here," Hanson said.

Davis, arm bleeding, shook his head. "We haven't time; we'll never get away, Hanson."

"We will," Hanson replied. "They will guillotine us if we don't. Come on." He was at the window leading to the patio.

Davis glanced once around the room, then picked the Koran and the Riff's paper from the floor where they had fallen with Rabat.

Hurriedly he climbed out the window, at Hanson's heels. In the street waited Rabat's soldiers, who would arrest them for murder surely. But through the yard in the rear of the bungalow they easily reached the other avenue, hurrying along it together through the night.

The tri-motored amphibian roared through the night, Pilot Hanson fol-

lowing the dark line of the coast underneath. Beside him sat Davis, on his way to freedom at last.

It was Hanson who had remembered the skiff waiting at the river, left by von Steub and Hassan, who would no longer need it. A quick row had taken them to the Dutch Guiana shore, a short walk to the clearing where the plane stood, deserted save for a sleeping Negro guard. It was fueled, ready to go. They put the black out, climbed in, and the flier Hanson took off, skillfully handling the big machine.

The engines made it impossible for them to hear one another. Davis gripped the Koran and the Riff's paper in his hands. Hanson looked at him, and Davis held them up. Hanson shook his head, grinned suddenly.

Davis leaned out the window, dropped the Koran and the paper down, into the sea.

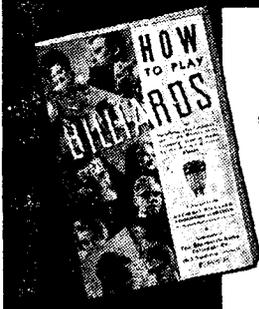
THE END

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*Delos White.*

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