

HAG GOLD

The gifted author of "Caravan Treasure" here gives us another colorful tale of weird adventure in Africa

By JAMES FRANCIS DWYER

THIS morning, reading the latest official statement concerning the enormous amount of gold that the United States is guarding for the terrified governments of Europe, I thought of Macklin, and his fear lest America might incur certain spiritual dangers through acting as keeper for this vast and ever-increasing mass of bullion. He thought that a large percentage of it carried the anathemas of the centuries.

Sitting in the soft Tunisian sunshine, he explained the difference between virgin gold and the metal which he and other seekers sought in the ruined cities of Africa. He termed the latter "hag gold."

"I know that there is a lot of virgin gold pouring into the United States," he said. "Clean, newfound metal from the goldfields of Australia and South Africa, brought to London and sold; but there's also a hell of a lot of stuff that is old. We call it 'hag gold.' It has been possessed by men for hundreds of years. It has brought about murders, piracies, rebellions, acts of torture, and devilry of every description. It's accursed. It's blood-splashed and evil. Mostly European and—well, yes, there's some, as I said, found in the dead cities of Africa. Now all that stuff, carrying the curses of centuries, rides off to find a nice, peaceful resting-place in the United States. Sometimes I'm scared of the evil it might bring to my country. Hellish scared. . . . Hag gold. Well, it's dangerous."

My introduction to Macklin came about in a curious manner. I am really a tramp. Not of the mendicant type that begs food and steals transportation, but a respectable tramp with a wanderlust that I feed by personal thrift and an active typewriter. I travel third- or fourth-class, and I shun grand hotels as I would the plague.

At the end of 1937 I was filled with the desire to visit the oases of southern Tunisia. It was the time of the date harvest at Tozeur. Calculating transportation, lodging and food on the lowest basis, and hoping that I might pare them still lower, I set out. The *Guide Bleu* of *Algérie et Tunisie*, put out by the Librairie Hachette, was in my pocket.

Now, on the way back to Tunis, I was thrilled by a few paragraphs in that guidebook. They told of the ruins of Sbeitla, the ancient Roman city of Sufetula, which some thirteen hundred years ago was a gay spot.

Things hummed in Sufetula 'way back in the six hundreds! There were theaters, hot baths, stadia, and dancing-parlors; and the betting is that one would have to engage one's table on a night when a theatrical company or a mob of gladiators from Rome had ventured into the African "sticks."

I decided to get off the train and take a snapshot of the ruins, which lie some three-quarters of a mile from the modern Sbeitla, a small village of a few hundred French and a scattering of natives. There is hardly a building above one story in the village, so that a visitor approaching the ruins is astonished at the contrast between the ancient and the modern. The huge crumbling temples have a dignity and beauty that is breath-taking.

I was alone. There was no one in sight. It was a still, warm day. The silence was intense. In a sort of tiptoeing manner I moved through the temples of Juno, Minerva, and Jupiter, circled the *arc de triomphe*, erected by the orders of Diocletian, crossed to the *thermes*; then, a bit fatigued, I sat myself down on an overthrown column to rest. It was then I saw Macklin.

THERE are throughout northern Africa many ancient underground aqueducts that date from the days of Roman occupation. The underground method was made compulsory by sandstorms and the necessity of keeping the precious water away from the murderous rays of the African sun.

These aqueducts were constructed with immense effort. Water was brought from sources thirty and forty miles distant, to desert cities. Today a large percentage of these canals are not in use. The towns they served are deserted, and sand has filtered in through the vents that were placed at regular distances.

Now as I sat on the fallen column, I saw the head of a man appear at one of these vents in the ancient aqueduct that once served Sufetula. He was about a quarter of a mile away. In the thin sunlight I could see his face clearly. For a few minutes he stared in my direction; then he disappeared, cone-fashion, into the ground.

I waited. There were several manholes in the aqueduct between me and the spot where the fellow had disappeared. I had an idea that his curiosity would prompt him to crawl along the tunnel and make a closer inspection.

My surmise was correct. From the nearest manhole the head appeared again; then a strong voice with a distinct American intonation hailed me.

"You startled me," came the voice. "I thought you were the damned guardian of this joint."

"I'm a simple tourist," I said. "Got off the train to look at the ruins."

The man took a grip on the crumbling cement around the vent, dragged himself up, and walked toward me. He was a lean, well-built fellow with a smiling, clean-shaven face. I took him to be somewhere in the early thirties. He wore corduroy trousers, high boots, and a leather jacket with a zipper fastener. Pushed back from his forehead was a battered *casque colonial*.

"What do you think of it?" he asked, waving his hand at the ruins.

"It's a little frightening," I answered. "Startled me with its silence and air of absolute desertion."

He smiled and sat himself down. "Sometimes there's a mob around here," he said slowly. "Not tourists. Oh, no. Natives."

"Why?" I asked.

"Well, they buzz around all the old ruins of North Africa," he replied. "Hunting. Like me."

"Game?" I queried.

He laughed. "No. Gold. Hunting hag gold."

Now I heard later that there is another reason for that name "hag gold" outside that which the antiquity of the treasure might have conferred on it. In the *souks* of Tripoli, Tunis and Algiers, where treasure found in dead cities is sold to dealers, the natives giving a reason for the possession of antique jewelry, lie by saying it belonged to their grandmothers! "*C'est l'or de ma vieille grand-mère*," they mutter; and possibly whites, wishing to make the lie humorous, might have called it "hag gold."

BUT to get back to John Macklin. He was, I discovered, a gold-seeker born. His great-grandfather was one of the original founders of Yerba Buena, the baby town that grew up into San Francisco. This ancestor served on the first Committee of Vigilance when the gold boom started. His son made a fortune and lost it. John's father was a fossicker—a gold-seeker—from the time he could walk till the day when he and his burro were found dead in an arroyo in the San Bernardino mountains.

"He left me his taste for gold, several picks, and a baby donkey," said Macklin. "Couldn't have a better legacy."

Along the top of Africa is a string of dead cities that mark the high tide of the Roman flood. Here the Romans ruled and rioted, then departed, leaving the temples, open-air theaters, *thermes*, and triumphal arches to decay slowly in the African sunshine: Carthage, Timgad, Tipasa, Lambessa, and five-score others.

Macklin had visited them all. Even the remote and off-the-trail places like Baal Regia—City of the Royal Baal—which at one time was the capital of Numidia and is now the haunt of miserable nomads who camp in its enormous cisterns. He had fossicked in ruined temples, palaces and sand-filled aqueducts for treasure that might have been overlooked in the hurried departure of the long-dead inhabitants. For there is much evidence of swift evacuation in these ruins. Take Timgad, the Roman *Thamugas*, constructed in the First Century. Timgad had a fine prosperous

time for four centuries; then the Berbers swept down from the Aures Mountains and pillaged the city. The Tingadians cried for help to Rome; but Rome was busy with pressing affairs at its own gates. The people fled northward, and Tingad slid into the has-been class....

The green lizards ran up and down the fallen columns of the once gay Sufetula as Macklin talked. His was a colorful tale of wandering. It evoked dreams.

"Have you dropped on anything big?" I asked.

He laughed softly. "Well, yes," he said; then, after a pause, he continued: "I get tips where to search. Of course one doesn't scream one's findings to the stars in North Africa. There are laws concerning treasure-trove. It must be reported at once; and the finder, if he is lucky, will get a percentage that might be half and might not be. If he makes the find in any of these old cities, the chances are that he'd get nothing. They are all under the control of the *Direction des Antiquités*, and a fossicker has no right to search. When I saw you, I was startled. Thought for a moment you were the watchman.

"But you asked about finds. I've found a few things that I wish I could have kept in their original state. Couldn't, you know. Had to drop them into the pot."

He stretched himself on the warm column and stared upward. After a long silence he spoke. "I doubt if any man alive, outside myself, has handled a double fistful of gold *octadrachms* with the heads of Ptolemy I and Berenice I. I didn't know at the time that they were so rare, but I kept a rubbing of one, obverse and reverse, and showed it to a big French numismatist. He nearly went crazy when I told him that I had handled some twenty of them."

"And did you drop them all into a crucible?" I cried.

"Sure," he answered. "Couldn't get rid of them otherwise. The dealer wouldn't buy them. I sold the chunk of gold in the *Souk des Orfèvres* at Tunis. Hell of a pity. Who knows whether that chunk is not in the United States now? I mean part of a gold-brick that Uncle Sam is minding for France."

I gulped at the thought of those coins of Ptolemy the First being dropped one by one into a

crucible. It seemed a sacrilege.

"Funny about the natives," went on Macklin. "You know, you must have a heat of a thousand centigrade to melt gold. That's difficult to get in desert places, so they hammer gold coins and bits of jewelry into lumps without heating. They caught a few natives the other day in Algiers. Had a beaten-up hunk of gold that showed part of a necklace of Roman filigrane work that brought yelps of delight from the experts. They've sent it to Paris. Yes, it's dirty business to destroy stuff like that, but if you're an unlicensed *chercheur d'or*, what are you to do?"

I had no answer. In silence we sat and stared out across the tumbling ruins. Suddenly Macklin startled me with a question.

"Staying in Sbeitla tonight? If you are, you might see something. It's a feast night with a full moon, and there's going to be a sacrificial search."

I was intrigued. "Why a night search?" I asked.

"Well, Africa breeds a desire to do most things at night," he answered. "Possibly the sun is too damn' watchful. Dances, witch-hunting, sacrifices, smellings-out, and all the hocus-pocus of the continent is carried on at night. Queer. You never see anything out of the way during the daytime, but when the night comes down, all the deviltry of the world starts. If you're staying on, you can have a glimpse of a moonlight search after a sacrifice."

"Of what?" I questioned.

"Black goat or something," he said, laughing. "They sprinkle the blood, and if the blood strikes a spot where gold is buried, it sort of glows like fire. Where are you sleeping? Café de la Gare? I'll call for you about nine."

MOONS are no bigger in Africa than in the other continents, but one thinks so. African moons have so much desert space to shine on that they look bigger. And whiter. It was under a moon of this kind that John Macklin led me back to the ruins. With him was a Negro from the south, a Buzu. A queer, laughing type—a sort of black Pan who leaped from one fallen stone to another, making grimaces and gestures at his shadow, as black as himself on the barren ground.

We reached a point above the main aqueduct,

and there we crouched behind a mass of fallen pillars. Macklin whispered to me. The natives would come from a gorge to the north of the ruins and move down to the arches of the aqueduct.

Presently the Negro touched my arm with a finger and pointed. For a moment I saw only the inky shadow made by the party; their white garments blending with the sky and landscape. The compact mass of moving figures was hardly visible, but the pool of intense black that moved around them as they surged forward was plain to the eye.

They moved silently. Not a sound. A queer hurrying stride, the leaders straining toward the entrance to the aqueduct. There were two score, at least.

Macklin whispered to me. "We mustn't move till they go underground," he said, "They'd bolt if they saw us."

The line had lengthened when the leaders reached the stone arches. Eager were the leaders. They dived into the vault, and the swirling human tail slid in, serpent-like, behind them. The landscape was empty.

Macklin pulled me to my feet. The Buzu was scampering toward the dark opening that had swallowed the searchers. Now from the vault came a sort of nasal chant, thin and piercing. It went out over the deserted landscape, a queer probing stiletto of sound, unnerving and disagreeable.

My courage failed me at the black entrance of the aqueduct. Way back in the thick, century-old darkness were pinpoints of yellow light. The nasal chant was louder now.

"Come on!" cried Macklin. "They'll make the sacrifice soon."

"I'm stopping here," I muttered.

"But you won't see anything!" he protested.

"I'll see enough," I said.

Macklin laughed softly and ran ahead on the tracks of the Buzu. I was left alone at the opening. I was, I must confess, too scared to follow him. The whole business seemed evil. There was something foul, something satanic about the affair; I had seen nothing to make me afraid, but I sensed something diabolic.

Head thrust forward, I saw the lights flare up so that the fallen masses of stone and the arched roof were visible at odd moments. Skinny arms

were thrust upward. Tattered garments were tossed to and fro in the torchlight. The nasal, wasplike chant became unbearable.

It ceased at the moment when I turned with the notion of running out; ceased with a frightening suddenness. It was then I heard the sound which I have never been able to classify.

It stays with me. Puzzling, mystifying, disturbing. Cry, scream, screech, bleat? I cannot say. Human or animal? I don't know. But it has made a record of its own upon the complicated cells of my brain. At any moment I can start that disk. I hear it distinctly, and with the resurrected cry comes the memory picture of the uplifted arms, the sputtering torches, the wild scurrying of treasure-hunters who followed the sound.

It was an hour before Macklin returned, the Buzu running on his heels. Together we hurried up the slope and hid behind the fallen columns till the outpouring natives moved back across the sand to disappear in the gorge.

"Nothing doing," said Macklin. "The thing was a failure. The blood didn't glow."

"Whose blood?" I questioned.

"Why, the blood of the black goat."

The Buzu chuckled and started to leap from stone to stone as we made our way back to the village.

Well, whether it was a goat or not that helped out that performance in the aqueduct, I was the "goat," the following day.

MACKLIN came to the little railway station to say good-by to me. He chatted quietly during the short halt of the train from Tozeur; then, as it was pulling out, he thrust a small package into my hands. "Deliver that at Sousse!" he cried. "Don't fail me! Please!"

I shouted protests. I tried to push the little packet back into his hands. He refused to accept it. The train gathered speed. He stood on the platform making motions to me, imploring motions.

He had tricked me. I dropped back on the seat. Macklin had picked me as a simple fool he could use to transport something he was afraid to send by post!

I guessed, of course, that the packet contained a lump of gold that might be seized as contraband by the authorities. They might pounce

on me if they had reason to suspect Macklin and had glimpsed him pushing the packet into my hands! Possibly they had noted the clumsy transfer!

Sweating profusely, I read the address. "*Madame Macklin, Rue El Keha-oui, next door to the Caré Maure, El Koubba, Sousse.*"

Softly I cursed Macklin. I am careful when wandering to observe closely the laws of the country in which I am voyaging. Now, I'd become an accomplice of a man who was breaking the law by searching clandestinely in the Roman ruins, and furthermore, refusing to report to the authorities the treasure that he had found!

I realized then that Macklin had nursed me along so that he might use me as a messenger. He had found out my name, my usual address, the magazines I contributed to, everything that had a bearing on my honesty, and he had taken a chance. Angrily I told myself that he had summed me up as a milksop who, lacking the courage to keep the packet, would, on the contrary, rush hotfoot to deliver it the moment I reached Sousse.

"I hope he breaks his neck!" I growled, as the train rushed north toward Sousse.

The Rue El Kehaoui is not an elegant street. It adjoins the *souks*, and it is the meeting place of a thousand objectionable odors. I wondered if Madame Macklin had chosen the address so that she might be close to the sly dealers who would purchase anything her husband sent her through the medium of fools like myself. I was still angry with Macklin, but frightfully desirous of getting rid of the packet.

I found El Koubba, made inquiries at the shuttered house next door. I was told that Madame Macklin occupied an apartment in the rear. I went through a dark passage and knocked at the door.

For some reason or other I had, when reading the address on the packet, pictured an American woman. Macklin had not spoken of his wife during the hours I spent with him at Sbeitla, and I had no knowledge that he was married till the packet was thrust into my hands. Now the lady who opened the door to my knock startled me.

She was tall and slight, with a figure whose suppleness was strangely evident in repose. Her body in its slightest movement showed a serpentlike pliancy. It was a little startling. The face was remarkable too. It was foxlike, framed in

close-pressing plaits of blue-black hair. Nose and mouth were well shaped, the latter resembling a red butterfly at rest on the extremely pale skin; but it was the enormous eyes that startled me.

Eyes of a pythoness. Eyes that looked through one, peering at a spiritual shadow, so that they gave to the person they looked at the belief that he was transparent. To me, standing at the door, the feeling that those eyes were regarding something or someone beyond me was so strong that I swung on my heel, expecting to find another person in the passageway. Of course I was nervous with the damn' packet in my pocket.

I muttered an introduction. Said I had met her husband at Sbeitla, and he had given me a commission. I put the packet into her hand, a slim, graceful hand.

In a husky voice she bade me enter. I obeyed. Now that I had got rid of the packet, curiosity returned to me. This Madame Macklin was something out of the way. Extremely so.

The shutters were closed to keep out the glaring sun; so for a moment my eyes found it difficult to take in the furnishings. I stumbled over the inevitable tambour-cushions upon the floor, clutched the side of a chair and seated myself.

Gradually things took shape. A low divan, native rugs, a few chairs. Then I saw the tanned bull's hide.

It was tacked to the wall, stretched horizontally; and as I gazed at it in wonder, it sort of revealed itself. Quietly, like a slow-born revelation, I realized what it was. Upon the tanned inner side was a map! A fascinating map of North Africa!

The map brought me to my feet. Mouth open, I stared at it. I heard my own croaking demand to look at it closer. She must have made a reply in the affirmative, but I didn't hear it. I couldn't hear it. The power of all my senses had gone to my eyes.

The background of that map was rose-madder. The routes were purple—a glowing Tyrian purple; surely, judging from its intensity, made from the shellfish, *pur pura murex*, which yielded in ancient days the priceless dye. The cities were tinted green, prophet's green, and the wastes between were made wonderful with drawings of animals no one had ever seen. And it was centuries old. It was Arabic work. Crouched

before it, devouring the indications of age, I came to the conclusion that it was drawn in Bagdad sometime in the Fourteenth Century!

That it was not earlier was proved in a way by the broad purple line that marked the route of that great Arab wanderer Ibn Batuta, who had traveled as far as Timbuctoo in 1352-1353. And the manner in which that line had been put in, blotting out several imaginary animals, proved that the news of Batuta's trip had come to the map-maker while he was at work on the magic hide. For the line was his line, purple and finely drawn.

Wow, what a map! There was the Mediterranean under its Arabic name. *Bahr er Rûm*, the country of the Mamelukes, of the Barbarians, of the Caliphs! The Isle of Djerba, the land of the Lotus-eaters! The *pays des Lotophages* of Flaubert!

Purple routes to dead cities! Routes beaten by the sandals of Romans, Arabs, Berbers, Moors, Garamantes, Phoenicians and scores of other tribes that had braved the unknown!

The unknown and the dangers. The desert, the thirst, the animals that the imaginative map-maker had tried to show! In those empty places he had cleverly drawn heraldic beasts that brought to my mind Swift's satiric verse:

*Geographers, in Afric's maps,
With savage pictures filled their gaps,
And o'er unhabitable downs
Placed elephants for want of towns,*

The husky voice of the woman brought me back from the dreamland into which the hide of the bull had taken me. She was telling me it had been in the possession of her family for countless years.

The father, with the wonder hide as his guide, had explored many ruins, dying finally at Tébessa-Khalia—old Tébessa—from the *paludienne* fever which he had contracted in the ruins. Later I found that the father was a Frenchman, the mother a Greek.

"The skin of the ox drove my father," she said softly.

"It would drive an army!" I cried. "It is a dream map."

She told me then that the thing had been the

means of bringing Macklin and herself together. Someone had told Macklin about the pelt of fantasy. He had begged to see it. He and its owner were drawn together.

Then I knew what Macklin had meant when he said: "I get tips." The woman explained. "Sometimes I stare at the map for hours," she whispered, "and I find that my thoughts are drawn to one particular spot. I tell all this to John, and he visits the place. Often he has found valuable things at those spots which have attracted me. Coins and jewelry."

I was a little beside myself as I stood staring at the Hide of Bagdad. Some wise writer has written that life's best gift is the ability to dream of a better life. That may be so; but to me, at that moment, life's best gift would be the possession of that hide.

I had seen a hundred ancient maps. A thousand. The study of cartography has been a passion. But there was no papyrus in any museum of the world that had the power to stir me like this bull's hide. It had the quality of the magic carpet of Prince Housain. On it one floated over the world.

Reverently I touched it. I peered at the network of finely-drawn lines intersecting each other at right angles. The *isbas*, and *zams* that told of the altitude of the Pole Star, of the height of the Calves of the Little Bear and the Barrow of the Great Bear above the horizon. Ah, me! How slowly we have crept toward knowledge!

THERE are times when physical movements are not recorded. I have an impression that the woman pushed me away from the map. I don't know. I think she put my hat into my hand and gently directed me to the door. Hours later when I really came to my proper senses, I found that I had taken a room in the Hôtel du Sahel on the Place Colonel Vincent.

I couldn't leave Sousse. Not without the hide. Would Madame Macklin sell it? Imagination pictured it, a bulky roll beneath my arm. I would, I told myself, carry it with me wherever I went. On days when I was sad and depressed, I would unroll it on the floors of cheap hotel rooms, and sprawling beside it, follow with my finger those lines of Tyrian purple that led to the cities cunningly tinted with prophet's green.

I had dreams of exhibiting it on Fifth Avenue. I shut my eyes and saw it stretched in a large window somewhere close to Forty-second Street, with a milling crowd on the sidewalk "oh-ing" and "ah-ing" as they got glimpses of it. Forgetting everything as they stared! For there was, I knew, no talisman, charm, or potion that possessed the magic of the hide. Not one.

I counted my scanty funds. I would make the woman an offer. Who could tell? She might part with it.

HOTFOOT, I went the following morning to the Rue El Kehaoui. Excitedly I rapped at the door. More like a pythoness than ever was the woman. She was wrapped in a *pagne* of orange-colored silk; her blue-black hair was unplaited, falling on her shoulders.

I begged another glance at the map. A little startled, so I thought, she admitted me. With the stiff gait of a sleepwalker I stepped across the room.

Now a shutter was open, and the hide exulted in the light. The beasts that surely were seen in visions by the cartographer became alive. The green-tinted cities beckoned to me, and the routes glowed, so I thought, with the blood from the sandaled feet of warriors who had tramped them. . . .

I heard myself making an offer. A ridiculous offer. The woman received it with a smile. "I couldn't sell it," she murmured.

I doubled the sum. She shook her head. Then, seeing that I was unduly excited, she became slightly confidential, in the manner that women have of ridding themselves of unwelcome male visitors.

At the moment, so she said, she was in one of those staring moods that she had spoken of at my first visit. It would last for hours, perhaps days. It concerned a spot where great treasure might be found. When the location became plain to her, she would telegraph Macklin. Of course she could not be disturbed at the moment with offers for the hide. That was unthinkable. Once again she eased me out of the apartment.

A frightful thing is covetousness. It is the one great and deadly sin because it embodies all the other sins. It is their origin. . . .

I walked around Sousse, seeing nothing but the Hide of Bagdad. I wondered why a pelt had

been chosen for the map. Was there a queer magic in the bull's hide before the cartographer commenced his design? Possibly my mind was a little unhinged. Sousse itself, being the ancient Carthaginian town of Hadrumetum, has an atmosphere conducive to mental dislocation.

It might, I thought, have been the pelt of a bull that was not of this world! There are a thousand legends regarding bulls. I recalled them: Zeus as a white bull taking Europa! The Minotaur; the bull-cult of Minos!

Sitting in the shade of the grand mosque of Ksar Er Ribat, I remembered the epic of Gilgamesh and the divine bull who was sent to wage a contest on behalf of the goddess. That bull was slain in Babylon. He must have had a magic hide! And there was the sacred bull of Memphis, the most important of all the sacred animals of Egypt. The Memphis bull had a palace of his own and was buried in state when he died. Perhaps the hide of the original Apis, the black bull of Memphis, or his successor bull, had been stripped and taken to Bagdad!

Who could say? Yes, looking back now on those hot hours in Sousse, I think I was a long way off my mental base. But then I couldn't believe that an artist could make such a map without a magic canvas. And even now, I am not convinced. If it pleases you who read this story to think I am mad, your thoughts are excused by the fact that you did not see that hide. . . . And you never will.

That evening I thought of ways and means of raising money so that I could make a better offer to the woman. I would borrow small sums from friends; I would pledge my work for a year ahead. Into my mind came a startling thought, possibly thrust forward by an Irish *rapparee* ancestor. "If she won't sell the hide," whispered the spirit of the long-dead kinsman, "why not steal it? In the days of 'Cairbre of the Cat's Head,' the Dwyers took what they wanted."

AT eight next morning, I was back in the Rue El Kehaoui. I knocked, and Madame Macklin opened the door. She was in a state of great excitement. The big eyes were filled with fear; her cheeks showed marks of tears; her husky voice was broken with sobs.

Hurriedly she told of her trouble. From the

hide, on the day previous, she had received one of her unexplainable "tips." She had telegraphed Macklin immediately, urging him to visit Kasserine, a small village thirty kilometers south of Sbeitla. Near this village are the ruins of old Cillium, a flourishing spot in the days of Constantine.

"Well?" I said, not understanding the cause of her emotion.

"But now the skin of the ox warns me!" she sobbed. "John is in danger! I must go to him!"

I played a Judas to that woman. I sympathized with her. Near-thief that I was, I offered to guard her apartment while she was away. I would watch over the hide.

"No, no!" she cried. "The skin goes with me!"

Two hundred kilometers southward was Kasserine, on the road by which I had come up to Sousse. But I did not falter. "I will accompany you!" I cried. "If there is anything wrong with Macklin, I might be useful."

She didn't make any objections. She was whispering what I thought were prayers as she rushed her preparations. The fear had her in its clutch.

I helped her to take the hide from the wall. Dear Lord, how I thrilled! I put it on the floor and rolled it carefully, the *rapparee* ancestor whispering to me as I did so. "Stick it under your arm and run," said he, and the brogue in his voice was thick and harsh. "She's upset, an' she'll never chase you! Devil a chase!"

I combated him. "These are modern days," I said aloud. "That cannot be done."

The woman thought I was speaking to her. "It can! It can!" she cried. "The train is at nine-fifteen. Get a carriage!"

At a wild gallop we drove to the station. I bought two *billets, troisième classe*, to Kasserine. That, in the state of my finances, showed courage. We clambered aboard, and between us on the cushionless seat rode the bull's hide. The Bull's Hide of Bagdad!

Madame Macklin was silent. Vaguely she answered questions that I put to her. What was the actual danger the hide had hinted at? She couldn't say. But it was a great danger. Even then, as we rode through the dreary country with its great stretches of alfalfa, its dry riverbeds and its stony

deserts, the hide, so she asserted, was whispering to her.

Once again I saw the ruins of old Sufetula as we slipped by Sbeitla. I pondered over my meeting with John Macklin. I was a little afraid of the results of that meeting; yet when I touched the hide with eager groping fingers, the fear left me.

IN the early afternoon we reached Kasserine. Madame Macklin addressed the small stationmaster, a Corsican, like most of the railway officials in Tunisia. Had he noticed an American descending from the train the day previous?

I thought that a queer look of horror came into the eyes of the *chef de gare* when he heard the question. He swallowed like a pelican. He looked this way and that; then he clutched the lapel of my coat and dragged me into his little den, leaving Madame Macklin standing on the platform.

His words came spattering like machine-gun fire. I had difficulty in getting their meaning. They tore through the receiving-net of my brain in the manner of sharks ripping through the flimsy mesh of a herring fisherman.

There had been a disaster. "*Un épouvantable désastre, monsieur! Dix personnes mortes! Beaucoup blessés! Les soldats sont sur la place!*"

Stupidly I grasped the meaning of his words. Five kilometers from the *gare*, on the site of ancient ruins, a huge underground cistern of Roman workmanship had collapsed when a number of treasure-seekers were in the reservoir. Five thousand tons of stone had fallen in on them!

"*L'Américain?*" I cried. "Monsieur Macklin?"

"*Mort!*" cried the station-master.

I was stunned by the news. Glancing through the window of the little office, I could see Madame Macklin standing on the platform. How the devil could I break the news to her? As I debated, a captain of infantry, back from the place of the accident, cried out the latest news. "*Pas d'espoir!*" he cried. "*Vingt morts! Dix-neuf indigènes et l'Américain!*"

Madame Macklin heard. She screamed and stumbled toward a bench. The station-master, the captain and I rushed toward her. Of course she knew that the only American in the neighborhood of Kasserine was John Macklin, *chercheur d'or*

from California. . . .

When Madame Macklin came out of the faint, she insisted on visiting the spot where Macklin had met his death. The polite officer drew me aside and hurriedly put forward objections. The recovery of the bodies was out of the question. A fleet-footed native, who had escaped death by a miracle, had described the situation immediately before the collapse of the cistern. A sacrifice had been made—the officer thought it might have been a human sacrifice; then the tremendous clamor of the gold searchers within the huge underground reservoir had acted like an explosive on the masonry that had held itself upright for fifteen hundred years!

The escapee had seen the huge walls quiver. Slowly they folded inward upon the treasure-seekers blinded by their greed. Then with a frightful crash the immense mass had buried the clawing, screaming mob. Buried them under the thousand blocks of stone chiseled by masons in the days of Constantine!

"It would take an army of workmen a year to reach the bodies," whispered the officer.

I imparted a little of this information to Madame Macklin, but she was obdurate. She wished to see the spot, and so the captain offered to take us in his automobile.

We drove through a dreary countryside with the African night creeping down upon it. For a part of the way we followed the *piste* to Tebessa; then we swung westward over a flat plain till we came to the fatal spot.

There were a hundred bonfires around the enormous depression that marked the spot where the cistern had collapsed. The walls, as the officer explained, had folded in from all sides; and now, in the center of this depression, there was a four-sided pyramid of piled blocks beneath which rested the dead: Nineteen colored and one white.

A company of native soldiers kept order. They beat back the hundreds of *indigènes* who had come from far-off places to the scene.

I thought that there was a defiant look about the great stones as they sprawled one upon the other. A menacing look. I think the soldiers and the screaming natives saw it. The blocks put out a threat to those who would meddle with them. Perhaps there *was* treasure there. Great treasure, which they were guarding.

Gently the officer and I led Madame Macklin back to the automobile. We returned to Kasserine. A few minutes before midnight, a train came through from Tozeur and we boarded it. We reached Sousse seven hours later. I took Madame Macklin to her apartment. I carried the hide from the carriage to her sitting-room. I placed it on the divan and left her. It was not the moment to talk of what was uppermost in my mind.

FOR six successive days I visited that apartment in the Rue El Kehaoui. A super-Judas was I in those days. I played the hypocrite, whispering sympathetic words with my tongue while my eyes were upon the rolled hide.

That woman would not permit me to unroll it after our return from Kasserine. There it lay where I had placed it on the divan, and my eyes lusted for a glimpse of it. At times my groping fingers touched it furtively.

I pawned a few bits of jewelry to pay my board. The future was a little frightening. Again the *rapparee* ancestor whispered of theft. He thought me a fool because I hesitated.

Nervously I questioned the woman as to what she intended to do. She spoke of her mother's relatives in Greece. They lived at Phaleron, a few miles out of Athens. She thought she would go to them. She showed me letters that were very affectionate.

I touched the hide with my hand, hungrily; then I looked at her. The big eyes were upon my face. They were looking into my brain. They were reading my thoughts.

Those enormous eyes were startled with what they discovered. They knew me as a hypocrite because of my ride with her to Kasserine. A wordy deceiver because of my feigned sympathy for Macklin. They knew me a possible thief, a near-thief. Ay, the spirit of theft showed in my eyes! She pushed me gently to the door.

The following morning I went back to the apartment, and the spirit of that *rapparee* ancestor walked with me. Boldly he walked. Now and then he whispered in Gaelic, words that I did not understand; but they were fine, strong words. Strong and urgent. When we speak of the devil as a tempter, we mean, of course, our unmoral ancestors who knew nothing of our silly modern codes.

I knocked at the door. There was no answer. I knocked louder. I beat it with my fist. I thought the spirit of my ancestor kicked it, but that couldn't be. It must have been my shoe that crashed against it.

An Arab woman thrust a nervous face out of a door and spoke to me in French. "*Madame est parti,*" she said.

"Où?" I shrieked.

"*Pour Tunis,*" she replied. "*Elle rentre dans le pays de sa mère.*"

She had fled me! She had taken the early train for Tunis, where she would take a boat for the Piraeus!

"*La peau?*" I gasped. "*La peau du taureau?*"

She made a gesture with her hand northward. She laughed gayly. I could have killed her. At least my spectral ancestor could. . . .

There are but three trains a day from Sousse to Tunis. I had a wait of seven hours. It was not till after midnight that I reached Tunis. Too late to make inquiries.

I was at the doors of the *Società di Navigazione* before the place was open. A sleepy clerk looked over the list of passengers that had departed on the *Chalkotheka*, a small boat which had sailed the previous evening.

"*Oui, oui,*" he muttered. "*Madame Macklin est parti.*"

I staggered out onto the Avenue Jules-Ferry. I was a little deranged. I bumped into pedestrians on the sidewalk and did not apologize when they damned my clumsiness.

THAT evening news of the *Chalko-theka* was posted in the bureau of the local news-sheet. The steamer had struck what was supposed to be a derelict some hundred and fifty miles off the coast. The passengers and crew had barely time to leap into the boats before the vessel sank. Every scrap of luggage that they possessed went down with the vessel. The passengers were picked up by an Italian steamer bound for Sicily.

I wrote Madame Macklin in care of her parents at Phaleron. I wished to be certain as to the fate of the hide. Her tardy and ungrammatical reply was, I thought, fearfully ungracious. It ran:

You might makes false words with one mermaidens and get it from her. Or you mights steal it from Mister Neptune. There are your chances. I think you bad mans.

As I said before, if it pleases you who peruse this story to think I am mad, your thoughts are excused by the fact, that you did not see that hide. And you never will. But to me it is visible in my dreams. In my glorious dreams.