The Blue Book Magazine, August 1919

Irregular Brethren

By H. Bedford-Jones

THIS story, told in a quaint Oriental Masonic lodge-meeting, has all the tropical color and dramatic intensity which Mr. Bedford-Jones handles so skillfully.

THEY called me "consul," but I was really nothing but a consular agent here at Aru Taping, the new oil-station on the east coast of Borneo. The Dutch Oil Company, one of the largest in the world, was exploiting it at a cost of millions.

Half a mile back from the bay lay the refineries and half-erected buildings of the boom town. Here were gathered all sorts of men—some recruited in Holland at the end of the war, others, drifters from Australasia and the south seas. They were a hard lot, a tough lot, a hard-drinking, godless lot.

To get away from it all, I used to go down to the beautiful, unsullied shore of the bay—a wide strip of white sand below the cliffs. But I had been at Aru Taping five weeks before I went down there for a walk at night; and that night I made an amazing discovery.

I was strolling along the white sand, smoking and watching the stars and the phosphorescent curlings of the waves, when far ahead I made out a strange black blotch against the sand. A few red sparks showed that men were there, smoking. As I stood, a figure uprose ahead of me, and in some alarm I recognized a ruffianly Australian contractor who was doing some of the concrete work on the new tanks and piers.

"Good night to ye," said he, peering at me. "Oh! It's the American consul, hey?"

I felt thankful for the automatic in my pocket. "What's going on down here?" I demanded. "A Bolshevik meeting?"

To my surprise the Australian chuckled. "Ye might call it so," he responded, and then made a remark which took me all aback.

"Great Scott!" I exclaimed. "Do you mean—"

"Why not?" he said defiantly. "But since ye understood me, will ye join us?"

"Thank you," I returned, embarrassed, "but it's three years since I sat in lodge, and I'm afraid I owe some money—"

He let out a burst of laughter. "Oh, as for that, I owe something like ten pounds myself, brother. This is a meetin' of Irregular Lodge No. I. Come along!"

SO I came among the irregular brethren, and was introduced. I saw in the starlight a queer lot of men—one or two Arabs, burly ruffians from the refineries, a pair of murderous-looking Hindus, seamen from the oil-tankers at the docks. A little East Side New Yorker who had established an "American clothing store," shook my hand delightedly.

"Well, consul," he beamed, "this is a pleasure now, ain't it? I'll tell you vat, now; brother Ben Ali, vill you step aside vith us for examination, hey?"

A tall Arab arose from the circle, and we withdrew for a space. With apologies for his lack of English, Ben Ali conducted the examination in Hollandish, which of course everyone understood.

We returned presently to the brethren, and I was introduced in due form, and assigned to a seat between Ben Ali and a burly oil-man from Kansas who worked at the refineries. We sat there under the stars; to the north of us rose the black cliff; the waves lapped along the shore. Then my little New Yorker rapped with his empty pipe on a stone.

"The brethren," he began, "will come to order."

Cigarettes were doused promptly. The big Kansan beside me chuckled, and spoke in a soft whisper like a boy afraid of the teacher.

"This here," he confided in my ear, "is a lodge of refreshment, mostly! Ain't a man of us who's regular, I reckon. But we get around here Sunday nights an' chin, see? You'd be surprised to hear some of the things that's said, too."

"I made those jewels myself," said Ben Ali in Dutch, speaking at my other ear with obvious pride. "They are of wood, brother, painted with phosphorescent paint. Ah! Brother Ram Dass is to take the Warden's chair; now we'll have some fun!"

And we did; but it was fun of a sort that drew queerly at my heartstrings. These irregular brethren went about their work with an evident gravity, an earnestness, a sincerity, which was appalling when you considered what lawless rogues they were. Two were new men like myself; the Scots engineer of a tanker in port, and a Canadian who stated dryly that the Craft might outlaw him for taking part here, but he was outlawed anyway.

The work, I must say, was curious. How otherwise, with an American for Master, a turbaned Hindu for Warden, and in the third chair—of sand—a cockney bookkeeper? And yet, despite the strangeness, the work was done very beautifully.

"They had a hard time at first," chuckled the Kansan in my ear. "There was a lot of correcting—and still is, for that matter."

"You don't initiate, I suppose?"

"We have *some* decency, brother," he said gravely. "No, if we didn't have respect and love for the order, we'd not be here. But we ain't carrying things too far."

RESPECT and love for the sacred things of life—yes, that was it. The best that was in these world-wandering men was here brought out again, forgotten embers of fires long dead. Here met, they acknowledged under a mutual bond a respect and love which among the marts of men they would have scorned to admit; here under the stars and among brethren, there was no shame in hushing their rude wills and giving reverence where reverence was due.

But presently the cockney called us to refreshment, and pipes were taken up, cigarette rolled, men relaxed in the sand. The Master shoved back his derby and rapped with his pipe as he felt for his tobacco pouch.

"Brethren," he said, "we go away and forget, ain't it, all—"

"Aye," broke in the Australian from the outer darkness. "Tell them new chums that what's said ain't to be spoke of except among the Craft! Remember that, Canuck!"

"Aw, dry up!" spoke up the Canadian, who had been in Flanders trenches. "Think we ain't got any sense? Slip me the makin's, Brother Ben Ali!"

The makings were slipped; and the little New Yorker who had lighted his pipe, called upon a certain brother, a Dutchman from Batavia named Hendrick van Loon, for refreshment.

The Dutchman stuffed some Sumatra into a finger-long pipe-bowl, lighted it, and then addressed us in slow, rich Hollandish.

"Worshipful Sir," he said, puffing, "and brethren—"

I WAS looking for orchids up the Rokan River, over in Sumatra. That river, for a hundred miles, is nothing but a vast *meer*—a swampy mangrove lake; I was there in the wet season. *Duivel!* It was nothing but trees and rolling brown mud-water and corpses of natives and animals! But I found some orchids, and kept on. I had a good boat and a dozen Madoera natives, who would stick by me.

And there, one day, I saw the queerest thing that I have ever seen in the world. We found a drowned rhinoceros which had been swept in among some mangrove roots. He was not long dead, and I directed the boat to him with the idea of cutting out his horn. So I got into the bow with my little saw, and presently I was against him. And what do you

think I found on that horn of his, eh? Carved into the agglutinated bristle, and well carved, was a beautiful emblem; it showed a square and compasses—well, you understand!

"*Duivel!*" I said to myself. "There is something queer about this!"

I sawed part way through the horn, then struck something soft and glittering. Think of it! That horn was a brown shell, a real horn; inside, it was solid virgin gold—and the horn was upon a rhinoceros!

Well, I investigated. I found that this horn-shell filled with gold had been set on a peg of the real horn, and cunningly pegged in place with ivory pegs. Thus it was evident that the animal had been a tame beast somewhere up-country. But since that same up-country has never been explored, there was no answer to my questioning!

For three days we went on searching for orchids. It was just after the wet season, as I have said, and the whole country was at flood; we could go far afield from the river itself. Each night I examined that gold-filled horn, but got no answer. The gold was not a fortune in itself, of course; there was nothing to explain the prodigious amount of work that must have been expended upon the affair. Naturally, I took for granted that the whole horn, right down to the point, had been filled with molten gold; it was virgin, soft enough to cut easily with a knife, but I left it just as it was.

I was glad of the find, naturally; I needed the money. We always do, we folk who go up and down the world, from west to east and back again! So, when we ran across Doktor von Traube, I kept the horn out of sight.

VON TRAUBE had been up in the mountains for a year, trying to get the little red talking apes for his Hamburg museum. He had got them, too—three pairs of them in cages; and he had four boats with a crew of wild men. He was efficient, that von Traube, like all Germans—when it came to getting things. But he did not know there was any war.

I told him, as we sat together that night and had a bottle of *brandewijn* with our dinner. *Duivel!* He was a wild man himself when he heard of it, that big squarehead! No ships to get home in, no way of getting his apes back to Hamburg, and no need of them there, either! He was all gone to smash, that Herr Doktor.

"Never mind!" he said, smashing his fist on the table. "We will show them, we old Germans! Wait until our Kaiser sits in Paris—"

I let him go on puffing out his cheeks about that Kaiser of his, and meantime he drank. Presently he was drunk enough to talk, and he talked of the up-country.

"*Donnerwetter!* I wish I had known about the war three days ago!" he said, between drinks. His pig eyes rolled to the gun-case in the corner of his little cabin. "There was an Englishman living up there! He has a fine house on the hill outside Titigading village; I stayed there two days."

A guest in the man's house, and now regretting that he had not known of the war so he could murder the man!

"Well," he said, leering at me, "there is nothing to prevent going back there, *hein*? You and I together, my friend! And we shall put that Englishman in hell!"

I took another drink. "My country is not at war, Doktor," I told him.

"No, but this Englishman has found—what do you think? Diamond clay! Yes, for I saw it outside his fine house, a heap of it. Boats must bring it down to him."

I whistled at this, with a vengeance!

There were no Holland traders in that country; the posts were all across the hills in Tapanuri province. So this Englishman was doing an illicit diamond business! That put another aspect on von Traube's proposal.

Not that I have too fine a conscience, but I dislike killing a man without reason. Well, here was a reason, and a good one! I could kill the Englishman legally, and I could take his unlawful diamonds legally. Also there would be a reward at Batavia for having done it. It was obvious that he had been settled in the country for a long while, and had encouraged the natives to bring him down the blue clay in their boats, from the hills. Therefore he must have a fine stock of diamonds on hand.

"You want to kill this Englishman," I said, "because your country is at war with his. And I want to kill him because he is in the illicit diamond business, which is against the law, and also because I want his diamonds. Well! That is plain."

"Hold on," grunted von Traube. "I want some of the diamonds, too!"

Was that not a true German for you? However,

we agreed to split the loot between us, and von Traube would pilot my boat back to the Englishman's place. The Englishman was all alone, said Doktor von Traube, except for a few native servants; we agreed to kill these also, and leave no trace.

"But we will not be in a hurry, *hein*?" von Traube winked at me. "We shall tell him about the war, first. It will be humorous."

"Suit yourself," I agreed, "so long as we get the diamonds."

You will understand, brethren, that I am not glossing over my own part in this.

DOKTOR VON TRAUBE got into my boat next morning, left his own men encamped, and we started off for the Englishman's house near Titigading—a miserable little village up the river, which in dry seasons is quite a trading-point for the district. It was a three-day trip, and during those three days, von Traube rather got on my nerves with his talks about the old German god and the Kaiser and so forth. I would have been tempted to leave him clinging to a mangrove tree in the swamp, except that he had no money to make it worthwhile.

On the third afternoon we passed the mud walls of Titigading, perched on its hill above the floods, and toward evening we reached the Englishman's house. It was a very good frame house, perched on a hillside above the highest watermark; it had a nice garden around it, I remember. Off to one side was the Englishman himself, bossing three native boys who were shoveling blue clay into the river. When he saw us coming, he vanished, to reappear a moment afterward with a rifle slung in his elbow.

"*Lieber Gott!*" muttered von Traube, grasping my arm. "Look at the diamond-clay!"

I nodded. "The evidence is vanishing rapidly, eh? He probably has it brought down in large quantities, and lets the water carry it off after he's worked it over."

The Englishman walked down to the water's edge to meet us. He was a brown, lean man, with hard gray eyes like agate, and anything but a nice twist to his mouth—a hard drinker, evidently. He called himself Robinson, but he wore a bloodstone seal ring bearing a crest and other initials below the crest. It was not hard to imagine that he had been a gentleman, and had gone wrong.

He greeted von Traube with a cordial handshake, and gave me another upon being introduced. Naturally, he wanted to know my business here; I let him know that I was not an official, but was hunting orchids. He asked us into the house. Dinner would soon be ready.

I have compunctions about dining with a man and then killing him, but von Traube gave me a nudge, and we went along. Robinson spoke Hollandish like a native. He took us into the house, which was simply but neatly furnished, and assigned us his spare room with apologies that he had not one for each of us. Then he vanished to see about dinner.

"It must be done before we dine," I told von Traube firmly. "Otherwise not at all."

HE assented with a nod and a sneer. "Very well, Mynheer Van Loon. When we are seated at the table, you understand? Then I shall tell him about the war, and do the rest. You will attend to the servants. I wonder where he keeps his diamonds?"

I had been wondering about that myself, not so much about where he kept them, as about his method of getting them out of the country. He would not take them openly, of course, for toward the river-mouth he would encounter too many difficulties; perhaps he had never taken any out, and had the collection of years right here! It was enough to make a man's mouth water.

"If we cannot find them, we shall be fools," said von Traube. "Perhaps it would be best not to kill him until he tells us where they are."

"Suit yourself," I responded, indifferently.

I left the Doktor grubbing at the washbasin, and went out to the living-room of the house. There I found Robinson setting out cigarettes and cheroots, and we chatted. Since I did not care whether I offended him or not, I asked him direct what his business was.

He looked at me with a twisted grin. Even then, I imagine, he suspected us.

"You passed the town of Titigading on the way, didn't you?" he inquired. "Well, I'm training animals for the local sultan. That's the truth, too—training them!"

I must have smiled at this, for he shrugged and gave me a sour look.

"It's true, all the same, Van Loon! If you'd come a few days sooner, I'd have shown you something—a pet rhino that I raised from birth, and

trained to do no end of things! They say a rhino can't be trained, but—"

"A rhinoceros!" I exclaimed, giving him a sharp look as a sudden fear bit into me.

"Yes." He frowned, a bit puzzled by my attitude. I could see that he was watching me pretty closely, and was not going to be taken off guard. "Unfortunately, the poor brute was washed out the last flood—about a week ago. I must have searched half this damned country, without finding his body!"

A tingling sensation swept over me, as I began to realize the truth. I took a cigarette from his box and looked him square in the eye.

"See here, Mynheer Robinson," I said quietly, "do you mind explaining why you'd waste time searching for a dead rhino? Perhaps he was valuable—or was the body marked?"

Robinson went white along the jaw. His fingers twitched slightly, and I guessed that he had a revolver within quick draw. But his hard gray eyes did not flicker from mine.

"You have a reason for asking that?" he snapped.

"I have," I told him frankly, "and a good reason. Some days ago I ran across a dead rhino. The horn was marked in a very peculiar fashion—with marks which used to mean a good deal to me, Robinson. If you can describe those marks, and can tell me what they represent—"

"I think," he said coolly, the twitch of a smile on his lips, "we'd better shake hands all over again, Van Loon. Then I'll proceed in the usual way."

WELL, there was no doubt about it, as he made very plain. When he mentioned his lodge, which was one of the most famous of England, I knew at once that his name was not Robinson.

I made some excuse to get away, and rejoined von Traube just as he was coming to meet us. I led him back into the room, wondering.

"Now," I told him without preamble, "our arrangement is off, Herr Doktor. I have discovered that Robinson has peculiar claims upon me—in fact, claims so strong that I cannot disregard them. So long as I am here, you shall not touch him. Further, I'll tell him about the war myself, although I'll not mention our late intentions toward him; if you and he want to go out into the garden with pistols and have a war of your own, that's another matter. But there'll be no killing, and no looting. Think it over."

I left him there, staring like a dumb man with apoplexy, and rejoined my host.

He was unaccountably eager to get hold of me, too, and his eagerness was centered upon that rhinoceros horn.

"I can't see why on earth you put the horn on that rhino," I told him, "but of course, it's no business of mine. Anyway, I've the horn in my boat, with the gold intact. We'll get it tomorrow or have one of the boys bring it up tonight if you prefer. Meantime, allow me to tell you that Germany and England are at war, and you and von Traube will have to keep off the subject."

Five minutes later von Traube joined us, smiling.

"There is war in the world, Mynheer Robinson," he said, "but there need be none here, I think?"

"Not for tonight, at least," said Robinson with an answering smile. "Can you chaps take me out with you tomorrow? I'll want to get into the scrap, you know. I suppose you, von Traube, are just as anxious? Then we'll declare a private truce, eh?"

Von Traube assented gladly, but I did not like the look in his eye.

WE had an excellent dinner, and Robinson was traditionally Briton enough to don a regulation evening outfit. It was a bit tatted, but the real thing. Doktor von Traube rather surprised me by being extremely affable, cordial and avoiding all war-talk after I had stated the bare news of the declaration—which had come to me the day before I left Batavia.

By the time we came to the coffee, with long, thin, Sumatra cheroots, all three of us were quite chummy. I'll not say that a drink or two had not warmed us, either. Well, Robinson turned to me, with strange lights glinting in his eyes of gray jade, and said:

"You spoke about that rhino-horn, Van Loon—remember? If you'd not mind sending down to your craft for it, I'll be glad to explain its secret. There is a secret, you know, and a dashed interesting one, if I do say it."

I rose, nodding, while Doktor von Traube peered at us suspiciously. He knew nothing about the horn.

"I'll get it myself, Robinson. I put it away carefully, so those boys of mine would not know

about it."

Robinson would have protested, but I laughed and swung out of the house.

It took time to pick my way down to the water, for everything was pitch-black outside, and I had left my electric torch in the boat. Naturally, I was congratulating myself that everything had gone smoothly; for after knowing that Robinson was of the Craft, my whole intent fell to pieces.

Indeed, although the words may sound strange in my mouth, my finding of the drowned rhinoceros and the subsequent fashion in which I had been led to this Englishman's house, to say nothing of the chance remark which had led to my learning that he was of the brethren, all seemed to me a providential train of circumstance—a skein, as it were, of which the Divine Architect had the unwinding.

When I had groped my way down to the boat, one of the men found my electric torch, and I dug into the little shelter-cabin. A moment later I had the rhinoceros horn under my arm—and it was damnably heavy—and started back. The lights of the house guided me this time, and I soon reached the veranda.

As I did so, I heard a heavy, thudding crash from the dining-room, followed by silence—as though a man had fallen with his full weight.

I ran, alarmed instantly, cursing myself for not having given Robinson full warning. But when I came to the door of the dining-room, and paused, there was no one to be seen.

FOR a moment I stared, rankly incredulous; then I saw the square head of Doktor von Traube rising at the opposite side of the dining table. It rose slowly, and halted; the Doktor, snarling a little like a struggling dog, was gazing down at something between his hands. I realized suddenly that he was strangling Robinson to death.

A mad rush of haste flurried me, made me lose all coherence of motion, impelled me into a perfect fury of action. I might have drawn my automatic, but the thought did not occur to me; the first instinct of a man is to throw whatever is closest to hand, and I was already carrying the rhinoceros horn. I threw it blindly, without aiming, threw it heavily as a man throws the shot, at the head of von Traube. And as my automatic leaped out into my palm, I saw the pointed end of that horn hit the German just above the ear.

Before I could get across the room, Robinson was rising; I exhaled a breath of relief at sight of him. About his neck was a thin cord of Chinese silk, almost buried in his flesh. He jerked it away.

"Thanks, Van Loon," he said quietly. "The beggar caught me by surprise—jerked me clear over backward and fell on me. I suspected something of the sort, you know, and had made ready for it, but his method was peculiar."

He lifted the edge of the tablecloth. Just beneath the table itself, and hung at Robinson's place, was a Browning automatic. It came away at the touch of his hand, and he shoved it into his pocket. Then he stooped and picked up the rhinoceros horn.

There was no need of asking any questions about Doktor von Traube. He would never strike another blow in behalf of Germany.

"You've wondered about this," said Robinson, wiping the horn on the tablecloth and setting it on the table beneath the lamp. "Well, I'll tell you about that rhino. I wanted to smuggle some stuff out through Batavia; so I worked a long time over that rhino, fitted the horn and all that. Then I let it go six months, until the skin had crept up about the jointure—"

"But how the devil did you work on a live rhino like that?" I demanded.

"Stupefied him with native drugs!" Robinson laughed. "I meant to take his head and preserve it, then pass it out of here and into England, you see."

"No," I said, frowning at him, "I don't see at all! Of course, a man is not allowed to deal in free gold here, but there's not enough gold in this horn to make it worth all that trouble."

A slow smile crept about his mouth. He took a knife from his pocket and opened it.

"True enough, Van Loon. But I've no more use for this contraption, now that the trophy is spoiled; besides, I'm going home to this war—and finish the whole botched job. See here; you'll understand in a moment."

With the knife, Robinson dug at the soft molten gold that filled the end of the horn. A moment, and it came away in his hand—a thin, oval plate of gold. As it came away, there poured out upon the table a heap of yellow dust; under the slab of gold, the horn had been filled with dust, and in the dust had been snugly nested something like two dozen of the finest Sumatran diamonds!

"The pick of three years' work," said Robinson quietly. "If I'd smuggled these stones out of here

and into England or America, I'd have had something, eh? But they're of no particular use now, and I can't be bothered finding a new method of smuggling. Suppose you take them along, sell them whenever you get a chance, and remit me half the proceeds. The dust will take me home and get me into the army. There's enough in the stones to make us both well off."

"That's very handsome," I said thoughtfully. "But my friend, do you realize what would have happened if I had not found that horn carved with the square and compasses?"

Robinson laughed in his thin, ominous fashion.

"Yes, I do," he said. "You fellows would have done me in; then, my dear Van Loon, the estimable Herr Doktor von Traube would have done *you* in!"

"Not at all," I said, laughing. "You see, I was figuring to do *him* in! But let's clear out of this, and I'll take you over to Malacca Town in my boat, eh? The customs patrol down the river won't bother me much—when it's a question of a brother in distress."

"WORSHIPFUL *meester*," said Van Loon, "and brethren, I thank you for your attention." He sat down.

"A highly immoral tale, yon," said the Scots engineer, chuckling. "What wad they be makin' of it, eh, in the regular circles?"

My little New Yorker rapped with his pipe. "I might say, brethren, that Brother Van Loon is having a gavel made from the horn of a rhino, ain't it, w'ich is carved with appropriate emblems and w'ich vill be presented to this lodge next Sunday night. And now, brethren, if there ain't no more business—"

"'Ere, 'old on!" exclaimed the cockney, scrambling to his feet. "I know oo that there man Robinson was! I sye, Van Loon, didn't 'e 'ave a zigzag scar on 'is left 'and?"

Van Loon assented. The little cockney continued eagerly:

"Well, 'e went west at Mons—I was in the bleedin' 'orspital wif 'im! From what 'e said afore 'e passed out, I learned a 'ole lot abaht 'im; and it was talk abaht a rhino 'orn too! And I want to sye, brethren, that 'e 'ad the D.S.O. afore 'e up and bleedin' well died, too! A credit to the Craft; that's what *'e* was!"

A vote of thanks to Brother Van Loon was moved and seconded; then Irregular Lodge No. I proceeded to fold its tents and silently steal away.