

MACHASSAN AH

Talbot Mundy

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I.

Waist-held in the chains and soused in the fifty-foot-high spray, Joe Byng eyed his sounding lead that swung like a pendulum below him, and named it sacrilege.

"This 'ere navy ain't a navy no more," he muttered. "This 'ere's a school-gal promenade, 'and-in-'and, an' mind not to get your little trotters wet, that's what this is, so 'elp me two able seamen an' a red marine!"

From the moment that the lookout, lashed to the windlass drum up forward, had spied the little craft away to leeward and had bellowed his report of it through hollowed hands between the thunder of the waves, Joe Byng had had premonitory symptoms of uneasiness. He had felt in his bones that the navy was about to be nose-led into shame.

At the wheel, both eyes on the compass, as the sea law bids, but both ears on the more-even-than-usual-alert, Curley Crothers felt the same sensations but expressed them otherwise.

"Admiral's orders!" he muttered. "Maybe the admiral was drunk?"

The brass gongs clanged down in the bowels of H.M.S. Puncher and she gradually lost what little weigh she had, rolling her bridge ends under in the heave and hollow of a beam-on monsoon sea.

"How much does he say he wants?" asked her commander.

Joe Byng in the chains and Curley Crothers at the wheel both recognized the quarter tone instantly, and diagnosed it with deadly accuracy; every vibration of his voice and every fiber of his being expressed exasperation, though a landsman might have noticed no more than contempt for what he had seen fit to log as "half a gale."

"He says he'll take us in for fifty pounds, sir."

"Oh! Tell him to make it shillings, or else to get out of my course!"

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It is not much in the way of Persian Gulf Arabic that a man picks up from textbooks but at garnering the business end of beach-born dialects—the end that gets results at least expense of time or energy—the Navy goes even the Army half a dozen better. The sublieutenant's argument, bawled from the bridge rail to the reeling little boat below, was a marvel in its own sweet way; it combined abuse and scorn with a cataclysmic blast of threat in six explosive sentences.

"He says he'll take us in for ten pounds, sir," he reported, without the vestige of a smile.

"Oh! Ask Mr. Hartley to step up on the bridge, will you?"

Two minutes later, during which the nasal howls from the boat were utterly ignored, the acting chief engineer hauled himself along the rail hand over hand to windward, ducking below the canvas guard as a more than usually big comber split against the Puncher's side and hove itself to heaven.

"It beats me how any man can keep a coat on him this weather," he remarked, and the sublieutenant noticed that the streams that ran down both his temples were not sea water. "Send for me?"

His temper, judging by his voice, would seem to be a lot worse than could be due to the pitching of the ship.

"Yes. There's a pilot overside, and our orders are to take a pilot aboard when running in, if available. There are three men bailing that boat below there, and the sea's gaining on them. They'll need rescuing within two hours. Then we'd have a pilot aboard and would have saved the government ten pounds. Point is, can you manage in the engine-room for two or three hours longer? Three more waves like that last one and the man's ours anyway!"

"He might not wait two hours," suggested Mr. Hartley. "He might get tired of looking at us, and beat back into port. Then where would be your strategy?"

"Then there wouldn't be a pilot available. I'd be justified in going in without one. Point is, can you hold out below?"

"Man," said Mr. Hartley, "you're a genius." He peered through the spray down to leeward, where the pilot's boat danced a death dance alongside, heel and toe to the Puncher's statelier swing. "Yes; there are three men bailing, and you're a genius. But no! The answer's no! The engines'll keep on turning, maybe and perhaps, until we make the shelter o' yon reef. There's no knowing what a cherry-red bearing will do. I can give ye maybe fifteen knots; maybe a leetle more for just five minutes, for steerage way and luck, and after that—"

Even crouched as he was against the canvas guard he contrived to shrug his shoulders.

"But if we go in there are you sure you can contrive to patch her up? It looks like a rotten passage, and not much of a berth beyond it."

"I could cool her down."

"Oh, if that's all you want, I can anchor outside in thirty fathoms."

Curley Crothers heard that and his whole frame stiffened; there seemed a chance yet that the Navy might not be disgraced. But it faded on the instant.

"Man, we've got to go inside and we've got to hurry! Better in there than at the bottom of the Gulf! Put her where she'll hold still for a day, or maybe two days—"

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"Say a month!" suggested the commander caustically.

"Say three days for the sake of argument. Then I can put her to rights. I daren't take down a thing while she's rolling twenty-five and more, and I've got to take things down! Why, man, the engine-room is all pollution from gratings to bilge; if I loosened one more bolt than is loose a'ready her whole insides 'ud take charge and dance quadrilles until we drowned!"

"You won't try to make Bombay?"

"I'll try to give ye steam as far as the far side o' yon reef. After that I wash my hands of a' responsibility!"

"Oh, very well. Mr. White!"

The sublieutenant hauled himself in turn to windward. Curley Crothers gave the wheel a half-spoke and looked as if he had no interest in anything. Joe Byng in the chains bowed his head and groaned inwardly; his sticky, spray-washed lead seemed all-absorbing.

"Tell that black robber to hurry aboard, unless he wants me to come in without him."

The little boat had drifted fast before the wind, and the sublieutenant had to bellow through a megaphone to where the three men bailed and the ragged oarsmen swung their weight against the storm. The man of ebony, who would be pilot and disgrace the Navy, balanced on a thwart with wide-spread naked toes and yelled an ululating answer. With his rags out-blown in the monsoon he looked like a sea wraith come to life. The big gongs clanged again, and the Puncher drifted rather than drove down on the smaller craft. A hand line caught the pilot precisely in the face. He grabbed it frantically, fell headlong in the sea, and was hauled aboard.

"He says he wants a tow for that boat of his," reported the sublieutenant. "Said it in English, too—seems he knows more than he pretends."

"Missed it, by gad, by just about five minutes!" said the commander aloud but to himself. "Well—the bargain's made, so it can't be helped. That boat's sinking! Throw 'em a line, quick!"

The pilot's crew displayed no overdone affection for their craft, and there was no struggle to the last to leave it. One by one— whichever could grab the line first was the first to come—they were hauled through the thundering waves and their boat was left to sink. Then, before they could adjust their unaccustomed feet to the different balance of the Puncher's heaving deck, the gongs clanged and the destroyer leaped ahead like a dripping sea-soused water beetle, into her utmost speed that instant.

All conscious of his new-won dignity, and utterly regardless of his boat, the pilot had found the bridge at once. He clung to the rail there and braced one naked foot against a stanchion. To him the ship's speed seemed the all-absorbing thing, for either Mr. Hartley had forgotten just how many revolutions would make fifteen knots or else he had underestimated his engine-room's capacity. The Puncher split the waves and spewed them twenty feet above her, racing head-on for the reef, and Curley Crothers was too busy at his wheel to pass the pilot the surreptitious insult he intended.

The gongs clanged presently, and the Puncher swallowed half her speed at once, giving the pilot courage.

"This exceedingly damn dangerous place, sah!" he remarked.

"No bottom at eight!" sang Joe Byng in the chains.

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Three words passed between the commander and Crothers, and the Puncher hove a weed-draped underside high over the crest of a beam-on roller as she veered a dozen points, ducked her starboard rail into the trough of it, and sliced her long thin nose, sizzling and swirling, into the welter ahead. It was growing weedier and dirtier each minute.

"No bottom at eight!" chanted Joe Byng.

And at the sound of his voice the pilot hauled himself up by his leverage on the rail and found his voice again.

"This most exceedingly damn dangerous place, sah!"

But the commander was too busy acting all three L's—Log, Lead and Lookout—his shrouded figure swaying to the heave and fall and his eyes fixed straight ahead of him on the double line of boiling foam. He had conned his course and had it charted in his head. There was no time to argue with a pilot.

"Port you—ah hel—um, sah! Port you—ah hel—um!"

"By the mark—seven!" sang Joe Byng from the chains.

"Port you—ah hel—um, sah!" yelled the pilot in an ecstasy of fright.

"Starboard a little," came the quiet command.

Curley Crothers moved his wheel and the Puncher's bow yawed twenty feet, as if Providence had pushed her.

"Gawd A'mighty!" murmured Joe Byng, gazing open-mouthed at fifty feet of jagged rock that grinned up suddenly three waves away.

The pilot braced both feet against a stanchion and tried to take the weigh off her by pulling.

"Half speed, sah! Go slow, sah! Go dead slow, sah! You'll pile up you—ah damn ship, sah! Ah tell you, sah, you'll pile her up as suah as hell, sah! 'Bout a million sharks round he—ah, sah! For the love o' God, sah—Captain, sah—"

"Oh, muzzle him, some one!" ordered the commander, and the jiggling, complaining engines danced ahead, the horrid gray beneath the pilot's ebony notwithstanding.

"By the deep—four!" warned Joe Byng in a level sing-song. The two gongs clanged like an echo to him, and the Puncher's speed was reduced at once to her point, of minimum stability. She rolled and quivered like a living thing in fear, falling on and off, nosing out a passage on her own account apparently, and seeming to be gathering all her strength for one tremendous effort.

"That's bettah, sah! That's bettah, Captain, sah! Go astern! This he—ah's the bar, sah—damn bad place, the bar, sah! Go astern, sah. Captain, sah, d'you he—ah me—go astern! Try again, 'nother place further up, sah. Captain, sah! Over that way; that way thar—that way, sah!"

He pointed through the sky-flung spray with a trembling finger and his voice was rich with doleful emphasis, but the commander held his course and carried on. There seemed neither sympathy nor understanding on that unsteadiest of ships. Curley Crothers, solemn-faced as Nemesis and looking half as compassionate, moved his wheel a trifle. Joe Byng in the chains kept up his even sing-song, expressionless, as if he were an automatic clock that did not care, but must record the truth each time his dripping pendulum touched bottom.

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"And a half—three!"

White foam was boiling in among the dirty welter, and the Puncher's bow pitched suddenly as the first big bar wave lifted her; a second later her propellers chug—chug—chugged in surface spume as she kicked upward like a porpoise diving.

"Oh, lordy, lordy, lordy!" groaned the pilot. "This he—ah watah's full of sharks, an' that's the bar! You're on the bar now, Captain, sah!"

"By the mark—three!" Byng chanted steadily.

"Starboard a little more," said the commander leaning forward and shoving the pilot away to leeward at the same time. Then he shouted to the fo'castle head, where a bosun's mate and his crew had climbed and were awaiting orders in evident and most unreasonable unconcern.

"Get both anchors ready!"

"Aye, aye, sir!" came the answer, and efficiency controlled by experts proceeded at kaleidoscopic angles to defy the elements. The big steel hooks were ready in an instant.

"Stop her!" ordered the commander.

The gongs clanged out an alarm and the throbbing ceased.

"Hard astern, both engines!"

Again there was a clangor under hatches, and the suffering bearings shrieked. The Puncher dropped her stern two feet or so, and the foam boiled brown round her propellers. The shock of the reversal pitched the pilot up against the forward rail, where he clung like a drowning man.

"For the love o' God, sah! Captain; sah, we've struck! Ah told you so; Ah said—"

"And a half—three!" chanted Joe Byng.

"Stop her! Starboard engine ahead! Port engine ahead! Ease your helm! Meet her! Half speed ahead!"

The Puncher pitched and rolled, kicking at the following monsoon that thundered at her counter and tossing up the foam that seethed about her bow. She trembled from end to end, as if the pounding of the water hurt her.

"Helm amidships!" ordered the commander suddenly.

"Midships, sir!"

"Full speed ahead, both engines!"

The Puncher leaped, as all destroyers do the second day they are loosed. She sliced through the storm straight for the coral beach beyond the bar, shaking her graceful shoulders free of the sticky spray—reeling, rolling, thugging, kicking, bucking through the welter to where quiet water waited and the ever—lasting, utterly unrighteous stink of sun—baked Arab beaches. As each tremendous breaker thundered on her stern each time she lifted to the underswell, the pilot vowed that she had struck, rolling his eyes and calling two different deities to witness that none of it was any fault of his.

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"Thar's no water, sah---no water, Captain, sah---not one drop! You've piled up you--ah ship! Ah told you so; Ah said---"

"By the deep---four!"

"And a half--four!"

"By the mark---five!"

The Puncher was across the bar, gliding through muddy water on an even keel and giving the lie direct to him whose fee was ten pounds English. The pilot drew a talisman of some kind from underneath the least torn portion of his shirt, and to the commander's amazement kissed it. It is not often that a woolly headed, or any other, native of the East kisses either folk or things. But the commander was too busy at the moment to ask questions.

"Have your starboard anchor ready!" he commanded, making mental notes.

"Ready, sir!"

The glittering, wet, wind-blown beach and the little estuary slid by like a painted panorama smelling of all the evil in the world as the Puncher eased her helm a time or two seeking a comfortable berth with Joe Byng's chanted aid.

"Let go twenty fathoms!"

The pilot sighed relief as the starboard anchor splashed into the water and the cable roared after it through the hawse pipe.

"What nationality are you?" asked the commander, watching the Puncher swing and gaging distances, but sparing one eye now for his unwelcome but official guest.

"Me, sah?"

"Yes, you."

The pilot looked anywhere but at his questioner, and a picture passed before the commander's eyes---a memory, perhaps, of something he had read about at school---of Christians in Nero's day being asked what their religion was.

"Are you afraid to tell me?" he asked, softening his voice to a kinder tone as he remembered that God did not make all men Englishmen, and turning just in time to cause Crothers to withdraw his right leg.

The pilot's toes were, after all, not destined to be trodden on just then.

"No, sah, Ah'm not afraid."

"What are you, then?"

"Ah'm---"

"Well? What?"

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"Ah'm English!"

"What?"

"Captain, sah, Ah'm English!"

"Oh! Are you? Um—m—m! Mr. White, give this man his ten pounds, will you? And get his receipt for it."

That appeared to end matters, so far as the commander was concerned; official dignity forbade any further interest. But it was not so very long since Mr. White was senior midshipman, and it takes a man until he is admiral of the fleet to unlearn all he knew then and forget the curiosity of those days.

"Now, I should have thought you were a Scotchman," he suggested without smiling, studying the salt-encrusted wrinkles on the ebony face. "You like whisky?"

"Yes, sah—positively, sah! Yes, Captain, sah—Ah do!"

Mr. White sent for whisky and poured out a stiff four fingers, to the awful disgust of Curley Crothers, who saw the whole transaction. The pilot consumed it so instantly that there seemed never to have been any in the glass.

"I suppose your name's Macnab—or Macphairson—which? Sign here, please."

The pilot took the proffered pen in unaccustomed fingers and made a crisscross scrawl, adorned with thirteen blots. The pen nib broke under the strain, and he handed it back with an air of confidential remonstrance.

"That thing's no mo—ah good," he volunteered.

"So I see. Now tell me your name in full, so that I can write it next to the mark. It's a wonder of a mark! Mac—what's the rest of it?"

"Hassan Ah."

"Machassan?"

"No, sah. Hassan Ah."

"And you're English?"

"Yes, sah."

"With that name?"

"Mah name makes no diffunts, sah. Ah'm English."

"Well—here's your money. Cutter away, there! Put the pilot and his crew ashore! Sorry about your boat, pilot, but it couldn't be helped."

"Makes me believe that I'm a nigger!" muttered Curley Crothers, not yet released from duty on the bridge.

"First time I ever wished I was a Dutchman!" swore Joe Byng, coiling up his sounding line.

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Ten minutes later the cutter's captain swung the boat's stern in shore when he judged that he was reasonably near enough and too far in for sharks. He had his orders to put the pilot and his crew ashore, but the means had not been too exactly specified.

"Get out and swim for it, you bally Englishman!" he ordered, using a boat-hook on the nearest one to make his meaning clear.

One by one they jumped for it, the pilot going last. He plainly did not understand the point of view.

"Ah'm English!" he expostulated. "Lissen he-ah, Ah'm English! Damwell English!"

"All right; let's see you swim, English!" jeered the cutter's captain, and the pilot took the water with a splash.

"Ah su-ah am English!" he vowed, as he swam for the shore, and he stood by the sea's edge repeating his assertion with a leathery pair of lungs until the cutter had rowed out of ear-shot.

"English, is he?" said Joe Byng to Curley Crothers in the fo'castle, not twenty minutes later. "I'd show him, if I had him in here for twenty minutes!"

"That fellow's interested me," said Crothers. "He's got me thinking. I vote we investigate him."

"How?"

"Ashore, fathead."

"There'll be no shore leave."

"No? You left off being wet nurse to the dawg?" "I brush him, mornin's; if that's what you mean."

"Is he fit?"

"Fit to fight a bumboat full o' pilots!"

"Could he be sick for an hour?"

"Might be did."

"Tomorrow?"

"Morning?"

"At about two bells?"

"It could be done."

"Then do it!"

"Why?"

"Because, Joe Byng my boy, you and I want shore leave; and the pup-- and he's a decent pup--must suffer for to make a 'tween-deck holiday. Get my meaning? I've a propagandrum that'll work this tide. You go and set the fuse

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in the pup's inside; and mind you, time it right, my son—for two bells when the old man's in the chair!"

So Joe Byng, who was something of an expert in the way and ways of dogs, departed in search of an oiler with whom he was on terms of condescension; and he returned to the fo'castle a little later with the nastiest, most awful-smelling mess that ever emanated even from the engine-room of a destroyer in the Persian Gulf (where grease and things run rancid.)

II.

Lying lazily at anchor off the reeking beach of Adra Bight, the Puncher looked peaceful and complacent—which is altogether opposite to what she and her commander were, or had been, for a month. The ship hummed her shut-in discontent, as a hive does when the bees propose to swarm, and her commander—who never, be it noted, went to windward of the one word "damn"—used that one word very frequently.

He sat "abaft the mainmast" at a table that was splotted already with abundant perspiration, and the acting engineer who stood in front of him shifted from foot to foot in attitudes expressive of increasing agony of mind. It grew obvious at last that there was a limit to Mr. Hartley's store of courteous deference.

There had been news, red hot but wrong, of dhows loaded to the water-line with guns and ammunition somewhere up the Gulf. India, ever fretful for her tribes beyond the border, had borrowed Applewaite and his destroyer by instant cablegram, and jealously held records had been broken while the Puncher quartered those indecent seas and heated up her bearings. It was almost too much to have to come back empty-handed. It was quite too much to have to run for shelter under the lee of Adra's uninviting coral reef. And to be told by an acting engineer that he would have to stay a week was utterly beyond the scope of polite conversation.

"Why a week?" asked Commander Applewaite, with eyebrows raised to the nth power of incredulity.

"Why a week?" asked Mr. Hartley, breaking down the barrier of self-restraint at last. "I'll tell you why. Because, although the guts of her are so much scrap-iron, you've a crew of engineers who could build machinery of hell-slag—build it, mind—and could get steam out o' the Sahara, where there isn't any water at all.

"Because—conditional upon the act o' God and your permission—I'm willing to perform a miracle. Because the whole engine-room complement is dancing mad for shore leave, and there'll be none this side o' Bombay; and because, in consequence o' that, creation would be a mild name for what's about to happen under gratings until the shafts revolve again. Man, I wish ye'd take one peep at her bearings, though ye wouldn't understand.

"Because you're lucky; any other engineer in all the navies o' the world would take a month to tinker with her, even if he didn't have to send to Bombay for a tow. Because—"

"That'll do!" said Applewaite, his mind wandering already in search of suitable employment for the crew. "Get the repairs done as soon as possible; we stay here until you have finished what is necessary."

It looked like an evil moment for asking favors, but it was the time laid down in Regulations when such things as favors may be had; and it was the moment Curley Crothers had picked out for asking for shore leave.

"Come 'ere, Scamp. Come along, Scamp. Come along 'ere—good boy!" he coaxed, dragging by a short chain in his wake the sorriest-looking bull terrier that ever acted mascot in the British or any other navy. Courteous and huge and cap in hand, his weather-beaten face smiling respectfully above a snow-white uniform, he took his stand before the little table. His outward bearing was one of certainty, but his shrewd, slightly puckered eyes alternately conned the expression of his commander's face and watched the dog.

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The lee, scuppers were the goal of the dog's immediate ambition, for he was a well-brought-up dog and such of the decencies as were not his by instinct he had learned by painful and repeated acquisition. But at the moment Curley Crothers showed a wondrous disregard for etiquette.

"He's very sick, sir," he asserted, tugging a little at the chain in the hope of producing instant proof of his contention. But the dog was gamiest of the game, and swallowed hurriedly.

"Well? I'm not a vet. What about it?"

"The whole ship's crew 'ud be sorry, sir, if 'e was to lose 'is number. He's the best mascot this ship ever had, by all accounts."

"He hasn't brought us much luck this run!" smiled Applewaite, remembering a long list of "previous convictions" and wondering what Crothers might be up to next.

"No, sir? We're still a-top o' the water, sir."

"Oh! He gets the credit for that, eh? But for him, I suppose we'd have piled up on the reef yesterday?"

"Saving your presence, sir."

Curley Crothers made a gesture expressive of a world of compliment and praise, but he kept one eye steadily on the dog; he seemed to imply that but for the presence of the dog on board the commander might have forgotten his seamanship.

"Well? What do you suggest?"

"Seeing the poor dog's sick, sir, and you and all of us so fond of him, and all he needs is exercise, I thought perhaps as 'ow you'd order me an' Byng, sir, to take 'im for a run ashore. There'd be jackals and pi-dogs for 'im to chase. A bit o' sport 'ud set 'im up in a jiffy. He's languishing---that's what's the matter with him."

There were almost tears in his voice as he tugged at the chain surreptitiously, in a vain effort to produce the cataclysm that was overdue. But for all his efforts to appear affected, his eyes were smiling. So were his commander's.

"Why Byng?" he asked.

"Byng cleans him, sir. He knows Byng."

"Then, why you?"

"Why; he knows me too, sir, and between the two of us, we'd manage him proper. S'posin' he was to get huntin' on his own and one of us was tired out chasin' him, t'other could run and catch him. If there was only one of us, he couldn't."

"I see. Well? One of the other men might take him on the chain. A good-conduct man, for instance."

Crothers tugged at the chain, and the unhappy dog drew away toward the scuppers with all his remaining strength.

"He's cussed about the chain, sir---apt to drag on it and try to chaw it through. Besides, sir, when a dawg's sick, he's like a man---same as me an' you; he likes to 'ave 'is partic'lar pals with 'im. Now, that dawg's fond o' me an'

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Byng.'

"I see. But supposing exercise isn't what he wants after all? Suppose he needs a long rest and lots of sleep? How about that?"

The argument had reached a crisis, and Curley realized it. Joking or not, when the commander of a ship takes too long in reaching a decision he generally does not reach a favorable one. The leash was tugged again, this time with some severity. The martyred Scamp was drawn on his protesting haunches close to the official table, that the commander might have a better view of his distress. And then the expected happened—voluminously.

Curley stood with an expression of wooden-headed, abject innocence on his big, broad face, and looked straight in front of him.

"He certainly is sick, sir," he remarked.

"Sick. Good heavens! The dog's turning himself inside out! That's the last time a thing like this happens; he's the last dog I ever take on a cruise. Take him away at once! Bosun—call some one to wipe up that disgusting mess!"

"Take him ashore, did you say, sir?"

"Take him out of this! Take him anywhere you like! Yes, take him ashore and lose him—feed him to the sharks—give him to the Arabs— take him away, that's all!"

"Me and Byng, sir?"

"Yes, you and Byng! Did you hear me tell you to take him away?"

"Very good, sir; thank you!"

Curley Crothers saluted without the vestige of a smile, and hurried off before the dog could show too early signs of recovering health and strength or the commander could change his mind.

"Come on, Scamp," he whispered. "That was nothing but a temporary disaccommodation to your tummy, doglums; we'll soon have you to rights again."

He dived into the fo'castle with the dog behind him, and there were those who noticed that the terrier's whip-like tail no longer hugged his stomach, but was waving to the world at large.

And thirty minutes later, as the Puncher's launch put off with Curley and Joe Byng comfortably seated in the stern, it was obvious to any one who cared to look that Scamp was the happiest and healthiest terrier in Asia.

"Now, I wonder what they did to him," mused the Puncher's commander, watching from beneath his awning. "Those two men live up to the name they brought aboard! I believe they'd find means and a good excuse for walking to windward of a First Sea Lord!"

III.

Now an Arab would as soon allow a dog to lick his face as he would think of eating pork in public with his women folk; so the bearded, hook-nosed believers in the Prophet who looked down from the rock wall that lines one side of Adra knew what to think of Curley and his friend Joe Byng long before either of them realized that

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they were being watched.

Arrayed from head to ankles in spotless white, their black boots looking blacker by comparison, they proceeded in the general direction of the distant village, with the order and decorum of sea lords descending on a dockyard for inspection purposes. The trackless sand proved hot and sharp; the dog proved in poor condition from the voyage and the morning's incidental martyrdom, and Byng was generous-hearted. He picked up the dog and carried him; and Scamp displayed his gratitude in customary canine way.

The comments of the watching Arabs would not fit into any story in the world, and it is quite as well that Crothers and Joe Byng did not hear them and could not have translated them, for in the other case trouble would have started even sooner than it did. As it was, they tumbled and maneuvered over unresisting sand through almost tangible stench to where a gap in the ragged wall did duty as a gate. As they came nearer, a banner with the star and crescent was displayed from the wall-top, but no other sign was given that their coming was observed.

It was not until they had debouched (as Crothers termed it) to their half-right front and had taken to a narrow one-man track that ran below the wall that any over attention was paid them. Suddenly a hook-nosed Asiatic gentleman emerged through the once-was gateway—a picture of a Bible shepherd but for the long-barreled gun he carried instead of crook—a brown shadow against brown masonry. He challenged them in Arabic, and Curley Crothers answered him in Queen Victoria's English that all was well.

"Everything in the garden's lovely!" he asserted, in a deep-sea sing-song. "How's yourself?"

The man repeated whatever he had said before, this time with a gesture of impatience.

"Friend!" roared Byng and Curley both together. And the bull terrier took the joint yell for a war cry, or a bunting call, or possibly the herald's overture that summons bull pups to Valhalla. He was bred right and British Navy trained and his was not to reason why. He waited for no second invitation, but lit out from Byng's arms like a streak—a whip-tail, snow-white streak—for where the Arab's hard lean legs shone shiny-brown below his fluttering brown raiment.

"Come back, there!" yelled both keepers in excited unison, but they called too late.

Each grabbed for the chain too late. Their heads and shoulders cannoned and they fell together on the hot, dirty sand while Scamp and the Arab made each other's intimate acquaintance in a whirl of ripping cloth and legs and teeth and blasphemy.

That in itself was bad enough, and good enough excuse if such were wanted for war between the Shadow of God Upon Earth and England's distant Queen; but there was worse to follow.

One does not laugh, between certain parallels, unless the ultimate degree of insult is intended. And Curley Crothers and Joe Byng did laugh. They held their ribs and laughed until their muscles ached and their strong men's strength oozed out of them.

They were laughing when they grabbed the dog at last and pulled him off. They laughed as they set the Arab on his feet and gave him back his gun; and they laughed at him with Christian and mannerly good grace when he spat at them in awful frenzy until the spittle matted in his beard. And, being gentlemen after a fashion quite their own, they smilingly apologized.

Arabia lies in the middle of the zone where laughter is not wisdom. And a smile lies midway in the measure of a laugh. A laugh might be unintentional. A smile must be deliberate. And the Arab's spittle was run dry. Creed, custom, law of tooth for tooth and the thought of half a hundred co-religionists all watching him from crannies in

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the wall combined to make him shoot, since further means of showing malice were denied him; and he raised the long butt to his shoulder with meaning that was unmistakable.

And so, with sorrow that the East should be so lacking in good fellowship, but with the ready instinct of men who have been trained for war, they closed with him from two directions, swiftly, bull-dog-wise, and took his gun away. And how could even an able seaman help the dog's taking a share in the game again?

So far, nobody had done anything intended to be wrong—least of all the dog. The Arab was defending institutions; Crothers and Joe Byng were bent on holiday, and full of kind regards for anything that lived; and the dog was living dogfully up to well-bred-terrier tradition. It was as if two harmless chemicals had met and blended into nitroglycerin.

Deprived of his gun, the Arab drew a knife; and no British sailor lives who does not understand the quick-loosed answer to the glint of steel. Fist and boot both landed on the Arab quicker than his own thought served the knife, and the weight of quick concussions jarred him into all but coma. This time Byng caught the dog in time and held him back, leaving Curley Crothers to finish matters by making the long knife prize of war. Once more he helped the Arab on his feet, smiling hugely and gentling the iron sinews with huge paws that could have wrenched them all apart if need be.

"Take my advice, cully, and weigh quick!" he counseled, looking the Arab over and making sure the unfortunate had not been too much hurt. "Run for shelter where you can cool your bearings! Run off to the mosque and pray, to make up for all that cussing. Go and be good! And next time you meets us, be friendly—see?"

The Arab was too apoplectically angry to comply, but Crothers took him by both shoulders and shoved him; and finding himself shot forward out of reach, seeing safety ahead and its possible corollary of awful vengeance, he suddenly achieved discretion and scampered through the gap in the wall.

"E's gone to fetch his pals. Look out, mate!" warned Joe Byng.

"Not 'im!" vowed Crothers. "E's 'ad enough, that's all! We've seen the last of 'im!"

And the most amazing thing of all was that Crothers believed just what he said—Curley Crothers, to whom Red Sea and Persian Gulf ports were as an open book, and to whom the Arab customs and religion and reprehensible tendencies were currently supposed to be first-reader knowledge. It was he who had proved there were no harems—he who coined the Navy adage, "Search an Arab first, and sit on him, before you come to terms!"

Yet here he was, advising Byng to disregard a looted Arab's spittle! There is no accounting, ever, for the ways of shore-leave sailor-men.

"Come on, Joe," he said. "Lead 'the dawg—he can walk now—and let's see what Adra looks like."

IV.

All might have been well, and both seamen might have reached the Puncher again with dignity and grace, had they not entered Adra, past the only jail in that part of Arabia. And an Arab jail being rarer and one percent more evil than any other evil thing there is, the two of them quite naturally paused to make its closest possible acquaintance.

"Look out for vermin!" cautioned Curley, standing on tiptoe to peer in through the close-spaced iron bars.

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They forgot the dog. The jail, for the moment, challenged all their waking senses, the olfactory by no means least.

"Can you see anything?" asked Byng.

Before Crothers could answer him, a snarl, then a yap, then a quick, determined growl gave warning of the terrier's interest in something else than fleas.

He had been scratching himself peacefully a moment earlier; now, like a bower anchor taking charge, he ripped the chain through Byng's hand and was off—chin, back and tail in one straight, striving line— in full chase of a pariah.

The yellow cur yapped its agony of fear; the nearest hundred and odd mangy monsters of the gutter took up the chorus; within five seconds of the start there was the Puncher's mascot racing after one abominable scavenger, and after him in just as hot pursuit there raced the whole street-cleaning force of Adra—tongues out, eyes blazing, and their mean thin barks all working overtime.

"Good-by, Scamp!" groaned Byng, estimating rapidly.

"Not yet it ain't!" said Crothers, grabbing Byng's arm and nearly tearing out the muscles.

It was a crude way of rousing Byng's latent speed, both of thought and movement, but it worked. Before Joe could swear, even, Crothers was off like the wind, with Joe after him, using the string of oaths he had meant for Crothers on the sand that gave under him and made him stumble at every other stride.

Adra turned out, as a colony of prairie dogs might from planless burrows; only these had more venom in their bite than prairie dogs and came from structural instead of natural, from flea-bepeppered instead of grass-grown dirt. Man, woman and child—the grown men armed, the women veiled in dirt-brown, some of them, and some (mostly the better-looking) unveiled and unashamed, the little children mostly naked and colored with all the human hues there are—raced, yelling, through a swarm of flies in hot pursuit. Never since Shem's great-grandson gat the Arab race was there a procession like it.

Behind its mud-and-Masonry decrepit wall that guards only the seaward side, Adra straggles quite a distance desertward; and there are winding streets enough to hide an army in, provided that the army did not mind the fleas. Scamp, view-halloaing his utmost, led that most amazing hunt a quite considerable circuit before other men and dogs, arriving from a dozen different directions, set a limit to his unobstructed movement.

He knew what he was after, but they did not; they had come to see. For a moment they seemed to think that Scamp was the object of the chase, and a dozen guns of a dozen different kinds and dates were aimed at him.

And then, as consciousness dawns on a man recovering from choloform, there swept over their lethargic Eastern brains the simultaneous idea that Curley Crothers and Joe Byng were the real quarry; and—again like men recovering from chloroform—they did not quite know what to do. Should they slay, there was the Puncher to be reckoned with; and the Puncher's port quick-firers could be seen commanding Adra by any man who cared to climb the wall.

Besides, an Arab's hospitality is proverbial. He very seldom kills a visitor on sight.

On the other hand a man, and particularly a British sailor, who runs has reason, as a rule. Therefore these two men were evidently guilty. Therefore they must not escape. In five seconds the affair had changed from a spectacular amusement, with Adra's population in the role of super-heated audience, to a hunt of Crothers and Joe Byng.

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Within ten seconds each of the sailors lay with his face pressed hard into the sand and at least a dozen Arabs sitting on him. Scamp—utterly forgotten now by all except the sailors—still behind the one stray pariah and ahead of all the rest but beginning to appreciate the fact that he was hunted, and beginning to feel spent—raced on, took three sharp turns in close succession, and was gathered all unwilling in the arms of an enormous black man who snatched him from the very teeth of the following pack and dispersed them, howling, by means of well-directed kicks.

"Ah seed you yesterday, Ah did," said his deliverer in English; and, recalling principle, the terrier bit at him—only to find himself muzzled by a horny, huge fist that caressed even while it rendered impotent.

"Ah'm fond of little dogs! Ah'm English!"

Scamp understood nothing of the conversation, but with canine instinct realized that he was safe; and after that he was satisfied to lie and pant. With five red inches of tongue hanging out, and no sign whatever of his white-uniformed guardians to trouble him, a black man's arms were as good as any other place; he did not waste half a thought on Byng and Crothers.

But Byng, three turnings back, spat filthy sand out of his mouth the moment an Arab deemed it safe to leave off sitting on his head, looked wildly around for Crothers, and bellowed—

"Where's the pup?"

Crothers, spitting out sand, too, twenty yards behind where the swifter Byng had fallen, called back:

"Dunno. Whistle him!"

Byng tried to whistle, and the Arabs mistook the effort for a signal. In an instant both men were face-downward again, struggling for breath and clawing at the dirt. Then worse befell. The gentleman whose brown anatomy had suffered from the seamen's feet and fists just previous to their invasion of the town limped up with his eye teeth showing and his flapping cotton raiment still unmended where the dog had torn it. Any other wrath, however awful, could be nothing but the shadow of his state of mind; and since he knew the more vindictive portions of the Koran all by heart, and was quoting as he came, there was little need of words to illustrate further his attitude.

He seemed to be a person of authority. An Arab town or village is a democracy in which each free man has his say; not even a sheik can overrule the vote of a majority, and this man was no sheik. But rage and self-assertion will generally exercise a certain weight in tribal councils, and the crowd in this case was too doubtful of the facts to have any settled notions of its own.

"To the jail with them!" the new arrival almost shrieked, and about a dozen in the crowd took up the cry—

"To jail with them!"

"Infidels! Worshipers of dogs! Wine-drinkers! Eaters of pig flesh! Dogs and the sons of dogs—what mothers gave them birth? Are your hands, True-believers, fit bonds for them? To the jail! To the jail that Abdul Hamid caused his men to build for such as these!"

He stooped and looked deliberately to make sure that Crothers could not break away, then came closer and spat on him, saving half his spittle with impartial forethought for the struggling Byng, who looked up in time to see what was in store for him. Being spat on is even less exhilarating than it sounds or looks, and Byng waxed speechless after passing through a many-worded stage of blasphemy.

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Crothers, the larger of the two and by six brawny inches more phlegmatic, bode his time in silence, so that neither of them spoke a word while they were hustled and cuffed along the street between the unbaked brick hovels. It was not until the reinforced iron door of Adra's one stone building slammed on them that either of them said a word.

Then—

"I'm not a mean man," protested Crothers.

"No?" said Byng, monosyllabic for a start.

"No," repeated Crothers, "I am not, Joe Byng. But—and I says it solemn; I says it with one 'and above my 'ed, and I'd take my affidavy on it in a court o' law, if it's the last word I ever does say an' it's my dying oath—so 'elp me Solomon and all 'is glory; I'm a Dutchman if I wouldn't like to 'ave a come-back at that Arab."

Byng lay full length on his stomach, and buried his face in his arms. He was still too full of wrath for words.

"I'd kick his mother, if I couldn't land on him," mused Crothers. And then he busied himself about conning his new bearings. It was a four-walled jail—one-doored, one-windowed, iron-barred—ill-smelling, verminous, too hot for words and too suggestive of the opposite of home, sweet home to call forth humor, even from a seaman.

"They'll come an' rescue us," moaned Byng. "They'll quarantine the pair of us for being lousy, and they'll turn the perishing salt-water hose on us. We're due for the brig for Gawd knows 'ow long; our reppitation's gone; we've been spat on by a—by a Arab, and we 'aven't hit 'im back; an' we've lost the pup. We've gone an' lost the pup! Gawd! There ain't no more good in nothin'!"

Which shows no more than that Joe Byng in his sorrow overlooked a circumstance or two. For instance, there were rings in the floor that Crothers eyed with keen curiosity. They were anchored in the solid blocks of stone.

"It's better than it might be, mate!" he argued optimistically. "They might 'ave gone and chained us up to those!"

V.

Arabia has some peculiarities, not all of them discreditable, which she does not share with any other country. There is, for instance, the kind custom that dictates the setting free of slaves when they have rendered seven years' good service.

That rule (and it is rather rule than law) tends to eliminate all class and color prejudice. Provided that a man will bow to Mecca three times daily and refrain from pork and wine, he may wear whatever skin God gave him and yet mingle with the best. He may even marry whom he will and can afford; and he may be whatever his ability, ambition, and audacity dictate.

And Hassan Ah had never been a slave, so he had even less to overcome than might have been the case. He stalked Adra socially uncondemned where once he had caught fish, groomed camels, and done other irritating jobs. His old fish-catching days had given him an intimate acquaintance with the reef, and his small-boat seamanship, born of hard pulling in the trough of beam-on-seas, was well suited to the local type of craft.

So nobody questioned his right to the title of harbor pilot. And if certain perquisites went with an otherwise barren office, that was to be expected. Who worked for nothing, or for the empty honor of it, in Arabia?

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Nobody can pass the reef at night in shallow-draft lateen-sail boats without having him on board; and though he was never ostensibly paid for his services, it was understood that he performed pilot service in return for certain other opportunities that sometimes came his way. When things happened on the high sea that were not discussed in public, it was understood that Hassan Ah could have discussed them as thoroughly as anybody if he chose.

On the whole, then, and within limits that were only more or less definable, he was something of a personality. Men listened to him when he raised his voice in argument, and as one who could grant favors on occasion his words had weight.

The sun was very nearly in its zenith, beating down on dry Arabia between racing black clouds, when he had finished talking to the local council in the ramshackle old council-house, skin and mat curtained, that faced the sheik's where the main street broadened for a hundred filthy yards into a market-place. All through his argument he had held a pure-white bull terrier between his knees as proof that he knew whereof he spoke.

"Can any of you hold him without being bitten?" he demanded. And they did not seem to care to try.

"I know the ways of these men!" he asserted, drawing extravagant expressions of contentment from the dog in proof of it.

So the others in the stuffy council place gave the dog a wide berth and no privilege, but conceded him the right to hold the beast, if he wanted to, without personal defilement. And since the way of the world is that a man who has won the first of his contentions can win all the rest with half the ease, he persuaded them with a hurricane of black man's rhetoric to do what Arabs consider almost wicked.

Unbelievers who are prisoners should die, beyond all question.

"As the dregs of oil shall the fruit of the tree of Al Zakkum boil in the bellies of the damned!" the sheik quoted. "They should be hurried, therefore, to the punishment that waits!"

But Hassen Ah outargued him.

"Then they will land men from the ship, who will search our houses," he asserted. "Is there a majority in the council who would like to be searched by unbelievers?"

"Then bind them, and take them to their ship, and tell a tale of much drunkenness and wrong-doing. Ask an indemnity, and show the proofs, which will be easy to arrange."

"They, too, will tell their tale!" said Hassan Ah in perfect Arabic.

Unlike the more enlightened peoples of the West, Arabs do not encourage the mutilation of their mother-tongue; they teach it as carefully as they talk it, and this negro spoke like an Arab of the blood.

"There are certain damages they have received—some bruises on the face and tears in the clothing that does not belong to them but their government," he continued. "They would lay all the blame on us, and would breathe in the face of an appointed man, in proof that they were not drunk. And who could get other drink than coffee or water here? And who would believe the rest of our story, having found that part to be a lie? There would be a landing, and a search for proof, and much unpleasantness. Besides—"

If he had intended to add further arguments, the sheik saw fit to nip them in the bud; for there were some men in the council-room who did not know as much as Hassan Ah. Any free man may speak in council in Arabia.

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"What is thy way, then?" he asked.

The woolly headed pilot laughed aloud, taking care to make it evident that he was laughing at the prisoners; to laugh at a sheik or a sheik's bewilderment would be too dangerous.

"I would send them to the ship well satisfied," he answered.

"With money?" asked the sheik.

"With whose money?" asked Hassan Ah.

"With thine?" shot back the sheik.

"In the name of Allah, no!"

The black man laughed again, and rose to lean against the wall behind him, gathering the dog up in his arms.

"If it is the order of the council," he asserted, "I will send them back satisfied, with a tale to tell that will bring about no landing. Also, I will give the council much amusement."

"But will other sailors land afterward, seeking similar amusement?" asked the sheik.

"No! There will be an order that none land!"

The sheik took a vote on it. Heads nodded solemnly all around the room as his eyes sought each half-veiled face in turn. His own face was almost altogether shielded by the brown linen head-dress, for men of his race like to reach a judgment unobserved. They were all nods that answered him, and he saw fit to keep his own opinion to himself.

"Thou seest? These others are all with thee. Have it thine own way, Hassan Ah. Unlock thou the riddle and on thy head be the answer! Thou hast our leave to go."

So Hassan Ah set out undaunted for the jail, with a terrier in tow behind him and a huge smile on his broad-beamed face. And behind him a murmur rose that:

"It was well. He brought the warship in, instead of leaving it outside or—as any wise man would have done—wrecking it on the outer reef, where it could have been plundered at discretion. Let him send the sailors back again and bear the consequences!"

And within a minute of the pilot's arrival at the window of the jail (through which he peered for two minutes before speaking) the whole of Adra's council, followed by the city's children in a noisy horde, proceeded in a cluster after him and took up position, each as he saw fit, at different vantage points.

Then Hassan Ah shook a loose bar of the window until it rattled, and so called attention to himself. Crothers and Joe Byng raced for the window neck and neck, and reached it simultaneously.

"You two men want you—ah dog?" asked Hassan Ah, and the chained dog leaped up at the window as both men swore at once.

"You pass him in here! Come on, you black-faced cornerman! There'll be a cutter's crew ashore pretty soon to rescue us, and if you don't hand that dog over before they get here you'll get the worst whipping you ever had in

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all your black life!"

"They'll feed you to the dog when they're through with you!" vowed Byng.

"Come on, MacHassan!" ordered Crothers. "Get the key and pass the dog in. That'll settle your account. Then you's free. You needn't be 'fraid."

"Ah'm English," said the pilot of the day before, with an enormous grin that showed a pound or two of yellow ivory. "Ah'm not afraid; Ah can lick you; Ah can fight same as you men. Ah'm English!"

"Fight? You Irish Chink! Which of us two do you want to fight?" asked the outraged Byng. "Come on in here! I'll fight you!"

But to Byng's amazement Hassan Ah pointed to Crothers, who was heavier by forty pounds or more and taller by at least half a head.

"Ah choose him!" he grinned; and Curley Crothers clenched both fists in absolute but quite unterrified amazement.

"Come on, then," he answered. "Open the door." Then, as an afterthought—"I'll fight you for the dog."

"Ah don't want to kill that little man," said Hassan Ah. "But Ah'll give you the dog, win or lose, if you'll fight me. You fight fair? You fight English?"

"Well, I'm damned!" said Crothers. "I fight Queensberry rules. That suit you?"

"Oh—ah, yes! Keensby rules, that's it. All right—o!"

Hassan Ah produced his key and turned it in the creaking lock. He was stripping himself even before the two sailors were out in the sun, and by the time that Crothers and Joe Byng had realized that there was an audience of something like a thousand, including children, he was standing posed like a gladiator, with the straight-down tropic sun streaming off his ebony hide. As Crothers, not quite sure even yet that the whole affair was not a joke, began to doff his blouse it dawned on him that if the thing were true it would not be a picnic.

"Do you mean this?" he asked.

"Ah shohly do. Are you afraid o' me?"

That, of course, settled matters. The thing was not a joke, and Englishman or nigger—black, green, white, or gray—the plot must be licked forthwith and in accordance with the rules.

Crothers spat into his hands, while Joe Byng folded up his blouse and knelt on it. He eyed his antagonist for at least a minute, summing him up and ignoring none of the woolly-headed one's physical advantages in weight and strength, in height and reach, in being used to the climate and the glare, the odds were all with Hassan Ah. Then he sized up the moral odds; and though a biased audience might be at first supposed to weigh against him too, the sight of all those Arabs waiting to see him beaten roused his fighting dander.

"Do you represent the bloke that spat on us two men?" asked Crothers.

"Ah represent maself! Ah'm English! Ah fight English, and Ah'll prove it!"

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"Aw, wade into him!" advised Joe Byng. "London Prize Rules—no time called until a man's down. Go on, Curley—lead!"

"Do you agree?" asked Crothers.

"Suttainly!" The black man seemed disposed to agree to anything so long as he could get what he was after.

"Then here goes!" said Crothers; and he stepped in and led for the honor of the British Navy.

Oh! It was a fight! Crothers knew what he was up against the instant that his left fist slid along an ebony forearm and his nose collided with what seemed like an iron club. Steamship pilot this man might not be, but fighting man he very surely was. He hit straight and guarded high. He was no untutored savage. He had the hardest to acquire of all the Christian arts at his fingers' (or rather his fists') ends, and the heavyweight champion of Gosport took a double reef in his fighting tactics while he sparred for time in which to recover from the shock of that first blow. The claret was streaming down his face and he was dizzy.

"Oh, wade into him, mate!" urged Joe.

It is always easier to see what should be done than to do it. The sand was not slipping and giving under Joe Byng's feet, nor were his fists and wrists aching from contact with hard ebony. To him the thing seemed easy, and he was as anxious to get into the fight himself as was the terrier that strained at his chain. But Crothers, who had won a hundred fights at least in cleaner climes, fought canny and tried to make the black man tire himself with wasted effort.

And the Arabs sat in silence, like a row of vultures waiting for the end. Even the little children held their clamor and subsided into motionless calm. There was not a movement along the roofs or the wall, or in the rings of those who squatted. Arabia was spellbound, watching something she had never seen before and trying to puzzle out the wherefore of it. There were knives and guns available, yet these men fought without weapons. The white contender had a friend, but the friend did not join in. Why? Had Allah struck all three men mad? They sat still to see the end, having no doubt but that it would prove to be a judgment.

Curley Crothers was the first to close a round. He put an end to round one at the end of three minutes by missing with a heavy right swing, ducking to avoid terrific punishment, slipping in the yielding sand and falling.

"Back with you!" yelled Joe Byng, afraid that the pilot would take liberties and ready to jump in and stop him if need be. But he wasted his excitement.

"Ah told you Ah'm English!" said the pilot, stepping back and letting Crothers find his corner.

Curley was glad enough of a rest on Joe Byng's knee, and too intent on getting back his wind to listen over carefully to Joe's advice. When Joe called "Time" he stepped in readily again; and this time it was Hassan Ah who suffered from surprise.

Curley had been getting out of practise on board ship; he had needed waking up, and round one had done it for him. Round two and the six that followed it were exhibitions of the "noble art" that men in any of the larger cities of the world would have paid out a fortune to have seen.

There was racial prejudice, and service pride, as well as the usual decent man's desire to win to make a real mill of what might have been nothing out of ordinary; and there were the quite considerable odds against him that—after the first repulse—usually make men like Crothers do their utmost.

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Even the Arabs lost their stoicism while round two was under way. Byng yelled, and the terrier yelped, but the Arabs only shifted their position. That, though, was proof enough of their excitement; they actually sighed in unison when Hassan Ah thrust his ungainly chin in the way of a crushing right-hand smash, and laid his broad back on the sand.

After that it was slug-and-come-again with both of them, each getting wilder as round succeeded round, but neither man obtaining much advantage. Twice it was Crothers who went down; then he discovered a soft spot in Hassan's ribs, and after that he kept the black man busy on the desperate defensive.

There was no doubt of the end, then, barring accidents. Even Hassan Ah could not have doubted it; but he did his black man's uttermost to put it off, and he fought as gamely as anybody ever fought since prize-ring rules were drafted. He did not foul, or take undue advantage once.

It was a plain, right-handed, battering-ram punch to the neck that ended things, and Hassan Ah lay coughing on the sand with bulging eyes while Joe Byng tended Curley's hurts.

"Hasn't the nigger got any pals?" asked Crothers; and then it occurred to Byng that the most hurt man was surely most in need of mending. Both he and Crothers bent over him, then, and they soon had him on his feet again.

"Ah told you Ah'm English!" were the first words he succeeded in spluttering through swollen lips.

"Now, what d'you mean by that exactly?" asked Joe Byng, his attitude toward him almost entirely changed. A man who loses gamely is entitled to respect if not to friendship.

Hassan Ah searched in the tattered shirt that he had laid aside, and pulled out a folded piece of paper after a lot of fumbling. He opened it gingerly, and holding one corner of it displayed the rest with evident intention not to allow it out of his grasp.

"That says Ah'm English!" he explained.

"Oh!" said Crothers, rubbing an injured eye in order to see it better. "Can you read, you black heathen?"

"No," said the pilot. "That says Ah'm English, but Ah can't read!"

"Well, MacHassan," said Curley Crothers, reading the document a second time. "Black or white, you fight like a gentleman. I'm proud to have licked you. Good-by, and good luck! Here's my hand!"

They shook hands, and the seamen started shoreward with the terrier in tow.

"Did you read the paper?" asked Crothers. "It was dated Aden--non-coms' mess of some regiment or other. `This is to certify that this regiment taught Hassan Ah to use his fists, and that he has since licked every single mother's son of us!' Pity I didn't see that first, eh?"

"Oh, I dunno," said Joe Byng, who had not had to do the fighting. "You licked the savage, anyway."

Hassan Ah was right. There was no more shore leave granted. Crothers and Joe Byng were punished with extra duty and "confined to ship" for coming back with the marks of fighting on them; and the Puncher gave no further signs of life until, some three days later, her long-suffering engines turned again and she departed through the channel that had brought her in.

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Then the sheik and three others and a certain Hassan Ah went down at midnight to the jail and lifted with the aid of long poles passed through the rings in them the largest floor stones of that vermin– infested building. But the vermin did not trouble them. What they were after and what they lifted out was the cases of guns and cartridges the Puncher had contrived to miss.

THE END