

Colonel Furlong Found That Travelling With Arabs Had Some Difficulties; More Than Once He Had Dire Need of His Gun Arm

(Continued from page 18.)

sides stood out in silhouette against the sky. I bent low on my horse's neck and watched intently. At one of those turns where the sky cut deep into the mountainside, leaving every irregularity in relief against it, I noticed that men were following us parallel to our course and a little ahead of it. First, away up on the side, a foxed head and the barrel of a long Arab flintlock bobbed against the sky for a second, as, dodging cattle among the rocks, their owner rounded the side. Then a second and a third appeared, and I knew we were followed by thieves. This was not comforting; but if we were attacked, the guards rifle, Muraiche's old-fashioned five-shooter, and my two revolvers would be more than a match for them in point of armament.



Muraiche replied, still following the guard.

"Then let the guard take it if he chooses. Order the men on to the trail," and we scrambled over horses and donkey up the steep incline.

The guard turned to his saddle for a moment, made a low reply to Muraiche, then descended and disappeared in the darkness. Skirting the wood for half a mile, we passed beyond it, and my already well-aroused suspicions of intended treachery on the part of my men were confirmed, when in spite of the fact that the guard had by far the fastest-walking horse of our outfit and had taken a shorter route, there was no sign of him until we had passed a hundred yards beyond the grove and halted.

As he emerged I heard the faint click of his carbine upon which, half turning my horse, I awaited him; as he neared us I saw that he had been running his horse, which was breathing hard and sweating. Then the truth flashed upon me; my men were in league with the thieves, who, by a preconcerted arrangement, had gone ahead and hidden in the grove—there to set upon me in the darkness, relying on my confidence in the guard to follow his lead. Falling in their end, the guard had stopped to parley with them and then made up time. Had their place of ambush not been so evidently dangerous to enter, they might have been successful. Now would it have been the first time a guard and outfit had returned without the arbi, telling a good story of how they were attacked by thieves and escaped while he was killed.

Now here in front of me that picturesque, venomous-looking devil sat, his rifle full-cocked across the pommel of his saddle, my other men at a little distance to my right, and I a good mark with my white sun-helmet, but my revolver resting on my saddle covered the guard.

"Muraiche, tell the guard to uncock his rifle. It might go off by accident." With a sullen look the guard obeyed.

"Now tell him to ride first to protect the goods. Let the men with the pack-donkey follow, then you behind them. I'll ride last. If any thieves approach within gun-shot, warn them away at

once or I shall fire. You understand?"

"Yes, Arbi," and we swung out at single file. My purpose was to place the guard who possessed the most effective weapon where it was practically of no use against me, for this gave me a screen of the men and animals. The danger from Mohammed and Ali depended entirely upon their ability to close in on me, so while in that position there was nothing to fear from them. As for Muraiche, he was under my direct surveillance with the advantage all my way, as I rode with drawn weapon.

But I knew the Arab well enough to know that so long as he is not excited or his fanaticism aroused he will not risk his own skin while strategy will serve his ends; and also knew that I had no one to depend upon but myself, and that my safety lay in maintaining as far as possible normal conditions of things. So I watched; watched my men in front and watched to the side and behind for signs of the thieves, of whom I caught glimpses now and again. My Arab's conjunction with these men thwarted, it was but natural that they should communicate with each other to further their plans, and in various ways they sought to do this. While caravan men, while marching through a safe district and many strong often chant to ease their dreary march or to pacify the camels, in our circumstances the less attention we could draw to ourselves the better. So when Mohammed started to chant in a loud voice by way of giving information, I ordered him to be quiet.

Again as we rounded a short bend, Ali made a break for the brush, but he started a second too soon. I saw him, and called his name sharply; he halted and returned to the caravan.

When we passed within gun-shot of objects which might conceal a foe I rode abreast of Muraiche, using him to screen myself, knowing well that they would only attack from the side which from their position placed us in the full moon-light. And in the narrow ravines, though he growled, I often crowded him close, affording little or no opportunity to the Arabs to single me out for a shot without endangering Muraiche. So we traveled until a throng of one of Mohammed's sandles broke on the rocky ground, and he asked to be allowed to drop behind a little and fix it. Since we were on a long slope of hill I acceded; but as he fell behind some distance, I called to him to come, and when he approached us I turned my attention to the men ahead, feeling a sense of relief that we were in more open country.

The moon was slightly behind us, high in the heavens, and cast our shadows diagonally to the right and ahead of us. I watched the shadows of my horse and myself squirm and undulate as they traveled over the ground. As I relaxed from the tension under which I had been a moment gazing unthinkingly ahead, the movement of another shadow caught my eye, that of an upward-moving arm and knobbed club. There was no time to look first. Instinctively my right hand thrust my revolver under my rein, and I turned my head sharply to find, what I had expected, that my revolver was pointing full at the breast of the big fellow Mohammed, who, stealing up quietly behind me with sandles removed had intended to strike.

"Hoar-r-oo!" (Go on), I said. Lowering his club, without a sign of embarrassment, he took his place in line, the others apparently having been oblivious to the whole affair.

After he left me, and the excitement of the moment had passed, cold chills chased one another up and down my spine. From then on I saw no sign of thieves. For five hours I had ridden with my finger on the trigger of my pistol, covering my men. For five hours I had sensations which I trust I shall not experience again.

About one o'clock in the morning, high upon the hill top we sighted the white walls of Kussabat, and, after some hard climbing we came into full view of the silver city—gleaming in a bath of silver as Khoms had shone in a flood of gold.

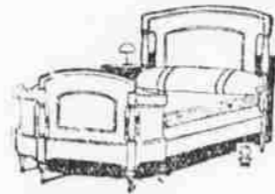
A few words with the town guard, and the great doors of its main gate, the Bad El Kussabat creaked and groaned as they swung open, and we entered the city, clattering up the steep, narrow streets, where, from the box-houses on either side sleeping forms muffled in barracans, awoke and peered over at us, and big white wolf-hounds craning their necks set pandemonium loose from one end of the town to the other, as they snarled and yelped in our very faces.

Soon we were in a small fondak with doors heavily bolted. The other occupants were a selected stock of camels, goats, sheep, and fowls taken from the Arabs by the Turks in lieu of taxes; in fact the fondak had been converted into a sort of pound. On the roof were a dozen or so of Arabs and blacks asleep, and I preferred their company in the moonlight to that of my four men under the dark archways. To prevent scheming, I took with me Muraiche, the cause of all the trouble. Some of these blacks and Arabs raised up out of their sleep probably for the first time, an apparition in khaki and a white helmet. Then we lay down, and, thanks to the previous night's rest, I managed to keep awake most of the night. When Muraiche rolled over in

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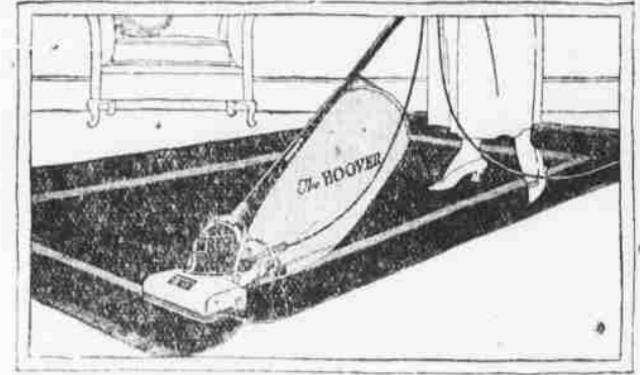
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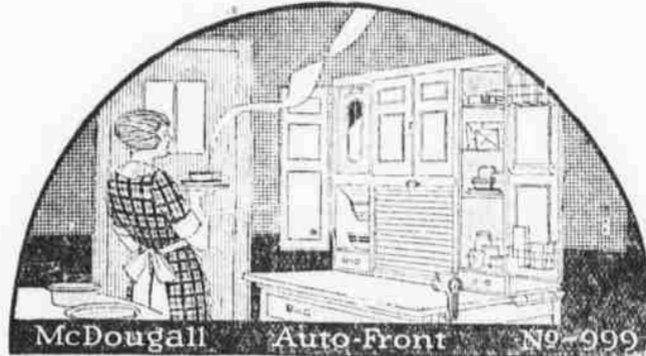
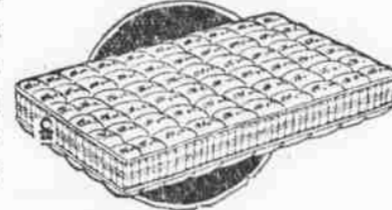
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his sleep, or a snoring black muttered in his savage dreams, I would start from my dozing.

True, I gave them no baksheesh at the journey's end. I might have had them thrown into the foul Turkish prison at the castle; but, after all, it

was the life of these men of the desert—they had only tried their little game and failed.

And the stakes? My revolvers and ammunition, the leather of my saddle and riding-leggings, and perhaps a gold filling in my teeth. They knew

I had no money, for in the presence of Muraiche I had deposited it at Tripoli, and Muraiche himself carried only the necessary funds for the journey. But modern weapons are a protected import save for the Turkish army and are worth their weight of

silver to the Arabs. Why such a risk for such small stake? Well, why the desert thief risk his life for a barracan, or an Arab scavenger dig up the corpse of a plague victim for the miserable piece of sackcloth that girds his loins?

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