

VALIANT DUST

by Percival Christopher Wren

Chapter 42
THE GREAT RICCOLI

MAJOR RICCOLI, at ease with dignity, leaned back among his cushions, sipped his coffee and lazily blew smoke-rings in the air. Smoke-rings in the air. Castles in the air. But smoke-rings, however beautiful, are very evanescent. Castles in the air. Castles in Spain.

An unpleasant expression, that most inappropriate. To the devil with Castles in Spain—when one has a Castle in Mekazzen—or rather will have one in a few hours' time. A knock at the door. Major Riccoli glanced at his wrist-watch. That would be the excellent Vittorelli, come to report.

"How goes it?"

Saluting with tremendous smartness and punctilious respect, the Sergeant-Major intimated that everything went well.

Having concluded his report, Vittorelli accepted his superior officer's offer of a cigarette, and gracious permission to be seated, while they once again discussed the subject of the hour of arrival, and probable mental attitude, of the officer, non-commissioned officers and men of the first detachment of the reinforcements.

"But after all, my dear Vittorelli, it is the accomplished fact, the world over. When they arrive to find me King of the Castle, the thing is done. And should there be among them any fool who is so damned a fool as to hesitate between a happy life and an unhappy death—why, let him face the firing-party, by all means."

"I suppose," mused Major Riccoli, "it is the better plan to act first as though for France, and afterwards to see if we have any such fool among us."

"Well—I think that's all," Riccoli added, yawning. "Turn the men out at 2 a. m. I shall be there at ten minutes past two."

"I doubt it," said a deep voice, in French, as the door opened, and a big man in a hooded cloak stood on the threshold. The man in the cloak stepped forward, threw back the hood and dropped the cloak from his shoulders, revealing to the astounded Riccoli and Vittorelli, a French Colonel in full uniform.

"Le Sage!" whispered Riccoli. Sergeant-Major Vittorelli instinctively sprang to attention.

"You are under arrest, Sergeant-Major," said Colonel Le Sage. "Remove your belt and revolver."

"Don't! Shoot him!" cried Riccoli, with a glance of positive agony at the table whereon lay his own revolver.

"Guard!" cried Colonel Le Sage, and four soldiers tramped into the room.

"Arrest that man!" ordered Le Sage, pointing to Vittorelli whose right hand tore at the flap of the holster of his revolver.

As the weapon flashed from its case, the nearest légionnaire seized Vittorelli's arm, while the second presented his fixed bayonet at the bit of his stomach.

"Sit still, Riccoli," snapped Le Sage, his own hand on his revolver-butt.

"Good!" he added, turning to Vittorelli. "Three of you march him to the guard-room and hand him over to Major Langsac with my orders that he is to be confined to the punishment-cell, to await court-martial. Use any necessary force."

The light of hope again illuminated the honest countenance of Sallor Harris.

"You may find that you have met Major Langsac before," added Le Sage, with a short laugh.

Légionnaire-Helléme! On guard outside this door, until your comrades return. Then report to me."

"Well, Major Riccoli! So we meet again. I wonder if you remember when we met last?"

"At El Brudja," replied Riccoli, saying as though it hypnotized him, the revolver on the table.

"Ah ha! A little snot to my vanity," laughed Le Sage. "My good Riccoli, you've seen me daily, since you came to Mekazzen. You talked with me for an hour at the post from which you marched here."

"You're not the Moor who came to the post with a message from the Kaid. He had a fat face, and a great beard," expostulated Riccoli.

"He had. So had I, an hour ago. And I have a fat face when I think I will."

"And you came to the post from the Kaid?"

"I certainly came from Mekazzen."

"Then you came from the Kaid. No one could go to and fro from here without his knowledge and consent."

"Or that of his trusted and all-powerful adviser and Vizier, the Señor Pedro Mallgul."

"Oh, ho! You got at him that way, did you?"

"I did. As you got at him through Raisul."

"Then the Kaid is fooling you, Le Sage."

"No. The other way about, I'm afraid, Major Riccoli. Now if you had said that Raisul and the Kaid are fooling you . . ."

"Nonsense, Le Sage. It is I who am fooling them. Talk sense. I hold the Kaid in the hollow of my hand. He thinks I am here to join him, to support him, to fight for him. I and my men are to serve his ends, the fool. He and his men are to serve mine."

"And France?" inquired Le Sage softly.

"France? She will be glad and proud to make terms with me before long—when I am the invincible Sultan of Morocco, head of the vast Pan-Islamic . . ."

"Yes, yes. I know it all, Major Riccoli. You're still riding that horse, are you?"

Riccoli smiled.

"Join me," said he. "Join me, and have a career worth having. Have a destiny, something finer than retiring as a fat Colonel, to grow cabbages in a French village. Join me, and I will make you a General, a Field-Marshal, a King. What did Napoleon make of his Murats and Bernadottes? If he could make waiters, hostlers, private soldiers, into Kings, what could not I make of you?"

"Why, a damned traitor. That is what you could make of me, Major Riccoli. If I put myself unreservedly in your clean and honest hands."

"Still riding that horse, are you?" sneered Riccoli.

"Yes, for France."

"And what will France give you, Le Sage? A cabbage-patch. Well, well, you've had your chance."

"I've got it, Major Riccoli, and I'm taking it quite soon," and again Colonel Le Sage consulted his watch.

"Well, I won't bore you for long, Major Riccoli. I shall be going in a minute."

"Might one ask where?"

"To interview the Kaid. By the kindness and courtesy of the helpful Señor Pedro Mallgul, I have an interview with the Kaid in his own private audience chamber. Private and personal, secret and confidential."

"For France?" sneered Riccoli.

"Well, in point of fact, I go in my Teutonic manifestation or incarnation, in the name and rôle of Herr Schlaicht."

"But you are quite sure it is for France?" asked Riccoli with a suggestive half-sneer.

"Oh, quite. The Kaid thinks he is going to talk to me—it is curious you should have mentioned 'cabbages' once or twice, Riccoli, and Le Sage broke into English.

"The time has come. The Kaid has said: 'To talk of many things: Of shoes and abbots and sealing-wax And cabbages and Kings,' and more particularly as to whether the time hasn't also come for the German equivalent of a quarter of a million francs to turn up, together with certain guns, rifles, ammunition and men. I hope that's how it goes, anyway."

"My men?" asked Riccoli.

"No, nobody's men. Mythical men. The German army of a Kaid's dream."

"And may one ask what you are going to tell him?"

"Oh, very little. Only that I've come to arrest him and send him over the border for trial, on a charge of murder of French soldiers; the destruction of French convoys, posts and property; and of waging unprovoked war upon France."

"And then—might one ask?" smiled Riccoli, kindly indulgent.

"Then your young friend Raisul."

"Oh, you will seize him, too, will you?"

"I will."

"On what charge?"

"Aiding and abetting. Also murderer of French soldiers and subjects."

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Riccoli tries, Monday, to laugh in the face of Hemsal.

STOLEN TRAIN RIDE IS FATAL FOR LAD

SALEM, March 28—(AP)—An impromptu train ride ended fatally for

Vincent L. Farmer, 20, when his head and left wrist were crushed as he fell beneath the wheels of the Cascade Limited here last night.

Farmer had accompanied Roy Zwicker, also of this city, on an errand for the latter's mother. On the way home Zwicker refused to "hook" a ride with farmer, and a few minutes later saw his companion ground to death.

The parents, Mr. and Mrs. Grover C. Farmer, survive.

Regulations recently placed in effect by the Chinese ministry of railways provide for the acceptance of freight shipments at the carrier's risk, a practice heretofore unknown in that country.

OLD TOWN ORDINANCE WILL PROHIBIT DRINK

MONMOUTH, March 28—(AP)—Sale of beer has never been legal in

this town, nor does its sanction now appear likely.

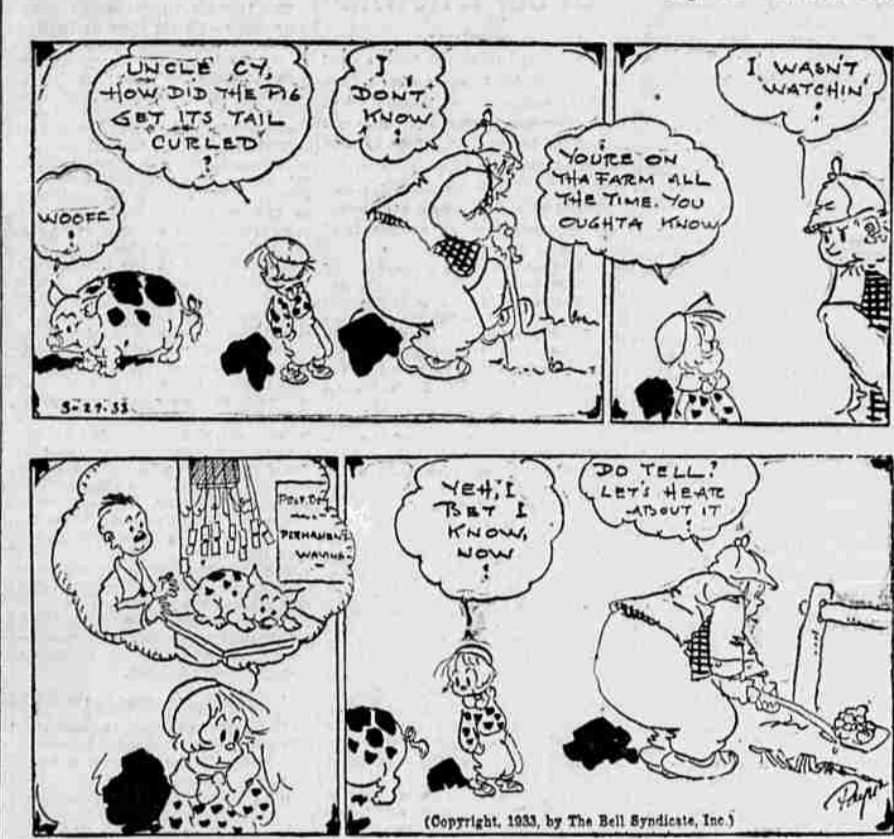
Neither does Mayor Boverax, the one doctor and only druggist in town, stock prescription whiskey in his store.

Charter ordinances passed in black ink more than 80 years ago still glare denial of right to sell any malt, vinous or alcoholic liquors within city limits.

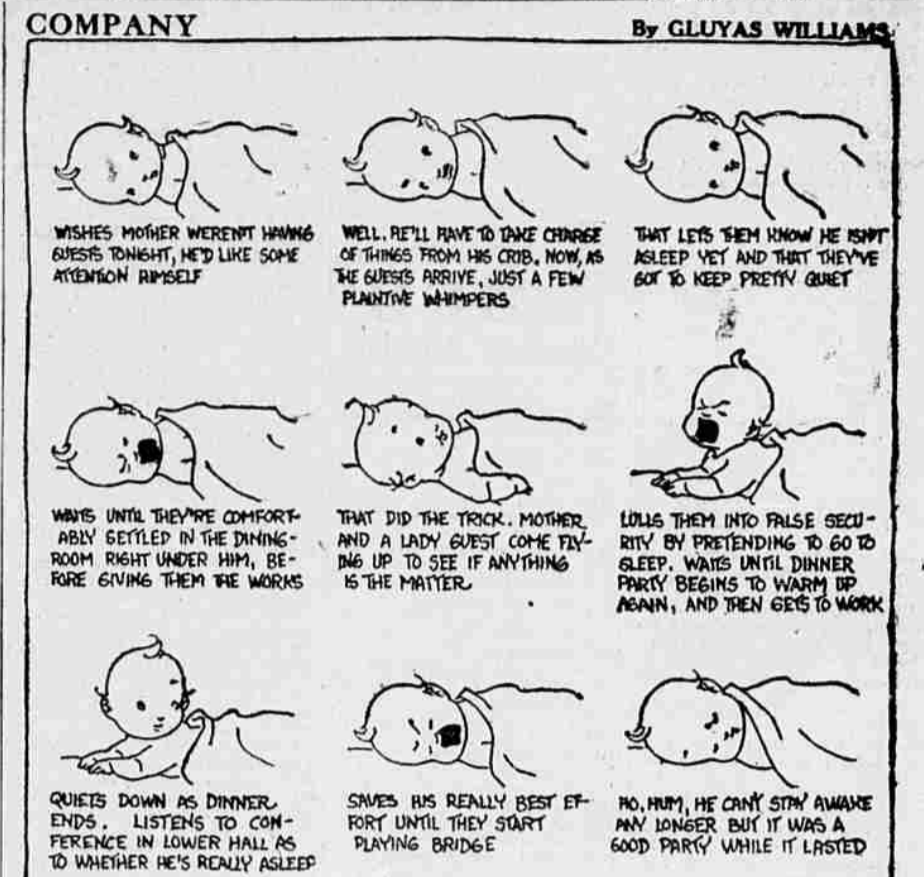
Ten Years for Killing Wife.
PORTLAND, Ore., March 28—(AP)—Edison Tupper, young Klamath Indian, was today sentenced to the maximum of ten years in prison for the killing of his wife on the Klamath reservation last January.

A cat set off a burglar alarm from a store at Rogers, Ark., and aroused residents of the community.

S'MATTER POP—



COMPANY



TAILSPIN TOMMY—Money Madness!



BOUND TO WIN—As Luck Would Have It



THE NEBBS—Welcome



BRINGING UP FATHER



MARSHFIELD COUNCIL VOTES BEER CONTROL

MARSHFIELD, Ore., March 28.—(AP)—An ordinance providing for taxing and regulating retail and

wholesale dealers and dispensers of 32 per cent beer was passed unanimously by the Marshfield city council last night after a spirited discussion before a large crowd of spectators. The ordinance followed by City Attorney John Goas drawn no previous pattern.

A handle mill at Pine Bluff, Ark., pays farmers about \$13,000 annually for hickory timber.

THIS RED TAPE SIMPLIFIES THINGS!

W-231

WRIGLEY'S DOUBLE MINT CHEWING GUM

TO OPEN, UNWIND