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ATTA

A Novel of a
Most Extraordinary Adventure

BY FRANCIS RUFUS BELLAMY

ACE BOOKS, INC.
23 West 47th Street New York 36, N. Y.

ATTA

To Walter Brooks, with whom I started
to write ATTA many years ago, and to
Ruth, who rescued the unfinished manuscript
and insisted that I complete it.

THE BRAIN-STEALERS

Printed in U.S.A.

Chapter 1

It is with a singular bitterness that I begin this memoir of my youth.

Here at my table, west of the Mississippi, I can turn in my chair and gaze out my window at sixty acres of green hillside, orchard, and valley. They are the actual scene of the greater part of the adventures I am about to relate; adventures for which I myself can vouch.

Yet even at the outset let me say that I shall experience no great surprise if you do not believe me. For I am not a professor or a literary pundit. Nor am I a scientist or a philosopher. I have no famous friends in Royal Societies to attest to my discoveries.

Also, my proofs—which lie before me as I write—are proofs only to the credulous eye: homely items providing no real evidence that I actually talked with a creature named Atta; that for many months, without hope of escape, I struggled for my life in a strange and hostile world which many men have observed but no man but myself has ever entered.

Yes, ironically enough, although I have studied the subject deeply in the last forty years I freely admit that even I might hesitate to accept my childish evidence as scientific proof, were it offered me by another. So great, indeed, are the limitations under which scientists and naturalists must labor that to verify my story as fact may always remain wholly impossible.

Nevertheless, to the best of my knowledge, my discoveries are definitely factual. Atta and I did labor together,

I did struggle and conquer in the cities of Fusa and Natissia, and I did cross the boundary into the world of Nature, to find proof of a universe that, for all I know, may embrace every living thing in the whole solar system.

Strangely enough, this universe must always have trembled very close to my perception. I can still remember, indeed—although this was many years ago—how my mother used to delight in telling stories of my childhood in which she said that even at the age of four I insisted that I was able to hold conversations with Dora and Roxy, two sorrel mares my father owned. Once, she said, when my father ridiculed my claims, I became very sulky and retired alone to the horse barn, where I did something to the two mares that rendered them wholly unmanageable for the rest of the day. Taken to task, I maintained that I had done nothing untoward to the team; I had merely told the two mares of my parents' disbelief and asked them to support my statement—an explanation that greatly impressed old Mac, our hired man, since he had actually been unable to control the two horses all day.

The truth of this happening, of course, I cannot vouch for now. It belongs among those apocryphal stories that are told of a man's childhood. Nevertheless I must admit that from infancy I always felt myself in strong sympathy with all kinds of animals and from the beginning recognized a more than physical bond between us.

Only as regards insects was I in just the opposite camp, even carrying my hatred so far as to kill them whenever opportunity offered; often, out of pure animosity, going many steps out of my way around the farm in order meanly to crush the life from some innocent and unsuspecting ant. My subsequent adventures could not have been better planned had they been a judgment from Heaven upon me for my conduct in this respect.

In any event, forty years ago I had a knack with animals and tools that distinguished me even in our countryside, and although I was barely twenty-one I had already acquired, with some assistance from my late uncle, this

very valuable farm that I still own; one that I intended to be a home for myself and my future wife, the young woman to whom I was affianced.

There was no house at that time on the place, a defect which I had every intention of remedying as soon as possible. That there had been one once, a rectangle of low, worn stones still attested. These stones had been the foundation of some fairly pretentious but vanished dwelling; they were now weatherbeaten and enclosed only what amounted to a rough, rustic sunken garden. Here some flowers grew wild, but others had been planted by a former owner and needed only care to bring them back to their former beauty.

It was, for that reason, a place that my betrothed and I often visited on Sundays in the three years during which I rented the fields to my prospective father-in-law. There we met and enjoyed ourselves after the fashion of country lovers. And there, too, Helen often busied herself pruning and weeding the plants and bushes, a sunken flower garden being among her dreams of the future—a tendency, I thought then, that augured well for the beauty of our home itself once we were married and gone to housekeeping.

Indeed, I can still remember clearly all the high hopes of that future that bubbled within me on the precise afternoon when I hitched Billy to my driving buggy and set out for what had in effect become our trysting place.

It was early June, about the same day of the month as this one on which I set writing, and the warm sunlight shimmered over the fast-ripening wheat and the sweeping fields of rye. The foliage in the woodlots was already dark with summer, and up in the sky a faint haze floated, brought by a warm breeze that spoke of rain not far off.

I was well aware of the possibility of this, for my mother had gazed rather wistfully after me as I drove out of the yard, and for a moment I was moved to delay my going a little to sit with her on the side porch, where she knitted among the hens. But if it rained, I thought,

Helen and I would not have much time alone together, and with the selfishness of youth I put my own desires ahead of all else and drove out of the gate without stopping.

One reason for this haste was that, although ordinarily Helen and I were in accord, once in a great while we would have a lovers' disagreement over some trivial thing, which my natural disposition would magnify; whereupon we would part in a tiff for the time being. Rare and soon forgotten, seldom lasting from one meeting to the next, these occurrences were perhaps almost entirely my fault.

On the preceding Sunday, however, we had had a rather more serious disagreement than usual. At least, I had thought enough of the affair to go to town and buy a box of candy as a peace offering, and this I had on the seat beside me as I drove along in the summer sunlight.

Otherwise I can think of nothing that distinguished this particular Sunday afternoon from a dozen others; indeed, I remember refusing to be in the least disturbed to find, on my arrival at the garden, that Helen herself had not yet come. She had a large family, and my only thought was that, as usual, she had been detained by doting relatives and would be along in a few minutes across the pasture.

With this in mind I alighted from the buggy, tied young Billy to the large silver birch tree that stood just off the road, sauntered into the garden beside some gray rocks that afforded a natural bench, and there began to turn over in my mind what I should say when at last my adorable one arrived. For not the least of Helen's attractions was the sweet confusion she always exhibited when I asked her forgiveness for my part in our quarrels and gave her a making-up present.

In this instance my box of chocolates was to be the present; and it seems odd to me now that I was prompted to open it before her arrival, for I was thinking only of our coming meeting. And yet I did open the box, select

carelessly a little bar of chocolate of the finer grade, and throw out into the grass the gold and silver tinfoil that had enclosed it.

Some ten minutes passed then, I believe, before I bethought myself of the spool of thread that Helen had left somewhere upon the low rocks the Sunday previous. She had sewed a button on my coat, broken her needle in the process, and forgotten to take the spool with her. I started idly to search for this along the edge of the flowers, without much expectation of success and chiefly to pass the time until she should arrive. The open box of chocolates interfered a little with this search, and rather carelessly, I laid it on the worn rock seat, never thinking of the insects as possible plunderers. Instead, I pursued my quest for the mislaid spool amid the grass and flowers.

For some time I passed around the sunken garden in this manner until I conceived that nearly a half hour had gone, still without sign of Helen. For the first time, then, it occurred to me that possibly there might be some reason for her nonappearance other than the presence of unexpected visitors at her house. Perhaps she had taken our week-end quarrel more seriously than I had supposed. Possibly she was sitting coolly at home with no intention of meeting me at all.

This was a wholly gratuitous assumption on my part, but after another half hour had passed and she had still not arrived my natural disposition began to take a hand and magnify her continued absence into a definite slight, a distinct desire on her part to continue our quarrel: an idea that did little to quench the flames of my irritation. It was in this frame of mind that I approached the spot where I had left the open chocolate box at the beginning of my search.

To my disgust it was almost completely covered with small red ants, some lying inert already sucking at the candy, others climbing the white paper sides to join them. In all there must have been fifty, and to my mind my whole gift was completely spoiled by their greediness.

"Why, you darn little pigs!" I said under my breath.

And with a sudden irritation at my own stupidity and a distaste for the small crawling creatures, I seized a large flat rock that lay near by and raised it over my head to crush the insects into a pulp with one blow.

"Darn you, anyhow!" I said aloud.

And with that I crashed the rock down on the ants and the candy with a passionate disgust that was scarcely human. Indeed, many times since I have wondered if I did not at that instant become something less than human; if I did not suffer, as a result of my anger, some form of temporary lesion of the brain, even some change in personality pressure.

For scarcely had my missile left my grasp before I was conscious of a hitherto unseen dark mass in the sky above me. Even as my own missile left my hand this mass became instantly larger in size and rushed down at me and the earth. It was like being assaulted suddenly by a hitherto unseen Kansas tornado. The grass and innocent flowers were suddenly flattened upon the ground. My chest felt nearly crushed in by an intolerable pressure. And then, amid a blinding shower of dust and an earsplitting crash like exploding dynamite, the whole sunken garden went black before me.

I had but one recognizable thought:

"God has struck you this time."

And then I knew no more.

Chapter 2

WHEN I came to myself it was dark and the surrounding landscape was enveloped in a Stygian blackness that pressed down upon me like an almost tangible weight.

With a start I pushed myself upright, only to groan with pain and lie back. Every bone in my body seemed to be sore, so intense was the pain. Only by gradually rubbing my arms and legs could I manage to move myself into an upright position and finally stand up and look about me. But even so I could see nothing but dense blackness.

Then memory came back to me with a rush, and I listened for the sound of Billy cropping the grass by the birch tree or pulling at his halter by the road. To my dismay I could hear nothing except a strange heavy roar as of surf occasionally breaking or a gusty wind sweeping through a great forest after nightfall. Also there was something strange about the ground upon which I stood. There were no flowers underfoot, and though I could scarcely make out the uneven surface, it seemed devoid of vegetation of any kind. Instead it appeared to be composed of great sandstone rocks, each one as big as a hogshead.

Surely, I thought in confusion, this is not the sunken garden. Where am I?

Then I slowly remembered the ants and the rock and the sudden rushing terror from the sky. Evidently Helen had not come to meet me after all. Some catastrophe had struck me down, and many hours must have elapsed.

What had happened during their passage? Had I been so severely shocked that I had wandered away from the garden in a daze? Or had the tornado torn the very earth to pieces about me?

Such was my first thought as I stood upright in the blackness; and I can only thank Heaven that in that initial moment I had no faintest glimmering of what had really taken place.

My eyes, however, were becoming more accustomed to the darkness now, and even as I thought a little regretfully of Helen and the chocolates I looked about me more intently to see if I could recognize this place into which I had wandered.

Stare as I might, I could discern nothing even vaguely familiar in the spot on which I stood. Instead, on every side strange bamboolike trees swayed in the night wind like some sort of Chinese tropical forest rooted in sandstone. There was no vegetation around the coarse boulders beneath my feet, nor did there seem to be any leaves on the trees directly around me.

Slowly I sat down again to think. And this time I was more than puzzled: I was aware of a touch of fear, the shadow of the dread of the unknown. There was not a foot of the country surrounding our farm with which I had not been intimately acquainted since boyhood, scarcely a field or patch of woods that I could not have recognized almost immediately or after a little thought. But nowhere near us was there any spot resembling in the least this sandstone-bouldered, spear-like forest that lay around me. Not even in the valley of the Upper Branch were there trees that looked like monster rushes of some new variety.

Where, then, was I?

Was I still in a state of nightmare shock? Or was I really in a place such as my eyes perceived?

With this last question I rose slowly and stood a moment trying to decide what to do. For I had become used in a measure to the rushing roar of the trees rubbing their

long flat branches against one another—although it was not the most comforting sound in the world, I can assure you—and it had not yet occurred to me that any danger might threaten me from the dark mass of foliage that stretched on all sides.

Now, however, I gave an involuntary shudder. Above the weird noise of the jungle trees I had heard a slight scraping sound as of some beast moving scaly claws on hard sandstone. It was a sound precisely like that made by an alligator or an armored reptile drawing himself up on a rocky beach, and for a moment I smiled to myself at my overheated imagination. Obviously the only alligator along the Upper Branch would be either Billy himself or some neighbor's cow floundering in a sandy pool.

The next second my smile froze on my lips. Directly in front of me, among the jungle trees, a black shape had appeared, distorted by the darkness out of all resemblance to any beast I had ever seen, but obviously a living creature. In the uncertain shadows of the night I could have sworn that it was an antediluvian monster, some throwback to man's primeval past. Two pale luminous eyes set somewhere in the center of its head shed a vague glow upon its body, and even in the darkness its queer flat legs and the long forked feelers thrust out from its armored hide gave it a resemblance to some prehistoric creature that lived in slime. Its luminous eyes, too, staring at me with vague intentness, bore no resemblance to any I had ever seen.

For a moment I had the horrible sensation of being caught in a nightmare, paralyzed by some apparition. Then my instinct of self-preservation awoke, and I turned and fled madly, blindly, away from the beast stumbling over huge boulders, crashing into the sharp edges of the flat trees, tearing my clothes and skin, plunging over stones and unseen obstacles only to rise and stagger on—in what direction I neither knew nor cared so long as I kept ahead of the thing that scraped and rustled inexorably behind me.

How long I fled thus cravenly I have no means of knowing. Five minutes, ten minutes—it could have been years and cycles of years. All I know is that there was no single instant when anything but utter fear filled my soul.

Then there was a sudden change in the jungle itself and in the ground underfoot. Instead of banging into clumps of bamboo that struck me in the face even as I slipped on the boulders beneath, I emerged without warning on to some kind of open rocky plateau whose surface was like congealed lava.

Out on to this I staggered, with sweat on my eyelashes and my breath coming in short painful gasps; and for the first time the light of a dim cloud-covered moon allowed me to see what was following me. It was no apparition or hallucination. Not more than thirty yards behind me lumbered a forked monster with armored legs and flanks, pursuing me with a kind of scrabbling inexorable hatred that was terrifying in the extreme. In the dim light he looked more like some kind of antediluvian beetle than any creature of the present day.

A huge storm was coming, too, I saw as I threw back my head and fell to running again. Black clouds were driving across the gray mist that obscured the moon, and the distant horizon held ominous flashes of lightning. What would happen to me if rain were added to the horror of the dreadful pursuer at my heels?

This was my one despairing thought as I forced myself onward, and what might eventually have been the outcome I do not know. For I had run perhaps only a hundred and fifty yards in the open when suddenly the night was rent with a jagged streak of white lightning, and with a gasp of horror I fell upon my knees, almost clutching the rock floor itself to keep from going one step farther.

Directly before and below me lay a precipice that cut straight down for a full two hunderd feet. At its foot, far down, swept and bent the tops of great trees of gargantuan size and strange foliage. A second flare of light-

ning lit them up as I gasped, and I saw that I clutched the edge of a cliff above a valley that stretched for miles, ending in the distance in other monster trees with strange cuplike heads that reared themselves at least a thousand feet in the air, their tops swaying like shorn waterspouts.

Even in the midst of my terror the sight almost stunned me. In God's name, what country was this into which I had come? Was I, finally, struck with madness?

For an instant, cold with terror and unable to move, I resigned myself to certain destruction. Even without thinking I knew that to leap down upon those gargantuan tree tops far below me meant certain death; and behind me the scrabbling, scraping footsteps of my pursuer now sounded almost in my ears.

Yet so dear and instinctive is the impulse to hold on to life until the last second that I did not jump. Instead I drove myself to my feet and faced my pursuer desperately; and even as I confronted his shapeless form and vague luminous eyes there came again a third vivid flash of lightning, so overpowering that it seemed to fill the whole universe.

It lasted no more than a second, I suppose, before darkness rushed back, accompanied by the ear-splitting crash and roll of thunder. But that second revealed something wholly unexpected. In a slight crevice in the lava floor at my feet glittered something that resembled a rounded steel pole, sharp at its far end and broken off at the end near me. Even in the darkness I could see it, and a picture of Crusaders in the Holy Land bearing down on the Saracens flashed into my mind.

A rude lance! A weapon!

This was my despairing thought, and with an inarticulate cry like that of a convict suddenly reprieved from the gallows, I reached down for my unexpected find and grasped it firmly with both hand. Over ten feet long it was, but not so heavy that to lift it in the darkness and poise it for action took more muscle than twenty years on the farm had given me. Strength came to me instantly.

Indeed, I needed but one more look at the huge beast now drawing close to me, thrusting out his obscene feelers like some monster from the Pleiocene Age, to make me lift the lance like a sword and hold it poised for action, resolved to rush him and at least die fighting.

For I knew instinctively that to await his onslaught on the edge of that cliff could result only in disaster. My sole chance of survival lay in rushing my enemy and plunging my lance into his very eyes before his long feelers could seize me.

For perhaps three seconds I stood there, praying for just one more flash of lightning. Then my prayer was answered. The white lightning flooded the dark rock, and simultaneously with the roll of the thunder I rushed at my antagonist and with all the strength at my command drove the steel pole straight at his ugly head.

There was a sickening crunch as the lance went home between his vague eyes. Then it was instantly torn from my grasp as the monster reared on his stumpy legs, shook his impaled head, grotesque in the darkness, and went into a horrible paroxysm of shuddering and shaking, trying to rid himself of the pole and at the same time attack me. Even in his agony he made one last effort to reach me. Despite the lance between his eyes he rose on his hind legs and staggered toward me, half blind with the piercing pain in his head, while I sought to evade him on the very edge of the cliff.

I suppose he must have been mortally struck. For he did not appear to see me as I fled down the narrow edge, nor did he apparently see the abyss before him or realize the danger of the trees far below. Instead he swayed straight ahead, tearing the pole from his head with his great feelers, and not until he was half over the precipice did he try to stop himself. Then, in one last soundless fury, he tore the lance from his eyes and threw it almost at my feet just as he lost his balance.

An instant he clawed with his hind legs on the edge of the abyss, a nightmare figure in the dim light above the

great treetops, and then he went plunging over and downwards into the dark valley far below.

Almost before I could credit my senses the faint sound of his heavy bulk striking the treetops and crashing on down to the ground came faintly up from the valley, and I realized that he was indeed gone and my life had been spared.

Then, as I stooped in the empty darkness to pick up my lance and give inarticulate thanks for my blessings, the long-threatening storm at last broke; and almost before I knew it the whole world was as if drowned in water.

I have experienced many storms in my life, both before and since, but never have I been suddenly assaulted by one of such furious violence as was unleashed upon me at that moment of my deliverance. There were no separate small drops in that abrupt downpour, nor even anything so bearable as the sweeping sheets of water that sometimes mark our worst storms in the Middle West. This rain fell from the inky sky like a Johnstown flood from the clouds. What separate drops there were, if one can call such prodigious splashes drops, fell in masses as large as barrels of solid water, one of these alone nearly sufficing to drown me as it drenched me from head to foot, leaving me gasping and scarcely able to stand upright.

Even as I shouldered my lance, streams of water up to my knees began to rush down the plateau upon me, and I had to struggle desperately to keep my footing and at the same time draw myself and my precious weapon away from the dangerous edge of the cliff lest I be swept over. For all of five dreadful minutes I bent against the onset of what amounted to a torrent.

Gradually, however, by using the lance as a riverman does a pole I succeeded in working my way up the treacherous plateau against the swirling water until I reached what appeared to be a great round sloping hillock of rock. Climbing this, I was out of the raging water,

except for the drenching rain itself, and for the first time I was able to shudder at the narrow margin by which I had escaped destruction by both beast and flood.

Meanwhile, however, the wind was turning cold, and even as I stood on my wet open refuge a cold shiver ran across me, making my teeth chatter and driving all thought of past terrors from my mind. One thing was plain, I perceived: I should have to find shelter, and soon, or morning would see me down with chills and fever—an illness too rich for the blood of a man who might still be obliged to meet all comers with a steel lance.

Driven by this thought, I did not hesitate for long. I walked to the end of my stone hillock, saw that it was succeeded by another of almost the same size, climbed up onto this to explore it, and stood on its dim top in the still blinding downpour. I could see nothing, however, except what looked like a succession of hills of the same kind, stretching in almost a straight line. I clambered up on a third one, and then a fourth, and for a long time I struggled thus through the gradually ceasing downpour in a world that seemed composed of nothing but wet, streaming smooth weatherbeaten stone.

I found no shelter. But the rain itself was ceasing, I realized, almost as abruptly as it had begun, and a few stars were beginning to come out. They seemed singularly bright and large now, and as I gazed at them the first real doubt of my sanity came sharply over me. Were these actually the stars over my home, or was I imagining them? Did I really exist in this country that was natural to no human eye? And if so, what was I doing, wandering with a steel lance in the night, beneath giant stars, plunging up and down a series of stone hillocks?

The questions startled me, for I could think of no answer that satisfied me. And the very weirdness of my surroundings enhanced the incredibility of my actions. Indeed, almost at the next moment I was brought to a full stop by a new strange shape gleaming before me in the increasing starlight. It was nothing alive, I realized,

as I grasped my lance tightly and peered at it with a slight resurgence of my earlier fears. It appeared to be more like some kind of huge metal hogshead lying on its side.

Cautiously I approached and tapped it with my lance. It was nearly round at its open entrance, I saw, and it was empty, as I soon reassured myself by poking my lance into its depths until it struck the far end. It held nothing, either, despite its length of twelve feet and its seven-foot circular entrance. I could imagine for it no appreciable purpose.

Nevertheless it was dry inside, and it provided a shelter, even a kind of defensible refuge, for a wanderer like myself. I finally walked into it, drew my lance in after me, and sat down just inside its rim. To my relief it gave me such a feeling of security that I drew a deep breath of relaxation and leaned back almost as if I had found a home.

For at least I had a shelter now; I was safe from the chill wind whose successive gusts still swept the plateau and the incredible valley outside.

Just what I intended to do when the wind ceased I cannot say now. For to point out that everything seemed like some monstrous dream is still grossly to understate the truth. Already my mind had refused to accept as reasonable the grotesque country I was in. Now, no matter how often I went over the incidents that had happened, my common sense refused to admit as possible the position in which I found myself: alone in a strange world of stranger beasts and vegetation than I had ever read of, and armed only with a steel pole with which to defend myself and get food and drink.

How on earth could such a thing be?

Nevertheless it was the unalterable fact before me, and I tried to confront it with equanimity as hour after hour wore slowly away. The gradual disappearance of the storm winds helped a little as the tempest fell below the distant horizon and a gentle warm breeze took its place.

With the warmth, too, came an almost deafening chorus of night sounds which, despite their intensity, brought a kind of familiar peace. But still I could not reconcile myself to the reality of my situation.

Finally Nature herself came to my assistance. The night voices slowly ceased, stillness settled over desert and jungle, and for a long time nothing happened. And during this armistice my watchfulness gradually relaxed. Presently my head was nodding in spite of my efforts; and at last, I suppose, I must have fallen asleep in my lonely shelter. For I remember nothing more .

Chapter 3

I WAS awakened by the warm rays of the morning sun striking into my shelter and shining brightly on my face. How long I had slept I had no means of knowing, but I was still stiff and sore in every joint as I rose and stretched, made sure there were no hostile creatures in sight outside, and then went out into the open, trailing my invaluable pole after me. A moment later I had reached the summit of my stone hillock and could look in every direction; and never shall I forget the picture that lay spread out before me.

I stood overlooking the immediate scene of my ghastly adventures; a harmless-enough-appearing rock mesa that extended some three or four hundred feet from jungle to precipice. But it was not the precipice that held my fascinated gaze. It was the valley.

This was some three hundred feet below me; I could see it from above to its fullest extent, and for at least a

mile it was one vast rectangle of huge colored plants. They were purple, yellow, russet, violet, pink and blue and reddish gold; the whole interspersed like a Persian rug with great light-veined greenish jungle trees whose branches sometimes offered huge leaves bigger than beach umbrellas. All this was directly below me. At the far end of the valley, where the ground began to rise, great splotches of dark red and brown stood out, and here it appeared that I was gazing at fields of gorse on rising hills. Behind these splashes of color still other green meadows rose, such as one sees in mountain uplands, and at the distant top, dim on the horizon like the great towers of a city many miles away, was the line of unbelievable cuplike trees that I had seen in the lightning's glare. In the daylight they could not be mistaken. They looked like gargantuan apple trees a good thousand feet high.

With a gasp of unbelief I turned to view the country behind the stone hillocks, the country whence the squat monster had come; and here I had another surprise. It was as level as a green Dakota prairie, without any sign of last night's rain beneath its heavy green jungle trees. As far as the eye could reach it stretched, an undulating plain of grotesque green woods covering coarse yellow boulders. These woods covered everything, growing thicker and more tangled in places until they resembled a kind of tropical jungle, yet never rising over thirty feet high.

Standing on a hillock as I was, I could see for miles, and the only break in the monotony was an occasional graceful palmlike tree that rose above the forest, bent its smooth green trunk toward the sun, and held out a circlet of bright yellow.

For a moment the whole character of the landscape reminded me irresistibly of pictures of central Africa as depicted in my schoolbooks. Even the occasional high graceful trees with yellow blooms bore a startling resemblance to some kind of gigantic African dandelion palm. They

held no kinship whatever with the natural trees of our own West.

Then my eye fell on the shining hogshead in which I had spent the night, and my thoughts jumped rapidly to the inhabitants of this country. Surely that cone of polished metal, remarkably like a huge thimble, spoke of human civilization, as did the sharp well-made lance at my side. No squat monster with vague eyes had ever cast such things. There must be people in this land, though whether hostile or friendly no one could predict.

At the thought I realized for the first time that I was hungry, almost ravenous. I had not eaten for an unknown length of time, more than twenty-four hours possibly, and regular meals have always been a necessary consideration with me. Now, before deciding on any course of action, I obviously needed food. Even so, the sight of the jungle intimidated me, and I hesitated to shoulder my lance and plunge into it again. Without much doubt the darkness of the night before had aided as much as hindered me in my escape from my enemy. Another time I might not be so fortunate.

The jungle valley was the only other possibility. I turned and gazed down into the beautiful country below me. Should I not be likely to find fruit or possibly an outlying farmhouse down in its trees?

With this hope in mind I scanned the landscape for some time for traces of orchards or smoke; but in vain. The valley appeared as forsaken as the desert above. Indeed, not only did I not find any evidence of life, but the strange conviction that I was suffering from a hallucination took possession of me again as I gazed. Had I not seen such a valley somewhere before, like this one and yet not like it, clear in its every detail and yet surely as unfamiliar as another world could be?

I finally shook myself and turned away. Lack of food must be addling my wits, I concluded.

As I came to this dismal conclusion my foot caught against some substance lying half hidden in a long gully;

and here I saw to my surprise that a long, thick black rope some four inches in diameter lay stretched in a crevice perhaps forty feet long. With strangely mixed emotions I walked down to where it ended, stooped to pick up its frazzled end, and examined it. It had been snapped asunder by some terrific force, and the strands of which it was composed were torn into unequal lengths. I pulled out several and examined them: they were like the remnants of some old ship's mooring line along the docks, still wound around the snubbing pile after the cable itself had parted. This resemblance, combined with blackness and the odd texture, suddenly struck me as very peculiar. What engine or circumstance, here in a desolate valley, could have snapped this thick rope off short like a piece of thread?

The whole piece was nearly fifty feet in length, I judged as I dragged it out of its crevice. It was of a remarkable lightness for its thickness. Indeed, when one unraveled its ends and untwisted the strands that composed it one had something approaching a good resilient twine. It suddenly struck me as valuable, and for some moments, like any good farmer, I devoted myself to unraveling the snapped end of the big cable and putting the best lengths thus obtained into my pocket against future emergency.

But I could not eat them, and I was beginning now to be aware of actual pangs—a further reminder that the problem of mere sustenance bade fair to overshadow all else in my present predicament.

Resolutely, I turned my back on my latest discovery and, lance on my shoulder, plunged into the desert jungle, first taking good care to observe the position of sun and shadows so that if necessary I could find my way back without retracing my outward trail.

For some time, then, I journeyed thus, going forward slowly over the boulders and among the green trees, my eyes on the alert for signs of hostile beasts and all my senses on watch against possible dangers. It grew very

hot after a while, and the going itself bothered me excessively. For the ground was much rougher than I had imagined, the wild confusion of rocks and great hard clods of sandstone alternating with thickets of brown dead trees to produce an extremely treacherous footing in which an ankle could be turned or wrenched very easily.

In addition, my lance impeded me by catching in the thickets, and its great weight soon became an almost unbearable burden. I dared not put it aside, however, for I should then be completely unarmed and helpless. I made my way slowly onward as best I could.

I had gone some quarter mile, I think, when ahead of me through the jungle I saw a sort of sandstone clearing and with renewed hope and energy made for it. I had been dimly conscious from the beginning of a tremendous life force inhabiting these rustling green woods through which I had been forcing my way. In fact, without having caught sight of a single creature of any kind or description, I had several times imagined that something more than the breeze had set the tough green branches to quivering as I approached them; and once or twice I could have sworn to the swift disappearance of some beast or other along the ground or in the air above, its only trace a sound of scuttling legs or whirring wings—a sound lost or caught up in the continual rustle of the jungle trees.

So far, however, I had not laid eyes on any creature. And there seemed to be an entire lack of fruit or nuts of all kinds; in fact, of anything edible. It was therefore with a decided rise of spirits that I now descried the open space ahead of me. If not human habitation, here at least was a change in the character of the country.

As I came to the edge of the jungle and looked out, I saw that I was doomed again to disappointment. A small clearing, perhaps two acres in extent, lay baking in the sunlight, with no sign of life or habitation on it and only the same large sandstone pebbles glittering in the heat. I

was turning away in bitter disappointment when my eye was caught by something that moved on the far side of the open space beside a large boulder. With a quickening of the breath I crouched down behind a green thicket and peered through the branches. Something brownish had raised itself from the pebbles for a moment and then fallen back. It was more than half behind the boulder but something in the pose, the gesture, sent a sudden thrill through my heart. It indefinably suggested a person's last hopeless attempt to free himself from a trap of some sort. Without stopping to think of the possible foolhardiness of my action I rose from behind the thicket and hurried across the clearing. As I rounded the boulder I stopped short with a cry of dismay and alarm, and then I fell back a step, grasping my steel lance tightly.

One of the most grotesque creatures I expect ever to encounter in my life lay stretched on the ground, almost beneath a rock that had evidently fallen upon him, pinioning one of his legs. He lay nearly on his back, his other legs, of which there seemed to be three, lying limply outstretched beside him, mute evidence of his exhaustion. He had apparently given up the struggle to free himself at the exact moment when I caught sight of him. Now both his arms lay lifeless at his side, and his head had fallen back upon the pebbles, his two large, extremely wide-set eyes staring faintly at the sky. He was clad in a sort of dull brownish leather-like material, burnished in places until it looked like natural armor. And two delicate feelers projected from his enormous head, weakly tapping the boulder beside him from time to time as if he considered some despairing plan of moving it from his imprisoned leg.

For a moment I was too taken aback to stir. Was I in the presence of some gigantic ant or of one of the inhabitants of this weird country—the forger of my shelter, perhaps, the maker of that piece of rope that I had so lately appropriated? Or was this some new bestial enemy

who, if freed, would vengefully seek my life as the Pleiocene monster had done?

While I stood thus transfixed with doubt, the creature turned his head and caught sight of me. A faint shudder ran through him as he made a new convulsive effort to free himself, and then he fell back again, his eyes fixed upon me in dumb despair. For the life of me I could not associate the look he fastened upon me with that of a wild beast. Strange as his appearance might be, the light of intelligence shone in those eyes. The certainty took possession of me and would not be thrown off.

He, on his part, evidently took it for granted that his last hour had come; and this pitiful resignation was, I suppose, what decided me. Almost before I knew it I was working feverishly to free him from the weight of the boulder, all fear of him forgotten.

At first I could not even budge the heavy stone; much to his disappointment and even surprise, I thought, as he pulled himself up on his arms and tried vainly to withdraw his imprisoned leg. Then I bethought myself of using my lance as a lever; and after a while, by dint of making a fulcrum with several stones and digging out a small hole under the boulder with the end of my lance, I succeeded at last in getting a sufficiently good purchase to pry the huge rock slowly up and off the unfortunate creature's leg, which he withdrew in a badly crushed condition and gazed at hopelessly.

This done, I sank down, panting from my exertions, and eyed the strange creature whom I had rescued.

From his acquiescence in my endeavors to help him and from his eloquent attitude of despair I had already concluded that I was in no danger of being attacked. Now it occurred to me that he was kindly disposed toward me and even grateful for what I had done; and when he rose painfully and came limping toward me, holding up the injured leg for my inspection, I did not draw back.

"Hold it out here," I said, "and hold it still, and we will see what can be done."

He seemed to understand, for he remained motionless, watching my every move with his enormous eyes, while I cautiously felt the broken bone, straightened it, made a rough splint from the fiber of a dead tree, and bound it to the broken limb with a strand of the rope that I had put in my pocket.

"There," I said, "that will keep it in place."

Again the creature seemed to understand, for he passed one of his feelers slowly over the splint, then raised it and tapped me lightly on the shoulder several times. I had lost all fear of him by this time, and there was something so comical about the gratitude of this grotesque being—something so human in spite of the preposterous absence of all human features—that I remember smiling as I rose and went to extricate my lance.

My companion watched me in silence for a few moments as I cleaned the dirt from it; then suddenly he sat up and began gesticulating rapidly with forearms and feelers, and from his throat came high-pitched sounds. That he was trying to tell me something was quite evident; it was quite certain, too, that I hadn't the faintest idea what it was. I merely shook my head at him slowly.

"It's no use," said I, though of course my words conveyed no meaning to him; "I can't understand you. The best thing for you to do is to come back with me to my shelter. You'll have to be careful for several weeks." To amplify this speech I pointed and made the usual absurd gestures that one makes to foreigners and idiots, and I still flatter myself that, in part at least, he understood what I meant. For after a while he ceased his twitterings and began making similar gestures himself, pointing in a direction in which he wished to go and bowing and holding up his injured leg. So ridiculous was the performance, we resembled so closely those cartoon characters of my boyhood, Alphonse and Gaston, that I had much ado not to laugh. Nevertheless his persistence

brought its reward. For it suddenly occurred to me that an injured lodger in my shelter would be no better off than I was, whereas it was possible that he was offering me food as well as some better refuge of his own.

"All right," I said aloud. "I'll go with you. Maybe you can find us something to eat."

And a few minutes later, lance on shoulder and considerable uncertainty in my heart, I was following my new companion as he limped to the north end of the sandstone clearing and there without ceremony plunged into the jungle.

I don't mind confessing that, once in it, injured though he was, he set me such a swift pace that I had all I could do merely to keep up with him. I had no time for more speculations on the wisdom of my choice. Lame as he was, his strength, agility, and quickness were far superior to mine, and I had much ado not to be reduced to merely scrabbling after him.

We traveled due north, and I kept careful check of the few landmarks we passed so that at the proper moment I could return to my metal shelter and recover my long black rope. In some dim way these two things seemed to represent to me all that remained of my actual entrance into this country, and I had the curious feeling that if I should lose them or be unable to find them again my road out would also be lost. For I had got to the rocky plateau by some route, and if this jungle lay at one end of it, then my own farm lay at the other.

In the meantime I was growing very hungry indeed—almost faint, to tell the truth; and this condition was responsible for the only untoward incident that marked our journey—a happening that took place after we had been traveling for about an hour.

During this time my new companion had waited for me to catch up with him every now and then, whereupon I had examined the splint to see how it was holding and both of us had rested ourselves. Usually such breathing spells had been productive of little more than the mutual

silence while I wiped my moist brow and my companion felt of his leg. This time, however, my eye was caught by what I took at first to be a mirror suspended from one of the limbs of a jungle tree and flashing in the noonday sun. It was a large eggshaped globule, I soon perceived, made of what looked to be polished glass, and it gathered and reflected the rays of the sun in an almost kaleidoscopic splendor of prismatic gleams. Resting in the lowest crotch of the tree where the first thick limb joined the trunk, it was not suspended, but it had clearly been put in its place by someone.

Fascinated by its appearance, I rose and went to it—it was not more than thirty feet away—and reached up my hand to touch it, wondering who had made it and placed it there. Instantly, as if by magic, my simple touch wrought an incredible change. The moment my fingers came in contact with its cool surface it changed from a glass globule to a huge mass of water that broke its shape with a splash and flowed down and over me, soaking me to the skin.

For an instant I stood utterly bewildered, soaking wet and stunned.

Plain water! Was it nothing but plain water? If so, how in defiance of gravity could it have remained suspended in the crotch of this tree, a glistening wet sphere over two feet in diameter? Where in the world was I, that the very laws of gravity could be defied?

At the unbidden question my overwrought nerves suddenly gave way and water rose to my own eyes. Standing alone in the heat of the jungle, I wept until the tears coursed down my cheeks.

Was I, indeed, on the earth at all? Or had I, in the darkness, somehow been transported to the moon or an even more distant celestial body?

These were my wild thoughts as I stood with my back to my companion. And you may laugh as you read this, seated in your comfortable chair, but I assure you that to me at that moment it was no laughing matter. Indeed,

put yourself in my place; consider the succession of unbelievable experiences that had come to me; and tell me then that you would have felt differently. Where on this broad earth do drops of water five times as big as a man's head hang suspended in the trees? Where does one find grotesque valleys such as I had seen, or huge ant-like creatures with men's brains but with feelers projecting from their heads?

Consider all this, I say; and then tell me if it is any wonder that I broke down and wept.

I was recalled to myself by a touch on my arm. My companion had evidently seen that something was wrong and had approached me and was stroking my arm gently with his feelers. His kindness, his evident sympathy, went to my heart. I could have embraced him, outlandish and grotesque as he was. Obviously I had found one friend at least in this nightmare country, and the thought gave me fresh courage.

"Don't worry," I said. "It will pass."

To this he replied with more gesticulations and such a succession of strange high-pitched words that finally even I had to smile at my weakness. With half a sigh I put my hand on his shoulder and walked back to where my lance lay, shouldered it, and thus signified that I was ready once more to go on.

For some two hours we pushed on again, over the same rugged, desert country, between the same clumps of queer trees, which grew now more thickly, now more sparsely, as far as the eye could reach.

Several times, down the long colonnades, I caught glimpses in the distance of moving figures like that of my guide, but smaller and clad in black armor; and these always hastened away at our approach as if fearing attack. Once, too, a deep humming filled the air, far louder than the incessant hum and rattle of the swaying trees. It came near and then nearer and finally passed over our heads with the roar of a bomber, while its huge black shadow swept the boulder-strewn ground. My companion, how-

ever, paid no attention to these appearances, but kept steadily on until finally, in the center of an unusually dense grove of trees, he stopped and signified that we had reached our journey's end.

Before us, hidden from view on all sides by the crowding green trunks of the bamboolike woods, was a roughly spherical light brown wooden structure; at least, it had the grain and appearance of brown seasoned wood, though nowhere could I see any sign of joints or planks. Some twelve feet high, with an irregular surface marked by cracks like those in a dried mud marsh, it looked for all the world like a huge English walnut shell.

I was in no mood for curiosity, however. Indeed, I was now far gone with hunger, and my weariness of both body and spirit was so great that I bestowed only a perfunctory glance even upon this new prodigy. Halfway up one side was a circular entrance, and up through this my companion now pulled himself, while I laid my lance against the irregular wall and with its aid climbed up after him.

The inside, I saw, had been cleared out and was divided into two chambers: an upper one in which I now found myself under a low domelike roof, and a lower one apparently reached by a round hole in the floor. Down this hole my host had already disappeared. I leaned out the doorway, pulled up my lance and laid it on the floor, and sank down to await his return.

To tell the truth, I no longer had much interest in my surroundings, or in life itself. I merely wished to eat and drive away the faintness that was assailing me. And the fact that my host had already so casually disappeared slightly irritated me.

Consider my surprise, then, when presently he reappeared from the room beneath, carrying several whitish objects like huge mushrooms, which he gave to me, indicating by his gestures that they were good to eat. Without hesitation I bit into one, found it indeed of the consistency of a dried mushroom though with little taste,

and soon had finished it to the last crumb. It had a peculiarly satisfying after-flavor, I found. I tried another and another until my hunger was satisfied and I could eat no more. In the end I had eaten five.

Then I lay back with a sigh of exhaustion and closed my eyes. Within five minutes, I think, I was asleep.

Chapter 4

How long I slept I cannot say, or if it were the next morning or the day after that my new companion waked me with another meal of his odd mushrooms. For of the two weeks that followed I have little remembrance now, except that my host's leg healed rapidly, and that I myself achieved a measure of acceptance of a situation whose reality I could not deny, yet whose explanation was beyond me.

Indeed, I think you will agree that the original mystery of my surroundings was now so doubly enhanced by the outlandish appearance of my new host that it was almost painful to consider. He lay nearly always at my elbow during those first nights, and, strive as I might to shut him out, there were few evenings when the nightmare implications of his presence did not rush at me and pin me down. For several nights I could scarcely sleep at all, but sat at the doorway staring out at the moonlight, hoping that I might wake the next second and find myself back in the sunlight of the sunken garden.

In these dark moments I arrived at only one conclusion: the sun still rose and set, the length of night and day seemed unchanged, the stars appeared precisely as

before, and, despite the character of the country and its storms, summer still continued. Therefore the presumption was that I was still on earth and in a latitude closely resembling the one in which I had been so incontinently struck down.

Right or wrong, this simple deduction temporarily satisfied my desperate need for at least one basic, familiar fact; and for many days it was the one rock to which I clung.

Meanwhile neither my new host nor I ever ventured far from our house; so that most of my time was spent in the little grove at our doorway, where I practised with my lance. It was too heavy to throw, I found, but I soon attained to a certain proficiency in using it as an old-fashioned pike, and this ability stood me in good stead later on.

My companion took little interest in this, but devoted most of his time to our larder. The food supply seemed to be, and in fact was, practically inexhaustible; for I found that the strange mushrooms that served as both meat and drink were nothing less than a kind of edible plant that my host cultivated in the lower room of our home. Every morning, in spite of his strapped leg, he would make a dozen or more trips into the grove, climbing the trees with surprising agility and cutting off certain long leaves with his beak. These he would bring back to the house, and when, with my help, he had laid them out and shredded them into small pieces, he would take them into the cellar and spread them over the mushroom plants, where they acted as a sort of fertilizer; for in a surprisingly short time a fresh crop would appear.

Tasks such as these took up much of our day; but we both sat long over meals, he never worked at midday, and if it rained he did not go out at all. Thus we spent much time together. As a result we gradually learned to communicate roughly with each other, and after a number of ridiculous attempts we managed to identify and name, to our mutual satisfaction, most of the im-

mediate objects around us. This achievement we followed with a similar identification of our common movements and actions—"eat" and "good," I remember, were among our first successes——and here, somewhat to my surprise, I found my new friend remarkably intelligent. Atta—for that, I found, was his name—even got to understand much of my language before I understood his; more, I think, from the inflection of my voice than the actual words, for he could never learn actually to speak English. Yet I had by far the greater curiosity and initiative, and the end result was that our conversation, such as it was, came gradually to be carried on in his language, which consisted of a combination of complicated gestures with a high-pitched use of words—I am at a loss to describe it—that I found very difficult to reproduce. Indeed, during all our months together I never learned to speak it without conscious effort. And Atta himself had a great deal of difficulty with certain English words —my own name, Brokell, among them.

Nevertheless both he and I made a sincere attempt to understand each other, and even during those first few weeks our ability to communicate with each other progressed remarkably; so much so that eventually I learned from him a number of things that both surprised and confounded me.

The jungle country about us was strange to him too, it appeared, though his ignorance of it was not on the same plane as mine. It belonged to no one in particular, he said, though it was infested at the moment by wandering bands of savages who were like him in general appearance and spoke a rude variation of the same language, but were of a rather lower type of civilization. He had never seen anyone like me before, and my clothing, white skin, and yellow hair were a constant source of wonder to him. Yellow, in particular, was a color he liked.

In his own country, he said, he was one of the leaders of a populous city long established, which in the far dis-

tant past his ancestors had conquered. He himself was of the present ruling class, a circumstance that had allowed him to go out on a scouting expedition. Unfortunately he had not suspected the presence of hostile invaders. His five companions had been killed in an ambush, and he alone had escaped, preserving his life by the discovery of this odd house.

His first experience in solitary living he had found unexpectedly pleasant—"disturbingly pleasant" were his exact words—except for the continued presence of the unexpected roving bands of savages who had killed his companions and who still appeared continually and prevented him from making any attempt to get home. Nevertheless he had managed to explore some of the surrounding country. His one error, he admitted, had been a failure to recognize how the sandstone boulders on the hills had been undermined by the recent storm. This failure had led him into the plight in which I had discovered him. Without my help, he said, he should inevitably have perished of hunger or fallen victim to some wild beast or to a passing party of one of the invading tribes; some of which last, he warned me, were not to be underestimated, being both ferocious and skilful fighters, particularly when they were on a foray to capture slaves, which was their main object in waging war. Such was the substance of what Atta told me in snatches during our first weeks—facts both stunning in kind and highly unsatisfactory in content.

For my new friend seemed to find sustained conversation or any continued intercourse a heavy burden, which he laid down as soon as he could. His disinclination afterward wore off; as was subsequently proved in different and tragic circumstances. But it would be idle to deny that in the beginning he was highly averse to telling me any connected story at all about himself.

Indeed, until I had known him at least a month he never asked me a personal question or displayed the slightest interest in the fact that I was obviously of a dif-

ferent race and from a different world. He appeared to have almost no curiosity and to view the ordinary give-and-take of a personal relationship with coldness and a touch of suspicion. Only on subjects like enemies and fighting did he seem to have no inhibitions, and in such contexts he could be eloquent.

In the beginning, for instance, my obviously soft and unprotected skin elicited many shakings of the head from him, and he had no hesitation in expressing the lowest possible opinion of my clothes, which he looked on solely as a very inferior kind of armor. Even his own tough hide, he said, with its undeniably armorlike quality, was not always proof against enemy attacks. Many savages had discovered the value of poison, and sometimes a very slight wound could result in death. In the circumstances he did not see how I had survived so far or could continue to do so except by great good luck.

He said all this in an impersonal, almost professional manner, as if it were none of his business, yet was a subject he understood. But it had more than the ring of truth in it; and it warned me that mere practical survival was still my first necessity in my new world. Thus his interest in my personal welfare had a practical result.

Indeed, now that I look back upon it, this first faint interest of his was a most remarkable thing. It must be ascribed, I suppose, to a kind of unrecognized gratitude for my having saved his life. For otherwise he never mentioned this obvious fact until fate finally brought it out into the open; and I am sure that during all the time we lived in the wooden hut he never fully realized the birth in him of a new and, in his society, unconventional feeling.

Meanwhile his warning brought back to me in full tide the recollection of my encounter with the squat monster on the plateau, and this alone was enough to make clear to me that the greatest ingenuity was going to be needed if I were to survive; particularly if my new companion left me or if I endeavored to accompany him on his de-

ferred journey home. Even on such a journey a heavy lance would present a drawback; for with it I should always have to fight at close quarters, and one glance at Atta's burnished armor and powerful arms showed that at close quarters I should stand little chance against what he called savages, if I should ever lose my weapon at the outset. What I obviously needed was a good repeating rifle and a thousand rounds of ammunition, or, lacking this, a bow and arrows, an ax or at least a sharp club.

All three of these admittedly primitive weapons presented themselves to me for consideration; and so I was reminded of my almost forgotten find of the black rope on the plateau. For it had occurred to me that its strands were of precisely the kind from which to string a bow. There was even the possibility that certain lengths of it, unraveled, might make a presentable lasso, in the throwing of which I still had a boyish knack. Sharp rocks or stones, which would be necessary if I wanted arrowheads or a decent hatchet or ax, seemed to be wholly lacking in our surrounding desert jungle; but certainly on the plateau or at the foot of the cliffs in the valley, sharp rock could be found.

In this view Atta concurred after a while. For a time I had a little difficulty in explaining what weapons I had in mind, but once he got the idea he agreed with me completely—he was keenly interested in all the fine points of fighting—and in the end he listened with the greatest attention and approval while I demonstrated what could be done with an ax or a bow and arrow. For my unarmed condition had finally begun to weigh on him, and to my surprise it was evident that he was genuinely concerned.

Indeed, I do not think it an exaggeration to say that when finally we set out for the rocky plateau where I had found my lance there was already something that amounted almost to friendship between us. Atta's leg was nearly healed, and its improvement seemed to induce in him a plethora of good spirits that was almost boyish. Occasionally he rushed ahead at great speed under pre-

tence of showing me how quickly enemies could come upon us. At other times he insisted on carrying the lance, and he did it with an ease that put me to shame. Once in a while he even suggested with mock solicitude that he carry me and thus conserve my strength. But underneath it all was an almost open acknowledgment of comradeship, an admission that our original reservations regarding each other had begun to fade, and that if the truth were said we were not far from being genuine friends.

As for the journey itself, it took us the better part of four hours to arrive at the cliffs, as I remember, and since we did not get started until long after dawn, the sun was by that time almost directly overhead—a circumstance that in Atta's judgment called for a siesta, this being the habit of his race. My metal shelter was as hot as a griddle, however—a discovery that somewhat alleviated the regret I still felt over having had to leave it—and after examining the length of black rope that still lay just where I had left it, we proceeded to look for some other place to rest.

This I was loath to do, for I felt an irresistible desire to stare endlessly at this valley where I had first recovered consciousness. But Atta soon found a cool ravine in the rock, a deep cleft at the bottom of which something lay glistening beside the rock walls, and nothing would do but we must examine it.

"Water again, I suppose," I said ironically, remembering my experience with the globule in the tree cleft.

But it was not water, Atta insisted, despite the fact that the rays of the sun were reflected from it. It was some other material.

"Well, we can't get down to it, anyway," I said, "without going back to the head of the ravine." For the wall of the cleft below us was smooth and nearly perpendicular—a drop of nearly a hundred feet. "Do you have to have a siesta?" I demanded.

His only answer was to look over the edge, try it with

his forearms, and then, without any further preamble, launch himself down the steep leaning wall. To my amazement he ran down it as easily as if he were a football player on the gridiron. "Come on!" he shouted to me from the bottom, and began excitedly tugging at the shining material that had first attracted our attention.

For a moment I had an impulse to try to emulate his feat. But common sense prevailed, and I waited a little shamefacedly for him to climb up the slope again, as he did very easily a few seconds later, bringing with him a piece of the shining stuff. It rang or clacked as he flung it down triumphantly at my feet.

"Why, it looks like coarse glass!" I exclaimed, picking up the glistening splinter and examining it. "How much of it is there?"

There was a great deal of it, he told me, of various sizes, part buried under rubbish, part out in the open but so dirty that it did not shine.

"It's just what I want," I said with some excitement of my own. "It's just coarse enough and sharp enough."

Indeed, glass or not, it had a sharpness and a texture that rock could never equal. As material for either arrowheads or axes it was perfect, provided that pieces of the right size with sharp edges could be found. Arrows so tipped or an ax thus bladed would be far more likely to penetrate the hard armor of any creature I might encounter than any mere sharpened bit of stone.

"I'll go up to the head of the ravine and come down," I said. "You can run down and wait for me if you like."

"I can carry you down," he offered. "Though of course," he admitted doubtfully, "I might drop you."

"It could break every bone in my body," I retorted. "I'll get down my own way."

He started to protest at this, but I insisted, and we ended by walking together to the top of the ravine and threading our way down its increasing depths—a journey that he insisted on sharing. It would be unwise for us to separate even for a moment, he said; we were in the

heart of a hostile country. We made our way down the rocky incline and soon reached the bottom without mishap. Then it was a mere matter of a few hundred yards to the place where the great jagged crystals were lying strewn about on the ground.

Many of them were too large to be moved; one in particular, a great sheet a foot thick and twenty feet high, which lay leaning against the ravine wall at a slight angle. I asked Atta sardonically if he could walk up this; he tried several times, but slipped back at each attempt, not being able to gain a foothold on the polished surface. I may mention here that I laughed heartily. But this was the only substance I ever found on which he could not climb with ease; he even had the ability to grasp things so tightly with his feet that he afterward showed me how he could walk upside down on the ceiling of our house. He did this with perfect speed and co-ordination, and he demonstrated his gift not once but many times without a single fall.

We hunted about among the rocks in the ravine for several hours, and I was fortunate enough to find eleven splinters that would do for arrowheads, as well as half a dozen larger, irregular pieces ranging in size up to a dinner plate. These had thin curved edges and were sharp as razors, and I conceived that they would make excellent ax heads or sharpening tools. But my best find of all was a strangely shaped piece a foot and a half long, narrow and tapering at one end and spreading at the other into an almost square head with a sharp cutting edge and a kind of spike on it. Set in a cloven stick and bound with some of the strands of rope on the plateau above us, this piece, I saw at once, would make a very serviceable ax—not only an extremely useful tool in any wilderness, but a formidable weapon as well. I little thought that I was so soon to find a use for it.

All this time we had been searching among the crystals and kicking the rubbish aside, and we had paid little attention to our actual situation, down in a deep ravine

with only a narrow exit at the top and its lower end a mere rocky ledge overhanging the still deeper jungle valley below. All this had rather belatedly occurred to me as I began stuffing the arrowheads into my pockets and wondering how we could transport the rest of the treasure. Now, at a sudden sound, I raised my head.

At the upper end of the ravine four antlike savages had appeared and were threading their way down in single file. Smaller in build than Atta, they were clad in black armor that shone under the overhead sun, and there was a kind of quick eagerness about them that I did not like at all.

Atta must have seen them almost at the same instant, for he tapped me urgently on the shoulder and half pushed, half crowded me behind a large boulder that lay against the ravine wall. Here we crouched for a moment, a good ten feet from my lance, which lay out in the open.

There was no escape, Atta said in a low tone. We should have to fight if they came all the way down. The only question was, how?

It was all I could do to keep myself from rushing out and securing my lance as a first step. But I restrained myself and in hurried whispers suggested a plan of action. I was to remain hidden behind the boulder while Atta emerged, went to the far side of the ravine, and retreated toward the rocky ledge. This I counted on to lure our enemies past the boulder and my lance. At the proper moment, then, Atta was to turn and show fight, and the instant they fell upon him I was to rush forth to his assistance, snatch up my lance, and attack them in the rear. Not only did it seem to me that my strange appearance would terrify the savages, but they would also be wholly unprepared for an assault from behind, and I ought to be able to despatch at least two before they knew what had hit them. At any rate this was our plan, and since it was in nearly all respects my own suggestion—Atta dis-

played a singular irritation with it, for reasons which I understood later—I was very much pleased indeed.

Meanwhile our four antagonists were coming down the ravine with almost audible exclamations of surprise over the shining crystals below the cliff, and in a matter of moments they were nearly abreast of our boulder. Without further hesitation Atta gave a shout and dashed out and across the ravine to the crystals, where he assumed a threatening attitude and then, as the four drew together into a closely knit group, began slowly to give ground and retreat.

This action seemed to arouse what I can only call sneers among the black-armored warriors. But it served to concentrate all their attention on their one antagonist. Not one of them turned around or gave the slightest indication that my boulder held any interest for them. They saw Atta well enough, however, as their actions attested. Indeed, I scarcely had time to get out into the open and snatch up my lance before they were upon him, crowding him backward, seeking to seize his arms and tear him with their cruel saw-toothed jaws.

Already, however, I had my lance braced under my right arm in the manner of the knights of old, and before our four enemies could accomplish anything I was upon them. The one nearest me was on the right, and him I charged. He saw me and tried to turn around and fight. But before he could get in position I was upon him; the point of the lance struck him full in the neck and transfixed him, and he fell writhing to the ground, carrying the lance with him.

Meanwhile the others were still advancing on Atta. But the sight of their companion felled by a strange weapon made one of them turn to see what was happening, and before I could lean down and recover my lance I was confronted with a second antagonist. He took just one look at his slain comrade still holding the lance in his death grip and then advanced murderously upon me.

It was a most desperate moment. For my bare hands,

I knew, were useless in a fight with a foe so well armed and protected. Then I remembered the crystal ax head that I had just found by the boulder. Without hesitation I turned and ran back, the black stranger close on my heels. Just what I intended to do once I secured the sharp crystal, I had no idea; the whole action was reflex. But I knew this one jagged piece was a weapon that, even in its rough form, I should not care to face. And fortunately I ran fast enough to get to it in time. My pursuer was very close behind me; so close, I surmise, that he could not have stopped and evaded me even if he had realized what I was going to do. But I still had that invaluable three-second lead on him, and this it was that saved me.

Without even looking back I leaned down at the boulder, snatched up the heavy crystal beside it, and, turning swiftly, brought the heavy end down with terrific force squarely on the top of my enemy's shining head. His dome crushed like an eggshell. He sank to the ground. It was all over. I leaned against the boulder, panting, perspiring, and with too strange a weak feeling at the pit of my stomach even to look and see if Atta were still alive.

He was. He was coming cheerfully and nonchalantly up the ravine, dusting his forearms.

"What has become of the others?" I asked hoarsely.

He tapped me all over with his feelers as if to assure himself that I had sustained no injury. Then he said dryly: "All disposed of. The wounded one I let get away. The other I slew in fair fight." And he began burnishing his brown armor as calmly as if nothing had happened.

"Well, I'm glad the plan worked," I said faintly.

"I didn't like it," he said frankly. "Did you hear what they called me? A coward!"

And with that he began rather glumly gathering up the rest of the pieces of crystal and preparing to depart. Indeed, for the rest of the afternoon I could hardly induce him to discuss the fight or anything else. We tore loose some strands from the black rope; with these we bound

up our big pieces of crystal, and I carried the bundle along on my lance. Atta took charge of the rope and all alone carried and dragged it the entire distance to our house—a matter of some sixteen miles, I should judge, and all through the desert jungle. But of the fight he said no more, a happenstance that was just as well. For I myself had had a bad fright, and my nerves had been badly shaken—a fact that I was reluctant to admit in the face of his evident nonchalance.

It was well that I did not admit it; for such a confession would have branded me inevitably as a coward in Atta's eyes, and to him, I found later, cowardice was the one deadly sin. So afraid of its stigma were all his countrymen that through an excess of bravery they often seriously and unnecessarily endangered their lives. For they were possessed of many admirable qualities, but imagination was not on the list.

Chapter 5

FOR SEVERAL DAYS thereafter we rested, while the peculiar aftertaste of our encounter in the ravine gradually wore off. It had left its mark on me, however, if for no other reason than that for the first time I had had an opportunity to see four more inhabitants of the country at close range; and the resultant conclusion was hard to evade.

You may have noticed that up to now, although I had accepted Atta and his story at face value, I had carefully refrained from emphasizing the one fateful question that had lain at the back of my mind ever since I had

come upon my new and strange companion. Waking and sleeping, this question had already beat upon my unwilling brain until I could scarcely endure a repetition of its unwelcome attentions. But now, with the four black strangers still vivid in my memory, it became a question that I could no longer ignore.

Put into cold words instead of the nameless apprehensions of my first moments in the ravine, it amounted to this: What kind of people were these on whom I had stumbled in this incredible, uncharted place? Had I, by some legerdemain, been transferred to an unknown and distant part of the earth where creatures of a familiar species, grown to gigantic size, occupied the place of the inhabitants with whom I had been brought up?

To be specific: Was my host Atta himself nothing more than a species of gargantuan, highly developed ant, and his enemies and companions other ants with whom I was condemned to struggle on some obscure continent hitherto undiscovered?

Historically, I knew, the fate of certain species of the past presented an almost total mystery to the best scientific minds. Were there possibly sections of the earth inhabited, not by men at all, but by gigantic insects possessed of an intelligence which some trick of Nature had stopped dead in the insects I knew, but which was here still present and evolving?

The possibility struck me hard as I remembered the black strangers and gazed appraisingly at Atta. I noticed his peculiar build, his beak and gentle eyes, and the manner in which his legs and feelers were attached to his body. Even his high-domed forehead and his brushed-back hair bore out such a conjecture. Certainly, whether engaged in conversation with me or busy in his mushroom cutting activities or sitting back with his legs crossed watching the rain, he resembled nothing so much as a gigantic and exaggerated reproduction of the ants I had seen on photographic plates at agricultural college.

If this were so, my case might not be so mysterious after all.

"Have you ever seen or heard of a creature like me before?" I ventured to ask Atta one day during our siesta.

No, he hadn't, he admitted rather humorously.

"I've just been wondering," I said frankly, "if perhaps I arrived in this country through the air."

"Through the air!" he repeated, as he often did when he was puzzled. "What do you mean by 'through the air'?" He sat polishing his armor when he said this, and he stopped to stare at me "You have no wings," he added. "How could you have come through the air?"

"I mean, picked up by some huge flying creature," I explained. "One that dropped me from the sky by accident."

"That is possible," he said slowly. "But I have never known a Formican to be thus caught up and carried away."

"But you have seen flying creatures big enough to do it—and plenty of them," I pointed out. "Could not one of your larger ones have roamed as far as my country and seized me in my own fields?"

"Perhaps," he said. "But it makes no difference, does it? You are here—and not there."

"It might make a great deal of difference," I said rather testily, "since it would solve the mystery of my presence."

"There is nothing to be gained by considering mysteries," said Atta irritably.

And thereafter he refused to discuss the subject at all.

Strange as this was—an attitude so extraordinary that I did not fully comprehend it at once—it was not calculated to encourage further open speculation on my part, and I too dropped the idea for the time being. For as a solution to the mystery of my arrival in Formica—as Atta called all the surrounding country—it brought up nearly as many questions as it answered.

Nevertheless the basic thought behind it—that somehow, in some logical manner, I had been merely trans-

ferred to another life in an unexplored section of the earth—this basic thought remained and gave me a certain amount of cold comfort: the comfort of reason and sanity. Mainly because of it I got Atta to answer as many questions as I could about himself and his country, and out of these grew eventually those long conversations that finally produced such a remarkable result.

Meanwhile the practical problem of my eventual survival still bothered me, and so did the rude savagery of our dwelling. But I now had the raw materials for tools and weapons, and, having been brought up on a farm, I knew how to use my hands and moreover possessed a kind of native Yankee inventiveness. These advantages now stood me in good stead. Within a few days I had contrived, out of my new collection of sharp glass, a fairly complete set of carpenter tools, and with these and my ax I was soon able to make a greater variety of useful articles than perhaps would seem possible to those who have never been thrown upon their own resources or been out of touch with our complicated civilization and its inexhaustible roster of manufactured products. Life is fascinating to the handyman, and all these things, particularly the roof gutter and rain barrel that I constructed for drinking and washing water, took my mind off my larger problem. They also interested Atta excessively, although he complained that we should be unable to take them with us when finally we were free to move; therefore why make them?

To my need for weapons, however, he was more sympathetic. With his help I made a bow from the springly wood of the near-by trees, strung it with a twisted rope strand, and then fashioned eleven straight arrows, which I tipped with the needle-sharp crystals from the ravine. To hold them steady in their flight I used a material resembling coarse thistledown to feather them. This came from a mass of the stuff that had become entangled in our grove; it had plumes nearly four feet long. Inci-

dentally I made a rough carpet from this material, too, a pallet for myself, and a curtain for the circular door.

I also planted some of its seeds in a thick row around the house at a distance of some hundred feet, for according to Atta, it was a plant that grew very quickly and would serve to screen us from the observation of our still ever-present enemies. He was right: the seeds soon sprouted and grew with astonishing rapidly, as for that matter did all the vegetation in this strange country—twenty-four inches in a night sometimes—and before many days had passed we had a thick hedge twenty feet high around our domain. It not only hid us from view, but it also formed a fairly effective barrier against sudden mass attack, for the trunks were covered with sharp spines through which even an aggressive enemy could not penetrate without difficulty.

Indeed, with Atta's help I soon transformed the house into a small fortress capable of standing siege for an indefinite time. I made a rough door that opened inward, swung from the top by rope hinges; it could be fastened up during the day, but at night or in case of attack it could be held shut by pins that dropped into holes cut in the floor. With much labor, I cut two very narrow windows in the wall, one on each side of the door. These admitted plenty of fresh air and gave me apertures through which I could shoot my arrows should anyone attempt to force an entrance.

I also made a ladder, for the door was six feet above the ground, and this I pulled up at night.

One problem that gave me considerable trouble was how to lock the door on the outside. It was quite possible that on our return from an exploring expedition we might find our house occupied by a wild beast or even a party of savage marauders, in which event we should have to search for another residence. I puzzled over this for several days, and at last I hit upon a device which, though it may have shown no great ingenuity, served the purpose admirably. I knotted a short piece of rope to

a billet of wood, passed the free end through a small hole which I bored in the center of the door, and fastened it to a stout four-foot stick, tying it as closely as I could to the outer surface of the door. Our doorway was irregularly oval, a little over four feet high but only three feet wide. It will be seen that, when the door was closed from the outside, the stick could be twisted crossways until it overlapped the edges on either side, and that to open the door again the stick must be twisted back to the perpendicular in order to pass through the opening. A man, of course, would have understood it at a glance, but our savage neighbors, Atta said, although their strongholds had gates that were closed at nightfall, did not understand the use of the simplest locks, and he assured me that the thought of twisting the bar to obtain entrance would never occur to any of them.

When I had completed these arrangements for our safety I spent many hours practising with my bow and arrows and with a lasso that I made from some more unraveled strands of the rope. To my pleasure, my boyhood proficiency soon returned, and I found that with a little practice I could rope Atta, jerk him from his feet with an unexpected tug, and tie him fast before he could seize me with his beak. He displayed a never-failing interest in this game, though I found it impossible to teach him to throw the rope himself. Occasionally he would challenge me to a wrestling bout, but his strength was so much greater than mine that, once he had seized me, I was helpless as an infant. The wrestling taught me one useful thing, however. Although the Formican, as Atta named his race, can run swiftly enough in a straight line, he cannot turn quickly and is thus far easier to dodge than, say a charging bull. This piece of knowledge increased my confidence in my ability to defend myself, for I felt that with my ax and lasso I was more than a match for the most powerful enemy.

We had now, as I have said, fortified the house so that it would be capable of standing a prolonged siege. But

there was still one difficulty: the food supply. As long as Atta could procure leaves for our mushroom cellar we should not lack for food and drink, but if the supply were discontinued, as it would be during a siege, the garden would cease bearing and we should sooner or later be forced to surrender. I had cudgeled my brains in vain for some way out of this difficulty. A chance remark of Atta's one evening finally gave me an idea. He had been telling me nostalgically of the great cities of his homeland; how they were built, not as we build houses of stone or wood, but hollowed out of the ground, story below story, all connected by inclined corridors.

"It must require a tremendous labor force," I observed, "to build a city such as you describe."

"Not so much as you might think," replied Atta. "Formicans are strong, and they understand the work." And he went on to tell me of the great length of the corridors or streets, fifteen miles long, some of them, as nearly as I could guess. He himself, he said, had once superintended the driving of a tunnel under the wide bed of a flowing river, in order to reach a particular forest whose leaves were useful in cultivating certain delicate varieties of mushroom.

At this point I sprang to my feet with a shout.

"What is wrong with you?" he exclaimed, tapping the floor testily with his foot. He was very methodical in everything he did, and he hated above all things to be interrupted when he was explaining something practical.

"Why," I exclaimed, "don't you see? If your people could dig a tunnel like that without any tools, you and I can do the same thing on a smaller scale. We can cut through our cellar floor and run an underground passage beneath the hedge and up into the grove. Then, no matter what happens, we shall always be able to get plenty of leaves for the garden."

Atta looked at me with admiration. "I should never have thought of that," he confessed, "although I knew

we should have to do something of the kind if these savages stay around until the Great Cold comes."

"Winter!" I exclaimed. "Then you have winter here?" For the profuse and luxuriant vegetation had latterly led me to believe that the climate must be semitropical.

Naturally there was winter, Atta replied; white crystals sometimes fell to an unbelievable depth.

"Then what do you do for food in your cities?" I asked.

"We store it," Atta replied. "We have to go down many stories, though, to keep it warm."

"Well, we'll cross that bridge when we come to it," I said. "But the first thing to do is to begin a tunnel, and we might as well start at once."

I picked up my ax and let myself down into the cellar, followed by Atta. Only a very faint light came through the hole in the floor above us, but it was sufficient to enable me to set to work, and in two hours' time I had a gap three feet across cut through the floor. Then Atta took my place and began to dig.

It was astonishing, the rate at which he worked. He was practically tireless, and though it took many days of unremitting toil to complete our underground passage he worked almost constantly, breaking off only occasionally to eat or to accompany me on the little excursions that I insisted on making into the surrounding country. It was pitch black in the tunnel, of course, but Atta could see in the dark as well as in the bright sunlight, and as far as I could make out he seldom slept. At night when I threw myself on my soft bed of thistledown, exhausted from the long hours of carrying heavy loads of earth up into the cellar, he would be digging away in the tunnel. When I woke up in the morning he would be at it again, and only with difficulty could he be persuaded to come up for breakfast. He kept at it; and so exact was his engineering mind that when he finally said we had gone far enough and he would now go outside and dig down in the grove for an entrance, he proved to be less than half a foot off in his calculations. In all he had taken

less than twelve days, and the tunnel was at least two hundred yards long.

It was a remarkable achievement—one that I thought called for a celebration. "We ought to have wine!" I exclaimed, "or something different, at least. I'm sick to death of these mushrooms. Don't you have any change of diet in your cities?"

"Oh, yes," he said. "In Fusa there is grain. The planters grow it outside the city."

"No," I said, "I mean something to drink. "Don't you ever have anything to drink?"

He looked a little reflective at this, I thought, and after some prodding he admitted that naturally there was plenty of nectar in all the big towns. Skins of it hung in the market-places, and everyone drank. But it was out of the question in the wilderness. Herds of aphids were required, and workers to feed and milk them.

"Wouldn't there be any aphids around here?" I inquired.

Only wild ones, he said; though they were a tame sort of creature at best. And with this he indicated, as was his habit, that he should like to drop the subject.

But my curiosity had been aroused—our mushroom diet had decidely begun to pall on me—and I kept at him until finally he admitted that, yes, almost anyone could milk an aphid and that in all likelihood there were plenty of wild ones in the lush green uplands beyond the plateau where we had found the rope and encountered our four enemies.

"Then why don't we knock off work and go get a few?" I suggested.

"Only because I don't know how to milk one," he confessed rather shamefacedly. "I don't belong to that class."

"Well, I do," I asserted. "In my country any man can milk anything from an aphid to a dragon."

In that case, he agreed, there was no reason why we should not undertake another scouting expedition; and I soon suspected that the prospect was as attractive to him, after his days of hard labor, as it was to me. Indeed, he

spent the rest of the afternoon polishing and burnishing his armor; and the next morning it was he who woke me at sunrise so that we might get off to an early start.

"Oh," I said, "so you really want to go?"

"I can't let you go alone," he said. "You might never return."

I smiled to myself, for his eyes were bright, and I knew that he liked nothing better than distant forays in the jungle. Yet I must do him the justice to admit that his words were not all pretense. He was devotedly attached to me, and in the end he proved it in a manner I cannot forget. Indeed I am old now, and it is forty years since Atta was my companion in the adventures that these pages are chronicling; yet not a day passes that I do not think of him and of those old adventurous days with regret and longing. How gladly would I set out again as I did that bright summer morning, with my ax on my shoulder and Atta by my side, into the jungle teeming with mysterious life! How gaily even the sun shone, and with what high spirits we went forward to meet whatever the day had in store for us of good or evil!

I had now, in addition to my ax and bow, a very passable lasso, coiled over my shoulder so as to leave my hands free, as well as a dagger with a wooden handle, the razor-blade a sharp crystal seven inches long. This I kept thrust through my belt, ready to hand. I had also filled my pockets with mushrooms enough to last three days, lest we be delayed in our return. I felt well fortified against misadventure.

It was a hot, dry day and the trees rasped and scraped together with a continuous sharp sound in the breeze. We had had no rain for two weeks, and the tree spears seemed to have become very dry and brittle in the hot sun. But Atta had assured me that we need not expect rain for at least two days more, and I felt exceedingly cheerful. For I had nearly as high a respect for his weather predictions as for the character and power of the storms themselves. Reassured by his prediction, I

entertained no fears; and so volatile is man's spirit, even in adversity, that I am willing to confess that I even sang as we plunged into the jungle beyond our low thistle hedge.

We traveled rapidly this time, too, without rope or baggage to encumber us, and we reached the plateau long before noon, as the shadows attested. One of Atta's reasons for wanting to start early had been a wish to explore the steep stone cliff in both directions, that we might find some easy way of getting down it. For Atta was quite sure not only that our best eventual path out lay through the jungle valley but also that only in the green uplands on its far side should we find any aphids.

Whatever the validity of this conjecture, our first view of the cliffs was not a reassuring one. Again, as far as the eye could reach, they stretched on both sides of us above the gorgeously colored carpet of the valley below. Again the valley itself presented its yellows and reds and browns. Only the violets and purples were missing now—sad signs, I supposed, of the passing of early summer. Otherwise the scene was unchanged, even to the green meadows on the rising upland mountains opposite and the incredible cuplike gargantuan trees that topped the far-distant ridge. It was a vista of magnificent proportions, trembling on the edge of memory and yet familiar once more, bringing into sharp relief the moment when it had burst upon me as I stood in front of my metal shelter. Even this was still where I had left it—still resembled a giant thimble slightly weathered and discolored on the rims where rain and sun had touched it.

But of a way down the cliffs there was none.

"We'd better take a look from the ravine," Atta suggested.

The suggestion repelled me slightly, with the picture it brought up of the black stranger lying crushed beneath me beside the boulder and my own perspiring hands still clutching my crystal ax. But I could think of no good reason for not discovering what lay beneath the ledge

above the valley, and we walked back to where the cleft began and descended the declivity slowly, eyes alert for any signs of our former enemies. No living thing was in sight; there was no trace of our recent battle, and to my surprise even the corpses of our antagonists were gone. Only the glass crystals glittered slightly in the rubbish beyond the boulder, and at the bottom of the ravine the green light of the jungle valley trees shone on the ledge.

When we reached this and paused and sitting on its edge looked out and down, an expression of what I can only name anticipation flitted across Atta's features. This was called forth by the character of the cliff beneath us. Only for some twenty feet did it fall away sheer. Then came another ledge; and this seemed almost supported by the apex of a huge mound of rock and débris that spread down below the trees to the ground at an angle sharp but climbable. It was as if in ages past the ravine behind us had poured rock and sand from its open mouth until the residue had almost reached its parent. Anyone who could reach the secondary ledge twenty feet below could easily descend into the valley.

"This is the sort of thing for which ropes were made," I remarked, and began uncoiling my lasso, intending to fasten one end of it around a boulder and slide down to the ledge below.

But Atta would have none of it.

For days he had been urging me to permit him to carry me over rough spots, just to show how easily it could be done. Now he saw his opportunity, and he did not intend to be robbed of it. "We don't need ropes," he exclaimed. "I'll carry you." And before I could remonstrate or resist he had seized me about the waist and, despite my protests, was carrying me over the ledge and straight down the wall.

Never shall I forget my sensations as we went over the edge and down the almost perpendicular cliff. I had sense enough to seize the loose coils of my lasso and hold them tight, and I stopped struggling almost immediately,

but I assure you that my heart leaped into my mouth and every hair on my head stood on end.

It did not last long, however. Atta went down as fast as his sure-footed legs could carry him, which was considerably faster than a horse can trot, and he deposited me unharmed and slightly ashamed at the far bottom of the conelike heap of rubbish in less time than I should have taken to lower myself to the first ledge, now far above us. "There," he said rather smugly, "you were perfectly safe, and we have saved good rope and time."

Now that I was secure on level ground and had had time to get over my first alarm I had to admit that he was right. I did so with as good grace as I could muster. "Very pretty," I said, "if you'll tell me how we are to get up there again."

That was simplicity itself, he said; he would merely take my rope in his beak, climb the wall, and pull me up after him! This was such a triumph of sagacity after the fact that I had much ado not to burst out laughing. But it put me in a good humor again with my companion, and eventually with myself, and soon we were traversing the valley floor as if nothing had happened.

Here, however, I had another kind of difficulty. The land in the valley bottom, fairly level when seen from the top of the cliffs, proved at close range to be a loose rubble of earth clods and small stones very lightly packed. It offered no trouble to Atta, but for me it was far more difficult to traverse than the dense jungles and rough boulder-strewn glades about our house. I toiled and struggled along it, hampered by my heavy ax and the coil of rope about my shoulder, until at last, as I was hurrying over a smoother bit in a vain endeavor to catch up with Atta, a piece of treacherous crust gave way and I fell flat on my face into a small underground cavern. I had shouted to Atta as I fell, and he came running back and dragged me out, unhurt but thoroughly discouraged. "There's no use my going any farther," I said. "I can't

make a mile an hour over this country. We had better give it up."

But Atta would not hear of this. "We have only a short way to go," he objected. He pointed ahead through a break in the roof of huge pale-green leaves to where the ground rose toward the uplands covered with green meadows and dotted with dark masses of red and brown vegetation. "Look!" he exclaimed. "Ten to one we'll find aphids there. Why not let me carry you? I would have offered before, but I thought you didn't like it."

"Of course I don't like it," I replied irritably. "Being carried around is too silly for words. Suppose some one should see us——"

I stopped suddenly, remembering what small likelihood there was of our being seen by any creatures even remotely resembling human beings. Indeed, I asked myself, was I not a hundred times more ridiculous as well as a thousand times more uncomfortable, floundering along alone in my awkwardness than I should be were Atta to carry me?

"Very well," I said, as he continued to urge the quite obvious unreasonableness of my objections, "carry me if you insist. But the quicker we get there the better, for I certainly don't enjoy it."

Without more ado he picked me up and bore me rapidly and without a single false step over the uneven floor of the valley toward the western uplands. They loomed ever higher before us as we proceeded, all the different colors of their surface now thrown into bold relief where the rays of the sun struck slightly slantwise across them. In some places they were of an exceedingly bright green, and this reassured me. For the vegetation in the valley was quite evidently all of the same kind, with nowhere any signs of bushes bearing fruit or berries or anything upon which aphids might feed.

Presently, however, the ground began to slope gently upward, covered with occasional green creepers over huge jagged rocks that barred the way; and beside one

of these Atta at length set me down. It had taken him less than a quarter of an hour to cross the valley, a distance of nearly two miles; he had not paused or hesitated once, yet he seemed in no need of rest, and without a word of explanation to me he set off at once to skirt the foot of the uplands and find a place that offered easy ascent.

From where I stood I could no longer see the red and brown hills, but the ground was more open than before immediately around me, and in one place a great green creeper four or five feet thick hung down from a rock, reaching from top to bottom and trailing for several yards along the earth in front of me. As I looked I thought I could make out something moving on it, and I approached it cautiously, my ax held ready in my hands.

Above, the bark was heavy and the creeper thick, but as it neared the ground the bark grew thinner until toward the ends of the fronds it was smooth and of a uniform light green color, with irregularly shaped leaves like huge, twenty-foot painters' palettes and occasional sharp thorns a foot or two long. As I came nearer one of these thorns suddenly moved several feet down the trunk, and I stopped a moment in alarm, wondering if the whole creeper was alive. Anything was possible in this country. But nothing more happened, and I went on again, still cautiously, until I was within three yards of it. Then I saw that what I had supposed to be a thorn was in reality a small light-green creature with long, very slender legs and a small round body, who was busily boring into the stock of the creeper with a long bill something like a woodcock's. He paid no attention to me as I came up, and I saw that there were fifteen or twenty more like him, all motionless and, as I supposed, sucking up the juices of the plant through their bills. I was still watching them in astonishment when Atta returned to tell me he had found a path toward the uplands. He called to me as he came, and I had no chance to direct his attention to my find. For just as I was about to ask him if these

creatures were not his vaunted aphids, I caught a glint of polished black armor in the jungle in back of him, and I pulled him quickly behind another rock, where we crouched in silence, waiting to see what was coming.

Presently, out of the jungle, a long line of black Formicans appeared. They approached rapidly, following roughly the trail up which we had come, and doing it with the greatest of ease. There were fifteen or twenty of them, and when they reached the ground below us they turned and came directly toward us.

It seemed impossible that they could have seen us, for we had remained motionless behind our rock, and only my head could have been visible as I peered around at them. Yet, even if they did not intend to attack, they could scarcely miss us now, for their present line of march would take them within a few feet of the rock behind which we were hidden. Fortunately there was an irregular hollow under the boulder—a small cave, in fact, in which, if, as seemed likely, they were in a hurry and did not stop to reconnoiter, we might escape detection.

We crawled in and awaited the event. I could hear them chattering together as they came on, and the crunch of loose pebbles under their feet. Nearer and nearer they came. And then, just as I was crouching lower, expecting any moment to see their shadows across the mouth of our hiding place, they stopped. For several minutes we lay perfectly still, hardly daring to breathe. Perhaps, I thought, they had discovered where we were and were silently creeping up to surround the rock.

I unslung my bow and fitted an arrow to the string, resolved to make short work of the first who should darken the opening. But none came; there was no sound of stealthy movements; and at last I crept on hands and knees to the edge of the cave and looked out. There was nothing in sight, and I rose cautiously and peered over the top of the boulder.

To my surprise nearly all the Formicans had disappeared somewhere. The rest, four or five, had climbed up

on the green trunk of the creeper and were walking up and down among the slender-legged green creatures, apparently milking them, and stopping now and then to stroke them gently with their feelers. Presently all five, having satisfied their thirst, climbed down from the creeper and also disappeared behind the huge rock, where, Atta guessed, the entrance to their camp must be, he having crept out beside me in the meantime.

This meant, Atta whispered, that the best thing for us to do was to get away as quickly as we could.

He said this very urgently, but for once I did not agree. "I came out to get a couple of aphids," I objected in a low tone. "Aren't these aphids?"

Yes, they were aphids, Atta admitted, but these Formicans were savages and in too great numbers for us to stand off if we were caught making off with their cattle.

"Maybe we shan't get caught," I said. "You watch here while I go and investigate the rock."

Atta grumbled at this, but when I offered to let him do the investigating while I stood watch, his sense of fairness got the better of him and he consented.

Beside the huge rock behind which the Formicans had disappeared there was another smaller one, some five feet high and flat on top. Toward it I crept on tiptoe, mounted it without too much difficulty, and wriggled to the farther side where I could overlook the entrance to the Formicans' underground camp. This was merely a circular hole four feet or so across, about which were heaped the stones and débris that had been carried out from below, I suppose to enlarge the space underground. There was no sign of life about, although I knew from what Atta had told me that there would be one or more sentinels on guard inside the entrance. I lay down with nothing but the top of my head visible and notched an arrow to the string to be ready for whatever might happen.

After a time, however, as nothing did happen, my curiosity got the better of my caution, and, being convinced that our enemies were busily engaged on underground

affairs of their own, I did a very foolish thing: I crawled back over the flat rock to see what my companion was doing about the aphids. He had climbed up on the smooth green trunk of the creeper and was standing beside one of the creatures, leaning over. Before I could make out what he was doing I heard a slight noise behind me; and, turning, I saw one of the hostile Formicans standing not five feet away, regarding me with a vicious mixture of fear and anger.

With a shout to Atta I sprang at him, whirling my ax over my head. But he was too quick for me. He turned and half scrambled, half fell down the declivity between the two rocks; and before I could reach him he dived down the slope toward the camp entrance to give the alarm.

There was but one chance for us, of course: to stop him before he reached the gateway. For if he could once get inside and warn his companions, we should soon be surrounded and overcome. Recovering my ax, I leaped after him and stumbled down toward the mound of dirt and débris at the gate, with Atta close on my heels. But I was not quick enough. As I reached the mound the black head of another Formican appeared above the surface, and behind him I could see the shining armor of many others. The tunnel-like entrance was veritably swarming with angry soldiery.

Fortunately my first quarry had only one idea: to reach the gateway. In this he succeeded, but at the cost of colliding with an emerging comrade, a confusion of which I was quick to take advantage. Without even thinking I swung up my ax and brought it down with a dull crash on his armored head, then turned and struck with all my might at my new enemy. I hit him squarely on the forehead, too, and with a shriek he fell back on to his pushing fellows below. They, undaunted by the suddenness of my attack, dragged him back and with angry cries pressed on to the surface.

I had the position of vantage, now, however, and for

five long minutes my weapon rose and fell as regularly as the ax of a woodcutter felling a tree. Every blow went home on a half upright struggling Formican, crushing black armor and sheering through legs and feelers, as savage after savage tried to get out and at me.

Once one of them got past me, but as he went by I fetched him a blow with the side of the ax that sent him spinning toward Atta, and there was not much left of him when Atta had finished. It was hot work while it lasted, and yet I had no fear of what might happen should I fail to hold the gate. I was conscious only of the fierce exultation of feeling the ax bite home and of seeing my enemies fall back crushed and maimed after each onslaught. It was the lust of battle, I suppose, such as I have since heard veteran soldiers admit after certain campaigns against bloodthirsty enemies; but it was the first time I had ever experienced it. Indeed, when finally the Formicans gave back and the gateway was clear except for corpses, I leaned on my ax almost like some exultant Hercules who had at last finished an allotted task.

I experienced none of the queasiness of my former experience.

"How many do you suppose there are?" I asked my companion, who had stood back for the most part during the fight, since there had not been room for two of us at the gate when my ax was swinging.

He answered rather coldly that he supposed there might be fifty or a hundred more of them, and even in my exultation I could see that he felt that I had taken more than my fair share of the fighting. I paid no attention to his tone, for I was thinking hard now, trying to devise some plan that would enable us to keep the Formicans bottled up in their camp until we could make good our escape. Indeed, it was obvious that unless we could hit upon something new we should be obliged to stay at the gate until we had killed or disabled all of them, a procedure that began to seem to me very dubi-

ous. What was needed was something that would delay any pursuit of us until we could cross the valley and climb up on the plateau again; for Atta, even when unburdened by me, could not travel so fast as these lighter and more active savages.

"Couldn't we block this gate?" I exclaimed. "Isn't there some way we can bottle them up for a while?"

I asked this question as much of myself as of Atta. But I had underrated him, it soon appeared. Immediately, without answering, he turned from me and began dragging out the largest stones from the heaps about us. These he rolled and dragged toward me, and I stood back, ax poised, eye on the dark gateway. There was still a faint rustling in the tunnel and occasionally the flicker of reflected light on black armor. Once a head with cautious feelers came tentatively up, only to duck back again as its owner caught sight of my ax. But no rush of enemies came, and Atta worked like a beaver. Soon he had a pile of rocks four feet high, none of them large enough to stop the entrance, but the whole sufficient to block the passage.

He was about to start throwing them down when I stopped him. "Wait," I said. "This won't do. They can carry rocks off as fast as we roll them down. We shall have to find a single big one first—one large enough to cover the tunnel. Then we can pile all these small ones on top of it. If it's heavy enough, they'll have to dig around it if they want to get out."

"I'll get one," said Atta briefly. "A big one."

He turned and hurried away and was back presently, dragging a huge flat rock nearly five feet across. This he flung down, tilted it on one side with no apparent effort, although it looked heavy enough to require a dozen men's strength, and then let it fall directly across the mouth of the tunnel, instantly blocking all egress from it. In another second he was at work piling the smaller stones upon it, and in a few minutes he had heaped the

stones so high and heavy on its flat surface that it was beyond anyone's power to raise it from beneath.

"There," he said, standing back and surveying his work. "Now we can do what we please. They won't bother us again today."

"Unless," I suggested, "they have another exit somewhere."

Atta thought not. These were mere savages, accustomed to using but one gate, and habit was so strong among them that they were unlikely to have dug a second entrance. Also, it would not occur to them to try to dig another way out until each one had become perfectly sure of his own inability to use the old way.

"Well, then," said I, "how about getting ourselves a couple of aphids and taking them along?—if they are aphids," I added.

They were aphids, Atta admitted, he had already tasted their milk. He would show me if I liked. Together, without a glance at the dead Formicans lying around us, we went back to the creeper, and he showed me a semi-transparent amber-colored substance dripping on the green trunk. It was rather sticky to the touch, but when I tasted it I gave an exclamation of surprise.

"Why," I said, "it's like honey! Milk and honey! Nectar! These creatures must be something like bees."

"Bees?" he looked at me doubtfully.

"Of course," I said, "you've never seen them. But it's too long to explain at present. By George! Nectar! Who would have supposed such a thing? We must certainly take two or three of these fellows home with us."

I had found what I had come for, and now I was anxious to get home again before dark, as we could easily do if we started at once. But Atta had decided that he wanted to explore the approach to the green uplands, and since he gave as his reason the possibility that, once on the uplands, we could follow the top of the cliff around the rim of the valley to where we had entered, I did not object. I insisted, however, that we must take

three of the aphids with us, and upon Atta's agreeing I lifted three of them from their creeper, tied their feet with the strands of rope that I always carried in my pockets, and slung them across my shoulder. They manifested not the slightest surprise or alarm at what must have seemed to them an extraordinary procedure; indeed, I always found them as mild and docile as the cows they so weirdly resembled in purpose if not in appearance. They were very light, too, being slenderly built, and I had no difficulty in carrying them, though I will admit to a slight uneasiness regarding their long bills, which were of necessity in rather uncomfortably close proximity to my unprotected body. But evidently they did not regard me as likely to furnish a very succulent repast, for they tucked their bills under their bodies. And a few minutes later, when Atta had carried all of us to the edge of the uplands, I forgot all about them in my wonder at the stupendous green jungle that greeted our gaze.

For the foliage on the uplands, although of the same character as the bamboolike jungle that surrounded our house, grew here in great tangled masses like giant tufts, and the ground was so encumbered with dead trunks and twisted fibers that to penetrate it was like nothing so much as crawling through a hurricane forest or the ruins of a thousand wooden buildings twisted by a cyclone.

"We might as well go back," I said at once. "I couldn't get through that stuff, and you couldn't carry me. As it is, we shan't be home before dark."

Atta was about to reply when a movement behind one of the giant tufts caught my eye, and, peering into the gloom beneath some dead foliage, I made out two eyes regarding me intently. With a low word of warning to my companion I fitted an arrow swifty to the string and let fly. But for once I missed. I sprang back just in time as some yellow creature pounced out, slashing viciously at me with his hooked jaws.

"Look out!" called Atta. "Watch his jaws. He rips from below."

It was an urgent warning, and I obeyed it. But as I crouched and drew my dagger my heel caught on a loose stone, and I fell on one knee. Before I could recover my balance the beast was upon me, and I gave myself up for lost. But to my surprise the yellow creature paid no attention at all to me. Instead he seized one of the aphids, and he had all but torn the unfortunate animal to pieces before Atta rushed up and put an end to everything with one slash of his powerful beak.

"An aphid killer," he said in a matter-of-fact tone, looking down at the beast as I rose and brushed the dust from my clothes. "He wasn't interested in you. They seldom attack anything but aphids. But they're dangerous if you let them get under you."

"Well, he's done for one aphid," I said grimly. "I suppose we can't risk going down into the valley for another one."

"No," said Atta, "but we're up level with the cliff now, and there are plenty of creepers along it. We shall probably see more aphids on our way around."

With this I had to be content. We started home, and eventually Atta was as good as his word. I recovered my arrow from its thicket before we went. Soon we struck the narrow open plateau, where Atta carried all of us at a speed that put travel in the valley below to shame. At one point the cliff made an almost right-angle turn. Here there were dozens of giant creepers on the stone hills, and on one of these Atta found another group of aphids, from which he selected a young juicy one. So our loss was made good before we reached my ancient rusting shelter and plunged once more into our own familiar jungle.

Then it was only a matter of three hours to home. We reached it without further adventure than an occasional glimpse of prowling forest beasts and, once, a solitary

red-armored Formican, whom I saw far ahead as he crossed our path and disappeared behind a clump of trees.

Chapter 6

So WE lived for many days in our gnarled, secluded house in the jungle while I learned to milk our new aphids. Nectar graced our table in small wooden jars which I hollowed out, and Atta went foraging for the green creepers on which the animals fed in safety behind our rapidly growing thistle hedge. In different circumstances it might almost have been an idyllic existence, and it is with regret that I approach the day when it all ended; the day of which for many long years thereafter I could not bear to think.

Yet first I feel that I must say more of the strange friendship that had grown up between Atta and myself during the course of the adventures I have been relating: a friendship based at first on our common necessities, but becoming deeper and stronger as the summer grew along, until finally the bond between us had become more like the attachment between two favorite brothers than the surface feeling that usually masquerades under the name of friendship.

I have never known, in the course of a normally long life, a character more admirable when considered in its larger aspect than that of this strange person. (I cannot bring myself to call him creature.) Certain characteristics, indeed, when considered from our narrow human standpoint, might fairly be censured; but his other quali-

ties of mind and heart so far outweighed them that when fair allowance was made for his utterly foreign upbringing and mode of life I was only too glad to admit that here was a person whom anyone might well be proud to call his friend.

I do not know what it was that made him different from others of his race, or what it was that attracted him to me at first. But I gathered afterwards that I was the first person to come into his life who had ever released the emotions of his heart or his desire for a companionship of the mind. His relatives and associates —though he rarely spoke of them except by way of illustration—had been trained from early youth, after the manner of the wellnigh universal Formican education, in the rigid pattern of absolute subservience to a racial ideal. In the communities of his people—as I afterwards saw proved—this ideal had long ago taken the form of a caste-dominated, highly efficient society, to the simple objective aims of which all else was subordinated in a truly incredible manner.

This conception, of which I shall have occasion to speak graphically later in connection with my own subsequent adventures, had never allowed Atta even to admit to any of the instincts of sympathy, kindness, or consideration of others that seem natural to the human heart. On the contrary, from childhood these instincts had been stifled in him whenever they appeared. When he first encountered me, therefore, he was almost unaware that he even possessed the simple emotions and feelings that in mankind have been the delight of friends and adventurers for ages.

In their place was a settled dour habit of work without play, plus a veritable distaste for thought, so marked at first that it was only with the greatest difficulty that I could induce him to spend part of our evenings in anything so desultory as mere conversation. This aloofness altered remarkably as we grew to know each other better, and eventually out of our experiences there sprang

up a mutual respect and affection not to be denied—a companionship of the mind little short of delightful. But, even so, he could never quite overcome the effects of that childhood training which is the common experience of his race; and different as he was from other Formicans, I do not think that he himself realized in the beginning what it was that drew us so closely together. He simply accepted me gradually and played his part in our joint life with a silent devotion that has since often touched me to tears.

One result was that, although I often described my past life in detail, he himself said very little about his own experiences. Outside of providing for our immediate necessities he seemed to have almost no interest in past or future, beyond a vague compulsion to fulfill his duty by returning to the society from which he had come. This difference led to many strange discussions between us. For to say that the opposite was true of me is to understate the situation sadly. As the days drew on, hardly an hour passed in which I did not ask myself what could be the outcome of this strange life into which I had come; what could be its explanation and what its final goal. To say that I had hope is to beg the question. I could conceive of no reasonable solution of my presence, and therefore I dared not expect any development radical enough to restore me to my home, my sweetheart, and all that I had been so suddenly deprived of. Indeed, for the greater part of the time I went about my tasks as if I too were a Formican, refusing to think too much of my situation lest the conviction be forced home upon me that beyond all doubt I was destined to pass the remainder of my life in this ungodly country, among the mechanical creatures whom Atta described as his countrymen.

This hopelessness was one reason why on rainy days I sought refuge in games of all kinds—and why I first taught Atta mumble-de-peg and then made a rude checkerboard and taught him the simple game of checkers.

This he enjoyed so much that I followed it with chess, spending many an hour carving the pieces and explaining to Atta the manner in which they moved. Then we set about playing that noble game, and we had many an exciting afternoon competing with each other until twilight. After a while I even contrived a rude flute to lessen the boredom of our evenings, and this amusement did much to enliven our loneliness. Take it all in all, we did not fare so badly in our search for entertainment.

In the meantime the only point upon which Atta thought a great deal, and which seemed to make a serious impression upon him, was my slowness of movement so far as covering great distances was concerned. From his standpoint this was extremely serious and might prove to be vital when the time came for us to make our dash for civilization. For not only did it take me a great time to cover distances which we should have traversed very quickly had I been able to keep up with him, but in encounters with other Formicans it had already proved and would continue to prove a serious and perhaps fatal disadvantage.

What a singular commentary it is on Atta's habits of mind that, with all the worrying he did on this score, the solution should never have presented itself to him! As for me, I think the idea finally came to fruition as I gazed one morning at our three aphids just before I sat down to milk them and observed their large eyes intent on the new branches on which they were feeding.

Why, of course! What I needed was a horse! Surely if this strange country had these counterparts for our domestic cows—grotesque as they appeared if compared with actual cows—why could I not succeed in finding some animal capable of being trained to act as a beast of burden to carry me on our final expedition?

At first thought nothing seemed more likely than that I should thus find a way out of our difficulty. My hopes received a sudden dashing, however, when I broached the subject to Atta. Not only was the idea new to him,

it appeared—he never having seen any animal thus used—but he plainly considered as perfectly preposterous the notion that any animal should exist which could be thus trained. He admitted that there were plenty of animals that could outjump and outrun the Formicans, many of them living in the jungle immediately around us. But their sole value, so far as he was concerned, lay in the advantage to be gained by killing them.

When I pointed out to him the manifest advantages of taking them alive, he saw the point at once, slaves being in common use among nearly all the races of Formicans. Indeed, he professed a great admiration for the intellect that had been capable of thinking of such a thing. But he was strongly of the opinion that, though there were any number and many different kinds of these wild creatures of the requisite size for horseback use, none would be found that could by any means be domesticated and trained to obey my will.

For some time this judgment of Atta's discouraged me. Nevertheless I could not help thinking that my lasso gave me an easy method of capturing any particular species of animal that I might hunt, and my former experience in breaking colts on the farm, coupled with my aptitude for managing animals of all kinds, ought to make securing a proper mount only a matter of time. In this I was correct, as the sequel will show.

My first efforts afforded much amusement to Atta, little prone as he was to see the ridiculous side of things. (Indeed, I think I have never seen so uniformly sober and serious a person as my companion was in those days.) True, my earlier choices did turn out with unvarying ill fortune, principally, I think, because I was then a stranger to the fauna of the region and usually captured what first came to my hand, in slight hopes of having struck upon the right kind of animal. But I was unwearying in my efforts, and after several unlucky experiences, in one or two of which I barely escaped with my life, I grew wiser and formed a definite idea of the sort of creature

that would be the most likely to respond to my efforts without endeavoring to end my existence. For there were in that jungle too many creatures that I gravely doubt if anyone could have trained, and that kept their fierceness and savage temper to the end.

I smile now when I think of my obtuseness—a blindness the more strange in a man born and bred to the country and skilled in rearing and training animals. Yet many days passed before the solution came to me.

It came one afternoon at the close of a particularly arduous three-hour tussle with a vicious captive who looked for all the world like an overgrown green beetle. His six legs had attracted me at first because they promised unusual speed and easy riding qualities; he sped about with none of the jars and jouncings incidental to horseback riding. But I had finally become discouraged by his unvarying obstinacy and ill temper and had sat down to rest on a post in our paddock, a fair-sized enclosure in back of the house. If only I could have had him from colthood, I reflected——

With the thought, the solution presented itself to me instantly. Why, of course! A young one! A young one might be easily tamed and raised to consider carrying me as its natural life and purpose.

As I viewed again all my efforts and discomfitures, when all the time such a simple solution waited around the corner, of a sudden the humor of my addleheadedness overcame me and I burst into shrieks of laughter so uncontrollable that at last they reduced me to tears. In the midst of it all Atta appeared in great alarm, the unusual sounds having led him to fear that the worst had happened to me—a calamity that he was quite ready to believe in, after some of my performances in the paddock. But when I explained my idea to him he was much struck with the excellence of the suggestion and agreed with me at once. Indeed, I think it was from that moment, and a consequence of that idea, that he gradually came to defer to me and lost all uncertainty over what

might happen to me if we should ever reach civilization again.

In any event I had hit upon a practical method at last, and I put it into practice without delay; so that within a few days I had a number of young Fabrans, as Atta called them, eating from my hand in the paddock. From these I soon selected a most promising candidate whom I named Trotta. On her I concentrated for many days, and with excellent results; until she was strong enough and intelligent enough to carry me around the paddock. After that it was not long before I felt safe in taking her for short rides around the immediate countryside. And I spent a number of afternoons enjoying this experience.

As a matter of fact, it was the security against pursuit that Trotta afforded me on these short rides that led directly to the fatal circumstance I have hinted at; for without her I should never have set out alone on any distant expedition. At the moment, however, the pictures conjured up by Atta's rather graphic descriptions of powerful Formicans skilled in the use of acid throwers and poison darts—had for a long while set me to thinking very seriously on the subject of genuine armor. As a result one fact had became clear. If I should become involved with such adversaries, to say nothing of trained armed soldiers, even a steed like Trotta would avail me but little; it was more than likely that her rider would be borne off from the engagement a corpse. What I needed, then, was armor, was it not? Real armor, of course, such as would readily occur to anyone's mind, was plainly out of the question; but was there not the possibility that, if I looked far enough, some material could be found—perhaps like the scales of the monster I had killed on the plateau—that could be woven together into some sort of protective covering?

It was this problem that sent me out eventually on this particular trip, resolved for once to penetrate the jungle alone for as far as I could go and return in a day.

It was my hope that I might discover some material as unusual as my lance or rope; and it was on this subject that my thoughts were fastened as I set out in the bright sunlight and rode easily along with my lance set in its stirrup and my eyes on the rough aisles of the great jungle. For Atta was content by that time to allow me to go alone wherever I wished, Trotta having long since proved her speed and general trustworthiness.

Hour after hour passed swiftly while I rode leisurely in the general direction of the south side of the great valley, and nothing of interest appeared. Occasionally I saw distant Formicans—once, a large party—but I kept severely to my own business, and if they felt any desire to pursue me I am ignorant of it, for I soon distanced them on Trotta. This mobility was one of the reasons why I had determined to do my exploring alone. With Atta along, several of our attempted journeys together had turned all too soon into pitched battles with wandering couples of hostile Formicans; Atta seemed to have such a fatal interest in fights that at the first sight of an enemy he forgot our original object. Also, he could not admit the possibility that other inhabitants of the surrounding country had cast the coarse steel of which my lance was obviously made, and this not only shut off any discussion of its origin, but also produced in him an impatience that extended to any real effort to find its makers, precluding any real interest in exploration for its own sake.

I rode along, then, unware of the dreadful discovery I was to make and perversely glad to be alone in the soft fall sunshine. When the sun was high, I drew forth my small allowance of mushrooms and aphis nectar and ate and drank almost happily. I did not dare take the risk of dismounting and exposing myself to the possible dangers of the jungle, and since Trotta was used to only one meal a day at nightfall, this arrangement was satisfactory to her also. In addition I must confess that I enjoyed riding her; she enjoyed the easy rein I gave her; and the

first hours of that journey still remain in my memory as touched with perfection.

I was astonished, too, as I rode along to see the marvelous variety of creatures that we startled from the green forest, varying from clumsy red-colored beasts with weird heads and faces to shining reptiles that I can only call monsters, so horrible were their long tentacles, hard-bodies, and hairy legs, all on the most terrific scale imaginable.

Nowhere, however, did there seem to be any change in the character of the country. Always the same interlacing green jungle trees and impenetrable thickets, with here and there a canebrake of tangled tropical monstrosities! Underfoot the ground varied from a rough rubble to huge blocks of rock and mighty clods of earth which I had to force Trotta to take at the jump, trusting to fortune that she would land safely on the other side. But my odd steed had the climbing qualities of a mountain goat combined with the surefootedness of the burro, and we met with no mishaps.

It must have been about two in the afternoon when through the jungle I saw the glitter of something bright and a moment later the flash of the sun on some wide silvery expanse. Water was my first thought, I remember, and I experienced a distinct thrill as I wondered whether it would prove to be fresh or salt, ocean or lake, stream or river. I was glad now that I had pushed my journey to its uttermost length. Indeed, for the last few minutes I had been examining the position of the sun in the heavens and debating with myself the advisability of starting on the return journey. For the evenings were beginning to shorten; a fact, by the way, that I still noticed with interest.

The next moment I rode out beside a huge glacial rock and came full upon what I had taken for a sheet of water. Before me, lying partly folded against the rock, lay a huge sheet of some bright material about the size of the mainsail on a thirty-foot sloop, but shining and

flashing in the sun as if made of brightest silver. For a second I could not believe my eyes. Was this another marvel that would burst into spray at my touch or disappear like mist at my breath?

Cautiously I dismounted—for Trotta refused to approach any nearer—and walked toward it, leading her and carrying my ax ready for instant use. The rumpled sail or whatever it was was humped up slightly in the middle as if some beast might be concealed beneath it; and in the state of mind of those days I should not have been in the least surprised to see a giant suddenly sit up and cast it aside. But nothing of the kind occurred, and I stood for some moments staring. Then, moved by a sudden impulse, I stooped and struck the stuff a sharp blow with my ax. It was like striking into delicate, pliable tin or wet tough canvas. The blade merely dented it without cutting through, though the dent made was deep, showing that the material was not stiff.

In the deep silence that followed, the sounds of the jungle came to me like so many distant voices, but nothing stirred beneath the silvery sheet. There was evidently nothing living beneath it. Again I stooped, and this time felt of the stuff with my bare hand. Then with a beating heart and a little cry of triumph I started upright.

Armor! This stuff was like armor! Providence had been leading me toward it all day without my knowledge. For surely such a material as this could be made to serve every purpose of sheet mail, clumsy and rude as my efforts with it must be. It was pliable enough to be made to serve as a rough unpierceable cloak if nothing else, and as a protection against darts or poison it would serve admirably. It was strong but bendable, and tough enough to resist the scythe-like jaw of any Formican. Could I not fold it up and take it with me ?

With a flush of excitement mounting in my cheeks I laid hold of the sheet and half pulled, half dragged it out level on the ground away from the rock. In the center, I saw, it was badly ridged in large vertical lines and

circles, and rain and dust had settled here, showing that it had been in this same position for a long time. But it was no moment to speculate on how or when, or who its mysterious owner might be; it was here before me, and that was enough.

With an even greater excitement I strode boldly across the shining sheet itself and looked down to see how badly damaged the vertical ridges were and if too crushed for my purposes. All of it seemed to be extremely uneven, almost as if it had been made like some old farm rag rug. I should have to press it out with a heavy rock, I saw, perhaps with Atta's help.

Not all the ridges were from folding, however, I saw presently. Some of them, to my amazement, seemed to form a definite kind of large hieroglyphic, done in characters so large that they were difficult to decipher, but remarkably like Roman letters, raised in low relief from the background of silver. I could not make out for a while the one nearest to me. Then of a sudden it stood out plainly. It was a large letter C.

Without waiting I took another step and deciphered the second letter just beyond it. It was clearly an H and easily seen. With rapid, fascinated steps I followed the other ridges or letters, and as I did so I added in my mind each one to the preceding. They were nine in all, and for a moment I stood like a contestant in a childish game, repeating them: C–H–O–C–O–L–A–T–E.

I gripped the handle of my ax in a kind of pounding amazed disbelief as I uttered aloud the word they formed.

"Chocolate! Chocolate!"

Why, the hieroglyphic was no hieroglyphic at all! It was the simple word "chocolate," done on a grand scale on something like coarse silver foil.

With the discovery I drew the back of my hand across my suddenly wet forehead and closed my eyes to ease the strain of the suddenly aching eyeballs. Chocolate on

silver foil; just the huge word chocolate written in letters four feet high on shining tinfoil!

For an instant I wondered if I were about to go completely mad. Then I opened my eyes, strode violently to the edge of the shining sheet, and kicked up the edge so that the underneath side was visible. Yes, it was bright gold, just like the piece of tinfoil that a giant might unwrap from a choice piece of chocolate and toss away into the grass of a garden.

"Chocolate"—on tinfoil! Written on a gargantuan candy wrapper precisely like the one I myself had tossed away so carelessly into the grass of my own sunken garden so long ago and far away!

At the incredible suggestion I burst into a mad, wild shout of ironical laughter and thrust from my consciousness the whole insane conception. Why, if this were actually tinfoil from candy, what was I? A madman in a hideous dream? A patient in some hospital for the mentally deranged, imagining an impossible nightmare, an illusion painted by a sick brain on the hospital wall? If this were tinfoil of natural size, I myself could certainly be nothing more than a pygmy, fighting for my life in the grass. I was not a man, lost in some foreign land. Like Atta I was a mere insect, carrying a lance that could be a broken needle, finding rope that was mere thread, taking refuge in what could only be a thimble—living in a tiny English walnut shell and stumbling about in the coarse fieldgrass of my own farm; a pygmy struggling against other pygmies. Atta was not my real friend, my companion, my rescuer—he was a mere ant. And I myself—— A bitter joke, the size of my own fingernail!

At the frightful picture I clenched my teeth and with a final effort at self-preservation shut the whole dreadful nightmare from my staring eyes. Instead, with sweating hands, I dragged and trampled clumsily the great sheet of tinfoil into one mighty bundle. I tied it up into transportable shape; I staggered with it to Trotta and laid it across her in front of my saddle. And then with a

hoarse cry to her I swung myself into the saddle and kicked her brutally in the ribs.

How I ever covered the dozen miles to our stronghold I do not know. It still seems to me a miracle that Trotta should have made her way through the trackless jungle, burdened down with both my heavy bundle and myself and without any directions from me. For I sat almost senseless on her back.

It is with shame that I confess what happened next. For I was not senseless when I arrived at our stronghold. I was fully aware of our huge poplar-like thistle fence, of the familiar ridges in our walnut house, of the small Fabrans gazing in the paddock. I had had time, too, to remember the uncanny familiarity of the great valley, with its distant uplands and the monstrous cup-like trees on the heights beyond. I had even struggled to shut from my memory the picture of the South African veldt with its bending dandelion trees. But it had all been in vain. At each added fact and proof faintness had assailed me, and sweat stood out on my hands, and I was close to being a madman when Trotta stopped before our paddock gate and I stared dully at its bars.

Then Atta came out of the house to unbar the gate. His pale, gentle eyes stared at me appraisingly when I did not move. He approached and laid a feeler on me. And at the touch and the unmistakable final evidence something went berserk within me. Like a maniac I turned on him, and I know now that nothing can excuse the madness, the fury, the bestial insanity with which I fell upon him and with vile curses sought to tear him limb from limb, blaspheming the Providence that had brought me to such a pass, grinding my teeth in a kind of murderous frenzy that wished nothing so much as death—release from this monstrous position in which I lived and struggled on an equality with the very insects of the fields. It was as if the mere touch of Atta had confirmed the reality of the nightmare from which I strove to awake;

as if in a frenzy of despair and horror I sought to end my life and his.

I cannot give sufficient thanks to whatever God of mercy there may be who gave Atta to understand in that supreme moment that I, the maniac who struggled so violently to take his life, was not his sane friend and companion of a few hours before, but a wretched sick man possessed by some devil of destruction. How long it took him to subdue me enough to bind me securely in the upper chamber, I do not know. I can but dimly remember how, in the confused blur of that awful struggle, he forced me down, down upon the hard ground outside the paddock until my strength suddenly gave way and I fell and lost consciousness completely.

When I awoke in the darkness of the upper chamber, it was to the confused sounds of a new struggle going on outside; and undoubtedly it was this that saved my reason. At first I confused this struggle with the one through which I had just come. But in a moment it resolved itself into what it was: the clash of armor against armor, the hoarse shouts of hostile Formicans outside in the garden, and the peculiar battle cry that only Atta could raise when he defended himself from enemies.

The mere sound was enough to drive from me all consideration of my terrible new position and the hopelessness of my ever regaining all that had been taken from me. Nothing mattered in that clash of sounds except to join the conflict going on so fiercely just below our stronghold door. For evidently the enemy had come upon us before Atta had had opportunity to close the door, and he was now sore beset out in the open.

"Hold 'em, Atta!" I shouted almost instinctively. "I'm coming!"

Alas, I could only sink back with a groan on realizing that I was securely fastened to the floor in some manner that the dimness prevented me from seeing. With a desperate effort I strove at my bonds, only to fall back again in despair.

"Curse my insanity," I muttered to myself. "I've destroyed us!"

For a moment I was indeed convinced that I had ended our lives for good and the conviction must have given me superhuman strength. For I made one more mighty effort, broke some of the black strands that held me, and in a heartbreaking second was free to rise and stagger to the doorway, below which Atta stood beating back with deadly precision a host of Formicans in brilliant ruddy armor; a host that far outnumbered and outclassed any I had ever seen for the fierceness of their cut-and-thrust and general attack. With a shout of encouragement I snatched up an ax that lay in the corner and leaned out the doorway.

I was just in time. A big ruddy Formican was pressing along the side of the house, seeking to take Atta in the rear as he stood below our doorway, and I could just reach him. Holding fast to the side of the doorway, I swung my ax as far back as I could and let it descend with a crash upon his skull.

"The door!" I shouted to Atta above the din. "We must close the door against them!"

Beyond a nod my comrade gave no sign that he had heard me or that he realized that I was recovered from my fit of madness and able to stand shoulder to shoulder with him again. It was no time for proffering excuses for past actions. I took a quick look at the outside country through the open doorway, and my heart sank. As far as I could see in the twilight marched a host of mangificent warriors such as were pressing us hard around our narrow doorway. Atta himself was visibly fighting the fight of despair, and it was clearly but a question of time before it would all be over.

"I'll spell you!" I shouted to him. "The minute I jump down, grab the door-handles and swing the door!"

Without a second's hesitation I leaped from the lintel straight upon Atta's nearest adversary, driving my dagger deep into his neck, while Atta turned and pulled himself

up to the doorway, leaning far out to grasp the door-handles and pull down the swinging doors. For a moment I thought he had succeeded and we were saved. But, by what accident of fate I know not, the door stuck fast, and in that second two other Formicans appeared, one on each side of the house. The first, on my right, I killed with one blow of my ax; but behind me the other must have grasped Atta by the leg, for even as I turned back to face a new knot of soldiers who were crowding upon me I was aware of a struggle behind me. And then Atta came crashing down from the lintel, a red-armored soldier beneath him, and two more Formicans leaped upon him.

With a cry of rage I whirled my ax and leaped for the spot myself. I had little hope, of course, of snatching victory out of disaster. But not for nothing had my loyal companion saved my reason and my life. Insect or Martian, I would show him that men have a spark of loyalty and nobility left in them, despite the exhibition I had given an hour since. "I'll get them!" I shouted to his pinned-down form.

But even as I shouted I knew that we were at the end of our resources. Both of us were trapped outside in the open, and nothing could save us now from that host of trained warriors. All that we could hope for was to die fighting and achieve death with honor.

For a giddy moment I did stagger his assailants. I killed one while he threw off a second. But a mass of warriors was crowding in upon us now, and before I could despatch the third a smashing blow from behind knocked me in a dizzy heap, and the fight closed over me, and I knew no more.

Chapter 7

IT WAS some time before I came fully to myself. I had been conscious of being lifted from the ground and of being carried swiftly along for an indefinite period. But the blow on my head had deprived me of all acuteness of perception or feeling, and for many minutes I found difficulty in separating everything that had actually occurred from a conviction that I was a child again, ill of brain fever in the hospital, and once more imagining that I was going through the Egyptian war.

Presently, however, the continuous joggling motion with which my captors carried me broke through to my consciousness, and I opened my eyes to find that I was being carried along a narrow path by a large black Formican, one of a long column that must have numbered many hundreds. I could see them winding in and out through the trees far ahead of me.

What astonished me beyond measure was to observe that every sixth or seventh black warrior in this host balanced on his head, like an Asiatic water-carrier, one of the red warriors who had attacked our house, and that these latter, though much in the minority, seemed to be directing the line of march and issuing orders that were immediately obeyed by their black servants.

My speculations as to the meaning of this oddity were soon cut short by a glimpse of Atta himself, who was being borne along in the same manner as I, though some distance behind me. This sight affected me powerfully and went far to clear my brain of any last trace of my re-

cent revulsion. I could not contemplate his distant inert form without an extraordinary feeling of remose; and the proof thus afforded that our friendship was real had a peculiarly strong overtone that reassured me instantly on the dubious questions of my own sanity. I immediately addressed my captor in a low tone. And at the next halt I succeeded, without attracting the attention of any of the master warriors, in persuading him to fall back until I was within speaking distance of my friend.

As soon as Atta saw me he grinned slightly and listened as before to my voice with gravity, without a hint that anything untoward had ever interrupted our relationship. But he warned me very quickly that in no circumstances should we continue talking together, and that for the present all thought of escape was out of the question. Our very lives depended on absolute obedience to the wills of those who were now our masters.

They were, he told me, a very fierce and savage tribe, whom he had heard of in his childhood as living somewhere far to the south of his home. They were dreaded for the swiftness and implacability with which they carried out their forays, descending unexpectedly upon some peaceful and distant village, slaying all who resisted, and carrying off the young to be reared as slaves. My yellow hair and beard, he thought, odd as it may seem, had been the means of saving my life; for this particular tribe, he told me, even more than other Formicans, had a special fondness for that color and even kept certain small animals as pets because they had tufts of coarse yellow hair on their heads. This I found to be true, and I afterwards saw many of these animals being fondled and petted by the ferocious warriors. The black Formicans were all slaves, Atta said, and we were evidently being carried off to be slaves, too. Meanwhile caution, the utmost caution, was our only defense.

"But surely," I protested in a whisper, "you don't mean that because we have been taken prisoner we must give

up all hope of escape? Surely you can't be content to be a slave now?"

There was no other way, he replied ruefully. Soon the Great Cold—it was thus that he always spoke of winter—would be upon us, and, once that had arrived, no one could travel. In the meantime we should have to make the best of our situation, perhaps until spring.

This extraordinary resignation in one who had always shown exceptional daring in the most trying circumstances astonished me. Guilty as I was of our mishap, I found such an attitude very hard to accept, and I argued with him for some time in whispered words, urging that we start at once to look for an opportunity to escape and that, once free, we could easily find and fortify another house such as the one we had lost. But it was all in vain, and though in the end I spoke so heatedly that my captor became alarmed and squeezed me with his beak, Atta only shook his head mournfully and said that we had much better resign ourselves to our fate. I was soon to find that all Formicans have this fatalistic tendency. Whenever there is no opportunity for immediate action their resolution seems to take wings and they become as meek and docile as aphids. For this reason most of them make excellent slaves and can be trusted as no human slaves could ever be. The Rubicundians, for instance, as I later learned that this tribe was called, were outnumbered eight to one by their prisoners, yet never, so far as I could find out, had there been any uprising against them.

Meanwhile our march was resumed; and at length, after many hours, we arrived in the late hours of the evening at what was apparently the Rubicundian stronghold, an underground castle of considerable extent. Here Atta and I were carried down a long, dark sloping passage and left in an underground room with a sentinel at the open entrance; and in this dungeon, again assailed by exhaustion, I finally fell asleep once more.

Indeed, I think that by that time I really did not care

whether I lived or died. I knew now that there was no longer any mystery about my actual situation. There is a curious finality about the truth; it both crushes and at the same time lifts from the soul the burden of intolerable doubt. Lost to the world as I now was for all practical purposes, I could at least accept my fate and resolve to concern myself no longer with the reasons for it. And the release from struggle was as if I had swallowed an unpleasant but effective anodyne.

When I awoke it was still dark, though it was late in the morning, and I felt immeasurably better. Our sentinel, who turned out to be little more than an attendant, brought us dried grain and informed us that he too was a captive and that his name was Subser. He was of the Cutter Caste, a slow russet-colored Formican and one of Atta's own countrymen, although he had come originally from the capital, Fusa, not from Atta's provincial city of Forza. He told us in his slow, stupid way that in a few days the Rubicundians would set forth on another raid whose objective was a village some two hours to the west. During the army's absence, he said, we would be expected to work for the guards at the gateway, and for that reason we had better set about regaining our strength.

This news cheered me a little despite the melancholy that our surroundings had induced in my battered self. I even roused myself enough, as soon as Subser had gone about his other duties, to suggest to Atta again that we explore the possibility of escaping at once. For it was obvious that our captors were paying little attention to us, and it seemed unlikely that friendly captives like this Subser would obstruct our departure or even give the alarm.

Atta, however, rejected the suggestion as before. We were in no condition to travel, he pointed out; I myself was now unarmed; and I was quite mistaken about the attitude of the captives or slaves toward escaping prisoners. No one could count on their apathy, for if they

caught us in the slightest out-of-the-way action, they too would set upon us as ferociously as any Rubicundian.

This unexpected fact temporarily dampened my enthusiasm. But it did not suffice to end my pursuit of the idea of escape. For the rest of the day I concentrated on the problem, almost as if escape from the Rubicundians would in itself produce some change in my condition that would make it at least bearable. This peculiar pertinacity I can only explain now as a product of the suppressed horror that I felt over my whole situation. For, although I was scarcely conscious of it at the time, the final realization that I was not on some distant planet, but was actually living as an insect on my own acres, reacted on me in a most unexpected manner. I did not seek to explain it; I sought to act upon it. I did not despair; I felt impatient to be up and doing.

Incredible as my position was, reduced as I might be to an unnoticeable pygmy where my former world was concerned, nevertheless I was still a human being—a creature, in my judgment, infinitely superior to these armored Formicans among whom I found myself. In addition, intelligent and formidable as other tribes of Formicans might prove to be, these particular Rubicundians were nothing more than high-grade savages, pure and simple. Surely a resourceful man could still triumph over large stupid insects, controlled very probably by instinct alone and ill fitted to cope with any unusual or original set of actions. At any rate such was my hope when our captivity began, and it served both to rouse my native ingenuity by setting me a problem and to preserve my sanity by slamming the door on the very real despair that any prolonged consideration of my true situation could not have failed to evoke.

Fortunately several days passed before we were assigned to our work at the gateway—we were common laborers, I regret to say, carrying rock into the fields as other workers brought it from the lower corridors—and during this time I made a heartening discovery. No one

seeming to be concerned in the slightest about what I did, I set myself to a thorough tour of the whole underground castle; and behind what should be called the granary—at least, it was a room off the main dining hall filled with various kinds of food—I found, heaped up in a corner, all my former accouterments: ax, bow and arrows, lasso, and even, beneath some refuse, my precious lance. Evidently some Rubicundian had had them transported hither out of mere curiosity and then thrown them aside, for although they were in plain sight no one was doing anything about them.

Their reappearance gladdened my heart, despite the dirty condition of rope and metal, and during the next two days I managed to carry off the whole lot at different times and hoard them in the dungeonlike chamber where we still lived. Here Subser saw them, as well as many passing Rubicundians and countless slaves. But no one displayed the slightest interest. Only Atta and I knew what an inestimably valuable find they were, and we concealed our knowledge beneath an exterior of boredom and melancholy.

Their effect upon Atta was really remarkable. Even before I had brought the last of them his eye perceptibly brightened, and the desire for escape, which I had with such ill success endeavored to instill in him, seemed at once to return to him with extraordinary force. For him, I suppose, they were not merely weapons, they were the mark of my human superiority over all Formicans, including our conquerors. Without them I was worse than helpless; with them, he felt, invincible. He at once began pumping Subser for details about the guards at the gateway and their habits, and he spent many hours with me trying to conjecture the exact direction in which our lost house lay in relation to the castle where we were now imprisoned.

Meanwhile our labor at the gateway was by no means intolerable. We were supposed, of course, to work with other slaves; but it was easy enough to avoid any hard

labor, for it is the nature of the Formican to be always busy about something, and I suppose it had never entered the heads of any of the other slaves to attempt to shirk. Even Atta did more work than was strictly necessary and seemed a little put out when I called it ironically to his attention.

As for the Rubicundians themselves, they were easy masters who seemed to have little interest in what went on among the slaves so long as there were always some about to serve them with food or carry them on their forays. For your true Rubicundian aristocrat never sets foot to the ground except in battle, and he is always carried to and from the field. Indeed, war seemed to be the only incentive that could arouse these haughty chiefs to any activity at all. At other times they sat about, eating, drinking, polishing their armor, petting their little yellow pets, and telling endless tales of old battles. They were more like robber barons in some late Stone Age than anything else I can think of, and they showed little trace of what we call culture. On their raids, however, they were brave and extraordinarily active and by far the best fighters among all the races of Formicans.

This was proved to me on the only raid on which I accompanied them during my captivity—an attack on a wooden city belonging to a tribe of Camponotans who had never before been assailed. These Camponotans were a very large and fierce tribe who lived half a day's journey to the west. And here let me put in a word concerning the manner in which I am carrying on this narrative. It may seem strange to you that after realizing the exact nature of my predicament I should still be speaking of obvious ants in the terms that I first found for them. But it must be remembered that, placed as I was, the true character of my new associates, although fully acknowledged inwardly, could hardly be held in focus during my hours of daily struggle.

I knew, for instance, that the dense jungle outside the Rubicundian stronghold was in reality no moon jungle,

or indeed any jungle at all. It was a meadow in western Iowa, temporarily gone to grass. Nevertheless, in my situation it *was* a jungle and could be thought of as nothing else. Nor, being what I was, could I figure the creatures I had been thrown with as anything other than the strange race that I had first thought them. To realize that they were actually not such creatures at all, but what we call insects, involved too much imagination, and I finally gave up the effort. Indeed, for weeks at a time the knowledge that Atta, for instance, was in reality an ant never entered my head. He presented none of the attributes that I had previously associated with ants—except an admitted gargantuan resemblance——and to all intents and purposes he was not an ant to me, a person who lived on an equality with him. He was a new and distinct personality.

Likewise the Rubicundians and the Camponotans were two quite distinct tribes of the species that we call ants; but they appeared as Formicans to me. And it is only by so characterizing them that I can ever convey the true value of everything that happened to me.

To return, then, to the attack upon the Camponotans:

We started very early that morning, the warriors, in the highest spirits, borne along by their slaves, and the slaves themselves in a great state of anticipatory excitement. By noon we had reached the edge of the Camponotan territory—a dark and gloomy land, swampy and sunless—and I was well exhausted, for although the army followed for the most part a well-worn path, the going was rough.

The path thus made merits a word of explanation. For the Rubicundians although not noted for their eyesight, can make and follow a trail in a most remarkable manner, and this is a great advantage to them in going great distances. Indeed, I would defy any woodsman to find his way back by a mere casual recognition of visible landmarks in such a country as we traversed that day. For half an hour at a time we would pass through long winding tunnels, roofed and walled with huge brown sheets

of what may have been dead leaves. These were crowded with débris in places, opening out in spots upon bare ground, but usually rising above the earth; sometimes as high as twenty feet above it when our path crossed some tangled brake of enormous grasses. These high crossings grew more and more necessary as we approached what the slaves called the Dark Country; for here the ground became moist and soggy in every direction and exhaled a strong odor of decay. When we finally reached the edge of the Dark Country and the jagged, stumplike battlements of the Camponotan city loomed ahead of us, as dismal a sight confronted me as I have ever seen. For the land around appeared like nothing except plain mud.

The warriors spread out at the foot of the brown battlements, their shining red armor a brave spot of color in the otherwise gloomy scene, and presently the assault began. There was no real military discipline among the warriors, I soon saw. Each one charged up the steep incline toward the entrances at the top without paying the slightest attention to his comrades. And the same lack of order was observable among the Camponotans. They made no attempt to await their foes in an advantageous position, but rushed down to meet the assaulting party as if afraid that they might vanish before a fight could be begun.

The personal combats staged were daring and brave in the extreme, and it ocurred to me as I watched from the edge of the mud field that much could be accomplished with such fighters if they were trained and disciplined in genuine military tactics. Thus trained, the Rubicundians, for instance, instead of allowing the battle to break up as it presently did into a series of meaningless personal duels, might easily have driven a single wedge of picked fighters to the gateways and captured the whole city in jig time—with a minimum of loss, too. As it was, they conquered finally by mere ferocity and force of numbers and at a great loss of warriors, driving the defenders back and plunging after them through the gateways, but leav-

ing great heaps of dead and dying behind them. For pure carnage I cannot imagine anything more sanguinary. But of military genius there was none.

For some time the battle raged in the high streets and corridors of the Camponotan city. Then, by two's and three's, the Rubicundians began to reappear, and in another hour the column was marching home, the slaves —among whom were Atta and I—laden with booty and captives, the victors boasting loudly of their individual skill and prowess.

This was the only real battle that I saw among the Rubicundians, and I am unable to report further on their expeditions; for there was considerable dissatisfaction over the smallness of the booty I had been able to carry, and thereafter I was left with the more aged labor slaves at the gate while both Atta and Subser went off on the other glorified robberies that the Rubicundians called war.

This outcome, naturally, was not at all contrary to my liking. For it was about this time that I decided finally to test fortune by having Subser carry my lance to the dump outside the castle gate, and for my purposes it was vital that I be on hand during the daylight hours to see that some guard or slave did not carelessly bear it back.

First, however, came my decision to test Subser himself. And here I should go back a little in my story.

I think I have already said that this worthy countryman of Atta's was a little on the stupid side. But he seemed to mean well, and as time went on he became less and less a sentinel or guard and more and more an associate. Indeed, after the Camponotan expedition we were little more than three slaves together. For after that episode he appeared to feel a liking or conceive an admiration for Atta, and though Formicans are as a rule extremely reticent, it was not long before he was beginning to tell us what amounted to the story of his life.

He had not, it appeared, been a slave for any considerable period. Several years before, while on a distant leaf-

cutting expedition from Fusa, he had been cut off by a small party of Rubicundians and taken prisoner. Since then he had served his new masters in many capacities, and he knew nearly everything there was to know about them. What interested Atta and me, however, was the account he gave of the manner in which he had marked in his memory the different landmarks that he hoped some day to use in making his way back to his home city, the headquarters of Atta's own present-day overlords.

This piece of information inspired considerable interest in me, and for several nights thereafter Atta and I talked of little else when we were alone. To my disappointment, however, Atta finally said that he placed little confidence in either the information or the informant. In fact, he viewed the fellow with decided skepticism. He himself had often been in Fusa, he said, and the class of cutters to which Subser belonged was both stupid and limited. He had never heard of one able to do anything more than cut, let alone memorize landmarks and act as guide across a trackless and illimitable country.

To this judgment I had no good answer, and, rather unwillingly, I let the subject drop for the time being. Then one night it occurred to me to question Subser more closely on the route he professed to remember. And after much difficulty and the use of endless pebbles as markers I extracted from him the unexpected fact that the route as he remembered it lay almost precisely in the direction of our abandoned home. In fact, he said, our great valley was one of his landmarks; it must be kept on the right during what would be an ascent of some difficult uplands, from which one turned right again in a southeasterly direction once one had reached the top of the mountains.

This description startled even Atta, with its promise that we might once more see our gnarled stronghold, its Fabrans and aphids, and possibly Trotta; and the anxiety thus aroused in me over their fate had much to do with my eventual persuasion of Atta at least to sound out

our new acquaintance on the possibility of making a break for freedom and, if he agreed, to attempt it.

At any rate he did consent at long last—except in fighting, one of Atta's outstanding characteristics was his prudence—and, Subser gradually agreeing, we spent many days thereafter hoarding up mushrooms in a closet that Atta dug in our quarters and in other ways preparing to meet what we now considered a certainty.

There still remained, however, the question I have already mentioned: that of getting my lance outside the gates—for I was obstinately determined to take it with me—and here, it occurred to me, we could both test Subser's loyalty to us and at the same time, if all went well, cache my invaluable weapon against the day of our departure. So I thought, at all events, and so it eventually happened. I drilled Subser for several evenings against a possible questioning by some Rubicundian. Eventually he brought the lance through the corridors without mishap, I cached it in a safe place beyond the castle dump, and there for several days it stayed hidden in safety against the moment when I should need it.

All that remained was to choose the proper moment for our actual escape, and this proved exceedingly simple. Just before dawn one damp, cold morning all three of us picked up our special burdens and in the darkness emerged cautiously from our dungeonlike chamber and stole swiftly up the long sleepy corridors. No one saw us, no one challenged us. Only at the gate itself was there anyone stirring. Here four sentinels kept a desultory watch, drugged with cold and the sense of security that sharp autumn nights bring. One of them saw us and sleepily stepped forward to intercept us while the others stared at us without moving.

It was the crucial moment, and there was no sense in parleying. I did not hesitate. I was in the van, and just as the poor fellow stepped forward I drew my hatchet from my belt and struck him on the head without warning. He went down like a stone, and after that it was easy. My

two comrades, as if galvanized, suddenly lost their fear of the authority he represented in their eyes; there was a rush forward, two minutes of sharp work at the narrow entrance itself, and then we were outside in the cool dawn air—and free! Behind us were four dead Rubicundian sentinels and not a soul to give the alarm. I led Atta and Subser to the spot where the lance was cached, we recovered it, Subser took it in charge, Atta lifted me and my burdens into a good traveling position, and with my rough map in my hands I took one look at the slowly reddening horizon and gave the order to proceed.

After that I was the leader of the expedition that I had myself conceived. As Atta told me later, the mere lifting of my ax upon a sentinel that morning had shown him and Subser that even the dreaded law of the Rubicundians was a dead letter when confronted with resolute will and firm purpose. With one stroke I had not only killed a gateway guard, but had also cut the bonds of that ingrained obedience that hitherto had appeared to them as the condition of their existence.

All this, however, Atta told me much later. That morning all I knew was that he was carrying me swiftly along the winding path up which we had come as captives, that I kept the sun carefully in position at every change in direction, and that long before night we had reached our beloved old home. Not only was it still standing, but to my delight Trotta rushed out of the woods at our approach and after some kind words and an offering of mushrooms approached and let me stroke her. Once I had her safely in the paddock, I spent all of two hours refurbishing her torn bridle and watersoaked saddle.

This necessary chore done, I was all for resuming our journey. It was an even chance, I felt, that the Rubicundians were already in fast pursuit of us, the dead sentinels being a fatal advertisement of our departure. But my companions demurred. It was nearly twilight, and the coldness of the night was beginning to affect them

so strongly that they could scarcely set one leg in front of another. To offset this—it is a weakness from which all Formicans apparently suffer—I was driven to an experiment that I had often wished to make, and that now seemed decidedly called for: in brief, to make a fire.

When I was a boy I had played Indian enough to learn how to dispense with matches in the woods by the somewhat laborious process of rapidly twirling a pointed stick in the hollow of a dry log until the friction produced enough heat to kindle dry wood. A sharp stick of hardwood is necessary, as well as a flexible string or cord to make the stick revolve swiftly. I had the cord in the string of my bow, and in the upper room of our house there were still a few pieces of dry wood as well as a number of pointed shafts that I had discarded when making arrows. One of these I took, wound the string of my bow about its middle, and, setting the pointed end in a depression cut in a small piece of timber, began spinning it by moving the bow itself back and forth across it.

It was some time before the process yielded any result, but after a while one or two sparks appeared, and then a dull red glow that I fed with bits of thistledown from my old bed, and soon I had a small cheerful fire blazing in the open garden before our house. Its warmth soon restored Atta and Subser, although at first they were unwilling to believe that I had produced the blaze. On my assurance that there was nothing to fear and that I could produce such warmth whenever it became necessary, they at length consented to start out, even though by this time it was quite dark. I mounted Trotta, adding my small piece of timber to her burdens, and after a long look at the familiar place that had so long sheltered us we set forth.

For perhaps an hour, along the path that we already knew very well, we traveled through the jungle, which, now that summer was over, was dry and brittle and

rattled and clashed in the cold wind. But the darkness impeded us, and as soon as the effect of the fire began to wear off my companions began to lag again. At last I gave up the attempt to get a commanding lead on our pursuers, and once more we stopped and rested until morning. It is odd that the Formican, so hardy in every other respect, should so easily succumb to a degree of cold that would scarcely inconvenience a man. To that circumstance, I suppose, we owed our eventual escape beyond the Rubicundian frontiers. For even Atta was quite incapable of moving after an hour's exposure to the chill of a cold fall night, and I doubt if we could have pursued our long journey at all if I had not been able to build an occasional fire to get us warm enough to push on. This ability our pursuers lacked, and in all likelihood they ceased to follow us as soon as we had gone beyond the extreme limits of one day's journey.

We had plenty of food, for Atta had reinforced our supply by gathering more mushrooms in the almost choked cellar of our old home. We were able to get an early morning start—usually before sunrise—by simply throwing fuel on the fire's embers and starting up a comfortable blaze. Thus we had little difficulty in following Subser's route with a respectable speed that soon carried us past the cliffs and the valley, up the rough, tangled uplands, and finally over the mountain and down toward Fusa.

It was about noon on the fourth day that Subser, who had rather importantly assumed the lead, turned in great excitement to point out what he said was the track of a party of his own people and announced that we must now be within a few hours' march of the city itself. Sure enough, a little later we came in sight of a low range of mesalike hills along a stream that Subser assured us marked the extreme southwest boundary of Fusan territory. By five o'clock we had reached the woods on the outskirts of Fusa.

Here Subser was of the opinion that we had better wait until morning before attempting to gain entrance; for the rules regarding strangers were very strict. I hobbled Trotta, and we made ourselves comfortable in a wooded glade, waiting to light a fire until darkness should have called the last worker back to the city.

For several hours we lay talking while the gray, damp afternoon dissolved gradually into a cold, clear autumn night; and the conversation thus induced is still sharp in my mind. Indeed, I still wonder sometimes what would have happened had I followed my instinct that evening and refused to allow either Atta or myself to enter the city. For already, naturally, I had realized that I was in a totally unpredictable world where only the bloody-handed survived. Also I was more than dubious of how far my unusual abilities with ax and lance would carry me in a civilized Formican city. Nevertheless, until that moment I had viewed what lay before me as principally an excitement that would at least obliterate the sense of what my transformation had actually done to me. I had conceived of life in Fusa as a new and pleasant extension of Atta's and my joint adventure, with Atta as still my friend and companion and Subser as, in a measure, our Man Friday. Now, however, it began to be borne in on me how limited was my knowledge. During the last few days Atta himself had been increasingly silent whenever I had attempted to discuss the subject. And even a brief review of the conversations between him and Subser threw little light on the kind of future I might expect.

Now that I considered it, indeed, it seemed obvious that not only did neither of them appear to have any idea where we should live or what we should do, but Fusa itself seemed to be bathed in a kind of gray, colorless twilight. Subser had lived there since childhood, and Atta had visited there many times. But nowhere in any of their exchanges could I remember any references to a desire to revisit some particular spot. Totally lacking

was any nostalgia for some familiar place dear to a metropolitan citizen returning home after a long absence. Instead, both Atta and Subser appeared to be interested solely in estimating such matters as tons of grain stored in public warehouses, the length of certain streets, the crowded condition thereof, hours of labor, the size of the armed forces, the effectiveness of the police, the prevalence of dwarfs or young thieves—I could not divine which—and the general division of daily work, even down to the job of rearing and educating the city's children: all of which, I gathered, was a community affair. But at no point had they mentioned any plans of their own, referred to any city official by name, voiced any criticism or opinion, or even recalled a past love affair or living relative.

Now that I considered it dispassionately, the impression thus produced suddenly seemed more dreary than I can describe; dreary and appallingly unrelieved. And after considering the matter of the twilight of our thicket for some time I became uneasy enough over the situation I might be getting into to rise and call for a conference. For it I kindled a fire of small wood trusting to the increasing chill of the night to protect us from unwelcome guests. Atta immediately protested, although somewhat feebly because of his slightly numb condition. But I replied briefly that the conference seemed necessary to me, because it had occurred to me that we had no plan of action for the morning and that I ought to understand better the nature of the problem confronting us before I entrusted myself to a city that I knew nothing of.

This declaration thoroughly awakened both of my companions and drew from Atta the best assurances of which he was capable. But it was still clear to me that neither one grapsed the extent of my ignorance or understood what it was that I wanted to know. Once we were past the guards, Atta assured me—and he would vouch for me there—no one would pay any attention to us,

and each would be free to seek his natural employment. What was there to worry about?

"But," I protested with some irritation, "I have no particular employment, and if I had I should have no idea where to go or what to do. I am a stranger."

"You must have done something in your own country," Subser reminded me rather impudently. "What was your work? Don't you remember?"

"Naturally I remember," I said testily. "I was a farmer, a planter."

"Then you are a planter now," said Subser tranquilly. "You will go outside the wall every morning at eight and plant."

I was about to protest my lack of interest in becoming a field hand when Atta, who had been staring into the fire, laid his feeller gently on my knee.

"Do not forget," he said, "it is the time of the Great Cold. It will not last long. Once the fields are clear, no one will go out till spring."

"Then what will I do?" I inquired grimly. "Shovel snow?"

Subser laughed with a kind of peasant superiority. "Follow the Formican next to you," he said. "You will know fast enough."

I did not like his manner, and I think it irritated Atta also.

"Perhaps you do not realize his abilities," he said coldly to the Cutter. "His place is among the soldiers. I will see to it that that is made clear."

"No doubt," ejaculated Subser, "once he has passed the tests."

Atta shrugged his shoulders. "I know the tests," he said. "But I know also that strangers may serve."

"That is true," said Subser. "I have seen their bodies embalmed in the Benefactor's Museum."

I was about to say that this did not sound exactly hospitable to me, but Atta had risen abruptly, his eyes on Subser, and he interrupted me. "Come," he said. "The

moon has risen, and we can gaze upon the South Gateway. Let us leave Subser to end the fire."

With that he took me by the arm and led me through the tangled thickets out into a swale of matted vines beyond which the forest ended abruptly. He said nothing as we pushed ourselves through the shadowy moonlit jungle and paused on the edge. There he parted the high bushes where the jungle ended.

"Subser does not comprehend," he said then without looking at me. "He is a Cutter and does not understand. That is why I have discussed nothing since he joined us."

He stepped through the bushes and stood gazing across perhaps a mile of cleared fields from which grain had been harvested. At the far side, rising some two hundred feet in the moonlight, appeared the South Gate of Fusa: a structure of piled stone at whose base, as in a pyramid, a small dark entrance gaped.

"That is the South Entrance," said Atta. "It is closed at night." He hesitated. "Subser is merely the name of all the Cutters," he added with no change of tone. "The first Cutter was named Subser."

"And Atta?" I asked.

"My name is Atta," he said, "as my father's was before me and his father's, and his father's. We are of the Maternity Guards and always have been." He plucked a piece of a long creeper and began chewing it while he continued to stare at the distant gateway. "I have brought you here to tell you," he said at length, "that Subser is right about the tests. I can be of help to you only in bringing you before the Great Oval. Beyond that, there is no such thing as friendship in Fusa. Our cities are not as you have described yours to me. Do you understand?"

"I understand partly," I said after a long while.

"It is very simple," he said. "As a Stranger you are with me, and I shall vouch for you. But after that it is for you to go your own way. Wield your ax, ride your Fabran, and prove that you are a soldier and can be of service to Fusa. Do you understand me fully?"

He looked at me with eyes of great intensity until I nodded.

"Good," he said. "That is all I can say. As for the rest" —his voice tightened oddly—"it is something to remember—to think of in the dark hours of the night. That is all."

Abruptly he threw away his piece of creeper and truned back into the jungle. And by the glitter of the moon on his high cheekbones I could see that tears lay beneath his eyes—tears that I did not understand until Fusa itself had taught me the reason for them.

Chapter 8

WE ENTERED Fusa after sun-up the next morning, and it still seems remarkable to me that no one challenged us. Nevertheless Atta gave the password to the soldiers on duty at the gate, they let us pass with a perfunctory glance at Subser and Trotta, and almost instantly we were lost in the pushing crowds of what was plainly a great city. As a matter of fact, it was the hour when the planters and cutters go to the fields outside, and a tenth of the field hands who surrounded us immediately beyond the gateway would have sufficed to swallow up a caravan much more numerous than we were. As I later learned, some two hundred thousand Fusans go out from the city every morning; from the South Gate alone over twenty thousand emerge. It was the full tide of this crowd that pushed and jostled us in the shiny roadway inside the gate, and for perhaps ten minutes it was like a New York morning subway crush.

Then the rush began to subside, and soon long files of hurrying Fusans took the place of the original vanguard. These too strode along at a good pace, but one after another and all on the same side of the roadway, so that we had plenty of room to go three abreast on our side, with Trotta following.

The roadway itself had been built on a gradual incline downward, like the terminal of some great railway station, and to my surprise the way was not so dark as it had been in the city of the Rubicundians. It was dimly lighted by a kind of dull gray reflection that came from the walls—whether by design or not, I am unable to say. The lanes themselves were simply broad tunnels, and, though there was no discernible pavement, the way underfoot was hard and dry, without dust or dirt.

At first I was struck by the fact that there were no side streets or shops at all—only occasional small, irregular galleries set in the walls, in which bags of aphis nectar hung upon the benches of what were evidently delicatessen stores or food bars. At such places, here and there, workers stopped, and attendants let them take long drinks without payment or fuss of any kind. The only function of the attendant appeared to be to keep an abundant supply of aphis honey on hand. This he did, to my amazement, by striking an empty bag sharply with his feeler, whereupon it moved away and a new and distended bag took its place from somewhere in back of him. The bags were living carriers of some kind, plainly bred for the purpose, and quite visible in the narrow lane.

At first these irregular galleries were few and far between, but after a while the lanes grew broader, the gallery entrances were more numerous, and rough pillars began to appear, reaching up to the ceilings of the avenue and giving the pedestrian a kind of side colonnade under which to walk. This left the center roadway freer and able to take care of increasing numbers of citizens, some of whom appeared to be food porters, carrying

huge, solid pieces of grain, burdens of mushroom food, and even an occasional bundle of the peculiar leaf stalks that Atta had brought into our fortified home. Such porters appeared in groups, apparently going from one gallery entrance to another, but seldom proceeding for long down the avenue itself. Once a long file of marching soldiers held us up beside one of these gallery entrances, and I looked inside. The scene was like that in a huge medieval courtyard in a southern European latitude, with open terraces instead of rooms opening upon it and hundreds of Fusans busy at their toilets and having breakfast. Each gallery, so called, was complete in itself, Atta explained as we resumed our progress, and as soon as its community larder was filled its porters carried the incoming supplies to the next gallery tenement, thus avoiding the inevitable congestion of the avenue that would have resulted from an attempt to supply all the communties direct from the warehouses at the same time.

Indeed, despite the apparent confusion, I could easily see that everything was being done according to a well-arranged plan, and the impression produced on me was far different from that given by the citadel of the Rubicundians. Only two things seemed haphazard and not calculated as part of a definite scheme of things. One was the presence in the courtyards of a great number of animal pets of all sizes, mostly yellow and orange in color; the other was an occasional squabble on the colonnaded avenue between the porters and what seemed to be dwarfs or thieves.

These dwarfs, for I can only describe them as such, were incredibly quick in their movements and so small in size that they were like precocious beady-eyed animals. They appeared from low narrow openings at the base of the avenue walls—openings so small that a full-grown Fusan could not enter—snatched at the burdens of the porters, and ran gleefully away, to disappear with their booty into their inaccessible retreats. They were the

stunted thieves, I judged, whom Atta and Subser had previously discussed.

Otherwise nothing unusual marred the steady succession of uneven courtyards, galleries, food shops, cross streets, and rough colonnades that met our eyes as we proceeded deeper and deeper into the city. So exactly alike, indeed, was each district to every other, and so evidently laid out by plan, that the impression of factory-like sameness of existence in Fusa gradually grew on me until the busy monotony actually assailed my sense of time. Was I on this corner now, or had I been here ten minutes before? If a corner precisely like this lay ahead, then why did I not stay where I was? Or had I in fact never moved at all?

The only relief from this monotony of time and place was the occasional appearance of bands of soldiers. I must say that these were magnificent specimens, with great heads like Napoleonic shakos and a general aspect of strength and endurance. They appeared to be wholly absorbed in their military formations or errands, however, and scarcely glanced at us or even at Trotta, with her load of armor, axes, and lance in plain sight. Considering what curiosity such a sight would have aroused in the streets of any American or European city, I formed a very low opinion of the powers of observation of the Fusan military. I stowed away the impression for future consideration. As a matter of fact I was both correct and incorrect in my diagnosis, a new sight being somewhat in the nature of a new idea to a Formican; not only displeasing to speculate on, but literally impossible to consider if outside the realm of inherited beliefs or actions.

Meanwhile such theoretical considerations were far from my mind. Already we had been proceeding for over an hour, and the realization that I was committing myself to a situation from which there could be no escape was beginning to weigh upon me. Street after street, courtyard after courtyard, avenue after avenue, crowd after crowd of Formicans, until the mass overwhelmed

the mind! How could a man ever reach the South Gate again if escape became a necessity?

Apparently a similar uneasiness was present in Subser, too, although for a different reason. For I noticed as we went along that he glanced at Atta and me covertly from time to time in a manner that I could not account for. Nevertheless I could not imagine that he shared my thoughts—after all, this was his home town—and nothing was said by any of us for a long while, until at the corner of an avenue we paused briefly to allow a procession to pass on the side street.

This was a group of male community nursery workers, I judged, with white, grublike infants in their care, and of no particular importance. But for some reason Subser stood staring at them as they went by and after they had passed looked after them for almost a minute, an expression of anxiety on his broad peasant face. Then he faced Atta rebelliously and refused to go on with us.

"It is already beyond the time for the Cutters," he said to my mystification. "I do not see why I should go farther."

For some reason Atta did not seem in the least surprised. "Suit yourself," he said coldly. "I will be responsible in the Oval."

"I can still reach the fields in time, down this avenue," said Subser stubbornly.

"Then go," said Atta. "Consider only your cutting."

"I am indeed a Cutter," said Subser. And without a word of farewell he turned and went off hurriedly down the cross avenue, like a man late for a dentist appointment.

"It is his caste and his duty," said Atta briefly. "That is all he knows and all he is likely to know." And as we resumed our progress he explained our late guide's sudden defection. No Fusan, it appeared, could allow a stranger to enter the city unless he immediately brought the intruder before the Great Oval for approval. Subser had left Atta to bear alone the responsibility for intro-

ducing me—an act of cowardice in my eyes, but in Atta's merely an inevitable product of Subser's humble role in Fusa. It was outside Subser's imagination, he pointed out, to allow anything to interfere with the work of his caste, even though two introducers for a Stranger were better than one.

"But you don't have to worry," he added, giving my weapons and Trotta a humorous glance. "There is your real recommendation to Fusa. No one can say there is personal favoritism in a beast and an ax, or a lance and a lasso."

And with that he dismissed the subject. Nevertheless I could see that he was disturbed, and for the first time it struck me that I was in the presence of an unusual, perhaps a unique personality, considered from the Formican standpoint. For so far I had seen no evidence whatever of any real personal relationships between other Formicans. Certainly there was little that one could call even remotely human about Subser, and among all the Rubicundians I had observed no single instance of personal attraction or even what we call the gentler emotions. All without exception had been moved by what seemed to me mere mass hysteria. Personal friendship appeared to be nonexistent. Was it possible that this lack of emotion was not confined to savage tribes like the Rubicundians, but was inherent also in civilized nations like the Fusans?

The supposition struck me forcibly as I considered the nature of the interview ahead of me and reflected on Atta's remarks. For these meant, if they meant anything, that the main consideration in admitting me would be my fighting value. Any vouching for me by Atta would be the merest formality; indeed such an act, if too deeply emphasized, might even cast suspicion upon not only my ability but his own motives in bringing me. Unquestionably, then, what would be required was proof of my fighting ability. And would the Great Oval be likely to take my word—or Atta's—for that? In brief, should I not

be required to give some sort of demonstration of my abilities?

This question walked into my mind as I pondered the peculiar character of the civilization I was now entering; and after a while it occupied my mind so oppressively that at last I spoke of it to Atta while we waited on a street corner for a gang of workers to pass. But he passed it off with a shrug. All I would have to do, he said, was to explain my ax and lance and lasso, put Trotta through her paces, and let him do the rest. He had seen me fight and could vouch for that. Even if the Oval leaders were curious and wanted a demonstration, what if I did have to lasso a number of captive gladiators? They were a poor lot, usually worn out by their struggles to provide young Fusans with battle experience. He doubted if I would even get much amusement from them.

This comment, typical of Atta with his love of fighting in any form, seemed to satisfy him, but it did little to reassure me. Indeed, the mention of what sounded like an arena, so far unknown to me, brought up a picture that made me rather nervous. But, able to think of no way of justifying my apprehensions, I resigned myself to an interview from which I could obviously no longer withdraw.

It was late in the morning now, I should judge, and the character of the city neighborhoods had begun to change. The side courtyards appeared to be of larger and more noble proportions. No colored pets were in evidence, no Formicans making a morning toilet or sitting at breakfast. Instead, huge shako-headed soldiers guarded entrance after entrance, and in some of the galleries tests of strength were in progress between individual Fusans. Shouts of approval or disgust issued from the little crowds gathered around these bouts, and I concluded that we were at last in the neighborhood of the Great Oval.

"It begins around the next curve," Atta told me above the din. "We shall be there shortly."

"Good!" I shouted back. For I was a little weary now of our almost endless walk, and I had already begun to notice that groups of the military were casting sidelong glances at my weapons and my mount. In fact, I was about to comment humorously on this to Atta when we came to a long, open corridor that stretched ahead of us on our right for perhaps a hundred yards. It had rough pillars set at fairly regular intervals, and between these I caught a glimpse suddenly of an open space inside: a great oval of such extent that it almost stunned me.

Up to that moment I had associated size in Fusa almost solely with walking distances. I had seen no roof hollowed out more than three stories above me in the medieval courtyards. Now I was forced to change my mind and with it my whole estimate of the abilities of the Fusan people. For beyond the pillars and inside them a vast amphitheater covering perhaps twenty acres arched its irregular dome to an incredible height. I say incredible because the sense of distance was stupefied by the shining material out of which the dome had been hollowed.

Beneath this dome and extending in an oval lay an open space dotted occasionally with rough stone posts. Its walls were also of some kind of shining silica, raised perhaps ten feet above the ground, and above these, around the whole great irregular oval, tier after tier of rough lateral seats rose, filled with thousands of ruddy Formicans with here and there a dark mahogany-colored Forzan of Atta's hue. Only at the far end was there a break in the circle of spectators. There the tiers of seats descended sharply to a kind of raised dais with four huge stones behind it.

This dais was empty, but messengers or pages or attendants were busy hanging bags of nectar in front of some two dozen wide seats, and beneath them to the right and left, in small enclosures like open opera boxes,

were perhaps a half dozen more Fusans who seemed to be dealing with small crowds of petitioners, occasionally passing their messages up to two high stone lecterns above them. These lecterns were almost exactly alike, one on each side, and behind each one stood an impassive individual who did not move or speak.

"Nuru is the one on the left," said Atta. "The other is Draca."

"What does Nuru do?" I asked.

"He sets forth the duties of each caste. He has memorized the Past," said Atta. "Draca prosecutes all infractions. The leaders will shortly fill the dais seats. So we are in time."

The great crowds of spectators, Atta explained briefly, as we moved forward to the dais across the Oval, had a double interest in being present: to hear the decisions of the leaders and to get entertainment from the combats that were staged, sometimes between Fusans and prisoners, occasionally between prisoners. This was the reason for the size of the arena. No week in winter passed without a spectacle of some kind.

"Haven't any of them anything else to do?" I inquired satirically.

"They represent their courtyards," Atta answered. "It is a mark of honor to be present in the Oval. By night every Fusan will have heard one of this assemblage tell the happenings of the day."

"Doesn't anyone write down the proceedings?" I asked.

"Nuru's factotums commit them to memory," said Atta briefly. "Outside the leaders, people are not taught unnecessary crafts."

"You mean Fusans can't read or write?" I asked.

"Why should they?" replied Atta.

A mighty shout from the spectators cut short this colloquy, and I turned to see what could have occasioned it, for the dais was still empty in front of us.

"A test of strength," said Atta as two distant figures emerged from a gateway behind us, far down at the

right. "A Rubicundian, perhaps, and a Fusan soldier. The Rubicundians always give a good show."

"What kind of test?" I inquired.

"Arm- or leg-breaking," said Atta, "without striking. Some of our soldiers can tear a shoulder from its socket if they get the right grip. Come. We must enter your petition before finding seats."

He strode forward again, a step ahead of me, and I followed with Trotta's halter on my arm, slightly put out by his casualness. Indeed, I could not help being impressed by his nonchalance. It was almost as if he were about to enter me as some kind of animal in a state fair, instead of staking my life before ten thousand overwhelmingly alien enemies.

This casualness was extraordinarily noticeable as we appproached the official boxes and he spoke to one of the messengers.

"Petition to serve, Code Thirty-one, Description Stranger and Beast, Endorser Atta of Forza."

He repeated this formula several times, until the messenger had it verbatim, and then he waited cheerfully while the message was delivered to Nuru in the stone pulpit above us. Apparently, however, Atta knew the official personally, for when Nuru looked down Atta's face broke into a faint smile and he waved one feeler slightly. To my amazement the august Memorizer of the Records did likewise; and an instant later he began to descend the incline from his lectern.

"Atta!" he exclaimed with what appeared to a cold, gentle smile. "What new fancy is this? Stranger and Beast? And where have you been? Not in Forza, I gather?"

"No," said Atta. "I came across this Stranger and his steed in the Rubicundian country, where I was a prisoner."

"Steed!" exclaimed Nuru, turning to me. "What does he do with the Beast?"

"He rides it, if you can believe me," said Atta. "He uses it to help overcome an antagonist."

"By the Code of our Ancients!" exclaimed Nuru. He turned to me, and for an instant he resembled some cruel Persian straight from the pages of Herodotus. "Where did you learn such a trick?" he inquired.

"I was brought up to handle beasts," I said.

"Where?" he asked curtly.

"On my father's farm," I replied.

"Father's?" He raised his eyebrows.

"He comes of an uncivilized tribe," explained Atta unconcernedly. "Too few to have formed a community, he tells me."

"Too few or too barbarous, I suppose," commented Nuru. He looked at me very sharply.

"He has lacked our advantages," admitted Atta. "So he has had to make up for them himself."

Nuru smiled coldly and turned to me. "Do you wish to serve Fusa?" he asked.

"I think I could be of value against her enemies," I said modestly.

Nuru stroked his head. "Is this your Beast?" he asked, turning his eyes on Trotta.

"Yes," I said more boldly. "And I could have brought a thousand like her had I known a year ago this was to happen."

"What an idea!" exclaimed Nuru. He stared at me with a sudden new interest. "How did you train her?"

One merely accustoms the beast to the idea," I said.

Nuru nodded. "Orthodox, very orthodox," he said. He looked up and saw Draca stalking down the incline from the Prosecutor's box across the way.

"I should like to suggest that you endorse no one today," he said abruptly to Atta. "Let your entry prove his worth in the accustomed manner. Draca will like it better that way, I think."

"Draca?" repeated Atta. "Does Draca rule Fusa now?"

Nuru gave a wry smile. "He has learned how to be very disagreeable," he admitted.

"Are you serious?" asked Atta.

"He has been making a specialty of accusation lately," said Nuru. "He accused me yesterday of favoring Halket."

"Halket!" exclaimed Atta. "Who needs to favor the General of the Army?"

"He made the accusation," said Nuru.

"Isn't it of record," remarked Atta, "that hate also was once a personal feeling? And jealousy?"

Nuru shook his head. "I am not jesting," he said. "I would give Draca no handle if I were you."

Atta's eyes flashed briefly, and he was about to make some warm reply. But I interrupted before he could do so. "I have no objection," I said. "Give me a couple of gladiators and I will write my own endorsement."

"Naturally," said Atta grimly. "But since when in Fusa has a soldier's word been insufficient?"

"Shh-h," said Nuru. He laid a feeler on Atta and turned to watch the approaching figure of the Prosecutor. "Observe his mood."

Atta turned to look. I did so too, and I must confess that the countenance of Draca was not a reassuring one. Even in the Great Oval confused by the shouting and the distant combat, his face stood out. He was unusually tall, and his height gave him a hawklike appearance, for his brows, instead of emphasizing a broad forehead like Atta's or giving a gentle effect like Nuru's flowing tufts, were drawn down heavily to a sharp, menacing beak. His eyes, too, were not pale or gently diffused, but darkly concentrated, almost stabbing with a kind of angry light.

He nodded to Atta coldly, took a swift glance at me, and turned to Nuru. "I see our Atta has consented to pay us a visit, now the summer is over," he said above the tumult.

"He has been among the Rubicundians," said Nuru.

"He certainly has not been here," said Draca.

"The way was not open," said Atta, "until four days ago."

"What is the Code in such cases?" inquired Draca of Nuru.

"There is no Code when one is imprisoned," said Nuru. "Not if the Rubicundians held him as a slave."

"That is correct," said Atta.

"Any witnesses?" asked Draca.

"I was there," I said.

"And who are you?" asked Draca rudely. He spoke insultingly, and I knew by instinct that I was face to face with one of those officials who in any community dislike the people they are supposed to serve and so insist on making them observe the last letter of the law. In this case I was an adjunct of Atta, whom he clearly did not like; therefore he wished also to insult me.

I did not feel like accepting an insult meekly. "If you put me in the arena opposite you, perhaps I could show you my value," I said with a taunting grin.

"So?" said Draca. He pursed his lips. But the taunt had got through his conceited hide. He looked at me steadily and then turned to Nuru. "This fellow appears made of soft stuff for a fighter," he said. "Who is he?"

"A petitioner to serve, under Code Thirty-one," said Nuru. "Introduced by Atta."

"Oh," said Draca. "Both Atta's petitioner and Atta's witness, eh?" He set his jaw grimly. "Very interesting."

"Nonsense," said Atta. "There is no mystery here. I need no witness, and Brokle"—thus he always mispronounced my name—"needs no endorsement. We are both able to take care of ourselves. Why try to make a plot out of it?"

"Protecting Fusa can scarcely be called 'making a plot,'" said Draca dryly.

"Why not let me use my right arm and make an end of the matter?" I broke in. "Where I come from each man is his own endorsement."

"Precisely my opinion," said Draca. "We should end all those endorsements."

"And listen only to Draca, I suppose?" said Atta.

"The strongest voice is the judgment of the Combat," said Draca. "Your entry is wiser than you are."

"Then let the arena judge me, I say," said I.

"We are in agreement on that," said Draca.

He made a sudden gesture to a passing messenger, and before Atta or Nuru could dissuade him he had stepped across the intervening space and held up the hurrying courier. What he said to this messenger I have no means of knowing, for at that moment a long, low, sustained rustle, like the wind in a forest, swept the Oval, and I could see that the distant combat was over and that all the spectators had risen and were staring in our direction. Only Draca, Nuru, and Atta seemed unaware of this general movement. But it served to cover everything Draca was saying.

"He is playing some trick," Atta muttered in my ear. "There are all kinds of tests. Conserve your strength if he calls for more than one."

But I felt that I had chosen the part of discretion, and I was well satisfied. "Don't worry about me," I reassured him.

And that was all we had time to say. For the vast crowd had fallen suddenly silent, and messengers, soldiers, and even Draca and Nuru stood motionless in deference to a small group of Formicans that was now filing in slowly from a number of entrances on the wall and taking seats in the semicircular dais.

Not until the whole group had found seats and their chairman had motioned to the crowd to do likewise did the silence end. Then it was broken by a mighty shout. "Fusa! Fusa! Fusa!" Thrice the shout rose to the top of the shining vault and came back almost as an echo. Considered as a tribute to the City's leaders it was genuinely stunning. I have seen many gatherings in my time. I have attended hangings and seen the eyes of those who did

the job. But never have I looked on faces so grim and coldly menacing as those of Fusa's high leaders. I was not over thirty feet from them, and I could see even their eyes clearly. I could not pick out a single individual whose features held one iota of gentle feeling. They were twenty-four creatures who might have put on black iron masks. Beside them, Atta seemed like some medieval philosopher, and even Nuru held the indefinable aura of the scholar. Only Draca could have sat down among them without causing a ripple in the calm surface of their menace.

"See you later," I muttered to Atta under my breath.

And I watched him go with Nuru and Draca up the incline to the circular bench beside Nuru's lectern, aware for the first time that I was indeed alone.

Then one of the huge shako-headed soldiers tapped me on the shoulder, and I found myself being guided away from Atta and toward the far end of the arena.

Chapter 9

Of the next hour my memory is very vivid, for in it I underwent the supreme test of my life. Even the smallest details still stand out as unforgettable.

At the far end of the Oval, near where Atta and I had entered, there was another exit. To this my guide led me. He knocked on a high wooden barrier, which was promptly carried to one side by four Formican attendants. Through the aperture thus opened Trotta and I were allowed to saunter into an enclosure much like a paddock in a county fair.

Here shakoed soldiers stood about in what appeared to be sawdust aisles, and from near-by stalls a variety of prisoners stared sullenly at us. I say prisoners because I noticed at once a number of red Rubicundians and several groups of Fusan dwarfs, and there were also scores of savage Formicans and animals with whom I had no acquaintance. All stared out at us with the peculiar hot eyes of those who hate their torturers.

No indignity was offered me, however, and this forbearance I suppose was due to the instructions particular to my case. For a number of the attendants turned and stared at me as I hobbled Trotta near the center, and among them I noticed the messenger to whom Draca had given his orders a few minutes perviously. He was standing beside a large, ruddy, almost beefy individual—a despicable caricature of Atta—who kept nodding his shaggy head with an expression of the utmost satisfied malevolence. This was the keeper of the prisoners, I judged. For a moment I amused myself by staring back at him. Then without warning I seized my short tomahawk from Trotta's saddle and hurled it with careful aim at the wooden post against which he and the messenger both leaned. To my gratification the blade struck within an inch or two of their heads directly between them, and they scattered as if shot. Grinning, I carelessly retrieved my tomahawk and sauntered back, well satisfied.

For let me say here that this was not so childish a gesture as may appear. Not for many weeks had I been able to practise with my weapons, and just at that instant I badly needed to regain the confidence that comes of sure command of primitive arms. Trotta, too, was still pretty well loaded down with the bundle of armor foil as well as my lance, and to put her in shape for combat meant completely unloading her and tightening up her harness. I intended to run no risk of losing her or any of my possessions during the process, and I wished to serve notice that I was well able to protect myself against pilferers or interferers. This my tomahawk threat completely a-

chieved. I unloaded Trotta and put her in shape without further interference.

I think I am sticking well within the bounds of truth when I assert that as I prepared for combat I was more concerned for Trotta than for myself. Not lightly did I view the possibility of losing my one faithful beast in some unexpected attack, and I could not help speculating on the probability that what Atta called a trick might easily include confronting me with as many as half a dozen contestants advancing simultaneously on me from different directions.

Such a problem might prove a pretty one; and to its fascinations, I suppose, I owe the fact that for the time being fear for myself remained almost totally absent from my mind. Indeed, the last fifteen minutes that Fate allotted me before the signal sounded I spent squatting on the ground in the paddock, pushing around a number of small pieces of dirt, and deciding what weapons to use first and last and at what distance.

The signal did sound finally—it seemed to come from something more like a thousand-stringed bass viol than any brass instrument—and when it did, the impact of it was unmistakable. Every living thing in and out of the stalls stopped, turned, and gazed at the gateway barrier. Then the barrier was slowly carried to one side. Two attendants appeared and began beckoning to me. "Stranger and Beast!" one of them called. "Ready!"

"Ready," I retorted. And with one last glance at Trotta's harness and my weapons I got slowly into the saddle, settled myself firmly, trotted through the aperture, and flicking Trotta with my heels, urged her into a gallop that would have done justice to the Gallant Six Hundred.

Not until I was opposite the very dais did I rein up Trotta in a cloud of dust. But even so I found that the chief leader had already risen. "Stranger and Beast," he was announcing in a full, gravel-like voice. "Facing Challenges One, Two, Three, and Four. Challenge One:

Singles, fighting to the death." He said this last loudly and leaned down to a huge soldier who stood by the incline opposite me. "See that he does not ride the Beast in Challenge One," he ordered.

And so the contest began—a contest that I shall never forget.

For I was only one man among thousands of insensate creatures, and I felt somehow deserted by the whole human race. I had already more than suspected that I should be compelled to fight a number of duels in order to entertain the spectators. But not until that instant had I conceived of any of these contests as not including the use of Trotta. I had seen myself as competing in some sort of medieval tournament with Trotta as my jousting partner.

Now it was clear that in the first combat, at least, I was to be deprived of my one real advantage over my antagonists: my steed. This decided drawback did not tend to make me feel sanguine about the contests to follow.

There was nothing for it but to accept the conditions, and I did not protest. Instead I turned my attention to my antagonist, whom I could see in the distance coming out of the exit gate, and here I felt a slight measure of relief. After all, he was only one huge shakoed soldier; one whose method of fighting I could already anticipate. So there was nothing yet to worry about.

I led Trotta swiftly to the jagged stone posts in the exact center of the arena, tethered her to one of them, and stood awaiting with exaggerated carelessness my antagonist's approach. For I had already decided that surprise would be half the battle in this particular instance, and I knew precisely what I intended to do.

Not until the soldier was within ten feet of me did I deign to give any sign that I so much as recognized his existence. As he approached I actually turned my back on him and leaned against a post. Tiny beads of sweat appeared on my forehead, and my heart began to pound

alarmingly. But I clenched my teeth and did not even unfold my arms until the last second. Then, at the sound of his feet on the gravel, I turned suddenly without the slightest warning, drew my hatchet from my belt, and threw it with perfect aim straight at his vulnerable neck. Caught off guard, he had no chance to dodge. The hatchet went home precisely where I intended, and in an instant he was no longer a shako soldier but some kind of half-decapitated creature, struggling toward me and then collapsing to lie twitching on the ground.

The impact of this terrible but effective dénouement upon the spectators was tremendous. The Oval fairly shook with their plaudits when it became obvious that Round One was over and that I had won.

Then in the distance the chairman rose again and placed two pieces of something red on the semicircular balustrade in front of him, and I perceived that Round Two was to follow immediately. "Stranger and Beast against Two Rubicundians," he must have announced in his gravel voice. His words were repeated by attendants at intervals down the arena wall until the announcement reached the section opposite me. "Stranger and Beast against Two Rubicundians!"

It was an announcement that caused considerable excitement in the stands, due I suppose to the reputation of the red fighters and their slave carriers. But it aroused in me merely a kind of cold rage against Draca. For now I began to understand him better. There was, however, little I did not already know about the methods of combat in use among the Rubicundians; not even Rubicundian-trained carriers could hope to equal my Fabrian's speed, now that I was to be permitted to use her; and this use also meant that this time I could choose my own battleground and methods. So for the second time I faced the contest with confidence, "Don't worry, old girl," I said to Trotta as I made sure that both my lariats were in good shape.

And this was truly my mood as I faced the second

challenge. I coldly intended to survive, and I viewed my antagonists with no feeling whatever when the barrier at the far exit was pulled aside once more and into the open came two powerful red warriors borne by slaves.

These were warriors of the first class, I could see, and their slaves made a good run of it, carrying them; at least it was a good run as Formican running goes, and perhaps in ordinary circumstances the combination might have overcome an antagonist much more powerful than I. But this time I did not wait for my enemies to approach my station at the stone posts. I went galloping straight at them, twirling my lasso. Just before I reached the first one head on, I cast my lariat at him, took off at right angles, and braced Trotta for the jerk.

In a matter of seconds the rope tightened, the coil choked the warrior about the throat, and almost before I knew it I had pulled him abruptly off his slave-carrier on to the ground. At the same time the other Rubicundian tried to make his slave come to a stop before he was carried past me, and almost simultaneously I took my reserve rope from the saddle, whirled it swiftly several times, and let its loop go full after him. It descended on him while he was still going, and, behold, I had two Rubicundians at the end of my lassos!

I gave neither time to escape. With a slap I stung Trotta into an instant gallop, and down the Oval we went, the two trussed warriors dragging and bumbling on the ground like mummies. They were half dead, I think, before I pulled up in front of the dais, dismounted swiftly, and ax in hand, despatched both of them like any headsman. Indeed, I suddenly felt like a brutal gladiator, and even as I stood with my dripping ax in my hand I could not help darting a glance of triumph at Draca where he sat above me by his stone pulpit, impassive and implacable. He gave no sign, however, that he saw me or even heard the new applause from the stands. No enthusiasm infected the other leaders either, and I must say that for the first time a kind of contempt began to invade me

for these selected creatures who ruled Atta's countrymen. There was not a single Fusan on the dais above me who could have equalled my exploit; yet no faintest recognition of my achievement appeared on their faces. What kind of creatures were these who ruled Atta's supposedly civilized world? This was my honest reaction to their expressions, and it did not encourage me to a further interest in Fusa.

But it was not mine to desist or to go on as I chose, and the chairman—his name was Oban, I learned later—soon made this fact evident. He paid no attention to the applause that was still coming from the stands, but leaned forward impassively and placed four pieces of some kind of mahogany wood on the balustrade before him. "Four Forzans against Stranger and Beast!"

Again the announcement echoed down the sides of the arena. And this time, I will admit, it was a challenge that startled me. Atta's advice to conserve my strength had recurred to me, and involuntarily I glanced up at my friend where he sat beside Nuru in back of Nuru's pulpit. To my surprise he was not looking at me at all: he was leaning forward in his seat, staring at the stone floor in front of him. His attitude was one of utter dejection—a mood I had never before seen in him.

What the reason for it was, I had no chance to conjecture, for already the far exit's barrier had been rolled aside, and out from the paddock behind it four Forzans were coming out, their forearms thrown up and out and all four of them looking for all the world like Atta himself. Indeed, the simple gesture almost struck a cold chill into me. For I had seen Atta fight and maneuver, and here were four Attas; four wily, fearless Attas all loosed upon me at once.

They had the good sense of Forzans, too, I noticed, for they did not separate as they came running out, but made a tight little knot of themselves as they ran, so that they advanced like an old-fashioned football backfield. Moreover they had just one aim, and I knew it: to bring

Trotta to the ground by seizing one of her legs, whereupon I, on foot, should be no match for four antagonists. To forestall this device it was not possible to use the lasso, for it was unlikely that I could ever snare all four at once, and even one would be enough to bring down Trotta.

Such was my instant perception, and in arriving at it I blessed all those hours of wrestling and fooling that Atta and I had put in around the garden of our house. For I knew exactly what would happen if any of these Forzans ever got a good grip on either me or Trotta. He would be an Atta in earnest, and the result would be fatal.

These thoughts take longer to tell than they did to flash through my brain. Actually I do not believe two seconds passed before I leaped into the saddle again, dug my heels into Trotta's ribs, and was off toward the center of the Oval once more.

This time, too, I had a definite plan in mind. To make it clear to you let me explain that Trotta was not ironshod like your ordinary horse, nor was she so formidable. She was of a more delicate mold than a good Percheron or even a coach horse. She moved swiftly if pressed, but usually she trotted, putting her feet quickly one before another in somewhat the way a small cat does in crossing a dangerous lane at night.

This gait afforded good speed with little change of pace, and it made me dubious of trusting her too close to my enemies. But it did permit a very effective attack with my lance, because this clocklike speed could be remarkably accelerated, so that she bore down on an antagonist like a small, inexorable engine.

To deliver such an initial blow was now my full intention, and I was aided by the single target my four bunched enemies presented. Indeed, it occurred to me that I could scarcely miss transfixing one of them if I rode them all down. My real danger lay in not reining Trotta aside quickly enough and spurring her to the gal-

lop once my lance had taken its toll. Here there would be little time to lose.

There was small opportunity to indulge in that worry, however, for already the distance between my antagonists and ourselves was rapidly diminishing, and Trotta was increasing her speed with machinelike precision. "Good girl," I encouraged her as I braced my lance in my armpit. And in this manner I went to my third attack.

I succeeded, too, in my initial intention. I struck one of the Forzans in the neck with the point of my extended lance, reined Trotta instantly to the left, and spurred her to the gallop. It was a terrible blow, and ordinarily I should have congratulated myself on one enemy the less. But there is always the chance of bad luck, and this time it happened. Even as the lance sank into the unfortunate Forzans body he grasped it with his feelers with such tremendous strength that I was almost torn from the saddle, and I could retain my weapon only by pulling on Trotta's bridle. At the same instant another of the Forzans threw himself at Trotta's hind legs and got a grip so strong that she almost spun about with the suddenness of her double detention. To make the contretemps complete the two remaining Forzans rose on their hind legs and rushed at me. One second more and I think they would have dragged me from the saddle to the ground.

But I had considered such a situation fully many times, and the order of my actions was already decided. Without hesitation I let go my lance, snatched my hatchet from its holster, and, leaning far back, struck downward with it in my right hand at the Forzan who half knelt clasping Trotta's hind leg. With a crunch the blade cracked through his head and collapsed him like an eggshell. It was a blind blow, because I could not turn in the saddle, and I meant only to free Trotta. Therefore I can only suppose that it was not enough. For even in death he held his grip on her right hind leg, and it was sufficient to slow up her start.

This check gave my two remaining antagonists time to

reach me, and for an instant I thought my end had come. I struck the first one with my hatchet, but he dodged, and the blow fell on his shoulders, so that he grasped the weapon even as he sank to the ground. I could do nothing but let go or risk being unseated and dragged down on top of him. I did the only thing possible: without hesitation I dismounted on the far side of Trotta, almost falling entangled in my own stirrup as I did so. Once on my feet I drew my long ax from its holster and, striking Trotta a smart blow with my fist, drove her from between me and my last antagonist, leaving me face to face with him almost over the body of the last preceding attacker.

This already disabled creature was down but not yet completely out. He reached for my legs with his arms, and in another second, I veritably believe, I should have been overborne by this peculiar combination had I not remembered Atta's oft-repeated advice: "Few Formicans understand a calculated retreat." The words tolled like a bell in my brain as I stepped deliberately backward. I had left now only my long ax and my dagger, and it is exceedingly difficult to strike a Forzan a frontal blow without being seized.

Behind me, however, not over twenty steps away, were the stone posts that I have mentioned, and toward these I turned and actually ran—an action that, as I dimly remember, evoked a roar of disapproval from the stands. I knew exactly what I was doing, though, and in the few seconds thus gained I was enabled to raise my self quickly on the nearest rough post; and thus in the twinkling of an eye I presented a new and most formidable front to my final antagonist. For the Formican, though he stands up or sits up while talking and occasionally while drinking, prefers to fight like the tiger, with all feet on the ground. Moreover, although he will rise on his hind legs to throw an enemy to the ground, he knows only the tactics of attack and will follow them in all circumstances. This slavish adherence to form I had observed a score

of times, and I was certain that this particular Forzan would follow it.

He did. He was already pursuing me with terrifying swiftness, and I had barely time to climb up on my four-foot vantage point before he was on me. He thought that he had me cornered, too. I am certain of it. For he rushed at my post like a veritable tiger, and then, like every Formican, he raised himself and extended his brawny arms to crush me, enfold me, and bite me to death.

It was instinctive with him, I can only suppose. But it was also fatal. For he presented a perfect target to an axman when he raised his sawlike head. Standing on my post I whirled my ax like any woodsman and brought it down with a crash on the top of his skull. The next thing I knew the very air shivered with crashing applause. I had just enough strength left to jump down from my post and acknowledge it. But I was so badly dazed that for several minutes I did not comprehend that Challenge three was actually over and done with. I staggered about picking up my lance, calling Trotta, and restoring my lost hatchet to its holster. Then, ax in hand, I stood watching the attendants carry off the corpses of my late opponents.

In some dim way I must have been imagining that surely no further proof of a man's ability to serve Fusa could be needed. If there were to be a Challenge Four, it ought to be in the form of a ribbon for distinguished service. No hint of the future presented itself to my mind; none could have in the few brief moments that elapsed between the end of Challenge Three and the onset of Challenge Four. All I knew was that a hush fell on the assemblage as an attendant crossed the arena toward me, bearing a green garland shaped somewhat like a Hawaiian *lei.* This hung around my neck after some deliberation, and then wild applause swept the stands once more as he and all the attendants fled for the stands, leaving me alone in the arena.

An instant later the bass viol trumpet sounded again with a sigh like that of a thousand waves falling on seashore sands, and I knew that a last and terrible test of some kind was upon me.

This time Oban made no announcement. On the far side of the arena a number of Fusans leaned over the wall and pulled up another wooden barrier that I had not noticed before. From the dark entrance thus disclosed darted forth a huge hairy monster as big as a two-ton truck, with high jointed legs and shaggy head shaped like a gorilla's. He looked like a monstrous, colossal Wolf Spider, and I suppose he was. For he ran along the base of the wall at first—I should say he stole along the wall, there was such an indescribable air of obscene stealth about his movements—and then, turning, he saw me and began to run toward me in a series of zigzag rushes that were swift and confusing in the extreme. That is to say, he ran toward me but not at me, as if he expected to dazzle me with the unexpectedness of his oblique movements.

At the same time he never took his two deepset beady eyes from mine, and they seemed to grow ever larger in their black caverns as he stared evilly at me and alternately ran and stood suddenly still. It was soul-chilling in the extreme. For his high-jointed knees were as high as my face, and his shaggy body was slung between them as if on bent buggy springs, and the whole monstrous mass of him was a good twelve feet across. His open jaws alone were a foot wide, showing wicked teeth below what appeared to be a grotesque gray mustache with four shiny portholes above it. Even his two arms and six legs—three on a side—were covered with thick, spiky, shaggy hair.

Almost on the instant Trotta began to tremble violently. And a faint fetid smell assailed my nostrils. It was the unmistakable smell of decayed meat—the stifling foul breath that many a hunter has endured from a wild bear. My opponent was a meat-eater; the kind of spider that,

disdaining web or poison, stalks and kills his prey on the run. In my boyhood I had seen this despicable creature often under the microscope, and the only difference here was that he was of nightmare size and seemed to be fascinated by the green garland that I wore.

Was it possible that this was the method the Fusans used to single out the beast's victim for him, and that not until he was sated by sucking the entrails of his kill could he be coerced back into his cell?

The possibility sent shudders to my very vitals. For it was obvious that my offensive weapons—my hatchet, ax, and lance—were almost useless against this kind of antagonist. It was impossible to reach his huge, sulky-like body without risking entanglement in his sharp claws and long, jointed legs. Moreover he moved with such unexpected jerkiness that he could not be approached with safety or certainty from any angle.

Meanwhile he was actually approaching me ever closer with his unpredictable oblique maneuvers. In a matter of seconds, it was clear, he would be upon me, seizing me in his claws, entangling me in his jointed legs, and sinking his jaws in my body.

Could I by any chance lasso him? Was there the faintest chance that a loop could ever tighten over one of his projecting knees without slipping off?

All this raced through my mind while I sat on Trotta. And then I dug my heels into her faithful ribs and galloped straight out into the arena in the rear of the now menacing beast. My only chance, I had decided, lay in swift movement—movement that would make any contest between us like a kind of insane, unremitting battle between two Queens on a chess board. For it had jumped into my brain that my antagonist might not only be relying on the definite hypnotism of his glowing, evil eyes, but also might be unable to run in any other way than the grotesque series of oblique rushes he had so far displayed.

This was wholly conjecture, of course, but I had inad-

vertently hit upon something, I realized as I reined up in a cloud of dust and turned Trotta abruptly about. For it had taken me some twenty seconds to reach the spot I had selected, and in that time my monster had only succeeded in wheeling himself about in a series of jerks. Did he have any other blind spots, I wondered?

He was now all set to rush me again, and even as the question entered my mind he started, this time in a direct line.

"Steady, Trotta," I admonished my faithful mount. And despite her nervousness and trembling I held her still long enough to try another maneuver: that of stepping aside at the critical moment as the matador does in the bullring. It took steady nerves, if I do say it so myself, for already my antagonist was bearing down on me like some voracious prehistoric beast, and I had no idea what he would do. Nevertheless I waited until he was almost upon me, and then I dug my heels into Trotta's body and reined her sharply aside. She fairly jumped away just as the monster shot by, not three feet behind us. He must have been going twenty miles an hour, I judged, and not for many yards was he able to stop—a fact that entered my pounding brain like a flash of lightning.

It took him less time to turn about than before, however, and I did not wait for him to complete the movement. I galloped off at right angles to the stone posts and again awaited his rush at a distance, I should say, of about a hundred and fifty yards. For a definite plan had entered my mind, but I did not dare put it into action without further trial.

My enemy seemed to have perfect confidence that I could not escape him eventually at all, for he made no attempt to change his tactics, and I had no opportunity for further thought before he was racing down on me again with that ungainly yet machinelike precision, terrifying in the extreme. Trotta almost whimpered at the sight, it was so blood-curdling; and I myself, I must confess, had hard work convincing my jumping nerves that

mere craft and brain could ever prevail against such an antagonist. It was a kind of inherited fear, I suppose, born of long-forgotten conflicts with such monsters by generations of men dead for ages. It nearly paralyzed me.

As a matter of fact I scarcely knew where I was, and the thousands of spectators had ceased to exist for me. I saw only the approaching destroyer, and I wondered if I could dodge him again and count upon doing it still once more. For in that lay my only salvation.

None of this suspense affected my antagonist in the least, of course. He bore down on me with incredible malignancy, his evil black eyes glowing with hatred or appetite, his impenetrable body slung behind his high-jointed legs, which moved like a machine. He seemed to have no idea that I might again jump aside; at least he gave no sign of considering anything but his headlong forward rush.

I took no avoidable chance, however. Waiting until the very last incredible second, this time I swerved Trotta right instead of left when the final moment to dodge came. And for the second time I evaded destruction, though by a margin that left me almost breathless. So close was the beast that his rush left in my nostrils once more that horrible fetid smell, sickening me to nausea.

He kept sliding on for many feet, and for the second time hope rose in my heart. It was now or never, I decided tremblingly. Tactics of evasion could never win such a contest and would soon wear thin. My only chance was to use them while they were still effective, and in a manner that would allow me to take the offensive.

Already I was the proper distance from the stone posts, thanks to my previous choice of position, and now I unslung my lance and headed Trotta for them, not at a gallop but at a slow trot.

It was a hair-raising gamble, of course, for I could almost feel my enemy turning around even as I started,

and before I had covered half the distance to the posts I could hear the rush of his feet as he began his new pursuit. But it was vital that he have no opportunity to look over the ground before he started and no idea that anything solid stood behind Trotta when I reined her up to await his onslaught. The stone post was my ace in the hole, and I meant to play it. I meant to reach it only a few seconds before my antagonist was upon me.

I held to my plan despite an almost irresistible impulse to let Trotta bolt for safety. I did not turn her to await my enemy until I was within ten feet of the post, and by that time the monster himself was not over fifty feet away. It was a split-second gamble if I ever saw one. I could see the rough stone in the post, and I could almost feel the fetid breath of my pursuer before I turned around, waited an incalculably brief moment to make sure he could not stop, and then dug my heels sharply into Trotta's body to dodge him once more.

He went by so close that one of his legs struck Trotta's hind leg as I whirled her forelegs out of his way and brought her up all standing. But he missed her, and that was all I wanted. For the stone post stood not ten feet behind her, and he could not miss that. He hit it with a dull thud that even I heard and that must momentarily have stunned him. He did not move for a second or two, and in that second I was on him, standing up straight in my stirrups, holding my lance above my head, gripped firmly in both hands. His back it was that stood exposed, and in four seconds I had plunged the huge sharp-pointed needle into him until two feet of it had disappeared. Then Trotta reared away from him; I let go the lance even as a high sudden shriek came from him; and the combat was on.

For I was under no illusion that one lance jab would put this antagonist out of the running. All I counted on was the terrible pain of the wound to confuse him and lead him to try to extract the venomous pole so unceremoniously stuck into his vitals. And to my profound

gratitude this was exactly what he first did. Even as I wheeled away from him he was backing away from the stone post and with shrieks of pain trying to pull out the lance with his cupped clawlike feet. "Praise the Lord God!" I exclaimed, an excitement flooded me like a cloudburst as I grasped my nearest lasso and began whirling its coils.

In less time than these words take to write I had whirled my rope and sent its snakelike coil hurtling over the lance and his struggling claws. Even as it fell I snubbed it on my pommel and backed Trotta swiftly until the noose closed with irrevocable tightness. Then I leaped from the saddle, looped my end tightly around a second stone post, leaped back into the saddle, and was off again. For my monster was now thrashing like a shark that a harpoon has pierced—thrashing the lance about and lifting his front claws frenziedly to the aid of his two tightly roped rear ones.

"I've got you now, my friend!" I exclaimed. And I threw my second lasso from a distance of less than thirty feet. I could not afford to miss those raised front claws. I realized. Nor did I. In five seconds I had a rope around his front claws, pulling them together; and soon I was backing Trotta in a new direction, stretching out my victim like a blanket, backing Trotta foot by foot with my arms almost torn from my shoulders.

But I did not stop until I had backed her clear around another stone post and got a purchase on that. And even then I twisted my rope many times around the post until it was tight and immovable, before I took time to go back and look at my antagonist.

Like a monstrous nightmare beast he lay, his hairy face on the ground, two of his legs and the lance pulled tight to the right, two more to the left, and his other two still scrabbling ineffectually beneath him. But I still feared him. With an air of casual bravado I dismounted, drew my hatchet from my belt, and threw it unerringly straight into the back of his brain. Then I unslung my

ax, walked slowly toward him, and cut off the claws from his two free legs, piece by piece.

These I held up to the view of the cheering thousands in the stands, threw them from me, and leaned on my ax.

"Merry Christmas, Draca," I said under my breath. "What next?"

Chapter 10

THE MAIN OUTLINE of what followed is a little dim to me. I remember the shouting thousands, the sound once more of the great bass viol, the admiring faces of the crowd, the distant announcement from the dais, and the attendants who accompanied me back to it.

I was apparently a hero. Hundreds of Fusans swarmed on to the field and examined my lance, my lassos, my hatchet, my ax, and at me they looked with awe, Even Trotta shared in my glory.

At the dais Oban nodded to me with as close an approach to approval as his expressionless countenance could manage, and Draca's saturnine face was a study in cold frustration. Nevertheless both of them approached me at last as I stood talking with Nuru and offered me their compliments. I accepted them as I did the words of praise Halket uttered in the name of Fusa's soldiers. But the truth was that the abrupt transition from facing death alone to being thus publicly acclaimed by thousands was too much for my nerves to assimilate, and to this day I scarcely know what I did or said.

All I was actually conscious of was that Atta was nowhere in sight and that I had won my desperate and in-

credible victory only to be deprived of my last link with reality and companionship. I was like a Rip Van Winkle who awakes from a dream to find his old friends dead and his new ones meaningless. I could have wept for my solitary state.

My endorser, Nuru told me, had got up directly after I had killed the Monster, and left to fulfill a new assignment to a Queen's Guard. I was to go home with Nuru, for Atta would now be busy with his prescribed duties. I no longer needed anyone to introduce me to Fusa.

This was all the information the Memorizer of the Records seemed willing to give me, and I accepted it without argument. Indeed, as I remember it now, a great lassitude enveloped me while the august leaders were welcoming me into their fold. An hour before, they had condemned me to what they must have thought was certain death. Now they made much of me, and there was about their attitude a dreadful insincerity that drugged all feeling in my heart. I was no longer a curious Stranger in a new civilization: I was an exhausted gladiator accepting the plaudits of the crowd and aware that the price of survival was to kill others.

The resultant weariness was almost stupefying as I received the official appointment to serve Fusa and at length went with the cold and gentle Nuru to his many-roomed apartment in the inner city. There servants placed mushrooms and nectar before me, and to my surprise I found that I was hungry. "Eat all you like," Nuru encouraged me. "There is always plenty in Fusa." So I drank and ate to satisfy my new-found hunger, and in an outside stable Trotta munched contentedly at her fodder.

Inwardly, however, in my heart, I was already disillusioned about Fusa, and I think the fact should be emphasized here. For it is undeniable that in the beginning I myself accepted citizenship. I fought for Fusa and directed her soldiers. But I did not do so because I had found anything admirable. Rather, I realized that I was facing a grim reality that I could not change; and, like

many a man before and since, I tried first to adjust myself to my surroundings and finally to surmount them.

What these surroundings were, Nuru made abundantly plain. Indeed, for some days I could scarcely swallow a mouthful of food that was not accompanied by a disquisition by my host on some aspect of the supreme importance of loyalty to the community in which I had fallen—a doctrine that he and all Fusans held so strongly that everything else had to be subordinated to it.

This inordinate admiration for Fusa, indeed, appeared to be a prime requisite for citizenship—a fact that slightly amazed me. For although as I trod the dim avenues of Fusa I had remarked the absence of individual life among the inhabitants—along with a lack of evidence of any appreciation of the arts—I had excused it because of what I considered the limitations of an unintelligent, almost mechanical race. But now, as I listened to Nuru day after day, it began to be borne in on me that I was actually in the presence of a planned society, an ordered community which its inhabitants considered perfect; one wherein further change was not to be thought of and new ideas were looked on with either contempt or anger.

To a visitor like myself this was a fact of considerable importance. For it suggested that in Fusa any free-and-easy relationship with Atta, such as we had previously enjoyed, could not possibly obtain. Worse, it brought up the possibility that there might be greater and more serious limitations on an individual's actions and ideas than I had so far imagined. For all I knew, these limitations might be so far-reaching that not only might my relationship with Atta be restricted, but any idea, action, or desire of mine that differed from those of the ordinary Fusan might be banned.

My possession of Trotta, for instance, and the original quality of the idea that had led me to train and ride her—would such an initiative have been allowed had I conceived the plan in Fusa and not in the wilderness? Now that the results of that plan had been exhibited in the

arena, should I be allowed to keep Trotta? What would happen if I boldly brought up the subject and suggested that Fusa itself might do well to adopt the idea and train other Trottas for Fusan soldiers to ride?

This question seemed so apt to me in the circumstances that before many days had passed I resolved to put it to the test. For my appointment to serve Fusa carried with it a military commission as advisor to the High Command, and I was not so stupid as to forget that I had secured it because of my abilities on the field of battle. In pursuit of this idea, therefore, I soon extracted from Nuru the information that the High Command spent most of the winter planning the military campaigns on which the Fusan Army embarked in the spring. This seemed to me an immediate opportunity to demonstrate my interest in Fusa's welfare, and I suggested the possibility of raising perhaps a thousand Trottas in the spring and using them to create a cavalry regiment with greater speed and maneuverability than the Rubicundian carriers possessed.

I made this proposal one day at a small gathering of the High Command in Halket's quarters, at which Oban, Draca, and Nuru were all present. To my surprise the proposal produced a most peculiar and prolonged silence, broken finally by Oban himself. "We have no rider caste in Fusa," the chief leader said coldly, "so it is useless to discuss it."

"But the Rubicundians have what amounts to one, with their slaves and mounted infantry," I pointed out.

"Fusa is not Rubicundia," Oban replied heavily.

"We could train riders," I persisted.

"We have no provision for such a caste," retorted Oban.

And with this ridiculous objection the suggestion was dropped. Nothing was done about training cavalry horses, and the subject was not referred to in my presence again. Instead I was inducted into the army in a number of ceremonials. Halket took me into his immediate military

group, and I was his guest on a series of visits to all the gateways of Fusa. I became thoroughly conversant with the headquarters guard, the main force stationed at the Oval, and the daily exercises there and on the parade grounds beyond the gates. On all these occasions I rode Trotta, carried my weapons, and received only the most deferential treatment, and I must confess that a sense of security descended on me. Indeed, Halket gradually so deferred to my ideas, as I made routine suggestions, that I thought I was gradually assuming a position in Fusa comparable to that of a Chinese Gordon or a Lord Kitchener in Egypt.

I was in no way subjected to ordinary military discipline or held to the hours of drill, mess, and physical encounter work that absorbed all the common soldiers' time. Instead, I was given complete authority to end the army's confused method of fighting and instill in the regiments a kind of discipline to which they were unaccustomed: a system of fighting in platoons and teams instead of in solitary combat.

I had early discussed this with Halket, after describing to him the inefficient Rubicundian assault on the Camponotans. And the co-operative, community idea involved had appealed to him strongly. In fact, this one aspect of my suggestion, I learned afterward, had much to do with the favor with which the leaders looked on my work. As winter set in, and the gateways were therefore closed I found myself daily involved in long hours of drill to make a number of disciplined companies out of the thousands of swaggering soldiers of whom Fusa's forces were composed. From morning till night I spent my time at this task, in the same oval in which I had earlier battled for my life.

Meanwhile it was as if the city itself had swallowed up Atta and Subser, and this I gradually perceived to be inevitable. For no close personal relationship, I soon saw, was either practicable or possible in Fusa. Work, location, class, all fixed the character of one's associates

and the nature of their shared interests. Likely to be unchanged throughout a lifetime, the prospect affected me with a kind of dreariness that I can only say reminded me of my childish picture of Heaven in my first Sunday School. Yet I supposed it was inevitable, being inherent in a social system based on the conviction of having arrived at perfection.

Only at the top, among the caste leaders, I found, was there a semblance of variety or personal original thought, and even this was strictly watered down by rigid conventions. Otherwise, among ordinary Fusans, so repetitive and mechanical were their actions and reactions that I do not wonder that human naturalists have credited Formicans with instinct but not intelligence.

In any event I was sufficiently overawed by the social code of Fusa to postpone any attempt to seek out Atta; and after some time I was well acquainted on my own with the city empire and no longer capable of being astonished by beliefs and practices different from those to which I had been brought up.

Among other things I soon learned why neither Atta nor Subser had ever spoken with affection of their parents or had any longing for what we call home; and this, though already known to naturalists, was, I think, the most shocking to me of all my discoveries. For I discovered in effect that, in common with all Formicans, they had had no home or parents in our sense of the words, and had never known such a relationship. Infants were removed by nurse workers from their mothers at birth, and maternity itself was essentially a factory job performed by females bred for the task until they were little more than mere producers of young.

As a result, brothers and sisters ceased to recognize one another after several months in a good nursery, primitive family feelings were practically unknown, and individual love had long since died out.

Such was the picture I got of Fusa and the Fusans, and needless to say it afforded me little pleasure during

the weeks I spent putting it together. For there had been strangers in Fusa before, I soon realized, and their fate was obvious. I saw their mummies preserved in a kind of rosin in what was called the Benefactors' Museum, where dozens of stupid Subsers stood and stared at them of an afternoon. All these strangers had aided Fusa in some way, it appeared, and when they had ceased to be useful the community had honored them with public embalming: a circumstance on which Nuru looked with great pride. Indeed, he was very candid about my own chances of eventually attaining such an honor, particularly if I were as successful in the field capturing slaves for Fusa as I had been in defending my own life in the oval.

"That is the object of our campaigns at present," he explained gently, "to obtain slaves—and I think I may say that it is also the reason why Draca and Oban now look on you with such favor. All of us are positive that you will be of immense value on the field of battle. We only trust that you will justify our hopes and the recognition we have already given you."

And with that candid statement my picture of Fusa, together with my future place in the city, was at length complete.

Chapter 11

That I found this future forbidding and menacing I think will be obvious to anyone who has followed my fortunes thus far. As you may have noticed, I have a lively appreciation of the chances of personal survival,

and the light that Nuru's disquisitions threw upon my own chances in Fusa was a frightening one in the extreme. Verily, if life in Fusa depended on a slavish loyalty to the community and a denial of all personal emotions and ideas, it would not be long before I was found out for what I was: an individual and a Stranger, to be used and duly embalmed in the Benefactors' Museum. Particularly, if friendship was outside the pale, what would happen to Atta and me if the truth of our relationship should by chance be discovered?

For the life of me I could not shake off this dreadful possibility, and I confess that for the first few nights after I had left the Memorizer of the Records and gone to my own private gallery I lay for hours on my solitary couch like some trapped animal and thought of little except how to outwit my enemies.

It was useless, I saw clearly, to seek out Atta for advice. I could do him no greater disservice than to call our relationship to public attention. In the Fusan world he was the last of the Formicans as they had been originally created. The rest were as they had made themselves.

The conclusion gradually turned me hard and bitter, and it was out of bitterness that my first decision eventually came: to make myself so feared and so powerful in Fusa that not even Oban would dare touch me.

Even so I spent many a night pacing the cold streets, hoping for a passing glimpse of Atta. I even made a number of official visits to the galleries of the different Public Mothers under the pretext of interest in all aspects of Nuru's work. For I was able at last to appreciate the quality of devotion and gratitude that my vanished friend had given me from the moment when I had rescued him in the now distant summer. In a man, I realized now, such feelings would have been natural, if unusual; but in a Formican they were little short of miraculous. They showed that genuine individual feelings could still persist. Perhaps only the fact that Atta had been brought

up in a distant provincial town where some of the customs of the past still survived had made it possible for us to understand each other at all. And yet——

Whence had come the impulse which made him what he was: a sensitive, warm-hearted individual in a world of iron-jawed Ants? God rest Atta, was the only answer I could make.

Nevertheless I did not find him on any of my visits to the Maternity Centers, nor did he come to see me in the immediate winter months that followed my departure from Nuru's apartment to quarters of my own. I suppose I was a marked man during all these weeks, and he knew it. I can see that now. But I must have more than satisfied Nuru by my silence if by nothing else, for I was left in the evenings to my own devices. Soon my days and nights, too, were given up to long conferences with Halket and his staff, to occasional grim dinners with the leaders of the Castes, and finally to the drills and maneuvers that I held with regiment after regiment in the arena. For this was the beginning of the interlude I have mentioned: my military service without Atta.

At this I worked hard, and I met with more than a small measure of success. Indeed, I should not be surprised if there is today a rough replica of me in rosin in the Benefactors' Museum. For I had the advantage of a number of Nuru's factotums in my immediate entourage, and their advice in getting Fusan soldiers to adopt my tactics and methods was invaluable. Without Nuru's assistance I should perhaps have failed. As it was, however, I did succeed: tactics, flame-feeding battalions, and all. If any credit can be claimed for so discreditable an undertaking, I can claim it.

Such an effort takes time, of course, and I felt both fortunate to have time at my disposal and chagrined that so much of it was necessary. For it was late in the spring before all my experiments were over and I felt ready to risk my reputation in the field; and by that time it seemed to me that Atta and I were destined never to

meet again. Outside the South Gate even the snow was gone and the green blades of spring were beginning to thrust their way up against the sky, harbingers of the great bamboo woods of summer.

Indeed, the bright green of the well-remembered forest is still the detail that I remember most vividly outside the South Gate on the spring morning when at last I gave the order to march forth and deploy in the level grain fields outside the city. Somewhere in the swale beyond those trees Atta and I had had our last intimate conversation—six months ago. Now the same trees held for me only the road to the city of the Natissians, the objective of our first campaign. Like Hannibal, I was crossing the Alps to Italy. Like Alexander, I was leading my men toward the distant Indus. For me, too, the die was cast and I had to conquer or perish.

Such, I think, was the final effect on me of Nuru's disquisitions: that I did not care in the least what happened to anyone else. As I stared at the green trees that morning I did not care if ten thousand Fusans lost their lives and ten thousand more took their places. I wanted victory at any cost, and I meant to have it. If mass murder was to be the price of safety, I would show the Fusans that Man was the most savage and destructive creature of all. Then let Nuru or Draca touch me at his peril!

Such was my grim resolve that spring morning, and, viewed from the removed standpoint of a just Heaven, I suppose I was on the way to becoming little better than a savage myself. Indeed, even as I looked out upon my new troops I shuddered a little to perceive how brutal they were, and wondered if in time I might not be indistinguishable from them.

But again I am getting ahead of myself.

At the moment there lay before me the first test of my military promises to the leaders, and this was all that concerned me as I dug my heels into Trotta and galloped beside my regiments on the way to the frontier, as im-

placable and savage a commander as ever Genghis Khan or Attila appeared to past ages of men. To my mind the only important consideration was the tactics and strategy of a first campaign that must not fail. Beyond these I did not try to think.

I rode with my Fire Feeders about me and left no precaution unattended to. I inspected their burdens at every stop and allowed no stragglers among the workers that I had impressed into military service to carry the necessary dry, tinderlike wood. They were Napoleon's Old Guard to me, these Fire Feeders, and I had drilled them until they responded to my voice and were attached to my person like any Palace Guard. Ahead were the regiments that I had trained to fight in military formations, and in the rear came the headquarters staff, with Halket receiving the reports as was his custom.

We were ten thousand in all, I suppose, and we marched not in single file or down one Formican roadway as I had noticed that the Rubicundians did, but in fifty parallel lines separated only by a few yards. This space was filled with scouts; so that we moved through the rough woods much as a living carpet would have moved. Nothing escaped us, and the first few scouting parties of the enemy that we encountered neither held us up nor got away. Our lines simply opened up and engulfed them, after which small special squads finished them off at leisure. In this manner the element of surprise was retained. And surprise was the essence of my strategy.

For our goal was a high wooden city set in a dark forest where it rose above the familiar green tangle of our own jungle like the huge serried towers of Ilium. There was almost no open ground around its walls, Halket had told me. Fighting in the dark forest could be a very long-drawn-out and costly business; a frontal assault might be even more costly. Moreover, such tactics would allow of a slow abandonment by the enemy of his stronghold, and this would defeat the object of our

campaign: to capture their young and carry them back to Fusa as slaves. Therefore I had drawn up a strategy of encirclement that depended on surprise and discipline, and I meant to see that it was followed to the letter.

To this end I kept continually on the move, leading first one column and then another and even pushing forward alone at times, to rein up and wave the advance squads forward. This scouting ahead involved no particular bravery on my part, for Trotta could outdistance any Formican enemy, and furthermore I was now clad at last in what amounted to armor. It consisted of my tinfoil discovery cut into a cape that fell from my shoulders, leaving my arms free, and further fashioned into greaves for my knees and elbow protectors and forearm guards for my arms. Made from the heavy metal foil, these were clumsy and had to be tied on; but they protected my tender skin against poison wounds and left my arms free at the shoulder for wielding my hatchet if necessary. Thus I was a swift and dangerous antagonist.

We had left Fusa at an early hour, but it was some time before we came in sight of the woods that surrounded our objective. During this time there had been only the briefest of halts for rest, and I could not but admire the stamina of my strange command. However, the real test of their discipline and of my ability still lay ahead, and on this score, remembering Atta and his weakness for combat of any kind, I had legitimate doubts. Only one circumstance reassured me: the manner in which my columns had marched past the entrapped scouts while my trained squad of fours set upon them. Such discipline was the essence of victory.

There must be absolutely no deviation from orders, I had impressed upon Halket, and to this principle every regimental commander had acceded. Now we were to have the proof.

Ahead of us, meanwhile, in the wet spring day, the dark woods dripped with dampness—the one real ob-

stacle to be feared. For, as you will have guessed, fire was to be the first of my new and unsuspected weapons, and for it I had had my Fire Feeders bring along huge supplies of dry, tinderlike wood. I intended to ignite the enemy's citadel, holding back my troops from the assault until flame had produced utter demoralization. The crucial question was whether their citadel, saturated with winter damp, might refuse to burn. A dozen times I debated this question when pool after pool and here and there a deep, rushing rivulet slowed up our progress and the encircling regiments struggled through the tangled trees on each side of our objective.

I had set a thousand yards as the extreme limit of any possible tunnel exits such as Atta and I had dug for our miniature stronghold, and beyond this distance I meant the circle of our investing lines to hold, completely shutting off any retreat. Not until these lines were fully in place did I intend to order forward my assault troops, behind whose expendable platoons my own Fire Feeders could bring up the necessary tinder and I could start the deadly work. At least twenty times I had rehearsed the entire maneuver in the Oval. But in actual combat would it work out so neatly?

Strangely enough, it did. Despite the hundreds of wild creatures my encircling infantry flushed from their hiding places on the flanks of their advance, no premature notice reached the roughly towered city while we gradually and silently surrounded it. No field worker or scout escaped our squads to sound the alarm to the defenders. The flanking parties met, and I sent forward my assault troops to cover the activities of the Fire Feeders at the foot of the battlements. As soon as the Fire Feeders were in position I gave the signal to the assault troops to rush the gateways and hold them until I had set the fires. The battle was on.

Fierce conflicts instantly developed in the gateways as soldiers rushed to their defense from inside the city. In back of them other thousands pressed forward to their

assistance. But none got through, and meanwhile the Fire Feeders were already in action at the foot of the wooden walls, bringing the dry wood and piling it ever higher and higher as I set fire after fire. The flames swiftly rose to a prodigious height as the workers poured load after load of the dry tinder on them. Even without the assault troops both a holocaust and a riot would have gripped the city, for the dampness increased the density of the smoke, and it rolled upward like a cloud toward the gateways and into the hidden streets of the citadel itself. At its appearance all the community took alarm, unaccustomed to such a menace, but well aware of what it portended.

At the gateways my assault troops followed orders and fell back; and from every conceivable aperture enemy soldiers, nurses, and workers poured forth in inextricable confusion, the workers carrying loads of food, the nurses with young children in their arms, the soldiers rushing hither and yon to do battle with somebody, but nobody seeking the cause of the smoke or making any effort to quench the now formidable fires.

I gave the signal for the Fire Feeders to retreat with all speed, and as the undisciplined mob from the city poured out of the gateways our own front lines let the Fire Feeders and the assault troops through and then closed ranks and advanced against the enemy like a belt of ruddy armor. No one could penetrate that wall of iron. The mob recoiled from it and turned to flee back to the city, only to face the now blazing fires and struggle against other refugees.

It was a ghastly spectacle. For our lines held like steel and pushed forward tightly and implacably, and the seething mob grew ever larger. Enemy soldiers shrieked as they were pushed back toward their own battlements, and the fires bit their bodies. Behind them the flames rose higher and higher toward the topmost battlements. The city itself began to burn, and from every conceivable place the inhabitants tried to reach the ground with

the incredible madness of a crazed crowd. Every newcomer but added to the confusion before the roaring fires. The heat reached even to my own face where I sat on Trotta, urging calmness on my men in the midst of the horrible and unheard-of yells.

Even in the face of the hitherto inexperienced, our own discipline held steady, and nowhere did our lines break or the struggle degenerate into single combats. Time and again I ordered the lines opened to allow nurses and foreign children to struggle through—children who were promptly carried off to our own slave attendants while their nurses were being torn to pieces by the Execution Squads. Each time the lines were reformed strongly; each time they pressed forward again upon the enemy soldiers and the raging fires behind them; and the outcome was never in doubt. Those who were not killed were burned to death, and the stench of hot acid was almost unbearable. In the rear more thousands tried to escape by emerging from tunnel exits in the wet woods, only to be wiped out in their turn by our disciplined waiting infantry. Nowhere did any of the Natissians escape except when the signal was given to take them alive.

In a matter of two hours the whole city had gone up in smoke and a flame so intense that we ourselves could no longer bear it and withdrew to a prudent distance. In our hands were six thousand young Natissians, at a cost of nineteen Fusans killed and perhaps fifty wounded or burned. Every order I had given had been obeyed, every prediction verified, every promise kept.

Victory was complete. I was a conqueror.

Chapter 12

LOOKING BACK NOW, I can see that that moment at Natissia, followed as it was by my triumphal return to Fusa, constituted both my zenith as a conquering Stranger among the Formicans and my nadir as a decent human being. For, let me say at once, I knew precisely what I had done and why I had done it. Not for patriotism nor in self-defense had I slaughtered thousands of innocent strangers, but for one reason only: to secure personal power and security. Worse, my amazing success made it inevitable that I should continue on the path I had begun; that victory should follow upon victory and slaughter upon slaughter—an illimitable future stretching ahead for all the rest of my days, until Fusa was become the Rome of what the Formicans called the world. For obviously I could now conquer the entire group of enemy states that surrounded Fusa and in so doing become Fusa's Caesar, an imperial ruler of a state that would remain forever alien to me.

Such was my perception as I stood and stared at the burning city. And it is obvious to me now that the sharp revulsion I felt against such a future went far to blind me to the hidden reaction to my triumph that must instantly have occurred among my Fusan masters.

It is an axiom among Formicans as among men that the mysterious, the unknown, produces unreasoning fear; and to the Formican of any caste fire is the most terrible mystery of all of Nature's devices. What more natural, therefore, than that my sudden and unheralded produc-

tion of fire, with its accompanying revelation of the actual purposes for which I had been drilling my Fire Feeders, should have struck an unreasoning fear of me into the minds of all of Fusa's leaders? Yes, I was a conquering hero. But had I not done the unpardonable: conquered by means of a new idea?

Such was the inevitable reaction of my masters to the mysterious weapon that my victory had revealed to them; and I think it not too much to say that even as they stood in the Great Oval and honored me for my conquests they had already determined to destroy me. Yes, the disciplines that I had introduced into the regiments could be accepted. But fire, even if obviously a potent and successful weapon, was too far outside Fusan experience to be put in any category.

It was this abhorrence, this deep suspicion of something new, I am convinced, rather than any personal jealousy of my popularity or any fear that I might be a new Napoleon come to upset the Directory, that actuated all the leaders after Natissia. All that my popularity meant to them was that any attack upon me must be as oblique and underhand as possible; because, after all, I had obviously served the community by securing it six thousand slaves. Just the same, I was marked for destruction.

All this was hidden from me, however, during my first few hours back in Fusa. In my new gallery Nuru was once more my constant companion—he came to my quarters evenings because (so he said) he was engaged in memorizing the victory and the first use of fire in Fusa—and I must say that he gave no hint of any dissatisfaction whatever, either with me or with the scope of my victory. Rather, he more than insinuated that none of it would have been possible without the assistance of his factotums in training the Fire Feeders; and since I was more than inclined to agree with him he appeared to look on me with considerable favor.

As a matter of fact it was the old Memorizer himself

who first suggested that Atta be my aid-de-camp in the next campaign against the Rubicundians, along with Subser as a mess sergeant for us both, and here I must contend that I had some reason for my gullibility. For it was true that no one knew more about the Rubicundians and their country than my old friend, and who could better serve as my adviser and adjutant. I admitted as much to Nuru without hesitation when he brought up the subject, and perhaps my very eagerness raised an unexpected suspicion in his mind. At any rate he sent for Atta, after informing me that my friend was a Guard at a Maternity Center not far off.

Summoned by messenger, Atta himself arrived within the hour; and at sight of him after so many months I had hard work to dissemble my deep emotion. Indeed, surrounded as I had been by ordinary Fusans, I had almost forgotten the gentle nobility of Atta's high forehead and pale eyes. Reinforced now by a kind of somber sadness, his appearance went straight to my heart. How different he was! How inconceivable that anyone could ever consider him like the others!

Such was my instant response on seeing him again. But I gave no outward sign of my feelings, and Atta himself betrayed not the faintest indication that he had ever known me at all, so our meeting passed off without any untoward incident. Not until Nuru and Subser had gone and we two sat alone over two gourds of nectar did my old friend permit himself even a wry smile. "To Rubicundia again, I suppose!" he said then, and raised his gourd for a toast. This set me off, and I recounted to him all my recent adventures. He listened in silence, nodding his head occasionally and brightening a little at my description of the sack of Natissia. "I should like to have had a hand in that," he said at one point. But he lowered his eyes when I had finished and sat in silence; and after that I waited in vain for any similar series of confidences from him.

His air of depression rather alarmed me. For six

months we had been forced to go our separate ways after our abrupt parting in the Oval, and Fate's final disposition to relent and allow us to be together again seemed to me to merit something better than mere dejection. Finally I said as much, hinting shamelessly that perhaps I had overrated the attractions of our companionship for him. At this he lowered his eyes again and said something that I did not catch.

"What was that?" I inquired.

"I said," he replied in a low tone, "you saved my life in the wilderness, and in the Oval I failed you and left you to die." To my astonishment he said this with bitter emotion, and I saw that he meant it.

"But surely," I protested, "you did all that the code requires? Why should you have been expected to do more?"

"I am not Nuru," he retorted abruptly. "Do not quote Fusa to me." He stared at his nectar for some time. "Would you have left me alone to fight such a Beast in your country?" he demanded finally. "After you had brought me to your city?"

Draca had been responsible for that, I pointed out; it was the rule of the arena; in no circumstances could he have fought beside me. Considering the way the contest had turned out, I thought we had little to reproach ourselves with.

I said this with real conviction. But he merely rose abruptly, went to my doorway, and looked down my corridor. Then he came back and sat down without any change of expression.

"I have had a long time to think my own thoughts," he said at last in a low tone. "And I have had many. One of them is: What is the good of life if one cannot enjoy it with one's friend?"

And with that his reserve broke down and he began plying me with questions about what I thought of Fusa. In these questions, for the first time, he exhibited a genuine originality; and it came to me with something of a shock that while I had been drilling Fire Feeders and

killing Natissians he had had many months in the Maternity Center in which to indulge in reflection.

We talked until nearly morning on that first night of our reunion, and to this day it is a source of surprise to me to remember the number of stumbling ideas that he expressed in his troubled manner. Apparently everything I had ever said to him had found lodgment in his awakening mind. To him, too, our entrance into Fusa had come as something of a shock, and its impact upon him was even more bitter than upon me. There was one vital difference, however. Whereas I had accepted the situation superficially and sought to make the best of it by concealing my real aversion, Atta for the first time had been awakened to genuine thought, and the effort to keep his conclusions to himself had been deep and painful. Beginning to understand his world, he could scarcely keep himself from struggling against it, from crying out against it.

His was the pure spirit, mine the tarnished one.

The difference had come about, I suppose, partly because I felt no responsibility for Fusa or for anything Formican. To me our reunion was almost adolescent; it was like some dim reminder of my almost forgotten life on the farm. In Atta the experience went much deeper and attacked his mature personality. For him, he said, our house in the woods had answered a deep, unvoiced desire that longed for simplicity. Ever since he had met me, he said, he had been disturbed; he had felt that the pounding, repetitive life of his day was choking him in the throat and constricting him in the heart and making of him a mere series of blind motions stretched briefly between life and death. Ever since we had fortified our little stronghold he had wanted somehow to begin over again. He had wanted something he did not have, something he had missed, something he could not define: something he had and yet did not have. What this was he did not know; yet he felt somehow that I had it, and that Fusa had lost it.

Thus he tried, fumblingly, to express his rebellion against Fusa as he saw it now, and to disown his own kinship to it; and there were moments that first evening when I found it difficult to believe that he was a Formican at all and not some higher spirit in Formican guise. Even before that first night was over it was clear to me that already Fusa had led Atta to identify himself infinitely more with me than with the Fusans or with the Forzans with whom he had been brought up. And his thinking was no mere intellectual exercise, either, as I soon had occasion to find out. It went deep into his emotions, as one immediate incident amply proved.

Since early boyhood I have always been fairly proficient with the jackknife. I am, in fact, a fairly skilled wood carver—what we call in Iowa, a mumble-de-peg artist. To entertain myself on winter evenings as a boy I used often to imitate some chosen animal or bird—once, to my subsequent regret, I carved old Grampa Brokell in kitchen soap—and these little mementos were part of my family tradition as well as of my own childhood.

Now, in my imposing gallery, I had nothing more than one of my glass knives to work with, but it was better than nothing—it had a pretty sharp edge—and during the evenings of the first week of our reunion I succeeded in fashioning from a piece of Fire Guard tinder a fairly good replica of our old walnut house in the woods. This I put on the open shelf when I went out to the drill ground early one morning, and when I came back at noon what was my surprise to find that Atta had taken it down and was working on two small figures to put in it. They were labeled Atta and "Brokle"—as Atta always pronounced my name—and to my slightly misty eyes they were exactly alike! Atta had refused even to seen any physical difference between us!

Again, we soon had occasion to make military visits about the city together, and by comparison with the gayety that we could sometimes scarcely restrain, the relationships of of the grim Fusans we met were dry and

brittle indeed. Never once did I see a Fusan smile on the street, and a street accident never attracted a crowd. An injured Formican could lie in the gutter and die unless a policeman came along. Nobody paid him the slightest attention. The reason, I suppose, was fear of being accused of a personal, individual act of pity.

But the most striking example of Atta's change was the incident of my flute. For my own amusement, during our separation, I had fashioned a new reed pipe with holes that gave six different notes, so that it was almost a musical instrument. One evening soon after our reunion I took it out and played on it, and to my surprise Atta admitted that he wanted to play it too. In Forza he had never heard any music, and the sound of an individual melody was entrancing to him. So strong did the desire eventually become that he spent many midnight hours fingering the instrument and trying to imitate me. In this he succeeded after several weeks, and my most amusing memory of Fusa is still the night I returned to our gallery very late from a meeting at Oban's and from far down the corridor heard the notes of Home, Sweet Home played uncertainly but lovingly by a new musician.

As soon as we were settled I made a new chessboard—I explained to the toadlike Subser that it was a form of military tactics—and Atta and I spent many a pleasant evening drinking our nectar and trying new gambits on each other. During these sessions, after Subser had gone to his quarters, Atta asked me many questions of which I am certain Nuru would have disapproved. But I am afraid that I answered them most lamely. For they consisted of attempts to find out from me what wisdom men had found in the business of life, what explanations and goals, what beliefs, and what political utopias. And I found myself inadequately prepared to answer. Indeed, who among us can completely set forth the story of the passions and ideals of human history? Even now I should hesitate to try, and in this, I find, I am not alone except among the confident and the ignorant.

For Atta I fell back on the chessmen as a rough approximation of medieval life—though I had to use good Queen Bess of England to explain the activities of the Queen—and from there I went back to early man and the primitive family and the tribe and the race and so down to country and nation and the patriotism of my own land: the brotherhood of idea, not of blood or frontier. All this interested Atta excessively, and he struggled with it as a kindergarten child might struggle in a university. But he had the clear eyes of a child, and when he discovered that I could not answer all his questions he became fascinated with the variety of mankind and in particular with my description of my own family; and after that he left me alone for long intervals.

Meanwhile the daily business of our lives lay in the Oval and on the drill grounds outside the South Gate, and there ironically enough, we worked for Fusa very conscientiously indeed. For the military leaders agreed fully with Atta that the Rubicundians were no mere neighboring tribe of savages, despite their truculent resemblance to ancient robber barons. They possessed a far-flung empire containing a good dozen strongholds bigger than the one in which Atta and Subser and I had been held prisoners. Merely their slaves were numbered in thousands, and of these as many as twenty thousand were already trained as warrior bearers of great speed.

This military mobility amounted to the possession of twenty thousand fierce cavalrymen who could be thrown against any objective without warning, and it presented a most serious problem to anyone seeking to invade Rubicundia through the jungle and desert that surrounded it.

To meet the threat I again brought up the idea of Fusan cavalry. And to my surprise I found the hitherto prejudiced Nuru willing to listen. Inasmuch as my conversation with him on this simple point was one of the evidences afterward used against Atta, I shall set it down.

Nuru: "How are the preparations coming?"

I: "I am toying with the idea of suggesting Fabrans again."

Nuru: "Have you discussed it with Atta?"

I: "Yes."

Nuru: "What is his opinion?"

I: "He says it is time Fusa welcomed the ideas of a Stranger."

Such was my brief conversation with Nuru on this simple topic. You may find it slightly ridiculous of me to set down such a plodding exchange; but because of the faint intimation that Atta and I were capable of discussing Fusa in secret, the innocent statement was later used to prove that Atta had not only established an individual relationship with me, but had also actually begun to infect me with the virus of personal friendship. A traitor himself, he was proposing treason to me; he was setting me on an equality with Fusa itself.

Chapter 13

Did I meanwhile suspect nothing of what was going on? Did I accept as wholly accidental the presence once more in my life of both Atta and Subser? Was I completely outwitted by a quartet of Formicans?

Well, in a sense I was. For I can see now that to Draca and Nuru it was obvious that my relationship with Atta was always my Achilles' heel. Yet, though simple, common sense told me this, I never once imagined that Atta would be the one on whom they would fasten first, the better to drag me down later. Even so, I was no such fool as to give Draca or Nuru the slightest handle to use

against us. Neither Atta nor I ever betrayed in public the smallest evidences of friendship. Rather, in any gathering both of us acted with extreme coolness and formality, particularly after Subser had been assigned to me as mess sergeant. Even at home in our gallery Atta was always at pains to conceal from the Cutter the fact that he was learning to play the flute or carving figures for our replica of the walnut house. The most he ever did was openly to discuss certain depressing aspects of human history, such as the melancholy fact that of all the seers in the Bible only Solomon had seen fit to mention Formicans. During such conversations Subser usually stood against the wall like some peasant servitor, and no expression ever appeared on his stolid features. I think we may be forgiven for not realizing that he was hoarding away many an incomprehensible statement to report to his superiors.

Our difficulty, of course, was that neither Atta nor I had the slightest idea that anything untoward was about to happen. This innocence was so complete that even in the end what Subser actually reported to Draca and Nuru remained hidden from me. For all I know, he may not have been an informer for pay at all: he may have been an honest patriot, full of regrets that he was forced to do his duty toward a Formican whom he had once admired and to whom he owed his escape from slavery. The devilishness of Draca's accusation of Atta, when at last it was revealed to me, was that it did not stop at the simple crime of friendship. No, it stood four-square on the more reprehensible crime of being a friend to a Stranger and thus seeking to corrupt a new servant of Fusa with a treasonable relationship.

All this I realized later but in the beginning the strokes were too swift and too stunning to allow me to perceive anything fully.

I had gone out to the new drill ground that warm day for a final test of a new Fire Feeding regiment—the Rubicundian invasion was close at hand—and it was late in

the evening, after dark, before I rode up to our gallery, gave Trotta to my hostler at the entrance, and strode down the corridor. I half expected that Atta would be waiting to have supper with me. But Subser met me in the gallery entrance with something as close to a personal expression on his peasant face as it could support.

"Sir, Atta will not be back for supper tonight," he said with averted eyes. "I have put away his food and nectar."

"So?" I said.

"I think they were Draca's officers who came," he added.

"Draca's officers?" I repeated. "What for?"

"They said he had committed some ancient offense or treason," said Subser uncomfortably. "Friendship, I believe."

"I think you must be mistaken," I said coldly.

"I could not be," he answered. "The Food Supply has already ordered his allowance to be transferred to the Oval."

"The Oval!" I exclaimed in dismay.

And I ate my supper in a state of extreme perturbation. For although I did not as yet suspect the whole truth or indeed find myself capable of imagining what might have happened, I knew very well that the change that had taken place in Atta's views of Fusa since I first met him would serve him very ill in defending himself against any charge.

Meanwhile I myself had been neither consulted nor informed. Was I not, then, under the necessity of extreme caution before I made any move? Or would inaction on my part indicate a degree of complicity or guilt that would in itself be suspicious? These questions assailed me as I ate my solitary supper under Subser's disagreeable eye.

Ignorance, however, has never appealed to me, nor its twin sister inaction; and of all situations this one appeared to me to demand no delay. As soon as supper was

over, then, although the hour was late, I took my way to Nuru's.

Nuru was still up, and he greeted me with his usual cold, impenetrable gentleness; but he disclaimed all knowledge of the affair. "Draca has his own way of handling things," he said with a sigh. "So I can only presume that he is aware of what he is doing."

"Then you personally don't know of what Atta is accused?" I persisted.

"My dear fellow," said Nuru, "the mere fact that he has been sent to the Oval is sufficient."

"It's not sufficient for me," I said. "I need Atta on my staff. I resent Draca's interference with the army. I want him released at once."

"You have no idea, then," said Nuru, "why Atta has been sent to the Oval?"

"Only what that stupid Subser says," I replied.

"It does not occur to you that perhaps Draca wishes to question him?" asked Nuru.

"Very good," I said with equal coldness. "Then I wish to question Draca—or have one of his assistants questioned. Perhaps a little fire at his feet would elicit the necessary information."

"You are speaking unwisely," said Nuru, "to threaten Draca. To question any Fusan's actions is to imply that there is need to question his patriotism." He stared at me reflectively. "Is Atta so important to you?" he asked, "that you would traduce Draca's character?"

"Draca is interfering with the community's military security," I said coldly, "to please his own personal mood. He has moods, you may remember—and as I do not forget."

Nuru smiled thinly. "I have no love for Draca," he said. "But you are a Stranger to our customs, or you would not allow yourself to be guilty of a personal interest in a fellow Fusan. This alone would serve to disqualify you in this case."

"So there is a case?" I retorted. "What is it?"

"Permit me to remind you," said Nuru coldly, "that individual discussion is not permitted in Fusa. Your mere action in coming here draws censure upon you—and would upon me if I did not call your error to your attention."

"Surely," I said, you are at liberty to tell me what Atta has done and what is to be done to him in the Oval."

"I know nothing personally," said Nuru, "and I have no personal opinion. I am simply in possession of the facts." He took a drink of nectar and stared at me with his icy gentleness.

"Well?" I prompted him.

"Did Atta ever tell you," he inquired softly, "that his first scouting trip from Forza was wholly his own idea, without authorization? That because of it his troop was massacred and he himself left alone?" He paused, but not for an answer. "Did he tell you when you first found him exactly why he had never returned to Forza but had taken refuge in a common wooden hut? Did he explain where his companions were? Did he give any reason why he was even then not on his way to Fusa?"

"He was unable to evade the Rubicundians," I said.

"Perhaps," said Nuru. "Or was it because he did not wish to return—because he preferred to stay where he was?"

"That's quite untrue," I said hotly. "He talked of little else than getting back to Fusa."

"To you, perhaps," said Nuru coldly, "but not to himself. Or to Subser. We have Subser's word for that."

"That was later," I said, "in Rubicundia. He did not believe Subser could guide us back, and I had not recovered my weapons to make escape possible."

"You had your weapons in the wooden hut," said Nuru, "before you were captured by the Rubicundians. But your companion did not guide you here. He grew mushrooms in the hut, he fortified it, he dug a tunnel for the winter. He wished to stay there indefinitely, as an individual Formican.

"For what purpose? To help Fusa? Or to learn to make sounds on instruments, to take hunting trips, to pursue new thoughts on small boards of squares; in short, to be an individual?" His eyes seemed almost white as he looked sharply at me. "Who thought of these things? You or Atta?"

"Nobody 'thought' of them," I said. "They passed the time."

"A Formican does not merely pass the time," said Nuru. "You are a Stranger, and you may not know this. But Atta was not a Stranger: he was a Fusan, even if a provincial. He was not playing. He was becoming something less than a Formican—an individual."

He took another sip of nectar.

"The fact is incontrovertible," he said. "Even in Rubicundia—even when he was a prisoner—he had to be persuaded by others to return to his own people. Why? Because he knew very well that the truth about his actions would be known the moment he appeared in Fusa. He could not return without some excuse, some reparation. Not until he had solved this difficulty did he consent to go with you and Subser. And how did he solve it? By pretending that he was the one who was returning and that he was bringing you with him. By being himself the one to introduce you to Fusa as his contribution to the military glory of his country."

"Oh, now, come!" I said. "That is patently absurd."

"It is not absurd," retorted Nuru. "It is fact. Was not Subser dismissed when you entered Fusa? Did not Atta bring you to the Oval as your sole sponsor? Did he not return to your quarters at the first opportunity, to avail himself of your protection as the hero of the Natissian campaign? Once there, did he not discuss new thoughts until far into the night? Did he not criticise Fusa and traduce her traditions? Did he not place the criminal feeling of friendship above his own kinship, above Fusa itself?"

"There is no proof of all this," I retorted.

"Pardon me," said Nuru softly. "We have all the proof. Subser himself was there, and I have the complete record. Draca and I have both gone over it."

"Then you knew all along of what Atta is accused?" I burst out.

"I could not believe it," said Nuru, "until Draca put all the pieces together."

"And now that you do believe it," I asked grimly, "what do you propose to do about it?"

"That is not for me to say," said Nuru. "The penalty is already well known."

"What is it?" I asked.

"Trial by combat in the Oval," said Nuru. "A Monster, I presume."

"Such as the one Draca selected for me?" I asked with a cold fury that I tried hard to conceal.

"Precisely," agreed Nuru. "If Atta can overcome a Monster, he too is too valuable to be dispensed with."

"Doubtless," I said sarcastically. "And when will the combat take place?"

"On the day that follows tomorrow," said Nuru. "In the regular afternoon session."

"Good," I said. "I shall be there myself to observe Atta's work."

And with that I turned on my heel and left him abruptly, lest I draw my hatchet from my belt and, killing Nuru with one blow, seal Atta's fate forever by rousing all Fusa against me while Atta himself still lay helpless in prison, facing utter destruction.

Indeed, at that moment I felt that I was fortunate in being able to leave Nuru's apartment at all. For now that I knew the truth at last it was clear that without me Atta was doomed. Incomparable fighter as he was, he could never stand up against the obscene, fetid Monster. No single Formican could. Such combat was not combat, but murder. And murder was what the leaders of Fusa intended the combat to be. The picture rose before me vividly as I stood an instant on Nuru's doorstep,

and I do not mind admitting that for the first time in my life I felt the faint, cold chill of impending and inevitable disaster.

This is a different feeling from that of panic or dread, and it struck me like a raw quick wind, because I realized how deep inside a strange city Atta and I were caught, and by what preposterous creatures. In these Fusans there was no trace of feeling for Atta, no affection of any kind for a comrade they all had known well and respected. They were like mechanical men to whom there could be no appeal because their minds were set and their eyesight removed. They would see Atta murdered with mere grim approval. Faced with such creatures—millions of them—what could I, a mere man, do?

The question beat upon me coldly as I went home through Fusa's streets to my own silent gallery. For it was evident now that Atta and I had been playing with fire in our idle discussions. The laws of Fusa might be invisible, but they were real and inexorable. Once aroused to action, Fusans were implacable.

Indeed, where in all Fusa was there a gallery like ours?

The question forced me to admit the inevitability of Draca's action as I looked around at our silent quarters. My flute beside Atta's chair, the chessboards and the chessmen that Atta had carved, the model of our house in the woods with the two figures he had made in its doorway, the twin gourds and plates he had made for our dining alcove—these things were not Fusan. They were the possessions of an individual, evidence of a human being, not a Formican.

Was I not to blame, then? Not Atta? For who if not I had evoked in Atta a desire for these simple things? What were they but symbols of the desire to be a single person, an individual like myself?

At the perception an immense regret enveloped me as I lay on my couch in my dim gallery. I looked back over all the days and nights of my friendship with Atta, and I could not recollect anything that I had given to make

up for what I had taken away from him. Nothing more than these few pitiful individualistic crumbs had he got to compensate him for the loss of his belief in Fusa. The inadequacy of the exchange stunned me and left me too heartsick even to think clearly.

Tears came to my eyes at the remembrance of everything Atta and I had experienced together, and I rose and walked up and down the gallery hour after hour until the very quiet of the evening street outside began to oppress me. For I knew now that except for me there was no help in Fusa for either Atta or myself—And what could I do—a single stranger in a vast city?

Such was the question that I asked myself in the small hours of the morning; and to this day I am amazed at the answer that I found. For there was despair in my search for a solution, and it impelled me to examine all the meanings of my situation until there came to me at last a kind of cunning that I would not have believed in my nature.

Yes, I was alone, this cunning told me, so far as my feelings for Atta went. But in another sense I was not alone at all. I was the commander of a Fire Feeder brigade to whom my slightest command was law. Three miles distant, on the drill grounds outside the gates, lay more than five thousand Formicans who would follow me anywhere—even into Fusa's own Oval. Should I not, could I not, contrive to use my own soldiers, in some desperate plan? Watched as I doubtless was, could I still not devise some maneuver that would at least hold out one chance in a thousand of rescuing Atta before it was too late?

Obviously I could, I decided, if I set my mind to it. And from this decision there came the plan I eventually followed.

What was this plan? Well, I must admit that as I first saw it that early morning in the gallery it was only a plan in embryo, born of certain things that I realized clearly were in my favor. For example, the Formicans

have not perfected any method of swift long-distance communication. Once one is in front of one's pursuers, escape is merely a question of relative speeds. And I had Trotta, who could outdistance any Fusan pursuit. Again, the fear of fire and smoke is one of the most terrible of all fears to the Formican, and I had the ability to produce fire and, with the aid of my Fire Feeders to threaten all Fusa with a conflagration. Merely with these two advantages, then, did I not posses the elements of a successful *coup d'état?* In short, could I not, granted the proper timing, bring the threat of conflagration into the Oval itself and under cover of the confusion thus produced seize Atta from his guards and carry him off on Trotta?

Certainly such an action held more than a faint hope of success if I myself could manage to be present in the arena before my Fire Feeders arrived. For I should then have an opportunity to rescue Atta before his jailers could carry him away. Indeed, all that seemed doubtful in that event was whether or not my Fire Feeders could be counted on to come to the Oval if I myself were not at their head to keep giving the usual words of command.

This point was the nub of my first cogitations on the subject; and in them my judgment was not wholly obscured by my vanity. Even before the capture of Natissia the discipline of the Fire Feeders had been so noticeably excellent that their officers hung on my slightest gesture before executing any maneuver. And the Fire Feeders themselves had long since accepted every order of mine almost automatically. Indeed, Nuru's factotums had so materially aided in specializing their inherent soldierly reactions that Bonaparte himself might have envied me the loyalty and blind obedience of this particular regiment of troops.

As a foundation, therefore, I had a body of trained soldiers blindly obedient to my personal command; and this was a fact of the highest importance. The only question was, would an order given by me *in advance* be

carried out when I was no longer present in person? This was an open question, because the ordinary Formican soldier responds easily enough to the instant word of command but finds long-range orders difficult to remember and is prone to relapse into mechanical action.

It was, then, of the utmost importance that this question be answered, and at once. For to achieve my ends—a successful *coup d'état* in the Oval—I myself must be already in my seat below the dais, ready to take instant advantage of the confusion that would result from a preplanned diversion. Yet the *sine qua non* was that the Fire Feeders arrive by themselves; on this one point I might have to stake Atta's life and my own. On this one point, therefore, I concentrated as soon as I could get to the drill grounds. In fact, I worked all the day on it, until finally, to my gratification and joy, one full hour elapsed between one of my delayed-action orders and its execution. As for marching into the city and executing maneuvers there, none of the officers seemed to have the slightest objection or to consider the idea either original or startling. By sundown I was encouraged enough to indulge in actual hope.

Meanwhile I was still very much on pins and needles where Atta and I were concerned. When Subser had at last gone for the night I wasted no time in cursing his part in our betrayal. Instead, in the silent gallery I packed every ounce of food and nectar left in the house and put them into the two saddlebags that still remained to bring back to mind my former hunting expeditions with Atta. These I took out to the stable corridor where Trotta was hobbled, followed them with my weapons, lassos, and suit of armor in a bundle, and spent until nearly dawn carefully loading that faithful beast.

Soon after sun-up I was ready to go, and shortly before the appointed hour I got into my saddle, with a whispered word to Trotta, and we set off for the drill grounds at a smart trot. Thus on that early summer morning I said good-bye to my spacious quarters in Fusa without

regret. It was an act upon which I look back without emotion to this day. For those rooms, despite their magnificence, were never anything but an uneasy prison to me, and they have remained in my memory always as a symbol of the futility of fame.

The rest of that last morning I spent with my Fire Feeder officers again, simulating in drill formation the line of march through the various sections of the city and discussing with the company commanders the best methods of holding a full-scale dress rehearsal of Fire Feeders in action in the Great Oval. By noontime I felt fairly confident that every order would be faithfully carried out on schedule, and to make sure I called for one final rehearsal. As a matter of fact I did not leave my well-instructed officers until the sun was past the meridian, and by that time every last detail of the fateful maneuver had been reviewed and rereviewed, even down to the smallest movement of the gangs of workers trained to carry the immense amounts of dry tinder required.

I was supremely conscious that the hour of genuine action was fast approaching, and I actually recall little of my final hour on the drill ground in the warm sunlight. I remember watching the last mechanical evolutions of my troops with a feeling of grim contempt because it did not occur to a single Fusan that nothing prevented me from putting Trotta to the gallop and disappearing beyond the grain fields into the greenness of the high bamboo woods. I remember, too, indulging in a kind of cynical satisfaction at the thought that neither Nuru nor Draca nor any of the leaders could even suspect me of trying to save Atta out of friendship. Such an idea was far beyond their limited perceptions.

This was my last simple thought, I remember, when in the early afternoon, I tethered Trotta outside the Great Oval, made a final survey of the various exists and entrances, and sauntered into the dimly lit, crowded arena.

Here I beheld one last picture of the leaders of Fusa, and it still remains very clear in my memory: Draca lean-

ing confidently against the dais, his black brows bent toward a witness in the box—it was Nuru—while above him the implacable faces of the leaders appeared like so many Stygian masks.

Nuru was well in front, I noticed, but in back of him, in the center, was a prisoner's pulpitlike dock, and in this sat Atta. I stole a covert glance at him while I made my way down the crowded Oval toward Halket, and his appearance nearly deprived me of my composure as I stood below him in the arena. My friend sat in the dock like any prisoner, but his front arms were folded on his chest, his head was raised high toward the distant ceiling, and in his pale eyes was an expression of the utmost resignation. He did not look like a prisoner who would rise and make a dash for freedom. He looked like a martyr who has already resigned himself to death.

He gave no faintest hint of fear, however. He was conscious of the slight stir my entrance made among the crowd, and he turned and gazed at me with such a gentle and enigmatic expression that for the first time I felt for him an infinite compassion. He was only a Formican himself, I saw sudddenly; he was small and alone. Once he was dead, no other creature of his race would ever dare to doubt the changless perfection of Fusa. The realization affected me strangely as I made my way to the front benches below the dais. It diminished my hatred of the Fusans themselves, but it hardened my determination to leave their city forever and to take Atta with me. For the Formicans themselves could scarcely be blamed for Atta's tragic situation; I realized that. They were the helpless products of their own past and incapable of changing. But one Atta was worth more than ten thousand, yes, a million such creatures. Did it matter, then, if ten thousand lives were lost in smoke and fire, provided Atta himself were saved? This was the specific question that I asked myself as I sat down below the dais; and to this day I have never been able to change the answer.

Meanwhile Nuru had stepped down and Draca had begun his outline of the case to the leaders. He spoke rapidly and confidently. He called attention briefly to the flute and to the carved figures. Only over the chessmen and the chess board did he linger, with careful explanation of the symbolism of the king and queen in a world that obviously saw such family figures as criminal. Then he called for judgment sentence.

The swiftness of his action filled me with despair. For my Fire Feeders were still many moments away, and I knew it. Indeed, without some form of delay, some statement by Atta, I saw grimly, all of my optimistic plans would come to a swift, ridiculous end. Atta would be sentenced and led down to face a Monster before a single Fire Guard arrived.

I need not have worried, however, if I had possessed more imagination. For whatever I might have done or left undone, Atta himself had no intention of leaving unfilled the pit his apostasy had dug for me, and I can see now that from the beginning—perhaps from the hour of his arrest—he had thought of little else but how he could avert from me the fate that was already his.

This it was that he must have been turning over in his mind as he stared so steadily at the ceiling, awaiting the spider. This it was, and only this, that he was waiting to say. And it was this quality of selflessness, I suppose, that made his words so moving to me when at last he faced Oban and that heavy-lidded Fusan asked him in measured tones if he were ready for judgment and if he had anything to say.

Absolute silence fell upon the crowd as Oban asked this question, and I, for one had the sensation that I had lost my breath and should never recover it unless Atta made some reply. Then Atta turned slowly and faced his accusers, and to my great relief I knew that he meant to speak. Our last chance was not yet gone.

Even so, his first words made a sound like the thin even dripping of water on a solid wall. He did not seem

to be answering an accusation; he seemed to be merely trying to arrive at some kind of truthful statement, as if Draca's accusation had never existed, as if the sincerity of his own halting earnestness were all that mattered.

Not until he came to his denial that I had had any part in his actions or thought did his voice suddenly ring out clear and strong; and even here it was as if he were trying to be heard above the commotion his words roused. Indeed, for a moment I was puzzled that any Fusan should care what part I had played. I thought that a Monster had already been brought to one of the gateways—that Atta himself had seen it and was making a last effort to be heard above the din that the beast's appearance had raised in the crowd. Then I followed Atta's gaze down the Oval, and I knew that something more powerful than the mere impact of words was causing a kind of tremendous confusion at the gateways to the street. Louder and louder came the sound of tramping feet, the sound of marching Formicans, penetrating the entrances to the Great Oval, piercing the ears and assaulting the brain. And a great hope rose in me.

"Soldiers!" someone shouted from the benches. "Fire Feeders!" The effect on the crowd was electric. As one man they rose. They forgot Atta and the leaders. The long lines of the Fire Guards appeared, carrying my fire bowls and endless bundles of tinder, and preceded by fierce warriors. Into the Oval from a dozen gateways they marched, heading directly for the dais. It was an imposing sight.

Only Halket comprehended instantly what it meant. He turned to me with an expression that I have never forgotten: the Formican mask shattered into a thousand pieces. "You will pay for this," he said with fury. And before I could make the slightest move to set alight the fire bowls nearest me he turned to summon his own men from the dais. It was Armageddon at last, I saw, and I felt neither honor nor pity.

Even as Halket turned his back I drew my hatchet

from my belt and struck him a mighty blow on the back of the head. He fell against the Formican next to him. I did not hesitate. I drove my dagger deep into his body and leaped up on the dais.

"They mean to burn us!" I shouted. "Fire in Fusa!"

Twice I shouted this and pointed at the high doorways to the street, where great piles of tinder were already beginning to appear. And that alone was enough to turn the Oval into a hysterical, milling confusion of terrified Formicans.

"The fire will scorch us!" some fool shouted in the rear. "To the streets!"

"Let me out!" shouted a dozen others. "Fire Feeders!" screamed a thousand shrill voices. "Fire! Guards!"

And for Atta and me Armageddon had indeed begun.

Chapter 14

Only Draca remained cool, as I remember it now. He stood on the dais like some kind of dark, implacable hornet.

"Remove the prisoner!" he shouted to the two shakoed soldiers who stood near Nuru. And he himself started toward the rear exits, whither Oban and the rest were pushing.

Not all the immediate spectators were such cravens. The front row had seen me assault Halket and seen him fall, and they began climbing up onto the platform where I now stood. I had only an instant or two before they could reach me, and I made the most of it.

"To the side exit, Atta!" I shouted above the din. "Trotta's waiting!"

Then I unloosed my lasso from my shoulder, whirled it in loops above my head, and sent it snaking after the the soldiers who were striding toward Atta. It snared them like two rabbits when I pulled the noose tight and snubbed my end of the rope around the nectar stand beside me.

"Atta!" I shouted again. "To the side exit!"

I turned and struck with my hatchet at the first Formican to reach me. He fell like a log; he was only an innocent worker, I suppose, but he was one of at least a dozen who were pulling themselves up to get at me, and my prospects seemed suddenly very dim. For no one is able to hold back a dozen Formicans bunched in a small space, and their ability to grapple is incredible.

Yet I should have known better than to expect Atta to leave me to my fate while he saved himself. Almost before I knew it he was beside me, and the old light of battle was shining in his eyes.

"Save yourself!" he shouted to me. "I'll hold them!"

And, like any two citizens fighting a gang of hoodlums, we began our last fight.

Even now I have not the faintest notion how it might have turned out had there been no intervention. Despite the increasing confusion Fusan after Fusan saw the struggle and came leaping up onto the dais to pull us down. Eventually we must have been overcome in that wild, choatic malestrom. But my Fire Feeders were true to their orders. From the side exit where Trotta stood, dozens of them now appeared and rushed for the dais.

"Drive back this crowd!" I shouted to them; and they obeyed me instinctively, precisely as if we had been before the burning towers of Natissia and not in Fusa's Oval.

"Now!" I shouted to Atta. "Together!"

And while the Fire Feeders rushed fiercely on the jostling and menacing crowd Atta and I made for the side

doorway. In a few seconds we were through it and in the square outside.

It was a terrible sight that confronted us there: thousands of fear-crazed Fusans fleeing in wild confusion from the doorways of the Great Oval, trampling the rear of other milling, pushing Formicans who were trying to get through the lines of Guards and escape down the streets and avenues. But I had no time for pity or regrets.

"Mount behind me!" I shouted to Atta. "No one will stop us!"

He nodded, grasped my lance, and vaulted into the second saddle that my bundle of armor made. I followed him into my own saddle and dug my heels into Trotta's sides, and a second later we were galloping through the long lines of saluting Guards, down the cleared and guarded avenue, past the gaping crowds of the still unaware lower city, and thus to the South Gate and freedom.

Such was my farewell to Fusa. I could wish now that the moment could have been prolonged forever; that Atta and I could ride eternally down the city's wide avenues, two loyal adventurers carved in obsidian or painted on some rude Formican vase, riding, riding, and never reaching journey's end.

So I feel now, when everything is over.

But on that summer afternoon I was still in the flush of triumph. I even had fleeting dreams of greater conquests—of leading the rest of the faithful regiments of the Natissian campaign from their post at the gates back up the avenues; of toppling Fusa to its annihilation. But no such revenge was mine, then or ever.

I had only to mention the idea to Atta as we rode to realize that he would have none of such a proposal; and his dissent ended my own desire for reprisal. Indeed, it made me feel strangely happy and light-hearted. For with it the cold armor of my own hatred fell from me; and thereafter I devoted myself cheerfully to seeing that

Trotta stayed in the middle of the road and took the right avenues to the South Gateway.

Here, once through, it was necessary only to guide her past the drill grounds—she tried hard to take that familiar lane—and past the slanting fields of growing grain where the planters still worked in the afternoon sunshine; and soon we were at the line of gorse and bamboo woods whence I had first glimpsed Fusa with Atta beside me. At this point he dismounted and led the way with the certainty of the old scout; and in a few minutes the tangled woods had closed behind us.

Thereafter he steadily led the way, and Trotta and I as steadily followed. We stopped once, munched some mushrooms, and took a few swallows of nectar. But we did not delay overlong, and not until darkness fell did we halt at last and make camp in a cave beside some boulders.

Here we were still many days' journey from our abandoned walnut hut. But the danger of immediate pursuit seemed reasonably remote. And already the lowering weather had disturbed Atta. All afternoon, he pointed out, huge clouds had been gathering in the west, and from the darkening horizon an occasional zigzag of lightning struck down at the rim of the world. A real downpour might be coming, he predicted, and we should do well to avoid being caught in any river valley.

This danger was the reason for our last camp, and it seemed good and sufficient to me. Comfortably ensconced as I had been for many months in my Fusan gallery, I still remembered those stupendous rains of my early adventures. Caught in a valley, one could be easily drowned; a cave on a hillside was a far safer refuge. There was even room for Trotta, I found, under an overhanging shelf, and this removed my last worry.

We had still not discussed our last hours in Fusa or our separate individual adventures after Atta's arrest. It is one of my great regrets that Atta, on our last evening together, told me neither all that had happened to him

nor the thoughts that had been his while he sat in his cell in the Oval awaiting punishment.

"Who cares what I think?" he exclaimed. "Let us drink a toast to the fact that there is not one of us here, but two!"

This, over a gourd of nectar, was the only statement he made on the subject of Fusa. The monstrous rain roared down upon us soon after that, and we spent nearly the whole night plugging chinks in the cave's walls and changing Trotta and our belongings from place to place as streams of water descended the hill and trickled over the rocky floor of our refuge.

Even so, we were fairly comfortable. Once or twice huge boulders above us become undermined and went crashing past our ledge. But they could not strike us in our cave, and after Fusa's false security our refuge took on an illusion almost of home.

"A good thing your Fire Feeders didn't ever have to face a rainstorm," Atta shouted once above the tumult. It was his only reference to the fact that I had come to his rescue just as once he had come to mine.

Conversation seemed empty and futile after the great danger we had escaped. We were like two lonely souls at the end of the world or at its beginning. Friendship and honor were ours. Little else was. Such were my thoughts, at least, as dawn finally came and the storm died down, and perhaps they were Atta's too.

I know his last act beneath our ledge was to take out a piece of eiderdown from my saddlebags and swab down Trotta's wet and shivering skin. He did it with the same gentle stroking motion that I have seen Fusans use at their morning toilets.

Then he stretched himself and went outside on the rocks before the cave. He walked down a little way on the flat space before our shelter; and I can see him yet, looking up at the clearing sky and the hill above us, his high forehead raised to the morning light. His look of appraisal at the broken clouds brought me out too, and

for a moment I stood at a little distance from him looking down into the valley over the treetops at his back.

After an instant thus, I heard a slight noise above and behind me, and I turned quickly to see what it was. The action, taken too quickly, twisted my left foot too much to retain its hold, and as I turned it slipped backward so that I half fell, hands upon the wet ground, face downward.

It was in this position that I heard Atta's shout: "Look out! A rock! A rock!"

At the same moment there struck my ear the grinding sound of a great boulder or an avalanche tearing down the hill above me, and I scrambled desperately to get up.

I never made it. The mud was too slippery, and my ankle had turned on its tendons. As if temporarily paralyzed I half fell upon my side, and in this position I saw dimly a monstrous boulder above me, half grinding, half tearing, and actually bounding down the slope directly toward me. It was nearly as big as a modern motor car in size and a dark wet gray in color, and it seemed to overhang our ledge like a monster of impersonal death a second before it plunged down upon me.

Another second and I should have been a corpse pinned beneath its weight in the muddy rocks. But in that second Atta must have arrived. For even as I shut my eyes I felt his strong arms around me. I was lifted from the ground like a twig and thrown violently halfway to the cave. Almost simultaneously came the crash of the boulder, rock against rock, and I staggered up on my twisted ankle to see five tons of stone fall on the exact spot where I had been.

"Atta!" I shouted. "Atta! Are you all right?"

There was no answering sound. I shouted again.

"Atta! Atta!"

Still there was no answer and so sign of my friend. And at the continued silence words of fear and horror sprang to my palsied lips. I ran limping and threw myself against the insensate rock. With every ounce of

strength in me I pushed and struggled against it. My effort was in vain. I could not stir the monster.

Nor was there any sign of Atta around it.

"Trotta!" I yelled. "Trotta, come here!"

I left the boulder and rushed, hobbling, for Trotta beneath her ledge. Fear made me clumsy, and I swore savagely at the faithful beast as I saddled her and took out my largest lasso. For I had only a feeble hope, and I knew it. But I pulled her out, whirled my lasso with sweaty hands, caught a projecting piece of the boulder on the top, drew the noose tight, and then passed my end of the rope around Trotta's broad chest.

"Pull, Trotta, pull!" I commanded her hoarsely; and, driving her a little way down the hill, I added all my strength to the rope as it tightened. Like a madman I pulled and shouted at Trotta. Her knees bent and her eyeballs stood out from her small head, but she did not give up, nor did I. And gradually the great boulder shivered, tottered on its base, and began to move. Another second and it was crashing downward again almost straight at us toward the cliff above the valley.

"Look out, Trotta!" I yelled. "Aside!"

I let go my grip on the rope and struck her smartly. She leaped to one side as she had been taught to do in the arena. I leaped aside with her, and the great stone swept past us, almost skinning my knees as the rope knocked me flat on my face and took my feet out from under me. I was almost stunned. But the boulder went past us, and for a second I thought both of us had escaped. I did not realize that I had doomed Trotta by knotting her securely to a boulder that was now again on the rampage. Then I lifted my head and saw the dreadful prospect. The boulder was not stopping: it was gathering speed. The lasso was firmly caught on it; the far end was securely fastened around Trotta's chest and neck; and the insensate mass was dragging Trotta swiftly to her death. Even while I was staring after her the great stone pulled her like a fly from her scrabbling, des-

perate attempts to find a stance, dragged her over the muddy rocks and down the steep hill, and before I could rise, crashed through the small bushes on the edge of the cliff, disappeared from sight, and pulled the wretched Trotta after it down into the abyss. Only a distant splash told me that both had reached the rushing stream in the in the valley bottom far below.

I had no time to mourn her, however, or even to curse my stupidity as she disappeared. For Atta lay before me on the wet rocks, and to him I half ran, half dragged myself.

Stretched out on the stones he lay, and I knelt on the ground and took him in my embrace. I spoke to him and held his poor crushed arms against my breast. But there was no answering flicker of life, and after a while I simply sat and held his head in both my hands.

Atta was dead. He was dead. My friend Atta was dead.

How long I sat thus or what happened thereafter I have no means of knowing. The sun came out. The clouds went. Noon came and departed. But I had no sensation of change or of the passage of time.

I must finally have elapsed into unconsciousness. For when I came out of my stupor the late afternoon shadows covered the ground, and in the sunset I was still sitting in the same position. All that had changed was the proportions of things. But these had changed so immeasurably that for an instant I could not take in the incredible alteration. Then I realized that the high hill before our cave on which I still sat was only a small hummock of field stones. Above, some short green grass led down, not to a deep valley, but to a tiny rushing rivulet below an overhanging bank. In the distance the trees of an orchard topped a hill, and close at hand a few cows grazed, looking at me unconcernedly.

I was sitting in my father's own meadow on the Upper Branch, a mile from my own sunken garden, and all that

had been Atta lay upon my palm. For in my hand I held the quiet body of a small dead ant.

Of my return to human size, all I can say is that when I rose I found that I still had a badly twisted ankle. (It lamed me for three months.) I found my lance and armor beside a tiny hole in the stones—mute evidence that my friend Atta and I had indeed been together in that last hour of his life.

As for Trotta, I searched for her body, but I never found it. The rushing stream must have carried it away. Nor could I ever locate our walnut house. Fusa itself I tried to identify many times. But there are a thousand anthills in the Upper Branch, and I was never able to be certain that any one of them was the one I sought. Indeed, who cared but me? And who cares now?

Nuru, Draca, Oban—all have been dead these forty years. Only Atta himself, the incomparable Atta, still rests beside me quietly in his glass-stoppered bottle. For me no human being has ever taken his place.