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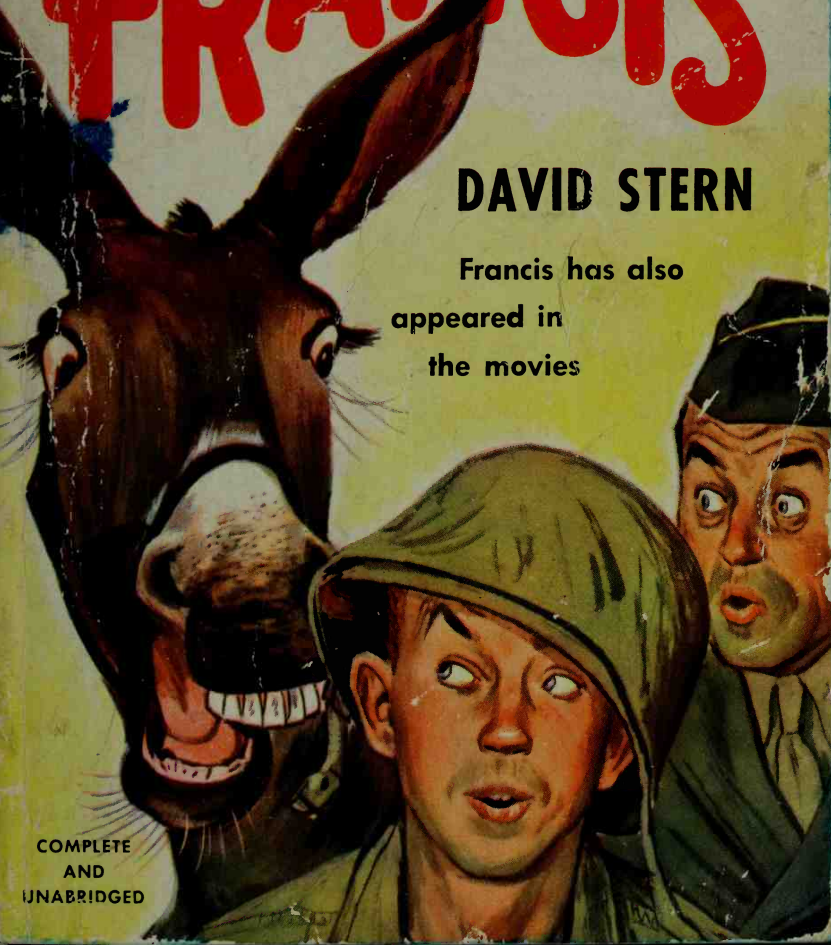
DELL
BOOK
507

The story of the GI mule who learned to
talk with common sense and hilarious results.

FRANCIS

DAVID STERN

Francis has also
appeared in
the movies



COMPLETE
AND
UNABRIDGED



The humorous and amazing adventures in the Burma jungles of a young, inexperienced second lieutenant, and Francis, the veteran Army mule who can and does talk, and who has a bucketful of common sense and oodles of ingenuity. And if you don't believe that Francis can also fly (he claims a cruising speed of 25 mph), this book has an unhappy ending.

Persons in the *Novel* "Francis"—

FRANCIS,
a hard-bitten Army mule, is as sad a looking creature as ever hauled a pack; his head hangs low and his back hangs lower. Francis has a low regard for junior officers, and the prospect of becoming one leaves him cold. For that reason he wishes to keep his unusual talents more or less to himself, but he is constantly on the alert to help the war effort in his humble way.

THE LIEUTENANT,
until a few months ago a happy young junior officer, has become the hero of the Burma Theater. He amazes his superior officers with the vital and accurate bits of Intelligence he reports. The revelation of his source of information, Francis, is even more amazing to those in command.

THE CG,
in command of the Burma Theater, has 35 years of army service and nine campaigns behind him when he risks both command and career to tell the world about Francis's many attainments.

MAUREEN VAN GELDER,
smack-dab, hit-you-in-the-pit-of-the-stomach, take-your-breath-away beautiful, is in love with the young lieutenant. For that to happen to a second lieutenant in Burma (where the only thing rarer than a white woman is a mint julep) is sensational. But Francis takes a dim view of Maureen.

VALORIE HUMPERT,
buck-toothed nurse in the neuropsychiatric ward, has a molar-to-molar smile and thinks mental disturbances are created as a very special favor to her.

(Continued on next page)

Persons in the *Novel* "Francis"—

(Continued from preceding page)

MASTER SERGEANT CHILLINGBACKER, whose physique causes Francis to dub him "Man Mountain Chillingbacker," is an able man in a pinch, and he is understandably reluctant about heading an expedition against the enemy in co-leadership with a mule.

LIEUTENANT COLONEL PLEPER, a psychiatrist in charge of treating battle fatigue in the Burma Theater, hasn't changed a word of his patter since his civilian days when he had a way with women suffering from excessive fatigue.

COLONEL CARMICHAEL, the irascible, gnomelike head of the neuropsychiatric ward, thinks all this "neuro this" and "neuro that" is a lot of poppycock. "Either a man's crazy or he isn't. Doesn't make much difference."

By the tail of my great aunt Regret who won the Derby, any similarity between this book and fiction is purely coincidental, so help me.

FRANCIS

THE MOST GIFTED MULE IN THE WORLD

.....

FRANCIS

By DAVID STERN

Author of

"Francis Goes to Washington"

Illustrated by
GARRETT PRICE

Author's Dedication—
To Louise and the Widget

COVER PAINTING BY RICHARD HOOK

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FRANCIS

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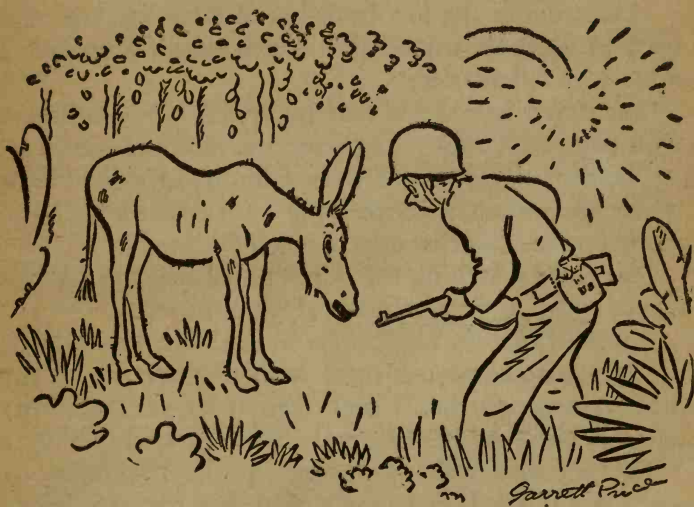
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FRANCIS

Chapter One

I MEET FRANCIS



THE NIGHT WAS BLACK. The Burma hills were rugged.

But there is no excuse for a second lieutenant's losing his platoon.

I reached out for the man in front of me. My hand closed around the trunk of a small tree. I whispered the name of my platoon sergeant.

There was no answer.

I crawled upward and to the right, pulling myself over

boulders. I whispered again, then tried sliding down and to the left.

When I realized I was alone, behind the enemy lines, I was worried. Who wouldn't be?

I started to think what the CO would say when I told him I'd lost my platoon.

Then I was downright scared.

I crept under the low branches of a banyan tree and tried to compose myself. I was exhausted. I suppose I must have fallen asleep.

Our dawn barrage waked me. Shell bursts mingled with patches of mist rising from the mountainside.

The nearest explosions were a thousand yards below where the mountain slope leveled off into the valley. I knew I must cross that area to reach our lines.

I sat there watching the white puffs, wishing I had a cup of coffee, trying to force myself to move.

I noticed that the explosions were closer. I was determined not to allow our own shells to drive me up the mountain any farther. I rubbed my eyes, smoothed my hair, adjusted my helmet, and started toward our lines.

The shellfire was advancing up the mountainside yards at a burst. It was only a matter of minutes before I reached the field of fire.

I'd half risen to make a run for it when I heard the whine of a shell. With the instinct one learns quickly in battle, I dove, rolled over three times, and came to a stop sitting up.

I was at the bottom of a slight ravine surrounded by low banyan trees. I looked around.

Standing a few feet from me was a runt of an Army mule, as sad a creature as ever hauled a load away. His

head hung low, and his back hung lower. The animal's hide was bespattered and anointed with what appeared to be a collection of all that was worst in Burma.

I scanned the ravine.

Except for the mule, it was empty.

I began feeling myself all over to discover if I was injured. When I came to my posterior I winced. Nothing serious, but tender.

"Isn't this one hell of a mess?" I must have spoken aloud.

"You said a mouthful," said a voice.

I leaped to my feet. Frantically I searched the ravine, following my gaze with the muzzle of my carbine.

"I suggest you pull your head down," said the voice, "or you'll get it blown off."

"Who said that?" I demanded.

"I did." The voice was close.

"Where are you?" I swung completely around.

"Right in front of you."

I could see nothing except the mule.

"I can't see you," I said. "Come out or I'll shoot."

"I am out," said the voice. "And you better put up that gun before you hurt somebody."

The mule was looking at me with mournful brown eyes. Its lips were moving.

"Who's speaking?" I demanded.

"I am."

"Who is I?"

"Me. The mule."

"Don't be ridiculous," I said.

"Coming from a second lieutenant that's almost ironic," said the voice.

"Is this a trick?" I demanded, feeling panic begin to rise.

"Most certainly it is not."

I gripped my carbine more tightly and advanced a step. I kept my eyes on the animal.

"Are you wired for sound?" I asked.

The mule cocked his head and rolled his eyes. "No. Are you?"

"I don't believe it," I said. "I flatly refuse to believe it."

"Believe what?"

"That a mule can talk," I said.

"I'm not particularly interested in whether you believe it or not," said the mule. "Probably we'll both have our blocks knocked off before we get back. So what's the difference?"

"But—but it's fantastic!" I stammered.

"After all, you can talk," said the animal.

"I am a second lieutenant," I said.

"And I'm just as impressed as you are," said the mule, "having had some previous experience with second lieutenants."

I sat down hard. I was wondering if I was suffering from shell shock or tropic fever. "Mules don't talk," I stated flatly.

"You were probably born a skeptic," said the animal.

"I never heard anything like it," I said.

The mule indignantly pawed the earth with one hoof. "Undoubtedly there are a number of things about which you have never heard. That's why you're a junior officer."

"The Table of Organization in our—" Then I caught myself. Making excuses to a mule. I must be Burma balmy.

"The old T/O wheeze, lieutenant," the mule said. "You're a pretty pathetic case."

I was annoyed. "Who are you?" I demanded.

"Just an Army mule. But my name happens to be Francis."

"Francis?" I said.

"That's right."

"And you can talk?"

"I wish you wouldn't keep bringing it up," said the mule. "You know, I have some feelings."

The shellfire was growing more intense. There were bursts on all sides of the ravine. The sharp, piercing shriek of the projectiles mingled with the thumping *broomph* of the explosions.

I should have been terrified. But in the excitement of my discovery I forgot the war. A shell landed near by. Instinctively I cringed.

"Getting close," said the mule.

"Much too close." I brushed some dirt from my arm. "Though you seem calm enough about it."

"I'm a fatalist," said the mule. "When a shell has your number on it, you're done for. In the meantime, no use worrying. Anyway, I've been hit once in this engagement. On the law of averages I shouldn't get it again."

"You're wounded?" I asked. It still seemed fantastic to be talking to a mule. But there wasn't anything else to do about it.

"Just a scratch." The animal shook his head. "I shouldn't have mentioned it."

"Where were you hit?" I asked.

"It's my hide."

"Where?"

The mule seemed to turn a darker shade of brown. "I'd really rather not say."

The tempo of the shell bursts was increasing. The earth was trembling, and wisps of smoke drifted into the ravine.

"We are facing an extremely serious situation," I said. "We must decide upon a course of action."

The mule flapped its right ear forward. "Brilliant, lieutenant! Smack, dab, on the button, brilliant. Sounds just like Army Field Manual twenty-two-dash-something or other. I presume you have studied a great many field manuals, lieutenant?"

I drew myself up. There was no excuse for rudeness. After all, I was a commissioned officer in the Army of the United States.

"I have," I said.

"How ducky," said the mule. "I suppose you know that in executing the salute the tip of the forefinger of the right hand should be an inch and a half above and slightly to the left of the right eye?"

"What's that got to do with this situation?" I demanded.

"Nothing," the mule said. "Nothing at all. Except that you look like the sort of second lieutenant who goes in for such chicken. Just what do you propose to do?"

I felt my face begin to flush.

A shell landed close. I fell to my knees, stumbled up again.

Immediate action must be taken. As an officer, the responsibility was mine.

I looked at the mule.

"Francis," I said, "you can talk."

"Thank you," said the mule.

"If you can talk," I continued, "perhaps you have some other unusual qualifications?"

"What do you mean?" asked Francis.

"I mean, do you do anything else that's different for a mule?"

"Well," said Francis, "I can fly."

"You can what?"

"Fly."

"Fly? You mean, like a bird?"

"Well, not exactly like a bird, lieutenant. After all, I am a mule."

Again I had forgotten the war. "Are you trying to tell me you can take off and sail through the air?"

"Most certainly not," said the mule. "I don't sail. I fly."

"How do you do it?" I asked.

"It's extremely complicated." Francis wiggled that right ear again. "I wouldn't know how to put it into words."

"Do you mean to say," I asked, "that you could just take off now, rise up in the air, and fly back to our lines?"

"I could," said the mule. "But I wouldn't."

"You could but you wouldn't, what do you mean?"

"Look at the size of my rear." The mule waved his posterior delicately. "Wide as a barn door. I've reached the age when I'm beginning to spread, you know. Suppose I took off, have you any idea what my flying speed is?"

"No," I said. "I haven't."

"I'll tell you." The right ear was wiggling. "It's less than twenty-five miles an hour. Now imagine me sailing around out there in the open. Why, the Japs would fill

me so full of fifty-caliber slugs I'd look like lattice work."

"The Japs wouldn't know what you were," I suggested.

"So what?" Francis said. "The Japs never know what they're shooting at."

Another shell exploded close by, staggering me. "Maybe they don't know what they're shooting at. But they're dangerous."

"Anybody with a gun is dangerous, especially—" Francis gave me a knowing look.

"See here," I said, "we must clear out of here."

"How?" asked Francis.

I thought for a moment. "Have you had much experience on mountain trails?"

"Considerable," Francis said. "Considerable."

"Can you run down them?"

"I can—" Francis paused, a wise look coming into his large, brown eyes. "I can, but only under the most extreme provocation."

"Well, what do you call this?" I asked.

"I've been thinking the same thing," said the mule. "Perhaps I had better make a run for it."

"Could you carry me?" I ventured.

"On my back?" Francis's voice rose.

"Yes," I said.

"Are you crazy?"

"Of course I'm not," I said.

"Do you realize how much you would slow me up?"

"No," I said. "I do not."

The mule pawed the earth. "Well, it would slow me up terrifically. Simply terrifically."

I have always believed that only when absolutely nec-

essary should an officer use his rank. This appeared to be such an occasion.

"After all," I said, "I am an officer."

The mule rolled his eyes in a circle. "A second lieutenant."

"I am a commissioned officer," I repeated.

"For the sake of argument," said the mule, "we'll admit that you are designated as an officer. Still, there's no reason for me to risk my life to try to save you. It wouldn't even be patriotic."

"Are you implying that it wouldn't be right to save my life?"

"The question," said the mule, "is not whether it would be right to save your life. The question is whether it would be right to risk mine to do it."

"I don't understand," I said.

"Logistics." Francis pawed the ground. "Cold, unemotional, military logistics."

"Explain yourself."

"First point." Francis flapped that right ear for emphasis. "What did the government have to do to get you? Induction. A number pulled out of a hat. Ten seconds. Poof. No fuss. No feathers. And you have a second lieutenant."

I felt a cold chill.

"But not me," said the mule. "I wasn't so easy. The government had to buy me. Yes, sir. Cold, hard cash on the barrelhead."

"This isn't a war of money," I said.

"Perhaps," said Francis. "But consider it from another angle. Is there a shortage of second lieutenants? Certainly not. The War Department has announced they have a

surplus, a large surplus. But not mules, that's a different story. The government could use thousands more."

I was searching frantically for an answer. I shook my head.

"Let's look at the mathematics of the thing," Francis said. "I figure—carrying you on my back would halve my chances of cutting through to our lines. You follow that?"

"So far," I said.

"Next step," said the mule. "I calculate I am worth exactly seven of you."

"What!"

"You heard me, lieutenant. I'm worth to the Army exactly seven of you."

"And how do you arrive at that figure?"

"I'll show you," Francis said. "Simplicity itself. Shipping space is at a premium. The Army allots as much boat space to one mule as to seven lieutenants."

"So what!"

"So the Army could have brought seven lieutenants over to Burma. But it didn't. It brought me."

"That's completely ridiculous," I said.

"So it comes down to mathematics." The mule disregarded my exclamation. "I would lessen the chances of saving a mule by one-half to save a lieutenant worth only one-seventh. A half for a seventh." Francis shook his head. "I just couldn't do it. Not with my interest in furthering the war effort."

I was nonplussed. I raced my mind through all the Army regulations I had learned so laboriously. None of them dealt with the relative values, handling, or discipline of mules. I thought of Circulars, Memoranda, Di-

rectives. No help.

"Suppose I order you to carry me out?" I tried.

"I wouldn't," said the mule.

"Why not?"

"I just wouldn't." Francis was looking me directly in the eye. "Friendly advice, lieutenant."

I rubbed my chin and tried to think. Suddenly an Army maxim flashed through my mind: "Always make a personal reconnaissance." I glanced at the lip of the ravine.

"Wait here," I said. "I'll take a look around."

Francis mumbled something that sounded like "Pull in your ears—" But I was already on my way.

I'd almost reached the top when I felt something hit the back of my right leg. Pain flamed up my back. I pitched over and rolled to the bottom.

"My God," I said. "I'm hit!"

The mule had cocked his head and was looking at me with an expression of thorough disgust. "Where'd it get you?"

"Oh," I moaned. "Oh! In the leg. A piece of shrapnel — My side feels as if it's on fire."

"It isn't," said the mule. "Don't waste time telling me how much it hurts. Go to work."

"I'm wounded," I wailed.

The mule pawed the earth. "I know you're wounded, lieutenant. Put a tourniquet around your thigh."

"With what?"

"With what! With your belt. Didn't they ever teach you any first aid? Or weren't you listening?"

I unfastened my belt and drew it out. Fumbling badly, I worked it round my leg.

"Ouch," I said, clenching my teeth.

"A little lower," directed Francis. "Now pull it tight—Tighter. You've got to close the main artery. See, the blood's stopping."

I leaned back exhausted.

Francis snorted. "This *would* have to happen. As though I weren't in enough trouble. Why don't they keep second lieutenants at home where they won't be in the road?"

"I didn't try to get hit," I said.

"By the tail of my great-aunt Regret who won the Derby!" Francis was growing more furious. "I ought to leave you here for Jap bait."

"Go ahead," I said. "Go ahead and save yourself. I'm done for."

"Quite a romanticist, aren't you, lieutenant? One little nick on the leg and you put your hand over your heart and pull a movie fadeout."

"What do you want me to say?" I demanded. "Go ahead. Take off."

"See here, lieutenant"—the mule was wagging that right ear—"you know perfectly well I can't leave you now. I'm an old-timer. I know the score. *Esprit de corps*. One for all and all for one. What the hell, after a while it gets you. Like drink. But there ought to be a limit somewhere. This is damned near it."

"What are you going to do?"

"What is there to do?" said the mule with a shrug. "Hoist you up on my back and take you to an aid station." The mule moved over. "Lean against me and pull yourself up."

"No," I said. "I'm done for. Save yourself."

"Stuff and nonsense," said Francis.

"You said a second lieutenant wasn't worth saving."

"A whole one isn't," the mule said. "Wounded, you become a matter of principle."

"Suppose I refuse to go?"

"You'll do no such thing," said Francis, his voice cracking like a bullwhip. "Start moving."

"I won't."

The mule stamped a hoof. "Do you want to have us both killed?"

"I told you to leave."

"And I just told you why I couldn't. Get a wiggle on you, lieutenant. Now!"

I swiveled around. Using my good leg and holding on to the animal's side, I managed to rise. Scrambling and clutching I drew myself onto the mule.

"Can you sling your good leg over my back?" asked Francis.

"It is over."

"Lean forward and put your arms around my neck."

I did as directed.

We began to move.

The ground was shaking beneath me. I closed my eyes. I was bouncing and slipping. The earth seemed far away.

"Are we flying?" I asked.

"Don't ask silly questions," Francis commanded.

I was growing weaker. The last thing I remember saying was, "Francis, I'll have you made a corporal for this."

From a long way off the animal grunted, "We mules certainly go through a hell of a lot to earn a couple of stripes."

Chapter Two

FRANCIS CREATES A PROBLEM



WHEN I REGAINED consciousness, I was in a bed. Clean sheets were over me. My leg, swathed in bandages, throbbed. I was very tired.

I allowed my eyes to wander about. I was in the ward of a hospital.

After a few minutes a doctor came over. Taking my pulse he looked down at me.

"Well, lieutenant, so you're awake now. How are you feeling?"

"I'm all right," I said. "What happened to me?"

"Caught a piece of shrapnel in the thigh. Nothing serious. Have you out of here in no time."

"Where am I?"

"This is the Burma Headquarters Base Hospital."

I thought a minute. In the back of my head, like a dark cloud, something was bothering me.

"How did I get here?" I asked.

The doctor released my wrist. "Ambulance, I suppose. You better not try to talk."

What had happened to me? It came back slowly. The patrol. The darkness. Lost. The Jap barrage moving up the mountainside. Jumping into the ravine.

My brain did a mental backflip. The mule!

Francis!

I could even recall the animal's name.

What a vivid dream. It seemed almost as though it had happened. A mule had talked to me. A mule had told me he could fly.

What strange effects battle has on a man's mind, I thought. I must have imagined the incident. After I was wounded.

But then I remembered, I'd met the mule before I was hit.

I motioned the doctor back to my bed. "Was my belt around my thigh when I was brought in?"

The medico shook his head. "First aid station had you all taped up when you arrived. Now stop worrying, lieu-

tenant. You're one of our minor cases."

Francis, the talking, flying mule—was it something I'd dreamed up in my fevered imagination? Or was there such a creature?

I lay there on my hospital cot in an agony of uncertainty.

The nurse came and gave me some pills. I went to sleep.

During the next week I spent my days going over and over in my mind every incident of my meeting with the mule. I tried to recall each word that had been spoken.

The doctor said my leg was coming along beautifully. I had no pain.

I was in the midst of one of my self-examinations when a captain from Army Intelligence sat down beside my bed.

He wanted to know how I had managed to make my way back from behind the Jap lines.

I decided I'd better tell him the whole story.

"I was carried by an Army mule," I said. "Remarkable thing, captain, the animal could talk."

"Ah— Yes. A mule carried—" Suddenly the captain straightened with such force he almost went over backward.

What did you say the mule could do?"

"Talk."

"That's what I thought you said." The captain jumped up, skittled around to the end of my bed, and examined my hospital records.

"This doesn't indicate there's anything the matter with your mind, lieutenant."

"There isn't," I said.

"But you just told me," said the captain, "that a mule talked to you."

"He did."

"You sure of that?"

"Yes, sir."

The captain lowered his head and looked at me through his eyebrows. Then, without another word, he walked out of the ward.

Ten minutes later two doctors, a major and a captain, approached. The major sat on the foot of my bed. The captain pulled up a chair.

"Well, how are you today, young fellow?" said the major with that heartiness which is the stock in trade of psychologists.

"Fine," I said. "Just fine, sir."

"Young man, I hear you told a captain from G-2 that a mule talked to you. That right?"

"Yes, sir."

"Ha, ha," said the major, "my patients like to have their little jokes."

"I wasn't joking, sir."

The major gave a nervous twitch. He looked at the captain. "Come now, lieutenant, this is no time for leg-pulling."

"No, sir," I said.

"Mules can't talk."

"One talked to me, sir."

"You mean to say, lieutenant, a regular mule talked to you, I mean, the way I'm speaking to you now?"

"That's right, sir."

The major closed his eyes. He shook his head at the captain.

An hour later I was moved to the neuropsychiatric ward.

There was a nurse in charge. Her name was Valorie Humpert. She had buck teeth. And she enjoyed the conviction that the good Lord had created mental disturbances as a personal favor to her. She was extremely grateful.

"I hear, lieutenant," she said the following morning, pausing beside my bed, "you know a mule who can talk."

"That's right," I said.

Miss Humpert gave me a smile which revealed the underside of each one of her pearly upper teeth. "I think that's cute," she said.

I groaned.

Miss Humpert came over and sat on the edge of my bed. "I just adore unusual cases," she said. "An officer who met a mule who can talk. How delicious." The young lady pushed forward her lips, then stuck out her tongue and licked them.

I almost asked her to do it again.

"Could the animal do anything else unusual?" she asked.

"The mule could fly."

"Fly! Why, how wonderful. Did you see it fly, lieutenant?"

"No," I said.

"Well, then how do you know?"

"The mule told me."

"Of course," said Miss Humpert, giving another free dental demonstration. "How too utterly stupid of me. I think mental cases are fascinating. Simply fascinating."

They put me on a milk diet.

At the end of three weeks I had gained eleven pounds, felt like a pre-war butterball, hated cows, was dubious of my sanity, and had decided I'd better keep mum about Francis.

My leg was completely healed.

The major and the captain came to see me. Miss Humpert hovered in the background.

"How are you feeling now?" the major asked.

"Fine," I said. "But I'd like to take some exercise."

"I can understand that, young man. You've gained weight while you were with us."

"I've been on a milk diet," I said.

"Certainly agreed with you," the major nodded. "Remarkable the way the Army's able to put weight on a man." He turned to the captain. "This is going to look beautiful on our chart. Beautiful."

The captain drew an ascending curve with his forefinger. He appeared delighted.

"And now, lieutenant," said the major with a sweeping gesture, "suppose you tell us about the mule who could fly and talk."

I was thoroughly tired of the hospital.

"I must have been shell-shocked," I said.

Miss Humpert's lower jaw fell.

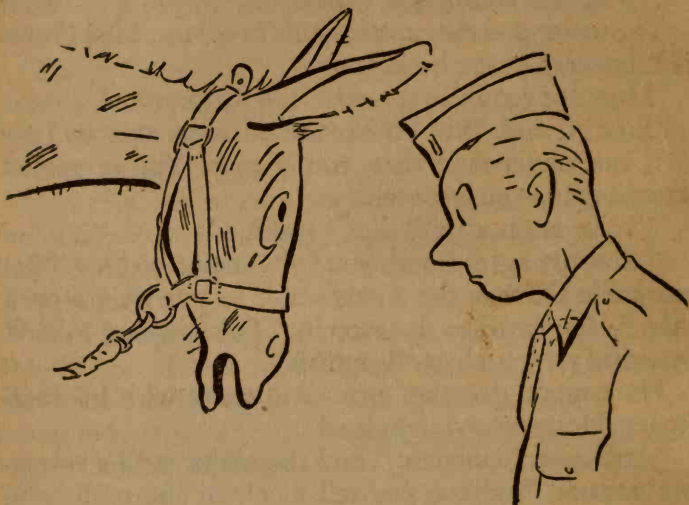
"No, no," said the major. "We call it 'fatigued.' You're thinking of the last war, lieutenant."

"I must have been 'fatigued,'" I agreed.

That afternoon they released me from the hospital.

Chapter Three

FRANCIS CONSIDERS OCS



I REPORTED BACK to my unit.

The CO looked worried when I entered his office. He kept glancing at me out of the corners of his eyes. He said he'd arranged for me to take a ten-day leave.

I thanked him and went to my quarters, lay down on my bunk, and looked at the ceiling.

Was I crazy?

If there was a mule who could talk, I wasn't.

If there was no such mule, I was.

I must find Francis.

Immediately after breakfast next morning I walked over to the motor pool. It took me half an hour to persuade the sergeant-in-charge that I really needed a jeep.

I drove to the Administration Building and talked a corporal into showing me a list of the mule units in the area. There were nine detachments, all within half a dozen miles of Headquarters.

At my first stop I saw I was in for trouble. Obviously, the mule units weren't used to visitors. There were odors. The first sergeant asked me what I wanted. I said I'd come just to look at the mules.

The sergeant sent for the commanding officer, a captain. I saluted. The captain took me aside and discreetly asked what I wanted. I repeated I had come to look at the mules. The captain asked why. I said I had a personal reason. The captain shrugged his shoulders, spat out some tobacco juice, and told me to make myself at home. I didn't like the way he said it.

I started down the first row. And before I'd gone far I knew I'd be able to spot Francis without any trouble. These mules were husky, healthy-looking animals.

Francis wasn't among them. As I was leaving, the captain came out of his tent and asked if I'd found what I was looking for. I said I hadn't. The captain looked insulted. It was all most embarrassing.

The mules in the second unit I visited were fine-looking creatures. The CO had a handlebar mustache. He kept wetting it with his tongue, then twirling the ends.

I felt sure the third outfit would bring me luck. It didn't. More hearty animals.

My leg was beginning to ache. I would never have

stopped at the fourth unit if it hadn't been on the route I must take back to camp.

Over in a field by itself, tethered to a banyan tree, was one lone mule.

I went all taut.

I half ran toward the animal.

The mule was a wreck. His head hung apathetically. His back sagged sadly. His hide was encrusted with grime.

"Francis," I said.

Not a muscle of the animal quivered. The tail continued its listless swishing.

"Francis, it's I, the lieutenant."

The mule looked straight ahead, his brown eyes languid.

"Don't you remember me?" I said. "I'm the second lieutenant whose life you saved."

The mule shivered slightly.

"Francis. Francis, speak to me." My voice rose.

"Sh."

"Who said that?" I swung round.

"Keep quiet," came a whisper.

Thank Heaven! I was not crazy! I was not crazy at all! There really was a mule who could talk.

"Francis"—all the wind went out of me—"Francis, it is you!"

"Of course it's I. And for the love of mud, keep your voice down."

"But I'm so glad to see you." I was hopping about in my excitement."

"Sh," the mule hissed. "Do you want to ruin me?"

"What's the matter?"

"I'm in trouble," whispered the mule. "Plenty trouble. And if I'm caught talking to you I'll be in worse trouble."

"Maybe I can help." I was full of compassion. "After all, I'm an officer."

"We won't go into that all over again," said Francis. "Besides, you wouldn't understand."

I disregarded the rudeness. "What seems to be the matter?"

"I'm almost sick from worry," the mule said.

"About what?"

"I don't think you can help."

"Tell me your problem," I said. "And we'll see."

"I can trust you?"

"Of course."

The mule pawed the earth hesitantly. "Just between us."

"Absolutely."

Francis lowered his head. "They want me to go to OCS."

"They what?" My voice must have risen eight octaves.

"Keep it quiet, lieutenant. Keep it quiet!" Francis was wiggling that right ear with annoyance.

"What did you say they wanted?" I asked, weakly.

"I said they want to send me to Officer Candidate School."

My brain was spinning. I was without an answer. I groped for words.

"You— OCS— They want to—"

"That's right," Francis said.

"But—but how did it happen?"

"They suspect I can talk," the mule said.

"Suspect you can talk!" I stammered. "You mean to

say they don't know?"

"Of course they don't know." Francis was becoming more annoyed and the ear was wiggling faster. "But they're watching me. Have me tethered alone here for observation. If they ever find out, off I go."

"But Francis," I said, "OCS is your great opportunity."

The mule's brown eyes grew smaller. "I was afraid you'd take it like that."

"But—but don't you want to go to OCS?"

"Want to go!" the mule stormed. "Want to go! Of course and most certainly I don't want to go!"

"Don't you want to be an officer?" I asked.

"A shavetail," corrected Francis.

With what I hoped was a certain amount of dignity I said, "A second lieutenant is an officer."

Francis looked me over slowly, starting with my feet and working up. His expression was definitely unpleasant. I felt myself slipping. But I kept trying.

"You'd be a gentleman by Act of Congress," I ventured.

Francis looked me full in the face, then let his eyes wander downward to my polished shoes. "Apparently," the mule said, "you are more impressed by the power of our law-making body than I."

"The Republicans have a majority in the House," I said.

Francis snorted. "I suppose I'd have to become a reactionary, too."

"Your politics are your own affair."

"How nice," said Francis. "And I suppose my friends would be of my own choosing, too?"

"That's right," I said. "With certain reservations, of

course."

"It's the reservations that worry me," said Francis. "Friends are important. I know who I'd have to associate with if I were commissioned. The prospect doesn't appeal."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I mean I'd be giving up more than I'd get."

"Then, there's another consideration, Francis."

"What's that?"

"Personal freedom."

"Explain, please," said the mule.

"You'd have more time of your own as a second lieutenant," I said.

"And what would I do with more time?"

"Anything you wanted."

"Except," said Francis, "associate with the real mules in this outfit."

"You could associate with the second lieutenants," I suggested.

"Could?" snorted Francis. "Could! You mean I'd have to or live alone."

"That's another thing," I said. "You'd have better living-quarters as an officer."

"A stall all to myself," said Francis. "With stalls on both sides full of second lieutenants."

"Your oats would be served in a private bucket," I suggested.

"How ducky," said Francis. "I'd probably get myself a case of tin poisoning."

"You could go to staff meetings," I tried.

"I sleep well now," Francis said.

"Doesn't the money appeal to you?" I ventured.

The mule's hide was darkened by a reddish blush. "I suppose it's superfluous for me to point out I'm single. In this show I'm on my own. I have more money than I need."

I hesitated. "Francis," I said, "underneath I think you are essentially patriotic."

"As the next mule," agreed Francis, "I do my bit."

"But you complain a lot."

"One of our rare privileges," nodded the mule.

"You complain particularly about junior officers."

"With reason," said Francis.

"You don't think they know the score."

"I don't."

"But you know the score."

"I ought to," said Francis, "after being in this mule's army for seven years."

"And yet when they offer you an opportunity to set an example for the junior officers, what do you do?"

Francis looked perplexed. He pawed the earth with his right foot, then his left. He switched his tail with a contemplative motion.

"You've got something there, lieutenant," the mule said. "You've certainly got something there."

"You see what I mean?" I said.

"Of course I see what you mean." Francis's head bobbed reflectively. "What I could show some of these youngsters!"

"You have an obligation." I followed up fast. "Your ability, your vast experience, they aren't being put to their full use."

"I've thought of that," Francis nodded.

"It's all so simple," I said. "Seventeen weeks of OCS—"

Francis shivered. "Seventeen weeks to be a second lieutenant."

"But that's just the first step," I said. "You can earn promotions."

"No." Francis shook his head. "No, you are wrong there. In this Army I don't believe a mule can go any higher than second lieutenant."

"Why not?" I blurted out.

"Just observation." Francis looked at me intently. "Just observation."

I felt myself slipping. "But what about your obligation, your patriotism?"

"No one can say I'm not doing my share," Francis said. "And I've managed to keep my self-respect."

"So have I," I said.

The mule shrugged. "I compliment you, lieutenant. Undoubtedly it has been difficult."

"Well, if you've made up your mind, you've made up your mind," I said.

"I have," Francis nodded. "And it wasn't too difficult."

"I still think you're making a mistake."

"I'm sure you do," said Francis. "But that's because you're so young. Wet between the withers, we mules call it."

"I'd like to help you," I said.

"I feel the same way about you." Francis was looking me full in the face.

"Well, good-by," I said.

"Just one question," said Francis.

I paused. "Yes?"

"What's the backbone of the Army?"

"The foot soldier," I said.

"And what's the lowest thing in the Army?"

"A second lieutenant." It slipped out before I could catch myself.

"And you still don't understand." Francis waved his rear with a helpless gesture. "I'll be seeing you, lieutenant. I'll be seeing you."

Chapter Four

FRANCIS COMMENTS ON MY ASSIGNMENT TO G-2



IT CAME AS a complete surprise.

The colonel had called a meeting of all officers in the section. He said there was an opening in G-2, Military Intelligence. He pointed out that it offered a tremendous opportunity for men with proper qualifications.

The colonel spent twenty minutes listing the requirements. Then he asked if any officers were interested.

Twelve signified they were. I was not among them.

Later that day my captain had a talk with me. He reviewed my background, shaking his head sadly as he read each item from my 66-1 Officer Classification card. He agreed that I was totally unfitted by training, inclination, ability, and appearance to serve in G-2.

I dismissed the matter from my mind and went back to work.

That had all happened two months ago.

Now orders had arrived. I was the officer picked from our section for assignment to Military Intelligence.

To say that I was flabbergasted would be gross understatement.

As soon as I could, I borrowed a jeep and headed for the banyan tree.

Francis was looking out over the Burma hills, a sad expression in his eyes.

"Hello, lieutenant. What brings you here in such a high state of excitement?"

"How do you know I'm excited?" I asked.

"Elementary, my dear Watson," said the mule. "Your tie is hanging out. Your breast pockets are unbuttoned. You have a wild gleam in your eyes. And your cap is on backward."

I shuffled around, putting myself in order.

"I have a reason to be excited," I said. "The Army's just made a terrible mistake. A ghastly mistake."

"You don't say so?" said the mule.

"I've been assigned to G-2," I blurted out.

The mule nodded his head. "Quite in order, lieutenant."

ant. Quite in order."

"But you don't understand," I said.

"No?"

"Look, Francis. There are ninety-seven officers in my section. Twelve of them applied for this opening in G-2."

"Yes?" said the mule.

"They were all qualified for intelligence work," I went on. "One of them has seventeen years' experience as a detective on the New York Police Force. One speaks nine languages, including Burmese. One is a fingerprint expert. One spent eleven years here as a geologist."

"And you?" asked Francis.

"Me? They couldn't pick a worse man. I've never done anything remotely connected with intelligence work. The only time I was ever in a police station was once when I was given a parking ticket. I never trailed a man. I can't read a map. I never studied aerial photographs. I don't speak anything except English. I never even learned about Burma in geography class."

"I see," said the mule, reflectively swishing a fly with his tail.

"You don't seem a bit upset," I said.

"Most certainly not." The mule looked at me.

"But don't you think it's terrible?"

"Terrible?" said the mule. "Of course it's not terrible. It's Standard Operating Procedure. SOP, lieutenant, SOP."

"I don't get it," I said.

The mule shook his head. "You're very young in the Army, lieutenant."

"But there were a dozen highly qualified men, all of them wanting the job."

"Of course there were," said the mule.

"And the Army picks me, who has no qualifications whatsoever. I'm the worst possible man for the job."

"Unquestionably," said the mule. "Unquestionably."

"Why was I chosen?" I demanded.

Across Francis's visage swept an expression of profound wisdom. "Because, lieutenant, that's the way we Americans fight wars."

"But why, Francis?"

"I'll let you in on a little secret about the Army, lieutenant. I don't know who commands G-2 at the moment, but undoubtedly he doesn't know too much about the job."

"Why 'undoubtedly'?" I asked.

"SOP," said the mule. "SOP. Now this colonel, or whatever he is, has a tough job on his hands. He's feeling his way around in the dark, not knowing quite where he's been and completely unsure where he's going. But he's supposed to be a leader. You follow me?"

"I think so," I said.

"Now suppose this colonel brings in an expert, a fellow who really knows how to run a show like that, what'll happen? Why, he'll make the colonel look silly. He'll show up the Old Man, confuse him."

I must have looked shocked.

"But not you, lieutenant. You won't show up anybody. You won't confuse anybody. You won't bother anybody. You'll be so mixed up the colonel can take you by the hand and lead you, even though he hasn't the vaguest idea where he's going."

I sighed. "You don't think much of the Army, do you, Francis?"

The mule stiffened. "I most certainly do. It's the greatest institution on the face of the earth."

"But you said it was confused."

"Confused!" The mule bobbed his head for emphasis. "Why, lieutenant, the Army is the most balled-up, helter-skelter, now-you-see-it-now-you-don't conglomeration of confusion ever conceived under the sun. That's its charm. Nobody's ever been able to figure what makes it work."

I realized that any further talk with Francis was useless.

"I guess I better be getting back to camp," I said.

I'd gone halfway to my jeep when Francis called, "Lieutenant, when you arrive at your new job, look dumb."

"I don't follow you." I looked around.

"Why," said Francis, "if later you show even a glimmer of intelligence, the improvement will be attributed to the senior officer."

I was talking to myself all the way to camp.

Chapter Five

FRANCIS AND THE CROOKED SKIRT



IN THE ARMY events can occur with startling rapidity.

I became an intelligence officer.

And Maureen Van Gelder arrived at Headquarters.

In the jungles of Burma the only thing rarer than an iced mint julep is a white woman.

Maureen Van Gelder was more than this. She was beautiful. She was smack-dab, hit-you-in-the-pit-of-the-stomach, take-your-breath-away beautiful.

On the Starlight Roof overlooking New York this young lady would have created a sensation. At Burma Headquarters she was more disturbing than the weather.

Pants took on a press, hair was slicked, shirt sleeves were rolled down, napkins appeared at the mess table, and even the scrubby lawn in front of Headquarters was trimmed.

Then the lady fell in love with me.

Me, a second lieutenant!

For such a thing to happen to any man would be extraordinary. For it to happen to a second lieutenant in Burma was more sensational than the bombing of Pearl Harbor.

Maureen said I had qualities of sedate wisdom and mature understanding which appealed to her. It was easy for me to perceive that she was an intelligent girl as well as a beautiful one.

Every moment when I was not occupied with my new assignment in G-2 I spent with Maureen. I was a happy man. My feet seldom touched the ground. And Burma seemed to me the finest land in all the world.

But it was not until I had known Maureen for several weeks and felt complete trust in her that I confided my great secret. I told her about Francis.

"My dear, that's ridiculous," said Maureen in a voice which would have melted the barrel of an M-1. "That's utterly and entirely ridiculous."

"But it's true," I said.

"You officers!" said Maureen. "You like to have your

little jokes."

"You must listen to me, Maureen. You know I trust you."

"Of course you do, my pet."

"Do you trust me?"

"Trust you?" The young lady ruffled my hair. "I adore you."

My heart did a double Immelmann and went into a glide. "You have such beautiful eyes," I said.

Maureen moved closer and rested her head on my shoulder. Wisps of blond loveliness tickled my nose.

"Do you like your new work?" she asked.

"I was telling you about Francis," I said.

"I thought it was cute."

"What was cute?"

"Why, your little story, my dearest."

"Maureen," I said, "this isn't a story. Francis is a real mule. And he can talk. I want you to meet him."

"Meet him!"

"Yes."

Maureen sat up. "Are you trying to ask me to go to see a mule?"

"I am."

"And you want me to believe the animal will talk to me?"

"I do."

"My darling," cooed Maureen. "My dream-world darling."

"Please come," I said.

Maureen wrinkled up her adorable brow. She was about to refuse, looking at me in the strangest way. Then suddenly she changed her mind and walked out to the

jeep. She had the attitude of an adult preceding a child into a dark room to prove there is no danger.

We found Francis tethered to the banyan tree.

Maureen looked at the mule and shivered.

"Is this the animal?" she asked.

Francis stiffened.

I sensed a situation in the making. "Yes."

"Oh!" said Maureen.

"What's the matter?"

"Oh!" repeated Maureen, her delicately beautiful face clouding with horror. "Oh! Such a creature! Such an unprepossessing creature!"

Francis was trembling from stem to stern.

"My dear," I hastened, "you mustn't be deceived by appearances."

"Deceived!" Maureen exclaimed. "Deceived! I didn't know a mule could look like this and live. Heavens above!"

Suddenly words poured out of Francis like pressurized steam. "Look like this and live! By the tail of my great-aunt Regret who won the Derby!" The mule spat. "I've seen better-looking dames than you in my time. One hell of a lot better!"

"What was that?" gasped Maureen.

"Lady, that was an indignant mule!"

"The animal—" Maureen seemed to stagger. "The animal—it really can talk!"

"Most assuredly I can talk," Francis was furious.

"What's more, I happen to have four legs instead of two. As I see it, that makes me worth exactly twice as much as you."

"It speaks so clearly!" trilled Maureen.

"And why not?" spat Francis. "I'm no fluffy-headed blonde."

Maureen was struggling between surprise and chagrin.

"Watch your manners, Francis!" I ordered. "Miss Van Gelder is a lady. I insist you treat her with respect."

"Tell her to show some for me," said Francis. "Tell her I have feelings, even if I am in the ranks."

"But this is marvelous," gushed Maureen. "Simply marvelous. It's the most exciting thing that ever happened to me. The most!"

"What's marvelous?" demanded Francis.

"Why, that you, a mule, can talk."

"You can talk," snapped Francis. "And nobody seems excited about it. Though, of course, in your case it may be a dubious asset."

"Francis!" I commanded.

"Isn't it adorable?" sighed Maureen.

Francis snorted. "Have I come halfway round the world to listen to this?"

"Can you fly, too?" asked Maureen.

The mule looked round at me accusingly. "Lieutenant, you talk too much, a great deal too much."

"I have complete confidence in Miss Van Gelder," I said.

"I assume," snapped Francis, "you're trying to tell me you're in love with the lady?"

Maureen blushed. It was a darling of a blush.

I paused, feeling this was hardly the place for a bridge-burning and cataclysmic declaration.

"Well, are you?" asked Francis.

"Don't you think you had better leave that to us?"

I tried.

"Nonsense," said Francis. "I'm asking a simple question. Are you ashamed of your feelings for this skirt—ah—woman?"

"Of course I'm not ashamed of them," I said.

"Then I repeat"—Francis's eyes lit with a point-scoring gleam—"are you in love with this woman?"

"I think it's all just too, too adorable," again cooed Maureen.

"Well—" Francis was pawing the earth impatiently with his right foreleg.

"Yes," I stated. "I most certainly am in love with this woman."

A soft hand reached out and touched mine. My face grew hot. "I am in love!" I said. "I'm head-over-heels, madly, and completely in love!"

Francis lowered his head, switched his tail, shivered slightly. "I was afraid of something like this," the mule said. "I was awfully afraid of something like this."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

Francis turned his brown eyes full upon me. "Lieutenant, I don't know why I worry about you. I can't even understand why I like you." There was a pause. "I suppose in all of us there is a trace of the mother complex."

"This is just the most thrilling thing that ever, ever happened to me," said Maureen. "And it's so intelligent, too."

"Why do you keep referring to me as 'it'?" the mule asked.

"But how should I refer to you?"

"My name is Francis," the mule said. "And whatever my intelligence may be, it is sufficient to see through you,

young lady. Through you like a book."

Maureen whitened. It was most becoming. "Don't you like me?" She spoke in a tiny voice that cut through me like shrapnel.

The mule turned. "You trust her, don't you, lieutenant?"

"Certainly he trusts me." Maureen flickered an eyelash.

"I asked the lieutenant." Francis looked at me.

"Yes," I said. "Yes, I'd trust Maureen with my life."

"And your honor?"

"And my honor," I said.

"I thought so," snorted Francis.

"Just what are you leading up to?" I asked.

"I'm leading up to the point," said the mule, "that Maureen Van Gelder is an Axis agent."

"Is a what?"

"The animal is insane!" said Maureen. "If you and I aren't insane for believing it can talk."

"Be that as it may," said Francis, "the young lady is still an Axis agent."

"Please make it stop saying such frightful things." Maureen gazed up at me, and her eyes were wide with innocence.

"Francis," I said, "I ought to get a club and beat you within an inch of your life."

"But you won't," said Francis.

"Why won't I?" I was furious.

"You won't," said Francis, "because when my CO asked why you were beating me, you'd have to tell him. Then the lady would be investigated."

"You mean you think they'd investigate Maureen just because you said she was a spy?"

"Not at all," said Francis. "They'd investigate her because you said she was a spy. They'd figure you said a mule told you just to be funny. Then, later, they'd investigate you."

Maureen was standing very still, and I noted that her hands were clenched into little balls. She looked up at me again.

"Your mule is so cute," she said. "But I think we have talked to it long enough. Shall we go?"

I glanced at my beautiful vision, then at Francis. "Why do you believe this girl is a spy?" I asked.

"Analysis," Francis said.

"Your mule is just trying to be clever." Maureen's hand was in mine.

"Deductive analysis and good, old-fashioned mule sense," Francis said.

"What do you mean, mule sense?" I asked.

"Something a second lieutenant wouldn't understand," Francis snorted. "But it's extremely reliable."

"You realize, I presume, what a serious charge you are making?"

"Fully," the mule said. "Fully! I only hope you realize it, because if they catch the lady, it's your funeral, not mine."

"Shall we go now?" asked Maureen. "I've really heard all I want."

"Just a minute." I was too wary of the mule to brush aside the accusation. "Francis, have you anything more than just a suspicion?"

"Most certainly," said Francis.

"On what do you base it?"

"Look at the facts," said the mule, "just look at the

facts. One white woman in the entire western end of Burma. Thousands of officers, generals, colonels, majors, all for a dime a dozen. The lady has her choice. And what does she pick? A second lieutenant who has just been transferred to G-2. Does that add up?"

"That's not very complimentary to me, Francis," I said.

"You need a nursemaid," Francis snorted. "But, since the Army hasn't seen fit to provide its junior officers with such supervision, I must do the best I can."

Maureen was standing stiffly, her face the color of chalk. "I think the animal is being fantastic," she said, "simply fantastic! I wish you would take me home, lieutenant."

I glanced at Maureen. She was truly adorable.

"I'm sorry this had to happen, my dear," I said. "I'm terribly upset you had to be subjected to such rubbish."

"Hmm," snorted Francis, "so you don't believe me?"

"No," I said. "I do not."

"I suppose I'll have to prove it to you." Francis shrugged.

"What's the animal talking about?" Maureen sounded nervous.

"I haven't the slightest—"

Suddenly the mule moved sideways. One hoof shot out. It came down squarely on Maureen's dainty toe.

"*Gott im Himmel!*" screamed the lady.

"There, I told you," said the mule, regaining balance.

Maureen was standing on one foot, grasping her other foot with both hands. She was obviously in pain. Never was a junior officer in such a predicament.

"*Mein Fuss, mein Fuss.*"

"'Mein fuss' is right," said Francis.

Maureen tested her shoe on the ground and found she could stand.

"What did you just say?" I asked.

There were hard lines in the girl's face. The beauty had dropped away like a mask.

"Fool," she said, "stupid American fool! Think you tricked me, don't you? Well, it won't do you any good!"

Maureen was facing me. Her right hand darted into her handbag, emerged with a tiny revolver. It was pointed directly at my midriff.

"Don't move," the girl ordered. "It's a shame to waste bullets on such a *Dummkopf*. If you have any prayers to say, be quick about them."

"Here we go again," said Francis almost with a sigh.

"And I'm not being fooled by any more animal tricks," said Maureen.

The revolver rose slightly. The girl steadied her arm.

I saw Francis's rear legs swing in a beautiful arc. They caught the lady flush behind the banyan tree.

The entire G-2 was delighted with the capture of Maureen Van Gelder.

My new colonel sent for me. He was profuse in his praise, suggesting I had devoted so much of my time to the lady in the interest of the service. He requested a detailed account of what had happened.

I told him.

Two hours later I was back in the neuropsychiatric ward. Miss Valorie Humpert was on hand, starched and perfumed with iodoform. She favored me with a smile which would have thrilled a hungry orthodontist.

"Is it the mule?" she asked, holding her breath in expectation.

"It is," I said.

"Fascinating," said Miss Humpert. "Simply fascinating."

Chapter Six

FRANCIS MAKES A PHONE CALL



FOR TWO WEEKS I was bumped and thumped, tested and observed. My cranium was measured, and lights were flashed in my eyes.

Miss Humpert hovered over me as though she expected me to bray at any moment. Her disappointment mounted as the days passed.

When the doctors asked me about Francis, I said I didn't know what they were talking about.

I heard that my new colonel and the chief psychiatrist had a set-to about me which ended in threats of physical violence.

Finally three doctors—a major, a captain, a lieutenant—convened around my bed. They spoke in abstractions.

After five minutes the lieutenant shrugged his shoulders. Ten minutes of talk, the captain shrugged. Twenty minutes more, and the major twitched slightly.

Miss Humpert looked frustrated.

I was dismissed from the neuropsychiatric ward and told to report for duty.

Later I heard that the major had called my colonel and told him exercise might prove beneficial to me.

Whatever occurred, I was greeted at the G-2 office with the happy news I had been chosen to lead a patrol. Reports had come in of a small body of Japanese which had infiltrated into a valley a few miles from Headquarters. It was my assignment to find them, and either wipe them out or report the strength necessary to do the job.

Fear has strange effects on people. Some it stimulates. Others it petrifies.

I was petrified.

I sat in the G-2 office of the Burma Headquarters alternately sweating and shivering. I was suffering from first-command fever.

The maps on my desk danced before my eyes like the multi-colored cubes in a kaleidoscope. Mountains turned slowly into valleys, and streams ran into boundary lines.

I was wondering whether I should discuss my assignment with Francis. I knew I needed the animal's advice. But I was more afraid of Francis's scorn of my confusion

than I was of the task I faced.

Of course I owed a great deal to Francis.

I was wondering what to do when the phone on my desk rang.

Mechanically I picked it up.

"Is this G-2?" asked a voice.

"Yes," I said.

"Oh, it's you," said the voice. "I'm glad you answered the phone, lieutenant."

"Who is this?" I said. "And please speak a little louder."

"This is Francis."

"Who?"

"Francis."

"Francis who?"

"Look, lieutenant, don't be any more dense than is absolutely necessary."

"Bu—bu—but," I stammered, "Francis, you can't talk on a telephone."

"Who says I can't?"

"But— Well— A mule just can't!"

"Maybe you think the telephone is just a fad, too."

"I didn't say that."

"You didn't, lieutenant. You didn't say anything. Now, whether your time's valuable or not, I have neither the time nor the inclination for chitchat. I hear you're leading an expedition."

"You what?"

"I said, I hear you're leading an expedition."

"Bu—bu—but that's impossible." I was stammering again.

"What, for you to lead an expedition, or for me to hear

about it?"

G-2 had taught me to be careful. "I don't believe you heard anything of the sort, Francis. I think you're just guessing."

Over the phone came a snort. "Hmf, I suppose I guessed X246."

The Burma world revolved before my eyes. There, on the map of the territory I was to reconnoiter, was ringed the spot where my platoon was to pitch camp for the night. It was designated as X246.

"Sh." I said. "For Heaven's sake, sh!"

"Stop shushing me, lieutenant."

"But that's top secret." I lowered my voice. "You couldn't know that."

"I just put two and four and six together," the mule said.

"Don't you know this phone may be tapped?"

"Now you're showing signs of basic intelligence, lieutenant. You'd better show a little more and get over here."

"I'm on my way," I said.

Francis was tethered to the same old banyan tree. He raised his mournful eyes as I approached, shivered slightly, and, without waiting for the conversation to begin, pawed the sun-baked earth.

"How did you manage to speak on the telephone?" was my first question.

"The same way I'm speaking now."

"But you're tied to this banyan tree," I pointed out.

"Brilliant, lieutenant. On-the-nose brilliant!" Francis looked at the cloudless sky. "You're something of a

Sherlock Holmes yourself, aren't you?"

"You're in a vile humor today, Francis. How did you get to a telephone?"

"I walked," said the mule, "pitty-pat, pitty-pat. As for the rope—to solve that great mystery—I untied it."

"But where did you find the telephone?"

"I didn't have to find it. I knew where it was."

"Don't be maddening," I said.

"I'm trying to control myself," Francis said. "But, as I pointed out on the telephone, I am not interested in chitchat."

"How did you find out I was going on an expedition?"

"Sensible question."

"Well, how did you?"

"Take it easy, lieutenant, just take it easy. You admit I found out, don't you?"

"Of course I admit it."

"Now, that's progress, lieutenant."

"Francis, will you stop treating me like a child? Remember, I'm an officer."

"Remember it! Lieutenant, it haunts me like a specter."

"How did you find out about X246?" I glanced around apprehensively.

"There's no one around," said Francis. "But if I found out about it, you can be sure that others have. And if others have, then it's better than an even bet that the Japs know of X246."

"But that's terrible," I said.

"Why is it terrible?"

"Don't be silly," I said.

"I'm never silly, lieutenant."

"Look, Francis"—I was trying to be patient, remembering that the animal was in the enlisted personnel classification—"if the Japanese know that we are coming and the location at which we are planning to camp, they can easily ambush us."

"But suppose we know that they are going to ambush us?"

"That just makes it worse," I said.

"Worse?" Francis kicked a tuft of grass. "Lieutenant, I might think you were subsidized by the Axis—if I didn't know you."

I disregarded this insult. "We'll have to call off the expedition."

"Nothing of the sort," said Francis. "The Japs know when we're coming and where we're going to stay. But the beauty of it is, we know they know."

"I don't think it's so beautiful," I said.

"That's because you haven't an aesthetic sense, lieutenant. All we have to do now is out-think the Japs."

"Who's 'we'?"

The mule turned a shade darker. "I hate to blow my own horn, lieutenant. Suppose we just say we're going to work it out together."

"Work what out?" I asked.

"Suppose you had a roving patrol in the valley."

"Yes?"

"And suppose a Jap platoon was coming in to find you. And you knew when and where they were going to pitch camp. What would you do?"

"Why," I said, "I guess I'd camouflage my men around the camp-site in positions to give my automatic weapons crossing fire. I'd wait for the Japs to settle down

for the night. Then I'd wipe them out."

Francis nodded his head. "Fine, lieutenant. Very fine, indeed. OCS, Fort Benning, no more, no less."

"I didn't go to Fort Benning," I said.

"I know you didn't, lieutenant. But one Officer Candidate School is as bad as another. Now, supposing the Japs do just what you've outlined, and there isn't a doubt in the world that they will, what do you propose to do about it?"

"Not walk into the trap," I said.

"That also sounds like OCS," said Francis, "sort of baked on one side and raw in the middle. Perhaps you should have continued your military education at the Command and General Staff School. Then you would have taken up the next lesson, the military double cross."

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

"I'm talking about your expedition," said Francis. "I'm trying to tell you that the information which the Japs possess gives you a supreme opportunity."

"An opportunity for what?"

"An opportunity to carry out your mission successfully," the mule said.

"But what do I do?" I asked.

"Look, lieutenant, do you have confidence in my judgment?"

"Certainly, Francis."

"Now, here's a tough one, lieutenant. Suppose you thought one thing and I thought another, whose judgment would you follow?"

"That's an improper question," I said. "After all, I am an officer."

The mule looked up at the banyan tree reflectively.

"Lieutenant, have you ever gone to Western movies?"

"Occasionally," I said.

"Well, have you ever noticed that there is always a young lieutenant in charge of the soldiers, a young lieutenant all bright and shiny and wet behind the ears? And have you noticed that there is always a rough, tough, uncouth, but two-fisted Indian guide? A decision must be made. The guide says the wagon train should go along the mountain trail. The young lieutenant says it should take the easier course along the valley. There is an argument. The lieutenant pulls his rank. The little wagon train with its single squad of soldiers starts out along the valley. And what happens?"

"Why," I said, "the Indians attack just where the guide said they would and wipe out the entire train."

"Right," said Francis. "They scalp every man, woman, and child, except, of course, the guide. He leaps onto a bronco and escapes amidst a hail of arrows."

"That's certainly the way it happens in the movies," I said.

"Now, lieutenant," Francis was looking at me searchingly, "you wouldn't like to make the same mistake that young, wet-behind-the-ears lieutenant in the movies always makes, would you?"

"Of course I wouldn't."

"You're not wet behind the ears, are you?"

"I—"

"Of course you're not. You're the sort of officer who would follow the advice of the Indian guide?"

"I guess so," I said.

"Then we understand each other?"

"But you're not an Indian guide," I said.

"When it comes to jungle savvy," said Francis, "I'm an Indian guide."

My expedition set out shortly before daybreak. The party consisted of two infantry squads armed with BARs (Browning Automatic Rifles) and rifles, one light-machine-gun squad of six men, a master sergeant named Chillingbacker, myself, and, of course, Francis.

I'd run into considerable difficulty arranging for Francis to come along. First, the colonel had said there was no need for a mule on a two-day expedition, the men could carry their own food and equipment. I managed to talk him out of that.

Then the first sergeant in charge of the mule outfit tried to palm off on me a muscular, well-fed, intelligent-looking mule. I argued. The sergeant was solicitous. He said he was looking out for the best interests of my patrol. I kept pointing to Francis and the sergeant kept shaking his head.

Finally I went over to Francis and untied him. "This is the animal I am taking, sergeant. I'm not interested in discussing the matter."

As I led the mule away, I looked back. The sergeant was scratching his nose and his expression most certainly did not connote respect for the judgment of the officer corps.

Francis was loaded with some two hundred pounds of equipment. I'd argued with Sergeant Chillingbacker about putting so much on the mule. The sergeant was about a foot taller than I, a veritable giant of a man. He condescended a glance at me which said as clearly as words, "Are you going to be a nuisance on this trip?" I

glared back up at him, but I had a feeling I wasn't too effective.

"Sergeant," I said, "you and I and the mule will head the expedition."

"It isn't done that way," said Chillingbacker.

"I'm in charge of this unit, sergeant," I said.

"Yeah"—the sergeant spit with the wind—"yeah, so they tell me."

"What's that?"

"Sir," said the sergeant.

I could see this was going to be quite a trip.

We'd been on the trail about half an hour when I told the sergeant to go back along the column and tell the men to close up. As soon as he left I put my arm over Francis's neck and lowered my head.

"What do we do now?" I asked.

"Just go ahead with the expedition," said Francis.

"Are you crazy?"

"Only on odd Wednesdays," said Francis.

"This is Tuesday," I said.

"Now you're catching on, lieutenant."

"How about the Japs?" I said.

"We'll take care of them when the time comes."

"But where do we camp?"

Francis snorted. "Why, at X246."

"That's absolute insanity!" I said.

"Remember the wet-behind-the-ears lieutenant and the Indian guide," said Francis.

"But it's suicide."

"Sh," said Francis. "Here comes Man Mountain Chillingbacker."

It was a typical Burmese day, hot, humid, and putrid.

The trail was rocky, overgrown, and either running straight up or straight down. All of us were as wet from perspiration as if we'd been swimming. We could hear jungle bugs clapping their wings in joyful expectation of a feast as we approached.

The K rations stuck in our throats at noon. I walked along the line and warned the men to go easy on the drinking water; it had to last.

We saw no sign of Japanese.

It was almost four o'clock, 110 degrees in the Burma shade, when we came to the crest of a small rise. There before us was a depression surrounded by heavily wooded hills. The clearing in the center was some fifty yards in diameter.

Sergeant Chillingbacker unfolded his pocket map. "That's it," he said. "That's X246."

"Take the men down," I said. "Station guards at the four corners of the clearing. Tell them to keep alert."

"The guards ought to be about twenty yards out in the woods," Chillingbacker said.

"I want them at the edge of the clearing," I said.

The sergeant spat.

"Did you hear me?" I said.

"Okay— Okay—"

"What?"

"Sir."

The men lost no time setting up camp. Foxholes were dug.

We ate K rations just before dark. I took my food over to where Francis was tethered and squatted close to the mule's head.

"Now we're in for it," I whispered.

"Lieutenant, you said a mouthful."

"Do you know what you're doing?"

"If I don't, you won't see the sun rise." Francis wiggled an ear.

"I'm worried," I said.

"Good for your libido, lieutenant."

"But what do we do now?"

"Build a fire right in the middle of the clearing."

"A fire! I'll do no such thing!"

"You won't?"

"No, I won't!"

"Then," said the mule, "suppose *you* decide what to do."

"What have you got up your sleeve, Francis?"

"I don't wear sleeves, lieutenant."

"This is no time for humor."

"Then you better build that fire."

I called the sergeant over and gave the order. A detail cut some wood and in a few minutes quite a blaze was going. The men looked at me as though they were sure I was crazy. Agreeing with them, I felt miserable.

Darkness came quickly. I changed the guard and went back to Francis.

"Now, do we just wait for the attack?"

"No," said the mule. "Now we go into action."

"Action, how?"

"First, have all the men take off their jackets and stuff them with grass. Make dummies. Place them in the fox-holes and beside the fire where the men now are. And, for the love of Burma bells, be quiet about it."

I began to understand.

"You're terrific, Francis," I whispered. "I'll be back

in a few minutes."

It took longer than I had thought. Half an hour later I fumbled in the dark, patted Francis's rear, worked my way around to his head.

"All set," I whispered.

"Now, move all your men back," Francis spoke out of the corner of his mouth. "Set up the machine gun on the rise to the left, the two BARs on the rise to the right. String the riflemen along the center. Tell them that if they take a deep breath none of us may live until morning. And I'm no marine. I have no objection to living forever."

I started back.

"Psst," said Francis.

I turned.

"Keep your chin up and your carbine handy."

I must hand it to Chillingbacker. He directed the unit skilfully. The men moved out of the clearing like ghosts. I crept to the left flank, saw that the machine gun was zeroed-in on the clearing. Studying it from only fifty yards away I realized how truly the dummies gave the illusion of a platoon sleeping.

I took up a position behind the center of the line. Francis was beside me. We waited.

Half an hour passed. Another half hour. The palms of my hands were wet from nervousness.

"Everything all right?" I whispered.

"Sh," said the mule.

The attack came with the suddenness of an explosion.

A burst of fire thundered out of the jungle across from us. Screaming at the top of their lungs, the Jap soldiers swarmed toward the clearing, firing as they charged.

As they reached the campfire, I put my fingers to my tongue and whistled.

The machine gun, the BARs, the M-1 rifles opened up.

The enemy, caught between the cross fire of the automatic weapons, silhouetted in the light of the fire for the riflemen, seemed to melt.

Then I cupped my hands and yelled, "Fix bayonets and charge!"

Next morning we counted seventy-two Japanese corpses. We had two wounded prisoners who verified that the enemy unit had consisted of seventy-five men, so only one had escaped.

Our only casualties were a corporal who had sprained his ankle during the charge and a grenade man who cut his fingers trying to untangle a Samurai sword from a dead Jap lieutenant.

We had buried the corpses, and I was sitting beside my foxhole eating my K ration breakfast. Sergeant Chillingbacker came over.

"If the lieutenant is ready, sir," he said, "I'll order the men to pack up and we'll get started."

"Very good, sergeant," I said. "Just one thing. I don't want any equipment loaded on the mule for the trip back. Divide it among the men."

"You mean the mule isn't going to carry anything?"

"That's correct."

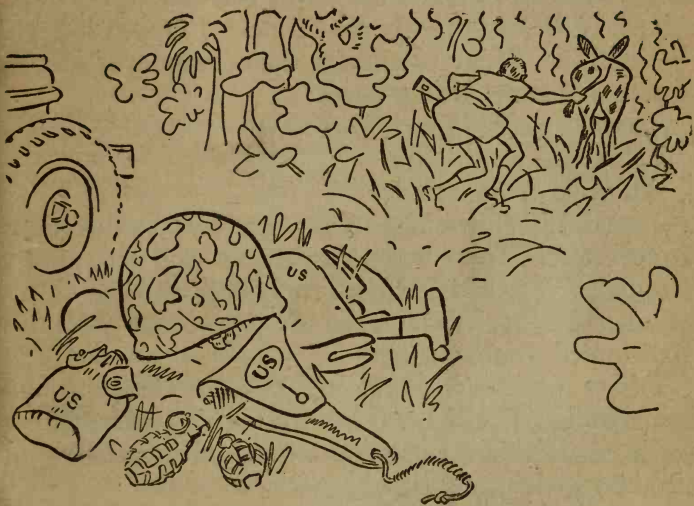
The sergeant looked as though he'd swallowed an unpeeled orange. He drew himself up and clicked his heels.

"Yes, sir!" said Sergeant Chillingbacker.

I felt very much in command.

Chapter Seven

FRANCIS LEADS AN ATTACK



THE COLONEL WAS PLEASED with my leadership of the patrol. He clucked over me for half an hour. He looked at the ceiling and spoke of the new Army policy whereby second lieutenants could be promoted after eighteen months even if there was no Table of Organization vacancy.

Then he looked at me and said that, of course, I knew I'd have to be in the section for three months before any advancement could be recommended.

It was baffling.

For three days nothing happened. I didn't hear from Francis, and my existence was calm. I began to dream of my peaceful Army life before I'd met the animal.

Then it happened.

I was late coming into the office. The colonel glanced at me in a most unpleasant way. I slid behind my desk. Lying on it was a neatly folded note. I flipped it open. Written in a Spencerian hand, the message was simple, direct, and rudely to the point:

Come at once. Signed, *Francis.*

I shivered.

An order from a mule!

I stuck my chin out. I didn't have to take directions from Francis. There was no excuse for such peremptory language. Why should I heed every beck and call of this animal? No one was forcing me to associate with this four-footed troublemaker.

I drew my chair closer to my desk. I shuffled through some papers. I called over a corporal and asked him a series of irrelevant questions. I made a great show of reshuffling the same papers.

It was hopeless.

I put on my cap and went outside. One of the G-2 jeeps was parked before the building.

Fifteen minutes later I turned off the ignition beside the banyan tree where Francis was tethered.

"Here I am, Francis," I said.

"You're late." The animal didn't look around.

"See here"—I felt I had a right to be annoyed at such a reception—"I don't like your attitude. I received your message and came."

"Figured you'd be here ten minutes sooner. Over-sleeping, eh, lieutenant?"

I knew I was lowering the dignity of the officer corps to tolerate such personal remarks. But I was consumed with curiosity.

"How did you manage to send a note?" I asked.

"I have methods," said the mule with a self-satisfied look.

"What do you mean, methods?"

"See here, lieutenant," Francis was pawing the ground, "just try to remember, I'm pre-Pearl Harbor. I know the score and I know how to get things done."

"Can you write, too?" I blurted out.

"Lieutenant," the pawing had ceased and Francis was looking at me, "I didn't send for you either to philosophize or to discuss trivialities. I don't doubt that most of your visits are devoted to small talk. But when I send for you it is important."

"Are you in trouble?" I asked.

"Most certainly I am not in trouble," the mule said. "You second lieutenants have an obsession about people being in trouble. Freudian inferiority, probably. However, I do have some vital information."

"What is it?"

"Take it easy, lieutenant," the mule said. "You have an abruptness of approach which is the height of naïveté."

"I see no reason for unpleasantness."

"I brought you here," said Francis, "because I have come into possession of certain facts which demand immediate action. They are of a most serious nature and I have no intention of blurting them out."

"We are alone," I said, looking around the empty field.

"Lieutenant"—the tail waved pensively—"lieutenant, would you like a citation?"

"A what?" I asked.

"A citation. A citation for unusual and meritorious service."

"Certainly I'd like one."

"Well, if you're worth your weight in Class II supplies, which I gravely doubt, you'll earn one tonight."

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

"Just this," said Francis. "The Japs have established a listening-post less than two thousand yards back in the jungle from our Headquarters."

"The Japs have what?"

"They have established a listening-post."

"That's impossible!" I said.

"Perhaps," said Francis, "but it's back there anyway."

"Two thousand yards from Headquarters?"

"Probably a little less."

"That's ridiculous on the face of it," I said. "No one can hear two thousand yards."

"Lieutenant, you amaze me." Francis shook his head. "You positively amaze me. How I'd enjoy being attacked by a platoon you were leading."

"You're in a vile humor today," I said. "I simply made a logical statement."

"I agree, no one can hear two thousand yards," Francis said. "However, I'd also like to point out that, since Alexander Graham Bell, the microphone has undergone considerable development. Or maybe you haven't heard?"

"They'd need wires for microphones."

"Most certainly."

"And it would be impossible to lay wires into Headquarters," I said.

"Impossible?" Francis raised his eyebrows. "The word is 'difficult,' lieutenant. But be that as it may, the Japs have laid wires."

"How do you know about this?" I asked.

"Why are you always so stupidly skeptical, lieutenant? I have my sources."

"Are you sure?"

"Certainly I'm sure."

"Do you know where the listening-post is?" I asked.

"Certainly."

"Have you seen the listening-post?"

"I have," said Francis.

"When?"

"When I went out to look for it."

"Why didn't you do something about it?" I demanded, with what I hoped was a note of authority in my voice.

"I did," said Francis.

"What did you do?"

"I sent for you," the mule said.

"Me!"

Francis pawed the ground. "Do you know what army you're in, lieutenant?"

"Of course," I said.

"Do you know what section you're in?"

"Certainly," I said, "I'm in G-2."

"Do you know what G-2 is?" asked Francis.

"Intelligence."

"Well, then," said Francis, "don't sound so all-fired surprised when I give you some."

"I won't," I said over my shoulder, starting to climb into the jeep.

"Come back here," said the mule.

"No time," I called. "I must take this information to the proper authorities."

"Come back here!" the mule repeated. There was a sharpness in the voice which made me descend from the jeep.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

Francis looked me over, and I thought I caught an expression of pity in the brown eyes. "Lieutenant, you're not very bright, are you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Did you have much of an education?"

"I went through college," I said.

"Hm." Francis raised his eyebrows. "Any honors?"

"Phi Beta Kappa."

"Well, now," Francis said, "that explains a number of things."

"What are you driving at?" I asked.

"Undoubtedly," said Francis, "you majored in abstractions."

"Why?"

"Because, lieutenant," Francis was pawing the ground again, "there's no other way to explain your complete lack of—because you don't know enough to come in out of the rain—and in Burma, that's bad."

"Did you call me back to discuss my intelligence?" I asked.

"No," said Francis, "I called you back because you

failed to ask me a few simple but pertinent questions."

I was annoyed. I felt I had a right to be and I showed it. "I think I know what I'm doing."

"Perhaps you do," Francis said, "perhaps you do, lieutenant. But you don't know where the Jap listening-post is. And you forgot to ask me."

I confess I blushed. It was inexcusable for an officer, but I couldn't help myself. "Where is the post?" I asked, striving for a note of command in my voice.

"That's better," Francis said. "But even if I could describe the location, I wouldn't."

"What do you mean?"

"Now look, lieutenant." Francis wiggled that right ear. "Try to show just common sense. You want a citation, which is understandable. And you've been in the Army long enough to know you aren't going to receive one for reporting a Jap listening-post."

"But what else can I do?" I asked.

"You can go out and capture the post!"

"Who! Me?" My voice rose up and disappeared.

Francis swayed from side to side, his right foot beating on the ground like a triphammer. "Do you know how to shoot a gun, lieutenant?"

"Certainly I know— But look here—"

"Now *you* look here," said Francis. "Either you're a soldier or it's an optical illusion. I'm not sure which. But I intend to find out. Put it down to mule curiosity. Tonight you and I are going out and capture the three men in that Jap listening-post."

"Three of them!" I said.

"That's right, two enlisted men and a junior lieutenant who probably doesn't know any more about fighting

than you do."

"But why don't we take a company?" I asked, disregarding the remark.

"Because we don't need one." Francis was quizzical. "Don't you believe one American is as good as three Japs?"

"Of course I do," I said. "But—"

"I know," said Francis. "But you didn't think you were going to be the American. Well, you are."

"Suppose the Japs refuse to be captured?" I was floundering and knew it.

"That's a beaut!" Francis said. "That is a beaut! Have you any objections, lieutenant, to shooting Japs?"

"No," I said, "certainly not. But suppose they shoot me?"

"Ah," Francis sniffed, "now you're beginning to show a glimmer of sense. I guess that's why they made you a second lieutenant. 'Command Presence,' they call it. You see, the object is for you to shoot the Japs first. And we don't pay off on a tie."

"I didn't think we did," I huffed.

"Well, don't forget it tonight," said Francis.

I returned to the banyan tree shortly before midnight. I was wearing camouflaged fatigues, a gas mask, a helmet complete with liner; I had my field pack with shelter half, and both pick and shovel; I had eight grenades stored in various pockets and hanging from my ammunition belt, sixty rounds of carbine ammunition, a .38 service revolver, with twenty extra rounds in my pack. My carbine was slung over my shoulder. I felt slightly loaded down and must have clanked a bit as I climbed

out of the jeep.

"Now, where the hell do you think you are going?" Francis greeted me.

"Sh," I whispered.

"Sh, my mule's tail," said Francis. "Getting out of that jeep you sounded like a badly warped xylophone. What have you hidden in that pack?"

"A shelter half," I said.

"Do you expect to shack up with those Japs?"

"Certainly I don't."

"I suppose you are taking the shelter half in case of rain?"

"Well," I said, "you never can—"

"And the pick and shovel?"

"We may have to dig entrenchments."

"Look, lieutenant, if there is any digging to be done it will be for the purpose of burying you. And that can be left to a work detail. Now, about the gas mask?"

"I have been ordered to wear it at all times," I said, taking off my pack and propping it against the tree.

"At OCS, I suppose?" said Francis.

"It's a Theater order."

"Lieutenant, do you really believe that three Japs in a listening-post in the middle of the Burma jungle along in the small hours of the morning are going to launch the first gas attack of the war against you personally?"

"No," I said, beginning to unstrap my gas mask cover. "I suppose the chances are they won't."

"That's a concession," sniffed Francis. "Now, how many hand grenades have you?"

"Eight."

"You realize, lieutenant, we're not attacking a regi-

ment of Hirohito's personal bodyguard. Not even a company. We are going after three, get it, three frightened Japs."

"How do you know they are frightened?"

"Because when you find three Japs alone they're always frightened."

"How many grenades?" I asked.

"Two will be plenty. Now, the revolver?"

"Certainly I'll need that!"

"Why?"

"In case my carbine doesn't function properly."

"Lieutenant, in case your carbine doesn't function properly you won't need anything—except flowers."

"You've stripped me," I said, laying the revolver on top of the pile.

"Just one more thing," said Francis, "your helmet."

"My helmet!"

"That's right, lieutenant, remove it and you're set. Remember, you're going out to shoot these Japs, not entertain them. One branch bumping that tin pot of yours, and the show'd be over."

I was down to shoes, socks, underwear (two pieces), fatigues, a carbine, two grenades, and twenty rounds of ammunition. I felt naked.

The mule took the lead. By the time we reached the edge of the jungle I was perspiring.

"Lieutenant," Francis spoke in a half-whisper, "did you ever go on any night problems in training?"

"Yes," I said, "many times."

"Did they teach you how to watch where you placed your feet and how not to make any noise?"

"Certainly," I said.

"Well, see if you can remember what you learned."

The mule glided into the ink of the jungle. There may have been a trail, I couldn't tell. I grabbed hold of the animal's tail and did the best I could.

"Don't yank," whispered Francis, "I'm sensitive back there."

"I'll try not to," I hissed. "How much farther?"

"We've just started."

"I thought you said it was only two thousand yards?"

"I did. We've gone less than two hundred."

We moved through the jungle in silence. Sweat made my hand slip and I kept renewing my grip on the mule's tail. The animal's rear had an undulating movement which I found highly disquieting, since it caused the tail to twitch constantly in my hand.

Half an hour must have passed before the mule stopped. I slipped forward and Francis put his lips close to my ear. I could just make out the words.

"They're over there in that hollow, about fifty yards straight ahead."

"Where?" I whispered.

"There." The mule pointed with one ear. It was quite a trick.

I followed the direction. There was a small clearing, and I was just able to make out the vague silhouettes of three crouching figures.

"What do we do now?" I whispered.

Francis hardly breathed, but I could make out the words. "I'll circle . . . the far side. Take me twenty minutes. Draw a bead on the Jap at the right. When you hear a whistle, fire. Then the fellow on the left. Both shots within a tenth of a second, you understand?"

"Yes," I whispered. "But how about the one in the middle?"

"He's the lieutenant."

"But what about him?"

"We want to capture him alive. He can speak English."

"How'll we capture him?"

"Surround him. Keep your gun ready. Follow my lead."

The mule slipped off like a silent wind. I stood there in the dripping jungle black. Sweat ran down my back and slapped between my knees. I kept tightening and loosening the grip on my carbine. A dozen times I sighted the middle of the Jap on the right. I was leaning against the trunk of a tree, steadying my aim, when I heard a soft whistle.

I fired. Swung my carbine half an inch to the left, fired again.

Two Jap figures slumped forward. Four shots rang out and bullets tore through the heavy foliage to the left of me.

The flashes of the Jap's gun were like balls of flame in the dark.

I found I was on my knees, clutching my gun.

A voice rang out. "Throw up your hands. You're surrounded." It was Francis.

"Close in with your men, lieutenant," called the mule.

"Com—com—coming." My mouth was full of cotton.

"Get those hands higher," ordered Francis. "No funny stuff."

"Really, you chappies, I surrender," called a frightened voice.

"How about the two soldiers?" I could hear Francis pushing forward through the underbrush.

"Both dead," said the Jap. "Fine shooting, indeed, veddy fine."

"Thank you," I said. I had moved up and was within twenty yards of the listening-post. The Jap's arms stuck up.

"Save your bows for later, Nip," said Francis. "One false move and we'll drill you."

"No need to worry, old fellow," said the Jap, "I know when the jolly old game is up."

"Bit of an English accent," said Francis. "Oxford, I presume."

"Certainly not," the Jap said. "Cambridge."

"So sorry," said Francis.

To say the colonel was pleased with my exploit would be gross understatement. My Jap lieutenant was most talkative, and the Old Man fairly drooled over me with flattery.

He asked for a detailed account of what had happened. I smiled.

The colonel said it reminded him of an experience he'd had in the last war. The colonel talked and talked. You could tell he was enjoying it.

I listened.

I heard later the colonel said I'd handled myself admirably during the interview.

Chapter Eight

FRANCIS AND THE GOLDEN BREW



A WEEK had passed.

It was hot. In Burma it is always hot, but on this particular day it was stifling. I sat at my desk and wiped the sweat from my face.

I felt bedraggled.

The colonel kept watching me. Finally he struggled

up from behind his desk and waddled over. He said I looked a little seedy. In fact, he said I looked seedy as a Jap prisoner who had been slightly carved by a bayonet and left in the monsoon for a week.

The colonel pointed out that the general was having a corps dinner that evening, that I was expected to speak about my adventure in capturing the Jap listening-post. The colonel asked if I intended to disgrace G-2 by any silly stories about my hallucination.

I asked if the colonel, sir, was referring to the mule who could talk and fly. The colonel said he was. I said I wouldn't disgrace G-2.

The colonel stared at me for half a minute, looked out the window, then suggested I take the afternoon off. I said, "Yes, sir," and left.

I drove my jeep over to the commissary. Sergeant Cosgrove was at lunch and Kim, the Chinese corporal, was in charge. I had once done him a favor.

I told Kim I was feeling off my feed. Kim closed both eyes together, then opened them quickly. This was supposed to be a wink. He gave me double the weekly liquor ration, two cases of beer, two fifths of rye.

Kim helped me load the cases into the jeep. I patted him on the back. I have always felt that under proper circumstances a certain familiarity between officers and enlisted personnel is allowable.

I had intended to go directly to my quarters and try to get a little sleep. But then I thought a short drive might be cooling.

It was. I drove for half an hour, winding along a cliff. I came to a section where the road swung back into the hills. There was a patch of banyan trees stretching to the

cliff.

I pulled the jeep off the road, drove down a half-trail almost to its end, turned off the ignition, and leaned back.

I closed my eyes and rubbed my forehead, trying to brush away the dullness. I felt low, very low.

"I wish I was home," I spoke aloud.

"Quite an original thought," said a well-modulated voice.

I started up.

Francis was standing beside the jeep, his large, brown eyes gazing at me.

"Francis!" I said.

"It is I," said the mule.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"I might ask the same of you," Francis said.

"Were you following me?"

Francis twitched an ear. "I might have been, lieutenant, I might have been."

"What is it you want?" I asked.

The mule disregarded my question. "Do you, by any chance, have beer in those cases?"

"I do," I said.

"And are those whisky bottles the real stuff?"

"They are."

"Hmf," said Francis. "Chiseling double rations."

"Watch yourself," I ordered.

"Keep your shirt on, lieutenant." The mule was eyeing the two cases. "Is that a bucket I see in the back of the jeep?"

"It is," I said.

"You don't say so!" Francis wet his lips. "You don't

say so!"

"What are you driving at?" I asked.

"Don't be so dense, lieutenant," Francis said. "Show a little hospitality."

"Do you mean to tell me you drink?" I had climbed out of the jeep.

"After seven years in this mule's Army!" Francis was looking at me out of the corners of his eyes. "What a question. What a question! Come on, lieutenant."

Almost without realizing what I was doing, I leaned over and opened the top case of beer.

"Put the bucket on the ground," Francis directed.

"What for?" I asked, moving the bucket to where the mule indicated.

"So I can drink out of it," said Francis. "Imbibing from the bottle always seems a bit crude, don't you think?"

"You're quite particular."

"As I've said before, lieutenant, being at war is no excuse for lowering our standards. All right, start pouring."

I opened a bottle of beer. The last drop gurgled out as I shook it.

"Quite a touch you have, lieutenant," Francis said. "Don't stop now."

"What do you mean," I said, "don't stop?"

"That's hardly enough to wet my whistle," the mule said.

I opened a second bottle and poured it in.

"Looks beautiful," said Francis, "just beautiful. Go ahead. Not very nice to make me urge you."

Reluctantly I poured three more bottles into the bucket, Francis watching my every move. Foam was

coming close to the top.

"How's that?" I asked.

"Lovely," said Francis, "just lovely. Now your drink, lieutenant."

"My drink?" I said.

"Aren't you joining me?" asked the mule.

"Joining you! It is definitely improper for an officer to mingle with enlisted personnel in such intimacies as drinking."

"Come on down off your high horse, lieutenant," Francis said. "You look like you need a drink."

I opened a bottle.

"Mud in your eye," said Francis. The mule took a long drink. I sipped my bottle. It tasted fine.

"Very good," I said, feeling extremely uncomfortable.

Francis raised his eyes to the sky, swept them over the clouds. "There's something missing, lieutenant," the mule said, "something definitely missing."

"What's missing?" I asked. I was on my second bottle.

"You know, lieutenant," the mule was looking at the bucket, "that beer would taste better if we used it for a chaser."

"Chaser?"

"To chase our whisky."

"Whisky!" I said. "With a beer chaser! I never heard of such a thing."

"And you a commissioned officer!" clicked Francis. "Beer and whisky is one of the oldest drinks in the Army. We call it a 'boilermaker.'"

"What does it do to you?"

"You'll see," Francis said.

I opened the first bottle of rye, poured a little into the

bucket.

"You have a very light touch," said Francis, watching the angle of the bottle.

I poured in a quarter of the contents.

"A dash more will hold it," said the mule.

I complied.

Francis wiped his lips with his tongue. His brown eyes were quite wide and he blinked them rapidly. "Fit for a king," the mule said. "Oh, even the CG himself. Now a slug in your glass, lieutenant."

I poured four fingers into my beer.

Francis lowered his head. We drank.

"Now the chaser," said Francis.

I poured out more beer.

Suddenly it came to me how fond I was of the animal.

"You're a nice creature, Francis," I said.

"I like you too," the mule nodded. "In fact, I like you tremendously."

"You know what we need?" I said.

"No, lieutenant, what do we need?"

"Another 'boilermaker.'"

"You're sharp today, lieutenant," Francis said. "Right on the old ball. Yes, sir. On the nose."

I poured most of the first bottle of whisky into the bucket.

"How's that?"

"A man of judgment," nodded the mule.

I emptied the bottle into my glass. "Here's to you." I lifted my glass.

"Likewise." Francis ducked into the bucket.

We had a beer chaser.

"I think I'll feel better sitting," I said, wiping my

mouth with the back of my hand.

"Even in Burma that's allowed," the mule approved. I backed up to the jeep and sat. Somehow I missed. I came down hard.

"Did you move that veh—vehic—(hic)—jeep?" I demanded.

"Certainly not," Francis said. "I was—(hic)—five feet away."

"You did, too."

"How can you make such accusations, lieutenant? You know I love you." Sorrow clouded the mule's eyes.

I felt ashamed of myself. "I'm sorry, Francis. I'm terribly, terribly sorry. I shouldn't have suggested such a thing. I feel awful about it. Will you forgive me, ol' pal?"

There were tears in the mule's eyes. "Forgive you, lieutenant? Forgive you! Why, we're buddies. You and I together, one for all and all for one—(burp)—Forgive you! I love you."

"Friendship's a wonderful thing," I said.

"Makes the world go round," agreed Francis.

"What'll we drink to?"

"To the war," said Francis.

"What war?"

"The war—(hic)—we're fighting," said the mule.

"Oh, that war. Shure— Shhhure, fine war. Bottoms up."

I opened more bottles.

"Looootenant," said Francis, "I think you are—(hic)—drunk."

"Don't be redi—redic— Don't be—(burp)—silly."

"I—(hic)—mean it."

"No," I said, "I'm perfectly sober. Sober as a—(burp)"

—a judge advocate.”

“Try standing up.”

“Oh, no, you don’t,” I said.

“Why not?” asked the mule.

“I just don’t—(hic)—feel like standing up. But that doesn’t mean I’m drunk.”

“ ’Course it doesn’t, looey. ’Course it doesn’t. You’re all—(burp)—right. Who’s all right? Looey’s all right. An’ don’t try to argue with me. I don’t like to be argued with, see?”

“I wasn’t arguing,” I said.

“Well, don’t!” warned the mule.

I was feeling sleepy. I was feeling terribly sleepy.

“I think,” I said, “I’ll take a little—(hic)—snooze.”

“Don’t you dare,” said Francis. “I’d be all alone.”

“Goodnight—(hic)—Franie Wanie.”

I struggled back to consciousness. Reluctantly I opened one eye. A blockbuster exploded in my head. Flame shooters were playing games in front of me.

“Where am I?” I groaned.

“Right where you were three hours ago,” a voice said.

“Who’s that?”

“Francis. Who did you think it was?”

I sat up and opened my eyes. The earth was spinning. Fog horns were challenging surf bells between my ears.

“Where are you, Francis?”

“Right here.”

“I can’t see you.”

“You’re leaning against me,” said the mule. “Look around.”

“What time is it?” I asked.

"Almost five o'clock."

"Five o'clock! I'm—(hic)—ruined," I said. "I'm completely and unutterably ruined!"

"You're drunk," Francis said. "But I wouldn't say you were ruined."

"I am," I said. I began to cry. Tears splashed down my cheeks. I licked them with my tongue. "My poor family, disgraced," I wept on. "My career blighted."

"A second lieutenant's career blighted?" said Francis. "Impossible!"

"Nobody cares about me," I wailed.

"Suppose you tell me what's the matter," said the mule.

"I have to make a speech tonight."

"A speech?" said Francis.

"That's—(burp)—right."

"Lieutenant, you're not ruined. You're saved."

"But you don't understand," I wept. "I'm supposed to speak at the general's—(hic)—corps dinner."

"The CG himself?"

"That's right."

"Hmf," said Francis. "We'd better do something about that. Can you drive the jeep?"

"Drive the—(hic)—jeep? I can't even see it!"

"Can you stand up?"

"I'll try," I said. I struggled to my feet. Burma was rocking all over the place. I sat down quickly.

"That won't work," said the mule. "I'll have to carry you back to your quarters."

"You're wonderful," I said. "I love you, Francis."

"Calm down, lieutenant. We have to work this thing out."

"I can't leave the jeep here," I said.

"You can if it's broken," the mule started.

"But it isn't broken."

"It will be."

There was a crash followed by the sound of falling metal.

"What happened?" I yelled.

"Nothing," said Francis. "I just kicked the jeep where it would do the most good."

"Are you hurt?"

"Of course not," said the mule. "Now we must throw these bottles away in case anyone comes around."

"That's easy," I said. "I'll throw them." I reached out and grabbed a bottle.

"Ouch!" said the mule.

"What's the matter?"

"That bottle you threw hit me."

"It couldn't have," I said, "I threw it in the other direction."

"Well, it hurt, anyway. Watch where you're throwing. Or better still, aim at me. Then I'll be safe."

I threw bottles all over the place. The woods surrounded us but I seemed to have trouble hitting them. Twice I landed bottles in the jeep. Francis made me fetch them out and throw again.

I did the whole thing crawling and sitting down.

"All right?" I asked.

"It'll have to do," said Francis. "Now, climb on my back."

"Maybe a drink might help me," I suggested.

"Lieutenant," said the mule, "do you remember what I just did to the jeep?"

"Yes."

"Then climb on my back."

I caught hold of the mule's tail and started pulling myself up.

"Not that way!" yelled Francis. "Climb up my side."

"Is this better?" I asked, hoisting myself up the flank and sprawling all over the mule.

"Fine." The animal started off.

"Wait a minute," I called.

"What's the matter now?" asked Francis.

"I fell off. Come on back here. You must be a little—(hic)—drunk yourself."

"Nothing of the sort," said Francis, returning. "I'm just full of—(burp)—confidence. Climb on again, lieutenant. All set?"

"All set."

I felt a tilt of the mule's back and realized Francis was going downhill.

"Where are we?" I asked.

"Keep your eyes shut and hold on," said the mule.

"Look," I pointed out, "we're more than—(hic)—five miles from the post. You'll never get me back in time."

"If we cross the chasm we'll make it," said Francis.

"But that's suicide," I said.

"It will be if you don't keep your eyes closed and hold on."

"Are you going to—(burp)—fly?"

"Don't ask so many questions, lieutenant."

The mule was bouncing unmercifully. I clung on knowing that if I opened my eyes I'd fall.

Suddenly the animal stopped.

"This ought to help solve your problem." Francis bucked.

I felt myself sailing through the air. I screamed and opened my eyes. I saw a flash of clouds.

Then I was under water. I'd been thrown headfirst into the river at the bottom of the chasm. It was cold. It was dirty. I came to the surface and spit out. Then I coughed. Then I spit some more. I was furious.

"You dirty, filthy scum!" I screamed.

"Me, or the stuff you have in your mouth?" the mule asked, standing on the bank looking at me.

"You!" I roared. "Wait till I get my hands—(hic)—on you. I'll pulverize you. I'll—"

"Duck your head under and hold it there," ordered Francis.

"I will like—"

"Duck your head!"

I went under.

"How do you feel now?" asked the mule as I rose to the surface.

"Terrible," I said.

"Climb on my back. We haven't any time to waste." I climbed on.

Facing the room full of senior officers, I had all the confidence of a Nazi out for an afternoon stroll in the Kremlin.

I opened my mouth to speak. A small burp emerged.

Later the colonel said I had not disgraced G-2. But he spoke with no great show of enthusiasm. As an afterthought, he added that it appeared to him I was cut out to be an undercover agent, not a front man.

I've been trying ever since to figure what he meant.

Chapter Nine

FRANCIS AND THE JAP AIR RAID



A FEW DAYS LATER I was standing at the window of the office looking out at the rugged Burma hills. The sun beat down on the lush vegetation with vicious intensity, and I felt that lassitude which comes from working indoors.

The phone on my desk tinkled. I wandered back, slumped into my chair and picked up the receiver.

"Lieutenant," said a voice, "this is Captain Hedrick."

"Who?"

"Captain Hedrick, CO of the Signal Corps Pigeon Detachment."

"Oh, yes," I said. "How are you, captain?"

"What are you trying to get away with, lieutenant?"

"Get away with, sir?"

"That's what I said."

"I don't know what you're talking about, sir."

"I suppose you think you're very funny, lieutenant?"

"Sir, there must be some mistake."

"There's no mistake and you know it. Hasn't anybody ever told you that the pigeons in my outfit are for military purposes, not amusement?"

"Yes, sir—I mean, no, sir—I mean, I don't understand, sir."

"I am not interested in your love life, lieutenant."

"My what, sir?"

"Your love life." The captain's voice rose. "And my pigeons aren't interested either."

"I haven't any love life," I said.

"Now, see here, lieutenant—you're a *second* lieutenant, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, I'm not interested in whether or not you have a love life. But I am interested in seeing that you don't use my pigeons to carry on your affairs."

"But, sir, I don't know what this is all about."

"I'll tell you what it's about." The captain's voice was belligerent. "We send a flight of pigeons out on a routine

training mission. One of them comes back with a note tied to one leg. Very clumsily tied, too."

"But, sir, I don't see how that involves me."

"The note is addressed to you."

"But I don't know anybody who would send me notes by carrier pigeon."

"Ever hear of a person named Fran?"

"Who?"

"Fran. F-r-a-n."

My heart went down like a Zero with three P-40s on its tail.

"Yes, sir," I said.

"Yes, sir, what?"

"Yes, sir, I know who Fran is."

Suddenly, the captain's voice changed. "All right, lieutenant," he said. "I suppose I have been a little abrupt with you. Come on, now just between ourselves, what is she? Blond or brunette?"

"Blond or brunette, who?"

"Come on, lieutenant. Give! Fran?"

"She isn't either."

"A redhead?"

"No, sir."

"Native girl?"

"No, sir."

"White!"

"I'm afraid you don't understand, sir," I said.

The captain's voice was formal again. "Very well, lieutenant. I'll read you the note this time. But if this ever happens again I'll bring charges. You understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"The note reads: 'Miss you. Please terminate intermi-

nable separation. Vital to our well-being. All my love.' Signed, 'Fran.'"

"Did a pigeon bring that?"

"It did. A combat pigeon. And that's not the purpose for which we train combat pigeons, lieutenant."

"Yes, sir."

"Watch your step, young man."

"Yes, sir."

The captain hung up.

I reached for my cap.

Francis was tethered beneath the banyan tree, stamping and switching his tail in his usual bedraggled state.

I stepped out of the jeep.

"Francis, did you send me a note by carrier pigeon?" I asked.

The mule wiggled both ears idly. "Quite novel, lieutenant, don't you think?"

"Do you know you almost got me in a lot of trouble?"

"You look angry," Francis said. "In fact, you look furious."

"I am furious."

"Very becoming, lieutenant."

"How did you manage to catch that carrier pigeon?"

Francis glanced coyly at the clouds. "Do you know what pigeons like to eat?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Sometimes that effete quality of yours, lieutenant, makes me wonder how you ever stayed out of the WAC."

"And why did you have to word the note as though it was a billet-doux?"

"Billet-doux! My, my. Cute, wasn't it?"

"The pigeon detachment CO accused me of using his birds to further an affair."

"Ha," said Francis. "I'll make a man of affairs out of you yet."

"You'll probably have me kicked out of the Army," I said.

"It might be a patriotic gesture." Francis bent an ear reflectively.

"I suppose you didn't send a pigeon just so you could insult me?" I said.

"No," Francis reflected. "No, I didn't. Fact is, I've just come into possession of some information that may blow this Headquarters higher than a kite. And I'm not being funny. Not intentionally, anyway."

"I'm listening," I said.

"Lieutenant, have you ever wondered why the Japanese haven't bombed this installation?"

"I guess they couldn't slip through our fighter and anti-aircraft screens."

"No," said Francis, "they just didn't have airports within range."

"Well, whatever the reason, they haven't tried it."

"But they have airports within range now. They finished building two last week."

"What are you trying to tell me?"

"I'm trying to tell you that unless some drastic action is taken, and quickly, this Headquarters is going to be blown off the map."

"When?"

"Tomorrow at sixteen thirty-five—that's four thirty-five to you—four waves of twenty medium bombers each

will fly out of the sun. They'll be echeloned starting at two thousand feet. The first two will ground strafe and drop fragmentation and incendiary bombs. The second two will come in with demolitions."

"You sound as if you knew what you were talking about," I said.

"I always know what I'm talking about, lieutenant."

"But this is serious."

"I hope to kiss a gray mare, it's serious," said Francis.

"Are you sure of this information?" I asked.

"Positive."

"How did you find out?"

"Lieutenant, you do understand the simpler facts of life, don't you?"

"Certainly."

"Well, then, instead of asking irrelevant questions, suppose you do something."

"I want to know where you secured this information."

"Lieutenant, do you trust me?"

"Of course I trust you, Francis. But I still—"

"Later, lieutenant. You have no time to waste."

My colonel listened quietly while I told him the information Francis had given me. He made hasty notes on a large pad.

"You're sure of this information, lieutenant?"

"Yes, sir."

"You realize how important it is not to go off half-cocked?"

"Yes, sir."

"How did you come into possession of this information?"

I must have blanched.

"I can't tell you, sir," I said.

"You can't *what?*"

"I can't tell you, sir."

"Young man, do you realize who I am?"

"Certainly, sir."

"Who am I?"

"You are the officer in charge of G-2."

The colonel was clenching and unclenching his hands as though he was trying to take a grip on something. I thought it might be himself.

"And do you, by any chance, know what G-2 is?"

"Intelligence, sir."

"Fine, lieutenant! Fine! I'm the colonel in charge of intelligence. You come to me and tell me that Burma Headquarters is going to be blasted by Japanese planes. You give me the number of enemy ships, the time and direction of flight, the whole operational plan. And then, by the Great God Jupiter, you tell me you can't divulge the source of your information!"

Visions of a return trip to the psychopathic ward danced before my eyes.

"Yes, sir," I said.

"Lieutenant, there's a question I'd like to ask you."

"Yes, sir."

"Just who inarnation do you think you're working for?"

"You, sir."

"And you still can't tell me how you came into possession of this information?"

"No, sir."

"Lieutenant, one of us is crazy. And I never felt better

in my life."

"Yes, sir."

"Don't be impertinent, young man."

"No, sir."

"Now, lieutenant, I haven't time to worm your great secret out of you. There's work to be done. I'm going to take a chance the information you've given me is correct. Can't afford not to."

"Yes, sir," I said.

"That'll be all, lieutenant."

"Yes, sir." I did an about-face and started for the door. My hand was on the knob when the colonel spoke again.

"Lieutenant!"

"Yes, sir." I swung around.

The colonel leveled a finger at me. "Lieutenant, do you know the status of a buck private in this man's Army?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, if the information you just gave me isn't right, I'll bust you so low that, by the Great God Jupiter, you'll have to use a telescope to look up to a buck private!"

"Yes, sir."

To say that I spent a sleepless night would be a wild understatement. When I closed my eyes, I kept seeing the gates of Leavenworth. When I tried walking the floor my mind raced in wild circles until I felt dizzy.

The next day was worse. The whole Headquarters was in a turmoil. Slit trenches were being dug, sandbags placed in front of doors, revetments erected. Two regiments of anti-aircraft had been moved in and were excavating gun positions at every suitable spot.

I wandered through this welter of activity in a state of

high mental fever. Each time I saw a gun jockeyed into position by sweating, tugging, swearing men, I muttered, "God help me."

It didn't calm me any when I walked into the office and the colonel rushed through, sleeves rolled up, hair disheveled, eyes red, and paused long enough to say:

"Lieutenant, if you gave us a wrong steer—"

The camp had been isolated. All passes had been canceled. Telephone exchanges were closed. Tactical wires sent code only. Top-secret papers had been moved to bomb-proof dugouts. Breakable objects had been wrapped in cloth and laid on floors. Tape was pasted crisscross over all windows.

I looked at my watch every two minutes. Time seemed to stand still. I tried to work at my desk, gave it up. I took another walk around the camp, gathered too many unpleasant glances. I came back to my desk, counted to a thousand ten times. It took thirty-nine minutes.

It was after four o'clock when I pulled the jeep to a stop beside the banyan tree. Francis was snoozing contentedly. I hopped out and slapped the mule on the flank.

"Wake up," I said. "Wake up."

"I am awake, lieutenant. What's all the excitement? You look as though you'd been ground through a meat chopper and dusted with salt."

"It's after four o'clock," I said. "Four o'clock!"

"Usually is about this time in the afternoon," Francis said. "What of it?"

"Do you realize what you've done to Headquarters?"

The mule sighed. "Well, I hope they didn't go to sleep

on the information I gave them."

"Go to sleep! The camp looks like ten minutes after a typhoon. Guns, trenches, taped windows, passes canceled. The place has gone mad."

"Hmf," said the mule. "May convince some of those chair-borne infantrymen there's a war going on."

"You're sure of the information you gave me, aren't you, Francis?"

"You mean about the Japanese air raid?"

"Of course I mean about the Jap air raid!"

"I suspect it's right," said the mule, rolling his eyes around.

"You what?"

"I said I suspect the information I gave you is right."

"Suspect! *Suspect!*" I meant to yell the words but my voice emerged a squeak.

"Don't get excited, lieutenant. It's much better to have a false alarm than to be caught napping."

My hair was standing straight. "Do you know what they'll do to me if that report is wrong?"

"To tell the truth, lieutenant, I hadn't thought. I suppose they'd be slightly annoyed."

"Annoyed! They'd boil me in oil just as a preliminary."

"Oh, no," said the mule.

"Oh, *no?*" I said. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, we Americans never boil people in oil. Not civilized."

"Where did you get the information about the air raid?"

Francis rolled his eyes again. "A little bird told me."

"*You didn't make it up, did you?*"

"Don't squeak, lieutenant."

"Did you make it up?"

"I might have."

"Heaven help me!" I glanced at my watch. "It's four-thirty."

"Time passes, doesn't it?"

I looked into the setting sun, scanned the masses of cumulus clouds that hung over the western sky. Never had there been a more peaceful Burma afternoon.

"Lieutenant, you look pale."

"I'm scared," I said. "I'm scared right on through and out the other side."

"That the Japs will come or that they won't?" asked Francis.

"That they won't, you fool."

"Calm yourself, lieutenant. Calm yourself."

I was burning up and shivering at the same time. I leaned against the mule and closed my eyes. The gates of Leavenworth loomed larger. In front of them stood an execution squad with its M-1s pointed.

"I thought they stood you in front of a wall," I said, half to myself.

"You thought what?" asked Francis.

"Sh," I said. "Sh, I hear something."

"Hallucinations?"

"Quiet!"

Far in the distance there was a humming, soft as a summer breeze. Then I saw them, a group of dots just above the haze sweeping in from the west.

"They're coming!" I yelled. "Francis, they're coming!"

The mule raised an eyebrow, "Surprised?"

I slapped Francis on the rump. "You old son-of-a-gun! They're coming! Sh. Sh. Quiet."

"What now?" asked Francis.

"Hold it, I hear something."

From the clouds above came a sound like a swarm of angry bees. It grew louder.

"There are planes up in those clouds," I yelled. I was shaking from head to foot.

"Well, what'd you think we'd have up there," asked Francis, "ducks?"

"I can see the second wave of Japs! There's the third! Two thousand feet, coming in from the west. Just the way you said. Man, oh, man, are they coming!"

The four waves of Japanese planes were all visible now. They were echeloned in steps, each succeeding wave about one hundred feet above the next.

"Why doesn't somebody do something?" I screamed. "Stop 'em! Hit 'em! Smash 'em! They'll be on top of us in a minute! Here they come!"

"Hold on to yourself, lieutenant," the mule said. "Just keep your eyes open."

Suddenly, out of a cloud bank I saw a black spot appear. It was shooting straight down with the whine of an enraged hornet. A tenth of a second later another spot appeared, then another. The air was filled with them.

"Our planes! Our planes! Look at 'em dive!" I was dancing around like a crazy man.

Now even the mule was excited. Both ears were standing straight up and there was a wild gleam in the brown eyes.

"Hot ziggety!" Francis spat. "Look at those babies

come down. Here we go, boys! Here we go!"

"They're shooting!" I yelled. I had my arms around Francis's neck hanging on for dear life. The animal was tossing his head and I was bouncing all over the field.

"Kiss my Derby-winning great-aunt Regret!" screamed Francis. "Are those Nips going to get the struts knocked out of them!"

There was a puff of flame.

"There goes one!" I tried to point.

"Where?"

"Over to the left."

The sky was speckled with exploding Japanese planes. Bursts of flame. Puffs of smoke. Still out of the clouds above poured a stream of American fighters. They were drops of water in a cascade, coming, coming, coming.

"Three down over there!" roared Francis.

"Six right behind them!" I yelled.

"What a show!"

"Look, in the center. Two of them. They've broken through!"

The ground shook. From the camp a sheet of flame shot into the sky as the regiments of anti-aircraft opened with every gun they had.

The two Jap planes seemed to run into a wall. One moment, they were flying, fighting aircraft. The next, the sky was filled with pieces of junk.

"Right on the button!" I yelled.

"Smacked 'em to kingdom come!" bellowed Francis. "For the love of mud, hang off my neck, you're ruining me."

As suddenly as the battle had commenced, it stopped.

Where a fleet of Japanese planes had been was only smoke, cruising American fighters, and the red rays of the setting sun.

I sank down on the grass. Francis was covered with a sheen of sweat.

"I never saw you excited before, Francis," I said.

"You never saw a show like that either."

"I'm weak as a baby," I said.

"I've got four legs," said Francis. "At the moment I could use a couple more."

I struggled to my feet. Suddenly it struck me that all these Jap planes shot down, this truly tremendous American victory came of information the mule had given me and I had told the colonel.

"Francis," I said, "I'll never be able to thank you."

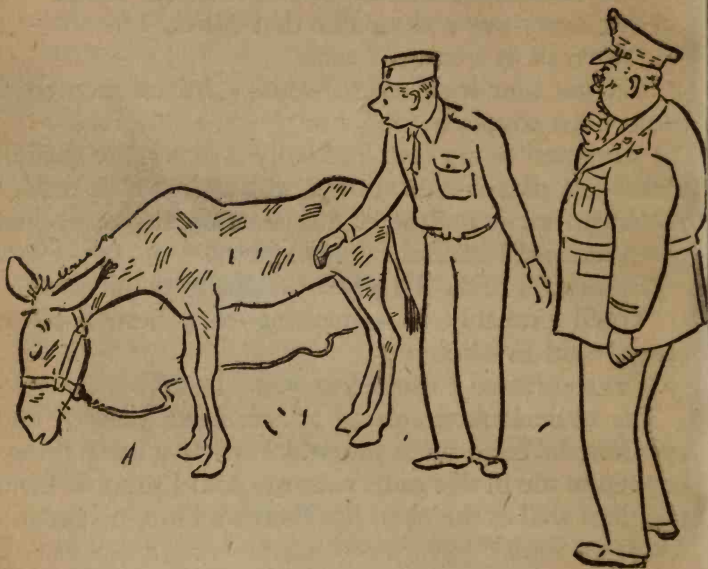
"You'll probably be something of a hero back at camp," said Francis.

"I'm so pleased I could kiss you," I said.

The mule looked around at me, head lowered and eyes raised. "Hold on to yourself. I've had a lot of things happen to me in this mule's Army. And I suppose I can take it as well as the next. But there's a limit, lieutenant. There's a limit!"

Chapter Ten

FRANCIS PLUMBS HIDDEN DEPTHS



EVERYONE WAS congratulating me. "Great job you did, lieutenant! . . . Sure saved this camp! . . . You Burma G-2 boys are on the ball. Yes, sir! . . . What a pasting we gave those Jap planes! . . . You must feel pretty good, lieutenant. . . . We here at Burma Headquarters owe you . . ."

My back was sore from being pounded and my hand from being shaken.

I arrived at the G-2 office a few minutes after the designated eight o'clock. Lying on my desk was a sheet of foolscap with two words scrawled across it: *At Once*. The Old Man wanted me.

I saluted smartly.

The colonel smiled. He looked not unlike an oversized marine who had cornered a Jap sniper. I felt distinctly uncomfortable.

The colonel returned my salute briefly, motioned me to a chair, proffered a cigarette. I refused, sat on the edge of my seat.

The colonel cleared his throat. "Hmf," he said. "Hmf. Well, young man, how does it feel to be a hero?"

I swallowed hard and groped for words. "I—you see— Well, sir— Fine, sir."

"Hmf. Quite a service you did your country, lieutenant. No doubt about it."

"Yes, sir."

"Fine intelligence, young man— Hmf. Fine."

"Yes, sir."

"Owe you a vote of thanks. All of us."

"Yes, sir."

The colonel leaned back in his chair. He cleared his throat, leaned forward again. "Young man—"

I waited.

"Young man—" The colonel rubbed his chin with his left hand, suddenly fired the forefinger of his right directly at my Adam's apple. "Young man, how did you secure your information?"

I gulped. "I—well—you see—sir—that is, I'd rather not say, sir."

"You'd rather not say! Lieutenant, you are an officer

of the Army of the United States assigned to the Burma Intelligence Headquarters. In the course of your duties you secured vital information. The source of that information was not"—the colonel was pounding the desk—"and is not your private property. Well?"

I was trying wildly to make up a story that would sound plausible. My imagination failed.

"I—I just can't tell you, sir."

The colonel leaned forward. "You know, lieutenant, I'm really fond of you."

"Yes, sir."

"And I'm old enough to be your father."

"Yes, sir."

An expression which the colonel must have supposed connoted paternal tolerance crossed his face. "If it's an *affaire de l'amour*, eh, lieutenant—I could understand that."

"No, sir."

"A native girl?"

"No, sir. There wasn't any girl."

The colonel looked crestfallen. "Hmf— No girl— Well, then, lieutenant, by the Great God Jupiter, what in thunder is so all-fired confidential about your source of information?"

"I just can't tell you, sir."

"But why? Why?"

"Because, sir," I blurted, "you just wouldn't believe me if I did."

"Wouldn't believe you! You bring me the most vital and timely enemy plan—intelligence which proves of the highest possible value. I am not completely stupid, lieutenant. Even if you plucked that information from a

rosebush, I must know the source."

"Yes, sir."

"Lieutenant, I order you to tell me the source of this information!"

I was cornered.

"The mule told me." My voice was squeaking again.

The colonel leaned forward. "What did you say, lieutenant?"

"The mule told me, sir."

The colonel leaned back emitting something between a sigh and a groan. "That's what I thought you said. You know, lieutenant, you are a constant source of surprise to me. Every time we question you about your activities, you start prattling about this Army mule. As I remember it, you call the animal Francis?"

"That's right, sir."

"Thing that surprises me, lieutenant," the colonel was nodding his head with each word—"is that a man who is able enough to accomplish what you have can't think up a better cover than a mule."

"But it's true, sir."

"Lieutenant, are you crazy?"

"No, sir."

"Am I crazy?"

"No, sir, of course not."

"Then why, by the Great God Jupiter, do you insist on this silly mumbling about a mule telling you things?"

"Because it's the gospel truth, sir."

The colonel banged his fist on the desk. "Lieutenant, do you realize how serious your refusal to talk can be?"

"I'm not refusing to talk, sir. Francis really did—"

The colonel shrugged his shoulders, leaned forward

and pressed a buzzer, wiped his hand over his brow.

"You're too much for me, lieutenant," he said. "One of us most certainly is *non compos mentis*. And when you talk about your mule, I'm inclined to eliminate myself."

The colonel's aide, a captain, had entered. He stood at attention. "You rang, sir?"

The colonel nodded. "Captain, I wish you would conduct the lieutenant here to the neuropsychiatric ward. I'll call Lieutenant Colonel Pleper."

"Yes, sir."

"And, captain, keep an eye on the lieutenant until you deliver him."

Nurse Valorie Humpert met us at the reception desk. Her smile was molar-to-molar wide.

Suddenly it struck me that if she was an angel of mercy, Heaven must be in desperate straits. Always in fiction Army nurses have the figure of a Venus de Milo and the face of a Hollywood madonna. But there is ample reason to believe that this information has never reached the Army Medical Department recruiting service.

"It's so good to see you again, lieutenant," said Miss Humpert. "And how is the mule?"

"Grrrr," I said.

Miss Humpert leaped backward. Into her eyes came a look of positive triumph. "You're violent," she said.

I was given a private room, a consideration which never before had been granted to me.

Miss Humpert, talking through the half-open door, asked if I was comfortable. I said I was. She wondered

if I missed the mule. I growled. She hastily closed the door, and I was alone.

I looked around me. Four bare walls. A grilled window (I examined the grilling and it was white steel), an Army cot, a metal table, an enameled chair.

There was a mainland magazine on the table. I removed my shoes, stretched out on the bed, tried to read. But it was no use. Thoughts of the mule and the colonel kept racing through my head. And the more I tried to rationalize the two, the more confused I became.

There was a knock.

"Come in," I said.

Lieutenant Colonel Ira Pleper pushed his head around the edge of the door, saw that I was lying on the bed, stepped into the room.

The colonel was a globular man. Wisps of blond hair straggled down the center of his oversized cranium like inductees awaiting their first physical. Rimless glasses were constantly sledding down his tobogganish nose.

Back in 1923, Pleper had rowed on one of the saddest crews Yale ever produced. He was inordinately proud of his athletic prowess. Nine years later, having gathered unto himself an MD and an intimate knowledge of the vagaries of the human mind, he had hung out an enameled, cast-iron shingle in Worchester, Massachusetts. The plaque had a quality of durability, and the good doctor had a way with women suffering from excessive leisure. Pleper was eminently successful.

The Army, its classification system overheated and spurting oil, had requisitioned Pleper to treat battle fatigue in the jungles of Burma. There, without changing a word of his patter, he carried on with the verve of

a Rotarian at a convention.

The colonel closed the door behind him. I scrambled to my feet.

"Take it easy, young man." The colonel pulled up a chair and eased himself into it. "Just sit on the bed. Now, young man, we are going to have a real talk. How's that?"

"Fine, sir."

"You know I want to help you? You know that, don't you?"

"No, sir—I mean, yes, sir."

"'No sir.' Now that interests me. Why did you say that, young man? It just popped out, I know. But, why?"

"Well— That is— Sir, I don't need any help. I'm perfectly sane."

"Of course you are, young man! Of course you are!" The colonel expanded visibly. "Nothing the matter with your mind, my boy, nothing at all. Sound as a new dollar!

"But you've been under a strain, young fellow, a terrific strain. All of us have. Strain does funny things to us. Not a matter of weakness. Mustn't think that. But you've had some things that have bothered you?"

"No, sir."

"Trivial things. Perhaps they don't seem worth mentioning. But suppose you just tell me, here in this room where nobody's listening to us."

"Nothing's bothering me, sir."

The colonel tilted his chair back, stuck his thumbs deep in his belt. "Well, young man, suppose you tell me about this friend of yours, this mule you've been saying talks to you. That's right, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir."

"How does he talk?"

"I don't quite know what you mean, sir."

"I mean, young man, does he talk with his mouth?"

Do his lips move?"

"Yes, sir."

The colonel rubbed the flat of his hand round the back of his head. "Tell me, young man, is it just one particular mule who talks to you? Or do all the mules speak?"

"Just one, sir."

"Any other animals ever talk to you, rabbits, chickens, ducks, squirrels, cats, goldfish?"

"No, sir."

"Ever have things talk to you, chairs, tables, automobiles, airplanes, rifles, toothbrushes?"

"No, sir. Of course not."

"Do you believe chairs can talk?"

"No, sir."

"Or automobiles, or scrubbing brushes, or wash rags?"

"No, sir."

"The thought of such things talking is ridiculous, isn't it, young man?"

"Yes, sir."

"How about chickens? Do you think chickens can talk?"

"No, sir."

"Deep down inside, you know animals can't talk?"

"That's right, sir."

"You don't really believe, seriously, that this mule talks to you. You know it's just a trick of your imagination, the result of frayed or overstrained nerves?"

"But Francis can talk," I said.

The colonel's hand was massaging the back of his head again. "You know, young man," he turned his head and looked at me out of the corners of his eyes, "you know, yours is not an unusual case. You must remember that. Nothing unusual about it at all. Not at all. You'd be surprised, young man, at the cases we have. Seem hopeless when you first talk to them. But in no time at all we have them fixed up good as new. That's what we're going to do for you, my boy. Yes, sir, sure as I'm Lieutenant Colonel Ira Pleper."

"But there's nothing the matter with me, sir."

"Now, see here, my boy," the colonel lowered his eyebrows again, "you must realize that all this talk about the mule is the result of some sort of—ah—some sort of mental strain."

"But it isn't, sir."

The colonel thrust out his jaw, caught his upper lip with his teeth. He gazed out the window at the Burma hills.

"Young man, where is this mule, this Francis you're talking about?"

"Just two miles from here, sir. I was wondering if we both couldn't go and see him. Then maybe we could get this all straightened out."

"Just what I was going to suggest, young man. Correct treatment for this case."

The staff car drew up at the side of the banyan tree. Colonel Pleper and I climbed out. Francis was about ten feet away. The old rope was tied to his halter, but the other end, which should have been around the banyan

tree, was dragging on the ground.

Francis, looking particularly bedraggled, stood with closed eyes.

The colonel and I approached.

"Is this the animal?" the colonel asked.

"Yes, sir."

"You're sure, now, lieutenant?"

"Yes, sir."

"There couldn't be any mistake?"

"No, sir."

There was a persimmon look in the colonel's eyes. He shifted his gaze to me without changing his expression.

"How do you make the mule talk, young man?"

"Francis," I said, "would you mind opening your eyes?"

Not an eyelid flickered. The slow breathing of the mule continued.

I leaned forward and patted the mule on the flank. "Francis," I said, "wake up. I have someone here I want you to meet."

Like snails retreating the mule's lids drew up. The brown eyes were dull and unrecognizing.

"How are you, Francis?" I asked in what I hoped was a light and friendly tone.

Not a disheveled hair twitched.

"Is the mule talking to you, young man?" the colonel asked.

"No, sir."

The colonel was looking at me with overwhelming tolerance. He was shaking his head. And though he wasn't clicking his tongue audibly I felt sure that it was clicking quietly like a clock.

"Francis!" I said, and there was desperation in my voice. "Francis, for Heaven's sake, speak to me. You must! *You must!*"

"Easy now, young man. Easy!" the colonel said.

"Francis is just being stubborn, sir."

"Oh, is that what it is?" said the colonel. "Perhaps, if I walk away for a moment, he'll speak to you?" The colonel began backing, keeping his eyes on me.

Slowly the mule turned his head away from the colonel.

I put my arm on the animal's neck and leaned over. "Francis," I said, "what's the matter with you! I'm in a jam, an awful jam!"

"Are you crazy?" Francis hissed a whisper.

"I'm beginning to wonder," I whispered back.

"So am I," said the mule.

"You don't know what a mess you've gotten me into."

"Watch yourself, lieutenant. Or I'll be in there with you."

"That's not a friendly attitude, Francis."

"Sh, the colonel's watching us."

"They've put me back in the booby hatch," I said.

"You don't say!" the mule opened his eyes wider. "You don't say!"

"They're sure I'm crazy!"

"The Army's not as backward as I thought."

"Francis, I'd like to kick you in the—"

"Careful, lieutenant, you're getting on my home ground. Straighten up. Here comes the tubby colonel."

"Well, young man," said the colonel. "So, your animal friend won't talk to you?"

"But, sir—"

"I know, my boy. I know. It worries you because the animal won't speak while I'm here. I want to explain something to you, young man. Perhaps it will make it easier for you to understand."

"Yes, sir."

"First of all, you must realize that there is nothing unusual about what has happened to you. Nothing at all. I've seen hundreds of cases exactly the same. Yes, hundreds. And they recover, young man."

"Yes, sir."

"At home, young man, you had close ties, family and friends. By nature you are warm and affectionate. That emotion is part and parcel of your mental make-up. You understand that?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Now, quite suddenly you went into the Army. Like a snap of the fingers a part of your emotional life was broken off, ceased to exist. It was as though a piece of your conscience had been injured. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"In you, in your mind, there was a void. Like a vacuum in nature, it demanded filling. You needed an object for your affections, an outlet. You see?"

"Yes, sir."

"Almost always— No, I think I can safely say, always, we find such cases seek some person or animal who is in trouble, hurt, suffering or miserable."

I saw the mule's ears begin to rise.

"Now, young man, look at this mule." The colonel gestured. "Undersized, flea-bitten, dull-eyed, spiritless, decrepit, stupid, as sad a creature as ever God created—

obviously an animal dying for one kind word."

"But I don't have a pot belly!" said a voice that crackled like a rampaging flame thrower.

The colonel sucked in his breath. "Who said that?" He looked all around.

"I did!"

"Who's I?"

"I is I, me, Francis, the mule!"

The colonel's mouth was open wider than his eyes, which were bursting from their sockets.

"I don't have a pot belly!" said the mule. "I don't have dandruff! I don't have fallen arches! I don't walk duck-footed! And I have a damned sight more consideration of other people than some colonels in the Medical Department!"

"Who said that?" demanded Pleper, glaring at me. He was shaking from head to foot.

"I didn't, sir," I said.

"And another thing," spat Francis, "I've listened to a lot of half-baked and sun-dried psychology in my time. But, by the tail of my great-aunt Regret who won the Derby, I have never heard such drivel as I listened to just now!"

"Scientifically correct!" fumed the colonel. "Clear case of hyper-imaginative reaction induced by emotional starvation. Acute symptoms impelled by battle fatigue."

"Stuff and nonsense," said Francis.

"Young man, I have had many years of successful practice—many years. I have seen hundreds, no, thousands, of such cases. Why, I recall back in Worcester, 1943, I believe it was, one of my most successful cases—young woman had been struck by the falling lid of a

water closet, sharp indentation of the occipital lobe, maniacal tendencies—subject fell in love with a garter snake. Pathetic. Positively—”

“Colonel,” the mule interrupted.

Pleper stopped short.

“Colonel, you know what I think?”

“No! And I don’t care!” Pleper was shaking again.

“I think you are a little off your rocker,” said the mule. “Nothing serious, you know. But a clear-cut clinical tendency.”

“Impossible!”

“Why is it impossible, colonel?”

“I am the psychologist,” said Pleper.

“Common medical reaction,” said Francis. “Extreme extroversion coupled with swollen megalomania. We use a garden term to describe it, The God Complex. Very common.”

The colonel’s face was the color of a Burma beet, and his shaking had taken on the proportions of a malarial chill.

“Silence!” roared Pleper. “*Silence!*”

“Calm yourself, colonel.” Francis spoke soothingly. “You’re among friends. Just a few questions I’d like to ask. Tell me, colonel, are you married?”

“I am not!” said the colonel.

“Hmf,” said Francis. “Hmf. At your age. Do you go out with girls, colonel?”

“There aren’t any in Burma.”

“Of course not,” said the mule. “But back home? Normal relationships?”

“Perfectly normal!”

“But you never married. Liked your independence,

I suppose?"

"Certainly I liked my independence. Who wouldn't?"

"Clinically correct," said Francis. "Good income, I presume?"

"Largest in the county!"

"Fits together nicely," said Francis, nodding his head. "Quite a build you have there, colonel. Remnants of an athlete."

"What do you mean, remnants?"

"Well, now, colonel, we're not as young as we once were, are we?"

"Just that my hair's thinning!"

"Of course. Of course." Francis wagged his head from side to side. "Tell me, colonel, how do you sleep?"

"Perfectly!"

"No dreams?"

"Of course I dream!"

"About being a full colonel?" suggested Francis.

"I might!" The words fairly shook out of the colonel. "A man has a right to his dreams!"

"Certainly he does, colonel. Certainly and by all means. But we must know what they are so we can help."

"My dreams are my own affair!"

"Clinically correct," said Francis, nodding his head with satisfaction. "Does your food taste flat, colonel?"

"In Burma all food is flat—flat and dull!"

"Just what I thought," said Francis. "Perfectly in order."

"I am being insulted!" bellowed the colonel.

"Pathetic." Francis's head was shaking. "Really pathetic. You'd better take him back, lieutenant. But

keep an eye on him."

"Don't you think we should leave now, sir?" I said.

The colonel seemed not to hear me. He was mumbling to himself and shaking like a bamboo tree in a typhoon.

But he turned and wobbled toward the staff car.

I started after him, but Francis motioned me back.

"Unhappy case," the mule said. "I do hope, lieutenant, you'll be able to bring him again. If the Army will only give me time I think I can do something for Colonel Pleper."

I was back in my room in the ward. The door, supposed to be closed, stood ajar.

I heard voices.

Miss Humpert's nutmeg tones were unmistakable.

"Colonel— Colonel Pleper, what's the matter?"

"Matter? Matter? Nothing's the matter." The voice screeched like a radio with a bad tube. "Why should anything be the matter? Why, I ask you? Why? Go ahead, nurse, why? Answer me."

"Sir, your face."

"What's wrong with my face? Come, Miss Humpert. Come!"

"It's highly flushed, sir. You appear to be shaking. I hope you're not having a chill, sir."

"Certainly not. Certainly not."

"Has anything upset you, sir?"

"No. Nothing. Confound it, nurse, nothing!"

"Yes, sir."

"Well. Well— Don't just stand there looking at me. What do you want?"

"I was wondering, sir—"

"Go ahead, nurse. Go ahead!"

"Is there any diagnosis on the lieutenant, sir?"

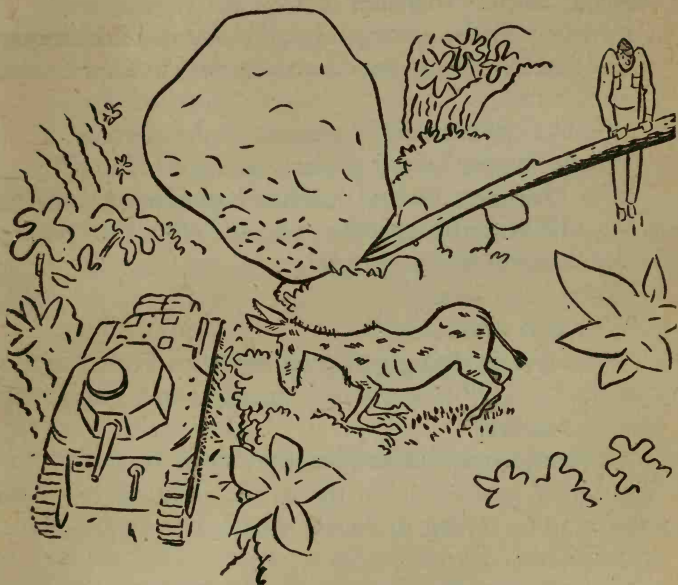
"Who?"

"The lieutenant, sir. The mule case."

"Most certainly there's a diagnosis, Miss Humpert. Young man's suffering from hallucinations!" The colonel's voice rose to a shriek. "*Violent hallucinations! Maniacal hallucinations! Watch him, nurse, watch him!*"

Chapter Eleven

FRANCIS TACKLES A TANK



I WAS SUPPOSED to rest.

For two days I sat in my private room.

Nothing happened.

By the third morning I felt jumpy as a rookie in his first foxhole.

I was lying there, wondering what was going to hap-

pen to me, wishing I'd never met Francis.

A beam of light shone on the wall across from the window. Idly I watched it as it jumped about.

Suddenly I sat bolt upright! There were definite dots and dashes. Someone was trying to signal me.

I leaped to the window. A mile away, on the crest of a hill, I caught the flashes of a mirror.

I rushed to the door and called for Miss Humpert.

She came running, her hair streaming behind her like Francis's tail.

"What's the matter, lieutenant?" she gasped.

"Come inside. I want to show you something."

Miss Humpert looked fearful. I grabbed her by the arm, pulled her through the door, and closed it. I pointed to the flashing beam of light.

"You see it?" I said.

"Yes. But what is it?"

"Someone is trying to signal me with a mirror. Can you read code?" It was a silly question and I knew it as soon as I spoke.

"Certainly not." Miss Humpert drew back her head and darted glances from me to the flashing light. She seemed to be trying to decide whether to be frightened or fascinated.

"Isn't there anybody around here who can read code?" I pleaded.

"Well, there's Joe Apana. He's orderly down in ward fifteen. He's always talking about when he was a dot-dash man. Could that be code?"

"Quickly," I said. "Get him."

Apana was a Filipino. His eyes and teeth, startlingly white, gave his dark face a triangle look. He sidled into

the room after Miss Humpert.

I pointed to the blinking light. Apana kept watching me.

"There," I said. "Look over there on the wall."

The Filipino seemed afraid to take his eyes off me.

"Go ahead," I said. "Read it."

Apana concentrated on the flashes. He waited a moment. Then, slowly, he began to spell out the letters,

"B—U—T—Q—U—I—C—K—F—B—U—T—"

"That's enough," I said.

"That will be all, Apana." Miss Humpert turned to me. "He shouldn't be away from his ward."

The Filipino nodded and slipped out.

I looked at the woman in white. "Valorie," I said, this being no time for formality, "you heard what that boy said?"

"Yes, lieutenant."

"You believe someone is trying to signal me, don't you?"

"Ycs," reluctantly.

"Tell me, Valorie, do you know what department I'm in?"

"No."

"I'm in G-2. You know what that is?"

"Intelligence, isn't it?"

I nodded, trying desperately to look mysterious. "Spies," I whispered.

Miss Humpert's eyes grew wide, and her upper teeth receded.

"Do you know how important that message may be?" I continued.

Valorie shook her auburn tresses.

"It may affect the whole course of the war."

The upper teeth traveled all the way back into line with the lowers.

I looked into Valorie's eyes. One had a cast.

"Valorie, do you think I'm crazy?"

"Oh, no." The nurse was on familiar ground. "None of my boys are crazy. We've been instructed. Everybody in this section is sane. Just suffering from temporary fatigue."

"Do you think I'm fatigued?"

Miss Humpert puffed out her lips. "They didn't send you to this ward for a bad leg, lieutenant."

"Look, Valorie, there's been a mistake."

"That's what they all say."

I saw that I was making no progress and decided to try a frontal attack.

"Valorie," I said, "I must get out of here."

Miss Humpert shook her head.

"Look," I said, "it's vital that I have a few hours to follow up this message."

"Do you know what it meant?"

"Certainly I do. And the entire future of the war may—"

Miss Humpert puffed up again. "The colonel would slay me, simply slay me if—"

"He'd never have to know."

"The colonel finds out everything."

I was growing desperate. I looked at the wall where the light was still blinking away. I looked at Valorie Humpert. I pulled back my shoulders.

"Valorie," I said, "Valorie, you are an officer in the Army of the United States. As such you have great

responsibilities.”

Miss Humpert blanched, and the freckles stood out on her nose.

“This is war, Valorie. And there comes a time in war when an officer must make her own decisions. There comes a time when an officer must search her soul and bring forth the right answer. A country was once lost for want of a nail. Would you, Valorie Humpert, like to go through life knowing your country had been lost because you lacked decision?”

The auburn tresses waggled uncertainly.

“Now, at this very moment, your country is in danger,” I rushed on. “Fate has determined that you, a lieutenant in the Army, must make a vital decision. You know I am an Intelligence man. You know I have received a secret and mysterious message. You know that there are strange forces at work here in Burma. Forces which do not want me to obey the instructions in this message. Valorie Humpert, Lieutenant Valorie Humpert, what are you going to do?”

Valorie wheezed like a broken bicycle pump.

“Oh,” she said. “Oh!”

“Well?”

“Lieutenant, I—I— Lieutenant, I have to go down to the seventh ward for a bedpan. It will take me at least ten minutes—and the door— Lieutenant, it won’t be locked.”

I could have kissed the lady.

I was certainly desperate.

Half an hour later I arrived at the banyan tree. I’d run most of the way and was out of breath. Francis stood

complacently in the shade.

"So you managed to get out of the hospital, lieutenant," the mule said.

"I'll probably be court-martialed for this," I panted.

"Not if you're nuts," reassured Francis. "The Army'll just say that you're a little screwier than they thought."

"How did you manage to signal me?"

Francis shook his head dejectedly. "Lieutenant, you're always asking questions. How many times do I have to tell you, I'm no inductee. I have angles. Even a mule can get things done in the Army if he knows the ropes."

"I suppose you went to considerable trouble to signal me?" I asked.

The mule shook his head. "No, lieutenant. Not much trouble. If it'd been much trouble I'd have handled the thing alone."

"Why didn't you?" I was growing angry.

"Now, keep your shirt on, lieutenant. There's some credit to be had and I thought I might as well let you receive it."

"Sweet of you," I said bitterly. "But please, Francis, please, will you stop trying to build me up? A few months ago I was a perfectly happy second lieutenant. I was minding my own business, bothering nobody, and waiting for a T/O change so that I could be promoted. Then I met you."

"Been quite an experience, hasn't it, lieutenant?"

"That's putting it mildly," I said. "Since then I've spent half my time in the booby hatch."

"The price of being a hero," said Francis.

"I'd rather have people think I am sane."

"If it weren't for me," said Francis, "people wouldn't

know you're alive."

"I wish they didn't. Then maybe I could figure a way to stay out of the hospital."

"I thought you'd be enjoying the rest."

"Look, Francis, you didn't send for me just to inquire about my health."

"No," said the mule. "But don't rush me, lieutenant. We have plenty of time to handle the Jap tank."

"To handle what?"

"The Jap tank."

"What Jap tank?"

"Why, the Jap tank that snuck through our lines up at the pass last night and is headed for Headquarters."

"Are you crazy, Francis?"

"Lieutenant, you're the one who's in the neuropsychiatric ward."

"So kind of you to remind me," I snarled. "But suppose you start at the beginning and explain what you're talking about."

"Simple," said Francis. "Last night a Japanese medium tank slipped behind our lines near the pass. Now it's on its way to Headquarters to do a little convenient duck-shooting."

"I don't believe it. How did the tank break through our lines?"

"Didn't break through, lieutenant. Just snuck down a defile we didn't know about."

"But the front lines are ninety miles from here," I said.

"That's right. Tank's coming down the main road."

"Impossible! A Jap tank traveling ninety miles down a main road would be seen by at least five hundred of

our vehicles."

"Superficial logic," sniffed Francis. "The Japs thought of that. Painted an American flag on the tank. Then, just to be safe, the thing pulls off the road and hides in the bamboo groves every time one of our vehicles is sighted."

"But what can one lone tank do?"

"Just mess up the entire Burma war, that's all, lieutenant. That one tank can blast its way right out onto the parade grounds at Headquarters. Then it can start plopping shells into the administration buildings. Kill a few brass hats and mess up all our records so badly it will take weeks to get things running again."

"Francis, how do you know about all this?"

"Same way I knew all the other things I told you. I have sources."

"But what are those sources?"

"Never you mind, lieutenant. They're reliable, as you should mighty well know."

"I'd still like to discover how you find out all these things."

"I'm sure you would, lieutenant. And I'm equally sure I'm not going to tell you."

"Why not?"

"Lieutenant, are you going to stand here all day arguing with me, or are you going to do something about this Jap tank?"

"Of course I'm going to do something about the Jap tank," I said. "Only I'm not sure—"

"Only you're not sure what?" snapped the mule.

"If I go to Headquarters I don't think they'll listen to me."

"Go to Headquarters! What are you talking about?"

"I've got to alert them," I said. "They'll have to set up anti-tank guns and take other precautions."

"Don't be ridiculous, lieutenant. If I'd wanted to alert Headquarters I could have attended to it myself."

"How else can we stop the Jap tank?"

"By outsmarting it."

"Francis," I said, "sometimes you worry me."

"Worry you?" the mule wiggled an ear. "That's not my intention, lieutenant. What I'm trying to do is stimulate that thing in your cranium the medics playfully call a brain."

"See here, Francis," I spoke sharply, "I know you think second lieutenants in general don't have much sense, and that I'm not one of the outstanding members of my rank. But I don't even have a revolver with me, let alone an anti-tank gun. Nor do I have either anti-tank mines up my sleeve or the makings of Molotov cocktails in my pants pocket."

"Creates a problem of some interest, doesn't it?" said the mule.

"I suppose you have a plan, Francis?"

"Naturally, lieutenant. Naturally."

"Perhaps you would be good enough to let me in on it?"

"All in good time, lieutenant," said the mule. "I think our first move is to hike ourselves up to the main road and survey the situation. You know the field manual advises, 'Always make a personal reconnaissance.'"

Ten minutes later we arrived at the road, a ribbon of gooey mud that twisted like a mad snake through the

Burma hills.

"The engineers didn't exactly do themselves proud on this highway," said Francis.

"That's neither here nor there," I said. "What about the Jap tank?"

"Any ideas?" asked Francis.

"None," I said.

We were walking along the edge of the road. We had passed over the crest of a hill and were descending a belly depression that made me think of the big-thrill dip on a roller coaster at home.

"How soon do you figure the Jap tank will be here?" I asked.

"What time is it?"

I glanced at my wrist watch. "Twenty after three."

"You mean, fifteen-twenty, lieutenant. Please try to be a little more military."

"How soon?" I repeated.

"Fifteen or twenty minutes," the mule said.

I could feel the blood drain from my face. "Do you mean it?"

"Certainly I mean it. You don't think I wanted to stand around all day waiting for a few Japs in a tin can?"

"But we must do something!"

"To be sure, lieutenant. Only be calm about it."

"A Jap tank coming down the road! Me without even a peashooter! And you tell me to be calm! Now what?"

"Here we are," said the mule.

We had reached the bottom of the hill. Running off to the right was a double rutted trail which led through a bamboo grove into a defile between two fifty-foot-

high cliffs.

"Here we are?" I asked. "Where are we?"

"This is where we'll set the trap for the Jap tank," Francis said.

"How?"

"Use the old noodle, lieutenant. Make with the brain waves."

I was too worried to take notice of the jive talk. "What do we do?" I asked.

"We put up a 'detour' sign."

"We what?"

"Look, lieutenant, we can't do anything to the Jap tank out here in the open. We'll have to trick the thing into a place where it can't maneuver."

"How do we put up a 'detour' sign?" I asked.

"There's an old road sign over there," Francis pointed with an ear. "Rip it up and plant it in the middle of the road."

"But it doesn't say 'detour,'" I pointed out.

"Of course it doesn't, lieutenant. But we can write it on."

"With what?"

"With mud, naturally," said the mule.

I began tugging on the sign. It came up easily.

"Right here," said Francis, standing in the center of the road just back of the wagon trail. "Drive it in hard."

"But suppose one of our vehicles comes along before the Jap tank arrives?"

"We'll have to risk that."

"And another thing," I said. "If I do write 'detour' on this sign, how'll the Japs be able to read it?"

The mule was wiggling that right ear again. "Lieuten-

ant, you are constantly underestimating the enemy. God didn't put a brain in your head as a counterbalance for your feet, you know."

"That wasn't such a stupid question," I said.

"Of course it was," stated Francis. "If you were planning to send an American tank on an expedition behind the enemy lines, wouldn't you have one man in the crew who could read Japanese road signs?"

"I suppose I would," I said.

"Well, the Japs are smart enough to think of that, too."

I had wedged the sign solidly into the mud of the road center. Grabbing a handful of oozing slime I printed in crude letters, D E T O U R.

"Now draw a short arrow pointing up the trail," said Francis.

"Why?"

"These Japs may be smart," said Francis. "But they aren't too smart."

I finished the arrow.

"Fine." Francis surveyed my work. "Now, let's get going."

"Where?"

"To the top of that cliff over the defile, the one on the left."

"What for?" I asked.

"You'll see," said Francis.

The mule led the way, pushing between bamboo trees, stepping over boulders, moving surely upward. I followed, puffing and swearing. It took ten minutes to reach the top.

"There she is," said Francis.

"There what is?" I asked.

"There's the rock we're going to use to finish off the Jap tank," Francis indicated.

A boulder was poised on the edge of the cliff. It was at least five feet high and ten feet around. It must have weighed ten tons.

I went over and put my hand on it. The rock was firm as Gibraltar. I stepped to the edge of the cliff and looked over. The defile was narrowest directly below me, the trail passing between fifty-foot cliffs little more than ten feet apart.

"It's a great idea, Francis," I said. "But I could no more move that rock than fly." To illustrate I put my shoulder to the boulder and heaved. Nothing happened.

The mule shook his head. "That old brain, lieutenant, just not working very well."

"We need the muscles of a dozen big men," I said, "not brains."

"Look, lieutenant," the mule was wiggling that right ear, "along about 250 B.C. a fellow named Archimedes, a Sicilian in case you're interested, worked out the theory of the lever. Something of a sensation in those days. But I doubt you'll get much credit for remembering it."

I felt a little silly.

"I suppose we could try that," I said. "Where will we find something to use?"

"There's a ten-foot log lying by that banyan tree," Francis indicated with an ear. "Looks about perfect for the job."

I picked up the log, carried it over to the rock. Francis pointed out a smaller boulder that could be used as the fulcrum. Grunting and straining I managed to roll it into place and insert the log. I took hold of the end,

eased my weight onto it. The giant rock teetered.

"Easy," said Francis. "You dump that rock now, lieutenant, and we're a couple of cooked geese."

"I think it might work," I said.

"Of course it will work," the mule snorted. "Let's just sit down and make ourselves comfortable until our tank arrives."

I'd hardly stretched out when Francis straightened his ears.

"Sh," said the mule. "I hear something."

"Is it the tank?" I whispered.

"Might be," said the mule. "Pretty good timing, I'd say."

Now I could hear a rumbling.

"It's almost reached the sign," Francis said.

The rumbling stopped.

"They're looking at the 'detour' now."

I crouched, holding my breath.

There was a grinding of gears.

"The Japs are turning the tank," Francis said triumphantly. "Better get ready."

I rose and took hold of the log.

Francis stepped gingerly to the cliff, sank down on his belly, only his head protruding over the edge.

The mule looked around at me. "All set?"

"All set," I said.

The mule's ears were standing straight up. "When I flap them forward like this," Francis indicated, "heave."

"Right," I whispered.

The Jap tank was drawing closer. I could hear the hum of its motor above the crackling of the bamboo shoots as it crunched through the jungle.

"Here she comes," whispered Francis. "Ready?"

"Ready."

The tank was almost below us. I concentrated on watching the mule's head.

The long ears trembled in their intensity.

Suddenly they flopped forward!

I heaved with all my might.

The rock swayed, tottered, fell.

A tenth of a second passed.

Crash! The thunderous bang was the fury of Satan slamming the fiery portals of hell.

Never had I heard such a tremendous, echoing bang. The very hills seemed to shudder to the marrow of their rocks.

"Got it!" screamed Francis. "Smack-dab, we got it!"

"Squash it?"

"Flatter'n Suffolk Downs!" said Francis. "Have a look."

I crept forward and pushed my head over the cliff. There, directly below me, was what was left of a Japanese medium tank. The great rock had struck squarely on the turret, crushed the tank as a heavy foot might flatten a child's toy.

"Scrap iron," said Francis.

A shot rang out somewhere to the left. It was answered by two quick shots from off to the right.

"What's that?" I asked, scrambling to my feet.

"Our patrols," said Francis. "We have them all over these hills. They're closing in to see what the noise was all about. Which means I'd better be leaving you, but quick."

The mule turned abruptly and started down the trail.

"Wait a minute, Francis. Where are you going?"

"Never mind."

"But you're a hero."

"You take the bows, lieutenant." The mule was at the edge of the bamboo grove.

"What'll I tell them? Don't leave me, Francis."

"Use your imagination, lieutenant. You know, the old brain."

The mule disappeared among the bamboos.

I was taken directly to the colonel's office.

"So this time you've smashed a Jap tank with a rock?" said the officer.

"Yes, sir."

The colonel looked unhappy. He massaged the sides of his face. He glanced from me to the ceiling.

"You're a hero," he said. "You most certainly are a hero. This whole Headquarters—" The colonel paused, then fixed me with an iron look. "Lieutenant, I thought you were in the hospital."

"I was, sir."

"And I suppose that mule sent for you?"

"Yes, sir."

Twelve minutes later I was back in my private room in the neuropsychiatric section.

Valorie Humpert was nowhere about.

But I was not neglected.

Two uniformed MPs guarded my door. They had fixed bayonets.

Chapter Twelve

FRANCIS UNMASKED



MY ESCAPE unloosed the dam.

The entire hospital went to work on me.

Seven psychiatrists examined me. Nine doctors thumped and bumped me from "cranial epidermis to pedal extremities." Tongues clicked as regularly as the staccato of machine guns in battle. Bespectacled heads wagged like the posteriors of a line of burlesque queens.

I told the story of Francis exactly fourteen times. I heard that I needed absolute quiet, violent stimulation,

complete isolation, constant companionship, a light diet, three steaks a day, no liquor, "a damn good drunk," isolation from the nurses, feminine companionship, and an appendectomy.

Three psychologists, after listening to my stories of Francis, said I was crazy as a Burma bedbug. Three learned mental doctors said I was sane as they were. One medic of the mind, after questioning me for three hours, had a violent attack of shakes, said the walls of the hospital were caving in, had to be led away.

I was in a sad state.

I lay in my private room wondering if the cutting-out-paper-dolls stage was to be looked forward to or dreaded.

There was a knock on the door.

"Come in," I said.

A bald head shoved through the quarter-opened door. Lightning green eyes, half-hidden by a pince-nez, surveyed me.

"Yes?" I said in an annoyed tone.

A gnomelike figure slipped into the room.

"What the hell do you—" I stopped short. On the right side of the gremlin's collar was a silver eagle.

I scrambled to my feet.

"Yes, colonel," I said.

"At ease, lieutenant," said the colonel in a voice that must have come from a cave under the hospital.

"Yes, sir."

"I am Colonel Carlson Carmichael."

"Yes, sir."

"I am the Chief Medical Officer."

"Yes, sir."

The colonel gave me a look he must have reserved for

rare cases of idiocy. He closed one eye and stared at my feet. Then he closed the other eye and stared at my face. He repeated the process, standing first on one foot, then on the other.

Suddenly the colonel stuck a finger into my midriff and gave a shove.

I went, "Oof."

"Are you crazy, lieutenant?"

"No, sir."

"You sure of that?"

"Yes, sir."

"Perfectly sane?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then, lieutenant, what the hell's the matter with you?" The colonel paused, drawing down his eyebrows.

I looked around to see how much room I had for backing. My rear was against the bed.

"Come on, lieutenant. What the hell's the matter with you?"

"Nothing, sir."

"Nothing! Damn fine attitude for a military man! Drive my doctors crazy. Drive my psychologists crazy. Drive my entire staff crazy!"

The colonel paused for breath. Then he poked me in the middle again.

"Have you any friends, lieutenant?"

"Yes, sir." I tried to lean over backward.

"Many friends?"

"Yes, sir."

"One of 'em a mule?"

"Yes, sir."

"Talks?"

"Yes, sir."

The colonel pivoted and walked to the far corner of the room, pivoted and came back. He poked.

"Half my psychologists say you're loco. Other half say you aren't. Me, I'm the head doctor. I think they're all loco. No man in his right mind would be a psychologist. 'Neuro' this and 'neuro' that. Damned poppycock. Give a man a dose of castor oil and a hot bath. Either he's crazy or he isn't. Doesn't make much difference, anyway."

"Yes, sir."

"How'd you get a commission, lieutenant?"

"OCS, sir."

"Pass all your exams?"

"Yes, sir."

"Doesn't prove a thing. Imbecile could pass 'em."

"Yes, sir."

"Father and mother living?"

"Yes, sir."

"Sane?"

"Yes, sir."

"Doesn't prove a thing."

I stood there. The colonel placed his hands on his hips.

"Have to clear this up, lieutenant. Disturbing. Damned disturbing. You're probably loco. Have to be sure. Damned disturbing."

I waited.

"Visitor coming to see you, lieutenant. The Commanding General."

"Who, sir?"

"The Commanding General."

"The CG himself!" I felt my hands begin to tremble.

"Be here in a few minutes. Think you can talk to him?"

"I don't know, sir."

"Don't know! Why don't you know? Anything the matter with you? Nonsense. Won't have my hospital disgraced. Positively won't stand for it. Clear, lieutenant?"

"Yes, sir."

"Sane as I am. Talking mules be damned."

The colonel did an about-face and marched from the room.

The CG coming to see me, a three star general, commander of the entire Theater. I sat there on the edge of my bed and tried to stop shaking. One second, I had visions of the Congressional Medal of Honor being pinned on my chest. The next, I saw myself spending the rest of my life behind barred windows.

First, only my hands were shaking. But the more I thought about the CG visiting a second lieutenant, the worse became my trembles. My teeth began to chatter. Cold shivers raced in relays up and down my spine. Star shells burst before my eyes.

The CG was coming to see me. I must be nutty as a Burma bedbug.

There was a knock on the door.

"C—C—Come in." I stood at attention.

The door opened and the Commanding General entered. He closed the door behind him and faced me. He was a tall, weathered man with friendly blue eyes. A pale scar on his left temple added an air of distinction. The three stars on the right side of his collar shone brightly.

"At ease, lieutenant." The general had a friendly way of speaking.

I was trembling so violently I felt I'd be safer sitting. I stumbled backward and came down on the bed.

The general lifted a white chair as though it were a toy, swung it around, sat straddle legged, hands resting on top of its back.

"Well, young fellow, you've had quite a time of it," he said.

"Y—Y—Yes, sir."

The general's eyes were searching me. "Just take it easy, my boy. Nothing to be upset about. You and I had better have a little talk."

"Yes, sir."

"You know, lieutenant, you have my whole command in a turmoil? Damndest thing I've run into since I've been in the Army. Spent an hour this morning reading a dossier on you, lieutenant. Were all those adventures of yours true?"

"Yes, sir."

"Fabulous. You realize, lieutenant, you have performed great service both to your country and to my command."

I said nothing.

"Now, lieutenant, we come to the crux of the situation. After each of these feats you were questioned at great length by various ranking officers. Is that right?"

"Yes, sir."

"At every interview you described an Army mule which you kept repeating can both talk and fly. Is *that* right, lieutenant?"

"Yes, sir."

"My boy, I want you to understand the position in which you place both me and my command." The gen-

eral was bobbing his head for fatherly emphasis. "You have performed services of the highest value to our forces in this Theater. You have thwarted several enemy maneuvers, any one of which might have resulted in a catastrophe. You have been able to do these things because you have obtained information from sources known only to yourself."

"Yes, sir," I said.

"When you are asked about these sources you keep repeating a cock-and-bull story about this mule." The general paused.

"Lieutenant, your actions are worthy of the highest commendation. But your explanation of those actions is an affront to the intelligence, to the dignity of my command."

The general lowered his head and looked at me through bushy eyebrows. "How do you suppose this tale of a talking, flying mule would sound in a communiqué?"

"But it's true, sir," I said.

"Am I to understand that you refuse to talk, lieutenant?"

"No, sir. I want to talk. It's just that nobody will believe me."

The general rubbed his hand over his chin, looked thoughtful. "I'm stumped, young fellow. I'm completely stumped. You really believe a mule talked to you?"

"I know it, sir."

"But mules can't talk, lieutenant."

"That's what I thought, sir. But Francis can."

"Francis, is that the animal's name?"

"Yes, sir."

"How do you know?"

"The mule told me, sir."

"You certainly stick to your story, lieutenant." The general patted the back of one hand with the other. "Positively the damndest story I ever heard. Thirty-five years in the Army. West Point. Nine campaigns. Seven children of my own, four of 'em in the Army. I thought I'd bumped into everything. But a lieutenant who insists he knows a mule that can talk! And a command that is practically standing on its ear arguing as to whether it's true. I'm stumped. What do I do now?"

"Sir," I said, "may I make a suggestion?"

"May you?" The general's face lighted. "Lieutenant, I certainly wish you would."

"I don't mean to be out of line, sir. But perhaps you would go and have a talk with Francis?"

"Perhaps I'd what?" The general looked startled.

"Perhaps, sir, you would allow me to accompany you to talk with the mule."

"You mean, I can meet the animal?"

"Why, yes, sir."

The general pushed himself back from the chair and straightened. He ruffled the hair on the back of his head, paced back and forth without speaking. I sat watching him.

"You're telling me, lieutenant, that you will take me to this mule and I can talk to the animal just the way I'm talking to you?"

"Yes, sir."

"And the mule will answer me?"

"Yes, sir."

The general made a turn of the room.

"This will probably cost me my command," he said, "but I'll go."

The general's car stopped some fifty feet from the banyan tree. Francis stood in its shade, seemingly asleep.

The general approached the mule. I trailed along three feet behind.

The animal's head turned slowly until the large, brown eyes caught the glint of the three stars on the general's collar.

Francis stiffened from tail to nose. Ears stood straight and trembling. Eyes became pin-point sharp.

The general stopped. He surveyed Francis from crest to hocks. He looked dismayed.

"Lieutenant, is *this* the animal?"

"Yes, sir."

The general studied the mule but said nothing.

"Hello, Francis," I said. "How are you today?"

I could tell the mule was highly excited. But there was no answer.

"Francis, I want you to meet the Commanding General."

Francis grew stiffer. His legs were boards and his ears pointed to the heavens.

"Something the matter?" asked the general.

I moved behind Francis and motioned the general to follow me. We stepped off twenty paces. I lowered my voice.

"Sir," I said, "I'm afraid I failed to tell you that Francis is in terror the Army will discover he can talk."

"Why in terror?" asked the general.

"I don't know, sir. Once he told me he was afraid they

would send him to Officer Candidate School."

"OCS?" The general gave me a strange look. "A mule?"

"That's what he said, sir."

"What do we do?"

"Well, sir, Francis has been in the Army for a long time. He takes great pride in the military. I believe, sir, if you gave him orders he would obey them."

"You mean if I ordered that animal to talk, it would?"

"Well, sir, I wouldn't—that is—I mean, perhaps if you could sort of trick him into it."

"I don't follow you, lieutenant."

"If you could give him a series of commands, one of which would require him to answer, it might work."

The general stood absolutely still. He looked over at the mule, then back to me.

"Young man," he said, "as I said, I've spent my life in the Army. As an officer I've been required to do some mighty strange things. But issuing a series of orders to a mule in an attempt to trick it into talking— Well, I just wonder what the limit is."

The general turned and marched back to the mule. He was all soldier.

I followed at a respectful distance.

The general came to attention six paces in front of the mule.

"TainSHUN!" barked the general.

Francis had been standing stiffly. He stiffened more.

"Right fHace!"

The mule's hind legs pivoted neatly, while his front legs carried him around to the right with precision.

"About fHace!"

Francis's right hind foot moved to the rear and slightly to the left of the left heel. The front legs side-stepped and the animal performed as neat an about-face as I'd ever seen.

The general gave, "Right fHace!" and brought the mule around facing him.

"Parade rHest!"

The mule's feet snapped to position twelve inches apart. The tail was stiff.

The general had a startled look on his face. He glanced at me.

"Countoff!" he roared.

Francis looked straight ahead.

The general shook his head.

"One step forward mHarch!"

The mule moved forward the prescribed thirty inches, stopped.

"Report!"

Francis was frozen. No sound came from him.

"Ateasel!" roared the general.

The mule relaxed.

The general motioned to me and I came over to where he was standing.

"Remarkably well-trained mule, lieutenant. No doubt about it. But there is no indication the animal can talk."

"May I try again, sir?" I asked.

"Go to it, young fellow."

"Francis," I said, "you and I have gone through a lot together. We've faced death together. Francis, for my sake, talk to the general and get me out of this."

Francis was looking in the other direction. He gave no indication of hearing me.

The general was suddenly angry.

"Lieutenant, I don't believe there is anything the matter with your mind. I do think there is something radically the matter with you. I'm inclined to believe you're trying to pull a very clever stunt." The general paused, then glared at me.

"The trouble with this Army," he said, "is the junior officers. They are, to use slang, full of prunes, or prune juice, or something. They confuse me. They confuse the GIs. They confuse the war. When I think what they'll do to the post-war world the little hair I have left stands at attention."

"General, you said a mouthful!"

The general swung around.

"Who said that?"

"You have no idea how good it made me feel to hear you speak as you did," said Francis. "Just echoed what I've been thinking ever since Pearl Harbor."

"Give me good junior officers," said the general, "and I'll have the best—" The general stopped short and gave me a searching look.

"Lieutenant, have you ever tried throwing your voice?"

"No, sir."

"You're not a ventriloquist?"

"No, sir."

The general fixed the mule with a glare that would have withered a heavy tank.

"TainSHUN!" he barked.

The mule froze.

"No nonsense, now," said the general. "I want direct answers to direct questions. Name?"

"Francis," said the mule.

"Organization?"

"123rd Mule Detachment."

"Commanding Officer?"

"Captain Hodgins."

"Length of service?"

"Seven years."

"*Atease!*"

Suddenly the general went limp. I thought he was about to faint. I stepped up to catch him. But the general pulled himself together, passed a hand over his brow.

"I'll be damned!" said the general. "I'll be double, triple damned! I'll be damned in seventy-two languages! So you can talk?"

"Yes, sir," said the mule. "I can talk. And I'm just as worried as you are about the junior officers, specially second lieutenants."

"They're a sorry lot," said the general.

"A very sorry lot," agreed Francis.

"We of the old Army have a tremendous burden to bear," said the general.

"I have done what little I could," said Francis.

"I'm sure you have," nodded the general.

"The lieutenant here—" said Francis.

"I know." The general was looking at me.

The mule shook his head.

The general shook his head.

"You know, general," said Francis, "I'm a great admirer of yours, a great admirer."

"You are?" said the general. He was smiling.

"I particularly liked the way you handled your light armor in that last push. Their co-ordination with the

155's was magnificent."

"It certainly seemed to work," said the general.

"One question I'd like to ask, sir, if I might?" said the mule.

"Certainly, young man—ah—Francis. Certainly."

"Sir, after the first wave had swept over hill X-32, you remember the incident?"

"Perfectly."

"I couldn't understand, sir, why you didn't order the 227th down from the heights on the left flank. It seemed to me that would have driven the Japs right into the field of fire of your mortars and machine guns."

"A very good question," the general said. "Astute. If I'd known then what I know now I would have done just that. But I was told the enemy had forces deployed to the right of X-32. I was afraid of a counter-flanking movement."

"I thought of that," said Francis. "But how about the 324th?"

"They came up into line later."

"I don't mean to disagree, sir. But they arrived in position some ten minutes before the first wave took off."

"They did?" said the general. "Damn that Signal Corps."

"That explains it," said Francis. "Poor communications. Probably some junior officer asleep at the switch."

Suddenly the general seemed to start. He gave a jerk just as though he were waking from a daydream.

The general shook his head to clear it. Then he looked at me. "Lieutenant," he said, "I owe you an apology. We all owe you an apology."

"Yes, sir."

"You, Francis," the general said, "you have done a truly magnificent job for the Army."

"I've always tried to do my duty as I saw it." The mule blushed a darker brown.

"But the work you have done," the general continued, "is as nothing to the tremendous service you can render."

"I am quite happy where I am, sir," the mule said.

"You mean, you like being a pack animal?"

"Most certainly, sir. I feel that I am helping in a vitally important job. I enjoy my associations. And I appreciate the sense of satisfaction after a fatiguing day."

"I like your attitude, young man—ah—Francis." The general was having trouble correlating the voice and the mule. "But I am here to offer you a tremendous opportunity. An opportunity to serve."

"I am in the Army to serve, sir," said the mule. "What sort of an opportunity, sir?"

"Francis," said the general, "when America finds out about you, when the world finds out about you, it's going to cause more of a furore than the war."

The mule looked worried. "I hope it won't be necessary to reveal to the public any slightly unusual qualifications I may have. I don't trust the public."

"Neither do I," said the general, looking at the mule with new respect.

"You see what I mean," said Francis.

The general stroked his chin, then shook his head. "I'm not sure you understand. I am offering you an opportunity for fame such as few men—ah—few human beings—ah—few living creatures have enjoyed."

"I wouldn't enjoy it, sir," said the mule.

"You are a hero. What I offer you is fully deserved.

You will be one of the famous personages of our era."

"I am completely happy where I am, sir," repeated the mule.

"You will be waited on hand and foot." The general was beginning to wax enthusiastic. "The Army will activate a special unit to handle you. The great of the world will vie for an opportunity to meet you. Millions of people will listen to your every word."

"One of the most unpleasant sales talks I've ever heard," said the mule.

"You mean," said the general, "you don't want all that?"

"The very thought of it, sir, makes me shiver right down to my untidy, for which I beg your pardon, sir, tail."

"But think of the prestige which you could bring to the Army, Francis."

"As you said, sir, I have been rendering valuable services in my present capacity."

"But you're a nobody," said the general.

The mule looked annoyed. "It's your nobodies, sir, who are winning this mule's war."

The general colored. "True," he said. "True. I've always maintained that it was the men of the line who won wars. I made a press statement to that effect only the other day."

"My greatest happiness lies in staying where I am," said Francis.

"But I am offering you a much broader field for service," said the general.

"And I appreciate it, sir," said the mule. "I appreciate it right to the core of my carcass. But I just couldn't be

happy in the life you picture."

"I don't want to issue orders to you," the general said.

"I hope you won't, sir," the mule countered.

"Then don't make it necessary for me to do so." I could see that the general was about to act like one.

"Why can't we just forget this meeting, sir?" suggested the mule.

"I have no intention of forgetting it," the general said. "I would be guilty of a dereliction if I did."

"Sir," said the mule, "I have spent seven years in the Army. The best years of my life. I have served faithfully, tried honestly to obey orders. I have taken pride in being part of what is commonly referred to as 'the backbone of the Army.' My only request is that I be allowed to continue to serve as I have in the past."

"That's impossible," barked the general.

"Sir," said Francis, "suppose I refuse to move?"

"I am the Commanding General in this Theater!" boomed the general.

"And I am a mule!" boomed Francis in an equally determined voice.

The general glared at Francis. The mule met the look without a blink, back feet firmly planted.

"I will not tolerate insubordination," barked the general.

The mule didn't even quiver.

I stood watching the struggle, wondering what I ought to do, afraid to make a move.

"We're going back to Headquarters," stated the general.

"Oh, are we?" said the mule.

"Now," said the general.

"Now?" said the mule.

Suddenly the general squared his shoulders. He took a deep breath.

"TainSHUN!" The general shot out the command.

The mule shook, stiffened, tried to relax. But the years of training were just too much for the animal.

Francis came to attention.

"Right fHace!" roared the general.

The mule turned.

"Forward mHARCH!" commanded the general.

The mule stepped off with precision. The general followed.

I trotted up behind the CG.

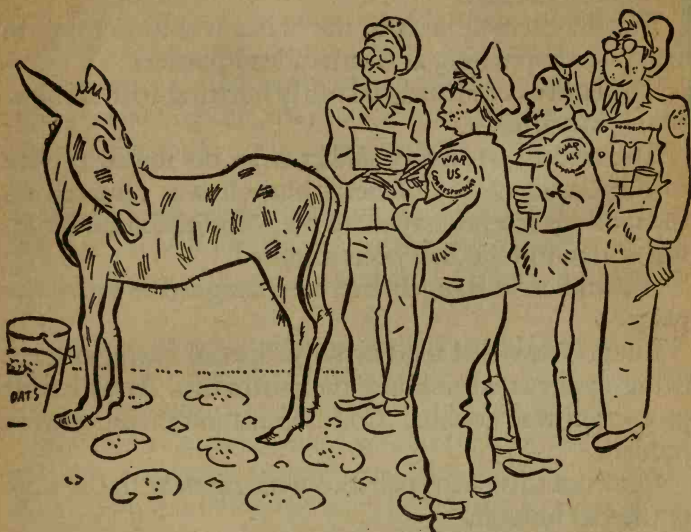
"What about me, sir?" I asked.

The general looked around as though he'd just remembered I was there.

"You can come along too, young man," he said.

Chapter Thirteen

FRANCIS KNOCKS 'EM FOR A LOOP



AMERICA WAS ROCKED BACK on its haunches.

Announcement of discovery of Francis caused more controversy than a national election.

In the big cities of the East public opinion was divided evenly between the believers and those who maintained Francis was some sort of military hoax. The solid South and the Middle West were preponderantly conservative and anti-Francis. The West, led by gullible California,

accepted the mule virtually without dissent.

The War Department, usually so calm in the face of world shattering events, seethed with excitement.

Two B-29s, originally scheduled to join the bombing raids on Tokyo, were diverted to shuttle journalists across the Pacific.

But the turmoil back in the States was as nothing to what was happening at Burma Headquarters.

The entire command was fairly bursting with its new-found importance.

The attention of every soldier from the lowest private to the Commanding General himself was centered on the spacious reception room of the Administration Building where Francis had been installed.

A battalion of Rangers had been assigned to guard the place.

Round it swirled mad activity. Special barracks were being constructed to house the journalists. Anti-aircraft protection was doubled. Communication facilities were trebled.

But even this chaos paled to nothing next to the state of the CG himself.

This worthy soldier was closer to blowing out his brains than any man I had ever seen.

And not without good reason.

The general had told the world about Francis. He had issued a detailed statement of the mule's linguistic, mental, and physical attainments. And he had done the job with a thoroughness which is characteristic of the West Point-bred officer.

Now the world was about to descend on the CG's doorstep to verify the story.

And Francis absolutely refused to say a word!

The mule was most talkative with me. And, though he tended toward the formal with the general, their conversation was animated and often brilliant.

But when any other person came into the reception hall the mule shut up like a Jap pillbox. Both the general and I did our best. We pleaded, argued, cajoled, threatened. The mule was adamant. No talk, except with us.

The general had brought his staff to meet Francis. The group of officers, all generals and colonels, had stood around the mule with a wild variety of looks on their faces.

The G-1 was skeptical. He was a haughty fellow, having just received his star. He regarded the mule with that disdainful leer he usually reserved for company grade officers.

The G-2, who had once worked on a camp newspaper and regarded himself as something of a journalist and liberal, wore an expression of distasteful curiosity.

The G-3, who had played on the '07 team at the Point and never recovered, conducted himself with the air of a man who was being forced to bet money in a dice game which he knew to be crooked. He kept his hands in his pockets and his lips tightly compressed.

The G-4, who had learned single-entry bookkeeping while stationed in the Philippines and believed that anything more complicated was a device of enemy agents, evinced a sort of timid apprehension.

The other officers on the staff huddled together and eyed the mule with a respect one shows toward a bomb which is expected to explode any minute.

The CG made a short speech about Francis. He

waxed enthusiastic as he described the mule's comments on his various battle techniques. There was real pride in his voice when he said that the animal felt he was a master of maneuver.

During this speech the eyes of the staff had shifted from Francis to the CG. If there was a predominant expression, it was one of sympathy. Clearly the officers thought the Old Man was blowing his top higher than a P-38's ceiling.

The CG turned and introduced Francis to his staff. The mule didn't twitch a muscle, just stood phlegmatically waving his tail.

The general stepped over and patted Francis on the flank. The mule cocked one ear, then subsided into docility.

Seven of the officers shook their heads in unison.

The CG looked worried. He spoke coaxingly to Francis. No result. He spoke sharply to the mule. Silence.

The CG ordered the mule to answer direct questions. He might better have spent his breath on the Sphinx.

I heard later that the staff called an informal meeting to discuss wiring Washington for authorization to remove the CG and confine him to a hospital for "observation."

Now forty-seven representatives of the press were arriving to "cover" Francis.

The Commanding General sent for me.

He was sitting behind his tremendous, glass-covered desk, his hands resting wearily on the arms of his heavy mahogany chair.

Standing at attention before him, I realized suddenly the general was an old man. In every line of his weather-beaten face there was worry.

"Sit down, lieutenant," he said, motioning me to a chair beside the desk.

I sat on the edge of the chair waiting for him to speak.

"Young man—" the CG seemed to be searching for words. "Young man, this is a serious business. A highly serious business."

"Yes, sir."

"I wonder if you realize just how serious?"

I figured my job was to listen. I said nothing, only nodded my head.

The CG licked his lips. "Can you imagine, young man, what it would mean to my family if I ended my Army career in an insane asylum?"

"Yes, sir—I mean, no, sir."

The CG passed a hand over his forehead. "I'm not crazy, young man, am I?"

"No, sir."

"But if that mule doesn't talk, the fact you and I know it can won't do us much good now, will it?"

"I was thinking, sir," I said, "suppose we rigged a secret microphone in the reception hall. Then you and I could talk with the mule, let the people outside listen."

"I thought of that," said the general. "But it wouldn't work. Everyone would think we'd spirited a third person into the room, or that one of us was changing his voice. No, I'm afraid not. Either that mule talks, or you and I, lieutenant, go to a psychiatric ward. Once in, I doubt we'll ever get out."

My mind was in something of a state. The thought

of being confined in a mental institution for life was bad. But the realization that the Commanding General, the highest court of appeal in the entire Theater, was going along was just a little too much.

"Yes, sir," I said. Then I said, "No, sir."

"Suppose we have another go at the mule," suggested the general.

Francis was standing in the over-large, wool-lined stall which had been constructed specially for him. Shining buckets of water and oats stood at his head.

The mule greeted us cordially.

"Do you find your quarters comfortable, Francis?" asked the general.

"To tell you the truth," said the mule, "I don't."

"No?" said the general with real concern. "What is it that you would like, Francis? Anything. Anything at all."

"Well, sir, I don't believe in complaining. But the truth is, after all the years I've spent outdoors I just dislike being confined. I feel cramped in here."

"This is the finest stall any mule ever had in world history," the general huffed.

"Still," said the mule, "I feel confined. Perhaps I suffer from claustrophobia."

"If we put you outside," said the general, "curious people might injure you."

"Ridiculous, isn't it?" said the mule. "Yesterday I was just an ordinary Army pack mule. Then you announce I can talk. Today the world beats a hasty path to my door. I am a celebrity. But it turns out I can't talk. And a week from now, without doubt, I'll be back with the

123rd, a happier, though no wiser, pack mule."

The general had paled three shades. "What do you mean, Francis, it will turn out you can't talk?"

The mule shrugged his withers. "It will just turn out I can't talk."

"But you can talk," said the general.

"Certainly I can," said the mule. "But I'm not going to."

"Why do you persist in your refusal to talk?" asked the general.

The mule shook his head. "General, we've gone over that again and again. I told you when we first met, and I've repeated it, I was happy with the 123rd. I didn't want to be a celebrity. I still don't. The tinsel of cheap popular acclaim nauseates me."

"But I've announced to the world that you can talk," said the general.

"I warned you," the mule pointed out.

"My career will be ruined if you don't talk, Francis."

"Mine will be ruined if I do."

"Think of my family," said the general with pathos in his voice.

"You've certainly got me there," said the mule. "Needless to say, I don't have a family. And, according to even the latest scientific reports, it would be virtually impossible for me to acquire one."

"I have four sons in the Army," said the general.

"Enlisted men?" asked Francis.

"All officers," said the general.

"Then they can take care of themselves," stated the mule.

"You realize," said the general, "I am the Command-

ing General of this Theater, your Commanding General?"

"Of course I realize it," said Francis.

"Then you understand if I order you to talk and you refuse you are guilty of insubordination?"

"I do," said the mule.

"And you intend to be insubordinate?"

"Blood," said Francis, "is thicker than water."

"What's that got to do with it?" asked the general.

"You're a commanding general. And I—I am a mule and I can be as stubborn as one. Just at the moment I intend to."

Anger flushed the CG's face. "I could have you shot," he thundered.

Francis shook his head. "I doubt it, general. I very much doubt it. What excuse would you give for having me shot?"

"I could say you were out of your head," said the CG.

"Now, now, general," Francis was patronizing, "you with one foot in the nut house. That would never do."

"I could get a club and beat you within an inch of your life," said the CG desperately.

"You're becoming rattled, general." Francis twitched an ear. "Even such a suggestion is a strategic error. Shows your hand too clearly. Let's suppose you raised one little finger to me, just a gentle slap, mind you, but in anger. Then suppose I decided to change my mind and talk. Of course I'd embroider the affair. I can see the headlines now, 'Mule Beaten by General.' What a story! What a general!"

The CG paled, then reddened again in anger. "Damned inconsiderate, stupid, stubborn mule!" he

stormed. "Not worth the powder to blow you to hell. Mess up my life. Mess up my command. Mess up the whole war effort. Damn you!"

The CG drew himself to attention, did an about-face and stalked from the room. I followed.

"Keep your shirts on," the mule called after us.

The forty-seven press representatives filed into the reception hall. There were correspondents from press associations, magazines, and radio networks.

The group arranged itself in a half-circle around the mule.

Francis stood relaxed, his brown eyes fixed on the ground in a dull stare.

As the Commanding General entered, the buzz of subdued conversation stopped abruptly. He walked over to the mule, laid a hand on the animal's flank, faced the group.

The CG radiated as much confidence as a pugilist who had just entered the ring with Joe Louis. He stuttered a bit, then managed to emit a growl which, when translated, proved to be a welcome to his Headquarters. The group stirred uneasily.

The general proceeded with a brief description of the fighting in Burma. He talked of the tremendous feats being performed by the foot soldiers, of the handicaps of terrain and weather. He touched upon the combat quality of the Japs. Finally he seemed to run out of ideas and paused.

"And the mule, general?" asked one of the correspondents.

"This, gentlemen," the CG lowered his voice, "is

Francis."

"That's what we came to see," said another of the correspondents.

"Gentlemen," said the CG, "I have been an officer in the Army of my country for more than thirty years. I have served, not without distinction, and now I find myself in the most embarrassing situation of my entire career."

There was a murmur of surprise from the group.

The CG went on to describe the reports which had been brought to him concerning the mule.

The correspondents were taking notes with furious intensity.

The CG told how he had decided to make a personal investigation. He described his first meeting with Francis.

The correspondents were leaning forward. Several men who could take shorthand were recording the general's every word.

The CG told graphically of the difficulties he had encountered in forcing the mule to talk.

At this point the correspondents began looking at each other. I caught one or two sly winks.

Finally the general told of his latest conversation with Francis, of the animal's absolute refusal to talk to any person except the general and myself.

"And so, gentlemen," the CG finished, "I find myself in an impossible position. I have here one of the most remarkable animals in world history, a mule who can talk, but a mule who informed me less than an hour ago that he has no intention of talking and, as far as I'm concerned, I can go hang. Gentlemen, I am at your mercy."

For a moment the group stood in stunned silence. Then the air was filled with excited exclamations. I caught such phrases as: "Fake . . . Greatest hoax in Army history . . . Must be crazy . . . Halfway round the damned world . . . Wildest story I ever . . . America will never take this . . . The president will have to explain . . . Triumph for the Axis . . . We're all fools . . . It's not the mule, it's us . . ."

The general drew himself to attention.

"Unfortunately, gentlemen, that is the situation." He marched from the room.

All hell broke loose!

Correspondents were cursing. They were yelling. They were demanding their money back. They were writing furiously, looking for telephones, making threats, stamping, clapping their hands, punching each other, and generally behaving like a Jap regiment in a Banzai charge.

I stood beside the mule, watching and wondering what was coming next.

Slowly the mob dissolved as correspondents rushed off in search of means to report the greatest hoax ever perpetrated on the world.

I waited. The last correspondent, a *Time* magazine man, turned at the door, shook his fist at Francis, glared at me, and disappeared.

"Well, Francis," I said, "you've certainly cooked our geese."

"Geese," said Francis.

"I hope you realize," I said, "that you have just sent your Commanding General and me to an insane asylum for life."

"Nonsense," said Francis. "They'll keep you there just long enough for a good rest. Then the excitement will die and they'll realize you're tolerably sane and let you out."

"You're smart, aren't you, Francis?" I said bitterly.

The mule didn't answer me.

I looked around. Some of the correspondents had just entered the room. There were eight of them, a rather nondescript group looking ill-kempt in their badly fitting khakis.

The men wandered over to the mule, stood around looking at the animal.

One of the Associated Press men was talking. "I tried to figure what the Old Man was up to, but it's over my head, way over. Speaking to us he seemed sane enough. But they tell me certain types of paranoia give that impression—"

An International News man interrupted, "Might be someone took the Old Boy for a sleighride, the kid here. It's been done to CGs before."

"Doesn't sound logical to me," said a *New York Times* man. "A general in a Theater of this sort is under quite a strain. Climate gets you. And it's been touch and go with the Japs for a hell of a while. Me, I'm inclined to the bats-in-the-belfry school of thought."

A second AP man was looking at Francis. "You know," he said, "one of the wildest aspects of this damned story is that they didn't pick a better-looking animal."

I saw Francis's ears begin to rise.

"Sorry-looking beast, isn't it?" said the United Press man. "Sort of a four-footed Sad Sack."

Francis was stiff as a board.

"Stinks, too," said the first AP man.

"All mules stink," said the *New York Times* man.

Francis was trembling.

"What I can't understand," said the International man, "is why they chose a mule for the stunt. Mules, you know, are the stupidest hybrids in existence."

"Pathetic beasts of burden," agreed the first AP man.

"But not dumb enough to work for a newspaper!"

The words cracked out like whip snaps.

As one man the correspondents pivoted.

"Who said that?" asked the AP man.

"I did!" Francis was shaking with anger. *"You want to make something of it?"*

The newspapermen were speechless.

The mule fixed them with a glare. "I have listened to twaddle in my time," said Francis. "I have heard more than my share of fool remarks! I have tuned in on radio commercials where men try to be funny about laxatives! I have heard the ravings of delirious men on the battlefield! There was a time when I endured the stupidity of half-baked recruits. *But, by the tail of my great-aunt Regret who won the Derby, I have never suffered through such disgusting hogwash as you so-called newspapermen are spouting!"*

Foreign correspondents are supposedly the most sophisticated of human beings. They have seen everything, heard everything, done everything—twice. To shock them takes some doing.

Francis did it.

All eight of the men stood rooted to the floor, their mouths hanging like open bomb bays on a B-29.

"Gentlemen of the press!" spat Francis. "*A hey nonny nonny and a nuts to you!*"

"You can talk!" said the AP man in a whisper of awe.

"I hope to kiss a duck I can talk!" said Francis. "You just heard the general say I could talk. But oh, no, you gentlemen of the press are too smart. You know everything. You even know about mules. Stink, do I?"

"Maybe we're nuts!" said the *New York Times* man.

"No doubt about it," said Francis. "A man with sense would never spend his life scrounging for a newspaper. What a stinking profession. And you had the nerve to suggest that I stink!"

"But you really can talk!" said the International man.

"Don't seem so damned surprised," snorted Francis. "I resent it. I resent it almost as much as I resent you. And that's plenty!"

Someone had passed the word down the corridors that the mule was talking. In a twinkling the room was filled with breathless correspondents. They stood, leaning forward, eyes bulging, too fascinated to think of taking notes.

"May we ask you some questions?" asked a UP man who seemed to have constituted himself spokesman of the group.

"I'm a poor, dumb beast of burden," said Francis.

"We've traveled thousands of miles to get here," said an NBC man.

"Well, where the hell do you think I came from?" asked the mule.

"We're extremely anxious to be friendly," said the UP man.

"How too, too divine," saccharized Francis.

"Just a few questions," pleaded the UP man.

"I'm a sucker for a soft-spoken word," said Francis. "But keep a civil tongue in your head. I don't like newspapermen. I don't like interesting people. And one more suggestion about how I stink, and I start kicking. At that I have no rival in this room. Shoot."

The faces of the correspondents were white. Some trembled so they could hardly stand. Others stood board-stiff.

"How did you learn to talk?" asked the UP man.

The correspondents strained to hear better.

"A silly question," said Francis. "A thoroughly silly question. How did you learn to talk?"

The UP man looked unhappy. "My mother taught me," he said.

"She probably had quite a struggle," Francis said. "Are people constantly expressing surprise you made the grade?"

"No—but—" The UP man was growing red in the face.

"Of course they're not," said Francis. "People take it as a matter of course you can talk. I suppose some even think you can write. Personally I always thought your style florid. Now, as for my talking, I too prefer you take that as a matter of course."

"How long have you been able to talk?" asked an International man.

"You gentlemen aren't even quick on the uptake, are you?" said the mule. "I've been able to talk since I was old enough. But see here, gentlemen, and I have my hoofs crossed when I use the term, despite the fact we have a representative of the *Christian Science Moni-*

tor present, this is no time for airy persiflage. I've admitted I can talk. Let's let it go at that. If you want to ask any questions make them worthwhile."

"Can you fly?" asked a Reuters man.

"Nice accent," said Francis. "I enjoy a well-modulated British accent. But, gentlemen, there's a war going on, and all you want to ask is personal questions. It so happens I can fly. But I don't like to."

"Why not?" asked someone in the back of the room.

"It's an effort," said Francis. "And it's dangerous. I go into a spin easily. But what's that got to do with the war?"

"Are all the exploits the general described true?" asked a *Time* magazine man.

"Trivia," said Francis. "Some of them I've virtually forgotten."

"How did you happen to befriend the lieutenant?" asked the UP man.

"He was malleable," said Francis. "I like 'em young and innocent. They're easier to handle."

"Have you handled many officers?" asked the UP man.

"You've never been in the service, have you?" Francis raised his eyebrows.

"No," said the UP man.

"I've been in seven years," the mule said. "Use your judgment."

"What do you think of the Japs?" asked a voice.

"Will I be quoted?" asked Francis.

The correspondents looked at each other.

"Come, come, gentlemen," said Francis. "I ask a simple question, will I be quoted?"

There was a commotion at the door. The mob parted and the Commanding General entered. He was cocky as an aviator who had just made ace.

"Well, well, gentlemen, how do you like Francis?" he asked.

"Are these the leading representatives of the press?" interrupted the mule before anyone could speak.

"They most certainly are," said the general.

"Hmf," sniffed the mule. "Just lends credence to my claim that the only reliable reading is the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*."

"Come now, Francis," said the CG soothingly.

"General," said the mule, "I am a democratic animal. But when I look over this crew I realize how right I was to prefer the life of a pack animal. Strictly palookas, eh, general?"

"Francis, careful what you say," said the general. His smile had faded.

"I didn't want to talk, general," the mule said. "But I've been insulted. Not that I mind specially when I'm insulted by my equals. But this crew—General! No self-respecting member of the Armed Forces of the United States should take it lying down. No, sir! I intend to raise my voice to high heaven and tell the American people the sort of cattle—and I'm not groping for words when I use the term 'cattle'—the press send out to cover wars."

Francis was in fine shape. He ranted and raved and threw insults that made the previous remarks of the correspondents about him seem tame.

The gentlemen of the press were enthralled. The more Francis insulted them, the more engrossed they

became.

The mule was thorough. First he took up the wire associations, pointed out that they were corrupt, prejudiced, untrustworthy, and managed by men of little wit and less mental weight.

Then he hopped quickly from magazines to radio to motion pictures.

Francis didn't pull any punches. He didn't miss a man in the room. He did a professional job of ripping to threads the entire publicity channels of the world.

The general was beside himself. Suddenly he straightened and commanded, "Attention!"

Francis froze.

"That will be all for the time being, gentlemen," said the general. "I will announce any later meetings."

There was a pause.

Then all the correspondents were trying to squeeze out of the reception hall at once. They jammed through the door and spilled into the hall. In half a minute the general, Francis, and I were alone.

The CG looked at the mule, rubbed the back of his neck. "You know," he said, "I'm not sure, Francis, your being able to talk is such a good thing."

"No?" said the mule.

"I've been through many battles," said the general. "But I've never been through anything like this. You covered the field, Francis, the entire field. Press, magazines, radio. One explosion, and you've antagonized the entire group."

"You mean, what I said just now?" asked the mule.

"I do," said the general, sighing like a doomed man.

"Why, general," Francis waved his tail airily, "those

fellows are suckers for bunk. If I'd been impressed, they wouldn't have been. I wasn't. They were. They went for it the way natives go for Spam. A couple more sessions, general, and I'll be the hero of the press."

The general was looking at Francis with awesome respect.

"Don't worry, general," the mule said. "I have everything under control."

Chapter Fourteen

FRANCIS HAS A ROUGH TRIP



WITH BATED BREATH America awaited the arrival of Francis.

Over the Pacific winged the B-29 carrying Francis, myself, and the twelve enlisted men who had been assigned to attend the mule.

We were flying at twenty-four thousand feet, the great plane slipping through the calm air like a dream ship.

Francis stood docilely in his specially constructed stall, relaxed and friendly. He chatted with the members of the crew, joked with the enlisted men, and discussed with me his future.

We had been flying some ten hours and I was feeling slightly drowsy.

I noticed the mule was looking at me out of the corners of his eyes. It was a crafty look and I didn't like it.

"Lieutenant," said the mule, "you appear tired."

"I am," I said. "The drone of the motors makes me sleepy."

"Why don't you slip into the back compartment and grab yourself a little shut-eye?"

"Have you something up your sleeve?" I asked.

"Now, lieutenant," the mule was speaking soothingly, "you know I don't wear sleeves."

"You're planning something," I said.

"How you do go on, lieutenant. What could I possibly plan here in this plane? A little sleep will freshen you up."

"Call me if you want anything," I said.

I went into the rear compartment. There was a bunk with a blanket. I took off my shoes and tucked the blanket under my chin.

I dreamed that I was sitting on the eighth tee just behind the country club. The soft darkness of the night was round me. At my side was a girl, a most gorgeous creature. Her perfume filled the air. She leaned a little closer to me. My arm was tight about her. "Kiss me," she whispered. "Kiss me." Her lips were but an inch from mine—

Crash! Bang! Klunk!

I leaped out of the bunk, bumped my head on the ceiling, cracked my ankle on an ammunition tin, skinned my elbow on a machine gun. I tore open the door into the main compartment.

Francis was standing on a stool, his four feet tangled on its small, circular top. He was swaying back and forth like a circus performer on a tightrope.

On the floor lay two empty whisky bottles. Three of the enlisted men were stretched out snoring.

"Hi ya, looey," said Francis. "I feel wonderful. I feel—(hic)—marvelous. I feel—whoops—I can fly through the air with the greatest of ease, the daring young mule on the flying toadstool— Doesn't rhyme, does it? But it's all right, looey—(burp)— Everything's all right."

"Francis, where did you get that whisky?" I demanded.

"I want to tell you something," said the mule. "Come a little closer— Not too close. Wouldn't like to fall on you."

"Get down off that stool," I ordered, approaching Francis.

The mule pursed his lips. "You know something, looey," he whispered, "you know, even though you're not a mule, I love you."

"Get down off that stool," I repeated.

"Yes, sir, looey, I love you like you had four legs. Oh, my, how I love you."

"I order you to get off that stool," I said.

"I can't, looey, ol' boy, ol' boy, ol' boy—(hic)—I really can't. I'm stuck up here. I'm trapped for life. Oh, me. Oh, my, was ever a mule in such a sad predicament?"

Francis began to cry. Great tears streaked down his

nose and he licked at them. "I'm so—(burp)—unhappy, loooey. Tell me, looey, you like me, don't you—(hic)—I mean, you like me because of myself, not because I happen to be able to talk, not for any of that tish—(burp)—tosh, but just because I am a really nice mule?"

"Of course I like you," I said. "Now climb down off that stool and tell me where you got the whisky."

"I have—(burp)—friends, loooey."

"But you didn't know any of these enlisted men?" I said.

The mule rolled watery eyes. "I must have a winning personality, eh, loooey?"

I stepped closer to the mule and started to put my arms around his neck. "Here, let me help you down off that stool."

"Stand back, loooey. Stand back. I'm about to yump."

"Easy, Francis, easy."

Suddenly the mule leaped. Four legs flailed the air. Four hoofs hit the floor. Francis wobbled, pitched, reeled, but remained standing.

"I made it!"

"Thank Heavens," I breathed.

Francis swayed. "Looey, this house is twisting round—(hic)—and round. Must be an earthquake. Where are we?"

"You know perfectly well where we are," I said. "We're in a B-29 flying over the Pacific Ocean."

"Which way are we flying?" demanded Francis.

"Toward America. We'll arrive in Washington tomorrow afternoon."

"America!" screamed Francis. "Stop the ship! Turn it around! Let me out! I came over here to kill —(burp)

—Japs. I want to kill one right now!”

Francis reeled toward the forward door which opened into the control room where the pilots and navigators were.

“Stop!” I shouted. “You can’t go in there.”

“Out of my—(hic)—way, looey, or I’ll kick you through a bulkhead.”

Before I could halt the mule he had taken the knob in his teeth and pulled the door open.

Sweat was pouring off me. For a moment I couldn’t move. I heard a clatter in the control room. Someone was swearing. The plane banked, dipped, lurched into a climb, came level again.

I staggered to the doorway.

Francis had managed to cram himself into the vacant seat of the co-pilot. His legs were draped over the controls.

The pilot, his face the color of a bursting star shell, was struggling with the duplicate controls. He saw me out of the corners of his eyes.

“Get that damned mule out of my cabin,” he roared.

“Turn around!” yelled Francis. “Or by the tail of my great-aunt Regret who won the—(hic)—Derby, I’ll wreck this hunk of plane. Turn around!”

“Take your paws off the controls!” shrieked the pilot.

“They’re not paws,” said Francis.

“Whatever they are, take ’em off!”

“Turn the ship around,” demanded Francis, “or I’ll turn it.”

“I can’t hold this thing long,” screamed the pilot.

“Better turn it around,” I said. I winked.

“I saw that wink,” roared Francis. “No finagling. Or

so help me, I'll—"

"All right," spat the pilot between clenched teeth. "All right. I'll turn around."

The great plane banked in a graceful curve.

"That's—(burp)—better," said Francis. The mule half rolled out of the seat and came down standing. "No more tricks now. Say, looeey, I'm—(hic)—sleepy."

"Right back here, Francis," I said.

Without a murmur the mule walked out of the control room and back into his stall.

"Oh, my untidy tail," said Francis. "All of a sudden I'm so terribly, terribly sleepy. Must have been somethin' I et." The mule's eyes began to close. "You're a sweet person, looeey, a very—(burp)—unusually sweet person. My goodness, looeey, all of a sudden I'm so drowsy. I really must have et something. You'll forgive me, looeey, if I just—(hic)—catch me forty winks—forty unhappy little winks."

Almost before he had finished speaking the mule was asleep. Great snores filled the cabin.

I stepped over and patted Francis on the flank. No response. I swung my arm around in a haymaker and caught the mule flush on the rump. The rhythm of the snores didn't change. With effort I resisted the temptation to give the animal a healthy kick where it would do the most good.

But Francis was dead to the world.

I went to the rear compartment, folded up the cot, carried it back to the mule's stall, set it up across the open end. Then I sat down and looked at the sleeping animal, wondering what sort of a temper Francis would be in when he woke.

The rhythm of the mule's snoring coupled with the drone of the motors was soothing.

It seemed only moments later that one of the enlisted men was shaking me.

"Lieutenant, wake up, sir. We'll be getting into Washington in less than an hour."

"Where are we?" I struggled to a sitting position, rubbing my eyes.

"We're flying over Ohio," said the enlisted man.

The mule was still snoring loudly.

"Has he wakened at all?"

"No, sir."

"You say we'll land in an hour?"

"Less than an hour, lieutenant."

"I guess we'd better rouse the mule," I said. I stood up, moved over to Francis.

"Wake up," I said.

The mule didn't stir.

"Wake up, Francis!" I raised my voice.

The steady snoring continued.

I reached over and patted the mule on the shoulder.

"Come on, Francis. Time to be up."

One bleary eye flickered half open, closed.

I patted the mule's nose. "Wake up, wake up, Francis."

The mule's eyes struggled half open. "Go 'way. Go 'way and leave me alone."

"Francis, we're arriving in a little while."

"Oh, my head, my poor, benighted, mulish head." The mule's red eyes were open now and filled with misery. Suddenly terror came into them.

"I've been wounded," screeched Francis. "What hit

me? Where am I?"

"Easy, Francis. Easy. You haven't been wounded. You're all right."

"My head. My poor head. It's bursting in two. Don't fool me, lieutenant," the voice was nasty mean, "the top of my head's been blown off. I can feel it."

"Nothing's been blown off or in or out," I said. "You're perfectly all right."

"That's what you think," said the mule. "But you can't feel my head. Oh, my, you could fry an egg between my ears."

"You just have a hangover," I said. "Two quarts of whisky without even a chaser. You had it coming to you."

"Well, don't stand there like a petrified mummy!" roared Francis. "Get me an ice pack! Get me some aspirin! Oh, my withers. Oh, my flanks. Oh, my ears and tail, do I have a head on me!"

I returned in half a minute. "There's no ice on the plane, Francis," I said.

"No ice! And this is the super-duper flying palace there's been so much blabber about. Rot! Nothing but a pigsty with wings! Don't stand around looking at me with that silly expression. Do something! Get some compresses. Put water on them. Put gasoline on them. Put anything on them. I tell you, my head's about to explode!"

There was a first-aid chest fastened to the wall. Printed above it were the words, *For Emergency Only*. I ripped it down.

One of the enlisted men brought in a canteen half-filled with drinking water. I unrolled a package of cot-

ton, poured water, wrung it out.

"Here we are, Francis," I said.

"In front of the ears," said the mule. "Oh, that feels wonderful. Watch it. Watch it. The water's running into my eyes— You're a clumsy oaf, lieutenant. Pay attention to what you're doing."

I grabbed a handful of swabs and wiped the trickle of water.

"Better get some bandage and fasten that compress in place," said Francis. "When it becomes uncomfortable, I'll tell you and you can put a fresh one on."

Francis was in a temper. I was too busy obeying his instructions even to brush my hair. I was tying a bow knot in the bandage when the co-pilot entered. "We're coming into Washington," he said. "Prepare to land in five minutes."

"Yes, sir," I said. "Francis, we'll have to take that compress off now."

"Like hell you will," said the mule.

"But there will be a great throng of people at the airport to see you."

"To hell with them. Either they'll see me with a compress on my head or they won't see me at all."

"Now, just a minute, Francis," I said, "you're a celebrity. You have certain responsibilities. You can't just walk out of this plane with your head covered by bandages."

"Why can't I?"

The motors throttled down and I realized we were gliding into the airport.

"Lieutenant," demanded the mule, "brush my right ear. I think the hair is a little ruffled."

"I'm damned if I will," I said.

"I'm damned if I'll move if you don't," said Francis.

I grabbed a brush and went to work on the ear.

"Don't slap, brush."

"I'd like to slap you so hard they'd have to send an expedition to find you," I said.

"My, my, lieutenant, more spirit than I've seen out of you in a coon's age. But keep your shirt on. I'm the one that has the hangover."

The wheels of the plane whirred on the runway.

"Is that dust on my right hoof?" asked Francis.

"I don't know and I don't care," I said.

"Well, it's my hoof and I care," said Francis. "Wipe it off, looey."

The great plane rolled to a gentle stop. I could hear the ramp being pushed into place outside the door.

The pilot came into the cabin. "All right, lieutenant. Say, what's the matter with the mule?"

"Never mind that now," I said. "It's too late to do anything about it."

"Good Heavens, they'll think I ruined the animal. In the name of thunder— Our trip was smooth as glass."

There was a wild tumult outside. The blaring of bands penetrated the sound-proof cabin.

"No time for explanations," I said.

"And we're not in a mood for them, either," Francis chimed in.

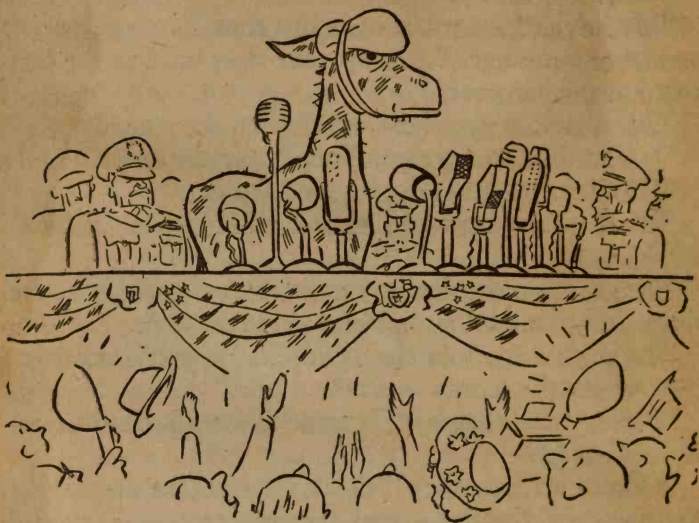
"The mule goes out first," said the pilot. "You go with him, lieutenant. Watch yourselves."

The door of the plane swung open.

Francis and I stepped through onto the ramp.

Chapter Fifteen

FRANCIS COMES TO A DUBIOUS END



I WAS STUNNED. Never had I seen such a sight. Masses and banks and tiers of people. People as far as the eye could see. The entire circumference of the flying-field was packed hundreds deep. Roofs, trees, automobile tops were jammed with cheering, yelling, hysterical people.

As they sighted the mule and his bandage a great silence descended as though a blanket had been thrown over the whole panorama.

Then a tremendous sigh rose from five hundred thousand throats.

Never before had so many beings felt such keen sympathy at the same instant. The very air was charged with compassion.

Francis stood still, looking around with bleary eyes. Then he inclined his head toward me and whispered, "Hell of a mess, isn't it?"

Four generals were approaching the foot of the ramp. I came to a salute. Francis wobbled to attention.

The generals looked nervous. One of them stepped forward and half bowed.

"Welcome home to America," he said to the mule.

Francis didn't move.

The spokesman turned to me. "Lieutenant, we have constructed a special platform in front of the Administration Building. We are all hoping the mule will say a few words."

I looked at Francis. The mule shook his head in protest.

"Yes, sir," I said.

Francis and I descended the ramp between rows of soldiers with fixed bayonets. We walked toward the Administration Building. Before us marched two generals. Behind us marched two more.

"This place is lousy with brass," whispered Francis.

"Watch yourself," I said.

We approached the platform. It was flag-bedecked and ringed with microphones. I saw that a special incline for the mule had been constructed. Somehow the uselessness of this struck me. The animal had been scrambling up and down the Burma mountainsides for

the past few years. He could go up a flight of steps backward with his eyes closed.

"Right this way," said one of the generals with a gesture not unlike a headwaiter.

The mule and I walked up the ramp onto the platform. At the front was a railed enclosure. Before it were two dozen microphones.

Francis and I entered the enclosure.

One of the generals stepped up to the microphones. He motioned with his hand. Six bands simultaneously struck up "The Star-Spangled Banner."

The multitude removed hats, stood in silence.

The general spoke briefly. He said America was proud of its fighting men, and his voice reached a crescendo as he roared, "And America is also proud of her fighting mules!"

The throngs cheered wildly.

"And now," said the general, "I want to introduce to you a great hero, a great soldier, a great mule, Francis!"

The mule stepped forward.

The masses were silent.

With bloodshot eyes Francis studied the regiment of troops drawn up directly below the platform. His eyes swept the entire field, seemed to rest for an instant on each individual.

Then Francis spoke.

"Morons!" said the mule. "Stupid, ignorant collection of clucks—"

The multitude's first gasp of surprise at hearing the mule's voice died in a half-million throats.

"For Christmas sake, Francis," I hissed, "are you nuts?"

"Shut up," whispered Francis. "I'll handle this my own way."

The mule turned back to the microphones.

"A half a million people here, they tell me. All gawking and staring and flapping their ears in the wind. Thrill-seekers, curiosity hounds, novelty nuts. Bah!"

The four generals looked at each other.

The thousands were too startled to move.

"Yes," said Francis, "a sorry-looking collection—"

There was a long pause. The mule looked around the field. "But," and suddenly Francis's voice rang out strong and clear, "by the tail of my great-aunt Regret who won the Derby, you are Americans! You are my people! You are the finest collection of human beings on the face of this sorry old world! I love every damned one of you, so help my mulish hide!"

For a second there was silence.

Then pandemonium broke loose. Even the generals were cheering. Hats sailed into the air. People were pounding each other on the back. Husbands were kissing their wives and other men's wives. Hysteria reigned.

It had been arranged that Francis go directly to Fort Washington, a military installation some twenty miles down the Potomac from the Capitol.

We made the short trip in one of the most impressive cavalcades in history.

Our specially built bus was flanked by staff cars loaded with generals. Mere colonels couldn't get within five hundred yards. There were tanks, half-tracks, weapons carriers, command cars, jeeps, and limousines. All were half buried in flags and bunting. A thousand MPs on

motorcycles raced back and forth keeping things confused.

It was quite a trip.

Fort Washington had been in a dither of preparation for days. The main parade grounds, far inside the Fort, had been ringed with a double barbed-wire fence. In the center of an expanse of green a magnificent stable-club had been built. Beside it was a new shack for attendants and guards.

Passes at the Fort had been canceled. Guard details had been doubled. Roads leading in were closed to all traffic. The entire reservation, in fact, had been transformed into a vast haven for the Army's leading celebrity.

I saw Francis installed in his rest quarters. I introduced him to the general in command of the Fort. The CG was extremely polite and the mule unnecessarily abrupt. I felt sorry for the general.

The plan, formulated by the War Department, called for Francis to enjoy seven days of rest before starting out on a nation-wide tour. The mule was to appear in all the leading cities. Admission was to be charged, and it was estimated that enough money would be raised to finance the combined Army-Navy Relief Fund for the duration.

I had been granted a seven-day leave. I was to proceed to my home, spend a week with my family, then meet Francis in Chicago where the mule was to make his first speech at Soldier Field.

I walked into the stable to bid Francis good-by.

"You ought to be fairly comfortable here," I said. "I notice your stall is plush-lined, air-conditioned, indirectly lighted. An entire platoon has been assigned to see that you have everything you want."

"Everything I want except peace of mind," said Francis.

"What's the matter?"

"Have you seen the schedule they've planned for me? Speeches, public appearances, more speeches. All the way across the country and back again. I'd rather be shot. I'd rather do KP for the rest of my life. You know, lieutenant, this is all your fault."

"My fault, what do you mean?"

"Back in Burma with the old 123rd I was a happy mule. I was a member of a fighting detachment. I was doing my part. I had the respect of my associates. Also, loooy, I knew a few angles. Now what am I? I'm a show piece, a bird in a gilded cage, a pushover for a microphone, a decoration for a speaker's platform. Look at this lay-out. It's enough to turn your stomach."

"But think of all the good you can do, Francis. Think of the opportunities you have."

"Bushwah with catsup; I'm a fighting mule!"

"Maybe you'll get to like it," I suggested.

"Yeah, like olives," snorted Francis. "I say it ain't hay and to hell with it. I wouldn't be surprised if I didn't run out on the whole show."

"You couldn't do that," I said.

"Maybe I couldn't," said Francis. "Then again, maybe I could."

"You mean you'd desert?" I asked.

"It's quite a hill," said the mule. "But I might go over it."

"You'd never get away with it."

"I might, lieutenant. I might—if the right opportunity presented itself. I'm pretty good at getting away with

things, as you know."

I shook my head. "Anything else I can do for you before I leave?"

"Where are you going?"

"Home," I said. "I have a seven-day leave."

"I suppose your mother will slobber all over you," snorted Francis. "A mess of mawkish sentimentality."

"I guess I'd better go now," I said.

"Damn it all, lieutenant, there must be something the matter with me."

"Why?"

"I hate to see you leave."

I went over and put my arm around the mule's neck. "It will only be for a week, Francis," I said.

"You're really not a bad guy, lieutenant. You're really not."

"Take care of yourself, Francis."

I arrived in Chicago two hours before the mule's plane was due. I'd had a wonderful week at home and was full of vim. More than that, I was looking forward to the tour with Francis.

I hopped off the train and started into the main station. Then I heard a newsboy yelling!

"Extra! Extra! Read all about it. Mule killed in plane crash!"

I staggered. Grabbed a paper. There it was in blazing headlines:

FRANCIS KILLED IN PLANE CRASH

I must have been crying. I could hardly read the story — The plane bearing the mule had taken off from Wash-

ington on schedule. The weather was perfect. Over the Kentucky hills the ship had run into a thunderstorm. It was climbing to get above the squall when lightning struck the right wing. Two motors went dead. The crew said Francis had taken charge, ordered the men to jump. The pilot reported that as he was about to abandon ship the mule had smiled at him and said, "Carry on. I am giving my life for my country."

I was numb with misery.

I stood there in the great station, confused.

Somehow I made my way to a taxi stand.

"Take me to the nearest Army airport," I told the taxi driver.

The air corps officers were more than understanding. Fifteen minutes after I arrived at the field, a reconnaissance plane was gassed and warming up on the runway.

Three hours later I was in the control room of an airport in Kentucky, only ten miles from where Francis's plane had crashed.

A cavalcade of jeeps set out for the scene of the disaster.

We had to climb the last half mile on foot.

At the end of a swath of crushed and burned trees we came upon the wreck of the plane. It was a twisted, blackened mass of metal. One end of the cabin was crushed as though it had been pressed between the teeth of a vise. Both wings were torn off. Fifty yards away a motor was still smoking.

A forest ranger stood guard.

I went up to him. My heart was beating wildly and waves of fever swept over me.

"Did you find any bodies?" I tried to keep my voice steady.

The ranger looked at me quizzically, spat some tobacco juice. "Wasn't no bodies," he said.

"Was there a mule?" I asked.

The ranger speculated a moment, spat again. "Wasn't no bodies at all."

"Can we go inside the plane?"

"Shore," said the ranger. "But I already been inside and there ain't no bodies."

I stepped through the opening where the door had been. The interior of the cabin was charred rubble.

The ranger had followed me.

"If a mule had been in here, would there be anything left of it?" I asked.

"Shore would," said the ranger. "Bodies got a lot of liquid in 'em. Specially mules' bodies. They're tough."

I walked from one end of the cabin to the other, stepping over debris, peering fearfully into crannies and under sheets of twisted metal.

There was no sign of a body.

Suddenly it struck me!

All those heroics of Francis—ordering the crew to jump—"Carry on. I am giving my life for my country—"

Had it all been a build-up?

Hadn't Francis always claimed he could fly?

Hadn't the mule told me he was going over the hill if the opportunity presented itself?

In my mind's eye I pictured the scene; the plane wobbling and dipping above the storm, motors sputtering, the crew leaping, Francis there in the deserted cabin, a smile of triumph lighting his face, calmly stepping out into the air.

I started, blinked my eyes, looked around the twisted,

scorched wreckage.

Was I just dreaming? Was the broken, lifeless body of the talking, flying mule lying somewhere in the Kentucky hills?

Or was this just another of the mule's fabulous stunts?

That's all I know about Francis.

To the best of my ability I have recounted fully my experiences with the mule.

Of course they're fantastic. So is the atom bomb.

But, as surely as Hiroshima was flattened, every word I have written is true.

Since the day the plane crashed I've spent my time trying to find the mule.

I've wandered over most of Kentucky and part of Tennessee. Mountain folk have told me of seven talking horses, five talking cows, one talking duck and three talking mules.

I've investigated every one of them.

All I've discovered is twenty-four moonshine stills. And the fact that mountaineers have a way of using buckshot and answering questions afterward.

My rear resembles a sieve.

Whether Francis is alive I do not know.

But if he is, then undoubtedly, at this very moment, the mule is standing contentedly in the shade of some sassafras tree, his tail swishing listlessly. While he indulges in the delicious satisfaction of being AWOL. *And so what!*

Me?

I miss the animal so I'm almost beside myself.

In the wee hours of the morning, lying in my warm

bed, I suddenly leap up, sure I've heard a voice saying:

"Lieutenant, by the tail of my great-aunt Regret who won the Derby, why the Army ever commissioned—"

I'm going right on searching for Francis.

Because, in my heart, I feel sure the mule is alive.

Absolutely sure.

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Chart of what Francis thinks makes a GI
mule different from other GI's.

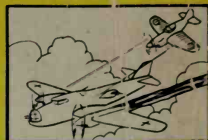
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