

Reprisal

GEORGE FULLEN

SAM was just too tired to pay much attention to the soldier who paused at the entrance and slid his eyes over the long, low building which was a combined Post Exchange and Red Cross Club. On the side toward the ocean, numerous posts had been imbedded in the ground and round tops nailed to them to serve as tables. A sign announced that it was a beer garden. Here were gathered the worshipers of sun, sea air and beer, and not a few who found watching specks on the horizon become ships and the surf leaping high against the rocks on the coast less boring than doing nothing. After a long, careful study of the crowd, the man's eyes caught Sam's, and Sam was startled into recognition.

"Sam," Ralph shouted as he approached the table.

"Ralph, I'll be damned!" was all Sam could say as Ralph clutched his hand and thumped him affectionately on the shoulder. "When did you get in?"

"Last night," Ralph answered. "Never expected to find you here. Thought you went home a month and a half ago. What's the delay?"

"I'm 'waiting for ships that never come in' like everyone else in this hole." It was an old joke to the men at the table and no one laughed. As Sam mentioned the names of the men in the group, Ralph pulled up a beer case, sat on it and accepted a bottle of beer. Then Sam asked him: "What's new in Algiers?"

"Nothing," Ralph answered. "Dearest town I ever saw since all the 'old-timers' started shoving off. These new guys haven't got any idea of how to enjoy life. Speaking of enjoying life, I've never been in Casablanca before and I'd like to see the sights."

"This town's got some," Sam replied with that curiously possessive pride which comes with seniority. "Real bars — and Martinis that'd walk off the table if you didn't hang onto them. When do you want to go in?"

"How about this afternoon?"

"What's your hurry?"

"Well, we're not supposed to be here long."

Some of the men at the other tables turned to stare and to wonder what was so damned funny.

Ralph and Sam crawled off the truck which had finally picked them up after more than an hour of waiting in the heat of the African sun. They knocked some of the fine, cloying dust of Camp Dushane from their pants and stood for a moment looking at the familiar spectacle of shabbily dressed Continentals and colorfully ragged Arabs, slowly rattling carts and small, speeding European cars, and army trucks, busses and jeeps. Shine-boys, prostitutes and black-marketeers crowded the small square where the trucks unloaded *les Americains*.

"That's the Vox," Sam said, pointing toward a large, modern building. "Red Cross Club, movies, snack bar and ice cream — sometimes."

"Same old stuff. I'd rather see the town. I've got a watch I want to sell, too."

"I wouldn't, if I were you. This isn't a good town for the *Marche Noir*. Every-time you turn around in camp, you hear about someone getting rooked. Too many transients. The town's as bad as when I landed here two and a half years ago."

"Well, let's look around anyway," Ralph said, and Sam knew that he might

as well talk to the Sphinx. Ralph had a high regard for the mighty dollar and none of Sam's scruples.

"That's the Montmartre Bar over there, but it isn't open 'til four. Nothing's open 'til four. I know! We can take some pictures up in the park."

They walked up the street. At the corner, they stopped while Sam pointed out the *Banque du Maroc*, a large building of marble and granite which combined the best of modern and Moorish styles of architecture, and the Post Office across the street, completely Moorish, very garish and ornate. They crossed the street and walked toward the tower of the City Hall. It was when they stopped in the park to take pictures that the boy approached them. The 'boy' was like all Arabs except the very young and the very old; he might have been fifteen or fifty.

"Hey, Joe," he said, taking them in with his shrewd, darting eyes. "You got bizness? You got watch for sell, mebbe? You speak me one time; I speak you."

Sam brushed him aside, but Ralph asked confidentially: "How much will you give? *Combien?*"

The Arab named a figure equal to fifty dollars. Ralph just looked as though he could not have heard right and made a counter proposal at four times that figure. The Arab offered five dollars more, and they settled down to the haggling. Sam wanted to say: "Look here! You know you're going to compromise for about a hundred dollars; so why not save time and agree on that price right now?"

Instead, he said: "Listen, Ralph! Don't let the bastard fool you. They've been pulling a little deal around here that ends with you paying them to take the watch. They flash five thousand francs just like he did, then palm it, and slip you a fifty instead. And you always have to give them change."

"I'm smarter than any Arab living so

don't worry," Ralph answered and Sam shrugged his shoulders. "I've got him up to forty-five hundred francs and he won't go a cent higher. Ninety dollars for a fifteen dollar watch is pretty good business."

He tried once more, but it was obviously the Arab's last price. As Sam watched the transaction, it was like something done in slow motion that he had seen before and always knew what would happen next. Ralph fished five hundred francs change from his billfold. The Arab waited while the watch was unfastened; then he offered a banknote, carefully folded so that no corner showed. He grabbed one end of the watch strap and surrendered the bill. The slow motion ended as he jerked at the watch. Ralph had been shrewd after all and still held one end of the strap securely. Then the bill was unfolded. It was fifty francs. The next instant, Ralph had full possession of the watch and had a firm grip on the Arab's arm. The Arab dug frantically in the folds of his filthy rags for the five hundred francs which he had already pocketed. Then Ralph had that, too, and the Arab had slipped from his grasp and was gone.

"That was close!" Ralph was breathing hard and looking stupidly at the money in his hand. "I'll be damned. I'm winners fifty francs." He still held the Arab's fifty francs. "If you hadn't warned me, he'd have taken me sure. The switch was almost too fast." He strapped the watch back onto his wrist, and he and Sam started back toward the business district of town, snapshots forgotten.

"So that's why they won't offer an even five thousand," Ralph said. "While you get the change, they make the switch. I'm cured. You can't do business in a town like this."

Sam could not resist saying, simply: "I told you so."

The two men were about two blocks

from the Vox when another Arab attached himself to them. Ralph began chanting: "No, no no, no-no-no—" And then there was one at Sam's side, too. A third seemed to come right out of the wall which they were passing and suddenly Sam knew that it was an unhealthy situation.

"They're giving us the rush," Sam said, slipping the words out through his teeth. "Keep an eye on your watch and pen or they'll steal 'em right off you." They had closed in and were plucking insistently at the men's sleeves, still pretending to offer a deal. They turned at the next corner and Sam knew immediately that they had made a mistake. There was not an M. P. or another G. I. in sight, and although it was a crowded street in downtown Casablanca, they might as well have been alone in the middle of the Sahara. Sam covered the pockets which contained his valuables to let the Arabs know that he was wise to their game. From the corner of his eye, he saw that Ralph had an Arab collared with each hand.

Give it back!" he yelled. As Sam rushed in, he saw something blue fall to the pavement. He grabbed it, recognizing it as Ralph's pen, and got out of the way.

"I've got it. I've got it," he repeated over and over, but either Ralph would not let them go or the Arabs would not get away from him. Sam was furious and common sense deserted him. He waded into them.

Small though they were, the Arabs showed the rugged strength that comes from rough living which naturally eliminates the weakest. But the two men soon had the upper hand, and when the blood began to flow from the nose of one of the Arabs, the wave of temper subsided. The men pushed them away; and feeling themselves free and beaten, the Arabs were soon out of sight. The men retreated wordlessly to the Montmartre.

When the waiter had brought them two Martinis and Sam had gulped his down, the words began to come. His intense anger put to shame the tempest of ten minutes before. His voice was low and husky, soft yet strangely vibrant—too obviously controlled. But there the control ended.

"I hate fights," Sam said. "It's been fully ten years since I've been provoked into one."

Ralph started to say something, but Sam continued: "You know damned well how I feel about the Black Market. And you certainly know that I feel the Arabs to be justified in their sins—" He interrupted himself, grew redder for not having phrased his remark properly, and corrected himself "—understandable, not justified; that I think they are a people who have been sold out by their leaders to the French; and that that is only possible because they are deeply religious and their religion commands their allegiance to those same leaders. It must be the same kind of allegiance that gets me into a fight on your side."

Ralph was angry, too, when he said: "You surely don't think I got into that fight on purpose, do you?"

"Do you think there was no connection between the watch incident and the fight?" Sam asked. "If you do, you're being naive. 'An eye for an eye' is the Arab's motto. You know that as well as I do. This all just goes to prove what I've always said: people who keep their noses clean aren't in much danger of being rolled. We're still winners fifty francs and a bloody nose. I'm damned glad the bus stop is right across the street, otherwise I'd be scared to death."

Sam knew that Ralph wanted to hit him, but he was not afraid of him. That lack of fear, curiously enough, always seemed to accompany the controlled voice and the more precise English. Knowing the full value of his tongue as a weapon, he had often wondered if, perhaps, it was that

lack of fear which made the weapon effective. Now, he knew that it must be. Ralph wanted to beat him up and was quite capable of doing so, but he did not try.

They sat in silence for a while. Finally, Sam got up and Ralph followed him from the bar. At the corner, Sam was nearly knocked down by two drunken sergeants. Standing at the bus stop, he watched them weave their way down the street to the next corner where they stood and talked, punctuating their conversation by tapping a finger on one another's chests. It looked so much like they were having a duel with forefingers for weapons that Sam had to smile. Just before the truck picked up Sam and Ralph, Sam saw them hail a passing taxi, an open carriage drawn by a tired horse that was impassive to the commands and lashes of the Arab driver.

"We want a woman," one of the drunken sergeants said to the driver. They were not too drunk to know from whom to get a lead on what they wanted.

"Oui, Monsieur," answered the Arab. He slapped the reins on the horse's back and drove off down the street, delivering his usual discourse in mixed French, Arabic and English—really made understandable by gestures—which extolled the physical virtues of the women in the house to which he was taking them.

Dusk had arrived as the carriage neared the native quarter. Three sullen faces peered out of the shadows as it rattled on its way, watched it progress a few yards, and then as if by a common decision, the three Arabs padded quietly after it, caught up with it, and hooked a ride on the back axle so smoothly that only the driver was aware of the extra weight on the back of the carriage. He said nothing. If it were merely a stolen ride, he was being more than adequately paid by the two Americans. If the stowaways intended robbery, his cut

would probably be more than his cut from Madame Paulette would be if he were to get them safely to their destination. By the time he turned down the side street which led to Madame Paulette's, it was very dark.

The two blows came so close together that, had the driver been less keenly aware of what was happening, the blows might have seemed to be one. He turned to see the three Arabs climbing over the folded carriage top. Once in the carriage, they raised their clubs and began maliciously beating the two unconscious men. The old driver, who was not too fond of violence, protested. But his protests were silenced by a flood of harsh, guttural Arabic. When they had finished, they pushed the bodies unceremoniously into the gutter. Even as the carriage was pulling away, the four Arabs were arguing about the division of the loot.

Four hours after the carriage had rattled away, the midnight patrol, on its way to check up on Madame Paulette's *etablissement*, turned into the side street. The headlights of the jeep revealed the two twisted, naked bodies just in time for the driver to swerve to avoid hitting them. The other S. P. and the M. P. were out of the jeep before the driver had completely stopped it.

"Goddammit," growled the M. P. who was holding the flashlight while the S. P. straightened the bodies.

"Well, they're alive anyway," he announced with a sigh of relief.

The first S. P. had turned the jeep around, and when he drew up beside them, his buddy said: "Go get the ambulance; they're alive."

As he drove away, the M. P. made a grotesque jest: "Well, Paulette's girls will have to give more for their five dollars tonight."