

## King of the Vermin

by Norman Blum

He awoke with a start. It was less than a yard from him. Its mouth was open revealing large teeth set in powerful jaws with saliva drooling forth. As it licked its chops with the pleasure of anticipation, a spasm of fear went through him. He grabbed hastily, and his fingers enclosed a handful of sand.

"Ahh!" He shouted in its face and threw the sand in its eyes. It yelped and retreated cowering and snarling in fear. It stopped about a dozen feet away blinking and snarling. Then it looked at him, and its snarl changed into that insane laugh which maddened him so. The fingers of his right hand tightened around the handle of his pistol as he started to lift it, but then he checked himself. He remembered he only had two bullets left, and he must save those for when they would all come in for the kill. The rest of the pack was also startled by this outburst and they all retreated a few feet. They were used to running from the death agonies of mightier animals than themselves, he thought. Some of them were growling, and they would usually end their growling with that laugh. The laugh, it was that insulting laugh that made him hate them and not their odious habits or their terrible stench. Why weren't hyaenas like the vultures who patiently waited for their victims to die and then ate them? Why must they insult their dying prey with that laugh?

He couldn't let himself fall asleep again or it might be all over. He rested his chin on his left hand and held the front of the gun handle with his right while propping the muzzle under his chin and against his wrist. When his left hand fell away, it would make his chin fall on the gun barrel and awaken him. He could see them more clearly now for it was almost morning. They were growing bolder every day. They were sitting around him in a circle, some no more than ten feet away. A few were stretched out getting the sleep that they were denying him. He had forgotten how many days it had been since he had slept. He had forgotten how many days it has been since he and his crew had landed in the desert. He looked up at the hyaenas, and he could begin to make out their hungry faces. He fancied that they had probably developed a taste for human flesh by now. He remembered his copilot and still believed his own decision was right.

They had been hit by a lot of flack over Naples on their last bombing run. The big B-17 had lost an engine, part of its right rudder, part of the tail section, and the radio. Also he had lost two crewmen, the tail gunner and the navigator. Unable to keep up with the rest of their squadron, they lost speed and altitude. They were afraid they might have to ditch it, but he made it over the water and back to north Africa. But using only dead reckoning, they had missed the staging point, and had flown a couple hundred miles into the Sahara desert before they realized their mistake. Although his copilot Frank objected he decided they would have a better chance continuing south rather than turning back north. He reasoned that the plane might quit before they got to the base, and they'd probably never find it anyway, just flying around getting nowhere. It was better to keep flying in a straight line. They might have even seen an oasis or a water hole where they could land. At any rate, if they could find some people, they would help them back to their base. They saw only sand, but they flew much farther than he had anticipated. They flew for hours and they must have covered hundreds of miles. They flew so far that the terrain began to change its appearance. Instead of endless sand, it became almost a scrubland of semi-desert. From this, he concluded that they must be somewhere near the northern edge of the great African savannah. When the plane finally ran out of gas, he allowed the rest of the crew to bail out. He and Frank had stayed with it and brought it in for an almost perfect landing.

All that morning he has assessed the damage to the plane and talked to the radioman about repairing the radio. They decided that the radio was beyond repair, so he concluded that they should head south for the savannah that night. He would never forget what Frank had said when he told him what he planned to do.

"You can't do it. We can get the radio working again."

"I just talked to the radioman this morning, he'd said, and he told me it was beyond repair."

"Jim, come over here and tell the captain what we decided."

"Sir, the receiver's out, but since this morning I looked at it again, and I think we might be able to fix the transmitter in a week or so."

"If you get it to work, he'd snapped, and if they receive it, and if they can spare a plane to get it, it will be two weeks before they get here and by then we'll be dead."

"You can't go across the desert or we'll die sooner," Frank responded.

"You're dismissed, Jim."

"Yes, sir."

"Now listen Frank, we have to be close to the northern edge of the savannah. Even if we don't find a water hole, we'll take our side arms along and shoot game. There's bound to be game out there, gazelle, wild hare, lizards. We'll get along out there."

"You're a damned fool if you take us out through that heat. . . ."

"What did you say, mister?" He could feel the blood rise to his face.

"Begging the captain's pardon, but we'll all die out there. . . Sir."

"I'd rather die out there with a fighting chance than starve in this tin cigar while you risk my life tinkering with that damned gadget. We're heading south tonight, and as long as I'm in command I'll thank you to let me worry about the lives of the men. Do you understand?"

"Yes sir."

"Then start getting ready to travel."

He wondered now if Frank had been right. Oh, surely he'd made the right decision, but what had gone wrong? Why should they have died? Frank's face haunted his mind, and his words still rang in his ears.

It had been worse than he expected on the desert, but he had forced them to go on day after day. Frank had fixed him with his icy stare all the way. He knew Frank thought he was doing the wrong thing, but he had to keep pushing them.

"You can't push us any more. We've all gone as far as we can. We're going to stop here," Frank hissed at him through his teeth.

"We have to keep going. We must be near water. Those vultures and hyaenas have to get water from somewhere near."

"You ass, those vultures and hyaenas are here because we've left three dead men behind us, and they're waiting for us to die next."

"I've had enough of you, mister. When we get back from this, I'm going to have you court martialed. Do you understand me?"

Frank sat down passively and so did the other two, for they were now eager for rest.

"Get up!" He shouted at them.

"What kind of a man are you? Do you like to hurt people? Do you like pain? We could have stayed with the plane, and we'd pro-

bably be saved by now. Do as you wish, captain, we're resting here until tomorrow.

He settled down on the sand and stayed there all that afternoon and evening. When dawn came, the other two were dead. He and Frank had to get as far away from the bodies as possible, so they traveled fast that morning. They had to leave the feeding hyaenas behind.

They were both getting very weak when the pack caught up with them, and Frank was a bit delirious from the sun. The pack moved swiftly to encircle them. They were moving in for the kill. To them, these were two dying animals who couldn't defend themselves. The dumb brutes couldn't know that the small pieces of metal these creatures had in their hands made them more deadly than the fiercest lion. As they started to move in, Frank lost his head and started shooting rapidly. Being excited by Frank's shooting, he too began firing until he was down to three bullets, then he realized what he was doing. Frank had emptied his gun, and now in a wild frenzy he threw it at them and started running after them. He ran after Frank and tried to stop him, but he was too weak to catch him and soon he fell. Frank disappeared over a ridge running and stumbling, then getting up and running again, yelling and screaming all the time. The hyaenas padded after him, their tongues out and saliva dripping. There was no need for him to go and see what was happening. He knew it as though it were taking place before his eyes.

He stayed there a long time with his head between his knees before he moved again. There were about half a dozen dead vermin around there now, and he couldn't stand to be near them. He had only gone a hundred yards when he fell down again and decided to stay there. Before sunset, they returned. It seemed that they had made quick work of Frank. After the darkness settled, they tried for him, but he killed one and set the rest running with another precious bullet. All that night he watched them, and he soon learned that they would flee even a loud yell. They were growing bolder all the time, though he was growing weaker, and his yelling seemed to bother them less and less. He could feel the heat of the morning sun on his back, and he knew it would be a hot day. He remembered the hot sweltering days when he was a kid. He and his friends used to go swimming at the lake in the summer. He used to float on the water. All he had to do was just relax his arms, legs, and head, and let the water hold him up. He could feel his arms and legs and head and even his body relaxing and

floating in the water right now.

He jerked his head up quickly to avoid the sharp pain he felt beneath his chin. The iron sight on the barrel of the gun had cut him below his chin when his head fell. He didn't know how long he had dozed before his hand and head had fallen, but the circle had drawn closer and tighter since the last time he remembered seeing them. He shouted and threw sand at them again. They growled and retreated a few feet but soon sat down again. What cowards they were; he thought. They had jaws and teeth more powerful than a lion's, and yet a pack of them were frightened by the yelling of a dying man. Some of the vultures were still circling over him, but most had taken their places behind the hyaenas to wait for whatever was left to them. He had to find some way to keep his mind awake and busy, so he started creating fantasies. He tried to create fantasies of home, but his mind was too exhausted and the heat too great for his brain to think of anything that abstract. He looked around for something to think about, the sand, the scrubs, or the water on the horizon. No, he mustn't think of the mirage. Then it was that his eyes fell on them, the two rows of scavengers with the hyaenas in front and the vultures in back.

He kept his mind busy by arranging the order of nobility of the vermin, with the vilest of them being the greater nobility and the less repulsive being the lesser nobility. Rats would only be knights in this order. Flies and maggots could be counts and barons. The vultures were only dukes and earls, but the king of them all was the hyaena. He had never seen or smelled a creature so filthy and vile in all his life. His hatred for them was a driving force in him now. He looked into the sky at the circling vultures. Some more of them were joining the waiting group, and they were coming from the southeast.

He had noticed that this seemed to be their direction of origin before. He had decided that they must go there to roost, and if they roosted there, there must be trees in that direction. Where there were trees, there was water. There must be water there, if he could only get to it. He had to get to it. He struggled and made it to his feet. He fell, but fought back up to his feet again. He took a few steps and fell. He looked toward the southeast. There, there it was! It was all over the horizon. It was just a few hundred feet from him. Water, all the water he could drink. He struggled toward it falling and staggering. Finally, try as he would, there came a time when he could no longer stand, and he sank down unable to move. He lay there exhausted and breathing heavily. His tongue was so swollen that he could no longer keep it in

his mouth. What a fool he had been to chase the mirage. He must have been delirious. As if it were life itself, his hand had instinctively clung to the gun. He thanked God for that, for they were closing in on him now.

He tried to focus his eyes on them, but he couldn't. He couldn't raise the gun for long, let alone hold it steady. Perhaps he could just pull the trigger and frighten them away. Just then he was vaguely aware of the noise of the vulture's wings as they all took flight. The hyaenas stopped and listened and then they too fled. He did not know what was happening. A short time later he heard a rumbling noise. He could make out the dust, but what was it? A man, no, men were coming, and they were on horseback! He was saved! They would take him back now, and away from these hideous vermin.

They arrived and dismounted around him. One of them picked up his gun and said something in a strange tongue to the others. Then he felt them tugging and pulling off his boots, and one was slipping his arms out of the sleeves of his shirt. He tried to yell, but his throat was too parched and his tongue too swollen. He raised his arm, but they weren't interested in him at all. They rode away with their prizes and left the rest for the lesser vermin. After they left, exhaustion and despair overcame him for the first time. As he was drifting off, he had a most peculiar dream. He dreamt he was floating on a raft in the middle of a cage. He was tied down to the raft, but could see out of his cage. It was like the opposite of a zoo. All the vermin came to look in at him. The rats, mice, snakes, and vultures, all came to see him. Finally, the hyaenas came, and he could smell them, but he felt secure inside his cage. The hyaenas leaped up and broke down the bars. The cage was filled with them, and he could remotely feel them tear his flesh with their teeth as they leaped upon him. They sank their teeth into his legs and shoulders, and some tore at his throat. But all this seemed very far away, and if he felt it at all it felt pleasant. Something deep inside of him swelled up and fought to regain consciousness, but he didn't let it. It felt so pleasant to be far way, and besides, the hyaenas weren't as vile as he had thought them. Among the nobility of vermin, they were, after all, only princes.