

***PERCIVAL
CHRISTOPHER
WREN***



***BEAU
IDEAL***

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Beau Ideal

EAN 8596547187899

DigiCat, 2022

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This book, while a complete and self-contained novel, is the last of the trilogy—*Beau Geste*; *Beau Sabreur*; *Beau Ideal*.

PROLOGUE

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The heat in the *silo* was terrific, and the atmosphere terrible.

A whimsical remark from the man they called Jacob the Jew, to the effect that he wondered whether this were heat made black, or blackness made hot, remained unanswered for some minutes, until a quiet voice observed in good French, but with an English accent:

“It is the new heat, Jacob. Red hot and white hot, we know. We are now black hot.... And when I have to leave this quiet retreat I shall take a chunk of the atmosphere ... a souvenir ... keep it in my haversack.”

The man spoke as one who talks against time—the time when sanity or strength shall have departed.

“Good idea,” mused another voice with a similar accent. “Send a bit to one’s National Museum, too.... You an Englishman?”

“Yes,” replied the other. “Are you?”

“No ... American,” was the reply.

Silence.

The clank of irons and a deep groan.

“Oh, God,” moaned the wounded Spaniard, “do not let me die in the grave.... Oh, Mother of God, intercede for me. Let me die above ground.”

"You are not going to die, Ramon," said the Englishman.

"No indeed," observed Jacob the Jew. "Certainly not, good Ramon. No gentleman would die here and now.... You would incommode us enormously, Ramon.... I go the length of stating that I absolutely do prefer you alive—and that's the first time you've heard *that*, Ramon.... Worth being put in a *silo* for."

"That's enough, Jacob," said the Englishman; "hold your tongue."

The irons clanked again, as though the sick man turned in the direction of the last speaker.

"You'll keep your promise, Señor Caballero?" moaned the dying man. "You *have* forgiven me?... Truly?... You'll keep your promise?... And the Mother of God will come Herself and tend your death-bed.... If you don't, my dying curse shall blast ..."

"I'll see to it, Ramon," said the Englishman quietly. "Don't bother about cursing and blasting...."

"You'll see that I die kneeling!... You won't let me die until I kneel up?... You'll hold my hands together in prayer ... my head low bowed upon my breast?... And then you'll lay me flat and cross my hands and make the Sign of the Cross upon my forehead...."

"As I promised, Ramon."

"You'll let God see that I fear Him.... *He wouldn't mistake me for my brother?*... He wouldn't visit my brother's sins on *me?*"

"God is just," said the Englishman.

"Yes, my poor Ramon," observed Jacob the Jew, "I greatly fear that you'll find God just.... But don't say that you have a

brother, Ramon?"

"*Nombre de Dios*, but I have, *hombre!*..." gabbled the Spaniard. "And he is in Hell ... *Seguramente*.... He was an enemy of God.... He hated God.... He defied God.... And God took him and broke him.... *Caramba!* It is not fair the way God ... *Yes*.... *Yes*.... *Yes*.... It *is* fair, and God is good, kind, loving and—er—just."

"Yes. *Just*—Ramon," said Jacob.

"If I could find your nose, my friend," said the American, turning in the direction of the last speaker, "I would certainly pull it."

"I will strike a match for you later," replied Jacob, a man famous among the brave for his courage; brilliantly clever, bitterly cynical, and endowed with a twofold portion of the mental, moral and physical endurance of his enduring race.

"God will not punish me for my brother's sins, will He, Señor Smith?" continued the Spaniard.

"No," replied the Englishman, "nor him for his own."

"Meaning him, or Him?" inquired Jacob softly.

"We punish ourselves, I think," continued the Englishman, "*quite* sufficiently."

"*Mon Dieu!*" said a cultured French voice, "but you are only partly right, *mon ami*. Woman punishes Man, or we punish ourselves—through Woman."

"Bless ourselves, you mean," said the Englishman and the American immediately and simultaneously.

"The same thing," replied the Frenchman. And the utter stillness that followed was broken by a little gasping sigh that seemed to shape a name—"Véronique."

"Basta!... My brother!... My brother!..." babbled the Spaniard and sobbed, "God will distinguish between us.... *Gracias a nuestra Madre en el cielo! Gracias a la Virgen Inmaculada.... Un millón de gracias....*"

"And what of this accursed brother? Surely no brother of *yours* committed an interesting sin?" inquired Jacob.

"*Cá!* It was the priest's fault," continued the Spaniard, unheeding. "We were good enough boys.... Only mischievous.... Fonder perhaps of the girls and the sunshine and the wine-skin and the bull-ring than of religion and work.... My brother *was* a good boy, none better from Pampeluna to Malaga—if a little quick with his knife and over-well acquainted with the smuggler track—until that accursed and hell-doomed priest ... No! No! No!... I mean that good and holy man of God—cast his eye upon Dolores....

"Oh, Mother of God! *He killed a priest....* And he defied and challenged God.... And I am his twin brother!... God may mistake me for him."

"God makes no mistakes, Ramon," said the Englishman. "Excuse my playing the oracle and Heavy Father, but—er—you can be quite sure of that, my lad."

"Yes, yes, yes—you're right. Of course you are right! How should God make mistakes?... Besides, God knows my brother, *well*. He followed him.... He warned him.... When he swore he would never enter a church again, God flung him into one.... When he swore he would never kneel again, God struck him to his knees and held him there.... Because he swore that he would never make the Sign of the Cross, God made a Sign of the Cross, *of* him."

“Quite noticed the little man, in fact,” observed Jacob the Jew. “Tell us.”

“My brother caught the priest and Dolores.... In the priest’s own church.... My brother married them before the altar ... and their married life was brief!... But of course, God knew he was mad.... As he left that desecrated church, he cried, ‘*Never will I enter the House of God, again!...*’

“And that very night the big earthquake came and shattered our village with a dozen others. As we dashed through the door—the old mother in my brother’s arms, my crippled sister on my back—the roof caved in and the very road fell from before our little *posada*, down the hillside. My brother was in front and fell, my mother still in his arms.... And where did he recover consciousness? Tell me that!... *Before the altar*, upon the dead body of his victim, the murdered priest—who thus saved my brother’s life, for he had fallen thirty feet from the half-destroyed church-roof, through which he had crashed.... Yes, he had entered the House of God once more!...

“It was to South America that he fled from the police—to that El Dorado where so many of us go in search of what we never find. And there he went from worse to worse than worst, defying God and slaying man ... and woman! For he shot his own woman merely because she knelt—just went on her knees to God.... And one terrible night of awful storm, when fleeing alone by mountain paths from the soldiers or *guardias civiles*, a flash of lightning showed him a ruined building, and into it he dashed and hid.

“It may have been the rolling thunder, the streaming rain, or an avalanche of stones dislodged by the horses of

the police who passed along the path above—I do not know—but there was a terrible crash, a heavy blow, a blinding, suffocating dust—and he was pinned, trapped, held as in a giant fist, unable to move hand or foot, or head....

“And, when daylight came, he saw that he was in a ruined chapel of the old *conquistadores*, kneeling before the altar—a beam across his bowed shoulders and neck; a beam across his legs behind his knees; a mass of stone and rubble as high as his waist.... And there my brother *knelt*—before the altar of God—in that attitude of prayer which he had sworn never to assume—and thought his thoughts.... For a night and a day and a night, he knelt, his stiff neck bent, but his brave heart unsoftened.... And thus the soldiers found him and took him to the *calabozo*....

“The annual revolution occurred on the eve of his garroting, and he was saved. Having to flee the country, he returned to Spain, and sought me out.... Owing to a little smuggling trouble, in which a *guardia civil* lost his life, we crossed into France, and, in order to get to Africa and start afresh, we joined the Legion....

“*Válgame Dios!* In the Legion we made quite a little name for ourselves—not so easy a thing to do in the Legion, as some of you may know. There they fear nothing. They fear no thing, but God is not a thing, my friends. *Diantre!* They fear neither man nor devil, neither death nor danger—but they fear God.... Most of them.... When they come to die, anyhow.

“But my brother did not fear God.... And his *escouade* of devils realized that he was braver than they ... braver by that much.... And always he blasphemed. Always he defied,

insulted, challenged God. He had a terrible fight with Luniowski the Atheist, and Luniowski lost an eye in the defence of his No-God. My brother fought with awful ferocity in defence of his God—the God he *must* have, that he might hate and revile Him—the God Who had sat calmly in His Heaven and watched Dolores and the priest....

“In Africa there was little fear of his finding himself flung into a church, or pinned on his knees before a chapel altar! We aren’t much troubled with chaplains and church-parades in the Legion!

“But one day my brother saw a lad, a boy from Provence, a chubby-faced child, make the Sign of the Cross upon his breast, as we were preparing to die of thirst, lost in a desert sand-storm.... My brother, with all his remaining strength, struck him upon the mouth.

“‘*Sangre de Cristo!* If I see you make that Sign again,’ he croaked, ‘I’ll do it on you with a bayonet.’...

“‘If we come through this, I *will* make the Sign of the Cross on you with a bayonet,’ gasped the boy hoarsely, and my brother laughed.

“‘Try,’ said he. ‘Try when I’m asleep. Try when I’m dying.... Try when I’m dead.... Do you not know that I am a *devil*? Why, your bayonet would melt.... *Me!* The Sign of the Cross!... *God Himself could not do it!*’

“And next day my brother was lost in that sand-storm, and the Touareg band who found him, took him to the Sultan of Zeggat.... And the Sultan of Zeggat *crucified* him in the market-place, ‘as the appropriate death for a good Christian!’... Wasn’t that humorous!...”

Silence.

“Yes, God made a Sign *of* my brother,” said Ramon the Spaniard, and added, “Help me to my knees, Señor Smith, and keep each word of your promise, for I think I am dying.”

Silence....

And then a cry of “*Dios aparece*” from the dying man.
Jacob the Jew, great adept at concealment, produced matches and struck one.

The flare of the match illumined a deep-dug pit, its floor hard-beaten, its walls sloping to a small aperture, through which a star was visible. It had been dug and shaped, for the storing of grain, by Arabs following a custom and a pattern which were old in the days when Carthage was young.

It was now stored, not with grain, but with men^[1] sentenced to punishment beyond punishment, men of the Disciplinary Battalions, the *Compagnies de Discipline*, the “*Joyeux*,” the “*Zephyrs*,” the *Bataillon d’Infanterie Légère d’Afrique*—convicted criminals.

The light from the burning match revealed a picture worthy of the pencil of the illustrator of Dante’s *Inferno*—a small group of filthy, unshorn, emaciated men, clad in ragged brown canvas uniforms which, with the grime upon their flesh, gave them the appearance of being already part

of the earth to which they were about to return, portions of the living grave in which they were entombed.

Some lay motionless as though already dead. One or two sat huddled, their heads upon their clasped knees, the inward-sloping sides of the *silo* denying them even the poor comfort of a wall against which to lean.

Beside a large jug which held a little water, a man lay upon his face, his tongue thrust into the still-damp earth where a few drops of water had been spilt. He had drunk his allowance on the previous day.

Another looked up from his blind search, with sensitive finger-tips, for grains of corn among the dirt.

As Jacob held the match aloft, the Englishman and the American gently raised the body of Ramon the Spaniard from the ground. It was but a body, for the soul had fled.

"Too late," said Jacob softly. "But perhaps *le bon Dieu* will let him off with eight days' *salle de police* in Hell, as it wasn't his fault that he did not assume the correct drill-position for dying respectfully....

"No use heaving him up now," he added, as the head rolled loosely forward.

Without reply, the Englishman and American lifted the dead man to his knees, and reverently did all that had been promised.

And when the body was disposed as Ramon had desired, Jacob spoke again.

"There are but five matches," he said, "but Ramon shall have two, as candles at his head and feet. It would please the poor Ramon."

“You’re a good fellow, Jacob,” said the Englishman, “... if you’ll excuse the insult.”

Jacob struck two matches, and the Englishman and the American each taking one, held it, the one at the head, the other at the feet, of the dead man.

All eyes were turned to behold this strange and brief lying-in-state of the Spanish smuggler, court-martialled from the Legion to the Zephyrs.

“Pray for the soul of Ramon Gonzales, who died in the fear of God—or, at any rate, in the fear of what God might do to him,” said Jacob the Jew.

The Frenchman who had observed that Man’s punishment was Woman, painfully dragged himself into a sitting posture and crawled toward the body.

“I have conducted military funerals,” said he, “and remember something of the drill and book-of-the-words.”

But what he remembered was not available, for, after the recital of a few lines of the burial-service, he fainted and collapsed.

“This is a very nice funeral,” said Jacob the Jew, “but what about the burial?”

[1]

A prohibited and illegal form of punishment.

§2

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Suddenly a man leapt to his feet and, screaming insanely, beat the wall with his manacled hands.

“Come! Come! Smolensky” soothed the huge grey-haired Russian who had been Prince Berchinsky. “We mustn’t lose our heads, comrade.... I nearly lost mine once.... Sit down.... I’ll tell you about it.... Hush now!... Hush! And listen.... Yes ... I nearly lost my head once. It was offered as a prize! Think of that! There’s an honour for you!

“It was like this.... I was with Dodds’ lot at Dahomey, you know. He was almost a nigger himself, but he was a soldier all-right, believe me. Faraux was our Battalion-Commander and General Dodds thought a lot of him—and of us. It quite upset Dodds when Faraux was killed at the battle of G’bede, but he kept the Legion in front all the same.... So much in front that he lost me, *le Légionnaire* Badineff....

“I was with a small advance-guard and we were literally pushing our way through that awful jungle when the Amazons ambushed us.... Wonderful women those Amazons—far better fighters than the men—braver, stronger, cleverer, more soldierly.... Armed with short American carbines and *coupe-coupes*, they’re no joke!

“I don’t want to fight any better troops.... Not what you’d call good shots, but as they never make the range more than about twenty yards, they don’t miss much!...

“Well, it wasn’t many minutes before I was the only man of the advance-guard who was on his feet, and I wasn’t on those long.... For these she-devils were absolutely all round us, and as three or four rushed me with their *machetes*, one of them smashed me on the head, from behind, with the butt of her carbine.... Quite a useful bump too, *mes amis* ... for it put me to sleep for quite a while....”

“Lost your head, in fact,” put in Jacob the Jew.

“No, no,” continued the old Russian, “not yet ... but I nearly lost my wits when I recovered my senses ... if you understand me.... For the ladies had divided my property among them to the last rag of my shirt, and were now evidently turning to pleasure after business.

“Dahomeyan is not one of the languages which I speak.... I only know fourteen really well ... so I could not follow the discussion closely.... But it was quite clear that some were for fire and some for steel.... I think a small minority-party were for cord.... And I was under the impression that one merry lass capped the others’ laughing suggestions with the proposal for all three!...

“Do you know, it was for all the world like a lot of nice little girls sitting on the lawn under the trees with their kitten, joyously discussing how they should dress him up, and which ribbons they should put round his neck....

“You know how they laugh and chatter and pull the kitten about, and each one shouts a fresh idea about the dressing-up and the ribbons, and the fun generally.... Well, those nice little girls discussed dressing me—for the table—though it wasn’t a ribbon they proposed putting round my neck.... And undeniably they pulled me about!...

“I could not but admire the way they had tied me up.... I was more like a chrysalis in a cocoon than a bound man.... They *were* playful.... Good actresses too—as I realized afterwards.... When they saw that I had come round, one of them, eyeing me archly, drew her finger across her throat, and the others all nodded their approval.

“The young thing got up, took a bright sharp knife from her waist-belt, and came over to where I lay against the

bole of a tree.

“Grabbing my throat with her left hand, she pulled up the loose skin and began to cut, just as the Leading Lady called out some fresh stage-directions—whereupon she grabbed my beard, pulled my head over to one side, and put the point of the knife in, just below my ear.... I closed my eyes and tried to think of a prayer....

“When it comes to it, having your throat cut is the nastiest death there is....

“And just as I was either going to pray or yell, there was a loud burst of laughter, and the girl went back to her place in the jolly group.... The Leading Lady then, as far as I could make out, said:

“‘Now we must really get to business or the shops will be shut’ ... and told another lassie, who possessed a good useful iron-hafted spear, to put the butt-end of it in the fire, explaining why, with appropriate gesture....

“It was evidently quite a good idea, for the girls all laughed and clapped their hands, and said what a nice party it was....

“While the spear was getting hot, they propounded all sorts of other lovely ideas, and, over the specially choice ones, they simply rocked with merriment.... It *did* seem a pity that one couldn’t follow all the jokes.... When the pointed haft of the spear was glowing nicely, its owner picked it up, and stepping daintily across to me, held the point a few inches from my eyes....

“Not unnaturally, I turned my head away, but, saying that that wasn’t fair, the Leading Lady and the Soubrette made one jump for me and grabbed my head....

“Fine strong hands and arms those ladies had.... I couldn’t move my face a fraction of an inch....

“And slowly ... slowly ... slowly ... that red-hot point came nearer and nearer to my right eye.... It seemed to approach for hours, and it seemed to be in the centre of my brain in a second....

“When it comes to it, *mes amis*, having your eyes burnt out with a red-hot spear-haft is the nastiest death there is....

“But when my right eye seemed to sizzle and boil behind its closed lid, and to be about to burst, my young friend changed her mind, and began upon the left ... and when the iron was just about to touch it she remarked, in choice Dahomeyan, I believe:

“‘Dammit! The blooming iron’s cold!’ and, with a joyous whoop, bounded back to the fire, and thrust it in again....

“Shrieks of laughter followed, and loud applause from the cheap seats.

“Meanwhile the ladies hanged me....”

“*Hanged* you?” inquired Jacob the Jew. “Don’t you mean they cut your head off?... You said you lost your head, you remember.”

“No, my friend,” replied Badineff, “I said I *nearly* lost it.... Not completely—as you have lost your manners.... What I am telling you is true.... And if you don’t like it, pray go elsewhere....”

“There’s nowhere to go but Heaven, I’m afraid,” was the reply ... “being in Hell—and Earth being denied to us.... But pray finish your story, as it is unlikely we shall meet in Heaven....”

“Yes.... They hanged me as neatly and as expeditiously as if they had had the advantage of an education in Christian customs.... They simply jerked me to my feet, made a noose in a palm-fibre cord, threw the end over the limb of a vast tree, hauled upon it and danced around me as I hung and twisted....

“They say a coward dies many times.... That was undoubtedly one of the occasions upon which I have died....

“When it comes to it, *mes amis*, being hanged by strangulation—and not by mere neck-break—is one of the nastiest deaths there is....

“But evidently they let me down in time and loosened the rope from about my neck, for bye-and-bye I was staring up at the stars and in full enjoyment of all my faculties.... Particularly the sense of smell....

“The intimate smell of Negro, in bulk, is like no other smell in the world.... There is nothing else like it, and there is nothing to which one can compare it—and here is a curious fact which should interest the psycho-physiologist.... Whenever I wake, as we of the Zephyrs do, dumbly sweating or wildly shrieking, from a ghastly nightmare, I can always *smell* Negro, most distinctly.... Very disgusting....

“Curiously enough, these fearless savage fiends, who will charge a machine-gun with the utmost bravery and with a spear, are arrant cowards at night ... in mortal fear and trembling horror of ten thousand different devils, ghosts, djinns, ghouls, goblins and evil spirits.... And when I came to, they were huddled around me for protection. I was almost crushed and buried beneath the mass of them as they lay pressed round and across me....

“As I was still most painfully bound, I can only suppose that I was, in myself, a talisman, a *juju*, a mascot, or shall I say, an *ikon*.

“And they had gathered around me in the spirit in which simple peasants might gather round a Calvary, and were using me as some might use a Cross, a holy relic or a charm....

“Yes, to this day I smell that dreadful odour—dreadful because of its associations, rather than of itself—in my worst nightmares and delirium of fever or of wounds....

“I can smell it at this moment....

“I have passed some bad nights—one, impaled on bamboo stakes at Nha-Nam in Tonkin—but this was the worst night of my life ... almost....

“And in the morning the ladies awoke, made no toilette, and gave me no food....

“But they had given me a faint hope, for I could not but realize that, so far, they had only tortured me by not torturing me at all—and it seemed that they might be keeping me, not only alive and whole, but without spot or blemish, for some excellent purpose....

“They were!...

“And when I discovered it, I was inclined to wish that they had killed me with fire or steel or cord—as they did all of our men whom they took prisoner....

“For some reason, possibly on account of my unusual size—I was a fine specimen in those days, six foot six, and with golden hair and beard—they were taking me to good King Behanzin at Kana, as an acceptable gift for a burnt-offering and a bloody sacrifice unto his gods and idols....

“There was a story afterwards, that Behanzin had been told by his sooth-sayers and medicine-men, that he would undoubtedly beat the French if a strong *juju* were made with the blood of a white cock that had a golden comb.... One of our officers, Captain Battreau, said I probably owed my life to my golden comb.... I have a very white skin where I am not sunburnt....

“Anyhow, the ladies took me along—by the inducement of *machete*-points and rhinoceros-hide whips chiefly—to Kana....

“I don’t know whether we marched for a day or for a week.... Yes.... I was strong in those days ... for I believe I ate nothing but raw carrion, and my arms were bound to my body the whole time, as though with wire....

“Kana stands on a hill and is built of earth, clay, and sun-baked bricks, inside a great high wall, yards in thickness....

“We entered through a gate like a tunnel, and, by way of filthy narrow red-earth streets, came to a second, inner wall, which surrounded the royal palaces, *hareems*, temples, and the House of Sacrifice....

“The yelling mob that had accompanied us from the outer gate, crowding and jeering and throwing muck at me—though they kept well out of reach of the weapons of the Amazons—evidently feared to enter this inner city, for that is what it amounted to....

“And I was handed over to a guard of long-speared ruffians and filthy priests who slung me into a big building and slammed the huge double gates.... As I staggered forward in the darkness, I slipped on the slimy, rounded cobble-stones, sprawled full-length and collapsed....

“There was a loud roaring in my ears—not the conventional roaring in the ears of a fainting man, but the buzzing of millions of billions of trillions of huge flies, that soon so completely covered me that you could not have stuck a pin into my body without killing one. Their blue-grey metallic bodies made me look as though I were clad in a complete suit of chain-mail.... And I could not move a finger even to clear my eyes.... I could only blink them.

“And as my eyes grew accustomed to the gloom, I saw that the whitish gleaming cobble-stones were the skulls of men, sunk in the red earth.... And I realized why I was being nauseated by a terrible slaughter-house stench....

“It *was* a slaughter-house.... The House of Sacrifice, of Kana, the Sacred City of King Behanzin of Dahomey....

“That was another unpleasant night, *mes amis*.... Oh, quite unpleasant.... We are in clover here—pigs in clover.... But, mercifully, I was at the end of my tether, and I had now so little capacity for suffering, that I was not clear in my mind as to whether certain things that happened that night were real or imaginary, fact or nightmare....

“They were real enough.... And in the morning I found I was, even as I had either dreamed or realized—actually inside a great wicker bottle or basket, from the top of which my head protruded....

“I could not move a single muscle of my body save those of my face....

“The priests and executioners had been busy during the night, and I was now like a mummy in its bandages, neatly encased in the Sacrificial Basket, all ready to play my

helpless part in the bloody ritual of their unspeakable religion....

“Half-dead as I already was, my one hope was that the Service would be short and early—the sacrifice soon and quick.... It is most uncomfortable to lie in a bottle with nothing to support your head....

“I could see nothing, and hear little, by reason of the huge flies ... but I was aware of tom-toming and shouting without, and hoped that it concerned me.... It did.... The gates of the House of Sacrifice were thrown open and a number of guards, priests, and executioners heaved me up from that terrible floor and carried me outside.

“Oh, the sweetness of that morning air—even in an African town.... It almost made me want to live.... And oh, the relief to have one’s head freed from an inch-thick covering of flies....

“The great Square of the inner town—a Square of which the sides were formed by, shall we say, the Palaces, Cathedrals, Convents, Monasteries and Municipal Buildings of King Behanzin—was thronged by hundreds and hundreds of warriors, both men and women. As my guards carried me across to the biggest of the buildings, all these people fell back to the sides of the Square, leaving the centre empty, save for me and my guards.

“In front of the palace, an ugly clumsy building of red earth and baked clay bricks, sat Behanzin, King of Dahomey, on the Royal Stool. Around him were grouped his courtiers.... I think that His Majesty and they formed one of the least pleasing groups of human beings I have ever encountered—and I have known quite a lot of kings and their ministers....

“As I have already observed, I do not speak Dahomeyan, and at that moment I deeply regretted the fact, and equally so, that none of them understood Russian or even French.... However, French I spoke, in the vain hope that a word or two, here and there, might be understood.

“A few were, as I will tell you....

“My speech was brief and blunt.... I told Behanzin that he was the nastiest king I knew ... the ugliest ... the foulest ... the filthiest ... the most abandoned and degraded.... And I should be much obliged if someone would remove me from a world which he contaminated....

“I had not finished even these few and well-chosen words before I was again seized by my porters and carried to the very centre of the Square, and there abandoned.

“Immediately the Public, obviously well accustomed to these out-door sports and pastimes, fell into perfectly straight lines on each of the sides of the Square, and assumed the position of sprinters at the starting-point of a race—but each with a *coupe-coupe*, knife, axe or spear in his right hand—and looked to His Majesty for the signal.

“The King rose from his royal stool, raised his spear aloft and gazed around....

“I also gazed around, having just grasped the underlying idea of the National Sport, a game in which I had never hitherto taken part, nor even seen....

“Of course—how stupid of me—it was a race-game, a go-as-you-please, run-walk-hop-or-jump.... And my head was the prize!

“I wondered whether His Majesty had gathered that my brief address was not couched in diplomatic language.... He

certainly now prolonged what was, to me, a painful moment.... He stood like an ebon statue, his white ostrich feathers nodding in the breeze, his handsome cloak hanging gracefully from his great shoulders, his spear uplifted, motionless....

“When that spear fell, I knew that every competitor of those hundreds surrounding me, would bound forward like a greyhound unleashed. For a few seconds I should see them race toward me, their bloodthirsty faces alight with the lust of slaughter, their gleaming weapons raised aloft.... And I should go down, the centre of a maelstrom of clutching hands and hacking blades....

“I wondered what would be the reward of the proud winner of the King’s Trophy—the head of the white cock with a golden comb ... the essential ingredient for the making of the strong *juju* that was to defeat the French....

“That black devil, Behanzin, stood steady as a rock, and there was absolute silence in that great Square, as all awaited the fall of the flag, or rather the shining spear-head....

“A woman, standing in a doorway, giggled nervously, and a crouching sprinter, presumably her lord, looked back over his shoulder—only to receive her sharp rebuke for taking his eye off the ball....

“Another woman dashed forward and handed her husband a *machete*, taking his spear back into the hut.... I imagined his saying to her, just before he left the house, ‘Tatiana, my dear, run upstairs and find that new *machete* I ordered last week.... I think it’s on the top of the wardrobe in

my dressing-room, unless that wretched girl has put it somewhere.'...

"And then I glanced again at the King.... Even as I did so, the raised spear-head, which probably had only been uplifted for five seconds after all, began to travel slowly backward.... And there was an audible intaking of breath.... Evidently the giving of the signal had begun, and in the fraction of a second, the broad, bright spear-head would come flashing downward....

"I closed my eyes....

"*Boom ... BANG!*

"I nearly jumped out of my bottle....

"*Boom ... BANG!*

"Two shells had burst in Kana, one just above the inner wall, the other in the corner of the Square itself....

"Our guns!... Our guns!...

"The runners were running indeed—for their *own* heads.... King Behanzin 'also ran' ... if indeed he did not get a win or a place....

"I was forgotten ... before ever the third and fourth shells arrived.... Oh, God! I was *not* forgotten!... There was *one* competitor left!... I supposed he felt attracted by the walk-over.... As he dashed toward me, straight as an arrow, yelling madly, a great spear in his hand, I saw that he was one of the group of courtiers ... the man indeed who had stood nearest to the King....

"I admit, *mes amis*, that it seemed to me a little hard, more than a little hard, that with the flight of all those hundreds and hundreds of murderous slayers, this solitary one should prefer my life to his own ... should not realize

that the match was abandoned ... the race scratched ... the proceedings postponed....

“A fellow of one idea.... A case of the *idée fixe*.... No sportsman, anyhow.... The sort of man that steals the Gold Cup....

“I had been through so much, *mes amis*, from the time that that Amazon had hit me on the head, that I really rebelled a little at this last cruelty of a mocking Fate.

“Saved by the bursting of the shells at the fifty-ninth second of the fifty-ninth minute of the eleventh hour, and then this one solitary, implacable madman to fail to realize that I had been saved!...

“Nearer ... nearer ... he came—and by the time that he was a few yards from me, he and I were alone in that great Square....

“Would he drive that huge spear through my body, and then clumsily hack my head off with the edge of its broad blade?

“How I hoped that the next shell would blow his limbs from his body, though it killed me too.... Another bound and he would be on me.... I closed my eyes—and the Nightmare Slayer flung his arm round me, and, in execrable French, panted:

“‘You tell Frenchies I be verra good man, massa.... I belong Coast ... belong French shippy.... I good friend loving Frenchies.... I interpreter.... I show Frenchies where old Behanzin bury gin, rum, brandy, ivory....’

“Another shell burst.... And the Nightmare Slayer tipped my basket over, and, flat upon the ground, the lion and the lamb lay down together....

“That, *mes amis*, was how I nearly lost my head....

“We must not lose ours here, for, as you perceive, there are far worse places than this one.... I rather like it....”

§3

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A long heavy silence was broken by Jacob the Jew.

“The lad we want here is the bold bright Rastignac ... Rastignac, the Mutineer....”

“Oh, did you know him?” said the Englishman.

“What *about* him?” asked the Frenchman.

“What about him? Ho, ho!... He gave the Government some trouble, one way and another.... They stuck him in the Zephyrs, but they didn’t keep him long. What do you think he did?...

“He used to carry a flexible saw-file round his upper gums from one cheek to the other, and they *say* he carried some little tool that he used to swallow—on the end of a string, with the other end tied round a back tooth—on search days.

“Well, he filed his manacles and got out.... And he killed two sentries, absolutely silently, by stabbing them in the back of the neck with a long darning-needle, to which he had fitted a tiny wooden handle.... There is a spot, you know, at the base of the brain, just where the skull rests on the backbone.... The point of a needle in *there* ... just in the right spot ... and *pouff!*...

“Rastignac knew the spot, all-right. And when he was clear, and dressed in a dead sentry’s uniform, did he run off like any other escaping prisoner?... Not he.... He broke into a