

ARGOSY

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Cover by Rudolph Belarski

Illustrating Cancelled in Red

This magazine is on sale every Wednesday

THE FRANK A. MUNSEY COMPANY, Publisher, 280 Broadway, NEW YORK, N. Y.
WILLIAM T. DEWART, President

THE CONTINENTAL PUBLISHERS & DISTRIBUTORS, LTD.
3 La Belle Sauvage, Ludgate Hill, London, E.C. 4

PARIS: HACHETTE & CIE
111 Rue Réaumur

Published weekly and copyright, 1939, by The Frank A. Munsey Company. Single copies 10 cents. By the year \$4.00 in United States, its dependencies, Mexico and Cuba; Canada, \$5.00; Other countries, \$7.00. Currency should not be sent unless registered. Remittances should be made by check, express money order or postal money order. Entered as second class matter November 28, 1896, at the post office, New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. The entire contents of this magazine are protected by copyright and must not be reprinted without the publisher's permission. Title registered in U. S. Patent Office. Copyrighted in Great Britain. Printed in U. S. A.

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The yowls redoubled as the pyjama-clad brigade galloped into battle

An Old Persian Customer

By MURRAY LEINSTER

Author of "Young Men and Pridetul," "Board Fence," etc.

The Merchant of Mersa rigs up a deal to overthrow the Empire, and Kallikrates the Magnificent fires the shot heard 'round the block

HORNER says that the only really good idea that Smithers ever had was that of blowing out his brains. And he says this though Smithers was the representative of the Near East Trading Company in Mersa and consequently was expected to brim over with ideas of a commercial nature.

Mersa is an Arab town on the Persian Gulf, which means bad water, worse smells, more heat than any other place on earth and much more tedium. Much more.

It is not a place to inspire anybody with ideas except of escape, but Smithers

was expected to brim over and he obediently tried to brim. He had, in fact, three ideas in quick succession, though Horner only approves of one.

That one came at a crucial and complicated moment; in a situation involving the prestige of the British Empire and the ethics of a naturalized British subject named Kallikrates; the prosperity of Abul-Ghazi and the fate of the Sultan Abdul Khalil; the appearance of some particularly foul German cigarettes and the disposition of dedicatory souvenirs of the Church of St. Honorius the Centurion, in

Milfordshaven, Upper Marlboro, Herts.

Smithers solved that involved tangle of affairs by the single gesture of putting a pistol to his head and pulling the trigger. It was—as Horner points out—a remarkably good idea.

You might say that the whole thing started with the arrival of Kallikrates off Mersa, in a weird contraption of a boat with three Somali sailors. The boat was a floating emporium in which Kallikrates displayed for sale about everything from Berlin-printed copies of the Koran to second-hand oilcans, piece goods, perfumery, saddle hardware and similar trifles. It was competition for the Near East Trading Company, and it wrung Smithers' heart.

On the other hand, it might have started, really, with the arrival of Lieutenant-colonel Bartley Crothers, D.C.M.R. V.O. to be Resident Political Adviser to the Sultan of Mersa, who had twenty-five children but still considered himself practically a bachelor. Or with whatever forgotten circumstances started Abu-l-Ghazi on his thoroughly successful career as an outlaw chief.

There are a lot of possibilities. The situation in Mersa at the time of Kallikrates' arrival was involved but tedious. Roughly, it was that the Sultan tried hopefully to get Crothers to borrow some soldiers from Aden to hunt down and kill his cousin Abu-l-Ghazi, before Abu-l-Ghazi killed him. One-eyed Abu contentedly lived the life of an outlaw chief, levying tribute blandly upon all around him, and considerably more feared than the Sultan himself. Crothers—a fat and pompous little man—sweated and steamed in the Residency and wondered hopelessly what crime he had committed to be sent to such a post.

Horner tells a story of going to see him one day and finding him sitting in his underwear in the Residency courtyard, fanning himself with a palm-leaf fan and weeping tears of pure nostalgia on the King's Birthday. Smithers kept his books and tried to brim with ideas.

UNTIL Kallikrates came. Then all things changed. Even Smithers got his ideas. Kallikrates' boat was a relic. His stock was remarkable. But he did business and he started things. Horner went on board that boat once. He resisted the hardware, perfumes, sleazy cushions, shell-covered boxes, and bad cigarettes with novelty cases for them.

But he came ashore with a pocketknife with a tiny hole in its handle. He couldn't resist that. You held it up to the light and squinted through the hole, and you saw a plump *fräulein* in tights and a simper. Horner was charmed. He talked for days about the blessings of civilization being carried to the remotest corners of the world by modern trade.

The Sultan went on board Kallikrates' ship too. He went back to his palace with chest-loads of the most awful trash you ever saw. Then Smithers went on board and came away satisfied that the stock carried by Kallikrates would not cut permanently into the business of the Near East Trading Company.

He'd been afraid he might have to make a bad report to Cairo. And Lieutenant-colonel Bartley Crothers, D.C.M.R.V.O. called on Kallikrates. In fact, he called first of all. He went to tell Kallikrates formally that, as a naturalized British subject, if he had any modern firearms on board his boat, he'd better chuck them overboard. The prestige of the British Empire requires that all weapons loose around the Persian Gulf must blow up at any critical moment. Kallikrates reassured him and, as I said, opened his ship for business. He did a rushing trade for three days.

Then he moved on before his dyed goods ran, his knives fell apart, and his gimcrack novelties ceased to be either novel or gimcrack. And peace settled down again upon Mersa. But only temporarily. Kallikrates had started things.

The first reaction was among the citizens of Mersa. The quality of Kallikrates' goods was bad. Catastrophically bad. One of the customs of Mersa is for gentlemen

who fancy themselves as scholars and bon vivants and judges of good dancing-girls to dye their beards red.

It is a point of pride for a prosperous man to round off a large Moslem turban and a fiercely beaked Semitic nose with a set of crimson whiskers. For which purpose Kallikrates had sold dyes.

And two days after his departure, the *haut ton* of Mersa sat in the coffee shops and cursed him through their whiskers. His dyes were as bad as the rest of his stuff. Even his hair-dyes.

In Mersa there were beards that had turned yellow, and pink, and almost magenta, and Horner saw one set which he swears were a lovely shade of green. But that man stayed in retirement, nursing his wrath and inventing new and bloodcurdling fates for Kallikrates, which he suggested to Allah at the stated times for prayer.

Smithers gloated, though only in private, because this would teach his customers that only the Near East Trading Company sold really reliable goods, and it would please the Cairo office. In public, he condoled with the victims of Kallikrates' business ethics and worked off a whole case of mange-liniment as a color-restorative. That wasn't an idea, however. With Smithers it was instinct.

But Kallikrates sailed happily on up the Gulf to a fishing village some twenty-five miles north of Mersa. There he opened shop again, and there fate overtook him.

Abu-l-Ghazi was his first customer, in Abu-l-Ghazi's own inimitable manner. He swaggered into the fishing-village with his one eye twinkling sardonically. He suggested mildly to the villagers that somebody row him and his men out to the ship of this *giaour*. They obeyed in extreme haste. Abu-l-Ghazi was no man to fool with.

Kallikrates greeted him cordially, viewing him as a patron. Abu-l-Ghazi told the boatmen to go ashore. They did. Shortly afterward there were heard howls of anguish from Kallikrates. His thrifty

Hellenic soul was pained. The three Somali sailors ran up the sails, the floating contraption beat off-shore and vanished, and the last seen by anybody of the boat was Abu-l-Ghazi, lounging negligently by the stern and Kallikrates weeping copiously into the scuppers.

THE news came to Mersa. The Sultan told Crothers about it. It was piracy, which the British do not allow in the Persian Gulf. The Sultan asked hopefully if a British gunboat would not chase down his cousin and hang him, and then let him stick his cousin's head on a stake in Mersa, with an inscription claiming credit for his demise. Crothers said no.

Abu-l-Ghazi was a national of Mersa, while Kallikrates had once been naturalized in Gibraltar or somewhere. Therefore the British Government called upon the Sultan to make good all damages done to a sterling British subject, and gave due warning of dire consequences if a hair of Kallikrates' head was harmed.

The Sultan mourned, but the *haut ton* of Mersa rejoiced. Kallikrates was in the hands of Abu-l-Ghazi and their beards would be avenged. Abu was good at avenging things. They only hoped that he would not be too lenient with Kallikrates. They even debated—says Horner—sending a few suggestions to Abu on things to do to him, but felt that Abu's artistic sensibilities might be hurt.

Then the three Somali sailors turned up with their bottoms very warm from a hiding Abu's followers had given them for serving an infidel. They delivered to Crothers a letter in exquisite Arabic script.

It was from Abu-l-Ghazi, and explained that he held Kallikrates a prisoner. He had stayed his hand in the slitting of the *giaour's* throat through his deep affection for the Resident. He trusted that Crothers felt equally deep affection for him. A hundred and fifty pounds in gold coins would prove that affection satisfactorily. Then he would release Kallikrates. Otherwise, the results would be deplorable.

Crothers put on his uniform and called

upon the Sultan. He explained decisively that Kallikrates must be ransomed, and it once.

You can estimate for yourself just how popular that idea was with the Sultan and his subjects, but the Sultan did make a weak effort to obey.

His prime minister interviewed divers prominent citizens. The object was a loan for the ransoming of Kallikrates. It did not come off. There were not one hundred and fifty pounds in gold coin in all Mersa, even if other things had been favorable.

The prime minister returned and explained his failure. The Sultan repeated the explanation to Crothers and relaxed in helpless relief.

With considerable satisfaction he pointed out the logic of the case.

Abu-l-Ghazi was a man of his word. If he demanded a hundred and fifty pounds or he would slit Kallikrates' throat, then he either had to have a hundred and fifty pounds or Kallikrates' throat would be slit. And there was not so much gold coin in all Mersa.

Therefore it appeared that Allah had decreed the death of this infidel and the Sultan could not do anything to change the decree of Allah.

It was a very pretty out for the Sultan, but it was not so good for Crothers. The prestige of the British Empire was at stake, because Kallikrates was a naturalized British subject. Crothers went to see Horner. He explained his dilemma. But British currency is not of much use along the Persian Gulf. Horner turned up a five-pound note, three sovereigns, seven-shillings sixpence in silver, and as a last noble gesture took a battered half-crown off his watch-chain and added it to the heap. He offered the half-crown, he explained, in honor of the *fräulein* in lights whose picture was in the pocket-knife he'd bought from Kallikrates.

Crothers steamed and fretted. He went to see Smithers. The till of the Near East Trading Company yielded eighteen Maria Theresa dollars, all of them clipped, a single gold sovereign, and twenty-seven

shillings in small change. Which was still far from a hundred and fifty pounds.

Then Smithers had an idea. His first.

FAR, far back in the dim and dusty shelves of his warehouse, there were divers untouched cases. They contained such stuff as could not be sold even in Mersa. They had been there for years uncounted, and Smithers' one dream was to get rid of them at a profit on the ledger and write a letter to the Cairo office about it. He went back to those shelves.

He dusted off a small box. He opened it. With meek pride, he displayed to Crothers what seemed to be wealth uncountable. Actually, it was a box of souvenir medals struck at the time of the re-dedication of the previously ruined Church of St. Honorius the Centurion, at Milfordshaven, Upper Marlboro, Herts. They were intended to be sold for sixpence as mementos of the splendid occasion. These, remaining over, had been sold as an odd lot to the Near East Trading Company. But they did look rather like goldpieces, if you hadn't handled many.

Smithers offered them for a pious swindle on Abu-l-Ghazi. He added hopefully that he would even contribute toward their purchase for the purpose, at 2½d. each.

Crothers wavered. The prestige of the British Empire would be damaged if Killikrates were slaughtered. The dignity of the empire would be imperiled by such a bit of jobbery as paying a ransom in counterfeit money. But as between dignity and jobbery, history points to jobbery. There was only one hitch.

Abu might not accept the little disks unquestioningly. Somebody had to go along and lie to him. But it might not be healthy. And no native of Mersa would have the nerve.

Then Smithers had another idea. His second. He did not reveal it, but he offered to deliver the ransom himself.

Horner says that Crothers ought to have become suspicious at once, but he is speak-

ing after the event. At the time Crothers accepted Smithers' offer with emotion. In fact, he made something of a speech about the fine loyalty to noble traditions Smithers was displaying in going forth with imitation money to cheat old Abu out of his fair ransom. And no doubt Crothers' eyes misted when he saw Smithers disappear into the sun-dazzle inland from Mersa.

Smithers was gone two days. He came back with Kallikrates quite intact. And Kallikrates alternately sobbed with gratitude for his rescue and raged in a fine drama because he had been robbed of his ship and all its contents. Crothers was infinitely relieved. Because of Kallikrates' unpopularity in Mersa, he hired passage for him in a *bagala* headed around for Aden and wanted to forget the whole matter. But he couldn't.

Kallikrates would lodge information and make a claim against the British Government for his loss by piracy, which Crothers would have to substantiate. Kallikrates was already compiling from memory—and hope—a list of what he had been robbed of. The value of his stock, it appeared, was amazing. Even his ship was twenty years younger than it looked, and it had a previously unobserved Diesel engine.

Then, when Kallikrates was safely clear of the shore and could not possibly be recalled, Smithers finished reporting the details of the ransoming. He told Crothers and Horner at the same time. And he remembered, then, to be uneasy.

"SMITHERS stood there blinking," says Horner, "with those watery blue eyes of his absolutely blank. He acted exactly as if something just faintly disturbing had turned up. He'd gotten to old Abu's camp, he said, and paid over the medals, and Abu made no question about them and Kallikrates wept on his neck and his whiskers tickled.

"Then Abu grunted and invited Smithers inside his tent. Smithers explained to us that in volunteering to ransom Kallikrates he hadn't been purely altruistic. He'd had

an idea for a good business deal. It was his second. He thought he might buy the loot from Kallikrates' boat from Abu, paying for it with more medals. Kallikrates could claim the loot, of course, but he'd have to pay reasonable salvage, and Smithers could write to the Cairo office and point out how well he'd done with these silly souvenirs.

"Smithers was vastly pleased with himself when he sat down cross-legged in Abu's tent and drank some of Abu's muddy coffee. But then he noticed the thing he felt it necessary to tell us. Right beside Abu, lying negligently on a brass tray, Smithers saw a perfectly modern, perfectly deadly automatic pistol. You know what that meant, of course!"

At its mildest, even one automatic pistol in the hands of a cheerful cutthroat like Abu-l-Ghazi would be uncomfortable. It was a flat violation of the British rule against weapons which will not burst at any really critical moment. And many of them—!

"Smithers mentioned it," says Horner, "to Abu-l-Ghazi. He said it was very pretty. He asked if Abu had any more. And Abu said hundreds. He'd got them from Kallikrates boat. Which was a facer. Then Smithers asked—so he said—if Abu had anything to use in them. And Abu said he had an ample supply. And Smithers gulped, I understand, and went on with his business deal to buy back Kallikrates' stock with those silly medals of his. Abu drove a stiff bargain, of course. He made Smithers swear that he had a full two-thousand-odd more gold-pieces in the Near East Trading Company's warehouse in Mersa, ready to pay up on the nail when Abu delivered the goods. Quaint of Smithers, eh?"

But it was not quaint when Smithers told about it. Crothers went purple. He would cheerfully have throttled Kallikrates with his own hands, then or at any time thereafter, on account of those automatic pistols. But Horner first saw Smithers' magnificent imbecility. To dream of commerce with Abu, if Abu had automatic

pistols and ammunition, and if Abu thought there were two thousand golden sovereigns in Mersa . . .

"Smithers stood there blinking at us," says Horner, "as if he'd just told us some vaguely unfortunate news. He even pulled out a packet of unspeakably vile German cigarettes Abu had given him from Kallikrates' stock and lighted one of them. The smoke was like poison gas. And Crothers and I were unanimous in agreeing that he'd been hasty in wanting to rescue Kallikrates. We both felt that the world would have been a better place if he'd just let Abu kill him in some preferably lingering and humorous fashion."

Mersa, as a community felt even more strongly. When the news leaked out the town went into a panic. Abu equipped with modern arms? The Sultan retired to his harem and wept, occasionally kicking his heels. His subjects made no effort to comfort him. They were busy burying what valuables they possessed.

Abu would take the town, of course. Consequently, anything anybody wanted to keep from him was safest underground. Men with especially personable wives were heard to lament the impracticability of burying them, too, until the worst should be over.

The inhabitants of Mersa knew their man. Abu did take the town. Without firing a shot.

At early dawn, when the gates opened, there was the rush of a little knot of men. Abu's followers. They bristled with weapons, especially automatic pistols. Not one but had at least two stuck in his belt, and a single automatic pistol will overawe a fair-sized village along the Gulf. The gatekeepers fell flat on their faces and howled. Abu himself strolled in with four automatics in his sash, his solitary eye twinkling wickedly, and a wal went over the town and then all was still.

IN MINUTES, it was apparent that Abu's intentions were for permanent possession. There was no indiscriminate looting. Half a dozen of the raiders went

to the Sultan's castle. Automatics in hand, they did not even have to demand surrender. The Sultan's guards—there were four of them—bolted at sight of the dreaded outlaws with their dreaded weapons. Abu's men worked leisurely. They hauled the Sultan out of a closet by the heels, put a rope around his neck, and led him squealing down to the castle gateway. There they made everything convenient for his extermination and sat down to smoke.

Elsewhere in the town there was confusion.

Smithers was wakened by the yell of his night-watchman. He came blinking out of his bedroom in pajamas, and three automatic pistols pushed themselves into various parts of his anatomy. He was then led through the streets toward the residence of Lieutenant-colonel Bartley Crothers, D.C.M.R.V.O., Resident Political Adviser to the Sultan of Mersa. Horner had been sleeping soundly. They dumped him out of bed and jumped on him.

Swearing and urged by gun-muzzles against his flesh, he was marched to the Residency. There he found Crothers with his head in his hands in a lovely flowered sleeping-suit, while four men smoked poisonous German cigarettes and stood guard over him. He received Horner with bitter relief.

He was glad Horner wasn't dead. He was prepared to rejoice in the safety of anybody but Smithers and Kallikrates. Apparently nobody had been killed in the whole town.

Abu had come to him to explain blandly that he merely intended to execute his cousin the Sultan, assume the sultanate himself, and then settle down to encourage the arts of peace, with increasing trade and a warm friendship for the British Empire. He'd gone off to consolidate his reign.

Then Smithers was added to the party in the Residency. He foresaw the looting of the warehouse of the Near East Trading Company. He foresaw disaster, ruin, and catastrophe all around. He anticipated

that he would be held for ransom as Kallikrates had been, and he doubted that the Cairo office would think it worthwhile to save him. Smithers was very low in his mind when he saw the others.

But his reception increased his despair. Crothers blamed everything on Smithers, after Kallikrates. He pointed out that Smithers was directly responsible for everything from the ransoming of Kallikrates to the capture of the town this morning. He pointed out that the lingering death awaiting the Sultan was due exclusively to Smithers. He painted a harrowing picture of the prospective sufferings of the civil population. Then he mentioned the certain looting of the warehouse of the Near East Trading Company. And then Smithers wept.

He wept copiously but in a quiet way, for he was resigned.

But Horner had been looking around, and he saw something promising right in the room where they were under guard.

"I say," he observed hopefully, "these men don't understand English, so I can ask. Isn't that your gun-case on the wall, Crothers? If we make a dash, we might get a weapon apiece and start a little dust."

Crothers pointed furiously to the guards with their automatics. With eighteen shots apiece in their belts, even Arabs couldn't fail to wipe out the three white men before they could get any gun out of the wall gun-case. Horner sighed faintly. Smithers wept softly to himself, overflowing woe.

MINUTES passed. Half hours. Hours. The guards smoked the unspeakable German cigarettes. Now and again one of them went out of the room for a moment and came back with a fresh handful. Kallikrates must have had millions of them on board his infernal boat. The three white men were not fed, which added to their respective states of mind. Crothers reached a state of sibilant fury in which he sounded like a locomotive blowing off steam. Horner grew terribly, horribly bored. And Smithers went into a frenzy

of self-condemnation, wherein he looked upon himself as the vilest and most unnecessary of men.

And then—it must have been about two o'clock in the afternoon—that Smithers got his third idea. One of the guards seemed to run out of German cigarettes. He put down the automatic pistol he'd been holding, to hunt through his sash for more. Smithers was near him. The automatic was within reach of his hand. The guard frowned and slipped out of the room, forgetting the pistol he'd laid down. He had three altogether, anyway.

He came back an instant later with a cigarette in his mouth and several in his hand, but in the interval the thing had been done.

Smithers had sneaked the weapon. Horner saw him do it, and Horner's eyes shone hungrily. He opened his mouth to tell Smithers to let him have it, because Smithers was the sort of man who would be an outrageously bad shot. But Smithers forestalled him.

"Horner!" cried Smithers hysterically, "I can't stand it! All this is my fault! Tell the office at Cairo that I made my mistakes and I've paid for them!"

And then with a gun in his hand that could have been used—so Horner reflected agonizedly at that moment—for killing a few of Abu's men and so having some fun anyhow, Smithers gave effect to his last idea. He was responsible for everything that had happened. He could not bear to think of it. So he raised the stolen weapon. His last idea was that of blowing out his brains. He put the muzzle of the gun to his temple—

The gun, you remember, came from Kallikrates' ship, and Kallikrates had a large assortment of gimcrack novelties, ranging from cigarette-cases to pocket-knives containing pictures of plump *Fraüleins* in tights. Smithers pressed the automatic pistol to his temple and pulled the trigger.

And the automatic pistol gave him a cigarette.

Horner howled and broke for the gun-case. One of the guards came loping with a knife. But Crothers swatted him magnificently with a chair, and then Horner was in the gun-case, at work with a gun butt, while Crothers in his turn got out a gun and put shells in it.

At the first shot of a really modern, really repeating rifle, the guards bolted as the Sultan's had done from the sight of novelty cigarette-cases in the form of automatic pistols.

After that, of course, it was moderately simple.

Even Smithers pulled himself together after a fashion and sallied forth with a shot-gun. But most of the work was undoubtedly done by Horner and Crothers.

Horner gives no details of his share in the mopping-up, but he tells luridly of the heroism of the Resident Adviser to the Sultan of Mersa, Lieutenant-colonel Bartley Crothers, D.C.M.R.V.O. Crothers was barefooted, and he was in passionately flowered pajamas. But he went forth valorously and danced furiously upon the sizzling-hot stones of Mersa's streets—because they scorched his tender soles—while he swore and potted at Abu's men with a sporting rifle.

According to Horner, Crothers' eccentric military tactics could not have been better planned to defeat Arabs. The dancing and the remarkable pajamas, he insists, lent a tone to the battle. Indeed the Resident Adviser in action that day must have

been an impressive, even terrifying, spectacle.

He and Horner, between them, undoubtedly cleared the town. Anyhow Abu-l-Ghazi probably didn't mind overmuch. There is much to be said for the career of outlaw. There are fewer responsibilities and probably more diversions in the rôle of thorn in the flesh of authority. Besides, Abu had the rest of the box of medals. He'd gathered them in, personally, right at the start.

Things settled down to a merely normal discomfort within hours. The Sultan was alive, largely because Abu-l-Ghazi hadn't gotten around to a suitably leisurely manner of dispatching him. The prestige of the British Empire was restored. Smithers was safe from the disapproval of the Cairo office of his firm. Kallikrates—on the slow-moving *bagala* headed for Aden—was happily piling up the list of damages he was going to claim. Abu-l-Ghazi was back at his old career as outlaw.

So Mersa went back to normal. That means, as in any Arab town on the Persian Gulf, bad water, worse smells, more heat than any other place on earth, and much more tedium.

In fact, nothing in particular had happened except that Smithers had had three ideas and tried to carry all of them out. But Horner says that the only really good idea Smithers ever had was that of blowing out his brains.