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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

Lead Soldiers

By ROBERT BARBOUR JOHNSON

A strange doom closed round the Dictator who sought to achieve his destiny through a bloody war

"THEN there is no hope for peace?"

The smile that touched the lips of the man at the desk was only formal.

"None, gentlemen," he said quietly.

The members of the deputation looked at one another. Then their leader said, wetting his lips, "But surely mankind's development has progressed beyond the barbarous stage. Nations need no longer settle their disputes by war and bloodshed. We offer you arbitration——"

The man at the desk stood up. He was not tall, but he seemed to dwarf the others. His eyes, cold as quartz, swept from face to face.

"And I refuse it!" he snapped. "Gentlemen, why waste time? The quarrel between my nation and those others cannot be arbitrated. Our future destiny lies in expansion, in growth. Peace to us is stagnation, a slow death. We mean to grow, to take our place among the great world powers."

One hand, a stubby peasant's hand, pointed suddenly down.

"There is my arbitration, gentlemen," he said. "Tomorrow all the earth shall know of it!"

The faces of the deputation paled as they looked. Rank on rank of lead soldiers stood there on the top of the desk. A forest of little bayonets glinted in the dim light. Set faces, crudely painted, stared at them. So perfect was the illusion that it seemed an actual army that

stood in serried, silent ranks. Waiting. . . .

The leader touched a handkerchief to his forehead.

"But," his voice rang hoarsely in the room, "but your people, sire. Think of your people. You cannot pretend that *they* seek this war. Why, they desert across your borders in such numbers that our customs guards cannot turn them back. We could hardly reach you tonight for the throngs that march with placards in the city's streets, crying 'No more war.' And hark! from this very room you can hear the chanting in the cathedral yonder, where men and women and children pray for a miracle that will halt this tragic, useless conflict. You alone force them on to fight. One little word from you and the crisis will be past. Oh, sire, in common humanity let us entreat you——"

"Stop!" the man at the desk ordered. His eyes gleamed with a reddish light. "You go too far! I have heard your protestations, gentlemen, with patience. But there is a limit. You may not judge my country's attitude by its deserters, its cowards, its weaklings! There are brave men here too, heroic men who know their country's destiny as I know it and who are willing to die that we may have our proper place in the sun. You shall judge my people's courage on the battlefield, gentlemen. You will find their ranks as unyielding as these!"

Again his hand swept down to point

at the dead-faced images that lined his desk.

The leader of the deputation took up his hat and stick. He seemed to have aged twenty years during the interview. His eyes were tired.

"Then—only a miracle can save mankind from this horror!" he said heavily.

The man at the desk regarded him unmoved.

"Only a miracle," he said with that formal smile. "Let us see, my dear sir, if it is vouchsafed!"

AFTER the last man had filed past the cuirassed guards the man at the desk sat down again. His heavy features relaxed.

The fools! Thinking to turn him from his purpose with their silly phrases! Only diplomacy's iron rules had sealed his lips during their tedious tirade. "What would you, little men?" he had longed to shout at them. "Do you ask a volcano not to spew forth its ashes? Do you entreat a hurricane to halt its course of destruction? Then why imagine that you can halt my nation's course of empire with your little words and phrases?"

The man at the desk probed back along the path of his own life. They talked to him of peace—to him who had never known the meaning of the word; who had fought ever since he came into the world; fought Nature and her savage forces for very survival in his peasant childhood; then waded through the blood of opponents, battled mass indifference and mass hostility through his long rise to power. Had anyone ever offered *him* peace in those days? No! They had sought only to beat him down, to crush him as ruthlessly as one treads on a serpent. And now that he had won over them all; now that he was top dog—the Dictator facing a world to be conquered—

these little fools thought that they could turn him from his goal with words. . . .

THE chanting from the cathedral was louder now. It rang incessantly, eerily, in the heavy shadows of the room.

Something in the timbre of that chanting penetrated the man's reverie. He found his fingers groping at the breast of his braided tunic, groping for a rosary that had not hung there in many, many years. The peasant in him, long held in check, stirred to that chanted prayer. That prayer for "a miracle to halt this horror!"

For just an instant there was a strange expression in the quartz-like eyes. They were praying, his people. Not only in that great cathedral but throughout the city, all over the land. In chapels, in meeting-houses, before crude little altars in thatched huts. Yes, and more. . . . The memories of his childhood stirred sluggishly. There were older gods among his people than the crucifix—dark beings, half forgotten, sought out only in times of great stress. . . . Were antiphonic chants rising now before the blackened altars of these Elder Ones? Were the fires lit on the druidic stones? Were the ancient sacrifices made?

For those prating men tonight had spoken simple truth. His people did not want wars and bloodshed and conquest. They were a simple, kindly folk. He alone, the Dictator, the man greater than a king—his lust for power alone could scourge them along this path to glory. Let anything happen to him and all the grim preparations, this martial clamoring, would pass like an evil dream. . . .

And then the man came back to reality suddenly. He smiled, an ugly smile. What nonsense was this? Let those fools hate him, let them pray and chant against him. What good would it do? What good would anything do? They could

not harm him. This lone, unguarded room was an impregnable fortress which none might enter without his sanction. And it was not alone the cuirassed guards on which he relied. The halls of this old ducal palace thronged with the purple shirts and arm-bands of his "Ballistæ". What man could pass them? The "Ballistæ," backbone of his power. Every man of them *bis* man; pledged only to achieve his dreams, worshipping him as a god. The man who tried to reach him through those purple ranks would need a thousand lives.

Absently the man at the desk reached out among his papers, ruffled through them. He must put aside morbid fancies, get to work. There was much to be done before he could sign the declaration of war.

And then his body jerked suddenly. He cursed, drawing back his hand with violence. Blood stained the papers, the surface of the desk. Clumsy ox! His nerves must indeed be in sad shape, or else he would not have pricked himself so savagely on the bayonet of a lead soldier.

His eyes swept over the ranks of figures. They stared back at him with crudely painted faces, stood in silent, ordered lines.

Odd! His hands must have been busy among those figures while he sat in his reverie. He had turned every one of them about! Those hundreds of little men still held their exact alinement, but they faced toward him instead of away from him now. A myriad little daubed faces ringed about him. Hundreds of little bayonets gleamed in the dim light.

With a grimace of distaste the man bent over his papers again. The figures did not matter. It was those papers that mattered. He must get to work. The declaration of war. . . .

He worked on there at the great desk, head bowed. The little gleaming figures faced him in ordered lines. It was strange how the light played tricks with those figures. They seemed almost to move. . . .

The chanting swelled louder in the great room. Incredibly loud and clear it seemed, so loud and clear that curious minor threnodies were audible in it; primal intonings and responses that might have come down from some strange, half-forgotten invocation from mankind's beginning.

The figures ringed about the man at the desk, hundreds of them. Their little faces were strangely alive in the dim light. . . .

* * * * *

FEW facts about the Dictator's suicide ever reached the world. Indeed, no one really cared about details. The world seized on the one fact that the Dictator was dead. The threat of a new World War was gone, and in the realization of that glorious news much was lost sight of. And after the revolution that swept the "Ballistæ" from power, it was, of course, too late for any inquiry.

Yet there was never any hint of foul play. The cuirassiers who found the Dictator dead at his desk had guarded his room against intruders all that night, and the purple-shirted hordes could only confirm their allegations of fidelity to duty.

But more than the mere testimony of his guards made certain that the leader's death was self-inflicted. For not even the "Ballistæ", bereft of their source of power, could dispute the facts, however much they might wish to. Enemies the Dictator might have had, but his enemies could not have killed him in the manner that he died.

For surely it is only a man's own hand that can thrust the bayonet of a toy soldier into his jugular vein!