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THREE CONTINUED STORIES

- The Motto Man Perley Poore Sheehan . . . 482
A Three-Part Story — Part One
- Kidnaped by Request Fred MacIsaac 541
A Five-Part Story — Part Two
- The Big Gun Richard Barry 594
A Three-Part Story — Part Three

TWO NOVELETTES

- What is the Cost? Kenneth Perkins 519
- Meet the Prince! (In Two Parts — Part Two) Wilson Collison 568

FIVE SHORT STORIES

- South of the Cimarron Earl C. McCain 513
- Fifty Fifty or Nix Garret Smith 560
- Songs and Tongs Cyril B. Egan 619
- A Primer for Primitives Eric Howard 626
- Merciful Plunder William Hope Hodgson . . . 634

POETRY

- | | |
|---|---|
| The Song of the Moor Sonia Ruthěle Novák 518 | The National Game Edward S. Morrissey 618 |
| The Magniloquence of Ninety E. W. Barnard 559 | Heartless 625 |
| My Friends M. G. H. 593 | The Scamannik Harold W. Gleason 633 |

NEXT WEEK — EXTRAORDINARY ATTRACTION

A notable transpacific serial will start, replete with thrilling adventures ashore and afloat, beginning in Japan and cutting across the sea to California and back. Name and authors in issue for August 1. Be on hand early for your copy.

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Merciful Plunder

By WILLIAM HOPE HODGSON

CAPTAIN MELLOR, trading along the Adriatic coast, had put in at one of those small seaports which found themselves involved in the wars so common in the Balkans. He had stayed the night ashore with a business acquaintance whose veranda, under its cane mat sun roof, commanded a magnificent view over the red slates of the village beyond which he could see his own ship as she lay at anchor, among a dozen others, in the bay.

From the mountains to his left there came every now and again the monstrous far-off grunt of a big gun. For days a prolonged fight had been waging. At times the far-off grunting would merge into a ponderous grumbling of sound, then, the continuous mutter dying away, there came the vast *lrrump*, *lrrump* of the rifles in the unscen fort that lay round on the eastern shoulders of the hills which sloped away into the sea in the curve of the coast.

Each time the fort fired Captain Mellor felt the iron-framed chair under him tingle, and the windows behind him jarred and

thrummed to the huge, ugly sound. Even the silver and green leaves of the olive trees all about the chalet seemed to quiver oddly with the great throb of the vibrated air.

Suddenly he sat up in his chair, his cup of coffee halfway to his lips. Through the still air of the eastern morning came the cries of a lad in agony.

He sickened as he heard with incredible clearness the awful sound. He had refused to go down into the village to see the butchery which the war authorities had dignified with the name of execution, though his friend, a Frenchman, had joined the onlookers at the scene. But he knew by the cries that the punishment was being carried out for twenty of the band of forty youths of the enemy who had been caught the day before fighting out of uniform—a youthful band of “death or glory” irregulars.

And so, an hour later, sitting on the quiet balcony amid the silent olives, the drowse and rest of the hushed morning about him, Captain Mellor listened to his host's account of the punishment.

The Frenchman shook with emotion as he described it. He declaimed against it all, though the youths had been taken fighting, out of uniform, upon their own initiative, and firing from ambush against the natives of the place where he lived and did business.

"And to-morrow," he ended, "the osser twenty will be executed, they say."

"No, they won't!" cried Captain Mellor. He jumped up from his chair, mopped his forehead with his red cotton handkerchief, and sat down again.

The Frenchman shrugged his shoulders. He continued his tale of horror and emotion till at last the captain interrupted him.

"If you don't like that sort of thing you should have kept away," he told him. "I don't like it, so I didn't go. After all, I expect the boys got what was coming to them."

"But, *monsieur—Sapristi!* It is terrible so to speak."

His friend's callousness shocked him, and he burst out afresh in horror; but Captain Mellor refused to show overmuch sympathy. Yet without seeming to be interested he managed to get a certain amount of very definite information from the excited Frenchman.

He discovered, for instance, where the second batch of prisoners was locked up. Also how they were guarded. And one or two other details which joined on, as one might say.

"Well," he said at last, "let's finish our business. I am sailing some time to-night."

Later that day the two men went down into the little town and took a walk round the palm-lined public square, where stood the low scaffold in readiness of the next morning.

With the terrible insouciance of the East—for even the Near East is touched with this quality of insensitiveness to the merciful fitness of things—the scaffold was neither more nor less than one of the town's fête platforms, used at half a dozen big festivals in the year.

When Captain Mellor saw it, the front was draped with the black funeral trappings which the townspeople hang round their doors before a funeral. And crowded

on the platform were scores of the natives of all ages, standing with strangely morbid pleasure upon the very spot where those boys had met their deaths a few hours previously.

"Come on," said the captain to his friend, "this sickens me."

He dragged the Frenchman down to the water front, where stood the municipal hall. Farther along the quay side was a tall building, outside of which stood a guard, leaning on his rifle.

"Up there, captain," said the Frenchman, "up there where you see the barred window. Zat is the room at the utmost top!"

"Sorry for 'em," replied the captain callously. "But I guess they'll be all right this time to-morrow!"

"Ah!" exclaimed his friend. "You are of all the most hard man I ever speak to."

Yet when Captain Mellor stepped into his boat and was pulled off to his ship that night, he had achieved a knowledge of local geography that would have amazed his friend. He had spurred the little Frenchman by his callous remarks to enlarge upon every detail concerning the twenty prisoners who were to die in the morning. The Frenchman had been incurably voluble and profuse with explanations, intent only to waken some pity in this Englishman.

And all the time Captain Mellor had shrugged his great shoulders and answered inhumanly. But always he had used his eyes, even while he used his ears to take in all the information that his friend insisted on deluging him with.

It was the Frenchman who had suggested they should go to inspect the prisoners. He knew the officer in charge, and he was sure of getting permission. The captain showed no enthusiasm, but submitted to be dragged to the prison. Here after a brief talk, his friend, accompanied by his officer acquaintance and one of the guards, invited him to come and see "the birds."

Never would the captain forget what he saw! The room was just under the roof, and the windows shut fast. There was dirty straw all over the floor, and the prisoners, most of them, were lying silently about.

Not one of them looked up or showed any sign of interest. They were all of them under eighteen, and at least half of them were boys of fourteen and fifteen. Some were wounded and roughly bandaged, and all of them showed marks of ill treatment.

"They'll be gone this time to-morrow," said the sergeant in patois, laughing and stubbing out the lighted end of his cigarette stump against the bare leg of one of the prostrate youths. "Pouf, they are pigs! Come on out," he added as he led the way downstairs again.

Thus it was that Captain Mellor, as he stepped into his boat that evening, had by the use of ears and eyes and some aid of good fortune, the following knowledge stowed in his big head:

He knew that the twenty boys were locked in the topmost room of that four-storied house which was owned by the mayor of the town. The house was built quite by itself on the edge of the road, with, at the back of it, the sheer, blasted rock face of the cliff that, further to the north, ran out into a long dwindling point of black rock. This cliff stood up within fifteen feet of the rear of the house and rose at least a hundred feet above it.

With regard to the house, the windows of the top room were all barred, and the roof was, like all other houses in the place, of red tiles wired down to the rafters underneath.

The top floor was just one big room, entered by a door at the head of the long flight of stairs. The door was covered with sheet iron on the inside, and the same kind of sheet iron had been nailed over the rafters so as to hide the backs of the naked tiles and prevent them from being removed by any prisoner.

The floor immediately below the prison room was also without partition, and was in use as a temporary guard room; three soldiers being stationed there while the fourth stood on guard at the main entrance to the house. The lower floors were used as temporary offices and headquarters by the military authorities.

The guard at the main entrance was relieved every two hours, and the prisoners were fed morning and evening, and inspect-

ed day and night every time the guard was relieved.

From this mass of information which Captain Mellor had accumulated some idea may be had of the good use he had made of his friend's eternal volubility, and of his brief visit to the prison.

When he got aboard he sent word to the chief engineer that he wanted him.

"Is it away we are, George?" asked the chief as he entered the captain's cabin. "It's not sorry I am to be goin'—the murderin' brutes! Did ye see the doin's this mornin'?"

Captain Mellor shook his head.

"Were you there, Mac?" he asked.

"Aye, I was that!" replied the chief engineer. "It was disgusting. Plain beheadin' I've seen, an' plain hangin'; but yon was just brute's work. I tell ye I had me work cut out to keep me hands in me pockets—I had that!"

"Mac," said the captain, "there's twenty more of those boys. They're going to be treated in the same way tomorrow morning. Mac, are you game to stop it?"

"You can't stop it, George; not without you've a whole bonnie regiment like the Gordons to clean them devils out an' set the dirty place on fire!" answered the chief.

"Mac," said Captain Mellor, "I've seen the prisoners. I've been up in that dirty, stinking room with them. Yon Frenchman ashore knows the officer in charge, and they took me up. I went so that I could see how the coast lies; and all the time I told the little Frenchman and the officer that I reckoned such scum was better off the earth. They'll never suspect me if I happen to let loose the whole bunch, Mac.

"I pretended I wasn't much interested; but I saw everything there was to see. It's the end house to the north, and the cliff's no more than fifteen feet from the back of the house. But the windows are all barred. A good length of two and a half manila, a block, a short spar and a file, and a couple of men to give me a hand, and I'll engage to be at sea this time to-morrow with all that bunch of youngsters. I'll land them down the coast in their own part of the world, and I'll cover the ship's name up. Are you game, Mac?"

"An' what 'll happen if we're caught. George?" asked the chief. "I'm thinkin' they'll be no very merciful!"

"Shoot us on sight, I s'pose," replied his captain. "Are you game to try it?"

"A file 'll no do for them bars, George," said the chief. "It's a good thing, man, you've the sense to ask an engineer to come wi' ye. I'll bring a hack saw an' some oil: an' I'm no thinkin' it's the bars as will trouble us. I'll speak to Alec. He was wi' me ashore along wi' the mate this mornin' an' he'll be eager to bear a hand."

"What did the mate say about the thing, Mac?" asked Captain Mellor.

"Not much! But ye know what Mr. Grey is. He just hooked his fist into my arm an' said he thanked God he was English; which I said nothing to, for I'd sooner be English myself than one of that lot ashore! You ask him. I'm betting he's spoiling to do something useful, George."

"And you'll get your crowd below, Mac, will you, and have steam up ready?" said Captain Mellor. "I'll tell the second to heave her short so we can break the hook out and away the moment we get back."

"Aye," said the chief engineer grimly as he turned to leave the cabin. "The moment we get back, George. Maybe they'll have to wait eternity for that same moment, I'm thinkin'!"

II.

FOUR hours later when the night had come down deep and silent upon the Adriatic, Captain Mellor brought his boat near in to the end of the low point of rock where it sloped down and disappeared under the warm, still water.

"Shove the grapple over quiet," he said. "Sound carries a mighty long way on a night like this. Pay out now. Right. Make her fast there. She'll ride just clear of the rocks. Mac, jump ashore with Alec, and one of you hold the painter while I pass you out the gear."

Ten minutes later the four men were climbing the long slope of the point, the captain and the mate carrying a thirty-foot spar, and the two engineers a coil of two and a half inch manila, a pulley block and a few of the tools of their profession. Be-

hind them in the darkness the double-bowed boat was moored with her stern toward the grapple, and her bows toward the end of the low point, so that in a hurried retreat they would be able to haul her close in with the painter in a moment and jump aboard.

Half an hour's walk brought them to the top of the cliff at the back of the prison.

"Quietly now," muttered the captain. "Keep away from the edge while I go and have a look round."

He lowered his end of the spar gently to the ground and went forward cautiously.

"Further along," he told them when he came back.

When they reached the edge of the cliff, creeping, they found they were directly above the prison house, and Captain Mellor and the mate got to work at once to rig the spar out over the cliff.

Mac and Alec had been gone but a few minutes in their search for some large stones to hold down the heel of the spar when a woman's scream was heard some sixty or seventy feet away.

"Hark, man! What's that?" asked the captain.

A few moments and the second engineer came up breathless.

"For all sakes come, captain," he gasped. "The chief's got a woman back there in the bushes and he can't quiet her. He doesn't understand a bit what she's talking."

Quickly the three men ran through the bushes to where the woman was hysterically shouting at the engineer.

"What is it? Who are you?" asked Captain Mellor in the patois common in the north of the island of Euboe.

The woman gave a cry and, whirling round on him in the darkness, sank to her knees.

"Aie," she called out. "They killed my son this morning. My youngest they kill to-morrow—"

"Whist ye! Whist ye now," muttered the chief. "Ye'll have us all hanged."

The woman caught the captain round the knees and poured out mad entreaties. He loosed her arms and, taking her by the shoulders, shook her with a quiet violence that seemed to bring her suddenly to her senses, for she became instantly silent.

Then the captain explained to her why they were there. He showed her how she was robbing her boy of his one chance of life by making any sort of outcry up there on the top of that lonely cliff on a quiet night when sound would travel far.

"I am no more than a she-dog that you may beat or strangle if I make one sound," was what she replied.

"They killed her eldest boy this morning," explained the captain to the others. "To-morrow the youngest one is to die."

"God help her!" said Mac. "Well, maybe we'll save the other for her."

"Aye," answered the captain. "We'll save the other boy for her, God willing. Now get going, all of us. Mr. Grey, back to the spar!"

He turned and spoke gently to the woman, telling her to hunt round for pieces of rock and bring them to the cliff edge. The two engineers cast about them again for bowlders while Captain Mellor followed the first mate to where the spar lay.

Fifteen minutes later it was rigged out some fourteen feet over the side of the cliff. The two-inch manila rope had been rove through the sheave in the outer end, and the inner end of the long spar had been covered with a mass of heavy pieces of rock so as to withstand the weight of a man upon the tackle at the outer end.

It was Captain Mellor who went down first, for he had to get into communication with the boys to prevent any of them making an outcry in their surprise at seeing some one at work on the bars of their prison.

He was lowered slowly down and got his feet on to the sill of the window, then, while he gripped a bar with one hand he reached between with the other, and began very gently to knock steadily on the glass.

Fear had made the boys abnormally sharp-witted. In a moment the panes vibrated slightly as if the catch were being slid up. Then slowly and cautiously the window was pulled open.

"S-sh!" whispered the captain, beginning to explain matters. Before he had finished every lad in the room had crowded round the window.

"Now, not a sound," he warned them. "When does the guard come round?"

The guard, they told him, had just been round, and telling them to go back and lie upon the floor as if asleep, he gave the signal to be hauled up again.

"All serene, Mac," he told the chief. "You can lower me down now, and I'll stand on the sill and send the bowline up for you. You come along down and cut those bars out. Now, then, down with me, smart."

Five seconds later Mac was beside him with his feet thrust in between the bars on the sill, and his weight taken by the bowline in which he sat so as to be able to use both hands at his work.

"Now, George," he said, "you stand by me with the oil can an' I'll have two o' these bars out inside o' fifteen minutes. I know this dirty Spanish iron! It's like bad butter with the sunstroke. Ye could almost cut it with the back of your finger!"

Yet in spite of the chief's contempt for what he termed "Spanish" iron, the bars proved reasonably healthy metal, though the tempered hack saw ate into them with marvellous ease.

But there was one thing which could not be achieved, and that was silence. The "bite" of the small saw seemed to fill the room and to go echoing with a minute, diabolical shrillness down the "well" formed by the back of the house and the side of the cliff.

Oil proved ineffectual to bring silence, and so did soap, a cake of which the chief had brought in the hope of making the saw work quietly. Yet the bars must be cut, and as speedily as possible, and so the risk of being heard must be taken along with all the other mad risks they were running.

A three-foot length of the first bar had been cut clean away and the chief had started on the second when the thing Captain Mellor had feared happened. There was a sudden sound of feet on the stairs leading up to the prison, and the lad nearest the window whispered shrilly:

"They come. They come."

Mac had heard the sound at the same moment. He stopped his saw and swung away silently to the same side of the window as Captain Mellor.

The steps came steadily up the stairs,

and light showed all round the edges of the door.

"Quick!" cried the captain in patois to the youth at the window. "Take this!"

He thrust the cut-out portion of the bar at him. "Shut the window quick, and lie down. Pretend to sleep. If he sees anything you must hit him with the iron. If you fail *you* die."

He swung away from the window as the lad pushed it shut, and caught the bowline in which Mac sat. He heard the key turn in the lock as the lad closed the window. A moment of intense suspense, then a burst of light and the noise of a door as it crashed open against the right-hand wall.

The two men outside heard some one enter the room and shuffle about among the boys. There came dull thuds and cries. The captain thrust his body entirely out of line with the window, and his weight was supported partly by the bowline and partly by the toe of his right boot, which he kept on the extreme corner of the ledge.

Leaning to the right somewhat he saw, by looking into the room, the cause of the sounds. The guard, with drawn sword in one hand and a lantern in the other, was kicking the youths lustily as he walked round among them.

"What devil's work are you up to now?" he growled. "I heard your noise. To-morrow you'll have no chance of speaking. Better talk now, you pigs!"

But as he got no reply, only groans, as he stepped brutally on the bodies lying about the floor, he appeared satisfied there was no cause for alarm, and again telling them that to-morrow would rid him of them forever, he concluded his inspection and made for the door.

At this moment a cruel thing happened. A sudden gust of wind blowing round the lofty house, pushed one of the French windows open. The lamp in the guard's hand flickered, and he whirled round.

With a suspicious cry he crossed the room to the window, held up his lamp and discovered the sawed iron bar.

"Arre!" he exclaimed, whirling round and flashing his lamp upon the floor where lay the lad who had stood at the window. Once, twice, three times he kicked him,

then the lad jumped at him, the solid iron bar between his hands.

Before the bayonet could be raised the heavy bar came down and the guard with it. He lay there very quiet on the floor.

"Shut the door and lock it, one of you," commanded Captain Mellor through the bars. "Put out the lamp, and make no noise." Then to the chief he said: "Get savage with that bar, Mac. We've got to be out of this inside ten minutes."

Without a word the chief swung back into place and fitted the blade of his hack saw into the nick he had already been sawing. Then grimly disregarding all precautions he drove the little tempered saw back and forth in one long skirr of sound which seemed to set the whole "well" singing with the shrill echo.

"Through!" he cried, and, reaching up for a second cut, the shirr of sound again filled the black depth below them, echoing to right and left among the absolute silence of the cliff face.

Suddenly there was a sharp snap. Mac swore softly under his breath and fumbled in his pocket for a spare blade.

"Swing to the side, Mac," cried Captain Mellor, sensing what had happened. "I'm going to give a heave on the bar."

"It's scarce half through, George. Ye couldna budge it, strong as ye are," replied the chief.

Nevertheless, he swung away a foot, for Captain Mellor had a reputation for strength which he could never hope to justify to a better end.

As the captain stooped, bending his great knees and gripping the lower end of the bar with his right hand, a voice from somewhere below in the building called out:

"Peldra! Peldra! Peldra!"

"They're shouting for yon man the lad clouted!" muttered Mac. "I'm thinkin' we're done this trup, George. I canna see to fix this blade an' me hands all on the go wi' excitement! Whist, they're comin'!"

Steps were on the stairs—heavy steps running up. Inside the dark room hopeless fear took the lads as they huddled together. The captain put all on the hazard of his strength. He bent his knees again, gripped the bar with one enormous hand

and the bar went upward with a curious dull bang.

Diving into the room, the bar still in his hand, Captain Mellor sprang for the door. A hand was fumbling for the knob. In that instant the captain turned the key, letting the lock come back quietly.

The handle shook, and a voice called out twice: "Peldra, Peldra!" And another voice from below called out loud and clear:

"Open the door, Marx; open the door!"

It was the voice of the sergeant who had stubbed out his cigarette on the leg of one of the youths that morning.

"It's locked, sergeant," replied the half drunken guard outside the door. Then he called out a contradiction as the door gave way before his push.

"Peldra!" he said, drunkenly, stumbling into the room. "Where's the lamp?"

From his place behind the door the captain heard the sergeant coming up at a run. In the threshold the man butted heavily into the guard, sending him spinning. A moment later the sergeant struck a match and, holding it high above his head, stepped into the room, his saber ready in his right hand.

"Peldra!" he called sharply. "Where are you?"

Then, as if sensing danger, he whirled round just as Captain Mellor sprang from behind the door. As the man cut at him Captain Mellor caught the blow on the iron bar he held. Striking with his weapon sideways he knocked the saber out of the sergeant's hand, and, dropping the bar, he used his fists.

The match had gone out, but he could see the man dimly outlined against the window. As he shouted an alarm, the captain's right fist caught his jaw violently and he fell with a thud to the floor.

"Mac," called the captain, "start getting these boys slung aloft smart!"

With a few brief directions to the youths he struck a light and began to feel round for the guard, who, with drunken cunning, was creeping out at the door in search of help.

Captain Mellor sprang for the man, whose howl was stopped by the captain's

forceful way of snapping his jaws together. Then before he could recover breath a handful of dirty straw was forced into his mouth, and his elbows strapped behind him with his own belt. His trouser legs were skewered together with his own bayonet.

The insensible sergeant was strapped up much as was the drunken relief guard. The third man, Peldra, was beyond the need of such treatment.

Captain Mellor shut the door gently and locked it. Outside the window the chief was silently sending the lads up through the darkness, one after another.

"Thank God!" muttered the big captain. "Get aloft, now, and send the bowline down for me," he whispered to Mac.

The moment he reached the cliff top he took command.

"Unship the spar. Handy now. You lads, stand back there. Mr. Grey, and you, Alec, carry the spar. We'll leave nothing for a clew. I'll hump the rope. Mac, you take the block. Get on ahead, all of you."

Presently he had them all on the march, going silently through the dark that lay heavy upon everything. He took the rear. In front of him the Greek woman was carrying her son in her arms, easily and lightly crooning a murmur of patois over him as though he were a baby.

Two hours afterward, with his "merciful plunder" aboard, Captain Mellor was leaning over the after-rail of his bridge, staring at a far-off blur of lights on the horizon—the lights of the little town where, in the public square stood that brutally incongruous scaffold which would greet no youthful victims on the morrow!

Captain Mellor still trades along the Adriatic coast. And to this day, such is the irony of life's rewards, the little Frenchman never meets him without a resentful memory of his grimly brutal harshness of heart.

Often he refers to the miraculous escape of the doomed boys. And always the captain grunts unsympathetically. Then the little Frenchman mutters as he crosses himself devoutly:

"But the good God was kinder than you."

THE END