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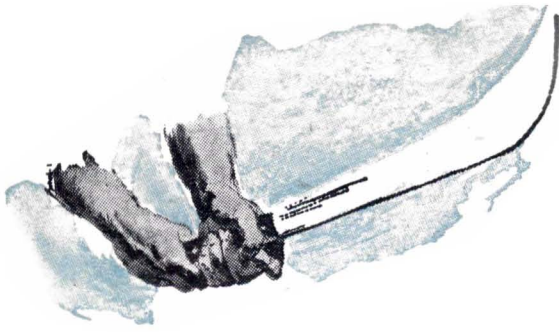
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No Panga for Pieters

By F. W. Holiday

The dread Mau Mau had spirited away the old man who defied them. It was up to Nicholson and his patrol to find him—somewhere in the blue-and-green vastness of 219,000 square miles.

I DON'T LIKE IT, SORR," Sergeant Delaney said. "Not at all. Things are wrong there, sorr." Captain Nicholson could see what he meant, all right. At least two things were wrong; there was no smoke coming from the cooking chimney, and there was a vulture sitting on the roof. Settling flat on his belly he focused his bloomed Zeiss binoculars on the bungalow again. It shot up in sharp detail, quite still, quite lifeless. A few banana trees drooped by the door, listless and unmoving. Nicholson noted they were going brown at the edges. The trees hadn't been watered recently.

"You're right," he said lowering the binoculars and wiping the sweat from his eyes. "It looks as though they've got him. Get ready to close in on both flanks. And watch that hill at the back of the house—they may still be around."

After Delaney had crawled away Nicholson rolled on his side and freed his .38 from its holster. This is what comes of playing patacake with a bunch of native hoodlums, he thought.

"The boys are all set to go," Delaney reported, crawling back. He looked wistful and happy, his bleached khaki drill thick with dust. His square ugly face suddenly brightened. "Should I slip in and have a look, sorr?"

Nicholson thought about that for a moment. The Kenya plain, flat as a wafer, teetered away through the binoculars as he looked around. Scrub, camel-thorn—a few scrawny palms; there was nothing to worry over out there. That left the bungalow itself and the hillock at the back. Those were the danger spots.

"Corporal Wilson's taken a party round the back, sorr," the sergeant said, following his line of reasoning. Nicholson nodded. That simplified the matter; leaving the bungalow.

"We'll go in together," he told the sergeant. "I'll go first—you can cover me. Okay, let's go." He slipped the safety catch off his .38 and bellied forward. Delaney saluted without raising his head. He swung his sten gun into a comfortable position and gave the Captain a 10-yard start. Then he too moved forward.

"Seems empty, sorr," Delaney said from behind in a loud whisper.

Nicholson rested on his elbows. "Yes." He too thought the bungalow was empty. He stood up. "Stay here and give me cover to the front door."

At close quarters the bungalow looked big. Nicholson moved towards the door crab-wise, his



.38 fanning at the blank windows. The banana trees lolled big green shields over him as he touched the edge of the door with his fingertips. He waited and listened but the bungalow was silent. There was nothing at all but a bad smell. He went in.

Delaney, close behind him, coughed and blew out his breath. They went along the central passage and looked into the open rooms on each side. All quite empty—as you would expect if Mau Mau had beaten you to it.

All except the kitchen.

"What is it, sorr?" Delaney asked sharply.

Nicholson came out and shut the door.

"The houseboy, I should think—what's left of him. Better have him buried right away. And find out if Corporal Wilson's got anything to report. I'll skim through these rooms and see if I can find any trace of Pieters."

The sergeant saluted and went.

Nicholson went into the long lounge and looked around. Nothing seemed to have been disturbed. A cane-bottom chair, worn with use, stood beside a felt-topped card table. On the floor was half a bottle of Scotch and an empty glass. He smelled the glass; it still carried a faint whiskey odor. On the walls were some good heads—gemsbok, kudu and buffalo. There were leopard and lion skins on the walls and floor. In the corner was a bookcase holding a few dried-up volumes that had not been opened in years. Not much else. Not a hell of a lot at all. Pieters had gone and that was that. This was a detective's job, not a soldier's. He sat down in the cane chair to think about it.

IN Africa, where every other man is an eccentric, Pieters was something more. In his own way he was a legend. He was credited with being the oldest white settler in Kenya which, if true, was a very interesting distinction. He was also said to have gone native. But since he visited town only once in five years he was not in a position to challenge this rumor. They said that he was as shy as a gerunuk and fierce as an old baboon. The Military, however, used stronger terms. Twice the Colonel had sent messages asking him to go into town until Mau Mau were put down, and each time Pieters had lit his pipe with them. What could anybody do with a man like that except let him stew in his own juice? And right now Pieters was probably pegged-out on an ant-hill.

"Tea, sorr?" Delaney's voice said.

Nicholson looked round suspiciously at the steaming mug.

The sergeant grinned. "We buried the stiff and got the stove working," he explained. "There's nothing on the hill, sorr. Not a blasted thing. What do you make of it?"

"Sit down a minute," Nicholson ordered petulantly. The stubbornness of this old fool Pieters was causing him a hell of a lot of trouble. Pieters just about deserved what he had almost certainly got; and that might be anything from 50 panga cuts to a crushed skull. The sergeant found a chair and sat down. He studied his boots until Nicholson spoke.

"You've been stationed two years around Nairobi. Have you ever seen this man Pieters?"

Delaney shook his head. "I've only heard tell of him, sorr. They say he's got a white beard like one of the Sivin Prophets. At Fort Hall we had a warrant officer who said he'd served with Pieters way back in '07."

"Pieters was an Army man, then?" Nicholson said, surprised.

THAT'S right, sorr. They say he was on the losing side in the Boer War and was proud of it. I heard tell that he used to be a color-sergeant in the Cape Rifles before he came to Kenya. All rumor, sorr, of course."

"And you think he's dead?" Nicholson asked.

Delaney shrugged and took a noisy sip at his tea. "Sure to be."

"Then where's the body?"

Delaney gestured expressively. "Jackals and vultures. Or perhaps they wanted a corpse to use in the initiation ceremonies. There's nothing sacred with them divils, sorr."

Nicholson swallowed the rest of the hot tea, the evaporated milk lingering on his tongue.

"Post a guard," he told the sergeant. "Lay the troops out in open formation round the bungalow—we'll stay here the night. And send the signaler in; I'll inform H.Q."

Delaney looked surprised as he got up. He saluted and went out.

Nicholson found a signal-pad in his pocket. He scribbled a message: "Company H.Q. from Nicholson, Captain, commanding 70 patrol. Routine search of area DY3 continuing. Pieters home-stead entered by enemy; servant killed. Believe P. may be still alive. Am investigating. Orders. End message." "Bring the reply back right away," Nicholson told the signals orderly.

The man returned within 10 minutes. He handed Nicholson the reply chit. It said: "Nicholson, Captain, commanding 70 patrol from Company H.Q. Carry on. End message."

So that was that. It was what you called working on a pure hunch.

He had a lot of figuring to do to see Pieter's angle. The only thing to do was to start from the beginning and see it as it must have happened, then the right plan would come easy. Take it in easy stages, he told himself. Pieters was an old resident—he knew this country better than you'll ever know it.

Illustrated by ANTHONY KOKINOS

WHEN Klimbo first heard the blade of the panga he was cooking mealie-mush over the pot-bellied iron stove in the kitchen. As he worked he hummed a tune, but as soon as the panga carelessly sliced through a branch of camel-thorn behind the bungalow his humming stopped as if switched off.

For a long indecisive moment he stood there in his frayed duck shorts, listening, his bare back shining black and greasy. Then with a sharp movement he thrust the pan of mealies to the back of the stove. He listened again, his cheeks quivering and his eyes dilated. Suddenly he swung on his heel and went up the earthen steps leading into the bungalow in one great bound; without pause he hurtled down the passage till he came to the open door of the lounge. There he found Pieters sitting in his cane chair smoking a pipe and facing the open window overlooking the plain.

"Bwana . . ." Klimbo burst out.

"What is it?" Pieters asked in Kikuya. Sitting there he looked like some benevolent patriarch watching over his flocks. White beard, washed and combed, lay over his chest. Thin white hair started from behind a high domed forehead. In build he was lean and his skin, though dark and wrinkled, was healthy. He blew a slow puff of smoke and it eddied up in a single perfect ring.

"Bwana . . ." Klimbo began again. His teeth were chattering now. He turned his panic-filled gaze behind him and listened. His tongue, lips and palate had grown stiff with fear, and he could say no more.

"Hand me a glass, M'Klimbo," Pieters suddenly said. As he took it from the boy's trembling grasp, he pressed Klimbo's wrist urgently.

"Do as I say. Go quickly to the kitchen and hide in the place you made until they have gone. When they have gone I will come for you. After a long time, if I don't come, you must go and tell the Polizzi. Do you understand this? Now go quickly."

Klimbo's mouth opened but there was no sound. He struggled with himself, looking at Pieters, not wanting to go but going all the same because his feet were moving on their own account. Somewhere beyond the window there was a soft footstep and Klimbo turned and fled, insane with terror.

Pieters sat for a while sipping his whiskey calmly. Outside the bungalow he could hear low voices and the vicious hissing of a panga casually slicing vegetation. The door at the top of the passage creaked as someone opened it slowly. Bare feet moved cautiously over the clay floor. Pieters had finished his whiskey now and he sat quite still with his hands on the arms of the chair. His pipe had gone out.

A man looked in the open doorway. He wore a dirty felt hat with a wide brim, dust-colored slacks and a filthy shirt. He took a slow step into the room, bare feet rustling, and the two-foot panga in his hand gleamed white as it caught the light from

the window. It was a fine-ground razor with the weight of an axe and on the blade were stamped the words, "Made In Birmingham."

The man strutted contemptuously into the middle of the room, the panga swinging from his hand in a slow silver arc. He was not a Kikuya. Under the hat-brim his face, shiny and black with gray sweat round the lips, suggested the Gold Coast. He glanced round the room, at Pieters, and then through the window and across the plain. In his chair Pieters had stiffened and now he turned his head. In a harsh voice he demanded: "What do you want?"

The man with the panga wandered round the room. He looked up at the trophies on the wall with a thin smirk on his lips. He stooped to peer into the bookcase. After a moment he came back.

He said with husky insolence: "You know what we want, Bwana. We want Africa for Africans."

Pieters sat quite still except that his beard shook with fury.

"Has this madness no limit?" he asked thickly. "Do you choose who is an African and who is not? Am I not an African—I, who was born and lived here for forty years before ever thy birth was perpetrated? Is this the logic of the foul structure on which thou wouldst build a new world?"

What the old man said was true. Born in Free-town of a Dutch father and a Portuguese mother, he had never set foot outside the continent.

The man with the panga shrugged indifferently and said nothing. He knew what he knew and a panga can always be used to shorten unpleasant monologues when the hearer wearies of them. As he shrugged there was a slap of many feet along the passage and the room filled with men—Kikuyas. When he heard them Pieters shrugged also and sat in aloof dignity. Angrily he waited for the end.

One of them asked offensively: "Where is that animal's off-spring, Klimbo?" Pieters coldly ignored both questions and questioner. At this they muttered together. "The kitchen," someone said—and a scuffle of feet moved away along the passage.

The man with the panga and the wide-brimmed hat leaned towards Pieters and smiled pleasantly. "We have a method with rats," he explained in a

conversational tone, cocking a slim pink thumb over his shoulder towards the kitchen.

Pieters said nothing; but he understood. In the last six months Klimbo had been captured by Mau Mau twice and under the threat of torture had partaken of the foul Ceremony of the Seven Cuts with its bestial drinking of human blood. Twice he had renounced his vows and returned to Pieters, and now it seemed that Mau Mau had lost patience.

From the kitchen came a noise, inhuman, brief, and Pieter's face twitched. Poor Klimbo. He had been a good boy, a clean honest boy. These thoughts stirred Pieters but he gave no sign even when he heard the main party returning along the passage.

Then the man with the panga touched him on the shoulder.

"Now we will complete our business, Bwana."

IN the darkness Captain Nicholson lay in the cane chair, relaxed. There was a creak from the door and the light of a torch cut across the room. He sat up.

"Sorry I woke you, sorr," said Delaney's voice. "I was just doing the 10 o'clock rounds. It's a quiet night. Nothing to report from the guards."

Stiffly, Nicholson got up. "Come in a minute, sergeant; I've been doing some figuring. Does anything about this room strike you as odd?"

"Odd, sorr?" Delaney flashed the torch around. "Not a thing."

"It's a soft room, isn't it? See what I mean—no sharp edges. Soft table, edges of the door . . ."

Delaney shone the torch. "Padded with leather. Yes, sorr—a strip down both edges. Every door in the house is the same."

"I suppose you can see the drift now," Nicholson said. "Pieters was blind—or almost blind. That explains a lot. A blind man wouldn't stand much chance against Mau Mau, would he? And from all accounts he was too proud and independent to go into town. When they came he couldn't escape and he couldn't fight back. Since he isn't here, dead along with his house-boy, there's only one other explanation. They must have taken him with them. Now, I wonder why."

"There might be several reasons," Delaney said, darkly, thinking of ant-hills and ceremonial blood-drinking.

Nicholson shook his head.

"No, it doesn't hang together; not in this case. They killed the boy, true, but that may have been to stop him talking. Or possibly they had a grudge against him. It seems to me that they came to collect Pieters. Everything points to it. They haven't smashed or fired the bungalow and there's no sign of looting. They came to get Pieters—to use him. And he was almost blind, remember. Now, what could a man like Pieters do that they couldn't?"

"Have you any ideas, sorr?" Delaney asked curiously.

Nicholson dropped back in the chair with a sigh. "Nothing worth a damn," he said. Then, "Have me awakened an hour before sun-up and have the men ready for a dawn start. Don't forget to get some sleep yourself. Good night."

THE cold dawn was filled with the clink of mess kits and the low talking of soldiers. Nicholson and Delaney stood near the trucks studying a field-map and planning which sweep to take. Both of them knew how much the element of luck entered into an operation of this type. Stalking Mau Mau across the open plains and into the forest was mostly a game of chance.

"We'll have to drive fast and take potluck," Nicholson said. "When we hit the Aberdares cliffs we'll turn north. They may be heading for one of the villages to hide-up, or possibly they'll dive into the jungle on the Aberdares. Without knowing why they've taken Pieters it's difficult to predict their movements."

"Perhaps they want him for one of them witchcraft orgies," Delaney suggested, not for the first time. He had seen some of the victims of Mau Mau and he looked upon the possibility of fresh horrors with a certain detachment.

In the Company Delaney had something of a reputation as a Mau Mau hunter. Some thought that he was over-quick on the trigger with difficult prisoners and that some day it would get him into serious trouble. Those that thought this were people who viewed the campaign from the paper jungles of Nairobi orderly-rooms. They were entitled to their view. Delaney, who had helped bury the houseboy Klimbo, felt himself entitled to his.

Nicholson looked at him, understanding his sergeant, and grinned a tight grin. "It could be," he admitted. "Let's go and find out."

As the six trucks rolled forward and took up convoy position, a gray herd of zebra stampeded before them and fanned away to the horizon. Nicholson, plotting the course in the lead truck, felt that the best plan was to zigzag due southeast. Before they had droned a mile, the first light had turned the plain into a pale yellow sea, and he saw with faint surprise that it was morning. Pieters, here we come, he thought grimly.

They ran southeast for four hours, zigzagging in four-mile steps but making no sort of human contact. When they stopped for a quick meal the blue wall of the Aberdares had come into plain view. Nicholson ate standing while he frowned over the map and compass readings and wondered if it was time to turn north. He glanced over at his troops who were smoking by the trucks, and at Sergeant Delaney who was helping the drivers to refuel from jerricans. Everyone looked gray with dust and the morning cheerfulness had worn off.

Nicholson folded the map and stowed it thoughtfully back in the case. If they failed to make contact to the north then Pieters was a cooked goose.

An hour later one of the truck tires blew out and they stopped to change the wheel. While the wheel was being changed, Nicholson wandered impatiently toward the next hillock. On the still air he could hear the voices of the repair squad mingled with the periodic *tink!* of a spanner. In the background was Sergeant Delaney's voice running through a useful range of adjectives. Delaney hated his Mau Mau hunting to be interrupted.

Nicholson reached the foot of the hillock and paused before pacing back. He glanced round and saw the sharp footprint of a leopard which had been stalking baboons on the rocks only 10 minutes before. Halfway back to the trucks he paused again, his eye running idly over the stony earth to a dark patch the size of a man's hand. He knelt and touched it, feeling its texture between his fingers. He fought down a rising exultation. Was this the break he needed?

"It's motor oil, all right," Delaney agreed when Nicholson fetched him. "Hard to say how old, sorr. Perhaps a week."

"A pity the ground's stony just here, and there are no tracks," Nicholson said. "Of course, it might be one of our own patrols."

Delaney frowned at the Aberdares and then looked down at the oil spot dubiously.

"They didn't use a truck to raid Pieter's place, but that doesn't prove they haven't got one," he said. "Just to clear the matter up I'll take a few of the boys and cast around. We might pick up the tracks."

They picked up more than the tracks. Half a mile away they came on a well-defined trail leading

back into the jungle. Delaney called his men off at once and sent a runner for Nicholson. Nicholson arrived at breakneck speed with the rest of the patrol. They drove the trucks as near as they could and left them when the euphorbia trees became too thick. When Nicholson strode up, his eye running appraisingly over the indubitable trail going into the Aberdares, Delaney's face twisted into his ugly grin. He flicked the dust from the khaki-belt round his waist. "Should I take a party in after them, sorr?"

Nicholson laughed. They both laughed. Behind them the baboons ran barking over the hillock. At that moment all the hours of frustration and empty searching fell away and the day became suddenly pointed and full of meaning. The leopard lying up in the rocks heard the baboons go and snarled.

Nicholson looked at Delaney seriously. "Now you're just being bloody greedy," he said. "But I'll let you fire the second burst."

IT was more than an hour later when the first bullet came *chinging* down on them like a mad hornet. The patrol instantly fell to left and right, bellying down into the undergrowth, and Delaney turned to flash a triumphant grin over his shoulder at Nicholson. Contact, Nicholson thought, grinning back. To confirm the idea, a second bullet hit a hardwood with a resonant plop.

While the patrol spread out and felt for the opposition, Nicholson looked at the terrain through the binoculars and saw that it was mostly open jungle with little cover. A hundred yards ahead of them was a line of black cliffs covered in scrub and vine. It appeared a damned difficult place to out-flank. Looking closer he saw a truck—probably the truck that had left the tell-tale oil-spots—parked at the foot of the cliffs, camouflaged with branches.

While he digested this fact a rifle started firing spasmodically from the cliffs ahead. There was no answering fire from the lower levels, and Nicholson grinned his appreciation. He had his patrol well-trained; they would wait till they had a target.

"Shall we set the mortar up?" Delaney asked, crawling beside him. Nicholson agreed; there was nothing like a mortar for softening-up, and if the growth got much thicker they would have no chance to use it. Along the cliffs was a shallow ravine—the very place to stage an assault. Delaney took a squinting look before crawling back to brief the mortar-crew.

A minute later the first shell crunched and flowered against the cliff-face—a near miss. The second one went into the ravine; and the third. Apart from a young bush-pig and two pigeons, the ravine showed no sign of being occupied. Nicholson decided to close in.

Slipping from tree-bole to tree-bole, soon they were up against the cliff and edging in on the

ravine. The mortar obediently threw a few shells over the top. Then they were in and going up over razor rocks and vines an inch thick. In a few moments they were on top.

Now the first bullets came from small tongues of flame at the edge of the jungle. The patrol ran from the gorge and fell into new positions. To Nicholson's left a soldier knelt on the stones and put his hand to his head then pitched forward with jerking limbs. Scrambling past, Nicholson shoved his .38 back in its holster and scooped up the dead man's sten gun. First blood to them, he thought, grinning savagely. But wait, you sons just wait!

The brief action waxed and waned through the trees. Firing rose to a crescendo, then died to nothing. Here and there little pitched battles were fought with snipers sitting tightly in the tree-tops. A few grenades exploded. At one point someone took half a dozen prisoners in one glorious swoop.

It was a hot, violent mix-up, yet the patrol moved forward inexorably—until suddenly, as they reached steeply sloping ground, there was a complete silence.

At the time Nicholson and Delaney were together. The silence shut down so unexpectedly that it had a balanced, brittle quality. They exchanged glances and waited for it to break, but it didn't. Delaney slipped away along the flank and after a moment came back.

"The devils have withdrawn, sorr." He gestured ahead up the rising ground, dense with bamboo and cedar jungle.

Nicholson nodded. He had half-expected this. At this stage there was only one thing to do: press on and press hard; cut them off before they reached the solid jungle on the upper slopes where pursuit was impossible.

But as the patrol crept up the strangely-silent rise, Nicholson felt a warning nerve twitch somewhere in his brain. You're getting jumpy, he told himself shortly; they're engaged and broken off—what else can they do now except fight and lose, or surrender? This was a reasonable, logical attitude, yet the warning nerve continued to twitch.

Finally Nicholson ignored it. What the hell, he thought, I'm going up after them!

THE patrol moved up in close formation. In this, Nicholson knew that he was taking a chance. But he relied on the probability that the Mau Mau would be in full retreat and would not waste any more men as snipers. And they would not have time to set booby traps.

Yet the distance he could hope to follow them was strictly limited. A recent order had made the Aberdares open territory and liable to R.A.F. bombing and ground-strafting. Without signaling his exact position, therefore, he would be running the risk of air-attack on any open ground they might

have to cross. In any case, beyond a certain point, pursuit was futile; the area was too big, the growth too thick.

Going forward at the head of the column, Nicholson had an acute presentiment of danger that refused to be ignored. When he lifted his hand sharply, the patrol scattered left and right behind the trees like birds. Instantly Delaney moved up beside him and they stood together listening and looking up the long and dark slope.

"It's a trap, sorr!" Delaney hissed suddenly.

Nicholson nodded. He had sensed that already. But what sort of a trap? A bunch of grenades didn't hurt well-scattered troops. A machine-gun would be awkward and so would two or three automatic rifles. Then what else? Was it plain bluff?

HE bent his head, listening. The jungle was like a giant sounding-board, amplifying and distorting every movement and its echo. From a long way off he could hear the cry of a leopard—a harsh unreal sound. Up in the trees some sort of bird was *chink, chink, chinking* monotonously, the metal notes reproducing themselves and whispering away as though in a cathedral.

Apart from that there was nothing except the soft breathing movements of the trees, nothing except the feeling of waiting, the atmosphere of expectancy that closed over Nicholson's skin like a cold nettle-rash.

Without speaking, he looked at Delaney, his eyebrows raised inquiringly.

Delaney shrugged slightly, hitching his sten tight under his arm-pit.

In a case like this, Nicholson thought, someone has to be the lamb on the altar. That means me. Who'd be a bloody officer anyway! They can always send the medal home to mother and hang it over my picture, he thought. That will be jolly to think about, if you *can* think—afterwards. In these few moments his lips seemed to have dried up to a salty smear. He felt his sten reassuringly and looked at Delaney with mocking eyes. He hoped Delaney would feel suitably impressed. On his own he went forward.

Farther up the slope the trees thinned, and then closed in to glossy evergreen thickets. The evergreens were the danger spot for sure. One foot slowly before the other, finger on trigger—and for God's sake keep your eyes skinned—he moved forward.

Nothing yet; not a sound.

He was now less than 50 yards from the evergreens. Still nothing. One more step. Nothing.

He paused, his hand half-raised to signal Delaney and the patrol to move up. And then, as he turned his head, he saw the movement, the blue oily barrel with the serrated cooling fins amongst the dense leaves, the black deadly mouth pointing at and beyond him down the slope towards the

patrol. In that fraction of an instant he dived forward like a swimmer, a warning yell bursting from his throat and his sten spraying an unaimed volley into the trees above.

The big Vickers machine-gun opened up at once. Nicholson could hear the *chug-chug-chug* of the heavy bullets passing over him and hitting the trees round the patrol.

Then a second machine-gun opened up, a third, and a fourth. These sounded like Brens or Brownings—it was hard to say which. For a moment he lay on his face in the soft under-tree mat until a spatter of bullets threw earth and fungus-dust over him. Frenzied, knowing it was his only chance, he dug, slawing sideways with his hands. It was a poor sort of fox-hole, but it stopped them drawing a direct bead on him.

WE'VE had it now, he thought; we've had it. They've got a fort—nothing less. He clawed a bit deeper, then twisted himself and cleaned the breech of the sten as best he could.

While he was doing this the Vickers stopped firing. He levered himself up, decayed vegetable matter all over his face, and gave it a burst with the sten.

Then the other machine-guns quieted—first one, then two. Silence crawled over the evergreens again, broken only by a few carefully aimed shots from his own patrol zipping up the slope. But there was no real weight of fire from his men down there; they were afraid of hitting him.

Silence again. Nicholson peered over the edge of his shallow fox-hole. Now what? Were they short of ammunition? That didn't make sense. By straining his eyes into the dense cover of the evergreens he could just make out the barrel of the Vickers. Vindictively he gave it a burst with the sten. Nothing happened.

Trying one more burst with the sten, he found that the magazine was empty. He pulled out his .38 and drew a careful bead with it on the Vickers. That shot hit metal and pinged upwards in a beautiful ricochet. There was no sign of enemy activity.

Nicholson lay low a minute to think. With their machine-guns apparently dead, the surprise element expended and the attacking patrol well-dispersed, it was hard to see what Mau Mau planned to do next. As Delaney and half a dozen others came up the slope, slipping from tree to tree, Nicholson saw what Mau Mau intended to do. Something climbed above the evergreens and he stared at it in wide-eyed disbelief. Then he laughed. He choked. It was an off-white shirt suspended on a long stick—the symbol of surrender.

They came out one by one, sheepishly, and allowed themselves to be cooped in a circle ringed with stens. Dressed in cast-off European clothes, some of them, or still in native Kikuya dress, they

appeared an evil, restless crowd. Every country has its scum, Nicholson thought, and this is Kenya's. He gazed at them with the indifference a soldier feels to a surrendered enemy, indifference mixed with a trace of contempt. Two men dead and two or three injured it had cost him for this little lot. They didn't look worth it.

Once the prisoners were safe, the first thing Nicholson did was break through the bushes to examine the machine-gun mounts. The whole business puzzled him. That they might have opened fire at long range with their last ammunition was illogical and stupid. Rather than question surly prisoners through an interpreter he went himself to find out. Close behind came the irrepressible Delaney, his eye bright for any lurking Mau Mau.

The gun-nests had been hacked out of the evergreens at intervals with enough forward clearance to command the slope. Nicholson shuddered at what he had been leading his patrol into. He touched the first gun—a Bren mounted on logs of wood. He tried the breech but it was jammed solid. That was interesting. Going to the next nest he saw that Delaney had preceded him and was struggling to free the belt of an old-type Vickers. This too was jammed.

AFTER a moment Delaney stood up, grinning. "The worst damn gun-stoppage I ever saw, sorr." On his palm he held a sliver of metal—it might have been the shank of a small nail. Amazed, Nicholson bent to look at it. The entire gun-belt, he then saw, had been sabotaged with tiny bits of metal cunningly inserted beneath the cartridges. No wonder the Vickers had stopped firing; it was a wonder it had ever fired at all. What sort of a mess was inside the breech was anybody's guess.

As they looked at each other, the same thought rose simultaneously to their minds—Pieters. Nicholson spun on his heel. "Take the side near the Vickers, Sergeant," he snapped. "If you find him fire one shot." He himself crushed away through the evergreens in the opposite direction until a shot, only a minute later, brought him stumbling back.

Delaney was standing at the top of a narrow clearing slashed out of the jungle. There were a few sleeping-shelters made from sticks and leaves. Scattered around were sundry ammunition boxes and a pile of assorted provisions—mostly native cereals. There was only the body of a man.

"Alive?" Nicholson asked, coming up.

"No, sorr."

Nicholson stooped and turned the body over.

It was a bearded white man, very old by the look of him; in his chest was a bad shot-wound. Nicholson searched the jacket and pants, but there were no identifying papers. Yet it was Pieters all right. A man like this was too distinctive to have a double.

From his own pocket he took a clean handker-

chief, gently laid it over the dead face, and then straightened, looking down thoughtfully. As he stared at this man lying here with his strong angular features and tough, spare body, the picture came into much sharper focus. For the first time he was thinking about Pieters without feeling irritated. Now he was dead, Pieters was at last beginning to emerge in his true stature.

"I still don't see what happened," Delaney admitted, puzzled. "He fixed their guns—sure, that's obvious—and a good thing for us that he did. But why did they bring him in the first place?"

Nicholson looked down again at the still figure. "Do you remember a Mau Mau raid a few months ago at Embu?" Delaney shook his head. How did you remember one particular raid amongst scores?

Nicholson smiled his slow crooked smile. "I remember it rather well, because I was there. They broke into the armory behind the native police barracks but found all the rifles chained up and the bolts removed and locked in a safe. So they stole what they could—four crates of machine-gun parts and a pile of ammunition. I know because I inspected the armory the next morning. After that I suppose they got the stuff away in a truck and brought it here. Then they discovered that machine-guns can be damned difficult things to assemble, so the next step was to capture and coerce someone with the necessary know-how. It looks as though the man they settled on was Pieters."

"But I thought he was blind," Delaney objected.

Nicholson looked at him musingly. "Sergeant. Could you still strip and assemble a Vickers?"

"I think so, sorr."

"Blindfolded?"

Delaney hesitated. "I might."

NICHOLSON shrugged. "Well, that answers your question. Don't forget that Pieters must have been a professional soldier for something like thirty years. They certainly picked the right man. Blind or half-blind, Pieters could do it and what he didn't remember he could guess. And being blind they knew he couldn't put up much resistance when they went to fetch him. Mau Mau never were technicians and Pieters must have been a gift from Heaven. He built the guns for them, with a panga at his throat, because he'd no option.

"Probably he chatted to them in their own lingo, talked them round, made them feel that he was mostly on their side. He knew what they were thinking and he knew how to turn their vanities and fancies to his own advantages. And when they relaxed he did his neat little job of sabotage. He was probably relying on the fact that they'd fire only one practice burst out of each gun, perhaps not even that. The bits of steel look as though they've been spaced to suit. But he made sure that there was enough metal in each belt and magazine

to jam the guns solid as soon as they were fired in earnest."

"And then they shot him?"

"Maybe, maybe not," Nicholson said. "Their bullet or ours—what's the odds. He died cleanly, like a soldier, and that's all that matters. In any case they'd never have let him leave this clearing alive, knowing what he'd done. We couldn't save his life—but at least we kept him from a slow death under the panga."

Then Nicholson remembered rank and duty.

"Sergeant!"

"Yes, sorr?"

"Have a grave dug right here and assemble a firing-party. Apart from guards all the patrol will parade by the grave in half an hour's time. We're going to give Pieters a send-off. Right?"

"Right, sorr."

THAT was almost the end of it. On a signal pad Nicholson wrote thoughtfully: "Company H.Q. from Nicholson, Captain, commanding 70 patrol. Enemy engaged in area PR 12. 39 prisoners taken with loss of 2 men dead, 4 injured. White resident Pieters killed during engagement. Am returning to base. Orders. End message."

After he had handed the message to an orderly, he sat on a crate. I know something, he thought. Old Pieters was nobody's fool. They said he was a recluse; that he'd gone native. Maybe he had; but he had a reason for it. He was an old man, growing quite blind, defenseless. But he knew Africa and the African mind and quite deliberately he allowed Africa to absorb him. To a large extent he identified himself with the common native. Perhaps that was the way he felt; perhaps he'd been kicked around by officials himself; or perhaps the whole thing was a pose, a defense mechanism. He'd seen what Mau Mau would do to harmless people like his houseboy, and when the time came he struck back in the most effective way that he could. How wonderfully effective it was he'll never know.

A short while later, Nicholson stood by the side of a shallow grave. He nodded; Delaney signaled; the firing party fired a ragged volley. Nicholson moved forward awkwardly and sprinkled some earth over the body; he muttered a few scraps of a psalm he remembered. Then the shovels were filling in the grave.

For a moment Nicholson watched them, and as he turned away he thought: I'd give a month's pay to have spoken to that man.

Before he reached the edge of the clearing a signal orderly came up with a signal reply-chit.

It said: "Nicholson, Captain, commanding 70 patrol from Company H.Q. Jolly good show. Carry on. The gin's on ice. End message."

Nicholson smiled grimly as he read it. Were there really such things he wondered, as civilized drinks in civilized glasses? —BY F. W. HOLIDAY