

The Latvian

By HERMAN FETZER

WE WERE sitting in the cool dining room of an Occidental club at Tokyo, enjoying the tinkling of tall thin glasses and the soothing gelidity of our highballs.

Knowlton, a slight young man with a moustache, who was gathering material in the Orient for a series of financial articles, was making a droll story out of an adventure he had when he once strolled through a pasture with a girl and a guitar.

"She had a red hat," he was saying, "and the bull saw it. Before I knew what was happening, he was heading for us, snorting like a mad schoolma'am.

"What did I do?"

"I picked up my guitar and ran. The girl got to the fence about the time I did, but she got there without any help from me.

"I saved my guitar and myself. The incident showed me that I was fonder of song than I was of woman."

Drucamp, a plump little old man with an absurd pair of whiskers, broke into the laugh:

"You should have played your guitar. They say that music hath charms to soothe the savage beast."

"Congreve wrote it 'the savage breast,' I think," said my friend Maclou, the wanderer. "He might as well have said one as the other.

"I have often wondered whether he knew how mysterious and strange a truth he was speaking, or whether he was just getting off a line that sounded good to him.

"Do you care to hear a story somewhat different from Knowlton's which proves the power that music has over

[AUTHOR'S NOTE: Incredible as it may seem, the events chronicled in this story have their foundation deep in the soil of fact. The police of the city of New York, during the summer of 1923, encountered two persons, both of them Latvians, who understood the mysterious art to which this story has reference. If there is one among you who doubts, I beg only that he will do me the justice of reviewing that doubt someday while he stands before the Hindu in the sideshow, while the Oriental charms hooded cobras with the music of his reed-flute.]

what Drucamp has called the savage beast?"

There was acquiescence in the general turning toward the speaker. He was a man of forty with a spare, dark face and a body as slender and hard as an iron rod. Two of us at least—Knowlton and I—knew that he had been captain of a rum-running fleet off New Jersey; that he had smuggled cognac from Cuba into the sponge beds off the coast of Florida for the sponger fishers of Tarpon Springs to find; that he had performed mysterious errands for the King of Siam and that his adventures in the Gobi desert had been the subject of a thrilling narrative by a famous author.

He spoke but seldom of the incidents of his life—the man who has had much excitement does—and he usually preferred listening to talking when there was conversation at the table.

The power upon him of the story he was to tell was obvious. As it progressed, his hands clenched and unclenched and his eyes looked through the fragile walls of the club, far into some magical territory of which we knew nothing.

"Perhaps," he began, "you have heard—but no; I'll start the story farther back than that.

"I was standing on the deck of an auxiliary sloop moored to a wharf in New Orleans, when I noticed the most dejected figure I have ever seen. It was the figure of a man, well-built, dressed in the outfit of a Russian sailor.

"The figure struck me because it was so downcast. You have seen men down and out along the beaches of the South Seas, and here in the Orient, and you know how far into despair a man can go. This man arrested my attention by his dejection—and I was used to waterfront bums. You can see that it must have been bad.

"His clothes, as I say, pointed him out to be a Russian, but the fine features were more those of a Pole. I decided, on second thought, that the man must be a Lithuanian, because his eyes were fair and his skin, in spite of the marks of exposure, was as delicate as a baby's.

"While I was watching, a policeman took him in tow. The man protested vigorously; waved his hands and talked in broken English, but the cop was obdurate. He took him away.

"THE sight of the Latvian started me on a train of thought. I had been in Lithuania once, in the government of Kovno. The mission that took me there is of no importance to the story. What I remembered, as I stood there on the deck of my sloop, was that I had watched the worship of trees in a little village at the edge of a long marsh.

"You have read of the tree-worshippers, and perhaps you have seen some queer rituals here in the East. I have seen fanatics shove saw-toothed swords through their bowels in a temple in Egypt, and I have seen the American Indians in New Mexico crunch scorpions in their teeth and swallow rattlesnakes alive. It was horrible and fascinating, but the most powerful thing I have ever seen was the worship of a gnarled oak tree there in that Latvian village.

"There was none of the crazy nastiness of the rituals I have mentioned. It was all in silence at the start, with the Krive-Kriveyto, the priest of priests, standing at the foot of the sacred tree, gnarled and ancient as the oak itself, his knotted arms and his bundled fists raised over his head, which he threw back till his dry skull rapped on his vertebrae.

"They brought sacrifices to the tree—and one of the things they sacrificed I will not mention even among such sophisticated men as you. But it was beautiful and solemn and glorious, and at the end there was a whispering in the leaves of the tree, and an eerie whispering broke out among the worshippers. They were talking with the tree—talking its own language!

"In the two weeks or so that I spent there, I heard much that I have forgotten now, and much that I never understood. The talk of the people was as thick with mysticism as you will find the air at certain towns of Wales and certain villages of India. I gathered

that certain of the people were known as "The Favorite Children"—of the oak, of course—and that they had mysterious powers over the dead and living things of the marsh and forest.

"I was kindly treated in that place, and because of the hospitality of his countrymen I wanted to do something for the poor Lithuanian whom I had seen standing so dejected at the wharf. I knew that something epically tragic was happening to him; I was young and perverse, I wanted a hand in it.

"I left the sloop to the charge of my mate and followed the policeman and his prisoner. They reached the city prison two blocks ahead of me. The police in New Orleans are not fastidiously accommodating but I knew a word or two that softened the heart of the desk sergeant, and I was admitted to the range where the Lithuanian was jailed.

"He refused to talk to me. He shook his head and muttered. When I pulled a roll of bills from my pocket and said, 'Out?' his face brightened a little, but he relapsed into melancholy despair. I was determined to help him, though, and I offered to place a cash bond for him. The desk sergeant accepted it, and I left the station with my protegee in tow.

"For all he knew, I suppose, I was another policeman—or something worse. His face didn't light up until I landed him on the deck of the sloop, and then he looked curiously at me.

"'Ven you go?' he asked.

"'When do you want?'

"'Qvick,' he panted. 'Qvick.'

"There was no point in my staying; I was leaving some time that day anyhow, and I was inclined to do as he asked. So we put off, and when we got out into the bay, he came to me and put himself on his face before me, trying to kiss my shoes.

"I picked him up.

"'What was the hurry, brother?' I asked.

"His English was terrible, and I won't try to mimic it. But I made out that a Chinese hatchetman was following him because of something he had done in Pell Street, and that the delay of a few hours would have meant his death. He asked my name, and I told him, and he engraved it with the point of a safety-pin into the flesh of his forearm.

"I had seen that before. A Chinese by the name of Nun Chang Ng wrote my name on his arm once, and about a year later a yellow Greek who was jumping from a balcony to my back in Salonika died in the air—a bullet in his heart.

"We put in at Tampa a few days later, and my Lithuanian left me to join a tramp bound for Rio Janiero. Before he left he gave me a tarnished talisman with an oak tree engraved on it (I lost it the next day) and he prophesied that we would meet again.

"'You haf save me,' he said. 'Some day maybe I'm gif you what you gif me.'

"I forgot him.

"Three years later I found him in Singapore, watching for a job. I needed a man, and he was ready to serve me.

"I must explain the situation to you.

"I was carrying out the commission of a New England banker whose wife wanted a Hindu room in her palace in Vermont. The man was disgustingly wealthy, and what his wife said went. They weren't going to do the thing in a cheap way; they were going to get their stuff out of some genuine Hindu temple. They were willing to pay whatever it cost, and when they discovered that the stuff they wanted couldn't be bought, they decided to have it anyhow.

"And so the stuff was taken out of a down-country principality of India, and it was brought to me in Singapore, one jump ahead of the emissaries of the priest of the temple. The emissaries had orders to negotiate only after the stuff was back in the temple. It was dangerous business, but exhilarating.

"My job was to get the stuff to a little island in the East Indies. Somebody else was to carry it away from there.

"I had been waiting a month before the stuff reached me, and I was eager to sail.

"THE CRAFT with which I had supplied myself was the crankiest, foulest old tub that you can imagine. I bought her because I was low in funds, because she was cheap, and because she would suffice for the work I had to do. I didn't want to be seen around Singapore with too nice a boat. There were reasons that I won't need to go into.

"I had her from a tramp captain; she was too old and soaked and rickety for his purposes. She ran against my taste, but I knew she would do. I expected no trouble at all at sea; if I had any apprehensions it was concerning what I would find at the appointed island.

"I knew that we would be chased, but I figured that the priest's men would try to learn my destination and beat me there, rather than chase a day or two behind me across the water. I knew very well that there was a chance of their finding out whither I was bound.

Such things have mysterious ways of getting abroad.

"So the looks of my craft didn't matter, and I judged her to be capable of what speed we needed. As long as it was humanly possible to live and navigate in her, she would have to do. As I say, I had small choice.

"When I got her she was lousy with rats. They were nasty, but I did not consider them especially important. I set my men to cleaning up the boat as much as possible during our weeks of waiting, but there was little use.

"On the day the treasure was loaded into my hold, a new swarm of the rats set sail for us from the rotten base of a nearby wharf, and they boarded us like a band of pirates.

"My men were not ill pleased to sail with the rats. It is more than a waterfront superstition that a vessel that leaves port with rats in her hold goes with the kindest of omens.

"It was a nice omen, but a most unpleasant condition. I did not realize until a day out how thick the pests were. They were eternally underfoot; they were everywhere.

"Fearless as dogs, they were, and their temerity gave them the appearance of tameness. They wouldn't run from a man. I can assure you that it is not an aid to the digestion to sit in a cabin stinking of mould, eating ship's food while a regiment of rats sits at the edges of the room, squatting in a dozen attitudes, watching you masticate your meat.

"We got on familiar terms with them. I gave up trying to reduce the numbers by violent means when it became apparent that killing didn't seem to diminish their numbers.

"There was one malicious old patriarch among them whom I took to be the leader. He had a rabbinical look; gray and hairy as an old ape, and solemn as a mayor at a flag-raising.

"This particular rat, gentlemen, dogged me. He followed me upon the bridge; he was squatting on the floor beside my bunk when I woke in the morning. At first I was amused with him, and often tossed him scraps from my table, which he munched in solemn dignity, never taking his eyes from my face. But at length I grew to hate him. I could not explain to myself why I had fastened my dislike upon so inconsiderable a thing as a rat. Nevertheless, I hated him more than I will ever hate any living thing again—more than I have hated any living thing but one.

"He knew it. His beady eyes, which night or day did not seem to leave my

face were full of glittering mockery. He adopted an attitude of complacent superiority to me, and when he eluded my bullets with an intuition that I will never understand he leered at me with scorn.

"Gentlemen, I shot at that rat a hundred times, and my hatred increased when I became aware of the fact that I could not hit him. It may have been that my anger made my hand unsteady, but I have turned from missing him and drilled a bullet into a mark no bigger than a half dollar, and twice as far away.

"As I had given up trying to rid the ship of his children, I gave up trying to hit the patriarch. I knew that the whole thing was impossible, and I knew that too much tackling of the impossible leads straight to madness. I knew a man who tried for fourteen years to kill a dog, and he went crazy and shot himself. The dog dragged him to his own door.

"MY LATVIAN came to me on the bridge one morning and asked, throwing one thumb in the direction of a rat which was nibbling tentatively at a coil of rope.

"You want me to kill 'em?"

"No," I said. "It's no use. You go back to your work."

"He smiled, bowed down to the deck, threw out palms of his hands and went away. I did not suspect then what it was that he meant.

"Because of the rats, our course was impeded. Daily some little thing would go wrong. The rats chewed at everything, and it was no wonder that things broke at the least strain. It was more by vexation than by delay that we were hindered. My men grew nervous under the irritation of the rodents; they talked of nothing else. Almost any other crew would have given trouble to its master. Anxious to end the trip that was growing so distasteful, my men tried to expedite matters, and in their haste they caused more delays, and added to the multiplicity of things which fretted us.

"And so there was a general feeling of relief on the evening that preceded the day we expected to sight our island. I alone was a little worried. A vague premonition had taken charge of my mind, and I glanced back along our wake too often.

"In the piercing light which comes just before darkness, I saw a sail behind us.

"My presentiment became a positive worry. The island was not in the path of the run of sea traffic, or we would certainly never have chosen it as a rendezvous. I had not counted on seeing

a ship for three days before we reached it.

"The more consideration I gave the identity of the boat, the more firmly I was convinced that we were its goal; that it bore the infuriated fanatics whom the priest of the ravished temple had sent to bring back the stolen treasures.

"How could they know?" I wondered, but in my heart I knew that intelligence has strange channels of transmission in the Orient.

"There was a dead silence on the water, and the splash of our own procedure was the only relief to the ear. The setting sun beat a long red welt into the breast of the sea, and the dreaded sail stuck up over the horizon like the fin of a leviathan.

"I ordered my men to put themselves in readiness for trouble, and at the moment of my speaking the sun popped into the water, and darkness gathered with the speed of an epidemic. All night I watched, but there was nothing to see and nothing to hear. Long before the dawn I found myself trying to persuade my heart that my suspicions were groundless—that the sail concerned me in no way at all—a tramp off its course—smugglers of pearls.

"But the first dim light of morning banished these illusions. The vessel stood by, so near that I marveled at the silence with which she had come upon us. We prepared for defense.

"You understand, of course, that we carried no ordnance. I think the recoil of one piece would have jarred that groaning churn apart. Besides, we wanted whatever appearance of innocence we could summon. The temptation in our hold would have upset the chastity of a warship.

"We were armed with automatic pistols and carbines, and most of my men were fond of knives.

"I am partial to knife-men, gentlemen. They are clean and they fight in the open. A gun-man is the lowest form of life; he lurks in a doorway and shoots into the back. The knife-man fights his enemy knee to knee, and his blade is part of his body.

"Our first message from the temple crusaders was a ball across our bow in the sweet old pirate style. We made no answer. I knew they would not try to subdue us with cannon. It would have been too dangerous to the sacred jewels of the provincial deity whose property they were replevining.

"There was no need of an attempted flight. A glance would have shown the greenest landsman that she had twice our speed. We stood by to fight when

the boarders should come, and, to be truthful, I was not greatly concerned. The worry of the night had given way to the actuality of the dawn, and battle was better than suspense. I knew the temper of my men as well as I knew the temper of my own blade; I had tried the blade and the men before.

"We waited until the first boatload of little men was almost under our rail before we riddled them with lead. Our first round must have accounted for half the boat's personnel. But before we shot again, three other boats had put out, and more were being lowered.

"One boat at a time," I directed, and my men nodded.

"IT MUST have been Hell itself in those open boats, clearly exposed to our fire, perfect targets. We emptied two of them completely. But there was no dimming the brown devils that were heading over the dimpled waters on that sparkling morning. They were not fighting for glory or gold or the love of fighting. They were fighting for the love of a god, and there is no bullet which stops such men.

"They swarmed up our sides at a half-dozen places almost simultaneously, and our decks were red.

"Side by side with me, in the horrid phantasma of battle, there moved a fighting shadow, protecting me, seconding me, keeping always with me. I knew, without looking, that it was my Latvian, keeping his pledge.

"At the first contact of fighting, the rats disappeared. Down the hatches they went, like roaches scurrying into a crack when one turns a light upon them. I recall a feeling of relief in the thought that in the fighting, at least, we would not be troubled by them.

"Gentlemen, I have fought much, and there is such a thing as pleasant battle, but that was not. It was like being thrown into a cistern filled solid with flies. The brown fanatics were on all sides of us. They fought with knives, and a few had old-fashioned firearms, but it was with their numbers that they fought principally. Many of them fell, but they were choking our defense as one may choke a mill by throwing too much wheat into it. An almost interminable stream of them came over our gunwales.

"Vaguely, I wondered that so small a vessel could hold so many men.

"The bright arc of a knife flying end over end loomed swiftly up before me, and the shadow which had been at my side sprang before me and crumpled. My Latvian was down.

"At almost the same time there was a stinging pain, cold as ice, upon my right shoulder, and I ceased knowing. There was only the troubled consciousness of terrible pain.

"The scene that impressed itself on my sight when I opened my eyes made me shut them again, immediately. It was too horrible for words. I have seen dirty messes here and elsewhere, but this turned my stomach and made me ill. Nausea added itself to my troubles. In that glance I had seen the deck unpopulated by a standing being, but torn bodies lay about like chips on a wood-pile.

"I judge, as I lay there with closed eyes, that my unconsciousness had lasted some time. I had no fear of death, nor did it occur to me that my wounds were fatal. In those days it did not enter my mind that I might ever die. I am wariier now, and one of these days I may settle down on a fairy farm.

"I considered, as I say, that much had happened since I had fallen unconscious. I knew that the Hindu crusaders would lose no time in transferring the treasure to their own ship, and—valuable as it was—one boat could easily have carried it.

"It developed that I was right. In a moment I heard the crunching noise of feet walking upon the blood-sodden, prostrate bodies. My ears told me that horrible work was going on. They were despatching all signs of life that appeared among the men on the deck. I tore open my eyes and beheld such horror as turns a man gray. There were two of them who were armed with cruel, curly knives, and one who gave directions. The latter had rolled over the body of one of his own men with his foot and was pointing at the throat. The poor wretch who had been a comrade of the headsman a half-hour before pleaded with his eyes and with his choking voice. The scimitars flashed, and blood spurted. . . The man without a scimitar was turning over another body with his foot. They were not sparing their own men. They were killing all the wounded!

"It was diabolical—uncanny; blood-freezing.

"They were near me, and I tried with my last ounce of strength to resist the fate that I knew was coming. I succeeded in dragging myself to my elbow, but I fell back again, powerless but awake, my eyes open.

"The movement attracted them to me, and two scimitars flashed upward before my eyes. But the man who bore no blade held up a retarding hand, and the knives remained poised. His throat was

guttural with a coarse negative, and he pointed with a smile of obscene satisfaction to the open hatches.

"The rats were coming back. They poured out of the ship's interior and went daintily among the bloody corpses.

"THE two executioners smiled and acquiesced with their eyes. The officer smiled into my eyes; he had seen my helplessness. Gentlemen, I might throw this table through yonder window with less effort than I exerted in an attempt to raise my hands, but they lay still on the deck beside me. The three Hindus were climbing over the rail. They were gone. There was the splash of oars, and I knew that we were deserted—such of us as were still alive—to the mercy of the rats.

"The horror of it turned me cold, and a clammy sweat mingled with the blood on my body.

"Over the fallen, mangled men came the rats, thicker than flies on a paper.

"They came and sat on my chest, the gray patriarch whom I had hated, and the hatred that existed between us was in his eyes as he leered into my face and minced his horrid mouth.

"I wished for the clean sweep of a blade, for the descent of a sudden bolt of lightning. The death that looked at me out of the eyes of that rat, and the death that surrounded me on all sides was too hideous to contemplate. But no mercy came.

"I turned my eyes in my aching skull to look for my Latvian. He lay beside me, and I thought he must be dead. But as if my gaze restored him, he became conscious, falling at once back into a stupor.

"How long I lay there in the grip of that cold, damp panic I cannot say. It had the qualities of a century and of a moment. There was nothing to break the nasty silence but the lapping of the waves, and the petulant squeaking of the rats.

"I became aware that my Latvian was conscious again, and I looked to him for understanding and sympathy. The gray rat still sat on my chest, biding his time. There is a language of the eyes, gentlemen. At the moment my Latvian turned his blood-spattered face in my direction, the gray rat stepped daintily upon my chin, and nuzzled my cheek with the nose of a connoisseur.

"The Latvian's face went chalky with horror when he saw what was to happen. With a grievous effort that contorted his face he turned on his side, and began crawling.

"A great disgust and a cold hatred for his ingratitude overcame me when I saw that he was crawling away from me. I wished that he might die before I died, that I might see the work of the rats upon him.

"He was going painfully, slowly, toward the rail. With a prodigious effort he grasped it, and with a strength that I have never seen equaled in the will of any man he dragged himself to a standing position, supporting himself by the rigging.

"Glancing toward me with a pride that hurt worse than my wounds, he twisted his face into an absurd gesture, and whistled. A sense of the incongruity of his action possessed me, and I wanted to laugh. The result was only a greater sickness.

"He whistled again, and the strain which issued from his pursed lips was eerie and miraculous. It carried me back suddenly to the little village at the edge of a long marsh in Kovno; to the priest of priests beneath the sacred tree, and the whispering of the oak. Dissimilar as they were, there was a cousinship between the whistling of the wounded Latvian at the rail and the whispering which had passed between the worshippers and the tree to which they prayed.

"Knowlton, you have lain under a tree on your back beside some peaceful brook in Ohio, and you have called up the bobwhites by imitating their whistle. You have heard men lure crows into ambush by croaking upon a reed. You have all seen the charmer call the hooded cobra harmless out of his basket. But you have never seen the like of what I saw. You have read it, perhaps, in the bad rhymes of a good poet, but you have never seen it. Nor had I, but while I watched with my heart thumping like the fist of the watch, I recalled certain cryptical things which my hostess in Kovno had said of the mysterious powers held by 'The Favorite Children.'

"For those rats lifted up their heads at the first sound of that whistle, and at the second bar they turned and walked, with gladness in the motion of their bodies, toward the whistling Latvian.

"From the far sides of the deck they came, hurrying to answer the call which he knew. It was such a strain of music as made magic in the heart, the strain he whistled, over and over. Belated rats came out of the hatches, and there was a scampering above and below of rats which were coming.

"Last of all there left my chest the gray old rat which I had hated, and which hated me. He went with many a

glance backward at me, and there was regret in his buttony eyes.

"When they had gathered before him in chorus—hundreds and hundreds of rats, sitting on their tails on the bloody bodies, waving their forefeet up and down and wagging their heads—my Latvian made a feeble wave of his hand to me and looked me in the eyes. There was triumph and a great gladness in his look. He let go of the rigging, and slumped over the rail. The rats followed him, and the water hissed as they dived into it. I heard the faint repetition of the call, and in a few moments there was

silence. The deck was clear of all but the shattered rigging and the mangled bodies.

"It was my Latvian's way of discharging an obligation."

WE around the table came back to our surroundings as men returning from afar. Knowlton was the first to inquire of the sequel.

"The emotions which my Latvian's sacrifice of his life aroused made me faint again, and when I awoke it was to find my mate bending over me, his head bandaged and his voice cheery.

"The three executioners who had been sent back to kill the wounded had done but a little of their work when the more subtle and horrid method suggested itself. With the rats gone, by the grace of my Latvian's mystical powers and great gratitude, we had a chance. Those who were less badly wounded were up and caring for themselves in a few hours. They took me to my cabin, and we sighted our island the next day."

Druccamp shivered.

"Those damned rats are running up and down my spine this minute," he said. "Let's have another drink."

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