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DETECTIVE-CRIME-SUSPENSE STORIES

| | | |
|---|------------------|-----|
| THE DESTRUCTORS | Graham Greene | 3 |
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| THE CUSTOMS OF THE COUNTRY | Thomas Flanagan | 16 |
| THE DOUBLE CLUE | Agatha Christie | 32 |
| DAPPER JOHNNY BROWN | Ruth McKenney | 40 |
| MURDER WEAVES A PATTERN | Charles B. Child | 51 |
| THE BIRTHDAY DIAMONDS | Barry Perowne | 65 |
| THE CREAM OF THE JEST | Fredric Brown | 101 |
| THE MAN OF THE KNIFE | Alexandre Dumas | 110 |
| THE FLAW IN THE SYSTEM | Jim Thompson | 116 |
| SNOWBALL IN JULY | Ellery Queen | 123 |
| FROM THE MOUSE TO THE HAWK | Dion Henderson | 130 |

BLACK MASK MAGAZINE

| | | |
|----------------------|---------------|----|
| \$100,000 A PINT | Paul E. Walsh | 81 |
| YOUNG MAN IN A HURRY | Tom Karsell | 93 |

DETECTIVE DIRECTORY

| | |
|-----------------|-----|
| Robert P. Mills | 142 |
|-----------------|-----|

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THE MAN OF THE KNIFE

by ALEXANDRE DUMAS

THERE DWELLS IN FERDJ' OUAH A Sheik named Bou Akas ben Achour. It is one of the most ancient names in the country, so we find it in the history of the dynasties of the Arabs and Berbers of Ibu Khaldoun.

Bou Akas is 49 years of age. He dresses like the Kabyles; that is, in a gandoura of wool girt with a leathern belt, and fastened around the head with a slender cord. He carries a pair of pistols in his shoulder-belt, at his left side the Kabyle flissa, and, hanging from his neck, a little black knife. Before him walks a Negro, carrying his gun, and at his side bounds a large greyhound.

When a tribe in the vicinity of the twelve tribes over which he rules occasions him any loss, he deigns not to march against it, but is satisfied with sending his Negro to the principal village, where the Negro shows the gun of Bou Akas, and the injury is repaired.

There are in his pay two or three tolbas who read the Koran to the people. Every person passing by his dwelling on a pilgrimage to Mecca receives

three francs and at The Sheik's expense remains in Ferdj' Ouah as long as he pleases. But should Bou Akas learn that he has had to do with a false pilgrim, he sends emissaries to overtake the man wherever he may be, and they, on the spot, turn him over on his face, and give him twenty blows of the bastinado on the soles of his feet.

Bou Akas sometimes dines 300 persons, but instead of partaking of the repast, he walks around among his guests with a stick in his hand, marshalling his domestics; then, if there is anything left, he eats, but the very last.

When the Governor of Constantina, the only man whose supremacy he acknowledges, sends him a traveler, according to whether the traveler is a man of note, or the recommendation is pressing, Bou Akas presents him with his gun, his dog, or his knife. If he presents his gun, the traveler shoulders it; if his dog, the traveler holds it in leash; if his knife, the traveler suspends it from his neck. With one or

another of these talismans, each of which bears with it the degree of honor to be rendered, the traveler passes through the twelve tribes without incurring the slightest danger. Everywhere he is fed and lodged for nothing, for he is the guest of Bou Akas. When he leaves Ferdj' Ouah, it is sufficient for him to deliver the knife, the dog, or the gun to the first Arab that he meets. The Arab, if hunting, stops; if tilling the ground, he quits his plough; if in the bosom of his family, he departs; and taking the knife, the dog, or the gun, returns it to Bou Akas.

In fact, the little black-handled knife is very well known; so well known, that it has given its name to Bou Akas — Bou d'Jenoui, or The Man of the Knife. It is with this knife that Bou Akas cuts off people's heads when, for the sake of prompt justice, he thinks fit to decapitate with his own hand.

When Bou Akas succeeded to his possessions, there were a great number of thieves in the country. He found means to exterminate them. He dressed himself like a simple merchant, then dropped a douro, taking care not to lose sight of it. A lost douro does not remain long on the ground. If he who picked it up pocketed it, Bou Akas made a sign to his chiaous, disguised like himself, to arrest the culprit. The chiaous, knowing the Sheik's intention in regard to the culprit, beheaded him without more ado. The effect of this rigor is such that there is a saying among the Arabs

that a child of twelve years of age wearing a golden crown could pass through the tribes of Bou Akas without a finger's being raised to steal it.

One day Bou Akas heard mentioned that the Cadi of one of his twelve tribes rendered judgments worthy of King Solomon. Like another Haroun al Raschid, he wished to decide for himself the truth of the stories which were told him. Consequently, he set out in the guise of an ordinary horseman, without the arms which usually distinguished him, without any emblem of rank, nor any followers, and mounted on a blood-horse about which nothing betrayed that it belonged to so great a Chief.

It so chanced that, on the day of his arrival at the thrice-happy city where the Cadi sat in judgment, there was a Fair, and, in consequence of that, the Court was in session. It so chanced also — Mahomet watches over his servants in all things — that at the gate of the city Bou Akas met a cripple, who, hanging upon his burnoose, as the poor man hung upon the cloak of St. Martin, asked him for alms. Bou Akas gave the alms, as behooves an honest Musselman to do, but the cripple continued to cling to him.

"What do you want?" asked Bou Akas. "You have solicited alms, and I bestowed them on you."

"Yes," replied the cripple; "but the Law does not say only, 'Thou shalt bestow alms on thy brother,' but, in addition, 'Thou shalt do for thy brother all in thy power.'"

"Well, what can I do for you?" inquired Bou Akas.

"You can save me, poor wretch that I am, from being crushed under the feet of the men, the mules, and the camels, which will not fail to happen if I risk myself in the city."

"And how can I prevent that?"

"By taking me up behind you, and carrying me to the market-place, where I have business."

"Be it so," said Bou Akas, and lifting up the cripple, he helped him to mount behind. The operation was accomplished with some difficulty, but it was at last done. The two men on the single horse traversed the city, not without exciting general curiosity. They arrived at the market-place.

"Is it here that you wished to go?" inquired Bou Akas of the cripple.

"Yes."

"Then dismount," said the Sheik.

"Dismount yourself."

"To help you down, very well!"

"No, to let me have the horse."

"Why? Wherefore should I let you have the horse?" said the astonished Sheik.

"Because the horse is mine."

"Ah, indeed! We shall soon see about that!"

"Listen, and consider," said the cripple.

"I am listening, and I will consider afterward."

"We are in the city of the just Cadi."

"I know it," assented the Sheik.

"You intend to prosecute me before him?"

"It is extremely probable."

"Now, do you think that when he sees us two — you with your sturdy legs, which God has destined for walking and fatigue, me with my broken legs — think you, I say, that he will not decide that the horse belongs to the one of the two travelers who has the greater need of it?"

"If he say so," replied Bou Akas, "he will no longer be the just Cadi, for his decision will be wrong."

"They call him the just Cadi," rejoined the cripple, laughing, "but they do not call him the infallible Cadi."

"Upon my word!" said Bou Akas to himself, "here is a fine chance for me to judge the Judge." Then he said aloud, "Come on, let us go before the Cadi."

Bou Akas made his way through the throng, leading his horse, on whose back the cripple clung like an ape; and presented himself before the tribunal where the Judge, according to the custom in the East, publicly dispensed justice.

Two cases were before the Court, and of course took precedence. Bou Akas obtained a place among the audience, and listened. The first case was a suit between a taleb and a peasant — that is to say, a savant and a laborer. The point in question was in reference to the savant's wife, with whom the peasant had eloped, and whom he maintained to be his, in opposition to the savant, who claimed her. The woman would not acknowledge either of the men to be her hus-

band, or rather she acknowledged both; which circumstance rendered the affair embarrassing to the last degree. The Judge heard both parties, reflected an instant, and said:

“Leave the woman with me, and return tomorrow.”

The savant and the laborer each bowed and withdrew.

The second case now came on. This was a suit between a butcher and an oil merchant. The oil merchant was covered with oil, and the butcher was besmeared with blood. The following was the butcher’s story:

“I went to buy oil at this man’s house. In paying for the oil, with which he had filled my bottle, I took from my purse a handful of money. This money tempted him. He seized me by the wrist. I cried thief, but he would not let go of me, and we came together before you — I clasping my money in my hand, he grasping my wrist. Now, I swear by Mahomet that this man is a liar when he says that I stole his money, for in truth the money is mine.”

The following was the oil merchant’s story:

“This man came to buy a bottle of oil at my house. When the bottle was full, he said to me, ‘Have you change for a gold piece?’ I then felt in my pocket, drew out my hand full of money, and put the money down on the sill of my shop. He snatched it up, and was about to go with both it and my oil, when I caught him by the wrist, and cried thief. In spite of my cries, he would not return my money,

and I have brought him here, that you may decide between us. Now, I swear by Mahomet that this man is a liar when he says that I stole his money, for in truth the money is mine.”

The Judge made each of the men, complainant and defendant, repeat his charge. Neither varied. Then the Judge pondered a moment and said:

“Leave the money with me and return tomorrow.”

The butcher deposited in a fold of the Judge’s robe the money of which he had never relinquished his hold; whereupon the two men bowed, and each went his way.

It was now the turn of Bou Akas and the cripple.

“My lord Cadi,” said Bou Akas, “I have just come from a distant city, with the intention of buying goods at this mart. At the gate of the city I met this cripple, who at first asked me for alms, and finally begged me to allow him to mount behind me; telling me that, if he risked himself in the streets, he, poor wretch, feared he should be crushed under the feet of the men, the mules, and the camels. Thereupon, I gave him alms, and mounted him behind me. Having arrived at the market-place, he would not alight, saying that the horse which I rode belonged to him; and when I threatened him with the law, ‘Bah!’ he replied. ‘The Cadi is too sensible a man not to know that the horse is the property of that one of us who cannot travel without a horse!’ This is the affair, in all sincerity, my lord Cadi, I swear it by Mahomet.”

"My Lord Cadi," responded the cripple, "I was going on business to the market of the city, and mounted on this horse, which is mine, when I saw, seated by the wayside, this man, who seemed about to expire. I approached him, and inquired whether he had met with any accident. 'No accident has befallen me,' he replied, 'but I am overcome with fatigue, and if you are charitable, you will convey me to the city, where I have business. After reaching the market-place, I will dismount, praying Mahomet to bestow upon him who aided me all that he could desire.' I did as this man requested, but my astonishment was great, when, having arrived at the market-place, he bade me dismount, telling me that the horse was his. At this strange threat, I brought him before you, that you might judge between us. This is the matter, in all sincerity, I swear by Mahomet."

The Cadi made each repeat his deposition, then having reflected an instant, he said:

"Leave the horse with me, and return tomorrow."

The horse was delivered to the Cadi, and Bou Akas and the cripple retired.

The next day, not only the parties immediately interested, but also a great number of the curious, were present in Court.

The Cadi followed the order of precedence observed the first day. The taleb and the peasant were summoned.

"Here," said the Cadi to the taleb, "here is your wife; take her away, she is really yours." Then turning toward

his chiaouses, and pointing out the peasant, he said: "Give that man fifty strokes of the bastinado on the soles of his feet."

The case of the oil merchant and the butcher was then called up.

"Here," said the Cadi to the butcher, "here is your money; you did really take it out of your pocket, and it never belonged to that man." Then turning toward his chiaouses, and pointing out the oil merchant, he said: "Give that man fifty strokes of the bastinado on the soles of his feet."

The third case was now called, and Bou Akas and the cripple approached.

"Could you recognize your horse among twenty horses?" inquired the Judge of Bou Akas.

"Yes, my lord Judge," replied Bou Akas and the cripple with one accord.

"Then come with me," said the Judge to Bou Akas, and they went out.

Bou Akas recognized his horse among twenty horses.

"Very well!" said the Judge. "Go and wait in Court, and send me your opponent."

Bou Akas returned to the Court, and awaited the Cadi's return.

The cripple repaired to the stable as quickly as his bad legs would allow him to go. As his eyes were good, he went straight up to the horse, and pointed it out.

"Very well!" said the Judge. "Rejoin me in Court."

The Cadi resumed his seat on his mat, and everyone waited impatiently for the cripple, who in the course of five minutes returned out of breath.

"The horse is yours," said the Cadi to Bou Akas. "Go take it from the stable." Then addressing his chiaouses and pointing out the cripple, he said: "Give that man fifty strokes of the bastinado on the back."

On returning home, the Cadi found Bou Akas waiting for him.

"Are you dissatisfied?" he inquired.

"No, the very reverse," answered the Sheik; "but I wished to see you, to ask by what inspiration you render justice, for I doubt not that your two other decisions were as correct as the one in my case."

"It is very simple, my lord," said the Judge. "You observed that I kept for one night the woman, the money, and the horse. At midnight I had the woman awakened and brought to me, and I said to her, 'Replenish my ink-stand.' Then she, like a woman who had performed the same office a hundred times in her life, took my ink-glass, washed it, replaced it in the stand, and poured fresh ink into it. I said to myself immediately, 'If you were the wife of the peasant, you would not know how to clean an ink-stand; therefore you are the taleb's wife.'"

"Be it so," said Bou Akas. "So much for the woman, but what about the money?"

"The money; that is another thing," replied the Judge. "Did you notice that the merchant was covered with oil, and his hands were greasy?"

"Yes, certainly."

"Very well! I took the money and placed it in a vase full of water. This

morning I looked at the water. Not a particle of oil had risen to the surface. I therefore said to myself, 'This money is the butcher's, not the oil merchant's. If it had been the oil merchant's, it would have been greasy, and the oil would have risen to the surface of the water.'"

Bou Akas again inclined his head. "Good," said he; "so much for the money, but what about my horse?"

"Ah! that is another thing, and until this morning, I was puzzled."

"Then the cripple was not able to recognize the horse?" suggested Bou Akas.

"Oh, yes indeed, he recognized it."

"Well?"

EDITORS' NOTE: *You now have two examples of the Cadi's perspicacity. Can you guess how the Cadi knew the horse belonged to the Sheik?*

"By conducting each of you in turn to the stable, I did not wish to ascertain which one would recognize the horse, but *which one the horse would recognize!* Now, when you approached the horse, it neighed; when the cripple approached the horse, it kicked. Then I said to myself, 'The horse belongs to him who has the good legs, and not to the cripple.' And I delivered it to you."

Bou Akas pondered for a moment, and then said: "The Lord is with you; it is you who should be in my place. I am sure, at least, that you are worthy to be Sheik, but I am not so sure that I am fit to be Cadi."