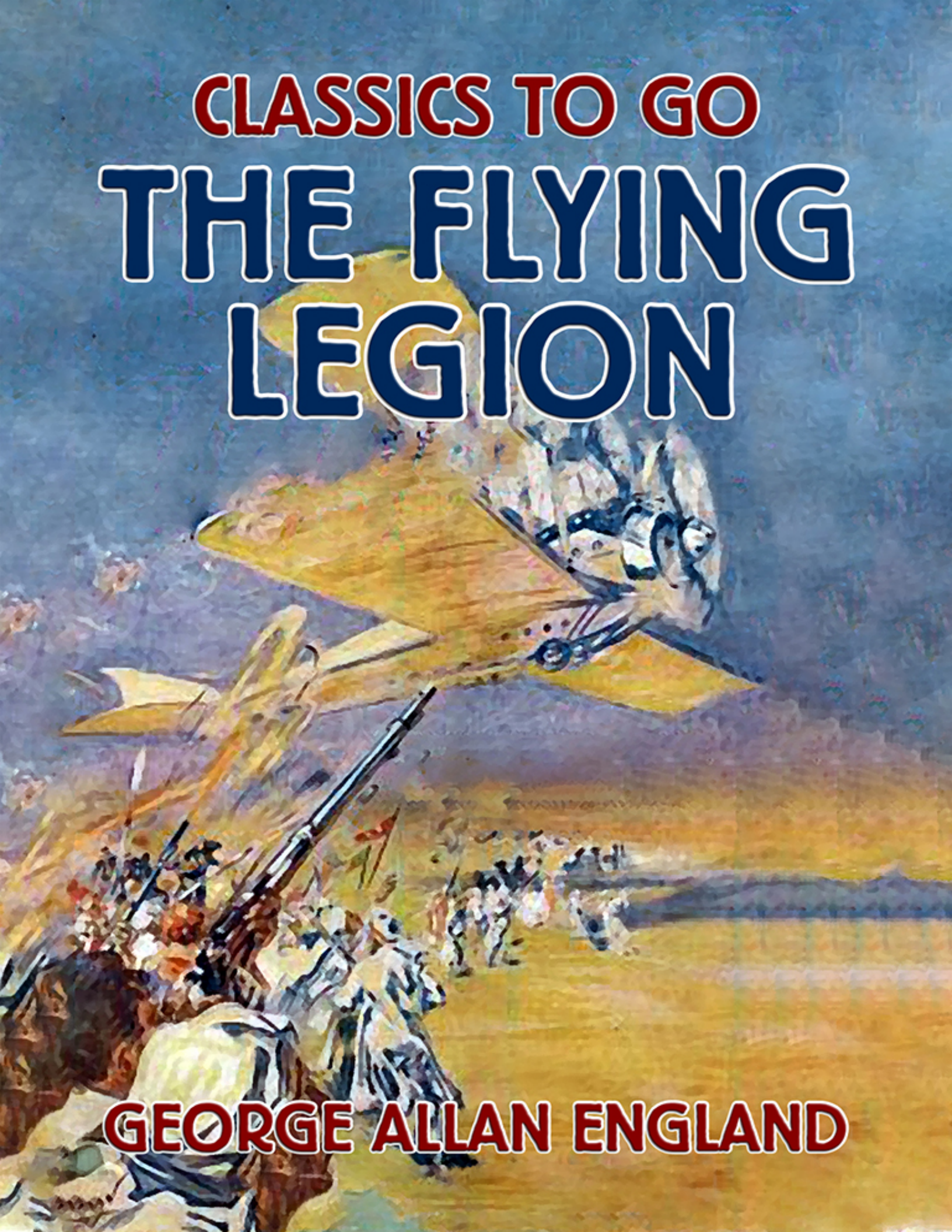
CLASSICS TO GO

THE FLYING LEGION



GEORGE ALLAN ENGLAND

THE FLYING LEGION

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CHAPTER I

A SPIRIT CAGED

The room was strange as the man, himself, who dwelt there. It seemed, in a way, the outward expression of his inner personality. He had ordered it built from his own plans, to please a whim of his restless mind, on top of the gigantic skyscraper that formed part of his properties. Windows boldly fronted all four cardinal compass-points—huge, plate-glass windows that gave a view unequaled in its sweep and power.

The room seemed an eagle's nest perched on the summit of a man-made crag. The Arabic name that he had given it—*Niss'rosh*—meant just that. Singular place indeed, well-harmonized with its master.

Through the westward windows, umbers and pearls of dying day, smudged across a smoky sky, now shadowed trophy-covered walls. This light, subdued and somber though it was, slowly fading, verging toward a night of May, disclosed unusual furnishings. It showed a heavy black table of some rare Oriental wood elaborately carved and inlaid with still rarer woods; a table covered with a prayer-rug, on which lay various books on aeronautics and kindred sciences, jostling works on Eastern travel, on theosophy, mysticism, exploration.

Maps and atlases added their note of research. At one end of the table stood a bronze faun's head with open lips, with hand cupped at listening ear. Surely that head must have come from some buried art-find of the very long ago. The faint greenish patina that covered it could have been painted only by the hand of the greatest artist of them all, Time.

A book-case occupied the northern space, between the windows. It, too, was crammed with scientific reports, oddments of out-of-the-way lore, and travels. But here a profusion of war-books and official documents showed another bent of the owner's mind. Over the book-case hung two German gasmasks. They seemed, in the half-dusk, to glower down through their round, empty eyeholes like sinister devil-fish awaiting prey.

The masks were flanked by rifles, bayonets, knives, maces, all bearing scars of battle. Above them, three fragments of Prussian battle-flags formed a kind of frieze, their color softened by the fading sunset, even as the fading of the dream of imperial glory had dulled and dimmed all that for which they had stood.

The southern wall of that strange room—that quiet room to which only a far, vague murmur of the city's life whispered up, with faint blurs of steamer-whistles from the river—bore Turkish spoils of battle. Here hung more rifles, there a Kurdish yataghan with two hand-grenades from Gallipoli, and a blood-red banner with a crescent and one

star worked in gold thread. Aviator's gauntlets draped the staff of the banner.

Along the eastern side of this eyrie a broad divan invited one to rest. Over it were suspended Austrian and Bulgarian captures—a lance with a blood-stiffened pennant, a cuirass, entrenching tools, a steel helmet with an eloquent bullet-hole through the crown. Some few framed portraits of noted "aces" hung here and elsewhere, with two or three photographs of battle-planes. Three of the portraits were framed in symbolic black. Part of a smashed Taube propeller hung near.

As for the western side of *Niss'rosh*, this space between the two broad windows that looked out over the light-spangled city, the Hudson and the Palisades, was occupied by a magnificent Mercator's Projection of the world. This projection was heavily annotated with scores of comments penciled by a firm, virile hand. Lesser spaces were occupied by maps of the campaigns in Mesopotamia and the Holy Land. One map, larger than any save the Mercator, showed the Arabian Peninsula. A bold question-mark had been impatiently flung into the great, blank stretch of the interior; a question-mark eager, impatient, challenging.

It was at this map that the master of *Niss'rosh*, the eagle's nest, was peering as the curtain rises on our story. He was half reclining in a big, Chinese bamboo chair, with an attitude of utter and disheartening boredom. His crossed legs were stretched out, one heel digging into the soft pile of the Tabreez rug. Muscular arms folded in an idleness that

irked them with aching weariness, he sat there, brooding, motionless.

Everything about the man spelled energy at bay, forces rusting, ennui past telling. But force still dominated. Force showed in the close-cropped, black hair and the small ears set close to the head; in the corded throat and heavy jaws; in the well-muscled shoulders, sinewed hands, powerful legs. This man was forty-one years old, and looked thirty-five. Lines of chest and waist were those of the athlete. Still, suspicions of fat, of unwonted softness, had begun to invade those lines. Here was a splendid body, here was a dominating mind in process of going stale.

The face of the man was a mask of weariness of the soul, which kills so vastly more efficiently than weariness of the body. You could see that weariness in the tired frown of the black brows, the narrowing of the dark eyes, the downward tug of the lips. Wrinkles of stagnation had began to creep into forehead and cheeks—wrinkles that no amount of gymnasium, of club life, of careful shaving, of strict hygiene could banish.

Through the west windows the slowly changing hues of gray, of mulberry, and dull rose-pink blurred in the sky, cast softened lights upon those wrinkles, but could not hide them. They revealed sad emptiness of purpose. This man was tired unto death, if ever man were tired.

He yawned, sighed deeply, stretched out his hand and took up a bit of a model mechanism from the table, where it had lain with other fragments of apparatus. For a moment

he peered at it; then he tossed it back again, and yawned a second time.

"Business!" he growled. "'Swapped my reputation for a song,' eh?
Where's my commission, now?"

He got up, clasped his hands behind him, and walked a few times up and down the heavy rug, his footfalls silent.

"The business could have gone on without me!" he added, bitterly.
"And, after all, what's any business, compared to *life*?"

He yawned again, stretched up his arms, groaned and laughed with mockery:

"A little more money, maybe, when I don't know what to do with what I've got already! A few more figures on a checkbook—and the heart dying in me!"

Then he relapsed into silence. Head down, hands thrust deep in pockets, he paced like a captured animal in bars. The bitterness of his spirit was wormwood. What meant, to him, the interests and pleasures of other men? Profit and loss, alcohol, tobacco, women—all alike bore him no message. Clubs, athletics, gambling—he grumbled something savage as his thoughts turned to such trivialities. And into his aquiline face came something the look of an eagle, trapped, there in that eagle's nest of his.

Suddenly the Master of *Niss'rosh* came to a decision. He returned, clapped his hands thrice, sharply, and waited. Almost at once a door opened at the southeast corner of the room—where the observatory connected with the stairway leading down to the Master's apartment on the top floor of the building—and a vague figure of a man appeared.

The light was steadily fading, so that this man could by no means be clearly distinguished. But one could see that he wore clothing quite as conventional as his master's. Still, no more than the Master did he appear one of life's commonplaces. Lean, brown, dry, with a hawk-nose and glinting eyes, surely he had come from far, strange places.

"Rrisa!" the Master spoke sharply, flinging the man's name at him with the exasperation of overtensed nerves.

"*M'almé?*" (Master?) replied the other.

"Bring the evening food and drink," commanded the Master, in excellent
Arabic, guttural and elusive with strange hiatuses of breath.

Rrisa withdrew, salaaming. His master turned toward the western windows. There the white blankness of the map of Arabia seemed mocking him. The Master's eyes grew hard; he raised his fist against the map, and smote it hard. Then once more he fell to pacing; and as he walked that weary space, up and down, he muttered to himself with words we cannot understand.

After a certain time, Rrisa came silently back, sliding into the soft dusk of that room almost like a wraith. He bore a silver tray with a hook-nosed coffee-pot of chased metal. The cover of this coffee-pot rose into a tall, minaret-like spike. On the tray stood also a small cup having no handle; a dish of dates; a few wafers made of the Arabian cereal called *temmin*; and a little bowl of *khat* leaves.

"*M'almé, al khat aja*" (the khat has come), said Rrisa.

He placed the tray on the table at his master's side, and was about to withdraw when the other stayed him with raised hand.

"Tell me, Rrisa," he commanded, still speaking in Arabic, "where wert thou born? Show thou me, on that map."

The Arab hesitated a moment, squinting by the dim light that now had faded to purple dusk. Then he advanced a thin forefinger, and laid it on a spot that might have indicated perhaps three hundred miles southeast of Mecca. No name was written on the map, there.

"How dost thou name that place, Rrisa?" demanded the Master.

"I cannot say, Master," answered the Arab, very gravely. As he stood there facing the western afterglow, the profound impassivity of his expression—a look that seemed to scorn all this infidel civilization of an upstart race—grew deeper.

To nothing of it all did he owe allegiance, save to the Master himself—the Master who had saved him in the thick of the Gallipoli inferno. Captured by the Turks there, certain death had awaited him and shameful death, as a rebel against the Sublime Porte. The Master had rescued him, and taken thereby a scar that would go with him to the grave; but that, now, does not concern our tale. Only we say again that Rrisa's life lay always in the hands of this man, to do with as he would.

None the less, Rrisa answered the question with a mere:

"Master, I cannot say."

"Thou knowest the name of the place where thou wast born?" demanded the Master, calmly, from where he sat by the table.

"*A* (yes), *M'almé*, by the beard of M'hámed, I do!"

"Well, what is it?"

Rrisa shrugged his thin shoulders.

"A tent, a hut? A village, a town, a city?"

"A city, Master. A great city, indeed. But its name I may not tell you."

"The map, here, shows nothing, Rrisa. And of a surety, the makers of maps do not lie," the Master commented, and turned a little to pour the thick coffee. Its perfume rose with grateful fragrance on the air.

The Master sipped the black, thick nectar, and smiled oddly. For a moment he regarded his unwilling orderly with narrowed eyes.

"Thou wilt not say they lie, son of Islam, eh?" demanded he.

"Not of choice, perhaps, *M'almé*," the Mussulman replied. "But if the camel hath not drunk of the waters of the oasis, how can he know that they be sweet? These *Nasara* (Christian) makers of maps, what can they know of my people or my land?"

"Dost thou mean to tell me no man can pass beyond the desert rim, and enter the middle parts of Arabia?"

"I said not so, Master," replied the Arab, turning and facing his master, every sense alert, on guard against any admissions that might betray the secret he, like all his people, was sworn by a Very great oath to keep.

"Not all men, true," the Master resumed. "The Turks—I know they enter, though hated. But have no other foreign men ever seen the interior?"

"*A, M'almé*, many—of the True Faith. Such, though they come from China, India, or the farther islands of the Indian Ocean, may enter freely."

"Of course. But I am speaking now of men of the *Nasara* faith. How of them? Tell me, thou!"

"You are of the *Nasara, M'almé!* Do not make me answer this! You, having saved my life, own that life. It is yours. *Ana bermil illi bedakea!* (I obey your every command!) But do not ask me this! My head is at your feet. But let us speak of other things, O Master!"

The Master kept a moment's silence. He peered contemplatively at the dark silhouette of the Arab, motionless, impassive in the dusk. Then he frowned a very little, which was as near to anger as he ever verged. Thoughtfully he ate a couple of the little *temmin* wafers and a few dates. Rrisa waited in silent patience.

All at once the Master spoke.

"It is my will that thou speak to me and declare this thing, Rrisa," said he, decisively. "Say, thou, hath no man of the *Nasara* faith ever penetrated as far as to the place of thy birth?"

"*Lah* (no), *M'almé*, never. But three did reach an oasis not far to westward of it, fifty years ago, or maybe fifty-one."

"Ah, so?" exclaimed the Master, a touch of eagerness in his grave, impassive voice. "Who were they?"

"Two of the French blood, Master, and one of the Russian."

"And what happened to them, then?"

"They—died, Master."

"Thou dost mean, thy people did slay them?"

"They died, all three," repeated Rrisa, in even tones. "The jackals devoured them and the bones remained. Those bones, I think, are still there. In our dry country—bones remain, long."

"Hm! Yea, so it is! But, tell me, thou, is it true that in thy country the folk slay all *Nasara* they lay hands on, by cutting with a sharp knife? Cutting the stomach, so?" He made an illustrative gesture.

"Since you do force me to speak, against my will, *M'almé* —you being of the *Nasara* blood—I will declare the truth. Yea, that is so."

"A pleasant custom, surely! And why always in the stomach? Why do they never stab or cut like other races?"

"There are no bones in the stomach, to dull the edges of the knives, *M'almé*."

"Quite practical, that idea!" the Master exclaimed. Then he fell silent again. He pressed his questions no further, concerning the great Central Desert of the land. To have done so, he knew, would have been entirely futile. Beyond a certain point, which he could gauge accurately, neither gold nor fire would drive Rrisa. The Arab would at any hour of night or day have laid down his life for the Master; but though it should mean death he would not break the rites of his faith, nor touch the cursed flesh of a pig, nor drink the forbidden drop of wine, nor yet betray the secret of his land.

All at once the Arab spoke, in slow, grave tones.

"Your God is not my God, Master," said he, impersonally. "No, the God of your people is not the God of mine. We have our own; and the land is ours, too. None of the *Nasara* may come thither, and live. Three came, that I have heard of, and—they died. I crave my Master's bidding to depart."

"Presently, yea," the Master answered. "But I have one more question for thee. If I were to take thee, and go to thy land, but were not to ask thy help there—if I were not to ask thee to guide me nor yet to betray any secret—wouldst thou play the traitor to me, and deliver me up to thy people?"

"My head is at your feet, *M'almé*. So long as you did not ask me to do such things as would be unlawful in the eyes of Allah and the Prophet, and seek to force me to them, this hand of mine would wither before it would be raised against the preserver of my life! I pray you, *M'almé*, let me go!"

"I grant it. *Ru'c'h halla!*" (Go now!) exclaimed the Master, with a wave of the hand. Rrisa salaamed again, and, noiseless as a wraith, departed.

CHAPTER II

"TO PARADISE—OR HELL"

For a time the Master sat in the thickening gloom, eating the dates and *temmin* wafers, drinking the coffee, pondering in deep silence. When the simple meal was ended, he plucked a little sprig of leaves from the khat plant in the bowl, and thrust them into his mouth.

This khat, gathered in the mountains back of Hodeida, on the Red Sea not far from Bab el Mandeb, had been preserved by a process known to only a few Coast Arabs. The plant now in the bowl was part of a shipment that had been more than three months on the way; yet still the fresh aroma of it, as the Master crushed the thick-set, dark-green leaves, scented the darkening room with perfumes of Araby.

Slowly, with the contemplative appreciation of the connoisseur, the Master absorbed the flavor and the wondrous stimulation of the "flower of paradise." The use of khat, his once-a-day joy and comfort, he had learned more than fifteen years before, on one of his exploring tours in Yemen. He could hardly remember just when and where he had first come to know the extraordinary mental and physical stimulus of this strange plant, dear to all Arabs, any more than he definitely recalled having learned the complex, poetical language of that Oriental land of mystery. Both language and the use of khat had come to him from

contact with only the fringes of the country; and both had contributed to his vast, unsatisfied longing to know what lay beyond the forbidden zones that walled this land away from all the world.

Wherever he had gone, whatever perils, hardships, and adventures had been his in many years of wandering up and down the world, khat, the wondrous, had always gone with him. The fortune he had spent on keeping up the supply had many times over been repaid to him in strength and comfort.

The use of this plant, containing obscure alkaloids of the katinacetate class, constituted his only vice—if you can call a habit such as this vice, that works great well-being and that leaves no appreciable aftermaths of evil such as are produced by alcohol or drugs.

For a few minutes the Master sat quite motionless, pondering. Then suddenly he got up again, and strode to one of the westward-looking windows. The light was almost wholly gone, now. The man's figure, big-shouldered, compact, well-knit, appeared only as a dim silhouette against the faded blur in the west; a blur smoky and streaked with dull smudges as of old, dried blood.

Far below, stretching away, away, shimmered the city's million inconsequential lights. Above, stars were peeping out—were spying down at all this feverish mystery of human life. Some of the low-hung stars seemed to blend with the far lights along the Palisades. The Master's lips tightened with impatience, with longing.

"There's where it is," he muttered. "Not five miles from here! It's there, and I've got to have it. There—a thing that can't be bought! There—a thing that must be mine!"

Among the stars, cutting down diagonally from the north-west, crept a tiny, red gleam. The Master looked very grim, as his eyes followed its swift flight.

"The Chicago mail-plane, just getting in," he commented. "In half an hour, the Paris plane starts from the Cortlandt Street aero-tower. And beyond Paris lies Constantinople; and beyond that, Arabia—the East! Men are going out that way, tonight! And I—stick here like an old, done relic, cooped in *Niss'rosh*—imprisoned in this steel and glass cage of my own making!"

Suddenly he wheeled, flung himself into the big chair by the table and dragged the faun's head over to him. He pressed a button at the base of it, waited a moment and as the question came, "Number, please?" spoke the desired number into the cupped hand and ear of the bronze. Then, as he waited again, with the singular telephone in hand, he growled savagely:

"By Allah! This sort of thing's not going to go on any longer! Not if
I die stopping it!"

A familiar voice, issuing from the lips of the faun—a voice made natural and audible as the living human tones, by means of a delicate microphone attachment inside the bronze head—tautened his nerves.

"Hello, hello!" called he. "That you, Bohannan?"

"Yes," sounded the answer. "Of course I know who *you* are. There's only one voice like yours in New York. Where are you?"

"In prison."

"No! Prison? For the Lord's sake!"

"No; for conventionality's sake. Not legally, you understand. Not even an adventure as exciting as that has happened to me. But constructively in jail. *De facto*, as it were. It's all the same thing."

"Up there in that observatory thing of yours, are you?" asked
Bohannan.

"Yes; and I want to see you."

"When?"

"At once! As soon as you can get over here in a taxi, from that incredibly stupid club of yours. You can get to *Niss'rosh* even though it's after seven. Take the regular elevator to the forty-first floor, and I'll have Rrisa meet you and bring you up here in the special.

"That's a concession, isn't it? The sealed gates that no one else ever passes, at night, are opened to you. It's very important. Be here in fifteen minutes you say? First-rate! Don't fail me. Good-bye!"

He was smiling a little now as he pressed the button again and rang off. He put the faun's head back on the table, got up and stretched his vigorous arms.

"By Allah!" he exclaimed, new notes in his voice. "What if —what if it *could* be, after all?"

He turned to the wall, laid his hand on an ivory plate flush with the surface and pressed slightly. In silent unison, heavy gold-embroidered draperies slid across every window. As these draperies closed the apertures, light gushed from every angle and cornice. No specific source of illumination seemed visible; but the room bathed itself in soft, clear radiance with a certain restful greenish tinge, throwing no shadows, pure as the day itself.

The man pulled open a drawer in the table and silently gazed down at several little boxes within. He opened some. From one, on a bed of purple satin, the Croix de Guerre, with a palm, gleamed up at him. Another disclosed an "M.M.," a Médaille Militaire. A third showed him the "D.F.C.," or Distinguished Flying Cross. Still another contained aviator's insignia in the form of a double pair of wings. The Master smiled, and closed the boxes, then the drawer.

"After these," he mused, "dead inaction? Not for me!"

His dark eyes were shining with eagerness as he walked to a door beside that through which the Arab had entered. He swung it wide, disclosing an ample closet, likewise inundated with light. There hung a war-worn aviator's uniform of leather, gauntlets, a sheepskin jacket, a helmet,

resistal goggles, a cartridge-belt still half full of ammunition, a heavy service automatic.

For a moment the man looked in at these. A great yearning came upon his face. Caressingly he touched the uniform, the helmet. He unhooked the pistol from where it hung, and carried it back to the table.

There he laid it down, and drew up his chair in front of it. For a moment, silence fell as he remained there studying the automatic—silence save for the faint, far hum of the city, the occasional melodious note of steamer-whistles on the river.

The Master's face, now that full light brought out its details, showed a white scar that led from his right ear down along jaw and throat, till the collar masked it. Gray hairs, beyond those of his age, sprinkled his temples. Strangely he smiled as he observed the nicks and deep excoriations in stock and barrel of the formidable weapon. He reached out, took up the gun once more, weighed it, got the feel of it, patted it with affection.

"We've been through some wonderful times together, old pal, you and I," said he. "We thought it was all over, didn't we, for a while? But it's not! Life's not done, yet. It's maybe just beginning! We're going out on the long trek, *again*!"

For a while he sat there musing. Then he summoned Rrisa again, bade him remove the tray, and gave him instructions about the guest soon to arrive. When Rrisa had withdrawn,

the Master pulled over one of the huge atlases, opened it, turned to the map of Arabia, and fell into deep study.

Rrisa's tapping at the door, minutes later, roused him. At his order to advance, the door swung. The Arab ushered in a guest, then silently disappeared. Without a sound, the door closed.

The Master arose, advancing with outstretched hand.

"Bohannan! God, but I'm glad to see you!"

Their hands met and clasped. The Master led Bohannan to the table and gestured toward a chair. Bohannan threw his hat on the table with a large, sweeping gesture typical of his whole character, and sat down. And for a moment, they looked at each other in silence.

A very different type, this, from the dark, sinewed master of *Niss'rosh*. Bohannan was frankly red-haired, a bit stout, smiling, expansive. His blood was undoubtedly Celtic. An air of great geniality pervaded him. His hands were strong and energetic, with oddly spatulate fingers; and the manner in which his nails had been gnawed down and his mustache likewise chewed, bespoke a highly nervous temperament belied by his ruddy, almost boyish face. His age might have been thirty-five, but he looked one of those men who never fully grow up, who never can be old.

"Well, what's doing now?" demanded he, fixing blue eyes on his host. He produced a cigarette and lighted it, inhaled smoke deeply and blew a thin gray cloud toward the ceiling.

"Something big, eh? by the way you routed me out of a poker-game where I was already forty-seven dollars and a half to the good. You don't usually call a fellow, that way, unless there's something in the wind!"

"There is, now."

"Big?"

"Very."

"So?" The newcomer's eyes fell on the pistol. "Yes, that looks like action, all right. Hope to heaven it *is*! I've been boring myself and everybody else to death, the past three months. What's up? Duel, maybe?"

"Yes. That's just it, Bohannan. A duel." And the Master fixed strange eyes on his companion. His muscular fingers fell to tapping the prayer-rug on the table, drumming out an impatient little tattoo.

"Duel? Lord's sake, man! With whom?"

"With Fate. Now, listen!" The Master's tones became more animated. A little of the inward fires had begun to burn through his self-restraint. "Listen to me, and not a word till I'm done! You're dryrotting for life, man. Dying for it, gasping for it, eating your heart out for it! So am I. So are twenty-five or thirty men we know, between us, in this city. That's all true, eh?"

"Some!"

"Yes! We wouldn't have to go outside New York to find at least twenty-five or thirty in the same box we're in. All men who've been through trench work, air work, life-and-death work on various fronts. Men of independent means. Men to whom office work and club life and all this petty stuff, here, is like dish-water after champagne! Dare-devils, all of them, that wouldn't stop at the gates of Hell!"

"The gates of Hell?" demanded Bohannan, his brow wrinkling with glad astonishment. "What d'you mean by that, now?"

"Just what I say! It's possible to gather together a kind of unofficial, *sub rosa*, private little Foreign Legion of our own, Bohannan—all battle-scarred men, all men with at least one decoration and some with half a dozen. With that Legion, nothing would be impossible!"

He warmed to his subject, leaned forward, fixed eager eyes on his friend, laid a hand on Bohannan's knee. "We've all done the conventional thing, long enough. Now we're going to do the unconventional thing. We've been all through the known. Now we're going after the unknown. And Hell is liable to be no name for it, I tell you that!"

The Celt's eyes were alight with swift, eager enthusiasm. He laid his hand on the other's, and gripped it hard in hot anticipation.

"Tell me more!" he commanded. "What are we going to do?"

"Going to see the stuff that's in us, and in twenty-five or thirty more of our kind. The stuff, the backbone, the heart that's in you, Bohannan! That's in me! In all of us!"

"Great, great! That's me!" Bohannan's cigarette smoldered, unheeded, in his fingers. The soul of him was thrilling with great visions. "I'm with you! Whither bound?"

The Master smiled oddly, as he answered in a low, even tone:

"To Paradise—or Hell!"

CHAPTER III

THE GATHERING OF THE LEGIONARIES

One week from that night, twenty-seven other men assembled in the strange eyrie of *Niss'rosh*, nearly a thousand feet above the city's turmoil. They came singly or in pairs, their arrival spaced in such a manner as not to make the gathering obvious to anyone in the building below.

Rrisa, the silent and discreet, brought them up in the private elevator from the forty-first floor to the Master's apartment on the top story of the building, then up the stairway to the observatory, and thus ushered them into the presence of the Master and Bohannan. Each man was personally known to one or the other, who vouched absolutely for his secrecy, valor, and good faith.

This story would resolve itself into a catalogue were each man to be named, with his title, his war-exploits, his decorations. We shall have to touch but lightly on this matter of personnel. Six of the men were Americans—eight, including the Master and Bohannan; four English; five French; two Serbian; three Italian; and the others represented New Zealand, Canada, Russia, Cuba, Poland, Montenegro, and Japan.

Not one of these men but bore a wound or more, from the Great Conflict. This matter of having a scar had been made

one prime requisite for admission to the Legion. Each had anywhere from one to half a dozen decorations, whether the Congressional Medal, the V.C., the Croix de Guerre, the Order of the Rising Sun, or what-not.

Not one was in uniform. That would have made their arrival far too conspicuous. Dressed as they were, in mufti, even had anyone noted their coming, it could not have been interpreted as anything but an ordinary social affair.

Twenty-nine men, all told, gathered in the observatory, clearly illuminated by the hidden lights. All were true blue, all loyal to the core, all rusting with ennui, all drawn thither by the lure of the word that had been passed them in club and office, on the golf links, in the street. All had been pledged, whether they went further or not, to keep this matter secret as the grave.

Some were already known to each other. Some needed introduction. Such introduction consumed a few minutes, even after the last had come and been checked off on the Master's list, in cipher code. The brightly lighted room, behind its impenetrable curtains, blued with tobacco-smoke; but no drop of wine or spirits was visible.

The Master, at the head of the table, sat with his list and took account of the gathering. Each man, as his name was called, gave that name in full, briefly stated his service and mentioned his wound.

All spoke English, though some rather mangled it. At any rate, this was to be the official language of the expedition,

and no other was to be allowed. The ability to understand and obey orders given in English had, of course, to be one essential requisite for this adventurous band of Legionaries.

When all the credentials had been proved satisfactory, the Master rapped for order. Silence fell. The men settled down to listen, in tense expectancy. Some took chairs, others occupied the divan, still others—for whom there were no seats—stood along the walls.

Informal though the meeting still was, an air of military restraint and discipline already half possessed it. The bright air seemed to quiver with the eagerness of these fighting-men once more to thrust out into the currents of activity, to feel the tightening of authority, the lure and tang of the unknown.

Facing them from the end of the table, the Master stood and spoke to them, with Bohannan seated at his right. His face reflected quite another humor from that of the night, a week before, when first this inspiration had come upon him.

He seemed refreshed, buoyant, rejuvenated. His eyes showed fire. His brows, that had frowned, now had smoothed themselves. His lips smiled, though gravely. His color had deepened. His whole personality, that had been sad and tired, now had become inspired with a profound and soul-felt happiness.

"Gentlemen all, soldiers and good men," said he, slowly. "In a general way you know the purpose of this meeting. I

am not given to oratory. I do not intend making any speech to you.

"We are all ex-fighters. Life, once filled with daring and adventure, has become stale, flat, and unprofitable. The dull routine of business and of social life is Dead Sea fruit to our lips—dust and ashes. It cannot hold or entertain us.

"By this I do not mean that war is good, or peace bad. For the vast majority of men, peace is normal and right. But there must be always a small minority that cannot tolerate ennui; that must seek risks and daring exploits; that would rather lay down their lives, today, in some man-sized exploit, than live twenty-five years longer in the dull security of a humdrum rut.

"Such men have always existed and probably always will. We are all, I believe, of that type. Therefore you will all understand me. I will understand you. And each of you will understand the rest.

"Major Bohannan and I have chosen you and have invited you here because we believe every man in this room is precisely the kind of man I have been defining. We believe you are like ourselves, dying of boredom, eager for adventure; and willing to undergo military discipline, swear secrecy, pledge honor and risk life itself, provided the adventure be daring enough, the reward promising enough. If there is anyone here present who is unwilling to subscribe to what I have said, so far, let him withdraw."

No one stirred. But a murmur arose, eager, delighted:

"Go on! Go on—tell us more!"

"Absolute obedience to me is to be the first rule," continued the Master. "The second is to be sobriety. There shall be no drinking, carousing, or gambling. This is not to be a vulgar, swashbuckling, privateering revel, but—"

A slight disturbance at the door interrupted him. He frowned, and rapped on the table, for silence. The disturbance, however, continued. Someone was trying to enter there against Rrisa's protests.

"I did not bring you up, sir," the Arab was saying, in broken English.
"You cannot come in! How did you get here?"

"I'm not in the habit of giving explanations to subordinates, or of bandying words with them," replied the man, in a clear, rather high-pitched but very determined voice. The company, gazing at him, saw a slight, well-knit figure of middle height or a little less, in aviator's togs. "I'm here to see your master, my good fellow, not you!"

The man at the head of the table raised a finger to his lips, in signal of silence from them all, and beckoned the Arab.

"Let him come in!" he ordered, in Rrisa's vernacular.

"*A, M'almé*" submitted the desert man, standing aside and bowing as the stranger entered. The Master added, in English:

"If he comes as a friend and helper, uninvited though he be, we welcome him. If as an enemy, traitor, or spy, we can deal justice to him in short order. Sir, advance!"

The stranger came to the foot of the table. Men made way for him. He stood there a moment in silence, dropped his gauntlets on the table and seemed peering at the Master. Then all at once he drew himself up, sharply, and saluted.

The Master returned the salute. A moment's silence followed. No man was looking elsewhere than at this interloper.

Not much could be seen of him, so swaddled was he in sheepskin jacket, aviator's helmet, and goggles. Leather trousers and leggings completed his costume. The collar of the jacket, turned up, met the helmet. Of his face, only the chin and lower part of the cheeks remained visible.

The silence tautened, stretched to the breaking-point. All at once the master of *Niss'rosh* demanded, incisively:

"Your name, sir?"

"Captain Alfred Alden, of the R.A.F."

"Royal Air Force man, eh? Are you prepared to prove that?"

"I am."

"If you're not, well—this won't be exactly a salubrious altitude for you."