

THE SAVAGE ARCHIVE

A TALE FROM THE CHINATOWN DEATH CLOUD PERIL

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Paul Malmont

Doc's Doughnuts had been eaten and the staff had run out of cream so everyone was drinking it black, with sugar, beer on the side. Their table, the one at which L. Ron Hubbard, President of the American Fiction Guild, hosted, still held the scent of adventure and comradeship for the for the men who spun their tales at that table. The writers of the other three tables had made their goodnights, and drifted out of the shabby Knickerbocker Hotel and on into the dark, cold Friday night and find some trouble, or better yet, let some trouble find them.

They had all been certain to swing by the head of the table to bid farewell to Lester Dent. Generally he was well-liked and he made too few appearances at these meetings, men were always happy to shake his large hand playfully spar with him or tell him a new joke. Men liked him, it was as easy as that, and he had an easy of getting men to be men when they were around him, exuding a calm

Midwestern presence that seemed to ask of them that they set their big city neuroses aside for awhile and just relax.

"So Dent? "Hogan asked sipping a brandy. "There are a lot of rumors and myths about Doc Savage."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, some people have said that there was a real Doc Savage down in the archives. The personal journals of some superman that had been published a long time ago, then nearly forgotten.

"Yeah?" Doc Smith asked. "Ever go down there?"

Dent lit his pipe in a gesture of solemn profundity. The action also built enough delay that the men knew he was not keeping them in suspense for nothing. "I have been to the archives," he said, at last, with a smile. "I've been down there." He let the smoke curl around his face mysteriously. "Miles upon miles of cloth-bound black books - each a volume holding half-a-year's title issues. I've got a shelf space of my own down there now. I got down every six months to see how it's growing.

"Well, when I first spoke to the fellas at Street & Smith about a character called, "Doc Savage", they got real excited. One of them seemed to remember a character they had published by the name of Savage. Go down to the archives and find him, they told me, and see if you can make him work.

"They love bringing old things back like that," The Flash interjected knowledgeably, "They've been dragging up old Nick Carter for sixty years."

"Nick Carter sells," Smith shot back.

"So I descended into the archives. It was an exotic jungle of lost ideas, and forgotten stories. My quest was fraught with peril and danger. However, in the end, after more days than I care to remember, I emerged triumphant. I discovered Savage, and I discovered that there were some certain elements of his story I could mold unto my own."

He reached into his jacket and drew out a fine, long, leather billfold. The Flash instantly coveted one, and he wasn't alone. He saw Hogan take note of it as well. Dent slid out a yellowed piece of notebook paper upon which he had transcribed notes from his discovery in the archive.

"I keep it close to my heart," he told them solemnly, "for inspiration. I went down to the archives looking for a story. I found a real man."

"Real?" The Flash asked. "This Savage fellow was alive?"

Dent nodded. "Once upon a time he had been. What I had discovered was a legend."

He unfolded the yellowed paper and began to read.

July 17th, 1871

I, being Brevet Second Lieutenant Richard H. Savage, an American officer serving in the Egyptian Army, drove my

camel this day at a steady pace through the desert drifts which seemed to edge every day closer to Alexandria. The sun here is hotter than I have ever known it could be. It thunders against my head, scorches my skin bronze, and heats this heavy wool uniform to a point just past intolerable. Touching the brass buttons on his jacket could raise heat blisters on one's fingers in spite of hard calluses.

The camel is a swaying, lurching beast whose foul disposition is only equaled by its foul smell. It is exactly not like a horse in any way. There are horses in the Khedive's vast stables; fine, well-muscled Arabian steeds of noble lineage and haughty bearing. True warrior steeds, they are trained to kill and stay on the battlefield should their rider be cut down. These elegant animals were a joy to ride in the early mornings down the Canopic Way through the Ras El-tin section, past the Roman amphitheater, to the busy port where I watch the fishermen setting out in their fast boats upon the blue-steel surface of the harbor and the Mediterranean sea beyond. I have never liked eating fish before coming to Egypt, but I have to admit that the fresh bounty these small, brown men return with in the late afternoon have re-defined what my palette considers pleasant. Now I look forward to the day's catch, seasoned heavily with dark local spices and roasted quickly over a flame.

I would have loved to have had one of Ismail's stallions under me this morning, but this journey is an

expedition, a hunt, and I have no idea when I shall return, or even reach a provisioning station. In this situation the only solution was the camel; the only beast suited to an excursion into the frontier of the great Western desert.

At least the beast respects my command, reacting surely to my adjustment in directions and pace. Of all the 50 American soldiers in the employ of the Egyptian Army I have been the only one who has had successful results with the dromedaries. While other officers, all exceedingly good horsemen, are tossed and buffeted by the temperamental monsters, I alone am able to hold my seat and bend my mount to my will. It may be because of my sheer size. At seven-foot tall, not only am I probably the biggest man this camel has ever shouldered, I am quite sure I am the biggest man in all of Alexandria. Since my fourteenth year I have stood head and shoulders above most men. Since my seventeenth it has been all.

I have with me my journal (of course), several leather large bladders of water in addition to my canteen, some strips of salt beef, my compass, a book of letters (in classic Greek) from Dinocrates, architect of Alexandria (it is fascinating to learn how the place that one is living came to be), a small brass eye-glass with good optics, some maps purchased locally at the bazaar (the official maps, even those commissioned by the Suez surveyors, are notorious for stranding men miles off course. I myself have discovered more than one chalk-grey skeleton dressed in

tatters, still accusingly clutching one of those damned maps. But that's what you get for sending Irishmen to make maps). My pack will provide only for myself. Although my prey is a Christian soul, my orders are clear. If I should find Wadleigh (and I will find him; being city-bred he has taken no care to hide his tracks) I am not to bring him back to Alexandria. If by some unforeseen trick of fate I should not find him, I am not to return either.

Did I list my weapons among my inventory? I carry two longarms, .50 caliber Sharps sporting rifles which I have modified with the addition of weight in the hilt. With either rifle I can drop a lion at three hundred yards. If there is no wind I can send a man to his just rewards at five hundred. I also have two brand new .45 caliber Smith & Wesson top-break revolvers designed by my good friend Major George W. Schofield of the 10th Cavalry as a refinement to their Model No. 3. I appreciate this pistols immensely for now I can load and unload the gun with one hand. I also carry my saber which is useful for finishing off a man from the saddle, and a Iroquois knife which I pulled from the corpse of an Indian-killer who tried to murder me in the Canadian wilderness when I was a lad. Two rifles, Two pistols, two blades. And a camel. I would not want to be Wadleigh and know that I was less than twelve hours behind him. Right now he was probably even beginning to feel somewhat hopeful that he had made good his escape. 'Tis probably to his benefit that he is so unfamiliar with

General Loring; otherwise he would truly understand the reach and execution of his wrath, and despair.

On the other hand that may have made my day somewhat easier.

I hadn't even been at the restaurant last night when the events which set me on this path began. Surprisingly, the shots which were fired did not stem from the differences between those who wore the blue and those who wore the grey in the war between the States (as that war is only seven years over and the rifts that remain are still deep and full of rancor). I should remind future readers of my journal that our small band American soldiers is here at the request and service of Khedive Ismail, King of the Nile, to help defend and repel his British and French aggressors. While we are here we are *de facto* soldiers of Egypt's army. In all practical terms, we are Egypt's army. As I have noted elsewhere in this journal, our work has consisted of training the poor excuse for a recruit that Egypt's bottom classes generated into a, if not formidable than at least a, competent force. We have also devoted much time to securing defenses along the Sea (in case of a sea attack) and around Alexandria's land borders. The deference given our special status here has permitted us to live in the style of Romans. General Loring, Old Blizzards himself, has secured our headquarters in Gabara Palace, which is grander by far than any home I have ever seen back in America including the great old ruined plantations of the South. My room in the

palace is greater than the whole of my father's small farm house on the Hudson River.

No, internecine rivalries were not the cause of the bullets being loosed. Ironically, it was diplomacy that felled Major Campbell. Or rather, a diplomat. Wadleigh, in the service of G.H. Butler, the United States Consul General to Egypt. Tensions run high between the diplomatic core and our force. We are loud, garrulous and popular with the Egyptians, while in all their manners and dealings they are seen as European, a distinct character flaw in a land that has so often felt the hands of the Old World around its throat. Petty squabbles have erupted before around such pressing matters as who should receive mail service first (they do) and who receives provisioning supplies first (we do).

Last night a coincidence of events conspired to place Old Blizzards and his dining party, which included Maj. Campbell in the same Greek restaurant which was serving Mr. Butler and his companions. As both parties chose the same instant to leave the restaurant, the Counsel General's party stood aside to allow Old Blizzard's to pass. Wadleigh was overheard to perceive a slight from Maj. Campbell. Evidently he had not saluted Butler as the General's other men had, not that they were required to do so. And the Major would never salute another man in the presence of his General unless it were a military official of same or higher rank. Major Campbell then affixed upon Wadleigh an oath

regarding his parentage. Wadleigh, a braggart and a brute under any circumstances, drew his revolver and fired at Campbell several times, striking him down. Then, before any of the aghast onlookers could react with anything other than concern for the fallen, he fled.

I have been sent into the desert after him.

It has been made quite clear to me from both the military and diplomatic camps that he is never to darken Alexandria's bazaar again.

Night has fallen over the desert as I write this by the light of my tiny fire. There is no other light made my human hands as far as my eyes can see, even with the aid of the telescope. And yet I know he is near.

July 18th, 1871

This morning I came over a hill and in the small canyon below I surprised a small band of *badawi*, desert nomads. What a startling appearance I must have made to their ignorant eyes: a giant bronze man bristling with weapons and driving the largest camel to be found in Alexandria across their lands. I greet the *sheikh* with the typical Arabian greeting, "Assalamu alaikum". He responds with a friendly smile and the expected enhancement to my salutation, '*Wa alaikum assalam wa rahmatu Allah.*' I am invited to break fast with them. I love the Arabian tongue, it is as ambiguous and floral as American English is course and direct. Arabian poetry is the best in the world; better by

far than that of the French because the words themselves are so emotional. Would that the words I use could speak so swiftly to passion and belief as theirs do; I would be celebrated in my land as the next Yeats.

They are concerned. They bring me to a youth, a young man of their tribe who has fallen from a camel and, while alive, has slumbered since, evidently in the grips of a coma. They have no healer among them. They cannot travel until he is well or dead, and knowing these people as I do, I am well aware that they will soon help this young man into the kingdom of Allah if his condition continues to prevent their progress towards water.

I use my medical knowledge to evaluate him. He seems to have no internal injuries which is promising. I pull my ammonia ampoules from my medical kit and break one under his nose. Soon he coughs and gags and thrashes his way back to consciousness. He may have a concussion, which I describe to the *sheikh*, but he will soon be able to ride again. The *sheikh* calls me a *doktor*. That is flattering. Doctor Savage. How my brothers would laugh!

They have seen a white man on a horse. He rode past their camp before night fell on the previous day. They give me his direction. They are grateful for my help and press dried dates and some water on. I accept their gifts and their blessings, and before too long I am sailing across the desert sea one more upon my Rocinante.

I have found Wadleigh. He shot my camel out from under me. Damn me for wool-gathering; I was composing a chamber music piece in my head when the first shot rang out, destroying the melody of the violin which had been particularly difficult to perceive. My mighty steed was struck through the heart, right before my knee, and dropped instantly and heavily into the baking sand. I tried to roll, but the animal's bulk rolled onto my leg, which broke instantly. Fortunately, while trapped and incapacitated, I was fortunately shielded from further immediate behind by the camel's body. I hear Wadleigh scramble over the dirt towards me. He threw himself on one of my water bags, he had evidently made his escape without water and was half-mad with thirst. He had no other concern than water. I held myself motionless, feigning death, as he slaked his thirst. He began to rummage through my provisions, moving slowly around towards me.

Through squinting eyes, I could see his form. None of my weapons was within reach. Even my knife was strapped to my pinned and useless leg which was growing numb. I must have made an involuntary movement for suddenly he was upon me, his pistol at my temple.

His face was burned and his lips were chapped. I remained still even as the barrel of the gun bore into my skull.

I realized I had one weapon close at hand. My fingers closed slowly upon this very fountain pen. I felt the gun

tremble as he pulled the hammer back and then I sprung and drove the pen deep into a lethally vulnerable spot on his face which I hesitate to describe for the sake of not offending more gentle spirited readers. At the same instant I wrested the pistol away from my head.

Suffice it to say that Wadleigh, like my camel, lay dead moments later.

I lie here now, leg broken and weighed upon by a dead camel, food and water for days within easy reach, writing this journal. I am able to absorb the pain for the moment. But I know it will grow worse. And the sun will grow hotter.

Now I all I have to do is figure out how to get home. Not to Alexandria, of course, that shall be easy. I mean to return home to the states, and that shall require some thought. Fortunately, I have time.