A further adventure of Davy—who appeared here last month in “The Golden Horn”—as he wanders into the middle of a skirmish between the forces of Skoar and Katskill.

A WAR OF NO CONSEQUENCE

by Edgar Pangborn

I

I sneaked past the town green without my usual pause for a glance at the stocks and the pillory; moonlight was dimming under a milky fog, and anyway I had no wish to look at those things that night. Something was moaning and grumbling to itself in the baiting-pit at the edge of the green, probably a bear who’d be used up soon in some entertainment, maybe the Spring Festival. I wasn’t stopping for that either, but went down Kurin Street, which belonged by day to Skoar’s small tradesmen and by night to the cats and pariah dogs, as far as an alley I remembered. It would bring me out near a certain part of the city’s stockade but not too near. More than an hour before I’d left a man lying there, a poor dumb city guard who took me for a Katskil spy, or said he did when he was roughing me up. It was actually the first time I’d heard there was another war on between my country and Katskil; the last one had happened before I was born, and I’d supposed the new one was nothing more than grown folks’ yak. A stupid business—the guard had his foot working on my belly, I got mad, grabbed it and heaved, his head loaded with a brass helmet clanged against a log of the stockade, and he stretched out flat with a broken neck.

I knew nobody in Katskil, hadn’t ever traveled. He could have listened. I’d simply been off in the woods of North Mountain, thinking about running away from a life I hated. My mind was nearly made up, but I needed to come back and say good-bye to my girl. It was important: I’d never said good-bye to her in just that way before. But then as I came slipping over the city stockade with not much room in my head for anything but Emmia Robson, that guard got me, and I got him.

Since he was dead, and saying
I was sorry wouldn’t help, I did go on all the way back to say goodbye to her—across the city to the Bull-and-Iron inn where I was supposed to be working for her father as a bond-servant yard-boy, up through her window by way of a jinny-creeper vine, into her bed. Sweet and sad and important. I had said goodbye to Emmia only once—she not yet knowing it was goodbye—when her plump fingers wandering over my throat discovered I wasn’t wearing my luck-charm. Now there was just one place I could have lost it—where that guard threw me and rolled me in the dirt. Yes, a stupid business. After that, it had to be truly goodbye. The Skoar policers would easily identify the charm by finding people who’d seen me wear it, and they wouldn’t be interested in hearing how I never meant to kill the poor sod. At fourteen I considered myself too young to hang. Still do, by the way.

The alley off Kurin Street was narrow, black and foul. Something soft slithered under my foot, not alive. Whatever it was—dog, pig, cat—the Skoar Scavengers’ Guild would take care of it in a week or so, when it was ripe enough to annoy the policers in their two-man rounds of this district. I don’t know why that detail sticks with me now. In later years, when I’d got myself slightly educated and was living in Old City of Nuin where the streets are clean, such a thing would have angered and disgusted me. But I was Skoar bred and born, totally illiterate and thinking it only natural that reading and writing, whatever they were, should be mysteries reserved to the priests. Full of other educational crud too. Being Skoar-born meant being hardened to the general grubbiness and slackness of a place where the people are mostly bone-lazy and seldom happy enough to take pride in the way they live.

Looking back, I don’t blame Skoar too much. It was a border town in a hot climate, and poor. Small snarling wars between Moha and Katskil had swept back and forth across it for over a hundred years. The few industries Moha had were up in the north, at Moha City and Kanhar on Moha Water, and in a couple of second-rate ports on the Hudson Sea. Since there was little enough in Skoar to make young people want to stay, I dare say they’d always been running off when they saw a chance, as I was about to do now, which left the city to the unambitious, the slobs, the politickers and the priests and the few ancient aristocratic families who ran things as much as the Church would let them. The proportion of mue-births was no higher in Skoar than anywhere else, but I recall the Mourners’ Guild made a more noisy thing of it than in other lands I’ve visit-
ed. The Mourners’ Guild, in case you don’t have any such in your part of the world, is an outfit of professional singers and wailers who move in on a family that’s had a mue-birth and set up a pious uproar for a few days—occasionally there’s a real singer in the lot, so it may not be too bad. The object, they say, is to comfort and appease the spirit of the mue by lamenting a bit more elaborately than people would be expected to do at the death of a real human being, after the priests have disposed of the mue’s body in the necessary way. The family has to pay the Guild, of course, but in Moha the poor families were let off easy, sometimes even got it for free by proving themselves paupers—in many respects Skoar’s an easygoing place.

When my foot slipped on that carrion in the alley I merely cussed and groped on with my hands out in front of me, till I could see a lightening of the darkness ahead. I heard a dull commotion of voices to my left, by the stockade. Sticking my head out at the end of the alley, I also caught a glimmer of torchlight.

They’d found him.

Moonlight was still abroad in the sky, but that fog was deepening and might be much heavier by morning, a spring fog, brought on by a cool night after a hot day. The policers—or they might have been soldiers of the Skoar garrison but I think not—were talking low-toned; what they said wasn’t likely to give me much I didn’t know. I could take it for granted they’d found my luck-charm. I slipped off in the other direction down the road that ran all around the city just inside the stockade, until the curve of it hid their torchlight. Then I crossed the road and scrambled up the log barrier, trying not to hurry. I wasn’t familiar with this section of the stockade. Dropping outside, I landed in a thorny thicket, with some noise. The policers wouldn’t hear it, but their dogs might, if they had them. Evidently they hadn’t, since nothing happened. All the same I froze a while, hearing a horned owl far off in the woods reciting his own thoughts of death and hunger.

Policer dogs—why, come daylight they’d bring them around outside the place where the guard had died, to cast about for my scent, which they would find. Then they might follow it all the way to a cave on the east shoulder of North Mountain, which had been mine by right of secret discovery and possession for a good while, and near which I’d hidden a certain treasure I couldn’t leave behind.

My treasure was a golden horn of Old Time. It had been in the possession of a wilderness mue, a poor desolate distorted thing who dared to make his presence known
to me up there in the woods of North Mountain. The laws of Moha and other lands say that such beings must be killed on sight. I couldn’t kill him, but I did steal the horn. Then because my heart hurt me about it, I tried to return it to him, but he was dead, and the horn was mine—never mind all that, I’ve written of it in another place, and it’s no credit to me the way I won my golden horn. But the horn was mine, buried up there near my cave, and I would not go without it.

I knew almost nothing then about how to play it. When I play it nowadays, I could make you laugh or cry or rejoice—no matter, I still know little enough. I only grope at the edges of the art of music they knew in Old Time when the horn was made, an art now nearly lost except for a few Old-Time songs that people sing occasionally, not even understanding that they belong to another world.

There was one brook to cross on the mountainside between Skoar and my cave, a hasty stream nowhere wide or deep. It wouldn’t confuse the scent-trail for the policer-dogs, because when I came down that night I’d merely stepped across it, not walking any distance in the water. Now the brook might help me find part of my way in the dark, if I had the guts to try it. It flowed into the city under the stockade, not far from this thicket where I’d tumbled. I could follow it upstream for about a mile, to a willow I thought I could find and recognize at night; then at least I’d be that much further along my way at first-light.

I heard no more of the men’s voices as I inched out of the thornbushes and cut across partly open grassland that lay between the city and the beginning of the North Mountain forest. Trying in fog and darkness to hold a straight line that would bring me to the brook, I had to move with dismal slowness. I don’t remember too much fog of fear in my mind, but the short journey was an experience outside of time. During what may have been ten or fifteen minutes, I walked a thousand years. Then hearing at last the mumbling wet monotone of the brook, I returned abruptly to a place and time-scheme I knew, in a kind of waking. A big frog jumped and ploshed from blackness to blackness unseen, less startled than I was and maybe less afraid.

Struggling upstream with no guide except the feel of rushing water was a different nightmare. Instead of too much time, I imagined there was not enough, yet I knew it was dangerous to hurry. The brook itself was shallow and moderate; at the small rapids and waterfalls I only needed to step out on the bank and keep the noise of the stream at my left until it changed back to the sound
of easier flow. But I could lose my footing and brain myself on a rock. I could step on a black water-snake—moksins they call that kind in my home country, fat and timid and sluggish, not as bad as rattlers or the copper-snakes because they can’t bite so well, but bad enough. My smell could reach black wolf anywhere in the night, and he could come take me before I had time to free the knife I carried under my shirt. Spring is the season too when the bear are thin and hungry, their males edgy with the beginning of the sex fret and sometimes in a mood to kill for the pleasure of it, as they say the great brown bear of the northern countries may do at any time.

Or I could walk innocently by one of brown tiger’s favorite drinking holes and save him a lot of trouble, never being aware of it until it was too late to be aware of anything. A man’s a small thing in the dark.

The mosquitos found me. I didn’t dare slap, but only rubbed at them, which doesn’t help much. You know, I happened to arrive at my heresies by a different route, but I’d think a mosquito you can’t slap would go a long way toward making an atheist out of anybody, unless he wants to believe in a God who’d invent that type of insect for the fun of it. The owl had ceased hooting, or floated farther away so that his outrageous talk was covered by the brook’s midnight music. I halted now and then to listen for his or other cries. There’s no mistaking the cold long howl of black wolf for the noise of the grays. Nobody minds the grays too much. I heard neither that night. It was a hushed time, a whole world deep in fog, and though at fourteen I knew well enough that most of my worst troubles were yet ahead of me, the thought was never too sharp that night. Nothing was sharp. Fog...

In perhaps an hour I found the willow tree waiting for me, its lower branches trailing to the water, giving me a scratchy kiss of welcome and reassurance. I could see nothing of course. Here there was darkness of forest as well as of night, old forest where moonlight would always have been a some-time thing even when the air was clear; I knew the fog had deepened only because of the damp smell and a thickness in my breathing. But my fingers told me these were willow leaves, and followed them along a twisting of twigs to little branches, then to the larger branches, finding at length one whose curve I remembered from daylight times, a branch that fitted my hand and was strong enough to bear my weight. I hoisted myself from the water and climbed with a dream’s slowness, cautious still at the edge
of exhaustion. High up in the willow, I took off my loin-rag and passed it around the trunk, tying it at my middle. Too tired to know or care what comfort was, I collapsed into a sort of sleep, with no images that I remember.

Damn a beetle. I hate beetles. They get up too early in the morning and there’s neither humor nor kindness in them, not a trace. Work all day long—bad as an ant that way—not a smile for anybody, and when they sleep at night, if they do, it must be like the sleep of a clock with the spring run down. I won’t say they haven’t got brains. If they hadn’t, how would they know for instance which are the parts of you that you can’t reach for to scratch? They do. I think some low-living miz’able great-grandfather beetle reasoned it out away back in the labyrinths of forgotten time, and passed it on so it’s come down through the ages to his twelve billion grandchildren, for to this day that’s the part of you, south of the ribs and north of the rump, where any beetle will go immediately, to tromp on you, and scrape, and tickle, and chew out free samples, and call his Goddamn bald-headed cousins to come look what he found. All the more certainly, if you happen to be stuck in a tree-crotch with an ache in every bone and no inclination to scratch your back if you could. Notice this too: I never met a beetle, and don’t hope to, who showed any reasonable liking for me. Contempt is what they show, contempt. I’ve known a beetle stare me right in the eye with a hunk of my hide hanging from his jaws, and I knew simply from the look on his stupid face that he was comparing me with other meals and finding fault with everything about me—too salt, too gamy, needed more sass, something. It wasn’t any use, you know—he wouldn’t have liked me if I’d spiked my rear and put butter on it. Well then, I contemptify ’em right back. I hate beetles. Damn a beetle anyhow.

Same thing goes double for ants, except I’ve got less respect for them, after once watching a whole gang of the idiots, loaded with dead spiders and left-over wings and daddy-long-legsies with parts missing and such like second-hand loot, go marching all the way to the top of a goldenrod and down the other side just because the one in the lead said so, when even a city alderman would have had the sense to walk around it.

I’m not grateful to the beetle who jerked me out of my weary half-sleep that morning while the sky was still dark. The faintest touch of first-light would have waked me. As it was, all I could do was fidget and scratch, or try to scratch, try also not to think
too much about danger and loneliness and fear, or about Emmia Robson whom I'd probably never see again, and wait until the fog was dimly gray and it was possible to glimpse the branches of the willow a few feet from my eyes.

It reached that stage at last, though I knew the fog might remain for most of the morning. I let myself down through the milk-soft confusion and pushed on up the mountainside. I could look doubtfully eight or ten feet ahead, and pick out specially remembered places—odd-looking rocks, dips and rises of the ground, scratches of squirrel-holes or knobby spots on the tree-trunks—that were trail-marks for me but wouldn't be for anyone else. I don't know why anyone with eyes and a memory should need to blaze a trail for himself.

In that fog, however, it did take me half an hour to win my way up to the cave. By that time I was cruelly hungry. The fog was already thinning off slightly, under pressure of an invisible sun. I couldn't afford the time to hunt, just gathered my things and made ready to leave.

Except for the horn, I hadn't much. Ten dollars buried near the cave; with another five knotted into my loin-rag, that represented more than a couple of years' savings from my bond-servant work at the Bull-and-Iron. It would help, as soon as I dared show myself in some place where money mattered. In the cave I had fish-lines with two genuine steel hooks, a flint-and-steel, a burning-glass, and a good ash bow I'd made myself—short for ease in carrying but with power enough to settle a deer. Half a dozen arrows, two of them steel-tipped, the others brass-headed but satisfactory for small stuff. That was it. I could get along.

I missed my luck-charm. But I recall thinking, as I dug up my golden horn and my shoulder-sack that was wrapped around it, how the charm hadn't done anything about my heavy bad luck of the day before; it was even the final cause of my being on the run. I went so far as to wonder whether all luck-charms might be nothing but a chunk of mahooha.

Of course I was still pretty religious and not ready for such reflections; still that idea got strengthened right away, for just as I'd slung the sack over my shoulder, feeling the hard splendid shape of the horn through the cloth, along comes a little wild hen foolishly hunting her breakfast of bugs not twenty yards away. My arrow took her head off neatly at the neck—she'd never miss it. I've heard say those chickens are descended from tame ones that took to the wilderness long ago, maybe during the Years of Confusion. It makes sense:
they're hardly different from the domestic kind except for smaller size and wildness; just as good eating—or better, since they don't live off garbage—and not much more brains. I couldn't make a fire to cook this one, but I drank the blood and dressed her off, burying the entrails in the hole where my horn had lain, and ate the heart and liver and gizzard raw. It braced me up. A stroke of pure good luck, you see, with no plague-take-it luck-charm getting any of the credit.

The nearest stream sprang out of a cliffside on the northeast slope of the mountain and tumbled off toward a region I'd never investigated. The brook was swift and loud with many rapids, troublesome alders and brambles on the banks. So far as I could guess, it must run two or three miles through the forest until at some point it crossed the one road that ran northeast out of Skoar, a trade and travel road pretty well patrolled. I couldn't risk any road near the city, unless maybe at night, but I might use it for a guide. Northeast was my desire, for Levannon lay that way, a nation where a youth, I'd heard, might sign on with one of the big thirty-tonners that sail the northern route through Moha Water and the Ontara and Lorenta Seas to the ports of Nuin on the great sea that's said to reach the rim of the world—yes, and he could be long gone, and make a fortune, and maybe some day sail out on the great sea as no one had ever done. So much for a dream that had been burning in me a while, but it was no dream that I was on my way—some-where.

The brook turned out to be a scratchy tunnel, a little gray-green hell. On account of the dogs, I had to use it for what it was worth. I'd stuffed my moccasins in the sack to save them, as I'd done the night before in that other brook. My bare feet took a beating on the stones.

Of course when the dogs lost the scent, the men would use their heads a little, and follow the brook with the dogs nosing along on both banks—considering the mess of briers, I wished them joy of it. I had another idea about that too. At a break in the tangle where brambles gave way to grass and weeds, I stepped out on the right bank and walked away from the brook, as if I'd given up flight and started back toward Skoar. I took care to pass within reach of a spreading oak I'd noticed, and went a good way past it, into a thicket where I tramped things to make it interesting. Then I back-tracked to the oak and swung up into it, careful to leave no damaged twigs or other signs. From the oak it was possible, by risking one difficult
jump forty feet above ground, to pass over into a neighboring gum tree. The rest of the route was simple, branch to branch all the way back to the brook.

I could hope they'd waste some time beating their gums before they caught on to what I'd done, if they ever did. Maybe they'd figure I was a demon, or in league with demons, and send back for a priest to help them louse it up. Policers have no love for wilderness if I know the breed, and I think I do. All the same I splashed on another half-mile along that brook, and when I left it I did so by way of the trees again. I swung and scrambled from tree to tree until I reached another oak, far from the stream, that looked good to me. There I climbed as high as I could without getting too much into the open, too visible, and through the leaves I studied the surrounding country.

No more fog. High clouds rolling eastward, making the sun vanish and reappear—jumpy weather, a nervous wind now and then stirring my oak with a sultry breath.

I'd been right about the road, except that it was nearer than I'd thought. A red gash in the landscape showed up half a mile away, more north than east, where the road approached and passed over a rise of the ground—red clay, likely still muddy with spring dampness. Though the road was empty to the eye, I heard faint sounds—very faint, unfamiliar, troubling.

I turned my head and half shut my eyes to listen better, but learned nothing. Then I realized I was staring at another section of what must be the same road, down on my right, startlingly near my oak. I don't think it was more than two hundred feet off, a place where trees and bushes grew thinner, revealing a short stretch of gray gravel with only a little of the red clay. That part of the road was empty too, no danger at the moment, but I didn't like it, and wormed around till most of me was behind the trunk of the oak.

Those sounds were remote enough, whatever they might be. A kind of dry murmur not suggesting voices, and with a certain beat in it. Something like the sound of a pulse in your ears. I tried to think it was that, but couldn't fool myself so. A pulse wouldn't have made my skin crawl.

I loosened an end of my loinrag, cut it off with my knife and tied the free piece around my head. I should have thought of that sooner. The cloth was a dull gray. I don't mind being red-haired, but it's not helpful when you want to look like a piece of bark.

While I was busy with that, something had appeared on the
distant road and now stood there, a dot of life between me and the uneasy sky. Even at a great distance a human being seldom looks like any other animal. I couldn't make out much of this one except his humanity, his watchful stillness under the intermittent sun. I supposed he was studying the road in my direction. This noise that had bothered me ceased while he paused there. Then I saw his tiny arm swing up and out and forward, and the noise started up again.

I think men must have used that signal from most ancient times, when they've wanted to say "Come on ahead!" and there's been some good strong reason why they don't care to shout.

II

He walked forward. At first he was followed by only a few like himself, walking apart, spread out thinly along the road and moving with the long-legged stride of men used to extended journeys with light burdens. Advance-guard scouts they were, though I didn't understand that at once and thought foolishly, Is that all?

The sound grew stronger. The first horsemen appeared over the rise. Feet of men and horses—no other noise in the world is like it, whether they are marching in rhythm or merely walking along in broken step as these men were. This was no parade. The helmets and other brass-work were dulled, by intent I think and not just from road-dust; they wouldn't want a tell-tale glint of the sun.

Noticing that was what made me decide they must be soldiers of Katshil coming to take Skoar, and the notion threw me into a dither of panic and trouble. For surely the only right and honorable thing for me to do was to run down the road—after all I had a half-mile start—and warn the city. Fifteen minutes, even ten, could make a difference.

I thought, What in hell did Skoar ever do for me?

The mounted soldiers were few—twenty or thirty, I think—walking slower than the horses liked, on tight reins. The massed foot-soldiers came then, in red-brown jackets and brown pants, short spears at the shoulders, bows slung, swords at the side.

For that matter, what had the nation of Moha ever done for me?—misery mostly, stupid laws that made me a less than human thing, a bond-servant who with the greatest luck just might be able to pay off the bond some time in the next ten years, and win the privilege of voting for the same laws and the same politicians.

There was Emma. She would be soldiers' meat, if she lived.

I got ready to slide down the
oak, and then I saw something that was like a sudden breath of cool air on a sweltering day. A special group of men off there, without spears, surrounding something bright and splendid in white and blue and gold that streamed backward on the air as they marched.

Oh, even I knew that the Kat-skil flag was black and scarlet. This was our flag of Moha, and these were our men, coming not to take the city but protect it. So I could lounge in my oak and enjoy my patriotism without a lick of work. Now that was happiness. Like falling out of a tree and not quite breaking your neck.

I heard no footsteps of those advance scouts approaching the section of road near my tree, but I knew they must be near it by now. I climbed down until a wall of leaves almost completely shut the road away, nothing for me to watch but a patch or two of gray gravel, my body well hidden on the far side of the trunk. A man would need to be uncommonly sharp, and know exactly where to look, to spot any glint of my eyes observing him.

I began to hear the horses. They were quiet on the soft ground of the road. The separate scouts were the only men who worried me, for they would be sure to glance into the trees from time to time. Those following them wouldn't—people seldom look upward, I've noticed, unless their attention is specially drawn. I glimpsed the quiet passage of the first scout, and drew back completely behind the tree-trunk. Then as the hoof-sounds grew plain and close, I dared lean forward to look again, and watched the whole mounted detachment go by. I counted thirty-six.

Fine horses of light build, clean lines, all black or gray or roan. Trained for quiet and precision—no neighing or blowing or acting up; they knew this wasn't a parade. Such horses are bred in western Moha, I suppose the most beautiful product of my native land. Bershar and Levannon are famous for horses too, but those are the mountain type—not so handsome but tougher, and steadier in a crisis.

These horsemen were mostly young, well set up, their faces seeming much alike to my limited view. They would own their horses and gear: the aristocracy goes for the cavalry, with a lot of ritual and circumstance. These boys—you could tell it from the swing of their shoulders—knew they were the cream of the crop and had a good thing. They thought horse and lived horse. Most of them would make a career of it, pleasant in peacetime with fun and privileges, something nice in politics or respectable loafing when they got too old to ride for the army. It made a
grand military picture; it was also a weakness. They wouldn’t dream of riding or owning any horses except the beautiful breed of western Moha—hell, I’d just as soon send a girl into battle. Those nags are like that, high-strung, too attached to their owners, their action depending on the rider’s firmness. Let him get hit or stumble from his mount, and our Moha beauties go all to pieces just like hysterical women. They won’t stand, and any thinking they do for themselves is skittish and wild as the wind.

There was no smiling or talk among the horsemen this morning, only a controlled tension and readiness—orders, I guess. For nearly all of them—they were that young—it was their first war.

That wouldn’t have been true of the foot-soldiers who came after them. Much older on the average, some of them scarred, hard-case types, used to road marches on poor rations, the yowling of sergeants and the discipline of the bull whip. Others were clods in uniform, ex-slaves, street trash, what little good sense they had all banged into them from the outside. No aristocrats in that lot: they were for the dirty work and the uncelebrated dying. Another weakness of Moha, in my view. An army of men who think for themselves may be hard to handle, but it does win wars, so far as any army ever does.

I looked off at the distant part of the road. Men were still coming, a second mounted detachment just then appearing over the rise. I thought it might be a rear guard, and as it happened I was wrong. But I hadn’t time to speculate about it, for as the first dozen horsemen of that new group started down the stretch of red clay, hell was loose up there, and a trumpet screamed.

The Katskill battalion had kept out of sight in the bush until about half of our Moha men had gone by. Then they stabbed at the center of the long weak line. We blundered; we should have had scouts on the flanks, of course. Maybe some fool thought the forest was too thick for an army to enter it. Now that the trap was sprung, the forward part of the Moha army doubling back to help—if it did—would have the hill to climb and the morning sun slanting across their eyes.

Katskil—(I’ll tell you presently how I come to know all this)—had been holding that ambush all night, deep in the forest tangle. There’d been sharp intelligence work too, learning what kind and how many of our men were on the way, and what part of the bottleneck they’d be passing through in the morning hours.

For that matter, nearly the whole damned road was a bottle-
neck. A military road, but nobody bothered to trim back the forest and weeds in peacetime. A military road, designed—so far as it had any design—by the military mind, which likes to make provision for everything except the fact that the enemy sometimes has brains too. That's what I've heard generals call an Incalculable Factor, which means that they aren't to be criticized for leaving it to God.

Katskil's first stroke was a flight of arrows from both sides of the road. I knew that, in my oak tree, as soon as I saw men falling from their mounts, the horses losing training at once, plunging here and there and throwing the whole detachment into a mess. No sound had reached me yet from up there except that cry of the trumpet. It still rang in my ears, three short notes and a long blast. Not music but a shriek, and I knew without thinking that it was more than a warning. It was a desperate recall of the men who had gone on ahead.

They'd heard it sure enough, those foot-soldiers on the section of road near to me. Through the leaves I saw faces gone blank and silly with shock, faces not wanting to understand. Someone yelled "Skoar!" A wave of cursing and shouting and yattering followed that, up and down the road on both sides of the small region I could watch. A young voice from much farther away on my right cut through it, high with fury and excitement: "Get back up there! They need us. Move, you lard-belly sons of bitches, move!"

Up there, uhha, but just looking at it practically, what was in it for them? Why, up there half a mile away men in dark green were pouring out of the woods, and cutting loose with the shrill Katskil yell that now reached me as clearly as the trumpet. As if the forest's own body had come awake with sword and spear and javelin, to squeeze itself shut on the confusion of men and horses in the road. And the rear detachment of the foot-soldiers of Moha was spilling over the rise. It looked to me as though the poor yucks were arriving still in marching line-up—stepping off a cliff in a dignified manner.

Yet there weren't so many of those dark green uniforms after all. I saw no more of them coming—no telling what might be happening in the region between me and the ridge, where tree-tops shut away my vision—and I did see a number of them fallen, out at the rim of the battle. Our newcomers might have stepped off a cliff, but they lit fighting. Up there they did.

On the road near me it was all a flurry of panic and indecision and shouts of "Skoar! To Skoar!"

The flag of Moha reappeared, climbing the rise—far off, living
and magnificent. The men of the color guard weren't milling and whimpering and hankering after the city's comfortable walls. Even now I'm still puzzled to know why a bond-servant yard-boy, running away from his native land in disgust and fright, should have shivered and gulped down tears of awe and pride, merely to see how the color guard of Moha knew where to go. Yes, it climbed the rise, that white and blue and gold, and a wave of dark green flowed down to meet it, and the trumpet cried again.

But where I was—oh, that was disgrace and nastiness, on the near section of the road. One flash of action I saw. A young cavalryman shot by, toward the battle, and as he passed he swung the flat of his sword across an open mouth that was yelling "Skoar!" The mouth yelled a moment longer, without words, the horseman was gone. Three others followed him, and no more. Then the foot-soldiers, our Moha men, were running, the wrong way. All of them, it seemed. A curiously slow run, a sort of shamble, like the running of sick men.

It was my patriotism. I wasn't thinking. I pulled out my golden horn, and forty feet above them in the leaves, I blew the same call the trumpet had given, with all the power I had. Nay, I blew it three times, the second time on a higher note, and again, higher and louder yet. Then I looked down.

Oh, I was safe. No one glanced my way. The sound would have seemed to come from all around them, or from within them, and such a sound as their lives had never known. They were not running now. They were turned the right way, and staring back up the road in total silence. No more yelling. No sound at all. Therefore I blew the call once more, not loudly this time but gently, pleadingly, as the men of their own kind up on the hill might have said simply to them: "We are in trouble."

I heard one sound in answer, as if they had all released their breath in the same instant. And one voice, from beyond my sight one of the cavalry, I think called out without anger: "All right, boys, let's go up yonder and take them!"

Our men of Moha were running again, the right way.

Sure, Moha won a dazzling victory that day, history says. Or somebody did. I saw it happen.

When I looked up from putting the horn away in the sack, the brave color guard was completely surrounded and cruelly beset. They were only a dozen men, lightly armed with sword and javelin, who had formed a ring to protect the standard-bearer, and as the ring was made
smaller by death it held its shape somehow, while the outer circle of dark green pressed steadily inward. I could not count how many of the color guard were left standing, nor indeed make them out at all except as tiny shapes with a glitter of sun on steel.

That struggle for the flag had edged over to one side of the road, but I no longer saw any red clay, for it was covered, all hidden by a heaving confusion of brown and dark green uniforms, and the many who were now lying still on the earth. Above, near the crest of the rise, the demoralized cavalry unit was yet trying to get back into some order, while the Katskil soldiers darted in and out— I could hear the horses screaming. Two or three of them, riderless, dashed blindly into the woods.

It was bad. But our men of Moha who had been on the edge of panic flight a moment before were swarming up the road. I knew that. I had a moment of feeling absurdly sorry for the Katskil fighters because they might not know it yet. Then our men arrived.

The horsemen were first of course—up the hill in a roaring charge, crashing into the green circle around the color guard and scattering it into random flying shards like a smashed wheel. The foot-soldiers followed in a moment, swords and javelins flashing. The swords were soon dropping and rising, though only my mind could hear the crushing of steel on flesh.

My eyes followed the course of a man in dark green who was fleeing for the woods with three soldiers of Moha after him. He did not turn to fight—I think he had lost his weapons. One javelin took him in the back. The other two Moha soldiers, with a motion that seemed to me strangely deliberate, thrust their swords into him as he lay on the ground, perhaps already dead. I looked away.

That incident might have held my gaze longer than I thought, or maybe I was temporarily faint or sick. When my vision cleared I saw that the Katskil men were all in retreat. The flag of Moha had been carried to the top of the rise and throbbed there in splendor under the wind. The fresh cavalry unit had joined the broken one; there was order in them now. I glimpsed two riders, their captains I guess, conferring on the high ground near our flag. Only the foot-soldiers were chasing the Katskil men into the woods, dirty work for dirty men. The cavalry captains watched them go.

I saw no dark green figures anywhere on the road, except the dead. I remember thinking that the soldiers of Katskil must have been brave men too. Heavily outnumbered apparently, only a small group to begin with, though
they had looked numerous in the moment of attack. (A battalion, I later learned, but far below strength; one whole company had been detached for a lesser border raid ten miles to the east—a foolishness on the part of the Katskil brass, and their men paid for it.) Well, we had the victory. I saw one of the cavalry captains take off his cap to wipe his forehead and snap the sweat away from his hand. Then he was making motions I couldn’t follow because of the distance, until I saw a tiny drift of gray above his head. He had taken time to fill his pipe, strike flint and have himself a smoke, waiting for the infantry to come back out of the woods.

The infantry had orders—(this also I learned later, and I believe it because the one who told me was a truthful man)—to take no prisoners in the woods, but to bring back evidence that they hadn’t been idle. Anything would do—a hand, a head, even a finger. War is a curious occupation. In most of the nations I’ve visited since these happenings that now seem rather long ago, top military figures usually have an excellent chance at political position and preferment, after the sword is momentarily laid away. By this time, the captain or major who gave that order could be the governor of a district for all I know. Human beings are curious people—nay, I believe that observation’s been made before; you may have it free for nothing.

They came back soon, the foot-soldiers. I’m sure it wasn’t too inviting there in the heavy woods, where the Katskil men would know the way better than they did, and might be regrouping. But their evidence must have been satisfactory, for the army was soon in motion. I saw a minimum of fuss and shifting about, organizing stretcher bearers for the Moha wounded, and a guard for a limping handful of men in dark green who had been taken prisoner on the road—they’d be slaves for latrine duty in the army barracks, or there might be an aristocrat or two in the lot who was worth a ransom. If any of the Katskil wounded had been officers or aristocrats they would have been placed on litters too; Moha had a reputation for generosity that way; but I saw none. Yes, we were in motion—two battalions, and at full strength before the ambush—and I don’t think more than twenty minutes had passed since I’d seen that solitary scout standing against the sky. A skirmish, a trifling encounter—

I caught myself wondering if the war itself was important, and if it was, what made it so. I knew nothing of the cause except that it was a dispute over the national boundary. From all I’d heard in casual talk during my first fourteen years of life, the same dis-
pute had been going on for fifty or a hundred years, neither side willing to sit down at a table, discuss the damned thing, and decide on something permanent. Neighbors could usually do that, I’d noticed, if they got into an argument over a line fence or patch. But not nations. I know that nations are not people, and no amount of foggy talk can make them so. But they are created by people, people very much like you and me, and there’s a rumor abroad that people like you and me occasionally have sense enough to know what we’re doing some of the time. It’s confusing.

I heard them passing me on the road below. I stayed completely behind the body of my oak, with no desire to look at them. Words floated up to me now and then. “Did y’ see the Katty I got, the tall bastard, the one with the beard? My Christ ‘n’ Abraham, it don’t look like they teach ’em to cover the gut ay-tall. Counted on his long reach, all I hadda do was go under it.” The words were brag and probably true; the voice was shrill, like that of a man afraid of something or in pain.

Another was crying and petulant. Hearing him up the road was what told me the wounded were being carried by; I did not desire to look. He was asking to see his little sister—they could perfectly well bring her to him, he said, because it was safe here, no damned soldiers around. She was nine years old, he said: they’d know her by her brown hair and brown eyes, the way she wore her hair long to the shoulders, cutest snip in all God’s creation. He wouldn’t, he said, be giving her any God-damned military secrets, he just wanted to see her. Cutest snip in all God’s creation, he said—they could perfectly well bring her here to see him. Then he said a few times: “My head hurts.” His voice faded out down the road. I would not look out at them. It was enough. “My head hurts—” and then again, much fainter and farther away under the dull tramp and shuffle of footsteps and occasional clash of steel gear—“My head hurts.”

I was waiting for silence. Soon enough it came.

III

I sat listening to the depth of it, that silence. It was an emptiness. I had expected to feel a kind of peace, and I did not.

If there had been any noise of dogs searching out my trail back there in the woods I suppose I would have noticed it—even earlier, during the battle. Some part of me must have been listening, concerned with my own safety. There’d been nothing of the sort; I seemed to be released from the pressure of that fear and perhaps of other fears.
Skoar wouldn't trouble itself at present with a fugitive yard-boy. Skoar would be celebrating the entry of a glorious army, with street crowds and bonfires, churches humming with blessings and thanksgiving hymns, political speakers being trotted out of their stables, taverns and whores getting ready for a long night's work, policers all busy with drunks and brawls and busted heads. I could forget about Skoar.

Yet I had to be practical. Levannon, many long and weary miles to the east—I didn't know how many—was the nation where I wanted to go. Trying to be practical—my mind was still dazed, unreasonably exhausted, unwilling to think straight—I studied what I could see of the countryside from my high place in the oak, searching for a route that would allow me to parallel the road without coming out on it or venturing too near the battlefield where there might have been some guard left behind or camp-followers foraging and looting the dead. I wanted landmarks that I'd be able to find from the ground, but the forest growth was too thick and too evenly spread out, with no great sentinel trees in view except the one where I perched now. So I must go through it blind, trust my sense of direction, maybe now and then angle over to the right far enough to locate the road without blundering out on it. Somewhere, in a hidden ravine or a dense patch of brush, I might chance lighting a tiny fire of dry sticks to cook my hen—raw chicken is discouraging. And I'd go on alone.

I was giving it all a last look, to print the landscape of my memory, when I saw the motion of an arm that should not have moved, on that faraway road. It ought not to have shaken and demoralized me, to see a Katskll soldier who was surely dead raise his arm toward the sky as if wanting to grasp something, and then let it fall over his eyes. It happened slowly, the arm no bigger at that distance than the leg of a fly groping upward, and certainly turning, because I caught a snap of dry brilliance as sunlight touched some metal on his hand, a ring or a bracelet. Then the arm fell. Why, he was like a sleeper troubled by the pressure of light in the midst of some dream, who covered his eyes, maybe in a partial waking and return to sleep.

I thought: No! And I thought: If he's alive now, he won't be in the time it would take me to reach him, even by way of the road. I thought: Man, turn over, turn away from the light if it hurts your eyes! And I thought: He's the enemy. He was one of the men who would have taken a share in the sack of Skoar (if we hadn't won a glorious victory)—butchering and raping the helpless, burning houses, dragging the healthier
survivors away into the half-death of slavery.

And I found I was wondering about truth and falsehood. All truth and falsehood. For it seemed to me that what I had seen that morning was no-way in accord with the talk of war I had heard as I was growing up. They talked of glory and bravery and patriotism and democracy and national honor, fine ringing words that conveyed a crowd of feelings—feelings but not meaning, if you ever stopped to ask yourself, What are these people actually saying? Glory and bravery—that color guard was brave. So were the men who overcame panic and ran back into the fight when my horn called them. So were the men who lay in ambush through a wilderness night and threw their scanty force against one twice its size. But what was the final quality of glory for the man whose head hurt, and for that sleeper by the road who for some mad reason wouldn't turn his face away from the burden of the light?

As for those enthusiastic civilians with their democracy and national honor, how well would they have shown up on that road this morning?

Garrison soldiers stopped occasionally at the Bull-and-Iron tavern. I couldn't remember hearing them talk about patriotism.

I climbed down from my oak, and worked my way through the brush with my best skill at moving quietly, to that near section of the road. Parting the bushes, I studied everything in sight and found no danger. At my right, leading toward Skoor, the road turned soon and vanished. I saw fresh horse-dung and a few spatters of blood where someone's wound had dripped; that was all. Up the other way, the road ran a little farther before reaching a curve. I ran that way with many a backward glance. Just before the curve I slipped into the roadside bushes, and stole on to a place from which I could peer through the leaves at the next section of the road, which was empty and still.

Here the smell of men and leather and horses and blood was already fainter. The sides of the road were not so densely overgrown, and I could feel a northwest breeze lightly blowing, cleaning the air. I may have wondered what had happened to most of my fears. I stepped out boldly on the road and walked on.

It seemed long, before the gravel and dark earth under my feet altered to red clay, but it really was not. With all the tree-hidden turnings, I suppose it was slightly over half a mile or some such matter. My thoughts had gone much farther, that morning.

One more turn, and the battlefield was visible ahead of me, the trampled earth, the sprawl of dead horses—had it been their
quarrel?—and the other fallen shapes, fewer than I had thought. I watched the sudden heavy flight of a black crow started at my coming.

No one was there to challenge me—only the crow, and he had flown away. I passed a man lying in the ditch, whose face was upturned and no-way angry. His uniform was dark green, drenched in the front—likely the work of one of our broad-bladed Moha javelins. His hand still held a bow, and I noticed it was quite like mine, rather short and heavy in the body. It would be hard to bend but easy to carry in thick woods. His fingers were clenched on it, though it had done him no good; anyway I had no wish to take it from him—my own suited me. I might have taken two or three of the good steel-tipped arrows I saw in his quiver, but something stopped me from it. Maybe some tavern-tale heard in childhood about the anger of ghosts, but I don’t think it was that: I think it was the mildness of his face after he had forgotten about war, and killing, and life. I went on up the road.

It might be difficult, I thought, to find that man whose arm had, in a way, beckoned me, for as I climbed toward the higher ground all the dead were somehow delaying me, holding me back, as though each one made some demand on me or suffered some need—like, say, a need to talk. Yet surely they did not, and if they had, what could I have done?

It was not difficult after all. He lay as I had last seen him, the arm over his eyes. The sunlit sparkle on his hand had been a little ring, ruby-colored—cheap glass, I guess; who would steal it? No insignia of rank, a private in the army with an arrow lodged low in the belly that would not have killed quickly, and a sword-gash in the neck. The sword-wound had missed the artery, but spilled a great deal, perhaps slowly, though it was doing so no longer. He was still warm. I think he may have imitated death while our brave men were going by, and then truly died as I was on my way to him.

Fear stirred in me again. The routed Katskil survivors would not be far from here, and might return. Some detachment of our own might come back, for the Moha dead—surely they would, rather than leave them for the wilderness scavengers. I climbed the rise hurriedly and started down the far side, meaning to get back in the forest cover.

Something gray was standing in a half-crouch at the edge of the road only a few dozen steps away. I halted from sheer startled curiosity. I had been walking, without any effort or thought for it, as quietly as I would have gone in
the woods, and the gray wolf, his nose already full of the smell of human flesh and blood, had not heard me. He was turned partly away from me, intent on something off in the bushes. I searched, and found what he was watching.

A tiny stream flowed out of the woods on my right and through low growth into a ditch along the road. A man, a Katskil soldier, was crawling toward it with his bronze helmet slung over his arm. He was a boy, not much older than I, maybe seventeen, dark and thin, with gray eyes. He must have been hidden in a thicket where they overlooked him. Now that all was quiet he had come out, driven by his thirst, and was trying to make it by pulling himself along on his arms, with a bit of help from one leg. The other leg was gashed from hip to knee and still slowly bleeding, and a broken-off arrow shaft protruded from his side.

He must have had every nerve focused on the water he desired, for he did not see me, but I saw him become aware of the gray wolf who watched him, undecided, with the timid cruelty and curiosity of his breed. A black would have taken the boy in a moment. The soldier braced up slightly on his arm, letting his helmet slip down to his hand, which gripped it—his only weapon. I suppose his others were somewhere in the woods. His face was set, patient, shining with a film of sweat.

The small noise of readying my arrow made the wolf whirl and face me. Seeing no better target, I gave him the arrow in the flat gray front of his chest. He leaped, scuttled a step or two into the road, and died. The boy lay as before, watching me now, without anger and without hope. I said: "I'll get the water."

He let me take the helmet, with some noise in his throat, maybe protest or assent, I don't know. He seemed more puzzled than anything else, damp brows knitting in a frown—a polite frown, not an angry one.

I filled the helmet at the stream and brought it to him. Lying in that awkward sprawl it was hard for him to drink; his hands could not help much. The arrow shaft in his side below the ribs made me afraid to lift him. I told him I was about to try it, and he nodded slightly, setting his jaw, but wincing and groaning too much at the first pressure of my arm under his shoulders. I had to give that up, and ease him back. I spooned out some water in my hand and got it to his mouth. He swallowed it, and lost it in a sharp cough that brought up a little blood. I think the arrow may have pierced his stomach. He cleared his mouth of blood and tried to say something. I believe it was "Thanks."
I took off the rag I had tied on my head to hide my hair, and attempted to bind up the long wound his his thigh. He let me do that, understanding it, watching me in the same abstracted way, but perhaps less puzzled and more indifferent. The rag wasn’t long enough, and I couldn’t fasten it properly. Presently he said quite clearly: "Let it be."

"Is it bad?"

"Numb mostly. Be you a Moha man, that ’ere reddy thatch?" They have an odd speech in Kat-skil. I’d heard it often from travelers at the inn before the war talk began to stir up quarrels and patriotism, and destroy friendships.

I said: "I haven’t any country."

"Nay? What you mean? You wasn’t with us, boy, I know ever’ God-damn bum in the battalion."

"I’m alone. I was running away."

"Sure enough? Why, I wanted —" his voice faded, I remember, and strengthened again—"always wanted to do that."

"You did?"

"Ayah." He was looking at me in a different way; I’m not sure if friendliness is the word. I felt his need to talk. "Come to that, Pa wasn’t for me going in the army. Said it was all no consequence. Could be right. You got that gray bastard real good. I never seen a bow handled neater."

"I’ve spent a lot of time in the woods."

"No country. You hadda be born somewheres, son. Moha—ayah?"

"Oh—Moha, uhha."

"What do they say about us there?"

"You mean the war talk?"

"Tell you something, boy. It’s all crap. No consequence." He wanted to talk, but it was hard for him. "Pretty country around here," he said. "Laid up all night in the woods, our mudhead hard-luck outfit. Three companies, you had two battalions. Another comp’ny, likely we’d’ve had you. That’s all crap too, boy. All night in the woods waiting for you, and a foggy son of a bitch too, had trouble keeping my gear dry."

"Waiting for them," I said. "I’ve got nothing to do with the army."

"Ayah. No country. Running away. Be glad you haven’t, boy—it’s all crap. I’ll tell you what you got for a major in one of them battalions. ‘No prisoners,’ he says, ‘just bring us the evidence.’ I was off in that ’ere thicket, heard him give the order. ‘Any old thing,’ he says, sitting his hoss real handsome, you know, and you could’ve heard him laugh ’way back in Nuber. ‘Any old thing, but a head’s troublesome to carry, a hand’ll do, just bring us the evidence.’"

"You wanted to run away?"

"Ayah. A kid’s thought. Maybe you’ll make it."

"Maybe you can run away with me. We could travel together, to
Levannon, that's where I'm going. Further too. Maybe—"

"Sure enough?" Why, he was thinking of it, with the arrow in his side, and taking pleasure from it I believe, seeing the idea for that moment as I saw it myself, the horizons, the friendship, the new places.

"You don't need to be afraid of me," I said.

"Nay, of course not." He said that easily. And that remains with me most clearly out of that morning—the flash of what I call recognition because I have no other word. I don't know his name, but he was in some way my kind, and we both knew it well for that little time before his face smoothed out completely and I had to let him lie back on the earth.

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