

June 16 – Anxious to penetrate further into this land, we got an early start this morning. Following a trail which meanders through the cultivated fields a mile or two north of the Sklabosian River (the sinuous river which we observed from the mountainside yesterday morning), in about an hour we reached the first of the orange groves which dominate most of the rural areas of this valley. As if in an enchanted land, we continued forward, tramping at a leisurely pace through row upon row, mile after mile, of luxuriantly blooming orange trees. The heady fragrance of the verdure, mingled with the delicate perfume of the orange blossoms, affected our senses to such an extent we glided along in a rapture, unaware of the hours as they drifted by like slowly moving clouds on a refreshing morning zephyr.

Reaching a peasant village along about noon, we paused in the plaza where, emerging from their huts and coming in from the fields, the inhabitants gathered around and gaped at us with curiosity. Though similar in physical type and clothing to our two guides, these workers in agriculture displayed fewer tunics and carrying bags than the peasants we encountered on the fringes of the valley yesterday, and those they did possess reflected deficiencies in color and in quality of design, and in the conscientiousness of their workmanship.

Holding himself erect in spite of his age, a peasant stepped forward from among his fellow villagers after a moment. Impressing us with his air of natural dignity, which a slight tinge of gray in his hair tended to augment, the peasant regarded us with solemnity.

“Would you do us the honor of dining with us?” he asked after a moment.

I did not find the invitation to my liking. Even less well off than the peasants we encountered on the fringes of the valley yesterday, these hapless farm workers displayed such degrading poverty I feared for the purity of their food and water supplies.

Steve assumed a look of gratitude.

“The honor would be ours.”

George verged upon speaking out, but changing his mind in the end, held his tongue. In spite of my misgivings, I thought it impolite to refuse the invitation. Furthermore, Steve’s acceptance left me no real choice in the matter.

“Yes, your invitation honors us unduly.”

Though surprised at my response, George nodded his head in agreement. Meanwhile, I continued giving the peasants’ spokesman as polite a look as I could muster.

“Please, now, don’t go out of your way to prepare anything special. Our customs dictate a light lunch under most circumstances.”

“You will share our food with us,” the man responded, beginning to walk away.

Obviously happy over our acceptance, the entire village accompanied us to the spokesman’s hut and then, continuing onward as we entered it with our host, they took our peasant guides to a nearby dwelling where the two men would enjoy a homely repast of their own. Seating us on straw mats once we found ourselves within their home, the spokesman’s wife and daughter served us a meal consisting of a thick corn gruel, unleavened wheat bread, black beans, and to wash it all down, a pungent beverage of low alcoholic content made from fermented corn. Though the food did not stick much to the ribs, a kind of hot pepper spiced it up sufficiently to make it more or less acceptable to our palates. Indeed, George and Steve actually found the meal rather tasty, or so they said.

As we sipped coffee from wooden cups after our repast, I decided to question our host on his people’s way of life. Though their poverty spoke for itself, I wished to determine whether or not they felt contented with their circumscribed, though by no means desperate, lot.

“Do you make a good living here?”

“We earn our livelihood working on the orange tree plantation through which you pass,” the peasant replied, giving me a look of disbelief.

Steve regarded our host with renewed interest.

“Who owns the estate?”

“Lord Emira.”

“Does he pay you well?”

“Lord Emira supplies us with corn, beans, and wheat grain every Saturday afternoon.”

“In return for your week’s labor?”

The elderly man nodded his head in agreement.

Anxious over the trend to the conversation, I decided to cut it off at once. Not only would it serve no purpose to continue the delicate and potentially dangerous interchange, I told myself, but it might start a controversy as well. Furthermore, nothing either of them could say would change the fact the orchards reflected careful cultivation and that, in spite of their poverty, the peasants seemed to get along well enough.... Under the circumstances, what more could one ask?

“Well,” I said, “we thank you kindly for your hospitality.”

Though, undoubtedly, Steve understood my purpose in intervening, he made no effort to continue the conversation. Our host gave me a look full of cordiality.

“We enjoyed your gracious company.”

“Before we leave,” I said, “I’d like to demonstrate our appreciation to you in more tangible form. Though I’m not a physician, I have received some elementary training in the field and would be happy to examine everyone in the village free of charge.”

Steve glanced at me aghast but, paying him no heed, I continued regarding my host with a questioning look. My offer may have sounded presumptuous, I realized, but, then again, some medical care beats none, and it's an easy and effective way to gain the good will of the local population.

To my pleasure, our host accepted my offer at once. Consequently, asking George to assist me, I left the hut and, removing my kit of medicines and surgical supplies from our goods, set myself to my task. Though a few evinced reluctance, many of the villagers took advantage of the opportunity. Most had symptoms of intestinal parasites, I found, though I could not verify my diagnosis without laboratory examination of feces. Also, many appeared to suffer from liver and lung ailments; since, however, I am not a physician, I could not know for certain whether my suspicions had any basis in fact. Possessing a supply of anti-parasitic drugs, I took them from my kit and, hoping I could at least clear up the infections in their intestinal tracts, distributed them with a free hand among my patients.

Meanwhile, Steve did some distributing of his own, making gifts of carbines to two startled and grateful residents of the village. Not wanting to let him outdo us, George and I promptly broke some of the weapons out of our supplies and gave away one apiece too. In addition, since few things could be more useless than a rifle without ammunition, the three of us gave each of the recipients a number of cartridges.

Our public relations duties taken care of early in the afternoon, we bid the hospitable villagers farewell and, determined to reach the residence of Lord Emira, the owner of the estate with whose workers we just had lunch, went out into the countryside once again. To our delight, once more our path lay through row upon row of short and delicately blooming orange trees whose leafy silhouettes receded to the horizon and merged into a soft and peaceful sea of down.

No sooner did we get started, than a light and refreshing shower fell, leaving the atmosphere even more transparent than before and augmenting the greenness of the verdure, the odor of which, mingled with the perfume of the delicate blossoms of the orange trees, penetrated to the depths of our souls. In all, it made me wish I could continue drifting through this land of enchantment like a footloose and carefree vagabond for the rest of my days!

After only about a half-hour of tramping, we came upon the river, whose waters lent a poetic quality to the green and white hues of the orange trees. Continuing along on the trail, we began following the wandering river's course, which takes the same westerly direction, albeit with many a twist and turn, as we wished to travel. Again, we seemed borne along as if in a dream world as, scarcely noticing the passing hours, we floated along, mile after enchanting mile, through row upon endless row of blooming orange trees.

Leaving the trail along the river bank about an hour before sunset, we turned northward and, penetrating into the groves, found ourselves before long exchanging the orange trees for the recesses of a cedar, oak, and pine forest which foretold the proximity of Lord Emira's residence. Wishing to preserve an area for hunting and picnicking, our guides explained, Emira's ancestors left standing this part of the forest which, with majestic grandeur covered the entire valley in primeval times. Passing through its cool and dark recesses all too quickly, of a sudden we came upon the focal point of the estate.

Huge gardens, every bit as elegant as those of Fontainebleau, lay spread out before us. Beds of lovely red roses, flame-covered tulips, deep purple violets, snow white carnations, and a myriad of other delicate and vividly colored flowers, enclosed by hedges cut in designs of perfect symmetry, awed us with their beauty. In the midst of this perfumed wonderland arose a chateau of stone covered with a plaster of pearly hue which gleamed gem-like in the light of the setting

sun. Walking through these enchanted gardens, we scarcely could believe such exquisite landscaping existed anywhere in the world. Verily, I thought, a time machine has taken us back through history to a scene from some mystical and perfectly miraculous sounding fable of yesteryear!

Apparently informed of our pending arrival already, the estate's owner, Lord Emira, strode through the gardens to greet us, accompanied by two of his liveried servants. Though he resembled the common peasants we have encountered before in physical type, the lord's skin was lighter in tone, due, perhaps, to less frequent exposure to the sun; in addition, unlike the local inhabitants, his nose tended toward the aquiline. Not unpredictably, a slight but noticeable plumpness contrasted with the leanness of the local population and as one might expect in a man of his station, a certain air of refinement set him apart from the other, somewhat more primitive Sklabosians we have met so far. Finally, draping in loose folds about his body, finely embroidered robes of silk enhanced the aura he exuded of what, for lack of a better term, I shall call deep and careful cultivation of an aristocratic character. In him, unquestionably, I thought, we have come upon a true representative of Sklabosian civilization!

Coming to a stop in front of me, he gave us a gracious look.

"I bid you welcome to my country and to my worthless but hospitable estate, gentlemen," he said soothingly.

Not only did his cordial attitude put me at ease with respect to our presence on his property, but it also allayed the not inconsiderable concern I felt over penetrating further into these lands. Though we had no complaints to make so far, the Indian's chilling tales of travelers who disappeared from the face of the earth while traveling in these regions still weighed in our minds, even though we avoided discussing it. Perhaps, I thought, this lord can shed some light

on the strange disappearances.... Though I must wait for an appropriate moment to broach the subject to him properly....

Collecting my thoughts, I returned Emira's greeting and, after introducing myself, presented George and Steve. Giving us a smile as soon as we finished shaking hands, the lord extended his arm and, with a gentle motion, gestured toward the chateau behind him.

"You'll want to rest after your journey," he said. "Please understand that my house is your house, gentlemen."

I nodded my head in gratitude.

"Thank you, Lord Emira," I replied softly, "you're most gracious."

Turning about, the lord ordered one of his servants to look after our guides and their burros, after which he conducted the three of us through the remainder of the flower garden to the chateau's elegant veranda. In contrast to those of the other chateaux I have known, this one ran the entire length of the building's façade, giving it a homely atmosphere of cool and refreshing repose. Rising some twenty-five feet into the air, pillars of elegant and brightly shining cedar gave support to the roof which, extending outward some thirty feet, provided more than adequate protection to the veranda while leaving space for the evening breeze to caress the tiles on the floor beneath it. Set here and there, armchairs with high backs, coffee tables with exquisite woodwork, and richly upholstered divans of rattan occupied strategic places on the floor while some four feet above it, slung from steel hooks screwed into the pillars, hammocks of henequen fiber offered their deliciously cool folds to any guest who, from weariness or just plain laziness, felt the need of their services.

Stepping up onto the porch, the three of us made ourselves comfortable on the richly upholstered divans while Emira selected a cool and comfortable hammock for his repose.

Seating himself in the middle, he executed a slow turn on the long and gently swaying bed and, with an ease of movement born of experience, stretched his plump body out full length.

Meanwhile, responding to a previous signal of his hand, a horde of servants came forward bearing trays replete with exquisite aperitifs and hors d'oeuvres, which they tendered to each of us in turn; then, as unobtrusively as they entered a moment before, they withdrew with hushed steps into the interior of the chateau.

Tranquilized by our surroundings, and refreshed by the food and drink, we felt ourselves in a humor for some conversation with our host. Turning initially upon our country of origin and our motives for journeying to Sklabosia, our discourse then moved on to matters of greater interest to us.

“The immensity of your estate impresses me, sir,” I said at one point. “Where do you find a market for your oranges – you must have a gigantic output, don’t you?”

“Yes, indeed we do. Because of the limited demand in our local market, we sell most of our oranges in Aurumia and, in exchange, we import some Aurumian commodities which we don’t produce here as yet, such as a variety of articles from their manufactories of pottery.”

“That sounds like a good arrangement to me,” I said. “And your enterprise is profitable...is it?”

“Oh, I get along well enough, as you see.”

Sipping his drink and setting it down, Steve gave Emira a quizzical look.

“Are the terms of your trade with Aurumia favorable?”

“They’re not so bad.”

“You have no complaints?”

Emira ruminated on the question and then cracked a smile.

“Well, as a matter of fact, we do have a few. Our principal import consists of a thin-orange vase of truly exquisite design. Over the years, the number of these vases we’ve received in exchange for our oranges has suffered a progressive decline. Whereas twenty years ago we received eleven vases for one thousand kilograms of oranges (which, in itself, didn’t mark a favorable rate of exchange), ten years ago we got only six vases for the same amount and, believe it or not, today we get only one.”

“Jesus, Aurumia must be knee deep in oranges.”

Emira burst into laughter.

“Indeed, it is, indeed, it is.”

Assuming a more serious mien, he pierced Steve with his eyes.

“In spite of everything,” he added, “I make out well enough.”

“Tell me, Lord Emira,” I ejaculated, “have you taken any measures to increase production in response to the decline in your terms of trade?”

“Yes, I have. After extending my holdings a good deal, I planted some twenty thousand seedlings in my new land. Next month I’ll have a portion of that forest over there cut down and planted to oranges.”

“Well,” I said, “I certainly admire your entrepreneurial spirit, Lord Emira.”

Steve leaned forward.

“Where did you get the additional land to plant your new trees, Emira?”

“Well, you see,” the lord replied, “the peasants of this valley have primitive notions of property rights. As they see it, all the lands of this region belong to them as a gift of nature, or as some sort or another of natural right. In keeping with their primitive conceptions, they have no formal titles to their parcels and, consequently, we estate owners occupy the soils we need for our crops

and, in turn, grant the peasants legitimate deeds to the lands upon which their villages stand. These tracts, then, they divide into smaller plots, where they raise a variety of fruits and vegetables to supplement their diets. So, at the same time as we inculcate a civilized sense of property rights in the peasants, we increase our output of oranges which are not only the principal product of our country, but form the basis of our economy and of our entire civilization!”

Though Emira’s voice grew deeper and sharper as he pronounced these words, the statesmanlike quality of his response quelled my fears he might allow Steve’s question to provoke him too far. Unimpressed, however, by the lord’s attitude, our traveling companion continued to lean forward.

“The peasants’ rations seem scanty to me. Don’t any of them object to their miserable lot?”

“Since our oranges exchange for so much less, you see, we had no alternative but to reduce their rations. We’ve done so on several occasions over the past two decades. Providentially, however, the peasants have accepted their predicament well. They’re a hardy, happy-go-lucky lot, you know – and patriotic, too. For the most part, they understand well the need to tighten their belts for the sake of their country’s future. Oh, you’ll find a few troublemakers and attention seekers among them, just as you will in any crowd, but they represent no problem for the authorities, I can assure you.”

At this moment a servant announced dinner and, with the conversation turning to pleasant matters once again, we penetrated into the chateau, passing through an elegantly furnished parlor, and entered the residence’s dining hall. Gazing about me as servants indicated our places to us, I felt stunned by the rich and tasteful décor of the hall. Furniture of exquisitely carved

mahogany rested on carpets which, in sheer beauty of design, rivaled the most expensive rugs found anywhere in the world (including the intricately fashioned carpets of Persia). Floors of blood-red tiles offered contrast not only to the snow white draperies of silk which hung from the balcony windows, but also to the chestnut brown paneling on the walls of stone. Overhead, chandeliers with hundreds of candlesticks provided illumination for the evening's festivities.

In the center of the hall, highly polished table service of silver and brightly shining candelabra of gold ornamented the dining table, where platters of succulent roast pig, turkey and venison awaited our pleasure. Set amidst the splendor of vases bearing bunches of yellow roses and bright scarlet carnations, the platters of food emitted odors which tantalized our already well awakened senses of taste and smell almost beyond endurance as they wafted to us on the evening breeze entering the windows. In all, one could not possibly find a more appropriate setting for a delicious evening.

Taking our seats at the table, we dug into the feast, which satisfied our palates in every respect. In addition to the main courses of meat and fowl, I found the strong but perfectly exquisite wine, an avocado salad, and a heavy and very creamy dessert of some sort of custard especially satisfying. At the same time, remaining light and cheerful throughout the evening, the conversation which accompanied the feast not only relaxed our minds, but aided our digestions a good deal as well. Even Steve surrendered to the spirit of the moment and refrained from being obnoxious for a while.

In an unfortunate incident, however, one of Emira's servants occasioned the only blemish on this otherwise perfect evening. A man in his early twenties, the attendant accidentally tipped over a glass of wine, the contents of which ran into George's lap.

Arching his eyebrows, Emira tilted his head back in disdain.

“You clumsy oaf!” he exclaimed. “Why can’t you be more careful?”

Instead of taking his reproof like a man, the attendant scowled and, taking a step toward his master, raised his hand as if to strike him. Fortunately, the corner of the table lay between the two men, making it impossible for the servant to carry out his impulse.

But, no matter, Emira did not take the incident lightly. He twisted about and glanced toward the entrance to the hall.

“Guards! Quickly!” he bellowed.

Two men of youthful appearance left their posts just outside the entrance and, unlimbering their hard and wicked looking billies, burst into the chamber at a dead run. Coming to his senses at almost the same instant, the servant made a dash for the opposite exit – but not swiftly enough. The guards reached out and took a few swings at his head with their foot and a half long clubs, catching him on about their third try and knocking him sprawling to the floor. Then, reaching down, they turned their victim over, grabbed him by his legs, and dragged him from the room, bumping his head along on the floor as if it were a sack of potatoes.

Emira regained his composure in a moment.

“Do not be concerned, gentlemen,” he remarked, “it’s just a minor incident. They’ll give the insolent fellow his punishment and he’ll show greater respect for his betters in the future.”

Before Steve could say anything, I asked Emira about the arrangements of flowers on the table and, in the ensuing conversation, the feast resumed its agreeable air of refinement. Meanwhile, embarrassed over the incident, George changed his pants in an adjoining chamber and then, though still a little abashed, resumed his place next to me at the table. Thereafter, to everyone’s relief, no further disruptions occurred to mar the evening’s festivities.

After dinner we enjoyed liqueurs, as well as aromatic cigars, which measured no less than eight inches in length. Or, better said, Emira and I took great pleasure in the latter – George and Steve do not smoke. Though strong, to my surprise the flavor of the Sklabosian cigars bore favorable comparison to the better priced brands one finds back home.

Observing the congenial attitude which the feast produced in our host, I decided to broach a subject which stood uppermost in our minds.

“Before undertaking our journey, we heard some tales of travelers who visited these lands in the past and, so the accounts go, disappeared from the face of the earth. One story which impressed us very deeply involves three Peruvian students who vanished two years ago without leaving a trace. Do you know anything about that case?”

Emira’s brow furrowed for a moment and then giving me a smile, he leaned forward and tapped some ashes into a saucer.

“Before giving your question a direct answer, perhaps I should fill you in on a little history first. We who live in these lands have always treasured our isolation. It guarantees our uniqueness, you see. Therefore, up until five years ago, more or less, any traveler who ventured into our beloved oasis we seized at once and executed.”

Gripped by a chill, I puffed on my suddenly insipid cigar with nervousness and then, leaning back in my armchair and feigning nonchalance, I occupied myself with observing the contents of my glass of liqueur. If I play it cool enough, I thought, perhaps Emira won’t detect the fear his words have aroused in me.... At least, perhaps not in full, he won’t.

Meanwhile, in contrast, George almost spilled his liqueur at Emira’s words, his hand jumped so. Then, too embarrassed by his reaction to look the lord in the eye, he lowered his gaze and examined the tablecloth in front of him with curiosity. At the same time, Steve sat

quietly and continued staring Emira in the eye as before. Evidently, I thought, our traveling companion prefers to conceal his fears under a cloak of bravado.... And, I must admit, he carries it off well indeed....

“At a summit meeting in Aurum five years ago, however,” Emira went on, “the heads of state of Aurumia and Sklabosia took the decision to modify that policy. Our leaders concluded that, considering the means of transportation and communication which the outside world possesses, our lands could not remain isolated forever. So, we relaxed the restrictions on foreign trade and travel for the first time in our history, permitting our merchants to barter with the Indians of a few villages located in the forests near our borders and letting outsiders who stumbled upon our lands visit us without restriction for as long as they wished.”

I regained my composure at once. On his part, though he still gazed at the tabletop, George seemed to calm down a good deal, too. Only Steve remained the same as before, looking Emira in the eye without concern still, as if the various twists and turns in the conversation had no impact on him at all.

Though Emira’s words quelled my fears, as I said, one thing troubled me still.

“If you permit outsiders to visit your lands now, Lord Emira,” I asked, “why, then, did those Peruvian students disappear two years ago?”

The lord clasped his hands over his stomach.

“I’m getting to that,” he replied calmly. “As a matter of fact, not one, but two groups of visitors disappeared: four young men from Bolivia and Ecuador, five years ago, and then, the three Peruvian students you mentioned, two years ago. Since I entertained them all right here in my home, I know whereof I speak.”

Though my nervousness returned, I concealed it better than I did a moment before or, at least, I thought I did. Sliding his fingers up and down the sides of his glass, George had a nervous reaction, too, though not as much as last time. In contrast, Steve still sat quietly in his place, staring into Emira's eyes. Frankly, his nonchalance started to get on my nerves. He simply can't be that indifferent to his fate, I thought... or can he?

"Just what happened to these men," he continued, "I simply don't know. After looking into the enigma, I still can say only one thing for certain – once they left here, they never came back."

"Can't you provide us with any more details than that?" I asked.

"Well, from what I can gather, after departing from my estate they reached our capital without mishap and then, continuing onward, they crossed the high sierras into Aururmia. Upon returning to this country a few weeks later and attempting to retrace their steps to the border, however, they suddenly vanished into thin air."

"Do you know the place from which they disappeared?"

"I haven't managed to pinpoint it with precision, but I can say with certainty it lies somewhere in the broad area between Sklabos and my estate."

"Well, then," George asked, "what happened to them?"

"I really don't know. But according to the rumors which float about, they disappeared for political reasons."

"Political reasons!" I exclaimed with a start. "What do you mean?"

Emira assumed a quiet and confidential attitude.

"Well, you see, politics dominates Aurumian thinking or, at least, the thinking of the Aurumian authorities. With the exception of private enterprise, ideological questions mean more

to them than just about anything else. And they don't tolerate ideological deviations. Either you think, talk, and act like an Aurumian, or you become the mortal enemy of Aurumia and its authorities."

"That sounds incredible – do they really display such rigidity toward political dissenters?" I asked.

"They don't think so, but, unquestionably, they do. I don't know the outside world very well, but, frankly, I doubt anyone in the universe displays greater ideological rigidity toward dissidents than the government of Aurumia."

"Tell me, Emira," Steve said, "toward whom do the Aurumia authorities display this remarkable rigidity?"

"Toward leftists and revolutionaries in general, whatever their origins. Usually, they'll tolerate political dissenters who don't fall into the category of social revolutionaries."

The tension draining from his face, George folded his hands on his lap and leaned back in his chair. I felt relieved, too, I must admit, though I attempted to maintain the same expression on my face as before. Steve continued boring in with his questions, his attitude unchanged by Emira's remarks.

"How do the Aurumian authorities determine a person's political beliefs? Do they have a secret police which keeps tabs on people's ideas?"

"Yes, of course, they do. In fact, they possess an outstanding political police, which gathers intelligence not only in Aurumia, but also in Sklabosia. In truth, no thought escapes them."

"What do the Aurumians call this police force?" George asked.

"The Fanatical Backlashers' International, or FBI, for short."

Though astounded at the similarity between the initial letters of the Aurumian police and those of that other well known federal bureau, I refrained from commenting on the coincidence. Similarly, George said nothing either. Retaining his relaxed air, he pierced Emira with a quizzical look.

“Who directs the FBI, Lord Emira?” he asked.

“Javlin Duster. He has no equal anywhere – everyone considers him the best dam law enforcement officer in the entire world. Or in our world at least.”

“Keeps tabs on everyone’s thoughts, does he?” Steve asked.

“You bet your life, he does.”

“Mr. Duster bears the responsibility for the disappearance of those travelers, then, I assume?”

Starting in his chair, Emira seemed confused. But then he gave Steve an equable look.

“I wouldn’t say that. But, of course, you can draw whatever conclusions you like, Mr. Mazard.”

Undoubtedly, Steve did just that. And I did, too. Taking everything into consideration, how Steve could maintain his composure under these circumstances, I just could not imagine.

Our traveling companion gave Emira a look of irony.

“Why do you tell us these things, Emira?” he asked. “Don’t you endanger yourself by talking so freely?”

George and I froze in our places. Emira remained unruffled.

“No, not at all. The FBI has investigated my political beliefs exhaustively, you see. But, even if it hadn’t, who could suspect me of harboring revolutionary ideas? The mere suggestion makes me laugh.”

“Maybe so, but, nonetheless, I seemed to detect some hostility toward the Aurumian authorities in your comments.”

“No, not really. I differ with them over matters of tactics – nothing more. In general, they need to display greater ideological flexibility, and this is especially true of Javlin Duster and the Fanatical Backlashers’ International.”

“Oh, in what way would you suggest the Aurumians display greater flexibility, Emira?”

“Well, for one thing, they must realize we have to place greater emphasis upon developing friendly contacts with the outside world. Though Aurumia’s new foreign policy is an important step forward, it still has caution as its keynote. It permits outsiders to visit us, but only those young men from Peru, Ecuador and Bolivia actually have found their way to these lands, and, as an unkind fate would have it, they didn’t return to their countries to tell about it. Apart from occasional, rather rickety, trade relations with two or three insignificant Indian villages, we have no further association with the outside world. And, what’s even more discouraging, Aurumia forbids us to expand our commercial contacts for the moment. In my opinion, since such friendly relations with the outside world might prove invaluable to our countries in the not too distant future, it commits a grave error in so doing.”

“Why do you consider these contacts with the outside world so essential, Emira?”

“Astute strategy demands such international contacts.”

“You don’t want to tell me, do you?”

“But, of course, I do. In fact, I just told you – it’s a question of diplomatic strategy.”

“Well, if you insist.”

Feeling sleepy by this time, I decided to interject myself into their conversation.

“I can see the point you wish to make, Lord Emira,” I remarked. “And, let me assure you, we appreciate your kindness in discussing these matters with us. But I think it’s time now for us to retire to our quarters.”

“Why, certainly. And, in response, let me say it gave me pleasure to talk with the three of you. I found the conversation most informative.”

Pushing his chair back, Emira rose to his feet and brought his hands together in a sharp clap. Responding to his call, two servants in fine liveries appeared and, following their master’s instructions, conducted the three of us, accompanied by the lord himself, up a flight of stairs which, after pausing at a landing at the midway point, took us to the second floor of the building. Then, continuing onward without stopping, the attendants led us down a hallway to a bedroom at the end.

Pausing at the entrance to the chamber, Emira bid us good night.

“Rest assured,” he said, “that you’ve found a friend in me. I wish to promote contacts with the outside world and, by a stroke of fate, you come from precisely that world. Just keep your noses clean while you’re visiting these lands and everything will go well with the three of you.”

“Thank you, Lord Emira,” I responded, giving him a nod, “I assure you we will.”

Meanwhile, after turning down the covers on three inviting beds and opening the balcony windows, the servants withdrew from the room and, joining their waiting master, followed him down the hallway, receiving further instructions from him in an authoritative voice. Entering the room as soon as they withdrew, we found ourselves in a tastefully furnished sleeping chamber of extreme elegance. Balcony windows and high ceilings permitted the breeze to flow through the room without hindrance, making it an ideal place for healthful repose. Exquisitely carved tables

of mahogany, tastefully upholstered armchairs of the same wood, and luxurious beds of unusual size made me anticipate a restful and aesthetically satisfying night. Don't enjoy it too much, I thought, or you'll never be able to sleep in your jungle hammock again!

As we prepared ourselves for bed, no one said anything for a while. Then I broached the subject which, I felt sure, weighed heavily on the minds of each of us.

"That secret political police, the Fanatical Backlashers' International, sounds like a formidable organization, doesn't it, Steve?"

Ceasing to rummage through his pack, George straightened himself up with an expectant look. Meanwhile, our traveling companion continued arranging the sheets on his bed, tucking the loose ends under the foot of the mattress.

"Yes, it does."

"Do you anticipate any trouble from them?"

"No, I don't."

"Well, I do!"

Steve straightened up and then began loosening the laces on his boots. Assuming a serious attitude, I gave him as calm a look as I could muster.

"I know nothing about your political beliefs, and I really don't care to know anything about them either. But I can't ignore the obvious fact that some of your remarks have a smack of radicalism to them. Now, just think for a moment: if you give me that impression, what impression do you think you'll give the Fanatical Backlashers' International?"

"I don't know, and I really don't care."

"Well, you should!"

Steve removed one of his boots and placed it next to his bed. I walked over to a nearby armchair and sat down.

“Look, Steve,” I said, “if you don’t mind me offering you some advice, I think you should give serious consideration to leaving the expedition and returning home. George and I are capable of carrying on alone, I can assure you.”

Taking off his other boot, Steve turned his head toward me.

“I’ve no intention of turning back under any circumstances, gentlemen.”

“Jesus Christ, Steve,” George exclaimed. “They’ll boil you in oil! Don’t you realize that?” Steve made no response.

“Look, Steve,” I insisted, “we know of seven outsiders who disappeared from these lands for political reasons during the past few years. If they didn’t survive, what the hell makes you think you will?”

“I don’t know – but I do know I won’t turn back. There’s no point in discussing it even.”

“What makes you so incredibly determined to go on?” George ejaculated. “I can see no sense to it.”

Remaining seated with the same expression as before, Steve made no response.

Knowing he disliked talking about his personal affairs (he made that clear enough to me during our interview in Macon), I did not want to pressure him. But we needed to understand his motives with absolute clarity. Rising, I sat down opposite him.

“Look, Steve,” I said, “this situation affects not only you, but the two of us as well. We have to talk it over now.”

“Yes,” George said, “that’s right. If they decide to fry you over a slow fire, they might well decide to do the same to us, you know, just because we associate with you.”

“Don’t worry about that,” he retorted. “If the secret police give me any trouble, I’ll make it clear to them that neither in politics, nor on ideological issues, nor in any other way, do you and I have anything at all in common.”

“No, no, Steve,” I said, “that is no problem at all – an entirely different issue confronts us here.”

Noticing his anger diminish somewhat, I hastened onward.

“As leader of this expedition, I must look after the well-being of every one of its members: that’s my principal concern. Secondly, I must consider the welfare of the expedition itself, too. If you got yourself into trouble with the secret police, I really don’t think it would put George and me in any danger, but it might lead the authorities to expel us before we’ve accomplished our objectives here. The entire expedition would suffer as a consequence – you can see that, can’t you?”

“Yes, I can.”

“Well, will you explain why you insist on going ahead with George and me then? Your attitude just doesn’t seem reasonable to us.”

Steve hesitated again, but then gave in to the inevitable.

“I want to make it as a writer,” he said. “If I can come up with a good account of our journey and get one of the major publishers in New York to take it on, I’ll have done just that.”

“But why must you write about these lands?” George asked. “Can’t you write about something else?”

“Perhaps I could, but I’ve committed myself to writing about this particular journey.... Can you imagine how a book on this lost civilization would attract the public?”

“You can’t write a book if you’re dead.”

Steve made no response. Realizing more lay behind his determination than appeared on the surface, I sat back and assumed as relaxed an attitude as I could.

“Have you written a lot?” I asked.

“Yes, I have. In fact, I began writing stories literally as soon as I learned to form my first shaky letters in grammar school. Not very good stories, of course, nor was the short novel I wrote during the summer between sixth and seventh grades good either, nor the seven or eight short stories during my middle school and high school years. But I’ve written a lot since then -- short stories, poems, and a few essays on political themes.... I should add, though, I never got any of my writings published.”

“Never gotten anything published!” George snorted. “And now you want to put your head in a hangman’s noose in order to write a simple travel book you may never publish either!”

Steve was abashed. No wonder he dislikes talking about himself – it merely increases his vulnerability, I thought.

I raised my hand toward the professor.

“Take it easy, George,” I said. “The fact he hasn’t published anything goes a long way toward explaining why the idea of making this journey at any cost has such a firm grip on him – don’t you realize that?”

“It does?”

“Certainly.”

Looking at Steve, I could see he still seemed possessed by a lack of self-confidence.

“Didn’t you tell me back in Macon, Steve,” I asked, “that after finishing college, you wandered about for a while working at a variety of odd jobs?”

“That’s right.”

“As I understood, you didn’t want an academic career, but you couldn’t find a non-academic job you liked. In truth, what you wanted simply was to write – isn’t that so?”

“Yes.”

Steve lowered his eyes.

“You’ve got the point, Bob,” he continued. “Nothing in the world means anything to me except writing. If I can’t write, if I don’t have the necessary talent, or if anything, or anyone, stops me from writing, then I would just as soon die – I would find no sense in forcing myself to lead a meaningless existence.”

He observed the interest in my face.

“Don’t get me wrong,” he said, “I don’t have a death wish. Looking into myself, I know I have it in me to make it as a writer... I feel it... And I will make it – I have no doubts..... Fanatical Backlashers’ International or not.”

“How about Javlin Duster?” George asked.

“—Javlin Duster.”

Like high octane gasoline filling a tank, life sustaining confidence flowed once again into Steve’s face and into his voice. Frankly, his determination impressed me.

“In your mind, then,” I said, “it’s now or never – right, Steve?”

“That’s right, Bob.”

Slapping my hands on my thighs, I arose from my armchair, walked over to a window and looked out for a moment. Then I went back to where my armchair sat to one side of Steve’s bed and turned toward our traveling companion.

“Well, Steve,” I said, “I think you exaggerate in turning this journey into a ‘do or die’ proposition for yourself. However, far be it from me to stand between a young man and his

sense of identity. If you want to affirm yourself as a writer, and if you insist on choosing this journey to do it, then you go right ahead with your plans. But let me make it perfectly clear that if you continue onward with George and me, you'll do so on your own responsibility."

"He'll find his sense of identity on this journey all right – in a pine box!" George exclaimed.

Steve responded with a derisive look. Meanwhile, I moved my head from side to side.

"Whatever the consequence may be, he's made up his mind to continue onward with us and, as leader of this expedition, I've decided to accept his decision. I'll have to ask you to accept it, too, George."

The professor turned, lifted his pack from the floor and set it on his bed. Then he glanced down at it.

"Well, I guess I'll have to accept it – it's two against one."

Swinging around, he looked from one to another of us with disgust.

"Yet, mark my words," he warned, "no good will come of this moment. We'll live to regret it."

I turned to our traveling companion again.

"I'll ask you only to show a little prudence in what you say in the presence of strangers, Steve."

"Don't worry; I know how to handle myself."

I wondered if he did.

Turning in without further conversation, I found great pleasure in stretching myself out in a bed again. As I write these lines before blowing out the candles next to my couch, however, I cannot escape a nagging sense of foreboding. Controlling myself, though, I refuse to let my

presentiments undermine my determination to push onward. We have made our decision now and we will act on it.

June 17 – Having enjoyed Emira's hospitality and facing an uncertain future on the road ahead, we (or, at least, George and I) took leave of our host with reluctance this morning.

Unfortunately, we had no alternative but to push on. After shaking his hand, I offered Emira the choice of whatever gift he pleased from our supplies and, without hesitation, he selected a thirty-thirty carbine, to which I promptly added one hundred rounds of ammunition. It will make him a good hunting rifle.

Anxious to reach Sklabos, the capital of this land, by nightfall, we set out at a brisk pace, with our Sklabosian guides and their donkeys showing us the way as usual. Passing through row upon row of orange trees as we did yesterday, we felt bewitched by the beauty and tranquility of our surroundings once again and, drifting along like clouds, scarcely noticed the hours as they slipped slowly by.

Lost in our reveries, we made no mention of last night's conversation with Emira, nor did we discuss our own exchange in our sleeping quarters afterward. Striding along easily, Steve appeared his usual self and, though distant and a little testy at first, George experienced a recovery of his wonted quiet but friendly self. Purposely making observations to him on our surroundings from time to time, I sought to re-establish our former close relationship. After all, I thought, even though he disagreed with my decision last night, he and I still find ourselves on the same side of the ideological fence and always will.

Coming upon another peasant village along about noon, we decided to stop for lunch. Much to our surprise, on penetrating into the place we discerned two tall and thin young men with fair complexions standing near the western outskirts. Dressed in long pants and trimly

tailored shirts not unlike our own, and assisted by some local peasants, they occupied themselves in digging a hole in the ground. Unbeknownst to us, we verged upon meeting our first Aurumians.

Inspired by the heartiness with which the men shoveled dirt out of the hole, George and I quickened our pace. Noticing us approach, the Aurumians laid their implements aside and, climbing out of the hole, exchanged greetings with us. Even more surprised at our presence than we at theirs, they bombarded us with questions about our country of origin, making it impossible for me to find out anything about them for a while. Finally, however, an interlude in the one sided conversation provided me with the opportunity I sought.

“If you don’t mind my asking,” I said, “what accounts for your presence here in Sklabosia?”

Assuming the role of spokesman for the two men, a fellow with blondish hair and blue eyes gave me an amiable look.

“We’re participating in a series of local developmental projects in this country, sir.”

“Oh, I see. Your government has a foreign aid program?”

“Yes, that’s right, sir. For the most part, Aurumia promotes the development of this country through the trade, loans, and investments of its corporations but, since Sklabosia finds this private aid inadequate to meet its needs, our government sends volunteers to assist further in developmental programs at the village level.”

“I see. Do you belong to a charitable organization of some sort, then?”

“Yes, sir, we do – to the International Good Will Corporation, an agency our government formed just last year to promote the development of backward peoples.”

Walking over to the edge of the hole as we conversed, Steve peered in.

“What’re you digging?” he asked.

“Well, though it doesn’t look like much now, in due time it’ll become a latrine, modern in every detail.”

His eyes widening with interest, George went over to the edge of the hole.

“Have you constructed many already?” he asked.

“Oh, yes. At least fifty-five, in every part of the republic – and in only nine months.”

“Well, congratulations!” I exclaimed. “Your labors merit commendation from your government.”

“Yes,” Steve said, “you two certainly do deserve special recognition of some sort. After all, everyone in the entire country can shit easier now because of you – right?”

Throwing their heads back, the Aurumians broke into guffaws – and, fortunately so, for us, that they did. Even though they took Steve’s remark well, I could not but feel his sarcasm had undermined, if not destroyed, my efforts at establishing friendly relations with the two men. Indeed, his vulgarity made me rue the moment I let him continue onward as a member of our expedition. For the sake of delicate temperaments, let me add that I record his remarks merely in the interest of scientific objectivity and for no other reason.

Resuming their shoveling with tears of laughter still streaming down their faces, the Aurumians began enlarging their already enormous hole in the ground with the same praiseworthy diligence they displayed when first we caught sight of them. Meanwhile, turning to our original purpose, we found a cool and shady spot near the outskirts of the village and, breaking out some of our culinary supplies, set about preparing our midday meal. Observing our actions, a spokesman for the peasants asked us to lunch with him but, preferring to eat from our

rations which were well sealed and hygienic, I insisted we decline the invitation. After all, we really had no need to contract amoebic dysentery at the moment.

Deciding to broach an important subject while we ate, I turned my head toward Steve.

“That sarcastic comment you made could get you into serious trouble, you know.”

Stopping his fork half way between his mess kit and his mouth, George looked at our traveling companion with a serious expression.

“It sure could.”

“The Aurumians got a good laugh out of it,” Steve responded.

“Yes,” I said, “you may have lucked through this time. But, even so, you shouldn’t take unnecessary chances like that.”

George glanced at me.

“They do seem friendly enough, though.”

“That they do. But in our enthusiasm let’s not forget their secret police, shall we?”

“I haven’t forgotten them,” Steve interjected, “but I don’t want you commenting on everything I say either. It’ll only create friction between us.”

Perhaps he’s right, I thought. And whether he is or not, I don’t want to get into another argument with him now, that’s for sure. It would serve no purpose.

“Okay, Steve,” I said, “let’s just drop it.”

Though shaking his head, George accepted my suggestion and said no more. On his part, as if he had not a care in the world, Steve resumed his lunch, eating it with considerable gusto.

Our repast completed shortly thereafter, we arose, put our utensils away and returning to the edge of the pit where, as before, the two Aurumians dug with difficult to comprehend but

awesome diligence, we took our leave of them, promising we would visit their homeland soon. Then waving goodbye to the villagers, we set out into the groves once again.

Hiking along in a blissful mood for the remainder of the afternoon, we reached the walled city of Sklabos by nightfall. Deciding to delay our entry until morning, we have pitched camp among the orange trees which encircle the city. Tying my jungle hammock between two of these trees, which stood scarcely a stone's throw from the wall, I climbed into it after supper and, illuminating my labors with the beam of a flashlight, penned these notes in my journal. Swaying with a graceful motion in the cool breeze, I write with comfort, enjoying in full the sometimes arduous task which caps my activities every day after sundown.

Our immediate objectives now at hand, I have told our guides they may leave in the morning. Upon hearing my words, Steve broke two more carbines out of our supplies and, against my express wishes, presented them to the peasants as further recompense for their labors. If that fool keeps it up, he'll exhaust our entire supply of rifles in just a few more days!

June 18 – Arising early this morning, we broke camp quickly and, with no little sense of anticipation, walked the remaining distance to Sklabos. The wall which surrounds the city consists of stone blocks laid in rows and held together by thin layers of mortar. At present, stone masons worked busily at adding another twenty feet or so to the already formidable wall, giving it a truly awesome predominance over the surrounding countryside.

Approaching the main entrance which lay on the northern side of the protective barrier, we discovered a large delegation awaited our arrival. Composed of the mayor and his assistants, as well as of some of the prominent landowners and merchants of Sklabosia, the delegates must have counted some twenty-five or thirty in number. How they divined our arrival, though, I did not know, nor did I care to ask them.

Most of the delegates wore double breasted suits not dissimilar in style to those we use back home, except, that is, for the colors they flaunted. Though brilliant and vivid shades of red, yellow and orange predominated, a number of suits sported bright and harmonious combinations of these tones, too. In all, it struck me as a stunning display of vivid and perfectly gorgeous colors. However, even though bright colors do have their aesthetic appeal, when it comes to daily wearing apparel I definitely find cooler and somewhat darker tones more to my liking!

In contrast to the attire of his companions, the mayor wore a flowing beige robe, which in one free fall draped from his shoulders all the way down to his feet. Elongated slash marks of blood-red hue cut diagonally across the baggy sleeves of the robe, attracting my attention not only by the intensity of their color, but also by the contrast they offered to the black edging which adorned the sleeves, collar, and base of the vestment. Protruding from beneath the robe, slippers with substantial curlicues on their points adorned his feet. As the mayor later explained, he wore these traditional garments, symbolic of his high office, only on ceremonial occasions, such as for receptions of distinguished visitors.

Drawing near, we stopped in front of the delegates with a show of respect in our faces. Responding at once to our presence, the mayor displayed a smile and, holding the folds of his vestment in one hand, stepped forward two or three paces. Medium in stature, dark complexioned, and sporting a beer barrel-like paunch which not even his loose fitting robe could conceal, he carried himself in an easy and dignified manner, in spite of his excessive weight. Giving us a hospitable look, he stopped and raised his arms at his sides with a dignified movement, keeping his palms turned outward.

“Welcome to the fabled city of Sklabos, the capital of our republic,” he said.

Thanking him for his hospitality, I introduced the three of us to him and, in turn, he presented us to the members of the reception committee. Then he indicated several topless carriages waiting nearby, each drawn by two pairs of horses.

“We would consider it an honor if you would permit us to escort you into the city,” he said.

I smiled.

“Your invitation honors us undeservedly.”

Walking over to the carriages, we mounted a long and ornate one and, following the mayor’s instructions, occupied a seat facing forward at one end of the vehicle. Accompanied by two of his assistants, the mayor took the seat opposite ours, facing toward the rear of the vehicle. Chatting in a reserved fashion among themselves, the members of the mayor’s delegation strolled over to the seven carriages which, similar to ours, though smaller in size, stood in a line behind our lead vehicle. Then, after waiting for us to accommodate ourselves in our carriage, they climbed aboard theirs.

Meanwhile, following the instructions of one of the mayor’s assistants, our peasant guides removed our supplies from the backs of their two burros, placed them on their shoulders, and took them to a cart drawn by mules waiting at the rear of the procession. After placing our supplies within, they waved their final goodbyes, displaying a touching air of friendship toward us. Straining effortlessly against their harnesses, the teams of horses attached to each carriage overcame the inertia of their loads and got our train of vehicles under way with scarcely a jerk.

Moving ahead at a rapid gait, the prancing horses took our procession through the main gateway to the city and down a series of winding cobblestone streets. The sharp blows of the

hooves echoed from the surrounding buildings like hollow rifle shots. Turning in my seat, I began taking note of the area through which we moved, intent upon remembering everything.

Though not unlike some Near Eastern or African cities I have visited, I felt the capital resembled a metropolis of Latin America in some respects, too. Initially, our way lay through a jumble of squat houses with dirt floors which, constructed of sun-dried brick and roofed with bundles of straw, provided shelter for the poor of the city. Washing hung to dry on virtually every housetop, pot-bellied children, scrawny chickens, and emaciated dogs ran in and out of the dwellings with abandon, and, squatting on their haunches in front of their hovels, toil-worn women cooked meals on charcoal braziers, filling the air with an odor of beans and peppers so strong I experienced a sudden, very intense, burning sensation in my eyes the moment we entered this district.

Frankly, so much of what, in fairness, I could describe only as squalor depressed me profoundly. Indeed, I should think it would have depressed anyone who had not become accustomed to it. Fortunately, though we clattered through its streets for a while longer, we soon left this district behind us, and a welcome sense of relief flowed through my entire body. It's bad enough a few unfortunate people have to live this way, I thought, but worse that I have to see it when, like it or not, I'm impotent to do anything at all about it!

Instead of going straight to our destination, our hosts directed our route so as to pass through the more attractive sections of their city, where the better sort of their people lived. Standing two or three to a city block, vine covered mansions lined the street through which our train of carriages passed. Constructed of blocks of stone cut into smaller pieces with great precision and planed with water and an abrasive until they fitted together smoothly, the buildings gave me the impression they would remain standing through the centuries like castles of the

middle ages, neither diminished in their grandeur nor threatened with extinction by the passage of time.

Due to the stone walls which surrounded each and every one of them without exception, only the roofs of these palaces, and sometimes not even that, revealed themselves to the viewer from the street. Through the entrances of some, however, we managed to catch glimpses not only of the grand mansions themselves, but also of the gardens which caressed them tenderly on all sides. More beautiful than even the most fertile of imaginations could grasp, the bushy hedges cut into geometrical designs, the neatly trimmed lawns, and the beds of brilliantly iridescent flowers reminded me of the landscaping which lends so much elegance to Emira's residence. Truly, I thought, these wealthy Sklabosians appreciate in full measure the beauty of nature's most delicate gift to mankind!

Furthermore, one feature of these mansions revealed itself not only to the observer in the street but also to the viewer located anywhere else in the metropolis. I refer to twin towers which, rising into the air like spires, attained a height of some forty feet above the roofs of the mansions. An intense pearl-white in color and mounted one on each end of the dwellings, the minaret-like structures lent an Eastern flavor to the buildings they adorned, giving them the appearance of just having materialized out of some tale from the Arabian Nights. Puzzled over the juxtaposition of dramatically contrasting architectural styles in the same structure, I gave our host a quizzical look.