

A Strenuous Hour

By W. R. Gilbert

IT was on the edge of dark, and as Hugh Wendover toiled along the lanes of loose sand, which do duty for streets at Beira, he was aware that someone was following him. He wondered idly who it could be, and as the darkness came on apace, he was conscious of a little prickling about his spine. Newly arrived from Rhodesia, and meaning within the next few hours to take the mailboat homeward bound for England, he knew no one at Beira, who was likely to be interested in his movements, and was the more mystified that anyone should shadow his steps. He passed the open front of a lighted cafe, and when safe in the shadows on the further side, he looked back over his shoulder. The man who was following him was dressed in uniform, and just behind him there was another man in white ducks, and wearing a sun helmet.

Hugh Wendover considered the pair as they waddled through the soft sand, then muttered to himself:

"This is getting interesting. I wonder what their game is?"

In order to find an answer to the question, he turned back, passed the man in uniform, and seated himself at one of the cafe tables. Quite coolly he called for a drink, lighted a cigarette, and then examined the two men in the sandy street. The man in uniform he easily identified as a Portuguese policeman, whilst the other man who had now joined him, seemed vaguely familiar to his mind, though his identity eluded him. The two stood in earnest confabulation, glancing in his direction from time to time, and Wendover watched the man in white ducks, searching his own memory for the clue which persistently evaded him. Then suddenly he remembered and laughed.

"The fat German at Mozambique!"

His mind traveled backward two years. He was standing outside a shop, looking at the Birmingham-made curios, idols, knives and what-not which littered the window, when out of an alley by the side of the shop, had broken a small negro boy, yelping with terror. Curious to know the cause of the boy's fright, he had looked up the alley to see a big, fat Teuton in pursuit, sjambok in hand. It had been the work of a second to thrust out a gaitered leg, and the Teuton's discomfiture had been complete. As the German had picked himself up, he had looked around to meet Wendover's smiling eyes.

"Gott!" he had cried, "Gott!" and then made for Wendover with the sjambok.

The scene that followed had been a painful one—for the German, and it had ended with the latter lying in the garbage of the street, writhing with the pain that a whip of rhino-hide can inflict.

And now? Wendover saw something pass from the German's hand to the policeman, and the latter nodded, then moved slowly towards the table where he was seated.

"You come along with me, Senor," said the policeman in an authoritative voice.

"What for?" asked Wendover sharply.

The policeman waved a hand towards the fat German.

"De gentleman dere, he say you steal his purse, dat you knock him down at Mozambique an' den run away."

"And when did I do all this?" asked Wendover, glancing from the policeman to the German, who had drawn nearer, and was now regarding him with a malicious grin wrinkling his gross face.

The Portuguese consulted the German, and Wendover took the opportunity to consider his position. The thing was a mere plant of course, but if, as it appeared, the German was a person of importance on the coast, it might turn out rather serious, since Portuguese colonial justice is not always for the man who has the shortest purse. If the German testified that he was a thief, it would be difficult to disprove it, the more particularly as he knew no one in Beira. At the very least, arrest would mean that he would miss the boat for which he was waiting; and if there was anything in the rumor of war

which was floating through this East African town, it was important that he should get to England with haste. When the policeman turned to give the answer to his question he had already decided that at all costs he would not surrender his freedom.

"Senor Hatzold, he say two years ago. He never see you since."

"No, I daresay not, and you can tell him from me that he's the most infernal liar, like most of the breed he comes from."

The German ripped an oath, and took a step forward, as if he meant business, but as Wendover rose from the table, he evidently changed his mind; and said something in Portuguese to the policeman who again spoke.

"You vill come-a vid me, senor."

"No," answered Wendover, and sprang

It was like running between sand dunes, terribly hard work; and at any moment his flight was liable to interruption from the darkness in front of him. He looked anxiously around. An opening between two houses presented itself. It was little more than an alley, and for anything he knew to the contrary, it might end in a cul-de-sac, but that was a risk there was no avoiding, and there were risks just as grave in the open street. He took the opening, and followed the alley between tall, windowless or shuttered houses as quickly and as expeditiously as he could. He heard the pursuit pause at the entrance of the passage, and for a brief moment he stood to listen. The soft swishing of the sand and the sound of voices told him that the pursuit had divided, that at least two men were following him along the alley.

He ran forward once more, looking from right to left for any opening between the blind walls on either side of

steps of one of his pursuers pass the door, and three minutes after the sound of several men in excited conversation told him that others were following the narrow way. He wiped the sweat from his face and chuckled to himself.

"Lucky I found that doorway, they'd have had me, sure, if I had kept on."

Two minutes later, however, he was not quite so sure of his luck. A door opened somewhere at the far end of the yard, and as he caught the gleam of a kerosene lamp swinging towards him, he crouched lower between the sheltering packing cases, and waited breathlessly. The light passed quite close to him; so close that, as they passed his hiding-place, he caught sight of a man's legs encased in white ducks, and by stretching his arm could have touched them. He waited, wondering what was to happen, and then to his ears came the grating of a key in the lock, when the light passed him again, and somewhere a door crashed to. He guessed what had happened, and whistled softly.

"Phew! Locked in!"

A moment's consideration told him that it was well to make sure, and creeping out from his hiding place he made his way to the door and cautiously tried it. It was undoubtedly locked. He looked around, and then as quietly as he could, moved one of the packing cases, and mounting it, stretched a hand to the top of the wall. He drew back hastily as it encountered a chevaux-de-frise of sharp iron.

Escape from the yard was barred that way, and he began to prospect for some other way out. The edge of a low building outlined against the stars caught his eye. With the aid of a packing case he could climb that, and perhaps, from the height of it he might find some means of egress. He climbed on to the flat roof, and found another building immediately in front of it, with some steps leading up to it. He mounted them, and at the top found himself on the roof of a high building from which he could see the lights of Beira and of the shipping on the front. He surveyed the scene from this god-like height, and hummed thoughtfully to himself:

"Twinkle, twinkle, little star,
How I wonder what you are,
Up above the world so high,
Like a—"

He broke off, as the awkwardness of his position thrust itself upon him. The view was admirable, but how to become part of the view himself was the thing that concerned him. His position, as he knew, was not merely awkward, it was positively dangerous. A stranger walking on the open roofs is likely to be suspected of a lover's ardor, of which he may be quite guiltless, and a knife-thrust is quicker than a question, and often more final. Wendover knew that, and knew also that it was imperative that he should reach terra firma at the earliest possible moment. He wondered if there was another staircase other than the one by which he had ascended, and began to walk across the flat roof. Then suddenly he trod on nothing, and shot down into an inky blackness, which, as his head came into contact with something hard, was momentarily illumined by the light of a thousand stars.

When Wendover recovered consciousness he found himself in almost complete darkness. He sat up, trying to remember what had happened, and very speedily realised that he must have fallen through some open trap-door in the roof on which he had been walking. His head felt sore, but as he stretched himself he realized that he was practically unhurt, and that no bones were broken. He rose slowly to his feet and lifted his eyes to look for the trap-door, and by that means to discover the steps or ladder that led to the rooms. A single star burning whitely, revealed what he sought, and groping in the blackness he found a flight of wooden stairs. His foot was already on the lowest step, when a sound broke the stillness, and made him pause.

"No, no, I will not; I do not want to marry you!"

The voice was a girl's, the tones of it betrayed great agitation, even fear, and it was unmistakably English. Wendover listened, and following on the first voice came a second, guttural and masculine, but in tones so low that the words were



Sir Eric Geddes has been appointed new First Lord of the Admiralty, succeeding Sir Edward Carson. Sir Eric is one of the handful of great Britons who emerged out of comparative obscurity with the advent of the war. The new First Lord is a Scotchman, born in India, but owing his ability in a large degree to an American training. He is only forty-one years old, which makes his appointment all the more remarkable.

suddenly forward. The policeman was taken by surprise, and backing, pitched over a chair into the soft sand of the street. The fat Teuton imposed his bulk, but a straight left-hander knocked all the wind out of him and turned him half-way round. The policeman was already struggling to his feet, and a waiter was running to intercept the Englishman. The chance of escape was of the slightest, and there was but a moment available, but Wendover took it. He flung a chair in front of the hurrying waiter, brushed aside the hand with which the policeman clutched at his legs, and dashed into the street. A moment later, as he ploughed through the soft sands, a chorus of yells behind him told him that the hunt was out.

He tore his hardest over the loose, shifting sand of the street, and he had not gone twenty yards before he realized that straight racing would not do.

him. He found one at last, took the turn as it offered itself, and followed a narrow, tortuous way that led he knew not where. A little way down his new path he paused to listen a second time.

A babel of voices sounding from the direction of the street told him that the main pursuit was returning, and looking down the blackness behind him, he caught the red glow of a cigarette, and realized that one of the pursuers was almost at his heels. Silently, he began to run again, and as the passage turned, became aware of a large doorway with the door ajar. He hesitated, and peeped inside. All was in darkness, and within appeared some sort of yard, for outlined against the whitewashed walls he caught sight of some crates. He slipped through the door, thoughtfully pushed it to behind him and then concealed himself behind a couple of packing cases.

Crouching there, he heard the cautious