

Jimland Reports Volume 4

By Jim Wright
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Report 151 - IN HIS OWN WORDS, PONATOWSKI REPORT 13.

Date: 2003-07-22

IN HIS OWN WORDS, PONATOWSKI REPORT 13

To: Headquarters of Overseas Operations, Polish Home Army

Subject: Jimland After Action Report #3

Sirs:

The following is an account of my first expedition to the Secret Islands off the coast of Jimland as the official Polish Military Attache in Jimland.

Expedition Composition: Lt. Stanislaw Dombrowski (Expedition Leader), Abdull (Local Scout), Diego Garcia (Portuguese Hunter), Fritz Kamienski (cousin of mine and the late Casimir), Marie (the late Casimir's advisor and current administrator of the Vistula Villa), N.B. Forester (US Geological Survey, more likely OSS), 4 locally trained soldiers, and 18 bearers.

Expedition Purpose: To journey to the Secret Islands in an attempt to locate and rescue the kidnapped Mrs. Constance Dullcote and collect the reward to fund our expedition and support the Polish Home Army. Start to gather intelligence on the 3 evil geniuses and their denizens that are reported to control portions of the Secret Islands. Attempt to acquire military technology from the evil geniuses utilizing all possible means. As always, eradicate the GPE and their mindless followers, including the Dons' Spanish Crime Syndicate.

Day 1: Departed Jimville in the steamer so graciously given to us for this undertaking by Mr. Dullcote. The American Merchant Marine, Lt(JG). Nils Porter was at the helm. He piloted the boat flawlessly. The sea was calm. We traveled through some fog and our progress slowed. Being unfamiliar with navigating near the Secret Islands, Lt. Porter did not want to endanger us. At about mid-afternoon, we finally got through the fog bank and there before us was an island. Other islands could be seen in the distance. I ordered Lt. Porter to make along the coast until he found suitable anchorage. We passed stretches of sandy beaches with a backdrop of dense jungle. A bit further on there were sheer cliffs that rose up to towering mountains.

Finally, very late in the day, we spotted the mouth of a small river with a village on the northern bank. We made landfall there. Lt. Porter and a small crew were left to perform standard maintenance on the steamer, as well as make sure that it would be there upon our return. The village appeared to have been deserted for some time. Abdull called me over to the riverbank and showed me a rather odd track in the mud. It appeared to be that of a large canine, but it was elongated, rather like the foot of a man. N.B. Forester mumbled under his breath. I turned to ask him about the print when a howling similar to that of a dog arose around us as 6 rather odd looking creatures emerged from the jungle. They appeared to be large dogs that walked upright like man. They were armed with various hand weapons and quickly closed on us. A volley from our firing line dispatched 3 of the beasts and the others ran off.

Upon further examination, the beasts appear very similar to that of a sheep dog, and their gait is strikingly similar to that of the GPE when overburdened with loot that they have stolen from the people of Jimland. Also, all of the creatures had a brand on their left foreleg, "P.F.", it is my belief that this indicates they are denizens of Professor Fate. I also speculate that due to the similarity in appearance to members of the GPE, the GPE may be in league with Professor Fate. A body was carried back to the steamer, and upon return to Jimville, it will be sold turned over to the Science Club for examination and we will request that this species of dogmen be named "Socialist Sheep Dog". We spent the night in the deserted huts of the village with a strong guard in case any of the creatures returned.

Day 2: Followed the river inland to the its' source in a mountain range. It was a hard day's journey into the mountains. Nothing further to report.

Day 3: During the night, thieves stole all of our trade goods. From the prints left behind, it appears that they were children, odd really. Abdull, N.B. Forester, and myself could not find an adequate trail out of the mountains. We will try again tomorrow.

Day 4: There were the sounds and echoes of beating drums intermittently throughout the night. One food bearer was absent come morning. We don't know if he answered the call of the drums or ran off in fear. Abdull found a suitable track to follow out of the mountains to the west. We were back into the dense jungle by late afternoon and made camp. The party is doing well.

Day 5: Moving through the jungle, Abdull signaled for the party to come to an immediate halt. He then signaled to form a firing line. We had no sooner done so than 7 fierce warriors from an unknown tribe burst out of the jungle. They moved quickly and after our initial volley, we were in hand-to-hand fighting with them. One dastardly individual dared attack Marie. Seeing the danger, Fritz spitted the coward on the end of his bayonet. The rest ran off. Sadly, we lost one soldier during the fight. We buried him where he fell. His family will receive a small pension. The dead tribal warriors were left to feed the local wildlife.

Day 6: Continued moving through the jungle to the south. We skirted a large, marshy lake. Upon return to Jimville, I will submit the proper papers to have the lake named Lake Peipus. On the south end of the lake was a village of tribals. They remained aloof to our presence and did not respond at all to our queries. It is highly likely that the warriors that attacked us the previous day came from this village as their appearance was strikingly similar. Moving a bit further south we came across a river that emptied into the sea to the west.

Day 7: We moved eastward along the river and into the mountain range that we had previously crossed. Our food supply was heavily impacted as 3 bearers deserted with their loads during this portion of the journey. At least we assume they deserted. One moment they were there, the next moment they were gone. Shortly after their absence was noted, our party was set upon by 6 pygmies. Abdull, Diego, and N.B. Forester all confirm that this is the proper name for the short humans that are occasionally found in Jimland. One exacting volley later and the attackers were either dead or running. We discovered items from our stolen trade good on the dead. This explains the small footprints we had seen earlier.

Day 8: As in our previous crossing of this particular mountain range, there were few tracks. No progress made on this day.

Day 9: Abdull found a suitable track to follow out of the mountains to the east. A food bearer and his precious load were lost when crossing a stream. Supplies were very low.

Day 10: Following the coastline to the north and back to the ship. Used the last of our supplies.

Day 11: A soldier suddenly gasped and perished. From talking to the other soldiers, it appears that this individual had dealings with a well-known Witch Doctor before departing Jimville. The "dealings" had to do with a card game of questionable results. Not saying that he cheated, but soldiers will be soldiers. Apparently the Witch Doctor cursed him as a result of this card game and the thought of it had weighed on him greatly...either that, or he had a stroke. We will never know. We returned to our landing point and Lt. Porter and the steamer were both there. Also, it appears that in our absence, the rightful inhabitants of the village had returned. They welcomed us and we purchased food from them to satisfy our hunger. We departed the next morning.

Events Upon Return to Jimville: Bearers were paid. Soldiers given leave before they will be rotated to our forward base at James' Landing. The maps we made during the expedition were sold by Marie to the authorities in Jimville. N.B. Forester took copies with him and a full report to the American Embassy. Lt. Porter saw to the steamer and said he would gladly captain it again. Abdull departed for family business. Diego talked extensively with Isabella. Again, I heard mention of "Red Fez". Troubling. Diego shortly thereafter left into the Wilds. Isabella said she did not know where he went. I continue my lessons learning Portuguese from Isabella.

The Lady Windsor welcomed back Fritz with open arms. He actually blushed I believe. Either that or it was a sudden case of sunburn. Marie seemed a bit nostalgic and read through Casimir's Journal. Then, with shotgun in hand and "Bobbie" on his leash, she went shopping. She returned with several pairs of shoes and a better mood.

We discovered no information on the location of Constance Dullcote and Mr. Dullcote was informed of this. He was visibly disappointed. Shortly afterward, there came word that the GPE had rescued Mrs. Dullcote. How very convenient.

Future Plans: Due to the size of our steam launch, party size will be reduced for our future expeditions to the Secret Islands. Though the GPE and the Spanish Syndicate are constant threats, a greater threat lies in the evil geniuses of the Secret Islands. Our future efforts are to continue to explore the Secret Islands.

Other Intelligence of Note:

It is rumored that the GPE and Spanish Syndicate are in league with each other. This has been reported first hand to me by Diego and Isabella, whom I both trust. The latest rumor to this effect after the return of Mrs. Dullcote by the GPE was that the Spanish had paid the tribals to kidnap Mrs. Dullcote on behalf of the GPE. They were given cheap, worthless trinkets and

told to hold onto Mrs. Dullcote. This is how the GPE knew exactly where to go to "rescue" Mrs. Dullcote. Sadly for the tribal kidnappers, the GPE killing them all to ensure their silence was not part of the deal they signed on for. At least they killed a few of the socialist cowards during the fight. Interestingly...it appears that at least one of the tribals survived the fight to tell about it.

Comrade Stalin, Comrade Trotsky, Comrade Mo. It does not matter. The GPE is a bunch of stooges. How else can you explain a group that vows to share the wealth with all of the people equally, yet is constantly stealing from the people, has more money than most of the "capitalist" backed expeditions in Jimland, and can afford to send members on extensive vacations to the bastion of capitalism and decadence, the United States. Next thing you know, they will all be going to the various "Club Jim" resorts being built around Jimland. Who knows, they may even embrace that ridiculous theology espoused by that crackpot Winthrop Churchill and his Italian dress wearing monk friends. Socialists? I think not.

It appears that certain members of the press have become corrupted by the GPE and the Spanish Syndicate. In the latest interview of our party by one such member, he suggested that it would be beneficial to us to "throw-in" with the GPE. We believe he had been smoking some of McFraser's opium (good stuff from what I hear). Unfortunately for this fellow, that suggestion was not well met. I became rather upset and berated the fellow (I am only a Lt. afterall. They don't teach "couth" in the Polish Home Army until you become a field grade officer). As Fritz was helping the card carrying GPE sympathizer to his feet, he tripped and fell out the window. It's a shame we were only on the second floor at the Villa. It would have been a more spectacular fall from the Penthouse of the Empress. All things considered, the fellow should be thankful that Marie and "Bobbie" were out shopping with Isabella (Marie is still trying to get her to wear more clothing, but Isabella keeps buying large knives instead), otherwise the fellow would have likely been a "Miss" after the altercation due to some of the rather "interesting" commands that Marie has "Bobbie" trained to do.

Further reports to follow as events occur.

Lt. Stanislaw Dombrowski
Military Attache', Polish Home Army
Vistula Villa
Jimville, Jimland

Report 152 - THE SULTAN RETURNS.

Date: 2003-07-31

THE SULTAN RETURNS

The Sultan has returned to Jimville. With very little pomp or ceremony the Sultan has returned to Jimville with a British Infantry escort.

When our reporter pressed his way through the crowd, both of whom kindly stepped aside for our man, his questions addressed to the Sultan were met with a simple "No comment" from the Sultan. The British Officer-in-Charge then hustled the Sultan into the Palace. Stern and tight-lipped British Infantry told the onlookers to go home. The British then took up guard positions around the Palace.

Is the Sultan back as the Beloved Leader of All Jimland or is he the Prisoner of the British Empire? Quiet honestly, Dear Reader, we are not sure. British troops guard the Palace grounds. British Officers and Members of their Diplomatic Staff flit in and out of the Palace like flies on something dead.

The Sultan's Guard is noticeably absent. Perhaps the Sultan's hard fighting while on vacation has worn down his Guard. What of the Rebels who were the Sultan's earnestwhile Allies while the Sharif was in power?

FURTHER STUNNING EVENTS

Three days after the Sultan arrived back in Jimville the entire Embassy Row across the mighty River Jim was being hastily packed aboard several steamers tied to the makeshift pier that served the east side of the river. All were busy loading their belonging on the ships. By nightfall, they had all departed. All that is but the British.

The British had moved back across the river to their old Consulate compound directly across from the Sultan's Palace. The Sharif's short-lived Embassy Row was deserted except for looters and stray dogs. The east side of the river was a dark place that night.

Meanwhile on the Sultan's side of the river, all was gaiety as the British Ambassador, now calling himself the British Consul once again, threw a riotous celebration at the Jimville House of Girls and Casino. He rented the entire building and its entire staff. Champagne flowed freely. To quote the Consul, "You only get to create an Empire once, so you should enjoy it!"

We of the Herald find this statement at once frightening and intriguing. Further explanation was not forthcoming from the Consul or any of his staff. The Soldiers of the Queen remained alert, silent, and on guard while the Diplomats played the night away. To quote an unfamiliar young Lieutenant, "Opportunities abound. It all comes down to us you know!" We wonder.

Whither the Germans? Whither the Italians? Whither the Americans? Whither the French though we hate to admit we might miss the scoundrel they have for an Ambassador? Whither the Russians?

The day after the party, at a suitably civilized hour, the British Consul escorted the Sultan over to the deserted and ransacked Embassy Row. The Sultan ceremonially tossed a torch into a building. The British Consul threw a torch into the British building seemingly with relish. British Sailors of the Naval Brigade fanned out to set the whole Embassy Row aflame. Rowed back to the Palace, the Sultan, the British Ambassador, several British Officers, with a number of Ladies from the Jimville House of Girls as guests, quietly sipped wine and watched Embassy Row disappear in flame and smoke. By sundown nothing remains but ashes, even the pier was destroyed.

What is going on, Gentle Reader we are not sure, but one thing is clear. Either the British have somehow managed to run the other European factions out of Jimland or the others have headed to greener pastures on their own leaving the British holding the bag and keeping a "stiff upper lip" over the whole thing. As we all know, in Jimland appearances can be deceiving.

COMING AND GOINGS

It has been reliably reported the Big Jake Frere was seen entering the British Consulate shortly after sundown. Where has he been and what is he up to now? Surely this is not coincidence.

Overheard coming out of the Consulate window, "Are you sure? Major Mauser?"

Like all of Jimland, we await developments. Be assured, Dear Reader, you will read about them here First!

Report 153 - JIMLAND SETTLES DOWN.

Date: 2003-08-01

JIMLAND SETTLES DOWN.

The Sultan has returned to Jimville.

A much reduced and subdued Sultan's Guard has taken up their duties throughout and around the perimeter of the Sultan's Palace.

The smoldering remains of the Sharif's Embassy Row have been plowed under and salt spread over the area on order of the Sultan. We might add that this was his first order without the British Consul looking over his shoulder. The Sultan seems to be regaining his spirit, but still remains much quieter than before his ouster by the recently disappeared Sharif. One can only wonder what caused this turn around.

The British Consul and staff are busy refurbishing their reclaimed Consular Compound. The British troops in Jimville, several companies of infantry, and a Naval Brigade detachment are putting their camp in order and patrolling the area around Jimville.

COMING AND GOINGS

The Ponatowski Expedition contingent seems happy enough in the Vistula Villa on the outskirts of Jimville. The reappearance of the Sultan has not put them off their stride. They are preparing for another trek into the Wilds of Jimland.

The two mysterious Americans, Forester and Porter have taken a small house near the pier. Both men are frequent guests at the Vistula Villa. The loss of the American Ambassador does not bother them at all. It even appears to have cheered up the somber Forester who's only comment on the Embassy closure was "Good! A free hand at last."

No Russians have been seen by anyone. No one is complaining.

The GPE has been quiet. Perhaps they feel vulnerable without the Russian Horde that was propping up the Sharif?

Rumors of Flagstone's imminent return to Jimville are everywhere. It is said he is fed up with the Secret Islands and plans to do some "real exploring in the Wilds of Jimland where only real men dare". Interesting. We wonder what happened to dampen his fervor for the Secret Islands. Lack of payoff, perhaps?

THE FINAL PROOF ON NORMALCY

The Sultan had a poster nailed to the gates of His Palace. The poster offered a Large Reward for information leading to the capture of the Brigand and Known Rebel Tastimin the Despicable. It brings a tear to the eye, does it not, Dear Reader.

Report 154 - EXPEDITION NEWS.

Date: 2003-08-05

EXPEDITION NEWS.

The Flagstone Expedition has returned to Jimville. The Herald was able to obtain this first hand report from Julius Flagstone, the Fearless and Famous Explorer.

FLAGSTONE'S REPORT

We went to the Secret Islands with high expectations. Rumors of Treasure beyond Measure clouded our thinking. The Treasure of the Secret Islands is not Gold. It is misery and suffering. In our many weeks there we found very little treasure by anyone's counting. What was found was not of First Class Quality. It is clear by our thinking that no Expedition can pay their way by exploring the Secret Islands.

We are sure there are things to be discovered, but the reward is clearly not worth the risk. The sparse population of the Secret Island is almost entirely hostile to all Exploring Parties. No amount of money or trade goods can satisfy them. Cannibalism is said to be prevalent on many of the Islands. Luckily for us, we did not encounter any Cannibals during our Expeditions.

In addition to the hostile population there is the hostile environment. It is hard to believe that there is a place more unforgiving than the Wilds of Jimland. But the Secret Islands surely are that place. Constant heavy rains soak everything many hours of every day. One is never dry. It is plain why the Natives, and especially the Tribals, wear very little clothing. What's the point?

The final factor is the dens of thieves, cutthroats, pirates, rebels, and mad scientists that are hidden away. At every turn of the few dismal trails there is the threat of attack. Just like mainland Jimland the threat of attack is not just from Natives. The animals of the Secret Islands are as ferocious as in the Wilds of Jimland.

Upon my return to Jimville, Olivia and I spent several evenings in the Jimville House of Girls and Casino attending impromptu meetings of the Jimland Explorers Club. After much discussion fueled by our collective experience and not a little Good Scotch, the consensus was that the risk is not worth the effort.

This does not mean the Secret Island will not be explored. It only means that extraordinary events will need to occur before the Fearless and Famous Explorers will risk their all in the Secret Island. Meanwhile the Mainland holds the Wilds of Jimland.

As we all know the Wilds of Jimland hold secrets that will take our lifetimes to uncover. The rewards are appreciably higher, the risks no worse. In fact at the final meeting there was much talk of the Lost City of Gold somewhere in the Desert of Jimland.

Few have returned from the Lost Desert. No one as yet has found the Lost City of Gold and returned. Much to everyone's surprise, Big Jake Frere attended the last meeting and related his experiences concerning the Desert. He said he knows it has been traveled. He said he knew for a fact that Denny Lee had gone into the Desert and found the Lost City of Gold. This caused quite a stir. We all questioned Big Jake on where he thought the Lost City was. He said that from his exploring and other pieces of information, he believed that the Lost City of Gold was dead center in the Greater Desert of Jimland.

This caused another stir. We asked what he meant by the Greater Desert. He freely answered that there were really two deserts in the interior of Jimland. There were aptly named The Greater and the Lesser Deserts of Jimland by the Explorers of Legend. We all had a chuckle at this. Big Jake was not laughing though. He related the tales of Denny Lee. Lee repeatedly looked for the Greater Desert and upon finding it launched a search for the Lost City of Gold. Big Jake said he has evidence that the rest of Denny Lee's life was spent in searching for and finally finding the Lost City of Gold. Several other local guides present at the meeting corroborated Big Jake's story.

For a story it must be. Only one Fearless and Famous Explorer has ever found any desert in the Wilds of Jimland. The Late Casimir Ponatowski once reported he had found the edge of a desert. Just how much importance Ponatowski placed on this discovery was evidenced by the fact he never went back. This seemed to quiet Big Jake down.

The last I heard of it was old Norton Dullcote cozying up to Big Jake at the end of the meeting. They were deep in quiet discussion when I finally left the "House". The last I heard was Dullcote saying "...spare no expense.."

Personally, I intend to return to exploring the Wilds of Jimland. I will use my steam launch to navigate as far up river as I can then head inland. I believe there are wonders to behold in the Wilds. A Fearless and Famous Explorer can do no better than bringing the Treasures of the Wilds of Jimland back to the Light of Civilization.

COMING AND GOINGS

The Flagstone Expedition has returned to Jimville taking up their usual rooms in the Empress. Each day Flagstone is busy recruiting and equipping a new expedition. His destination has been simply stated as the Wilds of Jimland.

Norton Dullcote has unexpectedly equipped a small expedition in a very rapid manner. Saying he needed some excitement, Dullcote, his Charming Wife Constance and a small, but well armed party, boarded their small steamer and headed up the River Jim. Destination unknown. Accompanying Dullcote as the Chief Scout was none other than Big Jake Frere.

Is Dullcote trying to enter the ranks of the Fearless and Famous Explorers Club? When asked about this Flagstone replied that he thought Dullcote would find that Exploring was a young man's game. Never the less he wished him success in the venture.

Little news of the other Fearless and Famous Explorers has crossed our desks at the Herald. Our status board of Fearless and Famous Explorers reads as

listed below. We know some of these Expeditions are in Jimville, but very little information is forthcoming about their status and intentions.

| Expedition | Status |
|--|------------------------------|
| Airdrieonian Expedition, aka MacFraser's | unknown |
| Big Al The Marauder's Expedition | unknown |
| Churchill Expedition | unknown |
| The Coleman Folly | never seen again |
| Don Alverado Expedition | unknown |
| Flagstone Expedition | re-equipping |
| German Number I, aka The Damned | unknown |
| German Number II, name unknown | unknown |
| Glorious People's Expedition | hiding at their Secret Bases |
| Ponatowski Expedition | re-equipping |
| Robert the Puce | unknown |
| Ross Expedition | unknown |
| The Lost Shope Expedition | never seen again |
| Swindell Expedition | unknown |
| Teddy's Rough Rider Reserves | unknown |
| Token Expedition | unknown |

Anyone one with pertinent information on the above Expeditions please contact the Herald.

Report 155 - SPECIAL EDITION! DULLCOTE EXPEDITION WIPED OUT!

Date: 2003-08-08

SPECIAL EDITION! DULLCOTE EXPEDITION WIPED OUT!

Gentle Reader, it is with great sadness that we write this report. The first Expedition led by Norton Dullcote has been wiped out. Nearly.

This morning Big Jake Frere washed up on the shore of the River Jim in the very shadows of the Sultan's Palace. A British patrol was lucky enough to spot him and rushed to his aid.

The patrol was lucky because Big Jake was lying hidden by a tree trunk he had been clinging to. To the patrol's further surprise Big Jake was firmly gripping Norton Dullcote by the lapel of his much tattered and bloody hunting jacket. Our reporters got this report from Big Jake in his bed at the Jimville Hospital.

"We headed up-stream for a destination known only to me. I'm not telling, so don't you rascals even ask.

We made good time. Dullcote's little steamer putted right along. No serious problems were encountered other than the usual ramming by an enraged hippo, the occasional spear or arrow or sling stone whizzing over to us from the jungle covered shores, you know, the usual stuff.

We camped each night ashore with a strong guard posted. It seems our intentions were well known despite the hurried nature of our departure. Several times we were attacked at dawn by various Tribes. Each was beaten off. Norton was a fine shot and of steady nerves. Much to my surprise Constance Dullcote was also a fine shot and remained calm during all the attacks.

She told me one day, after I asked where she learned to shoot, "From a dear little girl named Annie while Norton and I were visiting the American Wild West. Sweet lass. Dead Shot. No husband." Well, I must admit I didn't fear for Constance Dullcote while she had a gun in her hands.

It was just two weeks up river when disaster struck. We had just beaten off a half-hearted attack by some strange natives. Our wounds were minimal, just a few cuts and bruises. We had started to break camp and were loading our gear back on the steamer.

Suddenly out of the jungle came a deadly volley of arrows and blowgun darts. Several men went down immediately. We tried to build a hasty barricade of our gear. Another volley laid more men low. Then with wild cries a large war party charged us.

As you all know Dullcote formed this Expedition rather hastily to beat the others off the mark. Due to this our party was small and not used to working together. I didn't have many of my boys with me either. Anyway, this attack caught us unprepared and strung out between our camp and the steamer.

We shot down many of the savages, but on they came. We started to retire to the steamer. Now the savages played their trump card. It seems while we were dodging arrows and returning fire, several large canoefuls of savages had landed against the river-side of the steamer and boarded. A short vicious fight with the few men on board made the natives masters of our only escape route.

They attacked us from all sides. We gave a good account of ourselves, but numbers quickly began to tell when firearms were empty. Norton and I were fighting back to back. Constance kneeled behind us reloading as calmly as if on a picnic. She would press a pistol up to us and we'd grab it and fire away while slashing wildly with our big camp knives. We held them off for several minutes.

Then two from the steamer darted in. Norton shot one. I got the other one. The beggar fell on Constance. She struggled to throw him off. Norton and I both ran out of bullets. A half a dozen savages charged us. We fought as best we could. The injuries you see on us now came from that fight.

The native charge knocked both Dullcote and me back to the river's edge. Much to our terror several savages picked Constance up and dragged her off into the jungle. Dullcote became truly enraged at this point and nearly broke out of the circle of warriors that hemmed us in. They drew back at his ferocious assault. Then the leader cried out and they all charged us. The end was near.

Quickly I turned and pushed Dullcote off the riverbank into the muddy water. I threw my useless pistol at the natives and dived in after him. The savages did not follow us, but threw several spears at us. Inquisitive crocs along the bank slithered in after us. We swam to mid-river and let the current take us.

Soon we saw a tree trunk floating along and managed to struggle to it. Exhausted we held on and hoped for the best. We floated for a day. Finally I judged it safe to try the shore. We rested on the riverbank not daring to leave the safety of the river. We ate what fruits and berries we could find. We floated again each day, sleeping next to our log on the riverbank each night. Dullcote became progressively weaker. Finally, it was all I could do to hold on to him and the log.

And luckily we washed up and the patrol found us. It is safe to say the Dullcote Expedition has been destroyed. The fate of Constance Dullcote is unknown."

At this point the surly Head Nurse came in and drove our reporters from Big Jake's room. They were not able to gain an audience with Norton Dullcote.

All of Jimville is stunned at the unprovoked attack on the Dullcote Expedition. Several requests for the Sultan to find Constance have already been sent by interested parties. The British Consul has been approached. His official statement is that "the British Forces in Jimland are not in a position to go searching after lost explorers. We will not set a precedent by rescuing these people. They knew the risks." No amount of argument could sway the Consul.

We must turn to the Fearless and Famous Explorers, Dear Reader. Perhaps they will be the ones to Rescue Constance Dullcote should she still be alive. The GPE has pulled this off once before. Can they do it again?

What prompted the attacks? Where were they heading? Who knew where they were going? Who would resort to murder most foul to stop them? Large questions, one and all, Dear Reader, and They Require Answers!

Report 156 - DULLCOTE INCIDENT STIRS UP LETTERS TO THE EDITOR.
Date: 2003-08-09

DULLCOTE INCIDENT STIRS UP LETTERS TO THE EDITOR.

FROM THE PONATOWSKI EXPEDITION:

Sir:

I am writing to express my condolences at the loss of the Dullcote Expedition. While my party and myself are glad that Big Jake and Mr. Dullcote are alive, we are saddened that Mrs. Dullcote has yet again been taken by natives.

We have gained information from our sources that the GPE is behind this. Don't you think it is rather convenient that they "rescued" Mrs. Dullcote in the first place and then seemingly dropped out of site, but were the first expedition that was rumored to be heading back into the wilds? Clearly more socialist plotting.

Although the British are now the sole colonial power in Jimland, we have maintained our current agreement with the Americans and they will be accompanying us into the Wilds of Jimland during our next expedition. If we find any clues as to the whereabouts or fate of Mrs. Dullcote, we will surely report it here.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

Lt. Stanislaw Dombrowski
Military Attache', Polish Home Army
Vistula Villa
Jimville, Jimland

THROWN THROUGH OUR WINDOW:

Hey Editor Guy,

I'd don't think Constance Dullcote was abducted by Natives. It was clearly a case of Aliens from another World. If you need further proof I am available for a small fee.

Signed,
A Concerned Citizen.
[Yeah, right. - Ed.]

SLIPPED THROUGH THE MAIL SLOT:

Dear Editor,

We of the Jimland Womens League are getting fed up with Women always being kidnapped. Why aren't men even abducted? We'll tell you why! Its because Women are much more valuable than Men are. We demand that Constance Dullcote be immediately rescued by the Sultan. After all he's suppose to be in charge!

Failing that, the prig of a British Consul should spare no effort in recovering unharmed the Lost Citizen of his Homeland. Imagine our consternation when we read his remarks that he would not set a precedent by rescuing Dear Constance.

If neither of these testosterone-coated candymen can rescue Poor Constance, then it is time for a Change of Leadership in Jimland. We of the Jimland Womens League are ready to step into the obvious power vacuum and set things right. The Citizens of Jimland deserve only the Best.

Sincerely Yours in a Most Outraged Fashion,
The Jimland Womens League.

SLIPPED THROUGH THE MAIL SLOT:

Hey you in the Herald,

The kidnapper is Tastimin in league with the Devil. It has previously been shown the Tastimin is in league with the Devil or is the Devil Himself. If this is not clear to one and all, it should be. Only the Devil would do such evil deeds. And kidnapping women is just what Tastimin would do. So its obvious Tastimin is the Devil. These evil elements must be hunted down and destroyed at any cost. I can provide a list of all of the Devil's Evil Servants in Jimville. You are not on the List. Yet.

No signature.

A CABLE WE ACCIDENTALLY RECEIVED:

The Consul
British Consulate
Jimland

Dear Sir:

You are reminded that you are not to expend precious resources to search for lost explorers. Stick to the Plan.

Your Superiors
The Home Office
London

A SECOND CABLE WE ACCIDENTALLY RECEIVED:

Julius Flagstone
The Empress
Jimville

Dear Julius

As Father would say "Suspicious confirmed". Package enroute by the usual method.

Blackstone Jr.
Berlin

ACTUALLY MAILED TO US:

Editor
World Herald
Jimville

Dear Sir:

Th Science Club offers its assistance to any party attempting to rescue Constance Dullcote. The full measure of our technological expertise is available. The cost is minimal. The rewards great.

In addition, we apologize for our rockets scaring your horse. We sincerely hope that you were not injured when it dragged you down the street, across the gravel pit and into the jungle. By your screams we could tell you had not lost consciousness and were endeavoring to regain control of the panicked horse.

Sincerely,
The Science Club

[The bandages come off next week. Don't let me catch any of you alone. - Ed.]

Report 157 - FOUR EXPEDITIONS BRAVE THE WILDS OF JIMLAND.

Date: 2003-08-15

FOUR EXPEDITIONS BRAVE THE WILDS OF JIMLAND.

Four Expeditions set out for the Wilds of Jimland seeking fame and fortune. Three of them were successful, more or less. The fourth spawned a legend.

THE AIRDRIEONIAN EXPEDITION

The Airdrieonian Expedition led by Lord Angus MacFraser headed boldly into the Wilds, pipes at the ready. It is believed that MacFraser's comment that he never meet a native he didn't want to shoot provoked natives of every type imaginable to confront his Expedition at every opportunity. Along the same vein, but more difficult to explain, is that the MacFraser comment he never meet an animal he didn't want to shoot provoked the Fauna of Jimland of every type imaginable to confront his Expedition at every opportunity. Strange, but true.

The Expedition marched on. Bearers began to desert. Hardly an auspicious start. They marched on. They were attacked by many Pygmies. They marched on. A Bearer was lost in suspicious circumstances. They marched on. Tribals attacked. Ali Oops, the Expedition Scout was killed along with several Soldiers.

They marched on. Many Dogmen attacked. As they battled the enraged Dogmen, the Expedition was beset by A Giant Cobra, a Dwarf Mammoth, A Giant Snake, A Giant Dragon Fly and an angry herd of Elans. A good time was had by all.

They marched on. They discovered an Elephant Graveyard. They marched on. They discovered a mountain allegedly 32,000 feet tall. They marched on. Another large Tribal War Party attacked. They got lost. Food started running perilously low. They discovered some Ancient Ruins and were immediately attacked by Hordes of Pygmies. Food ran out. Large numbers of Hostile Natives attacked. Many Expedition members starved to death as they neared their base.

They stumbled across a Tribal Sacred Relic allegedly dropped by the Churchill Expedition during a brief moment of panic during an attack. They starved some more. They marched back to Jimville, much thinner and much fewer.

On a sad note, Lord MacFraser himself was killed during one of the many attacks the Expedition suffered. Lady MacFraser survived while being at risk many times. The Airdrieonian Expedition is recovering by counting the Huge Pile of Money they earned. It seems to put a smile on their faces.

THE CHURCHILL EXPEDITION

Led by the redoubtable Winston P. Churchill, backed up by a suspicious group of Monks with guns, the Expedition marched out of Jimville. They were halted by Fog. They marched on.

They discovered a new Species of Flying Dinosaur. They marched on. They found the remains of a Lost Expedition, either the Shope or Coleman

Expedition though the identity was not confirmed. They went through the Lost Expeditions stuff for loose change. Natives attacked.

They marched on. Bad water killed Bearers and Askaris. They marched on. Bearers were lost crossing a river. Dogmen attacked. Pygmies were talked out of being hostile. They marched on. Food started going bad. Some say that this was caused by a Pygmy Shaman's Curse. Lizardmen attacked. They marched on. They returned to Jimville, Filthy Rich, but none the wiser.

THE GLORIOUS PEOPLES EXPEDITION

It is rumored that the Glorious Peoples Expedition is changing its name to the Glorious and Embarrassingly Rich Peoples Expedition and Venture Capital Group. They went out Rich and came back Richer!

With Trotsky leading the way, the GPE headed into the Wilds of Jimland. They marched on. They discovered a new flower. A flash flood drowned several Soldiers. All lost were Stalinists reported Trotsky sadly. They shrugged and marched on.

They became "disoriented" in the mountains. But never lost, just ask them. They wandered on. Food went bad. Rockslides in the mountains swept away Expeditions members not once, but twice. All lost were Stalinists reported Trotsky sadly.

They marched on. They were poisoned by managed to make a local cure. They marched on. They discovered a new species butterfly they named, the "Yellow Neil". The reason for the name is unclear. Brushfire in the savanna singed the Expedition. They discovered a huge pile of X-Rock. They filled their packs and pockets. They returned to Jimville.

THE TOKEN EXPEDITION

The small Token Expedition led by their Token Leader marched out of Jimville and into the Wilds of Jimland. Numerous Goatmen attacked. The Token Leader was killed. The Token Scout was killed. A Token Explorer was killed. Things began to look, shall we say, bad for the remaining Token Hunter and his few Bearers and fewer Token Askaris.

They decided to march on. Legends are made from such simple decisions. A huge group of Slavers attacked. More Token Askaris were killed. They marched on. A huge Warband of Dogmen attacked. More Token Askaris were killed. The Token Hunter took to marching in the middle of the Token Bearers trying to "blend in".

With only Bearers left, the Heroic Token Hunter marched on. A large party of Tribals attacked. The Heroic Token Hunter looked at his Bearers and gave a simple order, "Run Away". They did. Amazingly most of the Bearers rejoined the Heroic Token Hunter. They marched on. They got lost.

They marched on. Finally, the tattered and hungry Heroic Token Hunter led the few remaining and totally exhausted Token Bearers back to Jimville. Immediately the Token Expedition disbanded. The Heroic Token Hunter was never seen again.

Such is the stuff of Legend in Jimland.

Report 158 - RECENTLY RECEIVED FROM THE GLORIOUS PEOPLES EXPEDITION.

Date: 2003-08-16

RECENTLY RECEIVED FROM THE GLORIOUS PEOPLES EXPEDITION.

Dear Comrade Editor-In-Chief,

The GPE once again successfully explored a large swath of Jimland & returned with a great deal of loot. At our August Politburo session, Comrade Stalin announced that there were at last sufficient funds to create a new government and nation - The People's Republic of Jimland. This nation has claimed all territory previously explored by the GPE. Henceforth, any forces of the sultan, sharif, or any Expedition for that matter which enter into the socialist territories of Maps 12, 13, 22, 23, 32, 33 will be considered imperialist invaders & destroyed.

Long have the oppressed jungle-peoples sought this day - the day of liberation from capitalist exploitation. Under Comrade Stalin's fine leadership, the newly freed people have been diligently extending the Ho Chi Jimh Trail and building fortifications and border defenses. A new medical clinic, school, a still, and Red Square are being built with 1/3 of GPE funds. Also, a small prison was recently constructed. At this time, there is only one prisoner within its walls. The name of this rather prominent prisoner is to remain a state secret at this time.

Following Comrade Stalin's glorious announcement, a politburo member read a brief statement, to the effect that Comrade Trotsky had recently taken ill and was unable to attend this important meeting. Comrade Trotsky is currently recuperating in a state "hospital" according to official announcements.

This same spokesman then provided the press with a very brief summary of the latest expedition. Under the questionable leadership of Comrade Trotsky, the GPE discovered a new species of butterfly - one that was extremely timid and one might even say, "cowardly." The species was named the "Yellow Neil." A new species of flower was also discovered. The expedition had to deal with several unfortunate events. Some food went bad. A soldier and bearer were drowned when the river washed them away. Loot was stolen. Comrade Yuri Andropov was nearly barbecued when Comrade Trotsky failed to take adequate measures to prevent the campfire from spreading. No hostiles were encountered until just outside basecamp. There, our forces were ambushed by hostile natives. The natives were quickly dispatched, but it appeared that they were given information as to the GPE's location.

Despite Comrade Trotsky's ineptitude, the party discovered huge amounts of X Rock and returned a great deal wealthier. The People will greatly appreciate receiving funds from the GPE - the coffers of the Sultan are never opened for the common folk.

Following the evening celebrations, Comrade Stalin felt it necessary to respond to the "insane" claims coming from the Polish Gangster Camp. The GPE and its affiliates are in no way responsible for the recent "rekidnapping" of

Mrs. Dullcote. The reasons for this are so obvious that only a Pole would not be able to grasp:

1. The GPE & People are aware of Mrs. Dullcote's eating habits.
2. The GPE and People have no cranes or other means of transporting this heifer any great distance.
3. One of the GPE members is still recovering from a nasty hernia - a hospitalization that is a drain on party funds. We don't need another expedition member KO'd.
4. She is a decadent capitalist with no redeeming qualities (other than a husband willing to pay ridiculous rewards for her return).

We believe that none other than Don Pedro is behind this recent kidnapping. If not, the clues point to the Churchill Expedition. This vicious cult likely seeks to sacrifice her to their Gods.

Unless a reward is offered for her safe return, the GPE has no interest in this matter.

Comrade Stalin

Report 159 - FEARLESS AND FAMOUS EXPLORERS TO SAVE CONSTANCE DULLCOTE.

Date: 2003-11-24

FEARLESS AND FAMOUS EXPLORERS TO SAVE CONSTANCE DULLCOTE

The Fearless and Famous Explorers of Jimland held an impromptu meeting at the Jimville House of Girls and Casino. It was impromptu in that the big bag of money Norton Dullcote dropped on the craps table promptly drew everyone's attention.

With a loud voice Dullcote calmly announced that "This and more is the reward for bringing my Dear Constance back to me unharmed." Then he strode out of the House of Girls, one Girl on each arm. We are pleased to see Norton taking the absence of his Wife so well.

Soon all the Fearless and Famous Explorers currently in Jimville were in the Casino. Many arguments were made as to how to rescue Constance Dullcote and who should attempt it. The weighing of risk and reward was carefully done. Finally Big Jake Frere hobbled in on the arms of several of the Girls from the House of Girls, ever helpful they are. Big Jake surveyed the hushed crowd. He nodded to Winthrop P. Churchill who was nursing a large brandy snifter and sniffing a large "nurse". Several members of the Glorious People's Expedition edged nervously toward the backdoor. Frere patted the very large knife hanging from his belt. Lt. Stanislaw Dombrowski, Military Attache', Polish Home Army, stepped forward. "What can you tell us, Jake", he asked.

Big Jake looked around. "I'll tell it to you all once so there's no claim of my being unfair." There were several murmurs in the crowd. The Glorious Peoples Expedition members edged two ways, some toward the backdoor, some toward the sidedoor. Big Jake watched. "I'd say the GPE paid some native scum from the Secret Islands to nab old Constance Dullcote. The native attacks were too many and knowledge of the Dullcote Expedition route seemed well known. Money buys secrets. And we all know who has a Lot of Money recently."

Several members and suspected members of the GPE bolted out the doors. Several more were seized by the crowd. They were thrust forward through the crowd to face Big Jake Frere. Even in his hospitalized state Big Jake is a formidable sight. The GPE suspects shrank back from his gaze.

Big Jake spoke again. "I say go to the Secret Islands. Find Constance Dullcote. Destroy the GPE. Come back and drink Dullcote's reward money dry." The crowd let out a nasty roar of approval.

Churchill stepped forward. "A bit theatrical, eh, Mister Frere. Indeed?"

Big Jake looked Churchill up and down. "Maybe. But it's up to you Explorers to rescue the Woman and put an end to the GPE."

Dombrowski spoke up. "Surely, Jake, but why us and not the Sultan?"

Big Jake laughed. "The Sultan has his own problems. But he knows what Dullcote and I were after. So do you. I suggest you beat him to it." Dombrowski smiled and winked at Churchill. Churchill took a long pull on his brandy snifter. Looking sadly at the woman on his arm he said, "Sorry, Candy darling, but duty calls." Looking at Dombrowski he said, "Agreed. Each on his own. Winner take all." Dombrowski nodded.

Suddenly another figure stepped calmly into the room. Lord MacFraser smiled at the assembly until his gaze rested on the suspected GPE hoodlums. The smile dissolved into a snarl.

"Thought you were dead, Sir", said Churchill.

"A common mistake," answered MacFraser. "It was only a flesh wound."

Dombrowski smiled and raised an inquiring eyebrow.

"Going for it?" MacFraser asked.

"Bloody right," answered Churchill.

"I'm in, whatever the risk", said MacFraser.

"Of course you are," said Dombrowski. "Wouldn't have it any other way."

The three men walked out the front doors of the Jimville House of Girls and Casino into the night. Behind them a voice asked, "What about these scum?"

MacFraser's voice carried back from the night's blackness. "As you will."

A large fight then broke out in the Jimville House of Girls and Casino. It lasted until several torches were thrown through the windows with several bodies through back out the windows in reply. The torches were quickly extinguished with no damage done to the House of Girls and Casino. Sadly, however, the Casino was closed for the night.

So, Gentle Reader, it appears a rescue attempt of sorts is at hand. But what were Dullcote and Frere after when they were ambushed and nearly killed? Is Constance Dullcote really being held in the Secret Islands? And lastly a purely rhetorical question, is the GPE to blame?

Report 160 - ANOTHER FEARLESS AND FAMOUS EXPLORER RETURNS.

Date: 2003-11-25

ANOTHER FEARLESS AND FAMOUS EXPLORER RETURNS!

Winthrop P. Churchill and Lord MacFraser sat on the veranda of the Empress Hotel sipping their cool drinks while watching their men go from shop to grubby shop, along the dusty main street of Jimland, gathering supplies. Preparations for the Second Rescue of Constance Dullcote were beginning. The air moved very little in the afternoon heat. Neither did Churchill or MacFraser.

From behind them in the darkness of the Empress' lobby a vaguely familiar voice asked, "Mind if I join you, Gentlemen?"

Two head swiveled as one. Two jaws fell open as one. Two Fearless and Famous Explorer were dumbstruck by one. Casimir Ponatowski stepped lightly onto the veranda. He looked the picture of good health though thinner than either remembered.

"Thought you were dead, Sir", said Churchill.

"A common mistake," answered Ponatowski. "It was only a flesh wound."

Not one to mince words, MacFraser got to the point. "Where the hell have you been, Casimir?"

Ponatowski chuckled and sat in the unoccupied chair at the duo's table. An Empress waiter immediately placed a tall frosted glass, contents unknown, in front of him. He drew in a deep breath and seemed to take forever to exhale it all. He smiled at both men, now recovering their composure.

"Where have I been? A fine question, Mac. I am afraid I cannot answer it. Let's just say that for reasons of international importance I had to fake my death, leave Jimland, and perform several services for several Governments, who shall remain nameless..."

The questions died unasked on the others' faces.

"Yes, it has been a hard time. Poor Marie had the worst of it, thinking I was dead. But she figured things out on her own and quite agrees with all my actions, overt and covert. Stanislaw, however, is still having a hard time reconciling my reappearance as he swears he put me in a grave not all that long ago. Still, he's young, and will recover."

"All in all, it's been interesting. I made many new acquaintances in high places. And low. Some new friends and, of course as these things go, a not a few new enemies."

"Good for you", snorted MacFraser.

"Capital", added Churchill.

"And, I might add, the pay was excellent." Ponatowski beamed at the others.

"Excellent", responded the others in unison. All three broke out in hearty laughter. Soon it was as if time had stood still. The three Fearless and Famous Explorers were in animated discussion about the latest Dullcote kidnapping. Much to the surprise of the others, Ponatowski seemed well informed about events in Jimland during his absence, very well informed indeed.

"You really believe that talk about the Secret Islands and the GPE?" he asked.

"Well, why not?" answered Churchill.

"Yes, why not. Big Jake was with Dullcote all the time. And Big Jake is renowned for his honesty. He's never lied to any of us before," added MacFraser.

"Ah, yes. Never before," said Ponatowski. "It may not be a lie, but a smokescreen to cover things up a little. Throw off the scent as they say?"

Churchill sipped his drink. MacFraser took a large swallow from his. He grimaced a little as he set the empty glass down. "Excuse me, gentlemen, but I have some questions to ask. I shall rejoin you for supper if I may." Without waiting for an answer he strolled off.

Churchill swirled the ice around inside his glass. Blessed wonderful things these icemaking machines, he thought. He looked at Ponatowski who seemed to be soaking up the Jimland afternoon heat like a lizard on a rock. He looked very happy. Too damn happy thought Churchill. "Excuse me, Casimir, but I mustn't leave all the work to MacFraser. See you this evening, say 7, for dinner." Churchill rose and slowly walked off.

Ponatowski smiled to himself and slowly began to laugh. Then he too, rose and walked off into the heat, on business of his own.

Now, Gentle Reader, all we demand is news of Julius Flagstone, last known location, somewhere in the Secret Islands. It has been far too long without news of his Expedition. Our network of reliable sources strains to gather even the faintest clues about Flagstone, Dullcote's mission, Frere's intent and the questions Churchill and MacFraser seem anxious to ask? Just what has Ponatowski be up to while away? And what is he up to now?

Answers, Dear Reader, dearer than all we cherish, must be found forthwith!

Report 161 - FOUR FEARLESS AND FAMOUS EXPLORERS STEAM TO SECRET ISLANDS.

Date: 2003-11-29

FOUR FEARLESS AND FAMOUS EXPLORERS STEAM TO SECRET ISLANDS.

THE CHURCHILL EXPEDITION

Winthrop P. Churchill was first to lead his Expedition to the Secret Islands. In his shiny new steam launch Churchill and Company steamed out of Jimville harbor with great expectations.

They steamed on. They found finding the Secret Islands more difficult than expected. They steamed on. They found an island. They discovered a village. They formed up and marched into the island interior. They marched on. They discovered a new species of Primitive Man. Fever struck down many in the Expedition. Churchill himself was laid low for a while. They marched on. Men drowned crossing rain swollen streams.

They became "disoriented". Fever returned. Churchill's supply of medicinal gin began to run low. They marched on. Flash flooding caused by heavy rains swept men away. They marched on. They returned to their shiny steam launch, got pressure up, and returned to Jimville. They were disappointed as they hardly got to kill anyone or anything. Better Luck next time, Mr. Churchill.

THE GERMAN EXPEDITION

A new and currently unknown German Expedition arrived in Jimville. With remarks like "God Save the Bismarck" and "For the Fatherland" and "Lets make some Marks", they formed up in good Prussian fashion and held an inspection on the pier. While they were strutting about, their shiny steam launch was unloaded from the cargo vessel that brought them to Jimland.

Immediately they got their shiny new steam launch underway and headed for the Secret Islands. Well, they say, "Haste makes Waste". Or in this case very large holes in your shiny new steam launch. Somewhere in the dense fog that typically surrounds the Secret Islands, the Germans became seriously lost. To compensate, they increased speed and piped a little Wagner over the PA system. They were rammed by a gigantic sea turtle. They began to take on water. They played "Ride of the Valkyries" over the PA, very loudly.

They lost men overboard. They steamed on. They bailed on, to no effect. Their shiny new steam launch sank. They swam on. Luckily they were washed ashore on an uncharted Secret Island. [Aren't they all? - Ed.]. They found they were lying on the beach in front of a village. They few remaining Expedition members formed up and headed inland.

They found the remains of a Lost Expedition. They marched on in a very small column. They lost men crossing a ravine. Much to their utter amazement skeletons attacked them. They ran.

Back in the village on the beach they gave everything they had to the natives in return for some canoes of dubious quality. They paddled off into the fog bank and miraculously made it to Jimville.

We will gather more information on this new Expedition as soon as they quit drinking themselves unconscious. One questions obviously arises. Is this the Bismarck's feeble attempt to reestablish a German presence in Jimland or are these guys just more money-hungry would-be Fearless and Famous Explorers? We shall see.

THE AIRDRIEONIAN EXPEDITION

The Airdrieonian Expedition led by Lord Angus MacFraser headed boldly to sea in their shiny new steam launch, pipes at the ready. There wasn't room to change your mind on the steam launch as MacFraser had packed it to overflowing with bearers. They nearly capsized on their way out of the Jimville harbor.

They steamed on. On coming out of the fog bank, they had to go to emergency full reverse to avoid a gigantic sea turtle and, of course, they hit a reef. Undaunted MacFraser ordered everyone ashore.

They formed up and marched inland. They marched some more. Goatmen attacked after seeing several rude gestures from MacFraser's would be interpreter. MacFraser's response was "Well done!"

They marched on. They stumbled across a diamond deposit and filled their pockets. They marched on. Swarms of bees attacked. They ran on. They nearly fell into a huge snake pit. MacFraser's only loss was the unfortunate lead man who discovered the pit. MacFraser's response was "Well done!" They marched on. Pygmies attacked claiming the Expedition was trying to steal their pet snakes.

"Nonsense," replied MacFraser as his Expedition gunned down the Pygmies like ducks on a lake. They marched on. Goatmen attacked. They marched on. Natives attacked. They marched on. MacFraser had a word with his Interpreter. MacFraser's word was "Well done!" They marched on. They discovered a new species of Large Bird.

They marched on. They discovered a new species of Dinosaur. MacFraser said it tasted like chicken. They marched on. They became lost in the mountains. While trying to find a way across the mountains they discovered a new species of Butterfly. Skeletons attacked.

They marched on. Tribals attacked and were quickly dispatched by the huge volume of gunfire from the Expedition. They jauntily marched on. Slavers attacked. The Slavers carried off the last Food Bearer. Starvation reared its ugly head. MacFraser sent his Hunter off for food. The Hunter succeeded. Whatever it was he brought back tasted like chicken.

They marched on. They returned to their shiny new steam launch and pattered back to Jimville much richer from the whole episode.

THE PONATOWSKI EXPEDITION

With the intrepid Casimir Ponatowski back in charge, the Expedition sailed out of Jimville harbor in their shiny new steam launch with high hopes. They steamed on. They entered the dreaded fog bank that surrounds the Secret Islands. They steamed on.

Suddenly land appeared directly ahead. They coasted to a gentle landing on the golden sand of the beach. Casimir was heard to remark "Too easy." They

marched into the island interior. They marched into mountains. Men were lost to a beast reported to be a "sabertooth tiger".

They marched on. More mountains reared up. They marched on. They discovered a Native Holy Relic. They became lost in the mountains. From the noise coming out of Ponatowski's tent that night it was plain Casimir and Marie were making the best of a bad situation. The next day they marched on with a silly smirk on their faces.

They discovered a medicinal plant. Floods swept men away. They marched on. Goatmen attacked. They marched on. The heat became intense. Men dropped dead as they marched on. They bought supplies from natives. They marched on. The heat continued to kill off Expedition members. They marched on. Goatmen attacked. Men died from food poisoning. Marie wanted to go back to the village that sold them the food and burn it to the ground. Ponatowski restrained her. They marched on. They discovered a new species of dinosaur. They returned to their shiny new steam launch and then to Jimville.

CONSTANCE DULLCOTE STILL CAPTIVE

Even with all the activity by the Fearless and Famous Explorers, Constance Dullcote remains a captive of unknown felons. Her whereabouts are unknown. We are taken aback that more rescue parties have not stepped forward. We do know that Ponatowski and the new German Expedition immediately resupplied and were preparing to renew the search. We await further news.

THE FLAGSTONE EXPEDITION

We have received several conflicting fragmentary reports about the Flagstone Expedition. One says the entire Expedition was wiped out by horde of howling Dogmen. Another says they found the ruins of an ancient city and having difficulties hauling all the loot back to their shiny new steam launch. Yet another says that they have found the Evil Valley of Hideous Death and their fate was sealed there. Still another says that Flagstone is not in the Secret Islands at all, but was taken prisoner by Forces of the Sunken Empire of Atlantis! A final note said that Flagstone was shipwrecked on the coast of the Mainland and too embarrassed to seek aid in Jimville. We don't know which of these rumors to believe. Knowing the Good Doctor as we do, we can believe them all.

As we all know Jimland is a place "where anything can happen."

SCIENCE CLUB NEWS

The Science Club would like to announce this year's call for new members. Join once and become a member for Life. The "Rockets to the Moon" theme of last year was huge success. This year's theme will be "Mining and Excavation, the Way to Mineral Riches." We are sure it will be a big hit. This year first meeting will be held in the "Old Witch's Cave" just outside of Jimville. Demonstrations of several mining techniques will be given. The public is welcome.

Report 162 - TWO FEARLESS AND FAMOUS EXPLORERS SEARCH FOR DULLCOTE.

Date: 2003-11-29

TWO FEARLESS AND FAMOUS EXPLORERS SEARCH FOR DULLCOTE.

THE GERMAN EXPEDITION

Gentle Reader, we still do not know who these guys are. Our reliable sources are busy trying to find out who they are and what is their reason for coming to Jimland. Be that as it may, they were the first back to sea, by a shiny new steam launch length over the Ponatowski Expedition. The warning shot across Ponatowski's bow caused the helmsman to veer and lose a little speed and distance to the wildly cheering Germans.

Coming out of the fog bank, the Germans landed on what they hoped was the same island. They confirmed this by finding wreckage of their previous shiny new steam launch scatter up and down the golden beach for at least a mile. Confident of their position, they marched inland.

They became lost. They marched on. Natives ambushed them. They marched on. Lightning struck several unfortunate Expedition members. They marched on. Food mysteriously disappeared. They marched on.

They discovered a new species of flower that they named the "Deadly Nightshade". They marched on. They "found" some loot. They marched back to their shiny new steam launch and returned to Jimland. They were overheard to mutter "Now we are getting the hang of it."

THE PONATOWSKI EXPEDITION

With the intrepid Casimir Ponatowski back in charge, the Expedition sailed out of Jimville harbor in their shiny new steam launch with high hopes. They steamed on. They entered the fog bank blanketing the Secret Islands. They steamed on.

They made a controlled landing on the golden sand of the beach. Casimir was heard to remark "Too easy." They marched into the island interior. They marched into mountains. They were attacked by natives during a trading session. A Huge Pterodactyl attacked. Torrential downpour stopped any marching.

Unknown animals dragged several men off into the jungle during the stormy night. They marched on. They marched some more. They marched still more. They discovered a lake. A Witch Doctor cursed the Expedition. Soldiers and Bearers began to mysteriously die.

In a happy coincidence, the Expedition found the Temple that was home to the Witch Doctor. Marie cursed the Witch Doctor with her shotgun, four times. This apparently made the Expedition members feel much better. No further unexplained deaths occurred. Of course, the usual explained deaths kept right on happening.

They looted the temple. They marched on. They returned to their shiny new steam launch and chugged back to Jimville.

CONSTANCE DULLCOTE STILL CAPTIVE

Alas, even with second attempts by Ponatowski and the Germans, Dear Constance Dullcote remains a captive. We hope more rescue attempts will be made. Until then we can only await events.

THE GLORIOUS PEOPLES EXPEDITION

The GPE wants everyone to know they are still a force to be reckoned with. They are reportedly honeycombing the countryside of Jimland with Hidden Bases from which they will conduct their liberation of Jimland.

To prove their determination, the GPE order 100,000 new copies of their manifesto. It is thought that this is 1000 copies per native able to read. Never the less the printer stall in Jimville happily began to crank out the pamphlet. Unfortunately the printing press overheated. The resulting fire destroyed the printing stall, several other small businesses and scorched the wall of the British Consulate.

It is not true that the outraged British Consul shot the printer. He had an orderly do it.

Report 163 - IN HIS OWN WORDS, FLAGSTONE REPORT 3.

Date: 2003-12-07

IN HIS OWN WORDS: FLAGSTONE REPORT 3.

From the Island of Diamonds comes a report, long overdue, from the Flagstone Expedition. The full report is below.

FLAGSTONE REPORT

The rains lessened and Flagstone was pleased. The Expedition, much battered in its first two forays on the Island of Diamonds, had recovered its health and repaired its equipment. Leaving only a handful of mostly ill men to guard the camp, Flagstone led the Expedition along the island's coast.

They marched east. The rising sun was in their eyes. They lost men when a ravine with precipitous sides appeared at their feet. They marched on. Natives attacked. The soldiers hired to guard the Expedition earned Flagstone's respect as their first volley ended the affair rather abruptly, killing or driving off the whole native force. Flagstone didn't even have to draw his massive revolver, nor did Olivia need to use her huge handgun. Both were a little disappointed. Both knew the Secret Islands were dangerous places. Both knew they would get their chance.

The chance came sooner than expected. The Expedition was ambushed at dawn the very next day. Caught unprepared, the Expedition members fought where they found themselves with whatever was close at hand. Several cooks fought with their frying pans and cooking knives. The Naives were quickly in among the Expedition camp. Hand to hand combat was everywhere. Julius and Olivia stood back to back and blasted native after native. Finally the natives decided that charging these two deadeye shooters was not a good idea and concentrated on the other Expedition members.

Murphy and Blind Bob held their own well enough. Olivia saved Blind Bob by blowing two natives off his back. Flagstone now saw that his soldiers were not very well trained in close combat. Several were sliced to ribbons. Bearers were butchered.

Finally, after what seemed forever, the natives broke off the attack and disappeared back into the jungle. Flagstone ordered the dead buried, the natives piled in a heap and burned and breakfast served. It took all morning to put things in order. It was late afternoon when the Expedition headed east once more.

This time Flagstone showed his stubborn streak and had the Expedition march through the night. It wasn't till noon the next day that he allowed a stop. Finding a pleasant green stretch next to a bubbling stream, he ordered the camp pitched for the day. The exhausted men were happy to oblige. Soon the camp was established and only the watch was awake, patrolling around the camp perimeter. Everyone slept fully clothed with their weapons close at hand. It was an uneventful day.

The next morning the usual routine was resumed. The party marched east. They ran into the ocean. They turned north. They marched on. They

discovered an ancient ruin. A small force of tribals attempted an attack, but were gunned down before they could close with the Expedition.

By carefully combing the ruins Flagstone found several pieces of gold jewelry and many seashells drilled for necklaces. He also found traces of X-Rock. Perhaps this was a trading site among the Secret Islands? The rest of the day was spent searching the ruins, but nothing of further note was found. That evening drums were heard in the far away jungle. Flagstone warned his men that they would march all night and all day again. No one complained.

Just as they were preparing to leave, the head bearer ran up and reported that several bearers had deserted and taken much of the food with them. Flagstone looked at Olivia who merely shrugged. He smiled and ordered the Expedition to move out. They marched on. They marched steadily all night.

Dawn found Julius and Olivia standing at the head of native suspension bridge. It was the only way across the gaping chasm at their feet. The bridge trembled in the light morning breeze. Flagstone looked at the bridge and then at Olivia.

"I'll go first", he said.

"No, Jules. It both of us or neither of us," she replied.

Together, they slowly walked across the bridge. It swayed in the freshening breeze. It creaked under their weight. The footboards crackled. They continued across not daring to stop. They reached the other side. Now the rest of the party was signaled to come across one at a time.

Of course, Fate is a cruel Mistress. At just this time, natives attacked the side where the Expedition was still waiting. Forming a protective half-circle the soldiers with Murphy and Blind Bob in charge allowed the bearers to cross one at a time. However, the natives did not allow the bearers to cross one at a time. Each bearer was shot down as he crossed. One made it entirely across only to be shot and fall off the chasm edge. Next came the soldiers. Their fate was the same. With all the soldiers dead around them or dead crossing the gorge, Blind Bob and Murphy did what any self-respecting Explorer would do. They ran for their lives. Murphy headed across the bridge at a breakneck pace, caution thrown to the wind. Blind Bob slinked silently as a shadow into the jungle in the opposite direction.

It must be reported that Murphy made it half way across the bridge before being shot by a number of natives. At this point Julius braved the hot native fire to hack apart the ropes holding up the bridge. It fell into the gorge. Julius Flagstone and Olivia Fate disappeared into the thick jungle foliage.

They have not been seen since.

Several weeks later a much bedraggled Blind Bob stumbled into the Expedition base camp. His report is the report you have just read. Blind Bob says he waited two more weeks for Flagstone to return, to no avail. Taking matters into his own hands he left a cache of supplies, then sailed back to Jimville to form a rescue Expedition.

Anyone wishing to join the Expedition is welcome. You must provide your own equipment. Food will be the only thing provided by Blind Bob, as his resources are limited. Sign up at the Empress any time you see Blind Bob there.

Well, Dear Reader, this does not bode well for Our Favorite Fearless and Famous Explorer! We are supporting Blind Bob's rescue attempt with supplies (in exchange for exclusive rights to the story, or course).

FEARLESS AND FAMOUS EXPLORERS

Several Expeditions are getting ready for another daring adventure in either the Wilds of Jimland or in the Secret Islands. Rest assured, Gentle Reader, we will bring you all the news you need about the efforts of these Expeditions.

SULTAN'S MILITARY ADVISOR

The Sultan's Military Advisor wants to make it know that the unannounced artillery practice at dawn two days ago will continue with further unannounced practices as needed to train the Sultan's Guard. So if you hear artillery fire in and around Jimville, don't worry, be happy. It's your tax money at work. Anyone wandering into the area of firing will not be reimbursed for any loses.

SCIENCE CLUB

The Science Club wishes to apologize to the entire population of Jimville. They had no idea their "Mining and Excavation, the Way to Mineral Riches." demonstrations in the "Old Witch's Cave" would cause the Jimville sewer system to back up. They promise to move further north of town for the next set of subterranean demonstrations. And they would like to remind everyone its not too late to join. Sign up and join in the excitement.

Report 164 - 1.1 - A RESCUE ATTEMPT.

Date: 2003-12-13

1.1 - A RESCUE ATTEMPT

Julius Flagstone lay panting in the jungle underbrush. Next to him was Olivia Fate, exhausted and soaking wet. The typical afternoon torrential downpour had nearly drowned them both and finally forced them to halt their mad dash through the heavy growth. Flagstone strained to hear anything above noise of the rain splattering on the leaves of the jungle. It was no use. All he could hear was the roar of the rain.

Flagstone tried to think. It had been about four hours ago that they were forced to abandon their Expedition. The attack had been ferocious. He doubted anyone was left alive. There had been too many attackers. If he and Olivia had not decided to be the first across the suspension bridge, they too might be lying dead in a nameless jungle clearing. Cutting the ropes that held up the bridge had been an act of desperation. But it had bought their freedom. No pursuit was possible across the gorge the bridge had spanned. Flagstone didn't know how far away the nearest crossing was. He didn't care at the moment.

He reached over and pulled Olivia into a sitting position. She smiled weakly at him. Still clutched in her strong hand was her large bore hunting pistol. Flagstone smiled to himself. Despite all that had happened and their running through the jungle she had not lost her weapon. He raised his own Express Maxim pistol and checked the cylinder, all full. He mentally took inventory of their meager supplies.

Each had their light daypacks on. That was a stroke of luck due to simple camp routine. Everyday they put supplies in everyone's daypack in case they became separated. It paid off in spades this time. They had a couple of day's worth of food if they were careful. They had their big canteens. And, of course, they had their rain ponchos that were at the moment completely forgotten and tied loosely to their packs.

Food and water were not the problem thought Flagstone. We are both experienced Explorers. We have weapons. We definitely won't be without drinking water what with the daily downpour. No, we will survive well enough. The problem is tribal warriors. Were they even now streaming through the jungle trying to find the trail he and Olivia had left? Chances were small, he thought, of them finding a trail they could follow more than ten feet. Just as the tribal warriors had to find a way across or around the gorge to get to us, he thought, so we must find a way to return to our base camp.

He looked at Olivia. He was surprised to see her watching him. He smiled. She smiled back and holstered her heavy pistol.

"Ready for a walk?", he asked

"Seems like a nice day for it", she answered. They both laughed.

Scatched, bruised, and without a dry spot between them, Flagstone and Olivia got tiredly to their feet. They looked up at the clouds boiling overhead and scanned the featureless jungle around themselves. Julius pointed. Olivia nodded. They began making their way through the jungle. It was a slow but manageable process. Flagstone used his big jungle knife sparingly so as not to leave any sign of their passing. Their pace was steady and they quietly passed mile after mile in the incessant rain.

For three days Julius and Olivia made slow progress through the Wilds of Jimland. By Sun and dead reckoning, they figured they were heading in a southwesterly direction. South would take them to the coast and west would take them to their base camp. So they hoped. To their relief the rains had stopped during the night of the first day. Thereafter the sun had been drying them out as it peeked through the jungle canopy. The jungle steamed in the heat.

Flagstone was always amazed at the smells that filled the air when the rains stopped and the sun came out. Sweet. Sour. Fresh. Rancid. Olivia commented on them also, but was less than enamored with the odors. Flagstone flung out his arm and stopped Olivia in mid-stride. Carefully she lowered her foot to the ground. They dropped to a crouching position. Both had drawn their big pistols.

Olivia looked a question at Julius. He sniffed and pointed with his head. Olivia slowly took in a deep breath. Smoke. She nodded. The pair moved forward very carefully, very quietly. Gently pushing a large frond aside Flagstone found the source of the fire.

A small clearing was revealed. The clearing was bound by ruins on all sides. Most were near waist high. Flagstone scanned the area. To him it looked like the clearing was the remains of a long overgrown village square. The ruins were very old. In the center of the square was a square stone platform. Three steps led up to the platform top. Surrounding the platform was a haphazard camp of tribal warriors. No women or child were to be seen. War party thought Flagstone. The men were in the process of making their mid-day meal. Although the camp surrounded the platform Flagstone noted all the warriors walked around the platform, never on it.

Olivia nudged him. She pointed to a spot near the edge of the camp. Flagstone saw something he never expected. Big Jake Frere was bound, spread-eagle, between two posts. Jake's head lolled on his chest. Flagstone squinted. Good, he thought, as he saw Big Jake's chest rise and fall regularly. He looked at Olivia. She nodded urgently in Big Jake's direction. Flagstone shrugged. Olivia frowned and nodded defiantly at Big Jake. Flagstone smiled and nodded in the affirmative. They slipped quietly further back into the jungle.

It took the better part of an hour to circle the small ruins and reach a spot about twenty yards from where was Big Jake tied between the two poles. So far all the tribal warriors to be seen were in the camp minding their own business. Flagstone was sure there were unseen sentries about or at least men wandering off to relieve themselves. Julius and Olivia sat motionless in the humid jungle undergrowth. Occasionally they would peek at Big Jake. They took turns napping. The afternoon heat was stifling.

The camp events were exceedingly ordinary. The warriors had their mid-day meal. After the meal a man began addressing the warriors. Flagstone figured he must be the leader of the war party or chief of the tribe. Two small parties formed up and left the camp from the side opposite Flagstone. The chief and several other warriors then walked over to Big Jake.

Flagstone nudged Olivia into wakefulness. They both gripped their massive hunting pistols and tried to blend into the underbrush. The chief grabbed Big Jake by the hair and pulled his head up. The chief asked Big Jake something. Apparently he didn't like the answer as he and two of the men with him each gave Big Jake a powerful hit. Big Jake hung limply between the poles groaning softly. The chief said something else that brought a laugh from his companions. The entire group then turned and walked back to the other side of the camp.

The afternoon wore on. Soon Olivia and Julius were wishing for a return of the rains. The heat had them panting in the grass like a pride of lions. Still they maintained their watch. Flagstone wondered if they would be able to rescue Big Jake. He wondered if it was worth the risk? Maybe Big Jake couldn't walk. That would put an end to all of them. Maybe he was seriously injured. The tribal warriors hadn't placed a guard on Big Jake. What did that mean? How many warriors were there? Olivia had estimate about forty. Flagstone wasn't sure.

Dusk came as the sun went elsewhere seeking satisfaction. The camp remained undisturbed. There was just normal daily camp activity going on. Food plants were gathered. A small animal was brought in and cleaned for the evening meal. Darkness came on amid the scent of roasting meat. Flagstone was reminded he hadn't eaten all day. Olivia stifled a yawn and her stomach let out a growl. She patted it, smiling. Flagstone thought she looked beautiful in the final flash of light before the dark of night settled on the tribal warriors' camp.

Still the pair waited. The camp slowly went to sleep. Flagstone and Olivia stretched trying to get life back into their limbs. The day of lying hidden had made them stiff and clumsy. They flexed and twisted. They cinched up their packs and pistol holsters. There would be only one chance at this rescue business and it might end in a hasty retreat.

Finally Flagstone judged the time was right. Clutching his big camp knife in one hand he began to crawl silently toward Big Jake. Olivia followed with her massive pistol at the ready. Ten feet from the poles holding Big Jake erect the jungle stopped. Ten feet of empty dirt faced Flagstone. He stopped. Olivia closed up behind him. He could feel her heart pounding as she pressed against him.

Suddenly a horrible snarl broke the night stillness. Olivia clamped her hand across her mouth to stop a laugh. Big Jake snored again. Somewhere in the camp someone yelled something. To Julius and Olivia's amazement out of the shadows stepped a tribal warrior. He walked up to Big Jake and slapped him on the side of the head. Big Jake jerked awake in response. The warrior said something, laughed, and returned to the shadows. Big Jake muttered something that sounded less than complimentary. Flagstone noted the patch of darkness that was the guard.

Flagstone nodded at Big Jake and pointed at Olivia. She nodded and pulled out her knife while holstering her gun. He point at himself and then at the point where the guard was. Olivia shook her head no. Flagstone shook his head yes and put his finger to his lips. Olivia shook her head no again, but Flagstone didn't see it as he had turned and was crawling slowly toward the guard.

Olivia crouched, waiting. It seemed forever. Longer than forever. She listened with every fiber of her being. To her surprise Flagstone's face appeared in the patch of darkness. A quick gesture was all she needed. Olivia crouched and then crawled to behind Big Jake on her hands and knees.

"Sure took your time," said Big Jake. Olivia nearly jumped out of her skin.

"Shut up. Can you walk," she asked in a whisper.

"All the way home," he answered.

Slowly Olivia stood up. She spread her feet apart and tried to become Big Jake's shadow. She sawed at one wrist. Then the other. Big Jake let out a small groan but held his arms up as if still tied to the poles. Olivia dropped to her knees and cut the ropes binding Big Jake's feet.

"Ready," she asked.

"Yes," he answered.

"Ok, let's go," she ordered.

Olivia grabbed Big Jake's belt and began backing away from the poles. Big Jake groaned again as he moved his feet in slow awkward backward steps. He trembled as he kept his arms up. Suddenly a yell went up. A spear whizzed by Olivia's head. Olivia and Big Jake turned and ran the final few steps into the jungle.

A chorus of yells came from all around them. Olivia and Big Jake looked at one another. A gunshot broke the night.

"They was waiting for you all day, Olivia. Hell, I smelled you when you got close enough," said Big Jake as they broke into a jagged run through the jungle. Another shot. And a third off to their left. More yelling on all sides. As they ran Olivia pulled her pistol. She tossed Big Jake the knife. They ran. A fourth and fifth shot farther off to the left. They ran.

Looking over their shoulders in the dark jungle did not show any pursuers. They ran. Big Jake ran headlong into a low-hanging branch. With a dull thud he disappeared. Olivia ran. A sixth shot came from much farther away on the left. She ran.

Report 165 - 1.2 - FLAGSTONE AND BIG JAKE.

Date: 2003-12-14

1.2 - FLAGSTONE AND BIG JAKE

Julius Flagstone ran through the night jungle. He carefully reloaded his massive Express Maxim Hunting Pistol as he ran. Behind him came the wild yells of the tribal warriors chasing him. If Flagstone's aim in the dark was worth anything, there were fewer of the warriors now than at the start of the chase. He jumped a particularly large root. A Spear thunked into the tree. He ran. He changed direction, always bearing to the left.

He hoped that far away to the right were Olivia Fate and Big Jake Frere, the man they were trying to rescue. He ran. He hadn't heard any gunfire from his right. Did that mean Olivia and Big Jake had made good their escape or were they captives. Or worse? He ran. The noise of the tribal warriors was beginning to lessen. Their enthusiasm was beginning to dim in the dark jungle. He ran.

Off to his right a monstrous form rose up from the dark jungle floor. Flagstone veered sharply away. Seconds later a loud shriek and louder growling and snarling indicated that lunch was served for some monster of the jungle. Flagstone slowed his pace a little and became more selective about his path. No sense not being careful he thought.

An hour later found him walking carefully but steadily eastward. All sounds of pursuit had stopped. Flagstone had holstered his pistol. He was now trying to circle widely around to head south and perhaps find Olivia and Big Jake. In any event they would all be heading in a roundabout fashion to Flagstone's Expedition base camp. Julius stopped and listened. For several minutes he stood rock still. The jungle was quiet. He took a sip from his canteen. The jungle was becoming lighter. He began to walk briskly toward the rising sun.

Big Jake Frere lay in an untidy heap beneath a low-hanging branch. His eyes fluttered open. He groaned softly. He raised a hand and carefully touched his forehead. It was covered with dried blood. Must have whacked myself good, he thought. He sat up. The jungle swayed then steadied. All was quiet. He got to his feet and leaned against the tree.

A few minutes later he noted the sun was coming up. There was no sign of Olivia Fate or of the tribal warriors that had been pursuing them. He picked up the small knife Olivia had given him during their run through the night. He looked around for signs of Olivia. All he found were two footprints heading east. Sticking the knife in his belt Big Jake headed east scanning the ground in front of him for further signs of Olivia.

Olivia continued to run east. She hadn't noticed that Big Jake wasn't close by. The noise of pursuit continued. She put her big pistol in its holster.

Probably couldn't hit the inside of a barn in this darkness she thought. She ran.

Finally she slowed, then stopped. She listened. Nothing. She sipped from her canteen. She noticed that Big Jake was not with her.

"Jake," she whispered loudly. Nothing. "Jake," she hissed. Nothing. Off to her left came noise. Olivia tensed up. She drew her huge hunting pistol.

"Jake?" she whispered. The noise stopped.

"Jake?" She pulled the hammer back on the pistol. The resulting click seemed awfully loud. The noise began again. It was coming toward her at a vary fast pace. Yellow eyes gleamed in the dark. There was a sense of something large leaping into the air.

Olivia fired point blank into the snarling face of the big cat. It dropped lifeless at her feet. A chorus of shouts, far and near, left and right, went up. Olivia stamped her foot.

"Jake," she yelled. Only tribal yells answered her. She turned and ran in the direction that she judged to be east. She ran. Right into the arms of the biggest tribal warrior she had ever seen.

Olivia struggled. The giant warrior had a grip of iron. He held away her hand with the pistol. Then quickly freeing his other hand he hit Olivia a powerful blow on the chin. She crumpled into his arms. He left out a yell of triumph. Other yells answered his.

It took Julius Flagstone two days to reach the coast. He was exhausted. The golden sand that encircled the island glittered before him. He walked out to the edge of the softly hissing waves. They lapped gently at his ankles. Flagstone got his bearings, faced right along the beach, and headed west.

He had not gone far when he came across a crystal clear stream trying to feed the turquoise ocean. He walked a few paces up the stream, then laid down in its cool waters. He closed his eyes. The sun beat warmly down upon him. He felt himself rushing down that long tunnel to deep oblivion.

"Don't fall asleep yet."

Flagstone was on his feet in an instant, pistol drawn and ready. Big Jake Frere held out his hands palms first.

"Hold on there, Flagstone. Its me, Jake," he said.

"Where's Olivia," asked Flagstone without hesitation. It was the first thing he thought to say. Big Jake shook his head.

"Don't know. We were running and I caught a branch between the eyes. When I came around again I was alone. That's all I know."

Flagstone holstered his pistol and sat in the edge of the stream. Big Jake walked over and sat beside him. They both looked out at the beautiful ocean,

rising and falling in serene swells of sparkling blues. Overhead a seagull wheeled and glided. Flagstone filled his canteen and took a long drink. He offered it to Big Jake.

"We going after her?" asked Big Jake.

Flagstone stood up. "Yes. Now," he answered.

They pushed through the jungle all day. Finally at dusk Flagstone called a halt. They sat in the underbrush and ate fruit. Neither has spoken much during the daylong march. Big Jake looked at Flagstone and snorted.

"We make quite the rescue team. A pistol. A knife. Two tired guys." He laughed.

"They'll never expect us. I just hope we find Olivia in time."

"Oh you will, alright," said Big Jake.

"What makes you so sure?" asked Flagstone.

"Well, they were saving me for something. I expect they will save Olivia," said Big Jake.

"Who?" asked Flagstone.

"That I don't know," sighed Big Jake. "But its gonna be interesting. Remember those journals of Denny Lee's? Well, the last thing he was writing about was something he called the Walking Stones. I don't know all the details cause he didn't write down everything he knew. But I was working my hunch that he was right about these stones."

"Right about what, Jake?"

"Well, since I told you and Igneous part of the tale a while back before I left Jimville, I might as well tell you the rest. These Walking Stone things are old. Real old. Older than anything we know. Somehow when you walk on them they transport you to another set of stones. Somewhere. Denny Lee was trying to figure out how they worked and how they were connected together. He thought they came from another time and another place."

"Interesting. But what does this have to do with you and Olivia?" asked Flagstone.

"Well, in times long gone by, the various tribes all over Jimland used to worship whoever built these platforms. Kind of like the Builders were the gods or something. But it seems the Builders went away for reasons unknown and never returned."

"So?"

"So now word's out that the Builders are coming back. Tribes all over Jimland are sending a party with offerings to every Walking Stone platform

they are aware of. No one knows where or when the Builders are returning except it's supposed to be sometime soon."

"Offerings?" Flagstone didn't like the sound of the word.

"Yeah. It seems the old legends say the Builders selected the best and brightest of the tribes as their personal attendants. Since the Builders haven't been here to choose, the tribes making their best guess. And throwing in a few extras as it were. Like me."

Flagstone didn't laugh. He shook his head. "You believe this crap, Jake?"

"Well, I believed it enough to go looking for Walking Stone platforms. I used Denny Lee's journal and I found seven before the tribes found me. I got passed around a bit before it was decided I should be offered as a sacrifice to the Builders."

"Sacrifice?" asked Flagstone.

"Yeah. The legends say the Builders like a sacrifice or two when they arrive. Shows your dedication and all that. That's what I was going to be. They said I should be very pleased. It was an honor. I think Olivia is now going to be honored." Big Jake looked glum. "Sorry for the mess, Jules," he said quietly.

"Not your fault, Jake. We butted in," replied Flagstone.

"Glad you did. Thanks by the way," said Big Jake.

"You're welcome. We better be going," said Flagstone.

The two men rose and silently disappeared into the darkening jungle.

Report 166 - 1.3 - THE SHAMAN.

Date: 2003-12-16

1.3 - THE SHAMAN

Julius Flagstone and Big Jake Frere moved silently through the jungle. It was mid-day of the fourth day of their search. They were trying to locate the place from which they had just escaped. They feared time was growing short. Had Olivia Fate already been sacrificed to the mysterious Builders? Flagstone didn't want to think about it.

Big Jake suddenly threw himself on the ground. Flagstone did likewise. Big Jake motioned Flagstone to move to his side. They peered out onto the ruins they had been searching for. Flagstone's heart caught in his throat. There was Olivia tied to the same two posts from which she had rescued Big Jake just a few days ago. Big Jake muttered something decidedly unfriendly.

The camp seemed quiet. But so it had seemed before. Taking one last look, the two men crept back into the darkest spot they could find. Flagstone looked at Big Jake.

"Tonight. No excuses," said Flagstone.

"Ok," answered Big Jake. He smiled. "You take the first watch." Flagstone nodded. Big Jake gathered some large fallen fronds and covered himself from view. Flagstone followed suit. They waited.

Darkness covered the jungle. Day things settled down. Night things came out of hiding. Julius Flagstone wondered which he was. Big Jake didn't wonder. The two men lay the heavy undergrowth watching the camp. It was well lit from all the campfires. Since Flagstone's first visit to the camp things had changed. The camp was now a small village. Women and children had joined the men. It was difficult for the two men to approach the camp unseen. Flagstone was hoping all the extra activity would be added distraction to warriors. Big Jake didn't think they should assume anything but the same deadly watchfulness that they encountered the first time.

After several hours of uncomfortable squirming through the undergrowth the pair had reach a point about thirty yards from Olivia. She was still bound hand and foot to the two posts. A tribal warrior guard slouched at each side. Flagstone watched her carefully. Other than being scratched, bruised, and dirty, she didn't seemed injured. It seemed the warriors regarded her as a special prize. Flagstone was glad Olivia had not suffered a worse fate.

After whispered conversation the men decided they were too far away to try to rush across the open ground between them and Olivia. They had to find a closer location. Prospects were not good. They slithered backward into the darkness. Suddenly a spearpoint struck the ground by Flagstone's face. He froze.

Next to him Big Jake grunted, "Now we've done it."

The two were roughly hauled to their feet and disarmed. Around them stood thirty tribal warriors. As unhappy as Flagstone and Big Jake felt the warrior look equally pleased. They bound the two men at wrist and elbow and hustled them toward the camp with great shouts.

A small parade took place. The men were led around the entire camp. Much shouting and whistling came from the women and children. The warriors shook their spears in a menacing manner. Flagstone was left with no doubt as to the desire of the warriors. The procession stopped before a nondescript hut. Everyone grew quiet. Flagstone and Big Jake exchanged glances.

After a minute of stillness a man emerged from the hut. He was about Flagstone's size. He wasn't as dark-skinned as the tribal people. He wore a grass skirt. Over his face was a huge red wooden mask with a long frond crest dangling down. He carried a small bright green snake in one hand and a skull in the other. The crowd stepped back as he drew nearer the captives.

He eyed the two men. He walked around them, studying them. He walked up behind Flagstone. He drew very close, his mouth almost in Flagstone's ear.

"Welcome, Flagstone," he hissed through clinched teeth. Flagstone's head jerked around to look directly at the mask. He didn't say anything.

"Yes, yes, we meet again," whispered the masked man. Flagstone's head followed the man around until he stood in front of the pair. The masked man yelled several commands. Flagstone and Big Jake were instantly seized and dragged off toward Olivia. Soon four more posts were in the ground and the new prisoners were bound between them. Olivia looked at Flagstone and shook her pretty head. Julius smiled at her.

"Stupid," said Olivia softly.

"I tried to tell him, Olivia, but, well, you know the man," said Big Jake.

"Yes, I do," she said. A bright tear slid down her cheek.

"Well, at least we're all together," said Flagstone. "Do you know, I think that is Tastimin behind that mask. Bloody amazing."

"Yes, it's him. He had a private chat with me when I first arrived. Same old Tastimin," said Olivia.

"What's he up to," asked Big Jake.

"I don't know," she answered.

"Masquerading as a tribal shaman. Bloody amazing. I wonder," said Flagstone. Olivia interrupted.

"He's not masquerading. He's done some amazing things while I've been here. He's healed a couple of sick kids, cured an old woman, and patched up several warriors you wounded, Julius. I'm sure they're happy to see you back. He's got some trick up his sleeve."

All three of the prisoners stared toward the hut on the other side of the ruins. All three stared across the empty stone platform in the center of the ruins.

Strangely, the three captives were left alone other than a daily feeding of leftovers after the morning meal. Their guards let them talk freely. The shaman was not seen again. Occasionally some of the camp children would throw small stones at them, but the guards would send them on their way. This uncharacteristic kindness had Flagstone's mind racing. They discussed it till they ran out of words. They wondered why they were so obviously being saved for something and what was that something?

Finally Big Jake let out a huge sigh. Flagstone looked at him.

"What?" asked Flagstone.

"I know what's going on," muttered Big Jake.

"What," repeated Flagstone. Big Jake squirmed a little in his ropes.

"The Builders must be coming here or have already come here. Looks like Tastimin has new friends," he said.

"You're kidding," said Flagstone.

"What are you talking about?" asked Olivia. Big Jake told her what he had told Julius. As he ended he nodded across the camp.

"How else can you explain it? Tastimin doing these wonderful things, the warriors jumping to do his every command. He's got something from the Builders, I'll wager," said Big Jake. "See that platform, if that's not one of the Walking Stone platforms I'll eat my hat, provided I ever get the chance."

"What does it do," asked Olivia, now intently watching the stone platform.

"Well, from Denny Lee's notes and my own figuring, they transport you somewhere instantly. You just step onto it and poof, you are gone to wherever."

"Wherever being...?" asked Olivia.

"To another Walking Stone platform somewhere I guess," answered Big Jake.

"And you think Tastimin the Despicable, the most foul creature in Jimland, has figured this out for himself and has become a tribal shaman curing the sick because of it," asked Olivia shaking her head in disbelief.

Flagstone laughed. Olivia gave him a look.

"Olivia, let's think a minute. What Big Jake is saying isn't too far fetched. Something is going on here. Tastimin is faking being a shaman for some reason. He never does anything without a reason.

"Except kill helpless people," Olivia spit out.

"Yes, that is true. But something is going on. It seems we are in the middle of it whether we want to be or not. The tribes gathered here don't seem to know what's about to happen except that one of their legends is suppose to come true. We are some sort of sacrifice. And I gather its going to happen sooner rather than later," said Flagstone.

"Bloody amazing," laughed Big Jake. They all laughed. Even their guard laughed. That made the captives quiet.

Night fell softly over the camp. A rise of general noise, then specific shouting announced the arrival of another tribe of warriors. Formal greetings were exchanged between the chiefs. Small gifts were exchanged and pledges of friendship were made. The captives strained to catch all this. After all the formality was over, the newly arrived chief had several sick tribe members brought forth. The camp chief called for the shaman to come forth and prove his power. The entire camp became still.

Minutes later the shaman slowly came forth. He walked around those to be healed. He muttered to himself. He threw some powder high in the air to settle on the sick and injured. He held aloft his right hand. The camp seemed to take a collective breath. A light shot out of the shaman's hand and came to rest on the first supplicant. She gasped. The light moved on to the next, and to the next until all had been bathed in the light. The shaman said nothing more. He walked majestically back inside his hut.

The tribes gathered round the supplicants. Shouts of delight and awe filled the night air. The sick and wound were healed. They danced about in their joy. A great noise rose from the assembled tribes.

Suddenly the Shaman burst forth from his hut. He commanded silence. The tribes fell silent immediately. The shaman walked to the stone platform in the center of the ruins. Lightly he leapt to the top. He surveyed the crowd around the platform.

"Do you doubt me?" he asked.

"No" came back the shouted response. The shaman looked around. He motioned to someone at the back of the crowd. "Stand back," ordered the shaman.

Snarling and barely restrained by the ten warriors manning the ropes that held it, a huge smilodon struggled forward. The tribes yelled in terror and fell back. The beast looked around and roared defiantly. The crowd retreated another step. The shaman laughed loudly and jumped down to face the giant beast. He threw a stone at the big cat. It howled in frustrated rage. He threw another stone. The beast nearly got away from its handlers. The shaman hit the beast with a large branch and just barely avoided a swipe of its huge paw. The shaman kept provoking the huge cat until it was frothing at the mouth. Slowly it was dragging its handlers toward the shaman despite their frantic efforts to hold it back. The shaman backed away ten yards. The beast snarled in anger. The shaman raised his hand. He ordered the ropes cast free. The great smilodon leapt directly at the shaman.

A blinding ray of light shot out from the shamans upraised hand. The smilodon fell lifeless at his feet. The shaman calmly cut out one of the

great cat's incisors. He held it up. The tribes roared approval. They began to chant a long forgotten song-line. The shaman walked back to his hut.

The camp was in a delirious uproar for much of the night. The smilodon was roasted. The whole camp celebrated. The captives were ignored.

The captives were stunned. They had witnessed the entire episode. It was as if the shaman had put on the spectacle for them as much as for the gathered tribes.

Just as the camp was calming down the shaman appeared again. A clamor arose for the assembled tribe. The shaman gestured for silence. Only the subdued jungle noises were heard. The shaman walked ceremonially around the platform three times. Then he raised his hands to the stars and spoke some unknown words. Then he flung some colored powder over the stone platform.

Dim lights began to shine on the surface of the platform. A great murmuring rose from the tribes. The lights grew brighter. The murmuring grew louder. The lights form geometric patterns on the platform surface. They settled into a large white square containing a green square, a blue triangle and a red circle. The lights became brighter. They lit up the entire area of the ruins and camp. They became so bright the tribes had to look away. Suddenly all was cast into darkness as the lights went out.

The shaman's strong voice rang out. "Tomorrow night they shall come!"

Report 167 - 1.X - RUN AWAY.

Date: 2003-12-17

1.X - RUN AWAY.

Julius Flagstone hung limply between the posts even though the rough rope dug into his wrists. On one side of Flagstone Olivia Fate slept standing up, sort of. On the other side Big Jake Frere was pulling and twisting his bonds. It was darkest night. Their guards were some distance away gathered by a fire. Flagstone stood up straight and worked on his wrists. Just to get one free was all he wanted.

Much to his surprise the coarse rope of local plant fiber suddenly began to unravel. These ropes weren't meant to last very long. He was surprised they were tied to the posts with the material. His hand was free. He reached over and undid the other hand. His eyes never left the guards. Big Jake whispered.

"My hands are free."

"Mine too," answered Flagstone. He looked at Olivia. She was still dozing. He quickly made loops and slipped his hands back in them. He still appeared tied to the posts. He watched the guards. He untied his feet and made loops for them. Then he and Big Jake exchanged looks.

"Well, now what?" asked Big Jake.

"I have no clue. I making this up as I go," Flagstone answered.

"Grab the guards when they come back? There's only two of them," said Big Jake.

"Too risky with Olivia still tied up," said Flagstone.

"I've had my hands free for a day," Olivia said. Flagstone looked at her in surprise.

"Why didn't you say something," he asked in a hoarse whisper.

"Just never had the opportunity," she said. "Besides where was I going alone?"

"Get your feet free while you can," grunted Big Jake not especially pleased with Olivia. Flagstone added a grunt of his own. Olivia giggled.

"Boys, boys", she said softly. "What's next? Run for it?"

"It's an idea," said Big Jake.

"No weapons. How far would we get," asked Flagstone? He was trying to form a plan. The conversation was distracting. They had to do something immediately. Now! Before they were found loose. He looked at the sleeping

camp. Their guards were still sitting together chatting by the fire. Flagstone estimated forty feet to them, forty feet to the jungle's edge.

Flagstone made up his mind abruptly. "Ok, we'll run for it. Try to stay together. If we get separated head for the coast then back to our base camp. Get ready."

They became tense and quiet. The guards still talked softly. The camp slumbered. "Get ready" repeated Flagstone as if talking to himself.

A monstrous dark form separated itself from the jungle on the far side of the camp. A terrifying roar woke the entire camp. The T-Rex charged into the camp. It clamped its great jaws on a skinny cow. One big gulp and the animal was gone. Another roar woke the dead. The tribes milled about in confusion. Warriors threw spears at the beast to very little effect. Lashing out with its tail, the T-Rex scattered people about.

"Now", ordered Flagstone. The three ran for the jungle. Several paces into the jungle cover they stopped and turned about. The spectacle of the tribal warriors fighting the T-Rex with just spears was too much to miss. The T-Rex gulped a slow warrior down. More spears flew through the air. Few did little harm. The T-Rex stomped forward toward the center of the camp. It roared at the stars. Its tail lashed back and forth bowling over all in its path.

The shaman appeared directly across the platform from the monster. The shaman raised his hand. The T-Rex charged forward, up and onto the platform. The platform shook. It blazed into blinding light. The T-Rex took a confused step forward toward the shaman. The shaman took a step back and fell headfirst off the platform and lay motionless. A silver ball rolled from his hand. In a flash Big Jake broke into a run. He scooped up the ball and kept running full speed into the jungle. The T-Rex roared again. It took another step amid the brilliant lights of the platform. It instantly disappeared.

Blinding darkness. Flagstone, Olivia, and Big Jake ran. They stayed bunched closely together. They heard no sounds of pursuit. They ran. They found a stream. They turned and ran upstream. They stumbled on in the darkness. They ran.

It was well past mid-day the next day when Julius finally staggered to a halt. Big Jake was wheezing beside him. Olivia lay in a heap. They all looked like hell. They were scratched, bruised, had several not so minor cuts or scrapes, and were covered with mud from head to foot. They gasped for air.

"Come on, we must not stop," Flagstone urged while trying not to fall over.

Olivia struggled to her feet. They headed east at a slow stumbling gait. They went on until nightfall. They found another stream and started following it downstream. Finally near midnight, without a word, they halted. They lay in the stream and drank deeply. They tried to wash some of the dirt off their exposed skin. They found leeches and removed them none too gently.

Flagstone had an idea. He stumbled out of the stream and looked up at the trees towering around them. Selecting one he began to climb.

"Come on," he said. The other two wearily followed. Soon they were thirty feet up in the jungle canopy. Big Jake and Flagstone tore off some huge leaves and made a blind in a fork in the tree branches. A little work with the vines close at hand and they had a platform to sit carefully on. They looked at each other.

Big Jake spoke first. "I'll watch, you sleep. Two hours."

Olivia and Julius said nothing. They tried to get comfortable without the risk of falling. Soon they were sound asleep. Big Jake watched the jungle floor. Later they each had a turn at watching. In the east the sky lightened. Olivia woke the men. Dawn had arrived in the jungle. She handed them a piece of fruit. They devoured it.

Big Jake began to climb down. Olivia grabbed his arm. "I'll get some more fruit," he said. Olivia let him go. She looked at Julius. He was looking around at the jungle and at the sky.

"Where are we?" she asked.

"I'm not sure," he said. Flagstone inhaled deeply. He seemed to taste the air. "Can't smell the ocean, so we are probably a couple of days inland still. We'll go directly south today." He pointed. Olivia nodded.

Suddenly warrior yells came from below. Big Jake came running toward the tree at a hasty speed. As he went by he yelled. "Stay".

Big Jake turned and headed north. Julius and Olivia pulled the big leaves close around themselves. Behind Big Jake six tribal warriors came on at a run. They disappeared into the jungle. Olivia and Flagstone looked around. They climbed down the tree and headed in the opposite direction from Big Jake.

Unseen by Flagstone, two warriors, carrying a deer-like animal between them, came out of the dense jungle as Flagstone and Olivia disappeared into it. They dropped their burden and immediately ran after the pair of Explorers. The warriors ran swiftly and quietly.

Olivia let out a stifled yell. Flagstone turned and was knocked over by the charge of a warrior. The warrior's spear grazed his side. They grappled on the jungle floor. As he fought his attacker Flagstone heard Olivia fighting with hers. His hands were trying to crush the warrior's windpipe while the warrior was trying to free his spear with one hand and hold Flagstone down with the other. Flagstone jerked the man to the ground. The warrior lost his grip on Flagstone. Julius rolled over and pushed his knee with all his strength on the neck of the warrior. There was sharp snap and the warrior lay still.

Flagstone grabbed the loose spear. Olivia and her attacker were thrashing in the underbrush. Flagstone rushed over. With a single violent thrust he ended the fight. Flagstone pulled the dead warrior off Olivia. He pulled the spear out of the warrior. Olivia shivered at the sucking sound the spear made. Flagstone retrieved a second spear. They took the water gourds and

food pouches from the dead warriors. Without looking back, they headed south again, Flagstone leading, Olivia a step behind. With their adrenaline pumping from the short fight, they quickly left the scene of the fight behind.

At mid-day the pair stopped. They took a sip of water and a mouthful of food. They listened. The jungle was quiet. Olivia let out a sob. She looked at Julius.

'Sorry, dear,' she said. Flagstone stepped over and held her gently while she sobbed quietly into his shoulder.

"Its ok," he said quietly. "Big Jake will be ok. He's the best. He knew what he was doing."

"Yes," choked out Olivia. She hugged him close for a few moments longer then stepped back. "Let's go."

They walked toward the south. Two days later they were soaking their feet in the blue waters that surround the Secret Islands. They washed up as best they could in a stream. They tended their myriad of cuts and scrapes. Flagstone managed to spear a napping fish. Putting caution aside they built a small fire and cooked the fish. They filled their gourds from the cool clear stream. With the afternoon sun in their faces they headed west.

Flagstone was walking behind Olivia. He watched her walked. She was steady and sure. Her clothes were torn and dirty. She set a strong pace.

"You look a little thin, Olivia," he said. She laughed.

"I like it." She laughed again. "No, really, you look good," he said.

Olivia slowed to walk beside Julius. She took his hand and squeezed it. They walked down the beach in silence.

The sun settled itself into the western horizon. Night came. They stopped only once and ate some fruit they found nearby. In the moonlight they continued to follow the beach west.

Four days later they approached their base camp. They were excited and exhausted at the same time. Flagstone called out. No one answered. He called again. Still no answer. The camp was deserted. All the canoes were gone. Flagstone's shiny new steam launch lay where the high tide had left it. They searched the camp. No sign of violence. No sign of the few men he had left behind weeks ago.

"What do you think, Jules?" asked Olivia.

He shrugged. "I have no clue. We have plenty of food and drink. I say we wait for high tide, refloat the launch, and get back to Jimville."

"What about Big Jake?" Olivia asked.

"High tide won't be for a few days I'd say. If Big Jake is coming, he'll be here by then," he said. Olivia frowned.

"We can't go looking for him, Olivia," Flagstone said.

"I know, Jules," she said.

Five days later the steam launch pulled lazily away from the golden beach and headed east. It ran parallel to the shore till mid-day. Then with a long sad toot of its steam whistle, the launch turned its bow to seaward.

Report 168 - FLAGSTONE RETURNS.

Date: 2003-12-20

FLAGSTONE RETURNS

Julius Flagstone has returned to Jimville. His Expedition has not. Let us explain.

Two days ago Flagstone piloted his shiny steam launch into the Jimville harbor. The only people aboard were Julius Flagstone and the fetching Olivia Fate. Both were in rather sad shape. Both were happy to be back in Jimville.

Upon hearing of their arrival, Casimir Ponatowski with the Lovely Marie at his side quickly appeared on the Main Pier and took charge. Chasing the overly inquisitive away, Casimir and Marie tenderly helped Flagstone and Olivia to their old rooms at the Empress Hotel. Marie attended to Olivia's needs, while Ponatowski placed his large frame squarely in the hall and allowed no one past.

Flagstone and Olivia got a good night's rest. The next day, in the lobby of the Empress, they granted a press interview.

PRESS: Mr. Flagstone we have worried much for your safety. Can you tell us where you have been and what you have been doing?

JULIUS FLAGSTONE: I, we, have been in the Secret Islands. The island we were on we named the Island of Diamonds.

A murmur went through the crowd inside and outside the Empress.

PRESS: You found diamonds there?

FLAGSTONE: No, no, no diamonds. The island was sparkling with the morning dew when the sun came up on our first morning there. It looked liked diamonds were sprinkled on everything. We thought it was a good name for the place.

PRESS: Did you find any diamonds, Mr. Flagstone?

FLAGSTONE: No.

PRESS: You left with a large Expedition, Mr. Flagstone. You returned alone. Where is your Expedition?

FLAGSTONE: The ones I know about are dead. The whereabouts of the rest I do not know.

PRESS: Did they find any diamonds?

FLAGSTONE: I don't know.

PRESS: How did your men die, Mr. Flagstone?

FLAGSTONE: Bravely. We were ambushed by hordes of natives while crossing a deep gorge far inland on the island. I am sorry to report that as far I as can determine all the men were killed.

PRESS: All of them?

FLAGSTONE: All of them.

PRESS: Ms Fate, what were you doing while this terrible ambush was going on?

OLIVIA FATE: Shooting any native I could see.

PRESS: How did you manage to escape?

FATE: Julius and I were the first to test the rope bridge across the gorge. The natives did not attack until the rest of the party tried to cross the bridge.

PRESS: Did you find any diamonds, Ms Fate?

FATE: No.

PRESS: Mr. Flagstone, rumors say you met Big Jake Frere on the island. Is this true?

FLAGSTONE: Yes. Olivia and I rescued Mr. Frere from some nasty tribal warriors.

PRESS: Rescued, Ms Fate?

FATE: Yes, I think that's what you call it when you cut a man down from being bound to posts and escape into the jungle with the angry warriors chasing you and throwing spears at you.

PRESS: Did Mr. Frere find any diamonds?

FATE: None that we are aware of.

PRESS: Then Mr. Frere could have found some diamonds and been hiding them from you?

FLAGSTONE: Are you new in town?

PRESS: Mr. Flagstone, Big Jake did not return with you. Where is he?

FLAGSTONE: Still on the island I would guess.

PRESS: Alive?

FLAGSTONE: The last time we saw Big Jake he was very much alive. He saved our lives.

A loud murmur filled the room.

PRESS: Tell us what happened, Ms. Fate.

FATE: Very simply, Big Jake decoyed the tribal warriors away from us into the island interior. That's the last time we saw him.

PRESS: Rumor says Big Jake was in cahoots with Tastimin running guns and liquor.

FLAGSTONE: Don't be silly.

PRESS: But it could be true, Mr. Flagstone, could it not?

FLAGSTONE: It could be if pigs could fly.

FATE: Are you new in town?

PRESS: Did Tastimin find any diamonds?

FLAGSTONE: I do not know if Tastimin found any diamonds. We did not see Tastimin on the island. I would know him if I saw him. Olivia would know the scum if she saw him.

PRESS: How many diamonds do you think are left on the island, Mr. Flagstone?

FATE: There are no diamonds on the island.

PRESS: But if there were, how many diamonds do think are left on the island?

FATE: Oh, great heaps of them I suspect. Right, Julius?

FLAGSTONE: Of course, Olivia.

PRESS: Mr. Flagstone, what will you do next?

FLAGSTONE: Have lunch. Thank you, Gentlemen, this interview is concluded.

The crowd slowly dispersed. Julius Flagstone and the fetching Olivia Fate walked arm-in-arm into the Empress' large dining room. They were shown to the best table, soon to be joined by Casimir Ponatowski and the lovely Marie. The doors to the dining room were closed. Several of Ponatowski's largest men then stood in front of the doors, feet wide apart, arms across their chests, and a frown on their faces. No one asked to use the dining room. From inside could be heard the chatter from the party with the occasional melodic laughter from the women and deep chuckles from the men.

Dear Reader, what Really happened on the island? How did the Expedition of Julius Flagstone, a Fearless and Famous Explorer of the Highest Reputation, get wiped out while only Julius and Olivia Fate managed to survive, nay, even profit from this disaster? What is not being said, Dear Reader? Is the diamond find as large as we think? The Truth, Gentle Reader, must be found. And We Will Find It, no matter the cost.

Is Tastimin the Despicable, even now harvesting several Kings' ransoms in diamonds? Is this the secret source of funding used by the Glorious Peoples Expedition? Its not too strange to be true. Surely there is a Fearless and Famous Explorer with Ethics of the Highest Caliber who will seek the Truth of this whole messy affair. We would gladly fund his Expedition to seek the Truth.

DULLCOTE RAISES REWARD

Norton Dullcote announced he has raised the reward for the return his Dear Constance unharmed. It has gone from "Large" to "Very Large." His words, Dear Reader. Dullcote also thanks Flagstone and Ponatowski for their efforts and hopes they will soon try again.

Rumors of collusion between natives, Tastimin, Don Alvarado, and the Glorious Peoples Expedition in the matter of the kidnapping of Constance Dullcote abound. It all makes sense to us, Dear Reader. Such a cast of miserable characters has not been seen in Jimland for a long time. What can one expect when this line-up of miscreants is on the scene. Disasters surely follow.

Again, we hear the desperate cries from You, Gentle Reader. Cries for justice and an end to the Evil Activities in our Beloved Jimland. We hope a Hero will step forth to lead us to a kinder, gentler Jimland.

SCIENCE CLUB

The Science Club is happy to report all club members were reported safe after the last meeting. The Jimville Fire Department rescued one and all from the freak cave-in that occurred during the demonstrations at the last meeting. The cause of the cave-in is under investigation.

Remember, there is still time to join this year's membership. Our theme of "Mining and Excavation, the Way to Mineral Riches" is turning out to be very popular. Next meeting we will have a presentation on "Diamonds, where and how to find them." Join up and join in the fun.

Report 169 - FOUR EXPEDITIONS BRAVE THE WILDS OF JIMLAND!

Date: 2003-12-22

FOUR EXPEDITIONS BRAVE THE WILDS OF JIMLAND!

Four Expeditions led by the few remaining Fearless and Famous Explorers trekked into the Wilds of Jimland seeking the kidnapped Constance Dullcote or Fame and Fortune whichever came first.

BIG AL, THE MARUADER EXPEDITION

Amid some cries of "what am I doing here," and "please don't make me go", Big Al's Expedition marched out of Jimville. Where they were bound not even Big Al knew. They marched on.

They found a new species of something, but forgot what it was. No matter, they marched on. They found a village in a jungle clearing. They marched on. Numerous Goatmen attacked. They were beaten off with heavy casualties.

They marched on. A hungry "big furry animal" attacked the Expedition and dragged an Askari off into the brush for lunch. They marched on. They discovered a new "medicinal" plant the smoking of which gave them a big case of the munchies. They marched happily along. Hi-ho, Hi-ho.

They marched some more. They ran into mountains. A brushfire out ran a Bearer. They shrugged and marched on. They became "disoriented" in the mountains. They threatened their scout with several atrocities. They wandered around in the mountains. They stumbled out of the mountains. They marched on.

They discovered a new species of Giant Snake that proved to be carnivorous. They shrugged and marched on. Starvation set in. Bearers dropped in piles. They staggered back to base camp, thinner, yet sadly, no wiser.

THE AIRDRIEONIAN EXPEDITION

The Airdrieonian Expedition led by Lord Angus MacFraser headed boldly into the Wilds, pipes bleating their march tune. They marched on. They were immediately ambushed by the angry Native Music Lovers Association. The attack was beaten off, but not without heavy casualties.

They marched on. The ENTIRE contingent of Soldiers accompanying the Expedition inexplicably abandoned the Expedition. Lord MacFraser was in rare form as he hurled invectives at the fast departing Soldiers. We think MacFraser has some explaining to do. They were attacked by Skeleton Warriors and a Giant Ape. Or so MacFraser claims. [Maybe those Soldiers were smarter than we thought - Ed.] They marched on feeling rather naked.

A huge number of Goatmen attacked. They were beaten off with heavy casualties to the few remaining Explorers. They marched on, pipes now silent. They discovered a new species of Big Cat. It was not friendly. It was hungry. They marched on. They met neutral Lizardmen, or so claims MacFraser. [What was this guy drinking? - Ed.] They marched on.

They discovered a new species of primate. They marched on. Jungle rot set in. They hobbled on. They met more neutral Lizardmen, or so claims MacFraser. They discovered ancient ruins. They marched on.

They discovered a Native Holy Relic. They marched on. Dogmen attacked. They marched on. They marched some more. Food went bad. Stomachs began to growl. Bearers were lost crossing a ravine. They wobbled along. They discovered a mountain 10,000 feet tall. Dogmen attacked again. Starvation gnawed at their innards. They marched on. Still more Dogmen attacked just as they reached their base camp. They were glad to be home.

THE PONATOWSKI EXPEDITION

Lead by the redoubtable Casimir Ponatowski they marched bravely into the Wilds. Immediately Soldiers began to fall ill. They marched on. They discovered an Elephant Graveyard. They lugged ivory out as loot. They marched on. A huge group of Dogmen attacked. They fought off the attack but suffered heavy casualties.

They marched on. They were ambushed by Tribals. The Tribals were beaten off. They marched on. Slavers attacked looking for some "merchandise." They were beaten off. They discovered a lake and named it "Lake Opalka." Not very catchy. They marched on. They found a deserted village and promptly looted it. They marched on.

They discovered a new species of flower and named it the "Jimland Snapdragon." They marched on wondering if there was any terrain other than Jungle in Jimland. [Probably not - Ed.] They marched some more. Slavers appeared then disappeared. A neat trick if you can do it. They marched back into their base camp.

THE TOKEN EXPEDITION

[We wonder if this is a misspelling and should be "tokin'." Just a thought. - Ed.] With their Token Leader leading they shuffled out of Jimville looking wistfully over their shoulders. They marched on. They discovered a new species of primitive man. They marched on.

They discovered a new species of Large Bird. They marched on. They traded with friendly natives. They marched on. They marched some more. They marched more and began to get a little bored with the whole marching thing.

A hailstorm pounded some sense into them. Several men were pounded a little too much. With renewed enthusiasm, they marched on. They wandered into some mountains. Men started dying due to something called a "damn table." [Never heard of it - Ed.] They marched on. More men succumbed to the dreaded "damn table."

They marched on. A Dogmen war party attacked. The Dogmen were beaten off. They marched on. They made it back to base camp on the verge of starvation. They were happy to have hot dogs for supper. A treat to be sure in Jimland.

LOST DOG

The British Consul would like his dog back. He offers all the usual bribes and/or threats.

SCIENCE CLUB

The Science Club would like its dynamite back. They offer all the usual bribes and/or threats.

Report 170 - 2.1 - HAPPY REUNION.

Date: 2003-12-23

2.1 - HAPPY REUNION

Julius Flagstone sat on the veranda of the Empress Hotel. The warm morning sun felt good. Olivia had gone to the Vistula Villa to spend the day with Marie. Flagstone had some free time. A scraping of boots on the veranda boards cause Flagstone to turn around. Julius jumped and clasped the man in a bear hug.

"Blind Bob! I thought you were dead," said the jubilant Flagstone.

"Nah. I got back before you did. Can we talk, Mr. Flagstone," asked Blind Bob.

"Sure can! Is right here ok?" asked Flagstone.

"If you think its safe enough," said Blind Bob.

Flagstone pulled him down into the chair next to his. He motioned to the waiter and ordered Blind Bob a stiff drink. Blind Bob took a small sip of his drink and waited for the waiter to move farther down the veranda. Flagstone noted his mood.

"No one told me you were alive, Bob," said Flagstone, breaking the silence.

"I didn't expect they would," said Blind Bob.

"Well, man, tell me what happened to you. I stood right there inside the Empress and told everyone you were dead," said Flagstone pointing.

Blind Bob looked around. He took a big swallow from the glass. A muffled gasp escaped his lips. Flagstone waited patiently.

"I didn't try to cross the bridge, Mr. Flagstone. I ran off into the jungle the opposite direction during the last native attack. I was just looking out for my own hide. I left you and Miss Olivia," said Blind Bob. He hung his head.

"Bob, no one's blaming you for anything. I'm sure Olivia would agree with me when I tell you we would have done the same thing. It was sure death to cross the bridge. It was what the natives wanted us to do. It was their chosen killing ground and it worked too well," replied Flagstone.

"Yeah," answered Blind Bob still staring at his hands.

"Come on man, you're alive and still welcome as my scout anytime, anywhere," Flagstone said. "Now what's the story."

"Like I said I ran off into the bush. I hid out and finally made it to the base camp. You weren't there. I waited about two weeks and then I gathered

up the boys in camp and sailed back to Jimville. Left your steam launch behind. Didn't know how to run it."

"And I'm glad you didn't. That's how Olivia and I got back to Jimville," said Flagstone. Blind Bob brightened a little.

"As soon as I came back, I tried to form a rescue Expedition. The Editor at the Herald offered to foot the bill for food supplies. Nobody else offered to help. Nobody, Mr. Flagstone. Not even Mr. Ponatowski," said Blind Bob.

Flagstone smiled at the corner of his mouth. "I know. I've talked to Casimir. I understand."

"Anyway, Mr. Flagstone, I got a few of your old boys together and we left Jimville in the night three days after we got back. I hoped to get back to the island and go looking for you. But we were blown far off course," said Blind Bob. Now he seemed to pull his head down between his shoulders and whispered to Flagstone.

"I found something when we were blown ashore on one of the Secret Islands, Mr. Flagstone. I don't rightly understand it all, but maybe you can," he said softly.

Flagstone felt himself perk up. Blind Bob was nobody's fool. He edged his chair closer to Blind Bob. A quick glance around showed no one paying attention to them.

"What did you find?" he asked.

Blind Bob pulled a leather pouch out of the huge pocket of his jacket. He laid it on the table and slid it in front of Flagstone. Julius sat back in chair and sipped his drink. A moment passed. He opened the pouch and pulled out several small fragments of animal hide scrolls. He looked at them. Very old he thought, old and ready to fall into useless bits of junk.

"May I," asked Flagstone sensing Blind Bob's nervousness.

"Sure, maybe you can make some sense of it," answered Blind Bob. He took another swallow from his drink. He seemed to relax now that Flagstone had the pouch. Flagstone pulled his notebook from his pocket and the pencil from its loop. He looked at the hide scroll carefully, muttering to himself.

"Old. Very old. Some kind of Greek, I'd say. Hmmm. Thessaly. Kingdom of Colchis. Jason. Argo. Found. Pelias's treasure. Lost. Found again. Cursed. Hidden atop the slumbering mountain."

Flagstone looked at Blind Bob. Blind Bob didn't blink.

"You keep it, Mr. Flagstone," Blind Bob said.

"Bob, can you take me to where you found this?" asked Flagstone.

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure I can find that island again. You understand those fragments then, Mr. Flagstone?" asked Blind Bob.

"I think I do. I need to do a little research, but I think we may be off on an adventure of a different sort if all goes well. You did very well, Bob, bringing this to me," Flagstone said. He took out his wallet, removed a not so small wad of bills from it, and slid them over to Blind Bob.

"And you get a raise." Flagstone smiled. Bob hesitated, then picked up the money.

"Thank you, Mr. Flagstone. I won't run off again," he said.

"No harm done, Bob. Staying alive is number one in this business," said Flagstone studying the scroll fragments. "Staying alive is number one."

Flagstone pocketed his notebook and the pouch. Blind Bob didn't even glance at him. Flagstone ordered Blind Bob another drink. He looked up and down the dusty main street of Jimville. Flagstone was lost in thought for several minutes. Then he rose and clapped Blind Bob on the shoulder.

"You find me a good hunter, and start getting some bearers together. I need to send some cables. We'll be leaving after I get some answers. You're still my head scout so get busy," Flagstone said happily. "Glad you made it back ok, Bob, really I am."

The two men shook hands and parted, each with a smile on his face.

Later that evening Flagstone sat in his room at the Empress. He reread the response to the cables he had sent immediately after talking to Blind Bob. He sipped his tall cool drink. Won't be having any of these for a while he thought. He laid the cables on the table next to the hide scroll fragments. Next to them was his new Express Maxim Hunting Revolver, .60 caliber. "It will break your target in two or your arm if you miss" touted the advertising. Flagstone had stopped a charging elephant with one of these. He smiled to himself. It nearly took his arm off too. He wouldn't think of going on an Expedition without one of these monsters in his holster.

Olivia returned to the suite to find Julius still sitting, lost in thought. She smiled at him. He motioned for her to sit down.

"Have a nice time? he asked.

"Yes, it was very pleasant. Casimir says he would like to talk to you about the Dullcote woman when you have some time," answered Olivia.

"Well, we may not have time for a while, my Dear."

"What are you talking about, Jules," Olivia asked. Flagstone slid the cables over to her. She read in silence.

"You've got to be kidding. I mean I'm very happy Blind Bob is safe, and I'll give him a big hug the first time I see him, but this is silly," she said.

"Perhaps, perhaps not," replied Flagstone.

"This is a silly fable, Jules," snorted Olivia.

"Olivia, if its true, think about it. What do we have to lose?" asked Flagstone.

"Oh, let's see. Only our too short lives. This is silly, Jules," answered Olivia. Her eyes flashed.

Flagstone laughed. "Everything in Jimland is dangerous. Only some things are worth the risk. I think this bears looking into."

"Looking into," snapped Olivia.

"Olivia, dear, let me review this."

"Please do. Maybe I've missed something," she said.

"Let's see. There is an ancient fable about a fellow named Jason. Nice chap I understand." Olivia stifled a giggle. Flagstone continued.

"Jason went on a quest for a Golden Fleece. It was the coat of a ram that saved a young prince from an evil step-mother. Phyrxus, the prince, sacrificed the ram and the Golden Fleece was placed in a sacred grove guarded by a sleepless dragon.

To make a long, and may I say interesting story short, Jason retrieved the fleece after passing many deadly challenges. Jason gave the fleece to Pelias. What became of the fleece after that is lost to us. Ok so far?

Olivia nodded with a small smile. Flagstone pushed back his chair and took a swallow from his drink. He continued.

"It seems that at some point the fleece was stolen or perhaps captured during a war. In any case, the fleece left Greece. Imagine it passing from hand to hand. Greed followed it everywhere as did it's curse."

Olivia interrupted. "A curse? This part I haven't heard before."

"It's a small curse. It is said the holder of the fleece will watch his children die due to his greed. Anyway, imagine the fleece being moved around the world. A Greek ship holding the fleece eventually finds its way to the Secret Islands and runs aground. The fleece is hidden atop a slumbering mountain. It is guarded once more by a dragon. And we know where it is. Want to go on a sea cruise?"

Olivia looked at Flagstone. She smiled and shook her head in resignation. Julius beamed back at her.

Later that night as they lay in bed, Olivia whispered to Julius.

"Do you really think this crap is true, Jules?"

"As true as the Walking Stones Big Jake is chasing," he answered quietly. He felt Olivia tense up. That was a dumb thing to say, he thought. It was a long time before she relaxed.

"We must be careful, Jules," she said.

"We will be, my Dear," he answered.

Report 171 - 2.2 - GETTING THERE.

Date: 2003-12-24

2.2 - GETTING THERE

Julius Flagstone watched as the last of his Expedition's supplies were hoisted aboard his large steam launch. He carefully noted each item. As the last bags and crates were stored, Olivia Fate stepped onto the launch. She was radiant. She fixed a dazzling smile on Julius.

"I still think this is silly," she said.

"Perhaps," replied Julius.

As the sun rose for another dawn, Flagstone piloted his steam launch out of the Jimville harbor and headed to sea. Flagstone and Blind Bob huddled over the map of the Jimland coast. They had talked their course over many times before, but Flagstone wanted no mistakes.

Jimville disappeared into the morning mist. The steam engine hissed merrily along. The seas were calm. The morning fog was light. Flagstone was enjoying his time at sea. Off to starboard floated a dark mass. Instinctively he edged his launch closer. Several of the men on deck pointed at the mass. One man threw something at the dark shape.

Suddenly the seas were turned to frothing foam. A great forest of snake-like arms rose from the sea and groped at the launch. Two great eyes gleamed in the water. The launch rocked violently. A man yelled as he fell into the sea. A tentacle shot out and grabbed him. A scream was stifled by a sickening crunch of breaking bones. The launch halted as if it had hit a reef. Everyone was thrown to the deck. More tentacles gripped the big steam launch. Another man was grabbed. Flagstone grabbed a fire-fighting axe and hacked at the tentacle. It spewed greasy blood all over him. He swung again. The tentacle and the man it held disappeared below the water.

Something began to drag the launch sideways through the water. Everyone was yelling and scrambling about. Flagstone crawled on his hand and knees toward another tentacle. He swung at it once, twice, and a third time. The tentacle let go of the launch and slipped beneath the water. A great gray thing bobbed along the launch. A huge eye peered at him.

The launch was slowly being turned on its side. Flagstone heard things crashing about. Several men including Blind Bob had axes and large jungle knives out had were stabbing and cutting the many tentacles that ensnared the launch. Some writhing pieces tumbled about on the tilting deck.

Olivia stumbled onto the deck beside the cabin. She looked over the side and shouted. A great eye just below the surface was staring at her. More tentacles lashed the boat. Another man was pulled screaming below the water. Olivia rolled away from a grasping tentacle. She had Flagstone's Express Maxim Hunters Revolver held with both hands. She braced both feet on the titling side of the launch. The great eye continued to stare at her. She fired at the eye.

Many of the tentacles went into frenzy. She fired again. Fewer tentacles gripped the launch. She lurched to the stern and fired two more times. The sea boiled and hissed. Water rained down on the launch. The tentacles slipped beneath the sea. The launch rolled gently in the ocean swell.

Flagstone licked the salt water from his lips. He walked clumsily back to where Olivia was. She sat on an upturned barrel.

"What the hell was that?" he asked.

"Octopus, squid, something like that, but very big," she answered, her whole body shaking in fright. Olivia took several deep breaths. She tried to smile at Flagstone. He tried to smile back, but neither was very convincing. Flagstone eased the big gun out of her strong grip and stuffed it in his belt. Then he put a blanket about her wet shoulders. Olivia pulled it about herself and continued to shake.

The launch was dead in the water. It rose and fell with the gentle ocean swells. Julius looked around at the mess and the stunned men.

"Ok, clean this mess up," he barked. Some of the men began to slowly respond.

"Come on, let's get going. Move it," he yelled. The men seemed to come out of their trance. They began work. Julius helped Olivia to pilot's chair and sat her down. Her shivering had stopped.

"You're in charge up here. I'm going below to get steam pressure up again. You ok," he asked? She nodded and stood up, throwing off the blanket. She bent, picked up a piece of tentacle, and pitched it over the side.

"Go on, I'm fine, really," she said. Flagstone went below. The mess was worse here. Carefully stored goods were jumbled up and throw about. Two men were putting a plug into a hole in the side of the launch. The engine room was a shambles with water and coal sloshing about his ankles. The boiler was out. His chief mechanic reported it would take three or four hours to get everything shipshape.

Flagstone returned to the pilothouse. The deck was being efficiently cleared under Olivia's firm direction. He looked at the chart and at his watch. The affair had not lasted more the a few minutes though it seemed much longer. With a calm sea and no wind to speak of they would not drift far. He rolled up his sleeves and went to help in the engine room.

Several hours later the first puffs of smoke arose from the launch's single smokestack. Soon the subdued clatter of the steam engine regained its rhythmic pattern. A small bow wave lapped at the stem post. Flagstone's steam launch resumed it's course. He climbed back into the pilothouse. Olivia was sitting in the only chair. Blind Bob was at the steering station. He nodded at Flagstone. Olivia smiled a weary smile.

"Feed the men," she said.

"Yes, a good idea. Think fish would be a ok?" he asked. Olivia laughed.

"I'd say beef and a double ration of spirits or nothing at all," she said.

Flagstone nodded and went below hollering for the chief Expedition cook. In a few minutes the scent of a meal in the making rose to the deck. The men murmured happily among themselves. Blind Bob winked at Olivia who surprisingly walked over and kissed him on his weathered cheek. He blushed. Olivia went below to help with the meal.

The rest of the day and the next passed quietly though everyone jumped if anything splashed in the water. The following afternoon Blind Bob pointed to the beach where a ship's bleached ribs could be seen among the tangled undergrowth inland from the beach. Flagstone gently beached his steam launch.

"Make camp up off the beach," he ordered. "Come along," said as Blind Bob took the lead. Olivia loosened her pistol in its holster and walked at Julius' side.

They walked for about ten minutes when Blind Bob signaled for a halt. They all crept cautiously forward. Parting the undergrowth before them, the trio found the wreck. The ancient ribs of the ship were overgrown with vines and plants. Weeds and bushes covered the broken keel. Flagstone walked to the bow. He fondly stroked the stem post. "Well I'll be," he said. "Amazing."

"What?" asked Olivia.

"The wood. Its turned to stone. That's why its still here at all. Amazing," Flagstone said. Olivia rubbed the hard surface.

"Mr. Flagstone, over here," called Blind Bob. Flagstone and Olivia joined Blind Bob. He lightly kicked at the earth before himself. A dull gleam caught their eyes. Flagstone knelt and brushed the dirt and sand away. There before him was a bronze sword hilt. He grasped it and pulled. He found himself holding a bronze sword broken off about six inches from the hilt. He handed it to Olivia.

"Silly, eh," he said. Olivia said nothing. They spread out and began search the ground around the remains of the boat. Soon they had found several skeletons, a bronze knife, and many amphoras all by one sadly in pieces. Olivia most gently brushed the sand away from the jar. Soon she had it complete uncovered. It was full of sand. Still she was pleased. This was a most extraordinary find for Jimland.

"Ha-roo," called Blind Bob. "Will you look at this."

Flagstone turned and there was Blind Bob holding a shield that sparkled in the sun like it was newly made. They gathered round. The shield was wood which strangely had decayed but little. The wood was covered in thin bronze plate. Fine etchings encircled the outer edge of the shield. The center boss had several attachment points for jewels long lost. Flagstone patted Blind Bob on the back.

"Well done," he said. "What do you say now, Olivia?"

"I'd say we have been very lucky, thanks to Blind Bob, to find a very ancient shipwreck," she answered. Flagstone smiled and shook his head. Blind Bob pointed inland through the palm tops. A small mountain poked its head above the jungle top.

"What do you say, Mr. Flagstone," Blind Bob.

"I say we return to camp, have a full supper and tomorrow we climb that hill," Flagstone said.

"I'll buy that," said Blind Bob. Olivia said nothing. They returned to camp carrying the shield, amphora, and sword hilt. The camp was abuzz about the finds and the thought of tomorrow. The jungle was quiet that evening. The ocean lapped rhythmically on the beach. Several times during the evening Flagstone caught Olivia watching him. He walked up beside her as she stood ankle deep in the surf admiring the endless stars overhead.

"What are you thinking," he asked. Olivia jumped then giggled.

"Oh, nothing in particular. It makes me feel so small looking out there," she said gesturing to the stars twinkling overhead.

"It's beautiful. I'll bet those Greek seamen were looking at the same stars in their day. I wonder if they felt small?" Flagstone said.

"Who knows," she answered.

"Still think this is silly?" he asked.

"Yes," she answered without hesitation. "But interesting none the less."

Julius laughed softly. "Thanks," he said after a few minutes. They stood in silence looking at the sparkling band of stars across the heavens. The sea bathed their feet. The myriad stars crowned their heads. They were the gods of all creation.

Dawn found the small Expedition ready to go. Flagstone's plan now became more evident. Only Flagstone, Blind Bob, Olivia, and six bearers were packed and ready to go. The rest, barely more than the first group, were told to remain in camp. Flagstone motioned his camp leader aside.

He spoke quietly and earnestly. "If we are not back in four days, take the launch back to Jimville and report to Casimir Ponatowski. The man nodded.

"Expecting trouble, boss?" asked the man.

"I'd rather find trouble expected than unexpected. Just being careful. It's probably nothing. We'll be back in four days or less," Flagstone said.

In a blink the small party had disappeared into the jungle. The undergrowth was light and walking was easy. They made good time heading inland. Soon the ground began to rise. It became steeper. As the sun began to settle in

the west, Flagstone topped a ridge crest. He came to an abrupt halt. The small party gathered on either side of him and stared in wonder.

"Bloody amazing," was all Flagstone said.

Stretched out before them was a huge circular valley rimmed on all sides by steep hills like the ones they had just taken a day to climb. The valley was not covered in jungle. Instead it was full of gently rolling hills covered in deep grass and groves of trees. The little mountain was in the center of the valley.

"Look," Olivia said pointing off toward the right side of the valley. She was pointing to what was obviously a village of stone building.

"Don't see any movement. Do you?" Flagstone asked.

Together Olivia and Blind Bob said, "No."

"We'll descend as far as we can this evening. Tomorrow we head for the village, then the mountain," Flagstone said.

"Right, Mr. Flagstone," Blind Bob said.

The party began scrambling down the inner side of the valley hills. They camped that night short of the valley floor. At dawn the next morning they were on the move. Upon reaching the valley floor Flagstone took several compass readings. He, Olivia, Blind Bob each noted the results in their notebooks. Then they headed for the village.

Several hours later they reached the village edge. It appeared deserted.

"Bob, stay with the men, and cover us. Olivia, come with me," Flagstone said.

"Absolutely," answered Olivia hand on her pistol butt.

Flagstone and Olivia stepped out of the covering brush. All was quiet. An occasion bird cried out. They walked forward slowly. Nothing moved. The dirt dusted up under their feet.

The sun had reached its zenith when Julius and Olivia reached the center plaza of the small village. The plain fountain in the plaza center was dry. They looked in several building along the edge of the plaza. They were all empty. Weeds had covered the gardens of the few houses making up the village.

"Whoever lived here are long gone by the looks of it," said Flagstone as he returned to the plaza fountain.

"Kind of eerie though isn't it," said Olivia.

"Nah, just your basic deserted village," Flagstone said.

A huge dark shadow swept across the plaza. It turned and headed back. From a distance Flagstone could hear Blind Bob shouting. A shot rang out. Flagstone looked up. A huge Pterodactyl was diving at him.

"Whao-ho," he shouted and roughly pushed Olivia behind the fountainhead. He pulled his Express Maxim pistol and fired at point blank range as the great animal flew by him. He felt the force of its wings. A huge nasty claw grasp at him. Suddenly Olivia leapt out of the shadows and raised her big pistol. Flagstone thought his head had been torn off when she fired. The huge creature shrieked and dropped Flagstone. He rolled to his feet. The Pterodactyl swooped around for another pass. Together they faced the creature as it dove at them. It shrieked again. Julius and Olivia stood feed wide apart, huge pistols held steadily in both hands.

"Wait for it," whispered Flagstone threw clenched teeth.

"Wait for it yourself, Olivia answered. She fired and was knocked back a step by the force. She fired again. And again.

"Julius," she shouted as she fired again!

Flagstone fired. He fired again. The great flying thing squawked and nose-dived into the ground just behind the pair. Flagstone looked at Olivia. She was panting. He noticed he was too. Olivia smiled.

"Trophy size, I'd say, Jules," Olivia said.

Flagstone laughed. He stepped to her side and gave her a solid kiss. She returned the favor. They walked over to where the creature lay. It was huge. It was dead. Blind Bob and the bearers came running into the plaza. Everyone began talking excitedly.

Flagstone quieted them down. Blind Bob walked up to the pair. He was smiling.

"You found that entertaining, Bob?" Olivia asked.

"Not really. The big thing never had a chance," Blind Bob laughed. "Not with you, Miss Olivia. You looked like a lioness guarding her cub. It never had a chance."

Olivia laughed and walked away. Flagstone looked at Blind Bob. "So I'm her cub now?" he asked. "Great. Thanks." They both laughed.

"Something else too, Mr. Flagstone," said Blind bob more quietly. "I saw a path heading up the mountain side."

"Excellent. Excellent. Lets get a bite to eat then head on up." Flagstone said.

The bearers tried to roast a piece of the Pterodactyl, but it proved a tough chew. They fell back on their normal fare. They searched the village one more time, but found absolutely nothing. The only things in the village were the small empty stone buildings whose roofs had long ago collapsed and decayed into dust. The small party headed out following the trail Blind Bob had seen. It was partially obscured, but remained easy enough to follow.

Report 172 - 2.X - ALL THAT GLITTERS.

Date: 2003-12-24

2.X - ALL THAT GLITTERS

Julius Flagstone walked quietly behind Blind Bob his scout. Olivia Fate walked at his side. Behind Olivia the hand full of bearers followed in single file. The deserted village was lost in the afternoon haze. They kept following the path up the mountainside.

Blind Bob suddenly signaled for a halt. Flagstone and Olivia closed up behind him. Looking over Blind Bob's shoulder they saw a well-manicured field with several small sarcophagi and many white stone headstones. In the center of the field was a single large tree with a bench around its base. Something white was piled about the bench.

Flagstone looked at the field more closely. He slowly drew his big Express Maxim pistol. Blind Bob's rifle was at the ready. Olivia pulled her huge pistol out.

"Too short," Flagstone said. "The grass is too short. Its been cut."

Everyone slowly squatted down and looked around. "Stay here," ordered Flagstone.

He stepped into the field. The grass was soft and springy beneath his boots. He walked slowly toward the tree. Something was behind him. He jerked around. Olivia let out a small squeak of a noise.

"I just knew you didn't mean I should stay behind," she whispered. Flagstone frowned at her, but said nothing. They continued to walk toward the tree.

"You know the bearers told Blind Bob they would not come into this field. They think it's a graveyard and haunted to boot," Olivia said softly as they walked.

"They are half right anyway. It is a graveyard. The haunted part we have yet to confirm," answered Flagstone.

Another quiet minute and they reached the tree. The bench around the tree was marble, beautifully worked. There was a pile wood as if ready for the evening fire. Scattered about the bench were piles of bones. Flagstone and Olivia carefully inspected each pile. Each one appeared to be a complete skeleton. All were adult men and women. No child's skeleton was found.

As Olivia continued around the tree inspecting the piles of bones, Flagstone waved the rest of his party on. In a few minutes Blind Bob was under the outstretched limbs of the tree. The bearers remained huddled by the entrance to the field. Flagstone looked at Blind Bob.

"They say they aren't coming in here, with all due respect of course," Blind Bob said.

"Fine, just so they don't run off. Go keep an eye on them if you will," Flagstone said. Blind Bob threw his rifle over his shoulder and walked back toward the bearers.

"Julius, over here please," called Olivia. He strolled over.

"Look at this," said Olivia. She pointed to a pile of bones on the bench. They were laid out as if the person had fallen asleep on the bench, and died in the same position. In the middle of the bones was a small silver flute. They leaned over and peered at the flute. It was strangely made.

"It has two mouth pieces, one at either end. Odd," Olivia said. She reached out a hand.

"Olivia," Flagstone said softly. She withdrew her hand. She reached out with the muzzle of her huge pistol. She gently nudged the silver flute from among the bones. It fell off the bench and hit the marble forming the bench's base. A clear pure note sounded from the flute. Startled, Olivia stepped back.

Olivia and Jules stood tensely ready, gun-hands steady. Nothing moved. The tree branches swayed the gentle breeze. A minute passed. Julius coughed. Then he reached down and picked up the flute. He examined it and handed it to Olivia. She looked it over and tucked it in her belt. They looked around. It was a splendid afternoon. The sun was beaming down from an azure sky. The gentle wind was soft and sweet. The grass was soft under foot.

"I don't like this, Olivia. Something is not right here," Flagstone said.

"Me too," she replied. They stepped from under the great tree and headed for the field entrance. As they made it half way across the field they heard a stamping and snorting. From out of nowhere four Black Rams, big as bulls, appeared one on each side of the field.

"Well that explains the grass," Flagstone muttered as they began to walk more briskly toward the field entrance. The Black Rams closed in. One charged. Its thundering hooves shook the ground. Its big black head with horns of polished ebony barely missed Olivia. Flagstone fired into the beast's side as it passed. There was no visible effect. The Black Ram passed on and stood between the field entrance and the pair.

"Ok, they don't want us to leave," Flagstone said.

Another Black Ram charged. Flagstone dived out of the way and the ram brushed against Olivia and knocked her down. Julius quickly helped her up as a third Black Ram charged. Olivia avoided it. Julius fired again. The Black Ram now stood next to the first, snorting.

The fourth Black Ram now charged in bellowing its anger. It headed straight for Olivia.

"Olivia, throw me the flute," Flagstone yelled. She pulled the flute from her belt and tossed it to Julius. The Black Ram headed toward Flagstone.

"Run for the tree," he yelled. Olivia hesitated. "Run," he yelled and began to sprint toward the tree. Olivia ran. All the Black Rams charged at

Flagstone. He ran. The Black Rams closed the distance, all aimed to run Julius down. Olivia reached the tree and began to climb into it.

Flagstone leaped for the bench and flung himself into the lower branches of the tree. The four Black Rams snorted, bellowed, and pawed the ground. They did not come under the outstretched branches of the tree. They stood just outside the circle of its branches, braying, and tossing their massive heads. Flagstone hung half in half out of the tree gasping for breath. Olivia sat farther up on a thick branch wheezing.

"You may be on to something after all, Jules," she said. He tried to laugh, but found simple breathing more important.

Flagstone and Olivia sat on a tree branch and looked at the four huge Black Rams. The Rams restlessly circled the tree.

"I'm open for ideas here," Olivia said.

"Me too," said Julius. He looked at the flute still clutched in his hand. It's silvered finish flashed in the sunlight. He turned it over. There was writing on the flute. He peered at it.

"My Greek's a little rusty. At one end it says "Arise like the sun" and the other end says, "Sleep like the moon." Very helpful, don't you think," said Flagstone?

"Very. Give it to me, Jules," said Olivia. She took the flute. She blew into one end. The Black Rams seemed to become even more agitated. One charged the tree and butted the trunk with his huge ebony horns. The tree shook. Julius and Olivia held on. Bellowing, the Black Ram returned to circling the tree.

"Sorry, wrong end," Olivia said sheepishly. She blew again. The Black Rams quieted down. She blew more. The Black Rams backed away from the tree. She stopped blowing. The Black Rams returned to circling the tree.

"Ah, very good, my Dear," said Julius. "Shall we leave this field?" he asked.

Olivia shook her head in agreement. They climbed down onto the bench. The Black Rams gathered facing them and pawed the ground.

"Will they follow us outside the field?" asked Olivia.

"I don't' think so. These fable things always have limits. I think these brutes stay inside the field. We'll be safe if we can get outside. Ready?" he asked.

"Yes," Olivia replied.

"Alright, just like the Pied Piper," Flagstone said. He stepped onto the ground. Olivia stood beside him. The Black Rams brayed and tossed their huge heads about. Olivia began to blow on the flute. The Black Rams backed away. Flagstone walked carefully in front of Olivia, leading her across the

field. She blew a tuneless melody on the flute. The Black Rams backed up until they reached the edge of the field. Then they were no more.

Olivia kept blowing. They reached the field entrance. They passed through the entrance. Olivia kept blowing. Finally a hundred yards from the field entrance she stopped blowing on the flute. There was a terrible noise from the field. Flagstone's small party carefully watched the field entrance. Nothing came out of it.

Olivia stuck the flute in her belt and smiled at Julius. He just shook his head.

"Keep going up, Mr. Flagstone?" Blind Bob asked.

"Yes. Let's keep going," Flagstone replied.

The sun was going down. Flagstone looked at his tired party. They had been climbing the steep slope for six hours since leaving the field of the Black Rams. They were tired. He didn't know how much farther they had to go. But time was growing short.

"Let's go," he ordered. Amid assorted groans the small party got to their feet and resumed trudging up the slope. Olivia looked in good shape, thought Flagstone. She didn't appear too tired. Blind Bob was doing ok also. One of the bearers was limping from a twisted ankle. All in all he was pleased.

Darkness closed in faster than Flagstone had expected. Icy, cold wind began to blow. Snow began to fall. Olivia and Flagstone exchanged glances. They both knew this was very odd. They party kept climbing. Soon the darkness was complete. The little party huddled together. There was no deadwood about to build a fire with. The snow continued to fall. The men were shivering as they gamely struggled up the slope.

Flagstone called a halt. He had made his decision. Swiftly reorganizing their supplies Flagstone sent the bearers back down the mountain to wait in the deserted village. He told the lead bearer to wait two days only, then no matter what, head back to the base camp or they would be left on the island. He, Olivia, and Blind Bob would continue to the top and return in time to march back with the bearers. The lead bearer looked somewhat dubious at these instructions, but promised to carry them out. Much relieved, the bearers headed downhill. Much more heavily burdened, the trio headed up hill. The snow continued to fall.

Several hours later the trio was shivering and wondering what was happening. From above them came a roaring and great plumes of snow. The avalanche poured down the mountainside with great speed. Blind Bob started to slide away. Olivia grabbed him. Then she started to slide. Flagstone grabbed her. The trio inched their way to beneath a sheltering rock. They sat sweating and shivering and tried to eat some cold food.

Olivia stood up. "Jules, we must move on. I'll freeze standing still."

Flagstone looked at his scout. "Bob?" he asked. Blind Bob nodded his agreement. They struggled up the slope. The snow had stopped. It was

getting noticeably warmer. Soon the snow was gone. They were climbing a grass-covered slope. Ahead the mountain ended. The slope stopped. They laughed. They hastened their pace. They reached the top of the slope.

Before them was a small bowl-like depression covered in the softest greenest grass. The air was warm and dry with a faint odor of berries and mint. In the center of the small depression was a tree of purest emerald. Lying in the lowest branches of the tree was the Golden Fleece shimmering in the light. Curled around the base of the tree was a great Worm Dragon, so called because they have no limbs other than their great wings. He was not asleep.

As soon as the trio reached the top of the slope they were spotted by the Dragon. It gave a great roar and flew up into the night sky and disappeared.

"Well, that was lucky," Blind Bob said. He started down into the bowl.

Flagstone grabbed his arm. "Don't be too hasty," he said.

"Not to worry," said Blind Bob as he turned to descend into the green depression. Flagstone and Olivia stood at the bowl top with their pistols drawn, watching the dark sky. Blind Bob headed for the Golden Fleece. He laughed, stooped, and held up a jewel-encrusted sword. He stuck it in his belt.

From out of the night sky, low to the ground, came a rush and a fury. Flagstone yelled and fired. Blind Bob flung himself on the grass. The Dragon flashed over his head. He scrambled up and began running back toward Flagstone. The Dragon came roaring in again. Flagstone and Olivia each fired several times. Blind Bob dived headfirst to the ground. The Dragon swooshed by just missing him. Blind Bob was up and running instantly. The Dragon melted into the dark sky. The Golden Fleece shimmered in the pale light.

"Grandma's teeth, that was close," gasped blind Bob as he reached the top of the bowl and Flagstone and Olivia. He leaned on his knees sucking air.

"Stupid move there, Bob," Olivia said. Bob did not respond.

"Ok, problem number one. How to deal with a giant, flying, and may I say angry, worm with a mouthful of teeth? Any suggestions?" asked Flagstone. No one answered.

"Ok, then I'll try next," he said.

"Oh no you don't," Olivia said.

"Oh yes I will," Flagstone answered. He looked at his big pistol. He put his hand on his belt. He loaded all his remaining cartridges. He had five shots. He looked at Olivia. She held up four fingers.

"It's not enough, Jules," Olivia pleaded. Flagstone shook his head.

"We are too close. We have come too far. I'm going to get it," he said. Then he turned and started down the green slope of the depression. He ran. He tried to look at the sky and the ground at the same time. He ran. He heard a roaring and Olivia or Blind Bob firing. He dived for the ground and

rolled. The Dragon flew by in a huge blast of foul air. Flagstone fired twice. He jumped up and began running again. Down came the Dragon again. Flagstone jumped left and rolled. He fired twice. His revolver jammed on the fifth cartridge. He cursed. He jumped to his feet and ran.

He made the tree. Flagstone jumped up to grab the Golden Fleece, but it was just beyond his reach. He could hear the Dragon circling about in the cloud filled night sky. He tried to climb the tree trunk. It was no use. The emerald surface was too hard to scratch and too slippery to grasp.

Flagstone looked wildly around. He saw a golden trident lying twenty feet away in the grass. He ran for it. The Dragon came gliding horribly out of the night right on cue. Flagstone grabbed the trident and sprinted back to the cover of the emerald tree. The Dragon flew by amid shooting that seemed to suddenly end. He looked to his revolver. It wasn't in his holster. It was no where to be seen. Flagstone cursed again.

Flagstone stood beneath the Golden Fleece with the end of the gold trident in his hands. Once he tried to lift the Golden Fleece off the branch. Twice. Three times. He was shaking now. The Dragon circled and hissed above in the dark night. He tried again.

He snagged it. Very slowly he began to work the Golden Fleece toward the end of the branches. The Dragon roared and swooped down at him. He ducked. The Dragon passed harmlessly above. Just trying to scare off, are you, thought Flagstone.

He slowly moved the Golden Fleece to the end of the branch. It fell to the ground with a huge ground-shivering thud. Flagstone looked over his shoulder. The Dragon had landed and was watching him. Flagstone smiled. The Dragon hissed at him.

Flagstone picked up the Golden Fleece. It was heavy. He held the gold trident in his other hand. He backed up to the emerald tree. The Dragon roared and hissed at him, but could not get at him. Flagstone considered his options. He thought calmly to himself. One, I stay here till I starve, and I die. Two, I can stay here until the Dragon eats me, and I die. Three, I can run for it and the Dragon catches me, eats me, and I die. Four, I can try to kill the Dragon in which case I probably die. He smiled grimly to himself. I hope this will look good in all the papers.

Flagstone edged away from the Dragon. He could see Blind Bob waving from the top of the bowl. Funny. It doesn't look very far he thought. He wrapped the heavy fleece around his waist and gripped the trident firmly with both hands. Probably won't get a second chance he thought. He laughed. This is great. I love this job. Killed on a nameless fog-bound island by a monster that doesn't exist to chase a treasure that is a fable. You can't pay me enough to do this stuff. He laughed out loud.

The Dragon roared. It roared again and turned frantically around. Olivia was hacking at it's tail with Blind Bob's jewel encrusted sword.

"Run," she yelled, jumping back as the Dragon lashed its tail at her. Flagstone ran. Olivia hacked again. The Dragon roared. It started to slither after Flagstone. With all her might, Olivia stabbed the sword down

through the Dragon's tail and firmly into the ground. The Dragon roared, but continued after Flagstone. Flagstone ran.

Olivia ran. Blind Bob hollered and waved. Flagstone looked over his shoulder and wished he hadn't. The Dragon was almost upon him. He raced across the bowl. He began climbing the side. The Dragon howled. It was pinned by the sword. The Dragon began rolling around in a desperate frenzy to free itself. Flagstone stumbled up the slope.

The Dragon thrashed about on the green grass smearing its black blood everywhere. Flagstone reached out. Blind Bob's strong hand gripped his. He was pulled over the side of the green bowl. He heard Olivia come running up. Together they huddled under the lip of the bowl and listened to the Dragon roaring, hissing, and thrashing about. Suddenly it stopped.

Flagstone ran. Olivia ran. Blind Bob ran. The Dragon rose up on furious wings. It dived down at the little party. It snapped at Flagstone. It caught the Golden Fleece flapping about his waist and hoisted Flagstone aloft.

Flagstone twisted this way and that. He couldn't get free. The Dragon had the Golden Fleece and the Golden Fleece had him. Cursing long and loud, Flagstone pulled out his big camp knife and started sawing away at the Golden Fleece. The Dragon turned and was rushing headlong toward the bowl-like depression. Flagstone sawed away with all his might.

He fell through the dark night. The Dragon disappeared over the rim of the green bowl amid much roaring and hissing. Flagstone hit the ground hard and slid downhill quite a ways. He stopped at the snow line. Dark shapes came forward in the dark night. What now he wondered? He gripped his knife ready for action. Olivia and Blind Bob stood over him. Blind Bob carried the gold trident. Olivia was covered in black Dragon blood. They both looked very concerned about something. Flagstone began to laugh. They stared at him for a moment then they too began to laugh.

Flagstone struggled to his feet. They huddled together. The Dragon continued to roar and hiss and was content to stay in its nest. Flagstone, Olivia, and Blind Bob began the long downhill trek. Some how it seemed much easier.

Safely back in base camp Flagstone sat writing in his journal. He finished the last entry. Olivia walked up and handed him a drink. She looked refreshed. She sat on the bench next to Julius and draped one leg over his. She started reading his journal. She laughed.

"What?" Julius asked.

"Who's going to believe this?" Olivia asked. "I mean, I know it happened, you know it happened. Blind Bob is over there trying to forget it happened. Who will believe this stuff," she asked. She put her arm around Julius' broad shoulders. She squeezed. "Well, who will believe it?"

"Probably no one, but you never know," answered Julius.

He laid a palm-size piece of shimmering Golden Fleece on his journal.

"You never know."

Report 173 - EXPEDITION NEWS.

Date: 2004-01-02

EXPEDITION NEWS.

Julius Flagstone and Olivia Fate have returned to Jimville taking up their usual rooms in the Empress. Flagstone is busy recruiting and equipping a small Expedition. Daily he has poured over the notes and bits and pieces of Denny Lee's Journal that were left with the Herald by Big Jake Frere. When asked what his plans were Flagstone's pat reply has been to simply state he was going into the Wilds of Jimland. Much is going unsaid, Gentle Reader.

Big Jake Frere's whereabouts and condition remain unknown. He was last seen by Flagstone and Fate as he ran off into the jungle of the Secret Island they named the "Island of Diamonds" with angry Tribal Warriors in pursuit. Why has Flagstone not gone to rescue his rescuer that he and Olivia rescued before Flagstone and Frere rescued Olivia? We are astounded by Flagstone's lack of initiative in this matter, Dear Reader.

Little news of the other Fearless and Famous Explorers has crossed our desks at the Herald. Our status board of Fearless and Famous Explorers reads as listed below. We know some of these Expeditions are in Jimville, but very little information is forthcoming about their status and intentions.

| Expedition | Status |
|--|--------------|
| Airdrieonian Expedition, aka MacFraser's | unknown |
| Big Al The Marauder's Expedition | unknown |
| Churchill Expedition | unknown |
| The Coleman Folly | lost |
| Don Alverado Expedition | unknown |
| Flagstone Expedition | re-equipping |
| German Number I, aka The Damned | lost |
| German Number II, name unknown | lost |
| Glorious People's Expedition | unknown |
| Ponatowski Expedition | re-equipping |
| Robert the Puce | unknown |
| Ross Expedition | unknown |
| The Lost Shope Expedition | lost |
| Swindell Expedition | unknown |
| Teddy's Rough Rider Reserves | lost |
| Token Expedition | unknown |

Anyone one with pertinent information on the above Expeditions please contact the Herald.

DULLCOTE RAISE REWARD

Norton Dullcote has raised the reward for his Dear Constance to a "very, very large sum." We might remind everyone that Dear Constance was stolen from the side of Norton when his Expedition was nearly wiped out. See our Report 155 for details. Dear Reader, we at the Herald find it most confounding that the many Fearless and Famous Explorers sitting on their respective back-sides have not gone to rescue Dear Constance. What is holding these alleged Fearless and Famous Explorer back? Surely it is not money. Money cannot be

the issue with one of Jimville's own at risk. Are they Fearless and Famous Explorers or are they Fearful and Flatulent Explorers? We demand action.

SCIENCE CLUB

The Science Club, whose theme this year is "Mining and Excavation, the Way to Mineral Riches," would like to thank the many enthusiasts that attended their meeting and heard the talk on "Diamonds, Where and How to find Them." The Science Club would also like to announce its next meeting's location and guest speaker. The location will be on the edge of Black Rock Quarry. The guest speaker will be an associate of Alfred Nobel who will speak on the invention of dynamite and its uses in the field of mineral excavation. After the speaker and dinner, demonstrations of the use of dynamite will be held in the old quarry. Come early to get a good seat. Join the Club. Join the Fun.

LOST DOG

The British Consul is still waiting for the return of his dog.

Report 174 - RESCUE EXPEDITIONS PREPARE.

Date: 2004-01-10

RESCUE EXPEDITIONS PREPARE

Fearless and Famous Explorers are preparing to continue the search for Dear Constance Dullcote. Supplies are being purchased. Travel arrangements made. Soldiers, Askaris, and Bearers are being hired. Jimville is a beehive of activity. Gentle Reader, rest assured that one of these Expeditions will rescue Dear Constance.

Norton Dullcote announced he has raised the reward for the return his Dear Constance unharmed. It has gone from "Very, Very Large" to "Really Big." His words, Dear Reader. Dullcote thanks in advance all the Fearless and Famous Explorers about to set out on this arduous task. Dullcote does say he could finance one more Expedition if a bold leader would step forth.

Further information is obtainable from Dullcote. His office has now been established on the ground floor of the Empress next to the Bar.

We wonder if new information has come to light to initiate this flurry of activity? Do they know something we do not? That would be a shame.

TASTIMIN THE DESPICABLE

Rumors of new activity by Tastimin, The Despicable, Known Pirate, Slaver, and Scourge of Jimland, have surfaced. It is rumored he, too, is searching for Dear Constance Dullcote. What his nefarious purpose is we do not know. Maybe we should not know. It makes our reporters nervous even considering having to report on the Monster.

The British Consul has dispatched part of the Naval Brigade to find and stop Tastimin. The success of this mission is highly doubted despite what the Consul would have us believe. Tastimin has slipped through too many traps and survived too many injuries. To believe that a small force of the Naval Brigade can do what all the previous foreign Armed Forces could not is silly.

We put our money on Tastimin. And it is our hope that if we put enough money on him he will leave us alone.

GLORIOUS PEOPLES EXPEDITION

The GPE has been ominously silent of late. We have noted the Sultan has doubled his Palace Guards. Perhaps there is something afoot. The Sultan's Court Advisor refuses to comment. A representative of the Sultan's Military Advisor, speaking on the condition of anonymity, said no one is quite sure what the GPE is planning. All the captive appeared to died during interrogation.

It is obvious to the Herald that more captives are required. What is the hold up? The GPE must be thwarted at any cost!

SCIENCE CLUB

The Science Club reports their last meeting was a spectacular success. The meeting was well attended. The dynamite demonstration was flawless. The

huge crater made by the cave-in after the demonstration has begun to fill with water. It will become a public swimming facility.

Those whose land is now at the bottom of the swimming hole will be reimbursed by Science Club upon submitting written proof of ownership.

There is still time to join this year's membership. Our theme of "Mining and Excavation, the Way to Mineral Riches" is turning out to be very popular.

Report 175 - BIG JAKE FRERE RETURNS!

Date: 2004-01-11

BIG JAKE FRERE RETURNS!

Big Jake Frere has returned to Jimville. He staggered onto the veranda of the Empress late yesterday evening and collapsed. He was in a sorry state. His clothes were dirty and torn. He had several minor wounds. In short, the Wilds of Jimland had roughly handled Big Jake.

As an excited crowd gathered around the poor man Julius Flagstone and Olivia Fate stepped into the circle and took control. They had Big Jake carried gently to a suite adjoining theirs. The Sultan's Personal Physician was called. The noisy crowd was dispersed. The doors to Big Jake suite were locked. Julius Flagstone pocketed the key himself. Julius eyed the Manager of the Empress sternly and said, "No one enters without my permission. Understood?"

The Manager palmed the small roll of bills, bowed slightly, and answered, "Of, course, Mr. Flagstone, as you wish."

The following brief report is all that has been made available to the Herald. Even though we strongly reminded Mr. Flagstone that Big Jake was still under contract to us, Flagstone refused to allow all but one interview request. The results of that short interview are below.

The Herald's reporter found Big Jake lying in bed. He was freshly bathed and shaved. His numerous small cuts and scratches had been attended to and two minor wounds had been treated and bound. Big Jake was sunburned which is hard to believe in this rugged outdoorsman. After a warning from Flagstone that the interview would be short, we began. During the interview Olivia Fate attended to Big Jake's every need like a Mother with a sick child. It was very touching to see her concern and gentle care for the big scout.

Herald: "Welcome back to Jimville, Big Jake. The whole town is excited by your return. Even the Sultan has sent his respects. The last we had heard about you was reported by Mr. Flagstone and Ms. Fate when they returned not long ago. They said they were saved by you and that you were last seen running into the jungle pursued by tribal warriors. We don't know where to begin so, please, if you will, tell us what has happened to Jimland's most Famous Scout."

Frere: "Well, let's see. That's pretty much correct, but I'll get to what happened on the island later. Last time we talked Ponatowski, Churchill, and MacFraser were making big noises about heading out looking for old Constance Dullcote. I understand they are all in town?"

Herald: "Yes, they have been out searching, Churchill once, they others several times. Sadly they have been unable to locate Mrs. Dullcote."

Frere: "I'm not surprised. We don't even know who kidnapped her. But I think Norton Dullcote knows why."

Herald: "Why?"

Frere: "Fame. Fortune. Greed. Power. All the usual reasons for these kind of things."

Herald: "Why?"

Frere: "Let's play a guessing game. Just you and me."

Herald: "Ok."

Big Jake glanced at Flagstone and Olivia. Flagstone nodded imperceptibly. Olivia seemed a shade whiter. Big Jake sat up in bed. Olivia was immediately at his side. She helped him hobble to a sturdy plain wooden chair by the table in the middle of the room.

Frere: "I get tired just laying in bed all day. Though if Miss Olivia had her way that's where I'd be all the time."

Olivia Fate blushed and returned to stand by Julius Flagstone. Big Jake fixed the reporter with a hard look.

Frere: "What was the last Expedition I was working for?"

Herald: "Norton Dullcote's, of course."

Frere: "And what happened to that Expedition?"

Herald: "It was ambushed after it had just begun and you barely made it back to Jimville, bringing Dullcote back with you. You saved his life."

Frere: "Ambushed. Yes. Almost from the start we were attacked. Seems like as soon as we were out of sight from Jimville we started receiving incoming bullets, arrows, and sling stones. We were attacked many times. Not big attacks, but even a small attack is dangerous."

Herald: "Yes."

Frere: "Then, as I told you after our return, there was a huge ambush. They came at us from the jungle just as we were breaking camp in the morning. We fought them off. But it was a feint to allow time for them to paddle down river, board our big steamer from the river side and then attack us from the rear."

Herald: "So you duly reported before, Mr. Frere. Is there something you didn't report the first time?"

Frere: "I said I thought it was odd that the ambushers knew our every move. They and their friends dogged us right from the beginning."

Herald: "Their friends?"

Frere: "Yes, after each attack I had the bodies lined up and looked them over trying to figure out what was going on."

Herald: "You found something?"

Frere: "Well, hell yes I did. But Dullcote said to keep quiet about it. So I did. He was paying the bills and, besides, information can save your life sometimes."

Olivia shuffled around next to Flagstone. Flagstone cleared his throat. He looked very calm, yet very attentive. Big Jake sipped the drink Olivia handed him. He made a face. Olivia laughed and returned to stand by Flagstone.

Herald: "What did you find, Mr. Frere?"

Frere: "I found that the natives were marked with tattoos."

Herald: "That's hardly unusual in Jimland."

Frere: "Yes, but some of them weren't ordinary tattoos. These were the marks of a secret society. A secret society long thought dead and gone. A thing of Jimland Legends."

Herald: "Tell us more."

At this point the fetching Olivia Fate interrupted. She said that this was enough for today and it was time for Big Jake to get back in bed and rest. She said she didn't want Jake getting all worked up. Big Jake didn't argue. Flagstone brooked no objections from the Herald reporter and firmly assisted the man out the door.

Dear Reader, it clearly seems there is more going on than meets the eye. What was Dullcote searching for in the first place? This has never been known, though they raised some eyebrows by their sudden departure. It was as if they were racing someone or against some clock. Were the ambushes really planned in advance? Was some party stalking the ill-fated Expedition?

What significance did the tattoos have to Big Jake and Norton Dullcote? What is this "Secret Society" Jake mentioned? And what's the connection between the "Secret Society" and any of Jimland's many legends?

Good questions all! We demand an answer, Dear Reader. You deserve only the Truth in these Matters and we will get it for you regardless of the cost!

LOST AND FOUND

The British Consul thanks the responsible parties for the return of his dog. He says the messenger was caught and stuffed in a similar manner and may be picked up whenever the dognappers feel the urge. The messenger will be left standing on the Consulate's front steps.

Report 176 - 3.1 - UNSPOKEN SECRETS.

Date: 2004-01-12

3.1 - UNSPOKEN SECRETS

Julius Flagstone peered up and down the hall. It was empty. The reporter had gone to file his story. Flagstone's men kept everyone away from this end of the Empress Hotel. He smiled.

"Well?" asked Olivia Fate.

"Everyone has gone home," he said.

Big Jake Frere was sitting at the table in the center of the hotel suite. He was watching Flagstone. "Think that will stir up their nest?" Jake asked.

"Let's be patient and see what happens for a couple of days," Flagstone said. "Now tell me more about this Secret Society."

Flagstone and Olivia seated themselves at the table with Big Jake. Jake spread his hands out on the tabletop. He sighed. Olivia watched Big Jake's face as he put his thoughts in order. After a minute Big Jake spoke.

"Well, as you know I read Denny Lee's journals. I still have them hidden away. As you also know I have been trying to find the Walking Stones that so intrigued Denny Lee. As I know you have see one actually work."

Big Jake looked at Flagstone. Flagstone was looking at the ceiling fan as it slowly twirled around. Jake looked at Olivia. She was looking at him. She did not blink. She smiled as if to coax him on.

"Well, that was only one thing I learned by reading Denny Lee's journal. And that's my quest it seems." He laughed. "But more in your line is the Secret Society and what Norton Dullcote had."

"Does this secret society have a name?" asked Olivia.

"None that I know of. Every reference I have ever found, and that's not very many, just refer to it as the Secret Society. Anyway, this Secret Society has one mission, to protect the Legends of Jimland."

Big Jake found Flagstone looking at him with a gleam of anticipation in his eyes. "That's pretty vague, Jake, even for a mythical secret society," Flagstone said. Big Jake nodded.

"Well, the way Denny Lee understood it, protecting the Legends of Jimland meant protecting people, places, and things that made up the legends from discovery or loss. This Secret Society is supposed to have started during the time of the Sun King, ages ago. I don't know who the Sun King was. The native tales say he was a great sorcerer who knew the truths of the world. Whatever that means. He formed the Secret Society as a network of spies to keep him informed about his enemies in particular and everyone in general. He wanted to protect his secrets from misuse.

Olivia laughed. "Quite a noble guy."

"So the native legends say. The Secret Society continued after the Sun King died at a very old age. They suspected foul play and murdered the Sun King's enemies, many while they slept in their own beds. They buried the Sun King in some hidden tomb in the desert. They hid his treasured secrets."

"Over the centuries the members of the Secret Society passed on their Trust, but broadened it to protect all of Jimland's secrets from prying eyes. They did so from the shadows. And so they passed into legend themselves which might have been part of their plan. Who knows?"

"Denny Lee gathered some tales together about them. He thought the Society was once a real thing, but wasn't sure if it still existed. Then his journal notes show he became aware of a protective organization that was said to exist in the desert, hiding great secrets and treasure from all of Jimland. He traveled around the edges of the Great Desert collecting more tales."

"He finally came to the conclusion that if the original Secret Society had existed, this could be it's current form. He said he had seen glimpses of strange tattoos on some of the desert tribe shamans."

"Then while on a trip into the desert looking for a Walking Stone platform his Expedition was attacked. Denny Lee was captured. He wrote that his captives told him that they were members of the Secret Society and he had to pay the price for trying to expose the secrets of Jimland. These men said they could tell him this as that was their custom before killing a trespasser."

Flagstone interrupted. "But you found Denny Lee dead in a piled-stone sarcophagus in the middle of the jungle."

Big Jake nodded yes. He cleared his throat.

"Well, if the story is strange to this point, it gets even stranger, if we can believe Denny Lee. It seems his captors knew who he was and how he was collecting legends and tales. Denny Lee told some to the men. They didn't kill him right away. They took him farther and farther into the desert. He kept talking to their chiefs.

"And some how, the son of a gun actually convinced them he was doing the same thing they were doing only in a different way. They must have believed him because they made him go through their initiation rites and gave him a tattoo. They released him on the opposite edge of the desert from which he had started. No modern white man had ever been there. It took him three years to find his way back to Jimville."

"I don't think Denny Lee conned the Secret Society. I think he showed them he wanted to do their work. He wanted to save Jimland from outsiders. He became their convert in his own way. When I found his grave I found the inscription 'Denny Lee rest in peace' as I have said, but I also found a strange set of symbols next to that. I now think it was some mark of respect from the Secret Society for a job well done or something like that."

"Pretty big story, Jake," said Flagstone. Flagstone rose and began to slowly pace the floor. "You let me read parts of Denny Lee's journal. It is fantastic. The old man was either crazy or had inside information. Just now you said Denny Lee was released where no modern white man had ever been. What does that mean?"

"Denny Lee wrote that where he was released white men were unknown except in the region's local tales. He found that hard to believe, but came to regard it as true. He stayed in the area for some time collecting tales and legends. I think this is where he got the stories of lost desert kingdoms and cities of gold and all that nonsense," Big Jake answered.

Olivia sat restlessly in her chair. Her eyes were bright. She was flushed. Flagstone smiled at her. He felt his own pulse speed up. "Jake, I'm going to ask a favor from you. If you think you can trust me, can I, we, read Denny Lee's complete journal?"

Big Jake set up straight in his chair. He looked at each of them in turn. After a minute of silence he answered. "No."

"Jake," Olivia said softly.

"No, I can't do it Olivia. I just can't. First it would be you. Then Ponatowski. Then, heaven forbid, Churchill or MacFraser. The Dons would be after it. Word would leak out no matter how you tried to stop it. Someone would try to steal it and I'd be lost. No, I just can't do it." Big Jake shook his head sadly. Olivia reached over and patted his big rough hand.

"It's ok, Jake, I understand."

Later that night in their own room Flagstone was still pacing. Olivia sat calmly sipping a cool drink and writing a letter to her family. She looked up at Julius.

"Will you go for a walk outside or sit down."

Flagstone walked briskly to the table and sat beside her. "How's this," he asked gently rubbing her thigh. She smiled and pushed her half-written letter aside.

"Much better, now what's on your mind?"

"Big Jake. As always we don't have the whole story, but I think I am filling in parts of it."

"Such as?"

"Personally I think there is always a bit of fact behind every tall tale. So I don't dismiss out of hand the legends that Denny Lee was collecting. So let's look at this piece by piece."

"Ok."

"Denny Lee believed in the legends enough to risk life and limb traveling throughout Jimland collecting them. The Secret Society believed in the legends enough to risk life and limb protecting them. Denny Lee joined the Secret Society. Big Jake was once Little Jake and the favorite of his strange old uncle Denny Lee. Denny Lee used bounce Jake on his knee and entertain him with tall tales. Big Jake grew up worshiping Denny Lee. One day Denny Lee disappears forever. Big Jake follows in his famous if eccentric uncle's footsteps and becomes a rather famous Jimland Explorer himself. He finds many marvelous things during his travels across Jimland."

"In fact, he finds his cherished uncle's grave. He finds his uncle's journals. He takes up the search for the Walking Stone things. He must know something. He has found more than he ever tells anyone. He risked mortal danger to grab that little silver ball from the fallen tribal shaman with a man-eating monster not ten yards away. He never mentions it. He drops casual hints about things but clams up when anyone asks questions."

"He went with Dullcote on an impromptu Expedition that nearly got them both killed. He won't say what they were after, but some one didn't want them to get to wherever it was they were going. Strange tattoos might indicate it was the mythical Secret Society. Maybe not. He recommended everyone search in the Secret Islands for Constance Dullcote. We even stumble across him there."

Olivia shot Julius a glance. "Jules, we saved each other's lives on that island."

"Yes, and I won't forget it. But there are questions I want answers to. First I want to talk to Norton Dullcote and find out what he was after and why. He's too old to be risking both himself and his wife on wild goose chases. Second, I.."

Olivia interrupted. "Second, you might tell Big Jake you have what you think are pages from one of Denny Lee's journals. If you show them to Big Jake, he might show you the rest of the journals."

"No, he won't. Big Jake is a member of the Secret Society."

Report 177 - 3.2 - DINNER WITH DULLCOTE.

Date: 2004-01-13

3.2 - DINNER WITH DULLCOTE

Big Jake is a member of the Secret Society. Julius Flagstone's words hung in the air. He watched the fetching Olivia Fate for her reactions.

"Of course," she replied. "But I think you need to chose between "is" or "was".

"Of course," repeated Flagstone with an air of surprise.

"He had to be, Dear. He was raised to be. It was his fate." She smiled at Flagstone who could only shake his head and smile back. She laughed.

"Jules, I do read the stuff you write and the things you give me to read. In fact, much to your dismay, I do my own research. Remember?"

"Yes, Dear," was all he could muster for a response.

"I even met old Denny Lee once. Big Jake was with him. We were all a fair bit younger then. It was before I met you, Jules. I saw the tattoo on the palm of Denny Lee's left hand. Tonight, for the first time, I noticed the scars on the palm of Denny Lee's left hand. I agree with your conclusion. But I add you must chose between "is" or "was". This alters nothing. I trust Big Jake. You trust Big Jake. We saved each other's lives for heaven's sake. The man has not suddenly become the Devil."

"You're right Olivia. But I would like to read that journal to confirm my suspicions before we go hip deep into the desert sands. I'm sure that if Big Jake suspected my latest project he would not have been as talkative tonight. He confirmed that I am on to something."

"I suggest you talk to Norton Dullcote. He had some knowledge or some thing that got Big Jake up and out of Jimville in a hurry and nearly killed them both. Besides Norton will be much easier to get information out of."

"Getting it out of him is one thing, getting him to stop is another."

They both laughed.

Julius Flagstone sat at a table in the bar of the Empress of Jimville, the finest Hotel in Jimville the capitol of Jimland. In fact, the Empress was the only hotel in Jimville, but it was still a reasonably nice establishment for a rough place like Jimland concluded Flagstone. He was nursing his drink waiting for his dinner guest, Norton Dullcote, to arrive.

"My dear Doctor Flagstone."

Flagstone looked up and rose to meet his guest. Dullcote was dressed for dinner. Flagstone felt a little shabby. The feeling passed when he noted the dull glint of a pistol butt under Dullcote's dress jacket. Old, but nobody's fool thought Flagstone. It reminded him to stay alert tonight.

Their dinner was pleasant. The food was good. Dullcote had all the latest gossip from Europe and elsewhere. Finally they were down to cigars and an after dinner drink. Dullcote swirled his around in its snifter. He eyed Flagstone.

"Flagstone, what brought you to dinner without the lovely Olivia? Surely you didn't wish to entertain an old man no matter how wealthy he might be? What's on your mind?"

"Straight to it, Norton?"

"Always worked for me," replied Dullcote.

Flagstone leaned in. "Well, Norton, I was wondering what you and Big Jake were looking for on the Expedition from which your Dear Wife was kidnapped. I just thought it might shine some light on who kidnapped her."

Dullcote chuckled sadly. He sipped his drink. A little of the twinkle left his eyes. "As you probably know Julius, I am a very wealthy man. Making money has always come easy to me for some reason. It is my fate. Now don't get me wrong, I worked for it, but still it seems to come to me."

"Yes, sir."

"I've always wanted to make a legacy for myself that was more than simply money. Something people would show their children. My pet project has been the Trojan Wars. Always pictured myself finding Troy and Helen and all the rest. But I obviously have been beaten to the punch in that line. So I shifted slightly and decide to follow Odysseus travels home. Think what it would be like to find all the places mentioned along the trail of the Odyssey. So I have been trying to find all the places, following every rumor, sparing no expense."

"And you came to Jimland for that? Seems your compass is a bit off, if I may say so, Norton," Flagstone said.

"Not really. I've done the shores of Turkey, the islands of the Greek Aegean, and scoured the whole Mediterranean. Now I am following the really bizarre leads. There are those who believe that Odysseus sailed out of the Mediterranean and into the Atlantic having many adventures along the coast of Africa. I am in Jimland following some clues. It has been suggested that there are ancient Greek shipwrecks in the Secret Islands."

"Yes, I have heard as much myself," said Flagstone smoothly.

"I hired Big Jake to lead me to the inland desert of Jimland wherein is rumored to be a lost civilization or two, all long dead, but one rumored to be settled by men from Odysseus' scattered crew. Wouldn't that be a find!"

Dullcote was beaming. Flagstone smiled back. He fully understood the man's enthusiasm. He research was very thin, but he was a very wealthy man

reaching the end of his days. He was entitled to chase his dreams. Flagstone wondered, am I only chasing my dreams too.

"Come, come, Flagstone. Don't look so damn serious."

Flagstone blinked and came out of his thoughts. "Why have you kept all this so secret, Norton?" he asked.

"Didn't want anyone getting there before me. But it doesn't matter now. What really matters is finding my Dear Constance unharmed and having her returned safely to me. Are you up to the task, my boy?"

Flagstone was speechless. "I hadn't realized I had volunteered, Norton."

"Nonsense, you're just the man for the job. I've got several of your contemporaries on it also. The man who succeeds will become very rich."

"I don't know, Norton. Olivia and I both love Constance and miss her dearly. I don't need the money and I am not in the search and rescue business. I have no experience in that field." Flagstone felt a little uncomfortable.

"Nonsense, you're perfect. You're an experienced Explorer. You know Jimland well. You speak many languages well enough not to get hung. You already have an Expedition at hand. I can give you inside information that only you will know. I can pay all your expenses even if you should fail. But you won't.

"I really don't..."

"You just need a little incentive to get you started," Dullcote said.

A heavy object thumped onto the table. Flagstone looked quickly around the bar. No one appeared to be paying them particular attention. Flagstone's napkin had immediately covered the thing. He reached out and pulled it into his lap. He looked at it.

It was gold all right by the feel of it. It had some inscriptions around the edge but he couldn't read them in the dim bar light.

"It's yours, Flagstone, if you take the job to look for my Dear Constance," said Dullcote quietly. He watched Flagstone intently. "I know you search for rare antiquities when you aren't plundering ivory."

Flagstone opened his mouth. Dullcote carried on. "Tut, tut, man, no one is perfect, not even you. I know you better than you think. Every man has his weakness. Antiquities is yours. The rare and the legendary."

The hair stood up on the back of Flagstone's neck.

"Interesting choice of words, Norton," Flagstone said.

"Do you know what that is?" asked Dullcote.

"Yes, I can hazard a good guess," answered Flagstone still feeling overwhelmed.

"Are you in," asked Dullcote.

"Yes," answered Flagstone.

"Good. Then dinner is on me. Come round tomorrow at your convenience for all the details. Bring Olivia. Go night, Julius. It has been my pleasure."

With that Norton Dullcote was up and gone. Julius Flagstone sat in his chair staring into his hands in his lap. That was pretty slick, Julius, he thought. You walked right into it with your eyes wide open. He laughed. Olivia will love this.

Report 178 - 3.3 - ITALIAN TRAVELERS.

Date: 2004-01-14

3.3 - ITALIAN TRAVELERS

Julius Flagstone smiled across the small table at Olivia Fate. She looked particularly beautiful tonight. She smiled back. Something's up, he thought.

Olivia Fate smiled across the small table at Julius Flagstone. He looked particularly handsome tonight. He smiled back. Something's up, she thought.

"How did dinner with Dullcote go?" Olivia asked.

Flagstone carefully laid the heavy thing on the table. It was still wrapped in his dinner napkin. He nudged it toward Olivia. She reached out and opened the napkin. A sudden intake of breath was her only response. They both stared at the thing. It was beautiful in the room's warm light.

The object was rectangular in shape, twelve inches long and three inches wide. It was an inch thick. The two ends were rounded off. Around the top edge was an inscription one-half inch wide. At one end where the straight side curved around to form the end was a large diamond nestled in the curve. Its sparkle offset beautifully the gold's warm glow.

After a minute of mutely staring at the thing, Flagstone cleared his throat. Olivia looked at him.

"Is it the marker you were looking for?" she asked.

"Yes. More properly, the Golden Tablet of Command. It is recorded that Kublai Khan presented the Polo brothers with a golden tablet inscribed with the words: "By the strength of the eternal Heaven, holy be the Khan's name. Let him that pays him not reverence be killed." The golden tablet was the special VIP passport, authorizing the travelers to receive throughout the Great Khan's dominions such horses, lodging, food and guides as they required."

"So we are on the right track?"

"It would seem so."

"How did Dullcote comes to have this," Olivia asked.

"I didn't have time to ask," Flagstone replied.

Olivia laughed softly. "He got you, didn't he?"

Flagstone laughed. "Yes. Left me sitting there looking stupid."

"What's next?"

"Tomorrow we are to visit Norton Dullcote to learn the particulars dealing with our search for Constance Dullcote."

Olivia sat back in her chair and looked wide-eyed at Julius.

"No kidding?"

"No kidding."

Olivia laughed again. "We are so clever."

"Apparently, too clever by half." Flagstone was grinning from ear to ear. "I think I have been taught a lesson tonight in humility. Very invigorating."

Olivia smiled a dazzling smile at Flagstone. "Both of us. You need some exercise to work off the excitement."

The next morning Flagstone and Olivia rose early and had a pleasant breakfast in the Empress dining room. They sauntered outside onto the veranda of the Empress. The sun was starting to pour its considerable warmth onto Jimville. They walked slowly down the dirt street that served as the Main Street of Jimville.

They took a complete turn around Main Street returning to the Empress bright-eyed and ready to meet Norton Dullcote. They had the Empress Manager send a messenger to request Dullcote's leave to come up to his room. The messenger returned and beckoned the Manager in a nervous manner.

The two whispered together out of earshot of Flagstone and Olivia. The Manager excused himself and hurried upstairs with the messenger. Flagstone and Olivia exchanged glances. Instinctively they both patted their small "in town" revolvers discretely at their waists. The Manager and messenger returned. The Manager hustled the messenger out the front door. The Manager turned to Flagstone and Olivia.

"What's wrong?" asked Flagstone.

"I'm not sure," answered the worried Manager.

"May we go up to Mr. Dullcote's room. We have an appointment to see him."

"That may be difficult."

"In what way," asked Flagstone starting to get angry.

"Come with me."

The Manager led them to Dullcote's room. He motioned them inside and following them in closed the door.

The room was in shambles. The dresser drawers were dumped on the floor. Sheets and comforter were tossed about. The mattress was ripped apart. Clothes were scattered about the room. Suitcases had been torn apart. One of

the large windows overlooking the jungle was wide open, it's curtains ruffling in the gentle morning breeze.

Norton Dullcote was not in the room. The Manager turned a nervous look to Flagstone and wrung his hands in worry.

"Mr. Flagstone, I am so sorry. I do not think Mr. Dullcote will keep his appointment this morning," the Manger said.

"I think not," replied Flagstone. "Have you sent for the Sultan's Guard?"

"Not yet. I have sent for the British Consul. I thought he should know. Mr. Dullcote was a rich and powerful Englishman was he not?"

"Yes. Now post a man on this door and let no one in until the Consul gives you further instructions. Ms. Fate and I shall wait here for the Consul."

"As you wish, Mr. Flagstone," said the Manager quickly leaving the room.

"What are you thinking, Jules?" asked Olivia.

"I'm thinking we have fifteen minutes to ourselves to search the room."

They begin carefully going over the room. They searched through everything being as quiet as possible. They found nothing. To their great relief they found no blood. It was possible that Norton Dullcote was still alive. They wondered if the kidnappers were the same who had kidnapped Norton's wife Constance. Noise in the hallway warned them of someone's approach.

The Manager entered the room followed by the British Consul looking rather peeved. The Manager waved his hand around the room.

"See, Mr. Consul, Mr. Dullcote has been seized. He has been kidnapped."

The Consul nodded to Flagstone. He looked around the room. Turning to face the Empress Manager the Consul said, "Yes, it appears so. But I am no policeman. I suggest you call the Sultan's Guard. When they arrive tell them I will await further reports an the Consulate. The Sultan will not be pleased if I am kept waiting. And, Sir, you should be ashamed letting this happen in your Hotel. Above you very head. Very hard to explain is it not?"

The Consul did not wait for an answer from the stunned Empress Manager. He turned and left the room. His footsteps echoed down the hallway. Flagstone could hear the first of the reporters clamoring to be allowed to see the scene of the crime. The Manager looked to Flagstone. Flagstone shrugged.

"I see we are no longer needed here. Olivia and I will be going for a walk to soothe her nerves. Good day."

Flagstone and Olivia calmly walked down the hall. At the foot of the stairs a throng of reporters and idle passers-by were gathered, held back from climbing the stairs by four bouncers from the Empress bar. As soon as Flagstone came into view the crowd cried out.

"Mr. Flagstone what do you think of the murder?"

"Mr. Flagstone who killed old Dullcote?"

"Mr. Flagstone will you be tracking down the viscous killers yourself?"

At this Flagstone held up both hands for silence. Slowly the noise subsided.

"Gentlemen, I wish to make a statement," Flagstone said. There was a flurry of pencils and notebooks. "Let me make it perfectly clear that Ms. Fate and I have no involvement whatsoever in this affair. We do not know what has happened. I sure we will be able to read all about in the newspaper. Thank you, that is all."

There were a few chuckles from the crowd. Flagstone pushed through the crowd making way for Olivia. Finally outside and out of earshot Flagstone spoke in a low voice. "Let's go around back."

Flagstone and Olivia slowly walked to the end of the Empress and turned the corner. A minute later they were standing under the open window of Dullcote's room. They searched the ground finding nothing but trampled grass. Flagstone snorted in disgust.

Suddenly a head and shoulders leaned out of the windows. A member of the Sultan's Guard. "Hey, what are you doing there?"

"Just leaving," answered Flagstone. With Olivia's arm in his, the pair calmly strolled on around the building. They reentered and went straight to Big Jake Frere's room. Big Jake was pacing the floor when they entered the room.

Before Flagstone or Olivia could speak, Big Jake held up his hands.

"I don't know anything about it," he said.

"I'm sure you don't," replied Flagstone. "What do you know about this?" He placed the gold tablet on the table.

"I've seen it in Dullcote's possession. I don't know what it is."

"Is this why he went looking for the desert?"

"Could be," answered Big Jake.

"What was he looking for?"

"A lost city. Piles of gold. The usual wild dreams." Big Jake shook his head. He sat down. Flagstone and Olivia remained standing.

"That's all?"

"That's all he told me. He didn't completely trust me. He just hired me to scout and interpret for him. Said we were going north into the desert. Asked me if I knew where that was. I said sure. Off we went in a hurry."

"Everyone knows there is a desert somewhere in the far north," said Flagstone.

"Not old Dullcote."

"Where were you taking him?"

"We planned to go north till we reached the desert. I know its there. I have even seen it. I've never been out in it," Big Jake said.

Flagstone picked up the gold tablet and weighed it in his hand. He looked at Big Jake carefully weighing him also. He made up his mind.

"Jake, Olivia and I are going into the desert. Tell your friends we are not going to take anything away that belongs in Jimland. We are looking for the companion to this gold tablet. Marco Polo's father gave the tablet to him. He carried it with him throughout his travels like a good luck charm."

"When Marco Polo left China for the last time it took him three years to make a simple three month voyage. He was delivering a Princess for pre-arranged marriage to a Persian Prince. Strangely the voyage was little documented by Marco Polo. It seems like he went somewhere else. By the time he delivered the Princess, the Prince had died or maybe been killed. She married his son instead."

"Before leaving to deliver Princess, Kublai Khan gave Polo a ceremonial gold sword set with many jewels to be given to the Prince as a wedding gift. That is what I'm looking for. It has nothing to do with Jimland. I have followed many slender threads to find that Polo came to Jimland for unknown reasons. I have a buyer for the sword should I find it."

"Good luck," said Big Jake.

Flagstone and Olivia stood for a moment watching Big Jake. Jake didn't move. Finally, Flagstone muttered, "Thanks. Take care of yourself, Jake." They shook hands. Olivia gave him a hug. The pair left Big Jake sitting alone in his room.

Report 179 - 3.4 - THERE AND GONE.

Date: 2003-01-15

3.4 - THERE AND GONE.

Julius Flagstone turned and looked over his shoulder. The line of small boats putted along after his steam launch like obedient ducklings. He smiled. So far this Expedition was proceeding smoothly. Four weeks out of Jimville and no trouble. He looked at Olivia Fate. She had her big "walking hat," as she called it, thrown back and was soaking up the sun. She looked the picture of good health. She smiled at him. The little steam launch chugged slowly up the river.

The River Jim was the main avenue into the interior of Jimland. It wound lazily mile after mile through Jimland. Its many tributaries were hardly explored. Only the few tribes in the Wilds knew where some went. Most were completely unknown. Even the source of the River Jim was unknown. There were several legends, and several claims by Explorers to have found the source of the Jim, but none had been proven. Like Jimland, the River Jim was a mystery waiting to be solved.

Abruptly Olivia disappeared with a big splash into the river. A startled second later Flagstone jumped into the foam where Olivia had fallen. He couldn't see two feet in the silt-laden water. Olivia wasn't there. He thrashed about. He rose to the surface, took a deep breathe, and ignoring the pandemonium on the surface dove deeply down into the river. Try as he might he could not find Olivia. Lungs bursting he resurfaced. It was no use. He could not see her nor get a grasp on her.

Flagstone let himself be hauled into the steam launch. He mind was numb. The Expedition was stopped mid-river. All the small boats were gathered together. His lead scout suggested they make for shore. Trying to regain his focus, Flagstone ordered all boats to the western bank. Once there, he formed two parties, one for each bank. Once in position they began slowly making their way along each riverbank searching for Olivia.

Many hours later an exhausted Expedition lay wet and muddy on the riverbanks. Flagstone signaled the far bank team to re-cross. Once they had rejoined, the entire Expedition returned to their hastily beached boats and made camp. Flagstone hardly spoke. The men seemed avoid him and his gaze. He was sure they were as stunned as he was. There and, blink, gone. Flagstone forced himself to go with the daily hunting party and even managed to bag a small gazelle. Its sad eyes did not cheer him up.

The camp was quiet that night. None of the usual jesting and banter. No campfire songs. Flagstone didn't remember sleeping though he didn't remember the night either.

Dawn found Flagstone standing by the river staring into its milky swirl. He had the men cut down a small tree and make a pole. The pole was planted on the west bank a the spot across from where Flagstone figured Olivia went overboard mid-river. There was nothing more he could do. He sent boats down-river with orders to search along the bank on both sides. He would wait

in camp. He sent out a hunting party and told the lead men to keep the others busy with camp duties and general mending and cleanup. If Olivia was not found today, they would resume going upriver at dawn tomorrow. Life must go on he told himself.

At dusk the boats returned. They had not found Olivia or any sign of her. Flagstone was disappointed but not surprised. The big river crocs buried their meals deep. He shuddered at the thought. He slept like a dead man that night, no dreams just blackness.

Dawn found the Expedition breaking camp and heading quietly upriver. The men were still subdued, but activity was good tonic. Flagstone himself took a couple of turn at the steering station. It seemed to get his mind of her for a while. Never long enough. They made good time moving against the slow current. The riverbanks, festooned with lush greenery topped off with colorful and noisy birds, moved steadily by.

Another day passed. More riverbank flowed unceasingly past. The third day Flagstone noted a feeling of excitement starting to pass among the men. The verdant growth on the banks was starting to thin and the plants were changing. On the fourth day the river forked east and west. There was nothing to indicate which way to go. Much to the approval of the grinning and joking men, Flagstone made a big deal out of tossing a coin to decide their route. East it was. With the sun behind them they turned into the eastern channel.

Several more uneventful days passed. Flagstone wrote daily in his journal. The vegetation along the riverbank and inland as far as the hunting team went was definitely changing. It was thinning out. Different plants and animals now met their gaze. The men were getting back to normal thanks to the novelty of the things they were seeing. Flagstone's mood improved although he looked over his shoulder more than normal.

Noon on the seventh day a dull roaring could be heard ahead. They slowly pushed on. The roaring grew. Soon they saw the cataract ahead. Flagstone studied it carefully. Taking one of the smaller boats he reconnoitered from bank to bank. There was no getting around the small falls and huge rocks and rapids of the cataract.

The Expedition made camp on the northern bank. The men were buzzing. They had not seen such a thing before. Many of them walked to the cataract and stood staring at it in wonder. Several old hands told stories of waterfalls miles high bringing whoops of laughter from the men.

Flagstone and a team scouted each bank looking for a possible portage location. He could find none. It seemed as if Mother Nature had drawn a line and said if you want past here, you must walk. Well walk he could, and walk he would. Flagstone passed word for the team leaders and made his plans for the morning.

The dew was still fresh on everything and the sun was just thinking about rising when the camp roused itself up. The men shouldered their loads and formed up. Flagstone explained to his scouts that he wanted to follow along the river today if they could. They still might find a portage way. The scouts disappeared into the brush. The Expedition with Flagstone at its head followed at a good pace. Noon came and went. The scouts returned

periodically or were found waiting for the main Expedition. Nothing unusual was reported. The Expedition moved on. The ground became dried beneath their feet. The brush thinned and the main tree line retreated from the flood plain on the low riverbank.

Camp was made that night away from the river. As the evening meal was starting to smell good, head scout Blue-bu came up to Flagstone. He looked troubled. Flagstone indicated they should take a walk. The pair walked up a small rise.

"What's troubling you, Blu-bu," asked Flagstone.

"Four scouts go out, only two came back. No one has seen the missing ones."

"You are sure?"

"Yes, Boss."

Flagstone looked around. He stretched his big frame. He tried to think. Blu-bu stood surveying the land. He didn't look happy.

"Trouble, Blu-bu? Do you think there's trouble out there?" asked Flagstone.

"Yes, Boss. Trouble. I don't know, just a feeling."

"I agree. Double the watch from now on. Scouts only go out in pairs and always armed. Time to be watchful."

"Time to be dangerous too," added Blu-bu.

"That too," agreed Flagstone.

Camp that night was more tense. The men knew two scouts had disappeared. They didn't argue with the order for doubled watches. Jimland was not necessarily a friendly place. Sometimes it was downright mean. Vigilance was a small price to pay for waking up alive.

Dawn came without incident. The morning meal was quickly over and the men formed up. Flagstone ordered the column into a more compact marching order. They would bunch up anyway he thought. He put his askaris on alert. They marched at the front and at the rear of the column in light fighting gear, their camping gear being carried by the bearers. No complaints were heard. They marched all day with the river on their right. The dirt became sandier underfoot. The clumps of dense vegetation spread out. They could walk four or five abreast without trouble now.

Just as Flagstone was calling a halt for the day a pair of scouts trotted up. They looked excited. "Blu-bu asks you come," one said. Flagstone nodded. He ordered the Expedition column to halt and wait. He walked ahead with the scouts. They climbed several small hills. There was a large ridge ahead. Blu-bu was waiting at the foot of it. He took the lead. Some sweating and grunting later the quartet reached the ridge crest.

Flagstone was surprised. Before him spread a desert. Not quite what he had expected. It was a land of gentle swells, steep sharp hills, sudden washes; all covered in a sandy dirt, with many bushes scattered as far as he could

see. The occasional lone tree stood out. The desert spread out everywhere. On his right he could see the river wind its way into the vastness. The river faded into a small silver line then disappeared behind a butte. It was eerily still.

"Not what I expected," said Flagstone. He wished Olivia were there.

"We go on tomorrow, Boss?" asked Blu-bu.

"Absolutely," answered Flagstone. "Make doubly sure all the water bottles are filled tonight. We might be close to the river, but we may not be able to get to it. Understand?" Blu-bu nodded yes and licked his lips.

One of the scouts shouted and pointed out in the desert. They shaded their eyes against the last rays of the sunset and watched a giant dust devil stir up the landscape. Flagstone judged it was a several miles way. It was the biggest one he had ever seem, bigger even than the ones in the Sudan. Suddenly it faded away. The scouts murmured together in excitement.

"Back to camp," ordered Flagstone. "We'll see plenty of that land before we are through."

Camp was full of bustling and noise that evening. Only one or two of the men had ever seen the desert. None had ever been out in it. Flagstone thought of the Sudan. The desert there had almost killed him. He brought all the team leaders together and gave them his orders for their first desert march. He went so far as to explain why he ordered some things such as requiring every man to have a hat or turban of some sort and every man having a full canteen every morning, but that was all the water they got each day unless he said otherwise.

The men took to the orders with some excitement. They were impressed that the Great Flagstone was worried for them, but what was there to be afraid of. The desert? Surely it was less dangerous than the jungle. You could easily see trouble approaching. They sang happy songs around the their campfires. Flagstone carefully cleaned all his weapons that night. He ordered the askaris to do likewise.

At dawn Flagstone was leading his Expedition over the ridge crest, down the slope, then out into the desert. Everyone was excited. The scouts were easily visible ahead. Flagstone felt a vague uneasiness. He noted that Blu-bu was not smiling today. Me too he thought. He missed Olivia more that he thought he could. A warm breeze stirred up dust around the Expedition column.

The desert watched and waited.

Report 180 - FOUR EXPEDITIONS CHALLENGE THE WILDS OF JIMLAND.

Date: 2004-01-16

FOUR EXPEDITIONS CHALLENGE THE WILDS OF JIMLAND

Four Fearless and Famous Expeditions formed up and marched into the Wilds of Jimland. Our reliable sources in each Expedition submitted the following reports.

THE BODINE EXPEDITION

This rookie Expedition, a.k.a. "The Texicans", marched bravely into the Wilds undaunted by the warnings of many and the threats of the GPE. They found a deserted village. The cookfires were still burning. Bearers with precious food were swept away crossing a rain-swollen stream. They marched on.

They marched some more. Fever struck down Expedition Askaris. They marched on. They discovered ancient ruins. They found another deserted village. The cookfires were still burning. They marched on. They "found" some loot. They marched on. They discovered a new species of Big Cat. They marched on.

They discovered a new species of lizard. They marched on. Their food went bad, all of it. They were attacked by Goatmen. They beat off the attack. They marched on into some mountains. They were attacked by angry Tribal Warriors. They marched on.

They sprung a cleverly laid trap. They marched on. They returned safely to Jimville where they cashed in for a big pile of money.

THE GERMAN "DRIFTWOOD" EXPEDITION

Don't ask about the name. It's a long story. They marched into the Wilds looking wistfully over their shoulders at Jimville. Jungle rot struck down many hygienically challenged bearers. Skeletons attacked. Many soldiers and askaris died defending the Expedition. They marched on.

Bearers deserted. They marched on. They found an elephant graveyard and hauled out much loot. Goatmen attacked. Many bearers were killed because they would not drop the ivory they were carrying to defend themselves. It was noted the Goatmen had GPE pamphlets with them.

They marched on. They discovered a new dinosaur species. More Goatmen attacked. More GPE pamphlets were found on the dead Goatmen. The Expedition marched on. Bad Water killed more Expedition members. Very much reduced in number the Expedition carefully marched on.

A large Goatmen ambush was barely avoided. The Expedition had to buy a gross of GPE pamphlets to avoid hostilities. More bearers died under mysterious circumstances. They marched on. Bad food meant there was no food. Bearers started starving.

The now very small expedition of just the Fearless and Famous Explorers and a couple of overworked bearers marched on. They discovered a lake. The few survivors happily straggled into Jimville.

AL THE MARAUDER'S EXPEDITION

Al smartly formed up his Expedition and with all the Darryls and Darrylenes in tow they headed into the Wilds of Jimland. They marched on. They marched some more. They marched through endless jungle. They discovered a new species of dinosaur. They said it tasted like chicken. They marched on.

They marched still more. They lost bearers to either a snake attack or a sneak attack. No one is quite sure. They marched out into the savanna where they were promptly attacked by hostile Tribal Warriors. [What other kind could they be? Ed.] They repulsed the attack or the attackers were repulsive. No one is quite sure.

They marched on. They discovered a lake that they named Darrylene's Something or Other. No one is quite sure. They discovered a new species of fresh water fish. They named it the "Graber." They said it tasted awful, but worked well as a laxative. They marched on.

They found a village. They marched on. They discovered another lake. They marched on. They made it back to Jimville and cashed in for a huge pile of money or so they said. No one is quite sure.

AIRDRIEONIAN EXPEDITION

With the world-traveling Lord MacFraser in the lead the Expedition headed out pipes bleating. They had a disaster crossing a ravine. Bearer after bearer fell in. Dogmen attacked. The attack was beaten off with high casualties. Shrugging, Lord MacFraser ordered the Expedition deeper into the Wilds.

They marched on. They met some Lizardmen who promptly scampered off into the undergrowth. They marched on. Unknown animals carried several bearers away. Shrugging, Lord MacFraser ordered the Expedition deeper into the Wilds. They marched on. They found a sacred tribal relic. They marched on.

Torrential rains stopped their marching for a few days. They dried out. They marched on. They discovered a new species of primitive man. They traded with friendly natives, an act completely out of character for MacFraser who's standing order has always been "shoot a few of them to stir them up, then shoot the rest." Must have been an off day for MacFraser. They marched on.

Natives ambushed the Expedition. A smilodon joined the fray. A giant dragonfly attacked. A giant spider attacked. A giant carnivorous beetle attacked. A pterodactyl attacked. A pterodon attacked. To quote MacFraser, "Bam, bam, bam, bam. Now that's more like it. Bam, bam, bam, bam, bam, bam bam." Angry lizardmen attacked. Many soldiers were killed defending the Expedition. To quote MacFraser, "Bam, bam, bam, bam. Now that's more like it. Bam, bam, bam, bam, bam, bam bam."

They marched on. They discovered a new species of Giant Snake. To quote MacFraser, "Bam, bam, bam, bam. Now that's more like it. Bam, bam, bam, bam, bam, bam, bam." They marched on. They were ambushed by natives. They gunned the ambush down. They marched on. They marched some more. Bearers deserted. They marched on. More bearers deserted. Hostile pygmies attacked. To quote MacFraser, "Bam, bam, bam, bam. Aim low boys. Bam, bam, bam, bam, bam, bam, bam."

They marched on. They returned to Jimville where several bearers were caught stealing supplies. To quote MacFraser on his handling of the situation, "Bam, bam, bam, bam. Now that's more like it. Bam, bam, bam, bam, bam, bam, bam."

They cashed in and had more money than they could count.

DULLCOTE REWARD RAISED AGAIN

In a letter received by the Herald, dated before Dullcote's recent disappearance, Norton Dullcote raised the reward for the safe return of his Dear Constance from "really big" to "more money than this entire rump of a country earns in a month of Sundays." Sounds pretty big to us. We encourage all the Fearless and Famous Explorers to get busy before the old coot drops the whole reward idea.

SCIENCE CLUB

The Science Club would like to repeat their statement that they cannot afford to rebuild that section of Jimville leveled by the inadvertent explosion of the Club's Dynamite Collection. They claim complete innocence in the affair sighting that they weren't even meeting when the explosion rocked Jimville.

They suspect GPE collusion with free radicals and other unsavory types. They deny all responsibility and refuse to return to Jimville while armed lynch mobs roam the streets.

Report 181 - IN HIS OWN WORDS: BODINE EXPEDITION REPORT 1.

Date: 2004-01-19

IN HIS OWN WORDS: THE BODINE EXPEDITION REPORT 1

Texas Bob Bodine looked over his small expedition. He checked his list, marking off each box or pack on his list as he confirmed the load of each of the bearers. Fellow Texans; Buckskin Sledge; a half Comanche Dog Soldier, his scout, and Harry Hunter his, errum, hunter, were smiling and ready to go. All his locally hired Askari were on hand, armed, equipped and ready to press on. And the bearers looked hale and fit.

It was a glorious day for it; a breeze coming from the south, offshore of Jimland, a little cloud cover and not too humid, though being from the eastern part of Texas, Texas Bob understood humidity.

Well, Texas Bob, thought, remembering some churlish looking lout from the bar last night. Despite that "persons" warnings of death, destruction and suffering, supposedly communicated to that person to pass on from some GPE type fellows or something like that, he and his fellow Texans were ready to go and show those European fops a thing or too. Americans and especially By-God Texans were in this strange and foreboding land now. All of Jimland would soon take note of their spectacular deeds.

Texas Bob, pulled off his dove-gray Australian-folded Stetson, ran his hand through his fine blonde hair, combing with his fingers and replaced his Stetson. A final twirl of his fine blonde mustachios, a glance back across his small party and with a wave of his hand they were off. Hah! Onward!

Stepping off a brisk pace the Texas Terrors were soon amongst the jungles, and, Texas Bob noted, it was somewhat more humid here and indeed warm - even for a Texan. Not too warm of course, never that, nothing a Texan couldn't handle.

A bit after the noon break for a sandwich and a taste of Jack Daniels they stumbled on a small village. Buckskin stepped into sight.

"Well boss," the grizzled scout reported. "Place is empty as a sod-buster's purse."

"Whoever those folks are they're gone. Left their cook fires burnin' and just skipped. Like tryin' to follow a covey of them damned Gamble's quail, run off in every direction includin' straight up I reckon."

"Umm," Texas Bob opined. "Must have been put off by our obvious martial splendor and undoubted reputation."

Texas Bob spun his right-hand ivory handled, polished nickel .45 Colt Peacemaker back into its tooled Mexican leather holster.

"Keep a sharp look out Buckskin, you too Harry. No telling what those savages are up to."

As he delivered his instructions to his scout Texas Bob checked his left-hand colt, the exact image of his right-hand revolver.

Buckskin rechecked his breech-loading Sharps and Harry snapped open his Webly-Smythe .555 Nitro Express Elephant gun, ensuring all was well.

"No sweat Boss, we gotta cross a river up ahead and it's pretty quick flowin'. We might had oughta run us a line to git acrost the thing." Buckskin advised his boss.

"Okay," said Texas Bob. "Let's take a look."

Indeed the river was swift but it was not too fast for any Texan he knew; so without hesitation Texas Bob ordered his small band across.

"Oh foot!" Texas Bob exclaimed as he watched two of his bearers, thrashing and screaming, being washed down the river and out of sight as they plunged for a last time under the white-watered blue torrent never to be seen again.

"Drat, that is a bit of a bother." He advised his teammate Harry Hunter.

"Ummm, worse than you think," that worthy answered.

"Oh?" Queried Texas Bob.

"Yep." Answered Harry.

"How so?" Asked Texas Bob with a somewhat puzzled expression.

"That last one there, Tazbomwa, he was carrying all the Jack Daniels." Harry answered, with a frown and disgusted look.

"Good God!" Exclaimed the blonde, blue-eyed Texan. "I mean can they do that? Can one loose one's Jack Daniels? That can't be right. Shoot, we might have to turn back."

Harry turned to look at the handsome Texan and was slightly surprised to see tears in the tall man's eyes. Harry could almost see the courage flood into that handsome face, the resolution and audacity flowing back into his leader's features.

"No, by heaven." Exclaimed Texas Bob. I know this is disastrous and down right heart-breaking. I know most would turn back, but no sir we are made of sterner stuff."

So, with a sorrowful glance at the river and the last place the Jack Daniels had been seen the party turned once again on the path of exploration.

The next few days were uneventful and somewhat somber with the lack of good American fortification. The team was made to do with the disgusting Gin served to the hired help.

The mood brightened somewhat as the jungle opened to a golden savanna of tall grasses and bright sunlight. However, that soon became boring with the ever same flatness.

Texas Bob ordered a return to the jungle hoping for some discovery of new species, or perhaps new tribal sightings. And the very next day two of the brave and noble Askari were struck by fever.

Texas Bob knowing of the stout heart of his team's loyal Askaris slowed the march not a whit. He was sure in his knowledge that a good sweat and hard work would bring the men around again. His father, God rest his soul, had often impressed on Texas Bob the fact that hard work was good for a man. But unfortunately even though he worked them as hard as he knew how the two soon expired.

As the surviving bearers and remaining Askari threw the last of the dirt onto the two graves Texas Bob thought. 'Well what can one expect, they aren't Texans after all.'

The brave explorers marched on for days covering more jungle, again savanna, and then in the distance there was an irregularity that broke the flat horizon.

It was an empty and ancient remainder, the ruins of a lost and unknown civilization.

"Well, phooie. There's no gold or anything of value here at all." Texas Bob lamented, a few hours later.

He pitched the delicate urn he was holding, with the strange designs showing helmeted figures of men climbing down from round disc shaped things, onto the ground to shatter beside the others his Askari had brought him.

"No, no," he told Harry Hunter pointing at some things shaped remotely like pistols or rifles. Damned alien looking they were he thought.

"Who in heavens name would want anything," he said reading the strange shaped letters on the side of one of the devices, "called a Ray Gun, Atomic Disintegrator, Mark-IV? I certainly don't want to disintegrate anything; I mean think of the mess. And what in blue blazes is a Ray Gun anyway? No, no, leave all that junk here, too heavy to carry anyway, just throw them in that great hole with all those strange Power Pack, Mark IV thingees. You'd think there'd be one thing of value in this place."

Disgusted Texas Bob had everyone pack up and they started off across the savanna once again. A few miles on they came across another native village, again empty, but with the cook fires going and the food pots still on the boil.

'Hmm', Texas Bob pondered. 'I wonder if all these empty villages could have anything to do with the smelly leather clothes Buckskin wears all the time.'

The next day as they crossed the empty savanna they came across a party of abandoned bearers. There was some nice loot to be had. So, being Texans and by God the Salt of the Earth, the party stripped the dead of their loot and marched on.

"They were all dead, were they not?" Texas Bob asked Harry Hunter after the burial ceremony.

"Indeed, Sir, they were. I shook each and every one of them and when that one fellow moaned I asked him if he was dead. Well, Sir, you know natives and how they tend to falsehoods, so when the fellow replied he was not, well, Sir, I believed him not at all, and after all you know how the natives lie."

"Humph." Agreed Texas Bob and they marched on.

The savanna once again gave way to jungle. After a few hours march a strange, unholy and chilling cry was heard throughout the jungle followed by a loud bang!

The bearers and Askari froze into immobile silence!

"Good Gosh, what was that," exclaimed Texas Bob!

"A shot Sir." Harry responded.

"No, silly, the other," said Texas Bob.

"Ahh, some evil beast I fear Sir."

The party on tip toes and high alert was surprised, Texas Bob almost firing off with his ivory-handled six-shooters, when Buckskin Sledge stepped from the jungle with something large and furry draped across his shoulders on a pole.

"Well Buckskin," queried Texas Bob, "What have you got there?"

Where upon Buckskin Sledge threw to the ground a spotted, stripy, rainbow hued feline never before seen by mankind.

Panting, the old scout said, "Don't know, but it scared the water out of me, 'ja hear me cry out?"

"Ah, so that's what it was." Harry whispered.

Texas Bob bent over the cat that was lashed to a bamboo pole cut by the scout. After a few minutes of study he turned to the others.

Pointing to the beast strapped to the bamboo pole he said. "Gentlemen, it is a new species of cat, there can be no doubt. The coloring, the smell, and the size are proof. We'll call it, in honor of Buckskin fetching it to us, a Polecat."

The old scout blushed to his heels. "Thankee sir, thankee very much."

Buckskin skinned the cat and tossed it to one of the bearers to pack and carry back to civilization.

Further on a group of friendly natives were encountered and through much sign language and makee-talkie guns and ammunition were exchanged to the smiling natives for food. [These Texicans can expect a visit from the Sultan's Guard and Every Fearless and Famous Explorer in Jimville for trading guns to the Natives. A good thrashing ought to cure that habit. Texicans! What can one expect? - Ed.]

Back in the jungle a new and interesting lizard was discovered. When you pulled its tail the thing began to glow. It was skinned and dubbed a "lamp lizard."

On the savannas again the next day the party saw strange men-things approaching from the distance. They were chasing the ever fleet-footed Buckskin Sledge, who was leading them straight to the party.

"Assume defensive position Able!" ordered Texas Bob.

Immediately and with much ado the bearers dropped their baggage, covered their heads and dropped to the ground. Texas Bob, Harry and the Askari, looking somewhat confused, defensive plan Able - what be that boss?

Then Buckskin and the strange goatmen were upon them. With a flourish Texas Bob whipped out his pistols and fired directly into the body of the leading goatman. Well, it was in that direction anyway. Two quick volleys of shots that saw Texas Bob's deadly accuracy desert him. The Askari and Buckskin caused many wounds, instantly ignored, to the goatmen. Stout devils what?

'Oh my, what could be worse', thought Texas Bob as the goatmen, apparently unhurt, charged into hand to hand range.

'What a stupid question', whimpered the Texan, when a giant spitting snake, a giant pincer beetle and a giant bee sprang upon the scene.

Then it went hand to hand. And the Lord be praised the snake and the bee attacked the ferocious goatmen. Then Texas Bob was too busy trying to survive to see what was going on around him as he fought breast to breast against the goatman in his face. Pistols blazing Texas Bob threw lead in all directions putting the fear of God into the goatmen, and unfortunately everyone else. The bearers, sans baggage, bolted into the distance.

Some confused time later with three goatmen dead, two killed by the snake and bee; the survivors uttered a bleat and retreated, vanishing into the savanna, chased by the giant snake and the giant bee, with the monstrous beetle in hot pursuit also.

But disaster, the giant beetle had consumed all their food. No wonder it had not attacked them thought Texas Bob.

As the expedition marched on game was not to be found, two of the now starving company perished, fortunately only bearers. But they were sorely missed; Texas Bob had to carry his own bottle of Gin now.

Into the mountains they explored, only to be ambushed by a howling mob of tribals.

Texas Bob's incomparable combat instincts and skills were again in the forefront of the battle leading his men, spraying lead about the compass and into the stratosphere. Being crafty and a planner no one realized the devilish keen Texas Bob's plan. His supposedly wild and random gunshots called forth a jungle bear, a giant lady bug, and a giant frog to fall upon the howling tribal's rear, which the giant lady bug instantly did. Unfortunately due to the sluggardly reactions of his Askari the bear and the frog attacked them.

During the ensuing melee two of the brave Askari and two of the panicked bearers fell. Texas Bob, ivory handled Colts smoking and empty looked at the dead laid out before, umm all the others.

"A good thing my shots were placed to draw those beasts to help us," said Texas Bob as he, Buckskin, Harry and the other four watched the jungle bear retreat with the limp body of an Askari clamped in its jaws.

Later, Texas Bob opined that giant frog legs didn't taste too bad at all and thanked Buckskin for all of them for felling the great beast.

Returning to the march the next morning and winding their way out of the mountains the group heard a loud yelp from in front in Buckskin's direction.

Limping back into the camp for the noon break of frog leg fricassee and gin Buckskin informed them he had detected and disarmed a devilish tricky trap someone had laid. After wrapping his bleeding leg he was off again and soon led them back into Jimland's capitol, Jimville.

Texas Bob went to see their broker, Skinflint MacShrew. After a lot of quibbling, fussing, fighting, and one quick-draw demonstration Mr. MacShrew laid out a rather large sum of money for the hides, map, and Texas Bob's journal.

After paying and dismissing the surviving Askari and bearers, Texas Bob, Buckskin, and Harry went to the Jimville House of Girls and Casino to rest recuperate and heal.

Sitting in one of the rooms, surrounded by empty bottles of Inspiration, Texas Bob looked blearily at Buckskin and Harry.

"Shoot, that wasn't so tough." He said.

"We ought to do that again, I mean to say, the pay is good and it keeps one out of the doldrums does it not. And it has gained us quite a bit of fame." He said pointing to the back page of the Jimville paper at the small column in the bottom right hand corner all about their adventure, entitled 'Texas Hooligans Explore the Wilds!'

"I mean, look, we have a whole two lines here counting the headline." He boasted somewhat fuzzily. "But mind you we shall need an interpreter and a prospector. I've just the folks in mind too. Americans, Texans of course, I mean why settle for second best when you can get Texans. Umm, hire some rangers too, Texas Rangers. And more bearers, eating all that frog has given me hives in a most unmentionable place."

"Of course, we'll have to find out why our map didn't come out, I, for the life of me, cannot understand all those blurry marks, nor could good Mr. MacShrew. Strange that."

Hiccuping, Texas Bob reached out for his tonic bottle and Miss Lisa of the Jimville House of Girls and Casino handed him the Jack Daniels.

"Hmm, maybe better paper or ink" He mused.

Editor's Note: Although their self-styled Expedition title is "The Texas Terrors", they are just "Texican Hoodlums" until they prove they are worthy of being called Fearless and Famous Explorers. It takes more than just soiling your breeches to make that elite club. On the plus side we do know who to blame as they actually have a leader with a name, unlike the Driftwood Expedition that just struts about, preens, and makes little "oom-pah" sounds all the time. - Editor.

Report 182 - 3.5 - DESERT RAIDERS.

Date: 2004-01-20

3.5 - DESERT RAIDERS

Julius Flagstone trudged through the soft dirt and sand. The sun was overhead. The desert was still. The Expedition churned up a small dusk cloud that hung about their ankles. Though he knew the river was only a short walk away, Flagstone could not see or hear it. It had disappeared between a pair of the innumerable small rolling hills the covered the desert.

The men were much quieter now that the novelty had worn off and the prospect of a long hot march lay ahead. The scouts had reported nothing to see. Still Flagstone felt uneasy. He wished he had convinced Blind Bob to come along. Blu-bu wasn't saying much. He had personally gone ahead with several scouts to see what there was to see. Back now with the Expedition column he reported nothing ahead but more of what was behind. Flagstone liked that report. He almost smiled.

Over the crest of a nearby small ridge came the sudden thunder of hooves. The horsemen bore down upon the unsuspecting Expedition. The askaris got off a few shots then the horsemen were among the men slashing with long gleaming swords and firing their rifles. Just as suddenly they were gone.

The rear of the column had been hit. At the extreme front Flagstone had only been able to turn and yell orders before it was all over. A half a dozen bearers were dead with a like number wounded. One askari was dead. Another half dozen bearers were reported a missing. Flagstone looked askance when this was reported.

"Missing? How can anyone be missing? Look again," he ordered.

Blu-bu walked up as the other men began to double check their findings. He had a small streak of blood on his shoulder. Flagstone looked inquiringly at him.

"The men are missing, Boss. I saw the horsemen carry them off," Blu-bu said.

"Carry them off? That's odd," said Flagstone shading his eyes and looking about the land. "Damn odd."

"Yes, Boss. It is bad. We will see," Blu-bu said.

Soon the Expedition was on the move again. The askaris were now in skirmish order on both sides of the column. The scouts were operating in pairs again. Everyone was scanning the rolling desert. Every hill hid an ambush. They marched on for the rest of the day unmolested. The Expedition camped near the river that evening. Gear was piled up and thorn bushes were cut and fashioned into a defensive perimeter, a zeriba similar to what Flagstone had seen in the Sudan. The watches were edgy that night.

The next morning the team leaders reported that several bearers were missing. Flagstone wasn't surprised. These men were superstitious. They didn't hire

on to fight desert thugs nor antagonize their pantheon of local gods and spirits. He ordered the Expedition to form up. Soon they were on the move again following the river deeper into the desert.

An hour passed. The Expedition was getting into its marching rhythm. Askaris guarded each flank of the bearer column. Flagstone walked along at the head. He saw Blu-bu approaching at the trot. Flagstone kept up his steady pace.

"Find something?" asked Flagstone.

"You better come see, Boss," said Blu-bu. Flagstone nodded and slowly trotted off with Blu-bu leading the way. After a couple of minutes he jerked to a halt. His mouth felt very dry.

The head of one of missing men was staring wide-eyed at him from atop a small pole. Flagstone looked at Blu-bu.

"We better not go this way, Boss," Blu-bu said. "We go back to Jimville."

Flagstone stood looking first at the head then at Blu-bu. He could hear the Expedition column approaching.

"No. We will go on. Leave this up. Better the men see it now."

The head of the column topped a small rise and came directly toward them. Flagstone stepped aside. He stood by the head. The men in the column stared at the head. He knew the new men must be terrified. The old hands he wasn't so worried about. There was always risk in this line of work. He took off his hat and wiped his forehead with a big handkerchief. He tried to look relaxed and unworried. He spoke to a few of the men he knew from past Expeditions as they walked by the gruesome warning.

The Expedition continued on. Flagstone knew more men would desert tonight. He walked alongside his askari captain. The man smiled and made a motion that passed as his salute. Flagstone nodded.

"Double guards tonight, and no one leaves the camp without my permission."

The askari captain saluted again. Flagstone increased his pace and returned to the head of the column. At regular hourly intervals the column found the heads of the missing men. It seemed to Flagstone the desert raiders must be staying just ahead of the column. How could they know where he was going when he wasn't sure himself? He shifted the route of march farther north away from the river. The heads always appeared in their path. He shifted back nearer the river.

Night found the Expedition making a nervous camp. Already several men had tried to run away. Flagstone had dealt with them severely. To encourage the others he had the first two men given twenty lashes. It wasn't something he normally did, but he needed to retain control and keep the men in camp. Flagstone was sure any that ran off would never make it back to Jimville.

Several times that night the sentries fired into the blackness. The camp was on edge. No one slept very much. The roll call at dawn found all the men still there. Flagstone smiled to himself. Maybe the terrors of the desert

would keep the men in camp if he could not. The Expedition formed up and moved out.

They hadn't been on the march for more than five minutes when the thunder of hooves was heard. The bearers huddle together like frightened children. The askari nervously formed a loose circle around them. No attack came. The unseen enemy disappeared. Flagstone waited a half an hour. Nothing happened. He finally ordered the Expedition forward. The scouts went out with a show of bravado. Blu-bu shook his head.

"Good men," he said. "They are scared. Something is out there." He waved out at the desert.

Flagstone need. "Something always is. That's why we get paid to go find it."

The warm desert day passed uneventfully. The men seemed to calm down some. Routine settled in. At dusk they made camp. Flagstone ordered a zeriba built. It was not a very good one, but it helped the men's spirits. The night was still. Flagstone slept deeply. His only dreams were for Olivia and how he missed her.

Flagstone awoke to shouts, gunfire, and the sound of hooves. Shadows rode up and tossed flaming torches onto the zeriba. It burst into flames. The askaris fired at the riders. In minutes all was quiet again. The zeriba burned briefly then fell into glowing embers. The sky above was especially clear. The stars in their multitudes twinkled down. Flagstone made a show of going back to sleep. To his later surprise he fell asleep. Maybe he was just too tired or maybe he just didn't care. He awoke refreshed to find a faint lessening of the dark on the horizon.

The morning meal was cooked. Men rolled up their gear. Flagstone received the morning roll call. Four men had deserted. He said nothing. As the Expedition moved out the sun rose golden over the eastern horizon. The river had decided to show itself. The Expedition marched several hundred yards from its banks. There was something reassuring about the river. Flagstone was glad it was there.

Four more days passed without incident. Flagstone headed steadily east. The desert became more sandy. The shrubs and sparse trees thinned out even more. Flagstone wondered if he had chosen the correct branch. He chided himself. How would he know which way to go? It was a simple guess. He wished Olivia were with him.

It was that twilight time just before the dawn. The night seemed its darkest. Flagstone woke fully alert. He looked around the slumbering camp. He could see the sentries walking the perimeters. He could have sworn he heard horses. All was quiet. He lay down. Horses. He could plainly hear them. He pressed his ear to the rock beneath him. He heard the horses. He jumped to his feet and shouted the alarm.

The horsemen came out of the night at full gallop. They jumped or rode through the small zeriba surrounding the camp. Their swords glittered in the campfire light. Rifles fired on all sides. Bearers fought with whatever was at hand. More horsemen attacked. The camp dissolved in a swirling melee.

Flagstone fought with rifle, pistol, and his big hunting knife. Blu-bu was down, maybe dead. The captain of the askari had no head. Bearers littered the ground. Desert raiders lay unmoving about the camp. Dawn finally appeared. At some signal the desert raiders abruptly withdrew. The morning sun found Flagstone standing not in his camp, but on a bloody battleground.

The Expedition spent the day burying the dead and tending to the wounded. Flagstone decided they would spend several days at rest, letting everyone regain their strength. Casualties had been heavy among the bearers. He only had about a third of his original number. Several more had deserted. He ordered the camp moved right onto the bank of the river. A shallow trench was dug and the earth piled up to form a waist high wall. Within this simple enclosure the expedition licked its wounds.

Daily, Flagstone led a heavily armed hunting party out. Seldom did they find any game. Once he caught a glimpse of a lone horseman on a distance ridge crest. He blinked and the man was gone.

The hunting party slinked among the sandy mounds of dirt, around large rocks, and the between the small hills. Flagstone carefully looked about. It didn't seem anything was moving but them. It was still early morning, but already it was warming up. They had been on the prowl for over two hours. It didn't look promising.

Flagstone stopped and cocked his head. Several men in the party did the same. Gunfire. From the camp thought Flagstone. He instantly turned and began trotting toward the river. Yes, it was gunfire. It grew in intensity. Flagstone was worried. A major attack while he was gone would not be good. Blu-bu was still recovering. There was no one who was a good leader in camp. He picked up his pace. He could hear the firing and yelling now.

Horsemen rode by on his left. They didn't appear to have seen the small hunting party. Flagstone hurried on. From behind a hill came horsemen. Rifles were raised and the horsemen fired. The hunting party broke into a run. Flagstone stopped raised his rifle and fired. A horseman tumbled from his saddle.

"Stay together," he yelled. The men slowed their pace slightly. "Stay together."

More horsemen now, on the right. Flagstone could not hear the firing in the camp due to the firing around him now. The hunting party was surrounded. They formed a small clump and fired slowly and carefully at horsemen. Several charges left dead horsemen in the sandy dirt. The raiders pulled back, unwilling to charge this small knot of men. Flagstone was glad he had the best shots with him. That was all that was keeping the desert horsemen at bay. Firing was still coming from the camp, but had lessened.

Flagstone heard the thundering of hooves. He looked around. He yelled at the men and they bolted for the rock-strewn side of a small hill. One man went down. No one stopped to drag him along. The drumming of the hooves grew louder. Flagstone and his men grouped together beside a large rock thrusting up out of the desert. Several other large rocks formed the sides of their small rocky redoubt in the desert. Flagstone looked at the men. No one seemed panicky yet.

A large party of horsemen charged over a dune top and straight toward the hunting party. The men fired quickly, but carefully. Flagstone aimed and fired. A horseman was jerked from his horse. Several of his men were down. The horsemen withdrew. Now dismounted raiders began firing on the hunting party. Soon half the men with Flagstone were dead.

Again Flagstone felt the trembling of the ground. He heard the dull rumble of thundering hooves. This is big one he thought. His men were going through the pouches of the dead for ammunition, not a good sign. The rumbling grew louder. The rate of fire from the dismounted raiders was increasing. Another man was down.

Charging horsemen appeared. Dismounted raiders attacked. Bullets smacked the rocks next to Flagstone. Bullets kicked up little geysers of sand. Flagstone fell like a limp rag. The mounted horsemen swamped the small hunting party and the dismounted raiders. The fight was quickly over.

The sun had not risen half way to its zenith. Silence filled the desert.

Report 183 - 3.6 - THE SHEIK.

Date: 2003-01-24

3.6 - THE SHEIK

Julius Flagstone snapped into consciousness. He didn't open his eyes. He listened. No noise. Soft feminine voices somewhere not far away. He opened one eye carefully. The other eye popped open.

Flagstone was in a tent lying on a soft bed of pillows covered in silk. Over his body was thrown a colorful light blanket. He peeked under the blanket. Yes, everything present and accounted for. He sat up. He found himself naked except for a bandage about his head. A beautiful young woman in a brightly colored cloak entered the room, halting as soon as she saw Flagstone was awake. She spoke quickly to someone behind her. The first woman knelt and watched Flagstone while the second ran off.

Flagstone sat still, not knowing where he was or what would be the best thing to do. Male voices could be heard approaching. The woman rose and stepped out holding a curtain aside.

A large powerful man entered the tent room. He surveyed Flagstone for a moment. Then he spoke. The accent was there, but Flagstone couldn't quite put his finger on it.

"Greeting, Mr. Flagstone. I am Sheik Fizzle. I am pleased to see you are recovering."

Flagstone nodded. "Thank you, Sheik Fizzle." He didn't know what else to say.

"Hungry, Mr. Flagstone?"

"Yes."

Sheik Fizzle clapped his hands twice. Immediately the same two beautiful young women entered and placed a tray of food and a silver pitcher and goblets before Flagstone. They smiled and left. Flagstone looked at the Sheik.

"How do you know my name, Sheik Fizzle," asked Flagstone.

"Everyone knows of the Fearless and Famous Explorer Flagstone. Besides I saw it on your journal. I can read your English."

Flagstone sat speechless. Fizzle laughed.

"Eat. Eat. It will give you strength. Then we will talk."

With that the Sheik sat beside Flagstone and torn a big round flat loaf of bread in two. He thrust half at Flagstone who took it rather than be knocked over by the man's gesture. Fizzle pulled a piece of bread off and held it between his index and second finger. Then he reached out and neatly scooped

some of the steaming meat dish onto the bread with his thumb. Then, just as neatly he ate the food. Flagstone clumsily mimicked his moves. The Sheik laughed.

Fizzle poured Flagstone a dark liquid. Flagstone, chewing his second mouthful of the meat dish and finding it very good, sniffed the drink. Alcoholic no doubt. He didn't hesitate. The stuff was cold and pure nectar. He sat the goblet down empty. Fizzle filled it again. They ate in silence, Flagstone intent on satisfying his hunger, the Sheik intent on watching Flagstone.

Flagstone quit eating when there was nothing more to eat. He nursed his goblet. He could feel the fire of the liquid in his stomach. Better slow down he thought. This could be too much of good thing. He looked at the Sheik. Fizzle was watching him with a merry twinkle in his eyes.

"What shall we talk about," asked Flagstone warily.

"We shall talk about your trip in my desert," replied the Sheik.

"Your desert?"

"Yes, my desert. Mine as far as I wish to claim it. You are very lucky I arrived to save you from those brigands."

"You have my deepest thanks, Sheik Fizzle."

Fizzle bowed his turbaned head and made a gesture. "It was God's Will."

"Then he has my deepest thanks also," Flagstone said. The Sheik laughed.

"What happened to my Expedition, to me?" asked Flagstone. He felt the liquor sending warmth throughout his body.

"I am afraid only you survived. All others were killed. The brigands are very blood-thirsty as you know," Fizzle replied shaking his head sadly. "We found you while we were searching for booty. It is what we do after a battle. Luckily you groaned when my men turned you over. They found this in your bag."

Fizzle tossed something at Flagstone's knees. It landed with a dull thump. Laying before Flagstone was the Golden Tablet of Command. Flagstone made himself hold very still yet remain relaxed. The Sheik looked at Flagstone. Flagstone returned the steady look.

"Yes, that is mine," said Flagstone after several moments.

"How did you come by such a thing?" asked Fizzle.

"It is a very long story," Flagstone said feeling very naked under the light blanket.

"They usually are," Fizzle replied flatly. He eyes grew harder.

"It was payment for a job," Flagstone said.

"You are the second man to carry that into the desert, Mr. Flagstone."

"The second?"

"Yes, the second. The first was most welcome. I'm afraid you will not be."

"Why is that, Sheik Fizzle. Have I offended you in some way?" asked Flagstone.

"Perhaps."

"Why?"

"Let us get you some clothes, Mr. Flagstone. You need to walk about I think."

Fizzle clapped his hands once. Another man, even larger than Fizzle, slipped into the room. Fizzle talked to him in low tones in his native language. The man bowed and quickly left the room. Fizzle yelled an order. The two beautiful young women reentered and removed the food.

Moments later to Flagstone's surprise his traveling trunk was carried into the tent and placed before him. Sheik Fizzle gestured expansively toward the trunk. Flagstone opened it and rummaged through the contents. As he pulled out clothes he thought to himself, extra pistol removed, journal removed, money removed. He kept a straight face. Minutes later Flagstone was fully dressed and feeling all the better for it.

"Yes, very good," said Fizzle. "Let us take small walk to wake up your legs."

Flagstone bowed slightly and the Sheik led the way out of the tent. Outside it was past noon. Four very large men fell in behind Flagstone. All were heavily armed. Flagstone immediately dismissed any thoughts of escape for the moment. The Sheik's camp was a huge number of low wide tents. Only his tent and the Sheik's tent were taller than a man. The Sheiks were prominent because it was sky blue. All the rest were varying shades of blacks, brown, very dark reds, and dusty tans. Everywhere there were people, adults and children. The adults watched Flagstone warily; the children flocked around and had to be ushered off by the Sheik's bodyguards who seldom smiled.

The small party strolled leisurely around the camp. Either the Sheik was showing his captive to the camp or the camp to the captive. Flagstone was only sure of one thing. He was the captive. Might as well relax and enjoy it thought. The heat felt good. They walked without speaking.

Flagstone wondered if these were the same people who attacked him in the first place. The dress and arms looked the same. He could find nothing to indicate friend or foe other than his being alive, but that told him little. Maybe they like nice healthy victims he thought smiling at some children.

Flagstone followed Sheik Fizzle around the camp. He carefully noted the layout of the area. At the opposite end of the camp from Fizzle's tent Flagstone saw a large black tent set apart from the rest of the camp. It stood alone in a patch of empty dirt. No guards were visible. Fizzle did

not approach the tent. Flagstone slowed his pace. Two of the accompanying guards roughly moved him along. Fizzle said nothing.

Flagstone was beginning to feel lightheaded and tired when the small party returned to his tent. The Sheik followed Flagstone inside. A silver pitcher and two goblets sat on a hassock. Flagstone poured for the Sheik. Fizzle sat watching Flagstone.

"Why do you come to my desert, Mr. Flagstone," asked the Sheik bluntly.

"I come searching for ancient ruins," answered Flagstone.

"Ruins stir some men's hearts, but do not make them rich," Fizzle said.

Flagstone smiled. "True, Sheik Fizzle. Gold and treasure always help."

"You think you know where there is gold," asked Fizzle his eyes twinkling.

"I don't know, but I am searching."

"It seems to me, Mr. Flagstone, that you have enough gold in your bag already." The Sheik pointed to Flagstone's leather bag hanging from a peg in a tent pole.

"As I said it was payment for a job. The job is not yet done."

"What job," asked Fizzle. Flagstone knew he couldn't bluff much longer.

"I am looking for the thing that goes with the Golden Tablet," said Flagstone. "I think it is in the desert, your desert, somewhere. By your leave I would like to continue looking for it."

Fizzle stroked his black beard. "Our legends say that long ago a man came to the desert bearing the Golden Tablet. His name was Marco Polo. He had a Princess with him and was armed with a Golden Sword. All who stood beside him prospered. All who stood before him perished. That is our legend."

"It is a good legend, Sheik Fizzle. I search for the Golden Sword. Now that is the truth. My heart is laid bare."

"Many men have come searching for this thing. None have found it. None have survived. It is not to be found."

"Surely more brave men will try. I will try. Think what it would be to find such a thing. Sheik you yourself much have searched for the sword."

The Sheik did not answer. He looked at Flagstone for several moments. "I did when I was very young. All with me died. I alone survived. I do not know why. My father sent me away to your England as punishment for being so rash and as reward for being so strong as to survive. I learned many things in England. I learned the English never do anything without a reason."

Fizzle rose to his feet. "Do you know where the Golden Sword is? Answer truly for I have saved you from death and you are my guest."

"Yes, I know where the Golden Sword is."

Fizzle paced back and forth. He stopped and looked at Flagstone. "I must have the Golden Sword. With it I can unite my people. It is a source of great strength and power. With it I can create a Kingdom in the desert. I will drive out the foreigners with the sharp edge of my sword." Fizzle's eyes flashed. "Where is the Golden Sword."

Flagstone rose. "Sheik Fizzle, you are wrong. The Golden Sword does not have any power. It is a trinket, a valuable trinket to those who want such things."

Flagstone stepped over to his leather bag and removed the Golden Tablet of Command. "I will give you this if you help me find the Golden Sword. This Golden Tablet of Command has power. It protects its bearer from harm. It gives him the power to command that his needs be filled. The Great Khan gave this to Marco Polo who traveled the world with it. No one dared harm Polo while he carried the Tablet."

"As your legend says Marco Polo came into the desert with a Princess. The Princess had filled his head with dreams of creating a great kingdom in the desert. She promised to be his Queen. Her charms wove a spell on Polo. For three years he fought to make his Kingdom. He won many battles against your people of old. Then the Princess took ill from the night air and died. The spell on the Polo was broken."

"He realized his folly. Taking a Princess from a loyal desert tribe he resumed his journey to Persia where the Princess married the son of the King there. He fulfilled his task for the Great Khan who had died during Polo's desert adventures. Internal strife tore apart the Great Khan's Empire. The change of Princesses was never noticed. Polo returned to his own land filled with sadness at his folly and broken-hearted over the loss of the Princess who had bespelled him. He never traveled again."

"He left the Golden Sword in his desert city, given to the priests as a peace offering, not a weapon of war. The city has many names. I can find this city with your help. With this Golden Tablet of Command you can make your Kingdom. With the Golden Sword I can complete my job. What do you say?"

Fizzle stood facing Flagstone. Fizzle's face was flushed. A long minute they stood looking steadily at one another. Flagstone almost held his breath.

"I will consider this, Englishman. But you shall not have another Kingdom to rule over."

The Sheik turned and left the tent. Flagstone lay on the bed of pillows. His mind raced. What am I getting into here he wondered. Empires, Desert Kingdoms, bah. I'm a businessman he thought. Flagstone fell into a trouble sleep.

The next morning Flagstone awoke when the two beautiful young women entered his tent and laid his morning meal before him. He ate in silence with the women watching him. They removed the empty dishes when he finished.

Flagstone walked to the tent entrance and stepped outside. Two guards blocked his path. He smiled at them and reentered the tent.

Not long after Flagstone heard Fizzle approaching. The Sheik swept into the room like a desert storm. He stood, a hand on each hip, looking at Flagstone.

"I will give you twenty men and horses and camels. You will have until the moon falls behind the horizon to find the sword and return to my camp. My men will know where it will be. If you fail and live, you will not be welcome in my desert. I will offer a reward for your head, just your head. If you succeed and bring me the sword, we will talk of the future. Now you will give me the Golden Tablet."

Fizzle held out his hand. Flagstone did not hesitate. He placed the Golden Tablet of Command in the hard palm. The Sheik left the tent. Outside Flagstone hear orders being given. A man came in and led Flagstone outside.

Ten paces from the door of his tent stood twenty hard-looking desert warriors. Each stood at the head of a powerful desert stallion. Several more men stood at the rear with a group of pack camels. Sheik Fizzle gestured. A particularly rough looking man stepped forward.

"This is Taleb. His is one of my Captains. He has killed forty warriors in battle. He is my eyes. He is my ears. He is my mouth. He will follow your orders. He will not disobey mine. He commands this party."

Sheik kissed Taleb on each cheek. Flagstone realized the little ceremony was that of Taleb getting a public commission from Sheik Fizzle. He was sure Taleb was up to the job at hand. Flagstone didn't wonder what private orders the Sheik had given Taleb. The Sheik then turned and pressed his cheek to each of Flagstone's. Then he walked away.

Taleb barked an order. Two men hustled into Flagstone's tent and returned with his gear. This they packed onto a camel. A horse was brought up. Flagstone mounted. The party mounted. Flagstone noted all were well armed and all looked like the raiders who had attacked his Expedition. He also noted no one made an effort to arm him. All he had was his big camp knife. He smiled. Taleb did not.

Flagstone looked at the sun. He pulled his hat firmly down on his head. He kicked the horse gently and the small party moved out into the desert. Flagstone did not look back. He was sure Taleb was right behind him.

The desert swallowed the small party.

Report 184 - 3.7 - THE BLUE PYRAMID.

Date: 2004-01-26

3.7 - THE BLUE PYRAMID

Julius Flagstone looked at the sun. He pulled his compass out of his pocket. He took a careful sighting. The desert stretched out in the limitless distance all around him. Taleb and the rest of the party sat quietly on their horses. Even the pack camels were silent. Flagstone looked at the notes scribbled in his journal and the scrap of map that was pulling him further and further into the desert.

Flagstone nudged the horse into motion. The small party moved on in stillness. The scrubs and bushes of the desert were thin now. The river was far behind them. Flagstone had taken to trusting Taleb's instinct when it came to finding water. So far they had been fortunate. By Flagstone's reckoning food and water were adequate, but time was precious.

He wiped the sweat off his face with his handkerchief. He guessed two more days to the ruins. If the map was correct. If he had deciphered where this fragment fit in the expanse of the desert. If desert raiders didn't kill them. If Taleb didn't have orders to cut his throat for some reason. Flagstone smiled to himself. I love this job he thought. He laughed out loud. Taleb looked at him with the same stern gaze he always had.

Taleb and the other desert warriors seldom spoke. Simple orders. Simple responses. They were organized. They were efficient. And no doubt, they were very deadly. Flagstone was at once glad to have them along and dogged by their silence and obvious dislike for him. Strange bedfellows he thought.

The party rode silently through the desert. An occasional scrub tree poked up its short head. Bushes grew sporadically across the land. Mostly it was a land of sandy soil punctuated by green oasis and dry ruins. It was getting warm. Taleb signaled a halt. The men gave their horses a little water and themselves even less. The party bedded down to avoid traveling in the worst heat of the day.

Flagstone sat under a makeshift canopy. He didn't want to leave its shadow. The desert shimmered in the afternoon heat. The haze played tricks on the eye. Around him the desert warriors snored away. The guards were sitting alert and watchful. Taleb sprawled under his canopy asleep.

Flagstone set up suddenly. It seemed he could see a ruin in the desert. It was well preserved. In the center stood a squat square building with a typical flat roof surmounted by a small pyramid of blue. It reflected the light like glazed stoneware. Flagstone closed his eyes and gently rubbed them. The mirage was gone when he opened his eyes. He was saddened. It had been exactly what he was looking for. It matched what he had come to believe was the tomb where the priest put the Golden Sword of Marco Polo. Was his desire making him see this thing? He was tired. He squinted into the desert. Nothing. Maybe something, fuzzy in the haze, fading in and out.

Was that it? It was in the direction they were heading. Had he just seen his destination? He slouched back against his saddle. How far away can a mirage be seen? One mile? A hundred? He was excited. If this mirage was there then they must be getting close. He sighed. Or I am going mad. He pulled out the map and compass and replotted their position for the umpteenth time. He would know before long.

Two days later as the party crested a sandy ridge Taleb pointed off into the distance. Flagstone squinted into the sun. He pulled out his compass and took a reading. He nodded in agreement. Flagstone found himself becoming as speechless as his guard and escort. The party moved down the ridge.

An hour later they dismounted and stood looking at a small ruin in the desert. The winds had piled the sand and dirt against the eastern sides of buildings. The party walked into the ruins. They stopped. Several murmurs of excitement and surprise came from the men. Taleb immediately silenced them. They stared at the building in the center of the plaza. It had a small pyramid on its roof. The pyramid was tiled with a shining blue glazed tiles. It gleamed in the morning sunlight. Flagstone couldn't believe he was standing there. He couldn't believe the pyramid was standing there.

Taleb broke the magical spell. He wanted to know what Flagstone wanted them to do now. Flagstone told him to have the men make camp. He would explore the building with pyramid on top. Taleb nodded. Orders were issued. Flagstone began to walk around the building. He found himself accompanied by Taleb and two other men. Never a moment alone he thought.

Flagstone paced off the building size. Forty paces square. About fifteen feet to the top of the walls. Maybe forty feet to the top of the tiled pyramid. He continued walking around the building.

"Look for a door or window, any kind of entrance."

The quartet circled the building finding only walls sanded smooth by the desert winds. The building was in exceptional condition. It hadn't outwardly decayed. They walked around it a second time. No doors. No windows. Flagstone stood with his hands on his hips and looked up at the pyramid. Suddenly he had an idea. He motioned the two men with Taleb to come to him. In a moment they were hoisting him up the wall. He stretched his tall frame. He couldn't quite reach the top. The men lowered Flagstone.

Taleb barked an order. Moments later one of the men was swinging a rope gently above his head. A small hook was fixed to the free end. Up went the hook, arcing over the top of the wall. With a clunk it hit the rooftop. The man slowly pulled the slack rope back. The hook caught. The man pulled on it. Then he put his weight on the line. It held. Taleb barked another order. Instantly the man scrambled up the rope.

Flagstone was unceremoniously hoisted over the small parapet formed by the wall and roof. He found himself standing on a stone roof. The Pyramid towered over him. He walked up to it and ran a hand over the tiles. He quickly removed his hand and rubbed it. The tiles were hot and getting hotter in the mid day sun. He looked at Taleb and the other two men now on

the roof with him. He gestured at the rooftop. The men began searching the roof for an entrance.

Not two minutes late one of the men yelled and the rest hurried to his position on the roof. He had found a stone set inside a small raised border. Flagstone crawled around on his hands and knees examining the find. He was sure it was a way in. He told Taleb to have their tools passed up along with more men. Soon six men were prying at the stone. Slowly they raised it. Several pry bars were placed under it. With great effort the men shoved the slab aside until there was an opening big enough for Flagstone to use. He lit a torch and handed it to Taleb. Grabbing a rope Flagstone lowered himself down into the darkness.

The interior the building was almost cold to Flagstone. It was dark. He yelled up for Taleb to come down. A minute later Taleb's torch lit the darkness. They were standing in an empty room. Empty except for a sarcophagus in the center on a slab of stone. The sarcophagus was plain. No covering of jewels or gold. No inscriptions except one small square plaque set over the chest area. It had some script on it Flagstone could not read.

Flagstone paced off the room size. Twenty feet. He was surprised. Ten-foot thick stone walls. This place was meant to last. It was a tomb for someone important. He examined the sarcophagus. Nothing. He examined the room with Taleb following him around holding the torch. The walls were painted in a simple white edged at floor and ceiling with blue. The ceiling was smoke covered. Flagstone was not surprised.

They came back to the sarcophagus. Flagstone looked at Taleb. Taleb looked at the sarcophagus. He made a lifting gesture. Flagstone nodded yes. Taleb then yelled up a series of orders. In a few minutes a dozen men were prying the sarcophagus lid off. Slowly they slid it aside and placed it heavily against the wall.

Flagstone held a torch over the open stone sarcophagus. It was empty. It appeared as if it had never been used. He was disappointed. This had to be the place. He reached in and felt the cold bottom of the sarcophagus. Empty. He brushed his hand over the bottom. A line appeared. He brushed some more. With a shout he climbed into the stone coffin. He brushed at the bottom.

Quickly more torches lit the scene. Flagstone was crouched in the sarcophagus. At his feet was a square outlined by a line in the stone. The men needed little urging. The smaller slab was wrestled up from the bottom of the sarcophagus. A dark square stared up at Flagstone. He lay on the cold sarcophagus bottom and lowered his head, shoulders and a torch through the hole. He breath caught in his throat.

Another smaller room was revealed in the torchlight. The walls were covered in brightly painted frescoes. In the center aligned perpendicularly to the first coffin was a second, inlaid with gold and lapis lazuli. He ordered another rope made ready.

Flagstone dropped down the rope. He landed lightly on the stone floor. This room was definitely cooler. Must be well below ground level now he thought. He ran a hand gently over the sarcophagus lid. It was beautiful. The room

like the other was empty except for the sarcophagus. The men excitedly marveled at the wall paintings. Even Taleb seemed impressed.

Taleb organized the men and soon they were lifting the lid off the sarcophagus. It was laid with a heavy thud on the floor. Flagstone again held a torch over the open stone coffin. Inside was a mummified figure wrapped in linen bandages. A jeweled crown rested on the head. A golden necklace circled the neck. Cradled in the mummy's withered fingers was a sword, a Golden Sword. Other jewels winked and sparkled in the torchlight. Flagstone could only see the sword. It glowed warmly like only gold can do. He found his breath coming in rapid gasps.

Around him the men babbled excitedly. Already some were reaching in to retrieve the gold and jewels interred with the mummy. An eager hand reached down and removed the crown. Another hand removed the glittering necklace. Loose jewels and gold were scooped out the sarcophagus. Taleb reached out for the sword. Flagstone shot out a hand and gripped Taleb's wrist. The two men stared at one another. Taleb spoke a single word. Men grabbed Flagstone and pinned him against the wall.

Taleb leaned over the sarcophagus and reached for the sword. He pulled it free with a tug. The mummy's withered hands fell by its sides. There was grating of stone followed by a low rumbling sound. The men in the room stood still. A swishing sound could be heard. A liquid spilled from a small opening at the base of the sarcophagus turning into a cloudy gas instantly and rising to the ceiling. Men began coughing and choking. Flagstone threw himself on the floor. Men began falling on the floor writhing. Flagstone pulled his big handkerchief out and covered his mouth and nose. More men fell dead. The gas seeped upward. Flagstone heard men yelling from the upper room.

A minute later all was quiet in the tomb building. The gas had dissipated. Flagstone crawled over to Taleb's body and forced the Golden Sword out of his death grip. He gathered up some loose jewels and golden ornaments. He crawled over to the man who had the necklace in his dead hand. He jammed it into his pocket. He stuffed a pistol into his belt.

Lying on his back he could see pockets of gas still trapped in the corners of the room. The opening above seemed clear. No inquiring heads poked through the hole in the ceiling. The rope hung there, beckoning in the stillness. Flagstone steeled his nerves. He bounded up and grabbed the rope. In a flash he had climbed out of the room and into the sarcophagus above.

He peered over the edge. Men lay unmoving on the floor. Torches sputtered next to them. He let out his breath and took a tentative sniff. He sniffed again. Carefully he climbed out of the sarcophagus. He picked up a rifle and slung it over his shoulder. Seizing the waiting rope he climbed out of the tomb and onto the building's roof. He lay in the early evening heat and sucked in several deep breaths. No one was on the roof but him.

Flagstone crawled to the roof edge and peered over. He could not see anyone. Were they all dead? Had any survivors run off? He could not tell. He climbed awkwardly down from the roof. The sun was setting as he feet touch the earth.

Flagstone walked slowly toward the half-prepared camp. No one challenged him. The camp was undisturbed. Flagstone caught a movement on the lip of a distance ridge crest. Two horsemen topped the ridge and disappeared. Flagstone hurried into action. He saddled his horse. He threw four water bottles over the saddle rear. He grabbed his daypack. He slung a bandoleer of cartridges across his shoulder. He threw a still rolled blanket onto the saddle. He thought rapidly; weapons, water, blanket for the cold, map, sword. Mounting, he rode swiftly through the night after the two horsemen.

Report 185 - 3.8 - ESCAPE.

Date: 2004-01-28

3.8 - ESCAPE

Julius Flagstone looked at the moon. It was nearing the horizon. Five days maybe six he thought to himself. He looked ahead. A tiny pinpoint of light showed him where the two men were he was following. They were unsuspectingly leading him back to Sheik Fizzle. Flagstone felt a shiver go through his body. He couldn't allow them to reach Fizzle.

That was his problem. The men were ahead of him. He must somehow ride past them unseen and ambush them. A wide circuit was out of the question. There was no time. His own horse was tiring. That's it. Flagstone had a plan.

The partially masked campfire was much brighter now. It was bothering Flagstone's night-vision. He could see the two men leaning against the big rock at their back. He crawled a little closer. He was being very careful. He must not let the horses hear him or smell him. Their restlessness would alert the two men. The horses stood out plainly. He crawled forward a little more. He was behind a small bush.

Flagstone pushed the rifle gently through the bush and sighted. It was as good as it was going to get. Bolt up, back, forward, down. With a click the rifle was armed. Flagstone took a long time to aim. There would be no second chance. The sound of the gun firing was deafening to Flagstone. He quickly chambered another round. He sighted again. Not so carefully this time. He fired.

He peeked through the bush in the darkness. The fire was out. Flagstone couldn't see the two men at all. He heard nothing, his ears still ringing from the two shots. He felt angry with himself, but it would change nothing. The two horses lay dead. Two big lumps in the dirt and sand. He was disgusted with himself. Slowly he crawled away. He had to be miles away before the men found his track. He knew they would not stop just because he had killed their mounts, but they would be much slower now. He had a chance.

Sunrise found Flagstone leading his horse across the desert. He had ridden much harder than he should have, but he felt he was clear of the two men now. They were miles behind him, probably trudging angrily after him. No matter he was ahead of them and would reach Fizzle's camp at least a day before them.

Fizzle's camp. Flagstone's mind began working on that puzzle. What would he do when he found it? He instinctively touched the Golden Sword strapped across his back. Sheik Fizzle wanted it. He wanted it. If he went to Fizzle's camp the Sheik would not hesitate to take it from him. I must reach the Sheik's camp first, but for what good reason? Flagstone shook his head and kept walking.

It must be about noon wondered Flagstone. He was tired. His horse was tired. Both were thirsty. Flagstone stopped and pulled out his piece of map and his journal. He worked through his rough dead reckoning once more. He laughed at the name. Dead Reckoning. If it wasn't right he would be dead. He chuckled. He started walking again.

An hour later there was a disturbance on the horizon. The perfectly flat horizon line had a spike in it. Flagstone adjusted his course to head for the spike. Two more hours of afternoon sun brought Flagstone to the well. It wasn't much, It was all he wanted.

The well was small and deep. Flagstone let the canvas bucket down slowly. It seemed to take forever before he heard a soft splash. He pulled the heavy load swiftly up. He took a long drink. Then he left his horse drink and drink. Four more times the bucket was filled and the horse drank. Flagstone stroked the horse's neck. "Sorry, boy," he said.

He filled his water bottles. Flagstone decided to rest for the rest of the afternoon. He fashioned a hood for his horse's head. He pulled the blanket roll down and undid the ties. He unrolled the blanket. A big grin crossed his face. Food. Packed inside the blanket was an assortment of dried meat and fruits. A small hide flask also lay in the blanket. Flagstone told himself not to get his hopes up. He took a gentle pull on the hide flask. He felt the wine coursing down his throat. He let out a little whoop of joy. His horse snorted. "Sorry," he said.

Flagstone filled the water bucket again. He soaked some of the dried fruit in the water while he chewed on the tough dried meat. Jerky never tasted so good. The wine, he told himself, will have to wait till after dark. He fed the horse some of the fruit and ate the rest himself. Darkness was coming on. He repacked his gear. One final drink for both and Flagstone was ready to go on.

He stood looking at the water bucket. No, he told himself, I can't do it. He left the water bucket where it belonged. Not looking back Flagstone led his horse out across the desert. The moon seemed ever so low.

Flagstone sat in the small wadi and watched the low ridge ahead for an hour. Nothing moved. He could hear muted noises from the other side of the small ridge. It must be Fizzle's camp. Flagstone wasn't exactly sure where the Sheik's mobile camp would be. He had just been going in a straight line based on the heading the two surviving men had been taking. It never occurred to him that they would go in any direction but straight to the camp. Well, Flagstone thought, somebody's camp is right over that little ridge.

He crawled on his stomach stopping frequently to look around. No one had spotted him. He angled over to a small bush. He raised his head and looked over the ridge.

Sheik Fizzle's camp spread out below him. Flagstone started. Not fifty feet from him was a sentry. Flagstone was hidden by a gentle rise in the land. A shiver went through him. The sentry seemed bored and not very attentive. Flagstone turned back to the camp. He could see Fizzle's sky blue tent as a

lighter grey across the camp from him. The nearest tent was the large black one he had seen before. Again it was set apart from the rest of the camp by about fifty yards. Flagstone wondered again what was in the tent.

He jerked his head down. Sheik Fizzle had just come stalking out of the tent. He turned and yelled at the guard. The man yelled back. Fizzle waved a hand and walked back toward the main camp like a man with something unpleasant on his mind.

Flagstone looked at the guard. The man had sat down and was drinking from a hide flask much like the one Flagstone had been nursing until it went dry. Flagstone could only see his head. It was now or never he thought. He slid over the ridge top and down into the bushes behind the tent. He heard voices from inside. He couldn't believe his ears.

Throwing caution aside, he rose and walked to the front of the tent. He boldly walked in, rifle at the ready.

Facing Flagstone's rifle was a very surprised Professor Fate. He slowly raised his hands. Flagstone looked around. His knees went weak. Olivia was sitting in a chair to his right between him and Fate. She raised her hands and brushed a wisp of hair out of her eyes. Her shackles rattled and shone in the light of the tent's lanterns.

"Olivia!"

"Jules!"

"Are you ok?"

"I'm fine now." She shot an angry look at Fate. Then her eyes suddenly widened.

Flagstone felt the muzzles of the shotgun pressed into his back. He froze. "Hello, Max," he said.

"Hello, Doc," answered Max. "Now lay your rifle down very gently."

Flagstone did as directed. Fate lowered his hands and smiled. He gestured at the pistol stuck in Flagstone's belt. Max pressed the barrel against Flagstone's back a little more. "Now the pistol, Doc."

Flagstone gently pulled the pistol from his belt all the while looking intently at Olivia. She gave an faint nod.

Flagstone flung the pistol toward Olivia while spinning quickly to his right. His right forearm knocked the shotgun barrels aside. He crashed a left jab into Max's jaw. Max crumpled to the floor.

Olivia dove for the pistol and rolled over pointing the cocked weapon at Fate who had only taken a step forward. He stopped and raised his hands again. He looked at Flagstone and then Olivia.

"I only have to yell for help," he said.

"I only have to pull the trigger," Olivia replied.

Fate smiled and bowed slightly. "May I," he asked gesturing to a chair. Olivia waved him to the chair with the pistol. Fate sat down and crossed his legs. He seemed very composed.

Flagstone bound Max with rope piled with supplies in the tent. He made them tight. "Sorry, Max," he said. Max didn't even groan.

"The key," said Flagstone advancing on Fate. Fate calmly handed him a key. Flagstone unfastened Olivia's shackles. She shook a foot. Flagstone knelt and removed those shackles as well. Olivia kept her eyes and the pistol on Fate. Finally she handed the gun to Flagstone and dropped into her chair. She stifled a sob.

"The chains weren't his idea. The Sheik demanded them," she said.

"Ok. Sorry Professor, but now we must leave," Flagstone said.

"You've done a daring rescue. Good luck escaping," said Fate.

"Actually, it's not a rescue. I didn't even know Olivia was here. I thought she was dead," said Flagstone. "I'm just lucky tonight."

"Just how do you expect to escape a second time," asked Professor Fate coldly.

"Escape a second time?" asked Olivia.

"It's a long story. I guess I'm supposed to be dead now. I'm not very high on the Sheik's list. We can discuss that later. We must get out of here now. I only have one horse. Does this rascal have any," asked Flagstone looking at Olivia.

"No. He has something better," answered Olivia with a twinkle in her eyes.

With Olivia's help Flagstone gagged Professor Fate and Max. Olivia insisted on putting the foot and hand shackles on Fate. He started to resist but calmed immediately when Flagstone put the pistol barrel in his ear. With both men securely bound and gagged, Olivia took Flagstone's hand and led him out a back flap of the tent. She pointed at an amorphous black box and a huge pile of canvas lying next to it.

"A balloon," she whispered.

"You're kidding?" said Flagstone.

"Don't be a ninny, Jules. It's the only way out. The Sheik will think its Fate. Come on.

"Sweet Jesus," muttered Flagstone.

"Julius, you know I hate that. Start unfolding the balloon."

Flagstone unrolled the great canvas pile. Olivia had climbed into the basket, a wood and wicker cube four feet on a side. She was pouring oil into a metal container. She climbed out and put two small oil barrels into the basket.

"Extra fuel. Get Fate and Max while I get this thing fired up," ordered Olivia.

"You can run this thing?" asked an astonished Flagstone.

"You bet. I love flying this thing. It's great. You'll love it too," she beamed. Flagstone shook his head and reentered the tent. In a few moments he reappeared with Max slung over his shoulder. He gently lowered Max into the basket. Next came Fate hobbling along with his chains clinking. Flagstone roughly helped him into the basket.

Olivia fired a burst from the oil burner. The balloon was fully inflated and tugging gently at its mooring lines. Olivia pointed to the two lines. "Release those and we will leave this place."

Flagstone leapt nimbly to the ground. He united the first rope. The balloon tugged upward. He ran to the second and united it. The balloon began to rise quickly.

"Jules," Olivia shrieked. Flagstone made a leap and grabbed the line. He pulled himself up and into the basket. He stood panting for a moment. He turned to look at Olivia. He shook his head. "Sorry," Olivia said meekly.

Flagstone looked at the camp below. There was some activity but no shooting. Give them a few minutes thought Flagstone. The balloon continued to rise as Olivia fired the oil burner. Max lay unconscious in one corner. Fate was chained in the opposite. Olivia stood one hand on the burner control and one on the basket side, looking out and up. Her hair was flying in the breeze. She shivered with excitement.

"Isn't it great," she said without looking around.

"Yes, it's great. Where are we going?" asked Flagstone.

"Up."

"Up? Why?"

"To find a breeze going our direction," answered Olivia.

Flagstone was getting cold. He ungagged Fate and with his cocked pistol aimed at Fate, had him remove his jacket. Flagstone draped the jacket over Olivia's shoulders.

"How about removing these," Fate said rattling his chains. "I have nowhere to go." Flagstone shook his head no.

Fate squatted down in the basket dejected. "Watch out when she lands," he muttered wrapping his arms about himself. Olivia laughed gaily and tossed her hair.

Flagstone peered back in the dark. No shots. No pursuit, but then how could they pursue this thing. He reckoned they were making ten miles an hour over the ground. The eastern horizon was beginning to lighten. Flagstone relaxed for the first time in weeks. They flew on in silence, Olivia managing the balloon with an expert's hand.

"Olivia?"

"Yes, Jules?"

"What happened in the river? I thought you were dead."

"I nearly was." Flagstone waited while Olivia put her thoughts together.

"It wasn't an animal that pulled me off the boat. It was a man. Or several actually. I don't know. Anyway they dragged me deep under the water to the bottom. Then when I thought my lungs would burst we surfaced under an overturned canoe. A man was slowly opening and closing a bellows like a blacksmith uses. You know. It was hooked to a valve of some kind then to a hose that when out the bottom of the canoe that was now the top. Do you understand?"

"Yes. The canoe held the air bubble for you to breathe. The bellow brought fresh air in from above. Your invention, Professor?" asked Flagstone. Fate only muttered to himself. Olivia continued.

"We stayed there on the river bottom for a long time. I don't know how long. Finally a new man bobbed up under the canoe. He said it was clear to leave. He said you had gone. I was nearly numb with cold. Everyone was. We took a deep breath and they swam me to the shore. Then we waded up a small stream and hid in a dirt cave for another two days. It was miserable.

Eventually the Sheik's men came for me. I was taken to his camp. There, much to my surprise, I was put into the keeping of Fate. There I have remained, plotting to escape until you found me."

She turned and gave Flagstone a solid kiss. "Oh, please," muttered Fate. Flagstone gave him a half-hearted kick. Fate shut up. Olivia laughed.

The sun rose. The desert stretched in every direction.

Report 186 - 3.X - SQUALL.

Date: 2003-01-30

3.X - SQUALL

Julius Flagstone looked at the land below. They were on the edge of the desert now. Olivia had refilled the oil tank twice already. It looked like they would be out of oil soon. For two days they had been drifting southward at a good speed. Flagstone marveled at the ease of traveling the balloon provided. Privately he was wondering if he should get one. He had no doubt that Olivia would be all for it.

She was relishing her role as pilot and doing an expert job at it. She seemed to have a talent for finding a wind that was going in the direction they wanted to go. They had not touched the ground since their escape. Flagstone looked around the little basket. Fate was asleep in his corner. Max was awake in his. Flagstone shaded his eyes and peered ahead.

The land was changing to jungle slowly but surely. He could see a dark line on the horizon. That was surely the jungle. The grasslands below were becoming greener. They had been rained on several times. He thought he could smell the sea.

A dark spot on a cloud caught his attention. He watched it. He had seen this kind of spot before. A pterodactyl was gliding in lazy circles hunting. He watched it now with his rifle in hand. He tapped Olivia on the shoulder and pointed. She nodded. The balloon continued on. The great animal disappeared behind a cloud.

Flagstone sniffed again. It was the sea. "The ocean is ahead," he told Olivia. She nodded. She was tired.

"We can land on the coast and let these rats go. Then we can fly along the coast till we find a village. I don't know if we are east or west of Jimville," she said.

"West I think, but I'm not sure. Let's follow your plan," Flagstone said.

Olivia nodded and fired a burst from the burner. They continued to drift silently along. Flagstone could definitely smell the ocean now. From their height he could see the grassland end at the edge of a narrow strip of jungle. Beyond the jungle was a tiny strip of golden sand, then the ocean glittered. Flagstone wondered how narrow the strip of jungle was, five miles or twenty. He wasn't good at judging distances from this height. They were deceiving.

A large shadow passed across the balloon. Flagstone was instantly on guard. A great dark shape flashed by under the balloon. Flagstone kicked Fate to awaken him. Everyone was standing and alert. Yesterday he had removed the bounds from Fate and Max's feet. They were now only bound at the wrists. The shadow passed overhead. There was a squawking cry. Flagstone tried to look everywhere at once.

He noted a rain squall moving toward them fast. He told Olivia. The balloon rose and fell as she hunted for a wind current to move them out of the way. It was not working. Something big hit the balloon. The basket swung radically back and forth. Everyone was hanging on. The pterodactyl peeled away squawking its weird cry.

It circled around and approached in a shallow dive. Fate yelled a warning. Flagstone aimed and fired. He fired again. The great beast passed under the basket. Flagstone fired again to no noticeable effect.

"Nice shooting, Doc."

"Shut up, Max, or I'll throw you overboard," replied Flagstone.

The flying giant disappeared into a cloud. The rain squall was almost upon. Olivia shouted, "Hold on." The storm hit the balloon. Cold rain drenched them. The balloon bounced around like a cork in rapids. Up, down, left, right, and all at once. Everyone was knocked to the floor of the basket. Lightning flashed. Thunder roared so loud that they couldn't hear it. It shook them in its power. Hail began pelting them. They tried to cover themselves but there was no place to hide. The hail worsened. Flagstone tried to shelter Olivia with his body.

"Look," he shouted. They all glanced at the wire attaching the basket to the net that surrounded the balloon's air bag. The wires were glowing a strange blue color with little lightning-like flashes jumping between them. They smelled a strange odor. They all jumped at a sharp bang of thunder. The winds swung them around. The basket continued to rock wildly. A ripping sound came from above.

"We're going to die," yelled Max.

Olivia gave the burner a long blast. The hail left. The cold rain returned. They all surveyed the balloon above their head. They could not see any rips. Flagstone looked below the basket.

"Up! Up," he shouted at Olivia. She opened the burner to full and let it run that way. Treetops grabbed at the basket. The basket skipped and tugged its way across the tops of the trees. Slowly it rose up. They cleared the trees. Another ripping sound came from about.

"We're going to die," yelled Max.

"Shut up, Max, or I'll throw you overboard," shouted Fate over the storm.

"Thanks," yelled Flagstone to Fate.

"No problem. I'll throw him if you won't," yelled Fate. Max slumped into his corner of the basket. Another rip came from above. Olivia let the burner flame on.

"Don't get it too hot, Olivia, damn it. It'll burn." shouted Fate.

She reduced the burner's flame. The storm threw the basket against the balloon's bag. They gripped the basket rail for their lives. The basket jerked back beneath the air bag. Everyone was tossed in a heap.

Fate came up pointing Flagstone's pistol at Olivia. "More heat, Olivia. Now." She opened the burner to full. The balloon began to rise. The basket's swing lessened.

Flagstone started to move. Fate pointed the pistol at him. "Now, now, Flagstone, don't get heroic. That will only get you dead. Untie Max."

Flagstone did as directed. "Sorry, Max."

"Sure. Ok, Doc," said Max rubbing his wrists then picking up the rifle. "Now back off."

The rain squall had passed them by. The Balloon was barely above the treetops. Flagstone could see the ocean fast approaching. "Olivia, we must land or change direction. We can't get blown out to sea."

Fate turned to look. Flagstone lunged at him. Max fired the rifle. The balloon basket was hit a terrific jolt. A great squawking pterodactyl head tried to poke its way into the basket. Its great talons were shredding the basket's sides. Fate fired point blank into the creature. Max fired again. The creature cried out. The basket ripped apart on one side. Flagstone felt himself sliding toward the creature's great beak. He kicked at it.

The pterodactyl slapped its wings against the basket. Olivia came flying into Flagstone. Together they fell out of the basket. As they fell they heard two more shots. The balloon disappeared back into the rain squall.

Flagstone and Olivia fell with a great splash into the ocean. They came up sputtering. The beach was fifty yards away. They swam for it. Eternities later they crawled exhausted onto the golden sand of the beach. They lay unmoving for minutes. Finally Flagstone rolled over and shook Olivia.

"Let's get off the beach," he said. She nodded. They staggered up and walked toward the edge of the jungle. The rain poured down. Thunder rumbled deeply overhead. Flagstone pulled the Golden Sword off his back and hacked down some fronds and made a simple rain shelter. Flagstone jammed the Golden Sword into the sand. They huddled under the little shelter. They shivered together. Flagstone put his arms around Olivia.

"You'll do anything to get a hug," he said holding her close. Olivia laughed.

"I was just thinking you'd do anything to get me half dressed and soaking wet."

They giggled together as the rain poured down. They looked for the balloon, but it had disappeared into the storm. They were alone on the edge of the jungle.

"Think they made it?" asked Flagstone. "I mean did they fall into the ocean or did..." He stopped himself. Olivia shivered in his arms.

"I don't know. I don't know how badly the balloon was damaged if it was really damaged at all. I, well, I just don't know. I hope they are safe," she said. "Safe, but far away from us." She shivered again.

Eventually the rain stopped. The sun peeked through the huge rain clouds. Birds began to twitter and call again. The jungle was coming out into the sunshine. Olivia took off Fate's jacket. She laughed. "Here."

She reached in the pocket and pulled out the Golden Tablet of Command.

"Well I'll be damned," said Flagstone.

"Probably," agreed Olivia. "Both of us." They laughed like a couple of school-kids with a secret. Flagstone laid the Tablet and the Sword on the sand. He looked at Olivia. She smiled a wet smile at him.

"Congratulations. Now what, oh great white hunter," she teased.

"Well, great white hunter says build a fire, get warm again. Then find something to eat. Tomorrow we start walking to Jimville wherever it is."

"Great white hunter's mate says this first," said Olivia as she planted a smacking good kiss on the startled Flagstone. "Just so you know why you're doing all this."

"I thought it was for the money," said Flagstone.

"That too," answered Olivia.

Ten days later Flagstone and Olivia created a stir as they walked tattered, torn, and muddy up to the main desk of the Empress. Flagstone carried a bundle. The clerk stood open mouthed, staring at them.

"Any mail for us," asked Flagstone calmly.

"I'll check, Sir. Ah, yes these two items. They have been here quite a while."

"Thank you. Please tell the cook we'll be down at seven for dinner. Tonight we expect his very best efforts."

Flagstone and Olivia squinched across the lobby and up the stairs. Every head turned to watch them. As they turned the corner of the stairs and disappeared Olivia's sweet laughter floated down.

Report 187 - FLAGSTONE RETURNS.

Date: 2003-02-01

FLAGSTONE RETURNS.

Julius Flagstone and his Constant Companion, the Fetching Olivia Fate, have returned safely to Jimville from undoubtedly harrowing adventures. Despite his reluctance to talk about them, we of the Herald are sure we will be able to coax the story out of our Favorite Fearless and Famous Explorer.

Flagstone has been exchanging cables at a furious tempo with parties unknown in England and on the Continent. We suspect something is up either as a result of his last adventure or in preparation for his next. We are as excited as you are, Dear Reader, to have our man action back in action.

Olivia Fate has joined the Science Club becoming the first female member. She has been using the Club's facilities to research, of all things, hot air balloons. When we ask about these things, she gaily laughs and proceeds to tell us all about them technically. What we really want to know is why is she so interested in them now. Did something happen recently? Is something going to happen on Flagstone's next Expedition? No answers were forthcoming, but talking to the radiant Olivia Fate was a pleasure in itself.

Speaking of Flagstone's next Expedition, we suspect its costs have gone up since no other members of the previous Expedition returned with the disheveled pair. In answer to our query on the matter, Flagstone said he did not expect any of the Expedition members to return for one reason or another. What does this mean, Gentle Reader? What is going unsaid? We can only continue to search for the truth.

BRITISH TO OPEN NEW BASE

The British Consul announced today that British Army was opening a new fort and trading post far up the River Jim. The Consul said the new site would be north of the Great Desert of Jimland. It would be the most northern outpost settled by any Power including the Sultan. This caused much hemming and hawing in the crowd.

As reported in Herald Report # 71, and confirmed by the Consul, the Sultan has granted rights to a lease for a new British Base on the River Jim. The new base is located far up the Great River Jim within the harsh badlands that twist between the Great Desert and the Great Mountains. The British Consul's statement is below.

"We are pleased to announce the signing of a lease in perpetuity for a small base in the Hinterland of Jimland. From this base we will be able to bring peace to the northern frontiers of Jimland. This is fully in the Sultan's best interests. It is also in the spirit of brotherhood and the harmonious pursuit of peace."

"No troops will be removed from Jimville to man the new base. The base complement will be filled by additional Troops drawn from Her Majesty's Colonial Empire and by Regular Army Troops from the Homeland Defense Forces. These Troops are enroute to Jimville by steam transport even as I speak."

"The initial garrison will soon be in place. It consists of a construction battalion under the protection of the Naval Brigade until the assigned garrison troops arrive. The full base garrison size is still undetermined."

"Peace is not secured easily, nor cheaply. We pledge to bring peace to the Hinterlands of Jimland, and of course, to all of Jimland itself."

SCIENCE CLUB

The Science Club would like to announce its first Ladies Night. They cordially invite the Ladies of Jimville to attend the Club meeting and learn of the Club's activities. Associate Memberships are available to Women at reasonable prices. For this inaugural meeting, our first Woman Member, Ms. Olivia Fate will give a talk on 'Women in Science and in the Jungle.' It is sure to be a memorable night. Drinks for Ladies will be half price. Join now. Enjoy the Fun.

Report 188 - 4.1 - MARKET DAY.

Date: 2004-02-03

4.1 - MARKET DAY

Julius Flagstone and the Fetching Olivia Fate, strolled along Jimville's main street. Today it was more than crowded with people. It was Market Day. Peddlers from Jimville, from the corners of Jimland, and from beyond had gathered to sell their wares. Olivia was enjoying herself. Flagstone was enjoying Olivia.

Olivia was buying everything she wanted. Flagstone had told her before they left the Empress Hotel that she could buy whatever she pleased. The buyer for the Golden Sword of Marco Polo had wired the agreed large sum of money into his account. The British Museum of Antiquities had given him a nice honorarium for placing the Khan's Golden Tablet of Command in their safekeeping. Not that he needed the money, of course. Being independently wealthy was blessing in Flagstone's business. He could chose his clients on merit alone, not according to how empty his purse was.

Tagging along behind Flagstone and Olivia were Flagstone's Scout, Blind Bob and Flagstone's current valet/batman/gunbearer Ginsu. Both were laden with packages, parcels, and bolts of clothe from Olivia's ravaging of the Market Day stalls. Flagstone looked at the two men and laughed. Blind Bob shook his head and smiled.

"Shoot me now before my friends recognize me," he said.

Olivia turned and placed her hands on her hips. She gave Blind Bob a withering stare and then laughed herself. "Why, Bob, you old rascal, you look positively radiant in that shade of pink," she said referring to the clothe draped about his shoulders. Blind Bob turned even pinker.

"And don't you dare get it dirty," warned Olivia with a gay smile.

Flagstone looked at the two men. All three shrugged simultaneously. They laughed together. Flagstone knew they would walk through hell barefoot for Olivia. He was lucky to havethe men working for him and he knew it.

Flagstone idly watched the crowd. Food of local origin, imported delicacies and mystery food he could not identify and regarded doubtfully abounded. Clothing merchants were as thick as flies. Weapons sellers were there in sizable number also, but these the Sultan had carefully restricted to a large earthen corral patrolled by his Guard. No one came or went from the arms dealers without the Sultan's knowledge and presumed approval.

A voice from a small stand on the out-skirts of the edge of the end of Main Street somehow caught Flagstone's ear.

"Authentic native artifacts. Rescued from fierce Desert Warriors at great risk to my very life. Yours for a fraction of their value. Pure golden doubloons brought over by the Conquistadors of Spain themselves. Original documents signed by Christopher Columbus himself."

The small man's stall was not getting any attention. What he was selling did not interest the locals. Flagstone waved Olivia along. He strolled up to the stand and listened to the man's spiel. He examined several of the items on the rickety table. Fakes and forgeries everyone. He shook his head in disgust. The man watched him.

"Would the Fearless and Famous Explorer Flagstone like to see the good stuff?" the little man asked. How the deuce does he know who I am, wondered Flagstone.

"Is it better than this pile of crap," asked Flagstone quietly.

"Oh, yes, indeed, Mr. Flagstone," answered the man.

The man turned and reached far back into his one mule two-wheeled cart behind him. He laid a metal breastplate on the shaky table. Flagstone picked it up and examined it. He smiled to himself. Now this was something to find in Jimland. A genuine Spanish breastplate circa 1450 or so, maybe later. Inlaid, but the inlay was gone. Flagstone did not doubt who had made good use of it. He turned the breastplate over. An inscription caught his attention. Then it caught his breath.

"To Juan Ponce de Leon for Exceptional Service to his Most Catholic Majesties, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabel, Rules of All of Spain and It's Possessions."

Flagstone's heart skipped a beat. Ponce de Leon. One of his childhood dreams was to find the Fountain of Youth that Ponce de Leon was looking for. All kids dreamed of these things he told himself. But he really believed he could find it given the barest of hints where it might lay. Such were his childhood fantasies. Flagstone put the breastplate on the table. The little man smiled at him.

"Where did you get this," Flagstone asked casually.

"Far away in a desert oasis," the man said.

Flagstone looked keenly at the man. "What else do you have?"

The little man climbed under the patchwork tarp of the cart. He returned to hand Flagstone a handful of gold. Spanish doubloons! Flagstone began to eye the man suspiciously. Was he a spirit sent to taunt me, wondered Flagstone, or a charlatan come to tease my senses? He looked at the doubloons. Authentic again as far as his eye could tell.

"I'll buy everything you have, if...", trailed off Flagstone.

"If what, Mr. Flagstone. They are genuine. You know this yourself," the man said.

"What is your name," asked Flagstone.

"Santusa," replied the little man.

"Santusa, I'll buy everything you have in your cart for the price you give me. Then you will come work for me. You will lead me to where you found these things. I will pay you well."

Santusa eyed Flagstone for several moments. He looked at his wares. He seemed to be calculating a price higher than he had ever calculated before. He took a deep breath.

"Five hundred English pounds for everything and one pound a day to work for you," he said suddenly.

"I will pay you one thousand pounds to show my trust in you. And one pound a day to work for me with a bounty of one thousand pounds upon our return to Jimville if we are successful. Agreed."

Flagstone held out his hand. Santusa looked overwhelmed. Timidly he shook Flagstone's big bronzed hand. "Agreed," Santusa said firmly. "All agreed."

"Good, Santusa. Very good. Now as my first job to you as my employee I'll tell you to bring all your things to my outfitting shed this evening. I will pay you and introduce you to the rest of my staff and we can talk about our adventure to come," said Flagstone. He put a fistful of doubloons in his pocket and slid the breastplate under his arm. "See you this evening, Santusa."

The little man nodded. Flagstone merged into the crowd and was gone. He found Olivia heaping more parcels on Blind Bob and Ginsu. She smiled at him.

"Found yourself a trinket, Dear?" she asked spying the breastplate poking out from under his coat.

"I have found our next little adventure," Flagstone said. His grin went from ear to ear. It wanted to get bigger but had no where to go. He bounced on the balls of his feet.

"Why, Jules, are you excited about something," teased Olivia.

"Not in the least," he replied trying to look about unconcerned. They both laughed. Blind Bob turned a calico covered head to a silk draped Ginsu.

"Here we go again, and high time too."

Ginsu nodded his wholehearted agreement.

Report 189 - 4.2 - PLANS.

Date: 2004-02-05

4.2 - PLANS

Julius Flagstone was enjoying the silence of his hotel suite. The muffled noise of Market Day was finally dying down. Olivia was examining her pile of purchases. She was having fun.

So was Flagstone. In his mind he was finding the Fountain of Youth and becoming world famous, if he wasn't already. He hummed lightly to himself. The breastplate reflected the light of the evening sun as it slowly disappeared. He swirled the ice in his glass. Ice making machines. Fresh orange juice. Crisp clean sheets. Binoculars. A fancy high powered hunting rifle. Piles of money. He had toys and gadgets and fame and wealth. They would be nothing if he found the Fountain of Youth. He would live forever. He couldn't quite grasp it.

He looked at Olivia. She would live forever also. Together they would see the future through to its end whatever it was. It would be glorious. He giggled inwardly like a schoolboy. This is going to be great, he thought. He pulled out a doubloon and began idly flipping and catching it, smiling all the while. Up, sparkle, down. Up, sparkle, down. Up, sparkle.

Olivia's hand snatched the spinning doubloon out of the air. She stood smiling at Flagstone, her head tilted slightly to one side.

"Well, let's have it, Jules, before you explode with joy," she said.

Flagstone rose. He took a step to her side and planted a long solid kiss on a surprised Olivia. He slapped her gently on her behind as he walked over to the breastplate.

"This, My Dear, was a gift to Juan Ponce de Leon from the King and Queen of Spain. These are probably some of his loot." He placed the breastplate on the table and piled the doubloons from his pocket onto it in a muted clatter."

Olivia stood looking at him, waiting. He smiled.

"I have hired the man who found these things. He is going to lead us to where he discovered them. If all goes well we will find the Fountain of Youth nearby." He sat down triumphantly.

Olivia stood for a moment. Then she collapsed into a chair laughing till tears rolled down her cheeks. Flagstone sat and smiled. Finally with a big breath Olivia stopped laughing.

She got out, "When do we leave," before she started laughing again. Flagstone sat nonplussed flipping a doubloon casually.

"As soon as I can get an Expedition together. Two weeks, three maybe."

Olivia calmed down and took a deep breath. "Ok," she croaked and fell back into the chair lost in laughter again. Flagstone sat calmly in his chair.

"I'm glad to see you're excited about the possibilities." Olivia's laughter rose a notch. Flagstone smiled. Olivia's cheeks hurt from smiling so hard. She tried to catch her breath. She looked at the solemn Flagstone flipping the doubloon. She burst out laughing again. Flagstone sighed.

"I will be in the shed, planning this little excursion if you should need me for anything," he said calmly and left the suite. Olivia's laughter followed him out into the hall. Women, he muttered.

In the wooden barn Flagstone called his shed, no one was laughing. Flagstone introduced Santusa to Blind Bob his scout. He also handed Santusa a deposit account book for the Banque de Jimville. Santusa looked puzzled. He had been expecting a great deal of cash.

"This way it will grow bigger while you are away," said Flagstone. "You can take the money out anytime you want."

Santusa still seemed puzzled. He nodded he understood. Blind Bob spit in the dirt at their feet. "Ya can't run off and get drunk and disappear either." Santusa didn't look pleased by this statement.

Flagstone spread a map out on the large table where they were standing. Ginsu brought in a bottle. Flagstone took a pull and passed it to Blind Bob. Blind Bob to a drink and passed it to Santusa. Santusa looked puzzled again.

"A little tradition, Santusa," said Blind Bob holding the bottle toward Santusa. The little man shook his head no. Blind Bob passed the bottle to Ginsu who took a quick drink and handed the bottle back to Flagstone. Flagstone set the bottle on one edge of the map to hold it down. He pointed to Jimville in the map and looked at Santusa.

"Whereabouts are we heading, Santusa?" Flagstone asked.

Santusa studied the map for a moment. Then his eyes lit up. He placed his finger on Jimville and began tracing the River Jim as it ran inland. He continued tracing the River Jim. Finally, where Flagstone knew the map to be only guesses, Santusa started tracing due north. Blind Bob cleared his throat and looked at Flagstone. Flagstone shook his head slightly. Santusa stopped tracing for a moment, then continued a northeastern direction till he came to the edge of the map. He looked at Flagstone and shrugged.

"Need more paper, Mr. Flagstone."

"What?" asked Flagstone surprised.

"Need more paper," repeated Santusa. "We must go beyond this edge. It is very far, very dangerous."

Blind Bob shook his head again. "That's nowhere, Santusa. Nowhere is up there."

"That is where the oasis is. Far up in the northern mountains. It took many weeks to get there, longer to get back." Santusa's eyes pleaded for Flagstone to believe him.

Flagstone looked thoughtfully at the map. He was thinking of supplies and bearers, food and ammunitions, desertions, attacks, plain old bad luck. He stood straighter.

"That's a hell of a long way, Santusa. We'd need a thousand men and boys, not to mention horses, and camels if that desert is rightly placed on the map."

"It is close," Santusa said calmly. "A thousand men no good. Everyone will see us coming. Sheik Fizzle will ambush us and kill us all. A big party is no good. We must go fast. Small party is best."

"Sheik Fizzle's desert," Flagstone asked waving his hand at an empty place on the map? Santusa nodded yes and circled a large area of the map with a finger. It was a large circle. Flagstone didn't feel any better. Still he wasn't one quit before he started. He looked at Blind Bob who had taken another swig from the bottle.

"Bob?" he asked.

"If it's true," he said giving Santusa sidelong glance, "then it's going to be a long walk. That's easily three or four times our longest trek, Mr. Flagstone. If it's true, that is."

"It is true," said Santusa calmly. "I have been there. It is very far and not easy. It is true."

"I believe you, Santusa," said Flagstone. "Gentlemen, I have a little thinking to do. We shall meet here again tomorrow evening, same time. Bob put your feelers out for men. Don't know how many yet."

"Yes, sir," replied Blind Bob. Flagstone left the two men bent over the map talking in low voices.

He walked head down back to the Empress straight to his suite. Olivia was putting away the last items from her shopping spree. Two local seamstresses were standing by with patterns and handfuls for notes. Olivia beamed at Flagstone when he came in.

"New shirts for you, blouses for me, and dresses too. Thank you, Jules."

"You're welcome," he absently replied. He walked onto the balcony and stood looking at the early evening sky. He didn't hear Olivia's instructions to the seamstresses, nor their leaving. Olivia stood beside him for several moments before he noticed her. He put his arm around her shoulders and pulled her close. She snuggled up.

"What's the problem," she asked.

"Time and distance, as always."

"The Fountain of Youth is farther away than you thought," she asked without a hint of laughter.

"Very far away. Farther than I have traveled in one Expedition ever. I wonder if it is too far. But I can feel it is there, Olivia. I just know it like I know the sun will rise tomorrow, that's the damn thing about it. I'm so sure."

"Hmmm," Olivia muttered. She slid her arms around Flagstone and hugged him to her. "Let's sleep on it and see what the morning brings."

They left the balcony. The jungle sounds and scents followed them.

Report 190 - 4.3 - TAKING A CHANCE.

Date: 2004-02-07

4.3 - TAKING A CHANCE

Julius Flagstone was eating his breakfast but not tasting it. His eyes had a far away look to them. The morning edition of the World Herald lay still folded near him. Olivia breezed into the room. She smelled good thought Flagstone coming to his senses. Olivia helped herself to the remains of breakfast.

"I have the answer to your time and distance problem, dear," she cooed.

Flagstone arched an eyebrow and folded his strong arms across his broad chest. It was his "Oh, yeah, show me" look thought Olivia merrily. She laughed softly. Flagstone didn't smile, much.

"Let me guess, he said.

"Oh, no, that would not be half as much fun as me surprising you with my cleverness," she smiled back. He remained quiet and still posed. She sat down across the table. Picking up the salt shaker she placed it at the far left-hand edge of the table. "Jimville," she said. Flagstone nodded.

She picked up a glass of water and placed it on the far right table edge. "The Fountain of Youth," she said with a straight face. Flagstone nodded again. Olivia spread her arms wide. "A great distance between the two. Too long to cross quickly to seize the prize and be safely off. The in-between is filled with toil and trouble. And probably poor hygiene," she giggled. Flagstone smiled and silently nodded.

"Unless," she said. She picked up cloth napkin and wrapped it around a hard-boiled egg. She held the napkin over the Jimville salt shaker. She bobbed it over the table till it reached the glass of water. Then she bobbed the egg and napkin back to the salt shaker.

"You're raving mad, Olivia," said Flagstone without a change of expression.

"Am I? Fast. Quiet. Unexpected. Fun. A small fast party in and out. Minimum risk. Costs in line with the risk. We could do it, Jules. It has never be done before. Think about it." Her eyes glittered.

"And if I go along with this crazy idea," he started.

"No crazier than the stated goal," she said sharply.

"True, true," nodded Flagstone. He was silent for several moments. "And where would I find a suitable damn balloon anyway," he burst out.

"Leave that to me," she said brightly.

"I was afraid you'd say that," he said. He pulled an ink pen out of his pocket and pulled a napkin up. "Needs to hold eight or ten people, gear,

food and water for an eight week trip. I suppose we will pick up food and water along the way. But we must carry as much as possible. We are going to cross the entire Great Desert and go to the mountain in the far north," muttered Flagstone jotting figures on the napkin.

Olivia leaned back. "This will be fun, Jules. Imagine the headlines. No one has done this before."

"And survived to talk about it anyway," he said. Olivia stuck her tongue out at him. "Oil burner, I suppose, like Fate's," Flagstone continued.

"It's the latest thing," she said. "Very reliable. Very efficient. Like me."

Flagstone laughed. "Ok, Olivia, I'll try the contraption again, but it's not to my liking. Build me an Explorer's balloon."

"I will, Jules. It will be beautiful," she gushed.

"Beautiful, I don't care about. Rugged I want very much. Remember that buzzard that tried to pick us apart in Fate's little wicker basket." He sketched on another napkin. "Like this. Can it be done?"

Olivia studied the rough diagram for a minute before answering. "Yes, I'll need some help and I know just who to get."

The dirty steamer tugged at the ropes that held it to the pier. It reminded Olivia of an old horse that was used to roaming free and found itself haltered and tied to a hitching post. The old steamer wasn't enjoying its time in port. Olivia looked at the passengers disembarking. She couldn't see her man. She did see her piles of supplies begin to accumulate on the pier. Ginsu was ably seeing to their arrangements. She shaded her eyes and watched the passengers coming down the gangplank to the pier.

Olivia had the man's portrait in her mind. She had been reading everything the Science Club members could dig up on balloons. They had found Marcello Viggio. Master Balloonist from Italy. Trained engineer by trade, balloonist by passion. He had agreed to come to Jimville and build Flagstone's balloon. Olivia had not even had to haggle over money. Viggio has said pay me what you think I'm worth after the first balloon flight, before that only room and board and a bottle of wine at dinner. She had accepted. Now he was here. If she could find him in the crowd.

Suddenly a little white-haired man was standing directly in front of her, hand outstretched. "Ms. Fate?"

"Marcello?"

"Yes, Ms Fate. It is I." The head of white hair bobbed.

To her surprise Olivia found herself gently hugging the frail little man. He looked so fragile she thought. She barely felt him hug her back. Soon they were walking arm-in-arm down the pier engaged in animated conversation about balloon building. Ginsu led the parade of bearers and carts full of material

along behind them. Viggio insisted on seeing the assorted objects and piles of wood and canvas to their home in Flagstone's barn-like building. He paced off the building interior making notes in a worn book. He had Ginsu climb to the peak of the roof and dangle a long measuring tape down to him. More notes were taken. Finally he consented to be lead to the Empress and be shown to his room. As he closed the door he spoke.

"We need a bigger building. Twice as big. Have a nice evening, Ms. Fate."

"Please, its Olivia. I'll see what I can do. Good night, Marcello," she said. The white head bobbed some more and the door gently closed. Olivia walked to her room with a smile on face.

Flagstone was hunched over a pile of maps spread in disorder over the entire tabletop. He looked up when Olivia entered humming to herself.

"Mr. Viggio safely in his room? Supplies arrived? All going according to plan?"

Olivia sat gracefully on the sofa. "Yes, yes, and yes. We need a bigger building. At least three times as big."

"Ok," was all Flagstone said.

"Good," said Olivia as she rose and left the room. Flagstone soon heard water splashing into the big brass tub in the wash room. Soon a mindless tune wandered into the room as Flagstone measured on the maps and compared distances. He snorted in disgust. Were there no two maps of Jimland that were the same. He tapped his pencil on the top-most map, rubbing his chin lost in thought.

A short while later Olivia padded back into the room wearing a bright green silk robe and little else. He watched her pour some lemonade. She settled comfortably on the sofa again. His eyes sparked.

"Promise me you will take that robe on the trip," he said.

"As you wish," she smiled and made a little bow.

The next day Olivia found herself alone for breakfast. Flagstone had risen early and disappeared. Olivia was gathering her sketches and diagrams before collecting Viggio for a planning session when Flagstone walked in. He strode purposefully right up to her and handed her a big heavy bronze key.

"We are now the sole renters of the Sultan's shipyard until we don't need it anymore. And don't forget that green robe."

He patted her butt and left their suite whistling. Olivia stood smiling.

Olivia led Viggio to the Sultan's empty shipyard. He looked around, clapped his hands, and nodded. "Perfect. Let us begin."

The weeks flew by. Marcello Viggio was worth every dollar they spent. His knowledge was immense. The shipyard became a balloon yard. Every day spectators peered in amazed at the activity inside. Flagstone had first thought this sightseeing was a bad idea and there was no denying the rumors spreading like wildfire throughout Jimville. He said nothing and let the rumor go where they might. It was better cover than he could dream up. There were so many possibilities mentioned in one breath that no one could guess his real destination. All that could be discerned was that Flagstone was letting Olivia Fate build a balloon larger than any ever seen in Jimland. And he intended to travel in it.

Supplies slowly accumulated near the balloon and its huge gondola, as Viggio called it. Olivia loved the word. She said it just slide off one's tongue and was exactly right. Marcello just bobbed his head of white hair and smiled like a happy child.

Finally the time came for the first test flight. The gondola and balloon bags were placed on the largest wagon Flagstone could find in Jimville. The whole contraption was hauled slowly outside Jimville. A crowd followed. Flagstone was amazed when a Sultan's messenger, who looked like his golden aguilletes were choking him to death, presented a request from the Sultan. The Ruler of All Jimland wanted to be present for the inaugural flight. Flagstone readily agreed telling the messenger that the whole affair was very dangerous and that he would feel better if the Sultan would observe from a safe distance. That ought to keep him at arm's length thought Flagstone.

The balloon was carefully unloaded. Slowly the roaring burners began to fill the bags. Olivia had explained to him at least three times that the two huge bags were needed due to the weight of the gondola, crew, and supplies, plus it was a safety factor. Once when Marcello and Flagstone were alone, Marcello had said that if one bag deflated the other would allow a controlled, safe, if rough landing. He seemed to want Flagstone to know this and would not talk about it when Olivia was present.

The crowd was growing along with the balloon. Flagstone dispatched Ginsu and a party of men to cordon off the area. The Sultan arrived amid much show. He shook Flagstone's hand, kissed Olivia's, made a little speech about progress, and thankfully retired out of the way. Flagstone was relieved.

The balloon bags were now tugging at the four ropes that held the great craft to the ground. The twin burners roared. Olivia disappeared into a small tent to reappear in a snappy pair of khaki pants, riding boots, and emerald green blouse and matching scarf.

"Wish me luck, dear," she said happily. Flagstone could only sputter.

"You aren't flying that thing are you?"

"Why, yes, I am. Who else will do it?"

"Marcello," muttered Flagstone loudly, "That's why I hired him."

"Oh, he's coming too. And Blind Bob at my suggestion. Anyone else I should invite," she said coolly. Flagstone sputtered to a halt.

"Me," he said meekly. Olivia gave him a big hug and whopping kiss. The crowd roared its approval. Flagstone wondered why he didn't keep his big mouth shut. Olivia whispered softly in his ear.

"Do it for the green robe, my dear."

The twin burners roared. At a signal from Flagstone, given when Olivia nodded at him, the four ropes were untied. The balloon hovered about twenty feet off the ground. Olivia opened the burners to full. The huge balloon rose majestically above the cheering crowd. A gentle wind started carrying them toward the Wilds of Jimland. Flagstone walked around the gondola with Viggio as he checked the craft.

Soon they had drifted several miles from the crowd. The jungle was approaching. The wildlife seemed awed into silence. Olivia and Viggio spoke their private language of balloon flying. They seemed to be having a wonderful time. The balloon gained more altitude. Flagstone walked over to Blind Bob. They leaned on the rail of the gondola.

"This ought to be interesting," said Blind Bob in a low voice.

"An understatement, Bob," answered Flagstone.

"You know she is planning to teach us all to fly this dang thing?"

"Didn't know. Not a bad idea though. Better to be prepared."

"I plan to be drunk," Blind Bob said to the treetops hundreds of feet below.

"Me too," said Flagstone. They laughed.

Report 191 - 4.4 - TEST FLIGHT.

Date: 2004-02-10

4.4 - TEST FLIGHT

Julius Flagstone was admiring the balloon. The two great air bags were above his head. Each was covered with a strong canvas cover itself covered by a strong netting. Over both balloons and their restraining net was another heavy canvas cover and net. All these were securely fastened to the gondola.

Twin oil burners sat in the middle of the gondola. On either side of the side of the burners were oil barrels to supply the burners. Next toward the "front" or "rear" was a cabin-like structure ten feet square. The whole of this entire collection was surrounded by a four-foot wide walk-way around the whole gondola.

Beneath the whole floor was a storage and ballast area. The whole thing reminded him of a boat suspended below a gray canvas cloud soaring high over the jungle canopy. At each end of the oblong craft was a control station from which the burners and ballast could be controlled.

Flagstone thought of the craft in nautical terms. It seemed to fit. At the stern of the gondola, outboard the control station, was a thing that vaguely resembled the propeller on Flagstone's steam launch. This was Marcello Viggio's masterpiece. Olivia thought it amazing. The long thin propeller was attached by a slender shaft to a small steam engine. The steam engine could be fired by oil or by wood. Flagstone thought it quite clever when Viggio explained it's purpose.

Marcello appeared at his elbow. Flagstone was startled.

"We need to try that next, Mr. Flagstone. Want to do the honors?"

"Sure, Marcello, pleased to," answered Flagstone. He threw off his coat. This was something he understood. Soon he had the pressure up. From the front of the gondola Viggio gave a signal. Flagstone pulled the level to engage the gears. The propeller started to revolve slowly. Quickly it was whirring away. Another signal from Viggio. The thing Flagstone called the rudder hanging behind the propeller turned. The balloon altered course. They flew at various angles to the gentle wind. Finally they turned into the wind. Progress slowed to crawl, but never quite halted.

Blind Bob walked up. He watched the little steam engine puff away. Flagstone tapped the pressure gauge. He adjusted a value. He loved his steam launch. He admitted he might come to love this ungainly craft.

Blind Bob coughed. Flagstone turned. Blind Bob was smiling.

"Beats walking so far." He pointed to the yellow lights of Jimville far in the distance as the sun was going down.

"Olivia, let's head for home," yelled Flagstone over the steam engine. She didn't answer. She and Viggio were vigorously playing with the controls that did not seem to be responding. Flagstone and Blind Bob went forward.

"They're stuck," Olivia said.

"Set down here while we still have light," Flagstone said.

"I'd like to, but everything's frozen."

"Great."

"Stop the propeller so we don't go too far afield," said Viggio. Flagstone nodded and walked aft. Soon the propeller was motionless. Flagstone returned to the forward control station. He noted the wind was picking up. How dumb can I get, thought Flagstone, trying to test this thing during the storm season. He turned his attention to the efforts at hand.

It was dark, windy, and cold. No one was laughing anymore as they struggle to loosen the controls. The moon hid behind low scudding clouds. Blind Bob cried out and pointed. The jungle canopy was not as far beneath them as they thought. The treetops reached up at them. The gondola jerked and hopped across the trees. Startled birds scattered in all directions.

With a lurch the gondola came to a halt in the treetops. The burners were keeping the bags up but not by much.

"What now," asked Flagstone eyeing Olivia and Marcello.

"Fuel is running out. This was only supposed to be a short test flight not an around the world thing," yelled Olivia into the wind. The balloon rocked. It broke free and leapt into the air. The four passengers were knocked to the floor. Flagstone helped Olivia to her feet. The wind was driving them away from the jungle, back toward Jimville.

Flagstone was silently pleased. A gust of wind raised them higher. Flagstone now had second thoughts about being pleased. At the speed they were making, he figured the balloon would pass Jimville in ten minutes and head out to sea. Not a good thing in his book. Flagstone looked at Blind Bob. Blind Bob forced a smile.

"Beats walking."

Flagstone only nodded. The wind increased as a summer rainstorm bore down on them. Soon they were really flying, being pushed rapidly on by the storm's leading wind. Jimville flashed by. The craft sank lower. The gondola began to rock in the wind. Flagstone could hear the ocean below.

Olivia yelled at him. "We need to find a wind for shore. I can't control our altitude. We must not drift out to sea."

Flagstone nodded and looked about. He grabbed the ballast lever and pulled. The balloon shot up. He put the lever in the shut position. Olivia looked

up then down. She motioned for him to release more ballast. Up the balloon went again. She signaled to stop.

The balloon was buffeted by a new wind. It began to head back to shore. Jimville twinkled in the distance. It was soon growing larger very fast. Olivia motioned downward.

Flagstone jumped into the rigging and began to climb up toward the balloons. He felt the wind snatching at him, trying to throw him off. He gritted his teeth and climbed determinedly upward. Reaching the outer canvas he paused, took a deep breath, and began climbing the outermost netting up onto the forward balloon's side. The wind howled now. Jimville was almost under them.

Flagstone was nearly flung into the night's darkness. He held on with one hand. Grunting with the effort he swung himself spread-eagle on the netting. He struggled upward. Rained began and he was drenched. Shivering in the cold he crawled upward. Finally the balloon rounded to its top.

Flagstone pulled his big camp knife out and plunged it into the canvas, through that, into the second layer of canvas and finally into the balloon itself. A loud hissing began. He yanked the big knife blade across the canvas. The hissing grew louder. Again he tore at the canvas. The hissing turned into a howling.

With a crack the fabric began to tear on its own accord. Flagstone found himself being flung about as the material tore and flapped in the going storm winds. He grimly held on as he was pummeled against the balloon side.

Lights blazed up below. Yelling reached his ears. He was entangled in the loose canvas. Crashing sounds deafened him. Jolts from the gondola striking something nearby tossed him free of the deflating balloon. A huge crash reached his ears and he was flying blindly through the air.

Flagstone awoke under a huge weight of something trying to smother him. He tried to fight it off. It was crushing him down. He could hear Olivia yelling his name. Other strange voices were calling it also. He fell back exhausted. The great weight began to crush him again. He fought back. He yelled for Olivia. He couldn't breathe. All was darkness and heat.

The great weight stopped crushing his chest. He sucked in the cold damp night air. Someone was stroking his hair. He opened his eyes. Olivia burst into tears and cradled his head against her chest. Flagstone pushed himself gently away and tried to breathe more regularly.

He started. All around him was light. Men with guns were everywhere. No one was smiling except Olivia. Even the Sultan was there. Flagstone thought that was unnecessary, but he reminded himself to thank the Sultan for his concern.

"Are we down?" he asked.

"Yes, dear, thanks to you," answered Olivia shaking.

"Where are we," he asked.

The Sultan came into view. "You are in my inner courtyard, Mr. Flagstone, the repairing of which, I have been assured by Ms. Fate, you will speedily pay for. Now stand up if you can."

Flagstone struggled to his feet and leaned on Olivia. He gazed stupidly around. The place was a mess. Splintered trees lay about. A gilded balcony hung at a terrible angle from the side of a building whose roof was now broken apart and scattered on the ground. A crowd of women from the Sultan's Harm huddled in the distance. Soldiers eyed him and the balloon with an unfriendly air.

"I'm glad we are down," was all he could think to say.

"I'm sure you are," replied the Sultan peevishly. "But next time land somewhere else or you may find out how deep my dungeons are." At this the Sultan turned and walked angrily off yelling orders to have the mess cleaned up.

Report 192 - 4.5 - FOR REAL.

Date: 2004-02-12

4.5 - FOR REAL

Julius Flagstone was finally relaxing a little. The reconstruction of the Sultan's Inner Courtyard was underway. The balloon's removal had not been as big a problem as he first thought. Olivia and Marcello Viggio had supervised the repair of the forward air bag. It was not damaged as extensively as he feared. Flagstone was pleased that the construction had proved very rugged though he mentioned this to no one.

Olivia and Viggio had refilled the oil tanks, fired up the burners, and with the Sultan nervously pacing the grounds and a lot of his soldiers tending lines tied to the gondola, the huge balloon gently picked itself up and floated quietly over and away from the Sultan's Palace. Flagstone had not dared breath till the gondola touched ground in an open field a half a mile from the nearest house. Olivia and Viggio nervously inspected the gondola from top to bottom, inside and out. Their report was a few broken boards, cut shrouds, and scratched paint. For all the damage done to the Sultan's courtyard the Gondola and balloon would be Expedition ready in a few days.

The frozen controls were traced to improper lubrication. Marcello reassured Flagstone it would not happen again. Flagstone was pleased. He was itching to go. He had grudgingly admitted the balloon was ready for his use. The loading of supplies began immediately.

Flagstone's crew was also ready. It included Flagstone, Olivia as pilot, Blind Bob as scout, Ginsu Flagstone's valet/batman/gunbearer, Santusa their guide, and five bearers/crewmen. Flagstone had had great difficulty in finding these last five men. He needed strong backs as bearers, but quick minds to be trained as crewmen for the heavy work on the gondola. It took two weeks of daily training to teach the men their basic skills. He paid them a premium.

In the early morning just before their official lift-off, Marcello Viggio approached Flagstone. Viggio looked around. Flagstone started to thank him for his work and wish him well on his trip back to Italy.

"Mr. Flagstone. Take me with you," Viggio said quickly.

Flagstone was caught unprepared. "Why, Marcello? It will be rough trip."

"I can pilot. I know how to repair everything on the craft."

"Yes, you do, but like I said it will be a rough trip."

"Take me."

"Marcello you could get killed very easily on this trip," said Flagstone forcefully. Viggio did not flinch.

"Take me or I'll tell everyone where you are going."

"Please feel free to tell everyone anything you want," Flagstone said calmly.

"Please take me," Marcello said sadly. "I need to go. There is nothing for me in Italy. I will work for free." The little old man fairly bounced from one foot to the other. Flagstone was reminded of a faithful old hunting dog being left behind on a hunt. He smiled.

"Ok, Marcello, but if you get killed, don't say I didn't warn you. And you will need to fill out the death or injury disclaimer. I don't want angry relatives on my back if something happens to you."

Marcello reached in his pocket and produced the required papers, signed and notarized. Everything appeared in order. Marcello was beaming. Flagstone sighed and handed the papers to one of his men with instructions on what to do with them. Flagstone shook Marcello's hand. The little white head bobbed up and down.

"Welcome aboard, Marcello. Now get aboard. We are leaving."

Three weeks of beautiful weather and fair winds passed rapidly by. Flagstone hardly noticed them. He did notice the landscape. He became absorbed in mapping the land they traveled. He enlisted Blind Bob as his assistant cartographer and the two men spent many pleasant hours in their labors.

Meanwhile, Olivia and Marcello were lost in piloting the balloon and enjoying the freedom of flying. They puttered around the balloon gondola fine tuning stowage of supplies and tension on the shrouds. The little steam engine was seldom used as the winds conspired to happily push them wherever they wanted to go. They landed only to resupply with water or to stretch their legs and get fresh food or meat. It was a flawless trip. One golden afternoon Flagstone cleared his throat and made an announcement.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, according to my calculations we have just flown off the map."

Heads turned and stared at him. An excited murmur went through the bearers. Marcello raised his cap in salute of the event. Olivia laughed a soft merry laugh. Flagstone and Blind Bob shook hands. Santusa looked more doubtful.

"What's wrong, Santusa," asked Flagstone.

"We are still over the desert. One of Fizzle's men will surely have seen us by now. There is still a long way to go. Can we go faster?"

Flagstone looked unruffled. "I'm not sure we need to. We are making excellent progress. Don't worry so much, Santusa, we are going along very well." Santusa said nothing and returned to leaning over the forward rail watching the desert glide silently by hundreds of feet below. That evening without making a show of it, Flagstone and Blind Bob inspected all the weapons on the balloon.

Santusa was excited. He pulled on Flagstone's cuff and pointed. Ahead the mountains were rearing up. The scenery was changing beneath their feet. More rocks and great areas of hard scabble lay beneath them. Santusa pointed again.

"Ahead of us and to the left. Horsemen. A hundred maybe. We are too late. Sheik Fizzle has beaten us."

Flagstone pulled his binoculars from his daypack and studied the indicated area ahead. Sure enough, horsemen. He could plainly see them pointing at the balloon. He had expected to be seen, but not this close to the mountains. There was nothing to be done about it. Olivia looked around at him. Flagstone pointed up. She nodded and opened the burners. The balloon drifted upward.

Flagstone felt cranky. He'd felt this way since he had seen the horsemen trotting across the foothills of the mountains. It hadn't helped that a storm was brewing and the wind was blowing directly from the direction he wanted to go. The little steam engine was running at full pressure. The slender propeller was spinning as fast as it could. The big balloon and gondola were making no headway. They were suspended between heaven and earth, moving neither forward or backward, up or down. After weeks of trouble free flying Flagstone was not enjoying this first setback.

The storm was growing in intensity. Lightning flashed ahead. Thunder rolled. Olivia yelled in his ear.

"We better land, Jules, while we can control this thing."

Flagstone nodded his agreement though in his mind he had a dozen other thoughts. A line of rain was fast approaching. Neither Olivia nor Marcello had any idea of what was below them. The balloon began to descend. Flagstone had waited too long. A powerful gust from the storm tossed them upwards. Another batted them sideways. Olivia and Marcello fought to keep things under control.

"Jules, go man the steam engine. Watch for our signals. This is going to be rough," said Olivia through the beginning spatters of rain. By the time he walked to the steam engine it was pouring. Blind Bob joined him. The rest of his small party was cooped up in the deckhouses. Flagstone decided he would rather be out here in the elements. He noted Blind Bob was fully kitted out except for his daypack.

"Going somewhere, Bob," Flagstone asked.

"Not that I am of aware of," was Bob's reply. "Never know if one will get tossed out of this thing or we could crash. Just being prepared."

The storm worsened. Flagstone began to wish he had done what Blind Bob had done as the gondola rocked and swayed. Lightning flashed close by. The noise was deafening. His hair stood on end. Olivia was waving from the

forward control station. He couldn't hear her yells. He looked over the side. A hilltop was sweeping by just feet below. He opened the steam engine throttle to full. The little propeller twirled furiously. The hilltop receded to a safe distance. The balloon was deep in the foothills. Dimly head he could see some seriously large mountainsides approaching. Olivia and Marcello were firing the burners are full power. They roared. The little steam engine roared. The storm roared.

The steep mountainsides parted as they clawed their way between two tall ridges. The rate of ascent of the balloon was not matching the rate of ascent of the ridgelines. Flagstone yelled at no one in particular to brace themselves. The impact was glancing but enough to throw everyone to the gondola floor. The burners kept roaring. The steam engine started to make funny noises. The propeller was gone. The drive shaft was spinning out control. Flagstone leapt for the throttle and brought the engine to idle. Olivia was looking aft at him. Flagstone waved his arm in circle and made a slashing motion with both arms. He hoped Olivia understood the propeller was gone.

Another ridge jumped up at the balloon. They smacked soundly into it. The wind was now having its way with the balloon. Flagstone could see Olivia and Marcello gesturing wildly to one another. They hit another ridge top. Olivia kept her feet, barely. Little Marcello was sent sliding along the deck clear back to stop by Flagstone's widespread feet. Marcello grinned an embarrassed grin and stumbled back to the forward control station.

Flagstone could see they were trying to find a suitable landing place as the wind drove them along. The big balloon was skipping and bouncing off the sides of the ever-climbing mountainsides. A clamp of thunder and simultaneous lightning flash announce the heart of the storm. The rain was cold now. The balloon was getting heavy as the canvas soaked up the water. The gondola scuppers were frothing as the rain spewed out of them.

Suddenly, Olivia cut the burners and pulled the air release rope. The balloon dropped out from under Flagstone's feet. Olivia fired the burner at once. The ground rushed up. With a bone-jarring crash the big balloon landed and began to drag across the ground. Olivia pulled the air release rope. Marcello shut the burners down. The bags began to deflate. The dragging slowed. Finally it stopped. Everyone was breathing hard. At a signal from Olivia, Flagstone banged on the aft cabin door and yelled instructions. All the bearers along with Flagstone, Blind Bob, and Ginsu jumped over the gondola side, tools in hand. Olivia ran down one side of the gondola throwing the heavy mooring lines to the ground below. Marcello did the same on the other side. The ground party began driving heavy metal mooring spikes into the ground. Santusa glumly gripped the gondola rail like his life depended on it. In five minutes the big balloon was tied down. In fifteen more it was secured in placed as the storm raged on.

With everyone aboard and safe within the two deck houses, Flagstone relaxed a little. The largest danger was not over. They were landed. He didn't know where but at least they were safely down. Only minor cuts and bruises and a little hurt pride were all injuries the storm had dealt them. Marcello quickly entered the cabin and banged the door shut in the face of the wind.

"I am sorry to say the forward burner has been damaged by the landing shock and must be repaired. The aft balloon seems to have a leak somewhere. It is slowly deflating. The gondola has a few broken boards but nothing we can't fix with supplies at hand. Three or four days at most to repair everything and continue."

"Three or four days!" Flagstone heard himself say the words rather loudly. Marcello seemed abashed. "Sorry to shout there, Marcello. But we can't wait three or four days. The Sheik is out there racing us for the prize."

Olivia looked at Marcello then Flagstone. "The balloon is not safe without repairs. We may not be able to fly at all if the balloon leak is too great. Jules we must repair the damage or our next landing could be far worse."

"Olivia, you, Marcello and three bearers will repair the damage. I will take Blind Bob, Ginsu, Santusa, and the remaining two bearers and head out on foot once we determine where we are. We must have gained a day's march on the Sheik and I'll be damned if I'm going to lose it."

Flagstone sat down. Olivia glared at him for a moment. Then she nodded agreement. "Will that be enough manpower to fix everything, Marcello," she asked more softly.

Marcello considered his answer. "Yes, that will be enough. It is a good plan." He bobbed his little white head enthusiastically. "It is the best plan."

Olivia gave Flagstone another look. Then she and Marcello left the cabin to inspect the damaged burner. Flagstone didn't feel particularly victorious. Blind Bob avoid his gaze. Ginsu simply started preparing some hot food. He was a practical man.

The next morning the storm had gone. The sun peeked through the retiring clouds. Everyone felt better for a reasonable night's sleep and a hot breakfast. Olivia and Marcello organized the repair party. Flagstone organized the tiny Expedition. He, Blind Bob, and Santusa got their bearings on the surrounding mountains. They could see the desert far off in the distance. Flagstone was impressed with the distance covered and the speed covering it. He had to admit the balloon, despite its problems, delivered him close to his objective, quickly and in good shape.

As the tiny Expedition shouldered its packs, Olivia pulled Flagstone aside. She held both his big hands. Her eyes were moist.

"Don't do anything stupid," she said quietly.

"I won't, I promise, Flagstone replied.

"Come back to me," said Olivia. She gave him a kiss and hurried off. Flagstone felt uncomfortable. This was the first Expedition he could remember since he had met Olivia that she wasn't coming with him. He stood for a moment. Then, noticing the rest of the men watching, he straightened up, pointed in northerly direction, saying, "Lead off, Santusa. Let's go."

Without a backward glance the little party disappeared over the crest of the mountainside.

Report 193 - 4.6 - CONQUISTADORS.

Date: 2004-02-14

4.6 - CONQUISTADORS

Julius Flagstone huffed as he climbed the steep mountain trail. He heard the other members of the little Expedition puffing along behind him. This was different than the jungle. He felt a little lightheaded.

Ahead, Blind Bob stopped at a bend in the trail and wiped his brow. Santusa was further ahead, unseen. Flagstone heard Ginsu behind him becoming restless. He continued to trudge up the thing passing as a trail.

Suddenly rifle fire erupted from across the ravine to Flagstone's left. Bullets whizzed through the air to crack loudly into the hillside. Rock splintered about. Flagstone yelled and ran up the trail trying to unsling his hunting rifle. More gunfire. A bearer screamed and pitched off the trail tumbling down the steep hillside.

Blind Bob was still at the bend in the trail. He was taking careful aim and firing slowly. Flagstone ducked under his rifle and halted behind him. He brought his big hunting rifle up to his shoulder. Brown figures across the ravine darted in and out of sight. Flagstone took a breath, held it, and squeezed the trigger gently. The rifle kicked him hard in the shoulder. Across the ravine a figure tossed over backward.

Ginsu and the remaining bearer ran past Flagstone and kept on going. The fire from across the ravine was growing more intense. Flagstone tapped Blind Bob on the shoulder and jerked his thumb up the trail. Bob nodded, fired, and ran after the bearer. Flagstone fired again and followed.

Ahead he saw Santusa gesturing wildly at the running party. One by one they disappeared behind a large boulder. Flagstone ran behind the big rock. A bullet whacked into the stone. Flagstone was in the hidden entrance to a dark cave. It was barely large enough to stand in. The firing outside stopped.

"Santusa, where are we going?" asked Flagstone between deep breaths.

"Boss, you've got to be one of the luckiest men on the face of the earth," said Blind Bob. "Santusa went on ahead after he told me this was the entrance he was looking for. Can you believe that," said Blind Bob. Flagstone just shook his head and reloaded his rifle. He stepped back onto the trail. Rifles immediately fired. Bullets crashed into the huge boulder. Flagstone fired back. Then he retreated into the safety of the cave.

"The Sheik's men. I think I even saw the old rascal himself over there. Well, we know where he is now. And it's a day's march to get from there to here," Flagstone said with a wicked smile. "We beat them."

Santusa stepped into the light. He was smiling. "Come, come. I have found the way in," he said gesturing to the small party. Flagstone stepped behind

the boulder and fired at his attackers across the ravine. Answering fire drove him back into the cave. He reloaded. "Lead on, Santusa," he said.

The little party stumbled on in the dark. There was no getting lost. The cave was more like a tunnel, straight and narrow. No branching of the main course. For ten minutes they felt their way through the dark. The silence was total. Flagstone thought he could see a pinpoint of light. Soon it was getting larger. Another five minutes and they were standing at the mouth of the cave. Before then was stretched a narrow valley. A stream trickled by the cave mouth, not ten feet from Flagstone. He looked at Santusa.

"This is it, Mr. Flagstone. Up there is the Spanish camp. Your fountain is there. I have seen it."

Flagstone licked his lips. He started walking up a better-defined path through the small narrow valley. The valley floor was green, lush with vegetation. Almost immediately they came upon a tilled field. Flagstone's pulse raced. Barely a quarter mile ahead was a low wall. Several small buildings rose behind the wall. Flagstone could see men behind the wall. And what men they were.

Flagstone shouldered his rifle and walked calmly up to the gate in the wall. Four men stood there watching him. Their helmets sparkled in the sunlight. Their breastplates reflected the light. Long sharp swords were held in their hands. Several men along the wall had crossbows, another had what Flagstone was sure was an old matchlock. He was watching time roll backward. One of the men stepped forward and spoke Spanish. It took Flagstone a moment to adjust.

"Are you the leader," asked the man.

"Yes. I am Julius Flagstone. These are my men. We were attacked outside the cave and found our way here," Flagstone replied.

"What do you want in these mountains?" asked the man suspiciously. Flagstone looked at the man's eyes. There was no fear, only a great strength, and a great sadness.

"I am looking for your Fountain," said Flagstone plainly. The man nodded. He said something Flagstone did not catch to the other men. The others step forward and took the rifles from everyone. Flagstone nodded to Blind Bob then handed his own rifle to the Spanish leader. The leader beckoned them inside the wall.

They walked into the small compound. Inside the wall stood a dozen small stone and earth houses. Women and children peeked out of door and windows. The stream bubbled merrily down one side of the little plaza. In the center was simple round fountain with a statue in its center from which came a gentle flow of water. Flagstone stepped toward the fountain.

The leader's sharp blade stopped Flagstone. The Spanish placed themselves around Flagstone's small party. They outnumbered the Expedition. Flagstone

noted there was an assortment of people in the village. The Spanish who seemed in charge wore the garb of Conquistadors. Others were plainly of local descent and armed with spears and bows. There were several men who looked like French Foreign Legion types minus their weapons, and a couple who might pass as Prussians of the previous decade. From behind the Prussians a voice broke in.

"English," it asked in good English itself.

"Yes," answered Flagstone.

"Welcome to the Fountain of Youth, may you be sorry you ever found it."

Flagstone was confused. "Come again?"

A portly man stepped in to view. He spoke rapid Spanish to the leader. The man nodded and stepped back. The portly man came up to Flagstone.

"It's cursed, you know?"

"Who are you?" asked Flagstone bluntly.

"Sir Evelyn Waterwheel, the last." The portly man seemed to find the last statement slightly humorous. "Lost Explorer of Jimland. Whom do I have the pleasure of addressing, Sir?"

Flagstone introduced himself, but it brought no reaction from Waterwheel. Flagstone waited. Waterwheel walked off with the Spanish leader. They talked for several minutes. They broke off the conversation returning to stand in front of Flagstone. Waterwheel spoke.

"May I have your word of honor that you will not try to escape nor drink from the fountain, Mr. Flagstone?"

"You have it, Sir." Flagstone gave curt instructions to his party.

"Thank you, Mr. Flagstone. Now we must deal with the Sheik's men." Flagstone looked surprised. "Oh, they have tried to get in here before, but we have our ways of preventing that. However we can not, er, entertain guests and deal with the Sheik all at once. Our number are too small."

The Spaniard fired a question at Waterwheel who answered curtly. The leader then shouted an order and all of the men in the compound except Waterwheel left following the Spaniard. Waterwheel shrugged. "We only have unwanted visitors, it seems. Please have your men make themselves comfortable over there, by the stream," said Waterwheel pointing.

The Spaniard and his men returned several hours later. The sun was going down and the valley would soon be pitched into darkness. Flagstone had Ginsu build a small fire and start their normal evening meal cooking. Ginsu went to the stream and filled two small pots. No one made a move to stop him. Flagstone nodded and Ginsu continued with meal preparations assisted by the last bearer. Blind Bob was stretched out pretending to sleep. Santusa was

no where to be seen. As he thought about it, Flagstone did not remember Santusa leaving the cave with them. He wondered what was going on.

As they were beginning to eat their meal Waterwheel walked up. He had a sad look on his face. Flagstone offered him a seat. He sat.

"Join us," asked Flagstone. Waterwheel nodded rapidly. Flagstone dished out some hot food for the man. Waterwheel gulped it down. Flagstone gave him some more.

"Why are you here, Sir Evelyn," asked Flagstone as he watched the man slow his eating to savor the stew.

"Can't leave you know."

"Why's that," said Flagstone.

"It's the curse of the Fountain."

"Really? Tell me about it," said Flagstone, serving up a third helping to the obviously hungry Waterwheel.

"This is the first time in, well, a long time, gentlemen, I have had food like this, real English food. Please excuse my manners," said Waterwheel, but he accepted the third serving easily enough.

"Mr. Flagstone you are obviously not the first to come searching for the Fountain of Youth. Congratulations to you. You have found it. As have many others."

Flagstone sat unmoving and silent. He played with his food. Waterwheel swallowed and continued.

"Not to burst your bubble but there are several Fountains of Youth, if you will, in the world."

Flagstone looked sharply at Waterwheel. "What's that you say."

"Oh, yes, there are several. I don't know exactly how many or where they are. One is rumored to be directly under the Vatican. Don't really care. This is not the famous one, the one Ponce de Leon supposedly found. Don't know where that one is if it even exists."

"What's going on here, Waterwheel," asked Flagstone.

"Nothing you haven't been looking for. Over there," he pointed to the fountain in the dark, "is a Fountain of Youth, discovered by some Spanish Explorers several centuries ago. The men you saw today are the few survivors of that party. The ones who believed the curse."

"What curse?" said Flagstone sitting up straighter.

"Drink from the Fountain and you get Eternal Life. It's true. We here are living proof. But, there's always a but; you cannot leave this valley. You came in the only entrance, the only exit. If you try drink from the fountain, no one will stop you. Do so and you are doomed to stay here

forever. Set one foot in the cave and you begin to die rather quickly. And rather painfully I might add."

Waterwheel held out his tin. Blind Bob handed him his. Waterwheel nodded and continued eating and talking.

"If you don't drink from the fountain, you can leave the valley, but you will be killed by us. You see, we can't have everyone wandering in and out. We need to drink from the Fountain once a year or, well, we need the water. You will not make it out of the cave alive. You will die rather slowly. And rather painfully I might add."

"I'll think on your offer, Waterwheel," said Flagstone quietly.

"You do that, Mr. Flagstone. Thank you for the lovely meal. Good night." Waterwheel rose and walked back into the shadows of the little village.

"This doesn't seem right, Mr. Flagstone," muttered Blind Bob as he watched the portly man walk off. "Something's strange here."

"I agree. I need to sleep on it. You've got first watch, then Ginsu, then me," Flagstone said. Blind Bob nodded agreement and loosened the big knife at his hip. Flagstone lay down on his blankets and closed his eyes. He did not sleep.

Report 194 - 4.X - SHE STAYS.

Date: 2004-02-16

4.X - SHE STAYS

Julius Flagstone woke as the sun came peeking over the mountainside. He drew a bucket of water from the stream even as several women were doing the same. He took off his shirt and had a field shower. He felt refreshed. He roused Ginsu and helped him get breakfast sizzling over the fire.

The little village woke and began its morning activity. Flagstone watched the village. It must hold about one hundred people he thought. Forty men, forty to fifty women, just a few children. It seemed just a typical local village to Flagstone.

Just after the morning meal was over, Waterwheel walked up to Flagstone. He looked grim. "There will be a birth today, and a ceremony. Remain here and take no action on penalty of you life. That's all I can say."

Waterwheel walked off. Blind Bob shuffled up to stand next to Flagstone. "Cheery joker," he said. Flagstone grunted.

The sun was fully over the mountaintop now. Flagstone noted the men all heading toward a single ordinary house. A few women were with them, but most of the woman and all of the children stayed, back standing in doorways or little knots about the plaza. For several hours nothing happened. A woman came twice to draw water from the stream and return to the house.

Finally there was a general stirring. A man, the Spanish leader, came out of the house and walked toward the fountain holding a baby in his hand. At the fountain's edge he knelt and kissed the baby's head. Then he plunged the baby under the water. A moment later he pulled the little figure from the water, held it high in the air, and spoke two words.

"She stays."

A gentle sigh swept round the village. The Spaniard walked back to the house gently cradling the baby in his big hands. The spell was broken. The village moved into its daily rhythm. Flagstone had watched the whole episode, but could make no sense of it.

Flagstone gathered his little party together. He made sure they were aware of what Waterwheel had told him. Drink and never leave, leave and die one way or another. Personally he wasn't sure he believed the whole thing, but he wasn't ready to test the water so to speak. No one said anything. Flagstone walked along the stream. He walked up to the wall. No one stopped him.

He wondered if he was the prisoner of a lie. He walked along the wall to the gate. Four armed men stepped out of the shadows. One shook his head in the negative and pointed back toward Flagstone's camp. Flagstone walked back to

camp. He stopped by Blind Bob who was dozing in the morning sun. He nudged Blind Bob gently.

"Bob, you awake?"

"Now I am."

"Don't move," said Flagstone pretending to look around. "We are being held prisoner if ever so gently," said Flagstone quietly.

"I figured as much. How long do you think," asked Blind Bob through the hat over his face.

"Till I find a way out," replied Flagstone walking slowly away.

Flagstone's party spent four uneventful days in the village. No one visited them. They visited no one. Flagstone was getting itchy. Olivia must be beginning to worry about now. He hoped she didn't do anything silly. He saw Waterwheel strolling across the village.

"Waterwheel," he called. The man seemed surprised to hear his name. He turned and looked at Flagstone for several moments then walked over.

"Yes, Flagstone?" he asked tersely.

"What is being planned for us. Will we be let go if we don't drink from the Fountain?"

"Unlikely."

"Can we drink from the Fountain then?"

"Unlikely."

"So we just wait till some one cuts our throats in the night?"

"So to speak, yes. Sorry." Waterwheel turned and walked off leaving Flagstone standing with his mouth open.

"We go tonight," Flagstone said under his breath as his party ate its evening meal. "Leave everything but your canteens and knives. I suspect we will have a long tough run for it. I will wake you during my watch if I decide it's safe." Everyone nodded. "Bob, I'd like to borrow your metal flask."

Blind Bob didn't say a word as he handed over the metal flask. Flagstone took off the lip and put the flask to his lips.

"Empty. Sorry, boss," chuckled Blind Bob. The others joined in the low laugh. Flagstone smiled and stuck the flask in his coat pocket.

"Ginsu, your watch I believe. Get some rest, gentlemen."

The party bedded down. The village was quiet. Flagstone lay still, his skin feeling prickly like some one was watching him. He didn't sleep. Ginsu roused him for his watch. Flagstone made a show of getting a cup of coffee. He strolled around the small campsite to loosen his legs. His circle became larger and larger.

He neared the fountain. No alarm was raised. He was sure someone was watching him, probably from the shadows around the gate. Let's find out; damn it, he decided. He walked deliberately to the fountain. He plunged the flask into the water. He screwed the lid down tight and stuck it back in his pocket. He wiped his hands carefully on a handkerchief and threw it in the fire of the campsite. Still no alarm.

He walked over to Blind Bob. "Now?" whispered Blind Bob as Flagstone stopped near him.

"It's as dark as its gong to get. There'll be some clouds over the moon in a few minutes. Wake the others quietly. Assemble across the stream by the wall." Blind Bob grunted and slipped across the ground to wake each man. No one was really asleep.

Flagstone let the fire die to dim embers as he continued to patrol the empty camp. The clouds finally covered the moon. Flagstone sprang into action. He ran to his small party crouching in the shadows.

"Hand me up," was all he said. Blind Bob and Ginsu understood in a flash. Flagstone pulled himself up the rough wall face. He gripped the top and stifling a grunt managed to get his elbows over the edge. He struggled and pulled himself over the edge of the wall top. He dropped a rope down both sides of the wall. Up came Ginsu quickly. The bearer clumsily followed. Then Blind Bob came in a rush.

"Something's in the camp. We better be fast," he said as he slid down the outside of the wall. Flagstone was the last man on the wall. He started to go down. Yelling broke out from the campsite. A strange shrill noise came from the camp. Flagstone shivered and jumped. He landed on Blind Bob and Ginsu. They picked themselves up and began running downhill. A commotion came from the village. Flagstone's daypack slapped his back as he ran.

They followed the wall toward the gate. They sprinted past the gate. No one yelled the alarm. The ruckus must have drawn the guards inside, Flagstone thought as he ran hard down the little valley. He could hear sounds of pursuit. The bearer fell and grabbed his ankle. Ginsu stopped to help the man up. "Run," Flagstone yelled! Ginsu handed the bearer his knife and ran. The bearer limped along as fast as he could.

Flagstone heard screaming coming from behind him. They had caught the bearer. The screams were terrible. They ran on. Their breathing was whistling through their teeth. Something big passed overhead. It landed ahead between Flagstone and the cave entrance. The clouds cleared the moon.

A large man-sized shape stood across the cave entrance. Flagstone saw it and felt something was very wrong here. The man's eyes glowed a cold red fire. It let out a high pitched shriek. Others answered from about the valley. As

he ran toward the figure, Flagstone noted it was dressed in Waterwheel's clothes, but definitely wasn't Waterwheel. Flagstone drew his big camp knife.

Flagstone increased his speed in the final charge. He barreled into the figure. He felt big tough hands grip his arms. The figure pulled him free of itself and held him at arm's length. Flagstone kicked with all his strength. The creature merely flinched, but did not loosen its grip. Its red eyes glowed.

Flagstone found himself looking into the distorted face of Waterwheel. The creature shrieked again. Answers came back much closer. It opened its mouth and bared large fangs. Flagstone struggle mightily to free himself to no avail.

He thought he heard Waterwheel's voice saying, "I tried to warn you." The creature drew him closer to its dripping fangs. Suddenly Blind Bob's head appeared over the creature's shoulder and his knife came down to sink deeply into the creature's chest. The thing let go of Flagstone. It tried to get at Blind Bob hanging on its back and stabbing furiously at it.

Flagstone waded in, knife in hand. In a minute the two had stabbed the thing a hundred times. It had fallen to its knees. Flagstone kicked its head with all his might. The head snapped back with a sickening snap. Blind Bob slashed its throat. Something big passed overhead.

"Run," gasped Flagstone. They ran. Flagstone could have sworn he heard the creature say, "Thank you," as it collapsed and was set upon by another similar creature.

Flagstone reached in his daypack and pulled out a short stick of dynamite. He struck a match. Reaching the cave entrance he counted faces. There was Ginsu holding his bloody arm and Blind Bob covered in blood and looking wild, out of control. "Run," he yelled waving the dynamite.

Twenty yards into the cave Flagstone turned and faced the entrance. In the moonlight he could see several creatures fighting over the dead creature and several more following his path through the cave. He lit the fuse on the dynamite and threw it. He grabbed another, lit it, and threw it. Then he ran.

A terrific explosion tossed Flagstone roughly from floor to ceiling and back in the narrow tunnel. He picked himself up and stumbled on. It seemed to be getting lighter ahead. He tripped over something. In the dim light he could just make out Santusa's face. It was contorted into a hideous mask of pure terror. His throat was torn out. Flagstone felt no sorrow. He felt nothing. Flagstone climbed to his feet and tried to run for the cave entrance.

He ran out into the fresh air. He removed his daypack and took out the final two pieces of dynamite. Tearing off a strip of his shirt he wrapped the dynamite together. Lighting the fuse he threw it into the cave and ran downhill. He found Blind Bob and Ginsu standing fifty yards down the path. "Run," he yelled as he dashed past them. A mighty roar shook the night. Rock and dirt pelted them.

Ginsu cried out and fell. Flagstone went back to him amid the falling dirt and dust. Ginsu stared at Flagstone with unseeing eyes. Flagstone closed his eyes and laid him gently down. Then he rose and began running downhill.

He caught up with Blind Bob and they slowed their pace. They trotted along with only the clothes on their backs and their knives in their hands. Blind Bob's canteen slapped his side as he trotted along.

"Well that was interesting," he panted. "What the hell was it?"

"Part of the curse, I think," replied Flagstone as he gasped for air. "Ginsu's dead."

"I figured so," was all Blind Bob said. They trotted silently downhill not looking back. Soon the sun crept over the mountains. They walked. When the sun was directly overhead, they collapsed in the shadow of a huge boulder. They shared a drink from Blind Bob's canteen. It wouldn't get them far thought Flagstone.

"Well, that stinks," said Blind Bob lying in a dirty heap in the rock's shade.

"What?" asked Flagstone.

Blind Bob pointed. Not very far down the valley and heading their way rode many horsemen. Flagstone was under no illusion who was leading the riders. He also knew what would happen to him if Sheik Fizzle captured him. Carefully Flagstone and Blind Bob crept around to keep the boulder between themselves and the riders as they approached. The riders passed.

Flagstone and Blind Bob jogged downhill frequently looking over their shoulders. Pursuit did not appear. They jogged on until they could only walk, dragging one foot after the other. The sun went down. Blind Bob's water ran out. Sitting with their backs against a rock they rested in the cool night air. Flagstone pulled the metal flask out of his coat pocket.

Blind Bob coughed. "After you, boss." He laughed a hoarse laugh. Flagstone shook his head no and put the flask back in his pocket. I'll never be that thirsty he thought. They pulled each other up and began walking in what they thought was a southerly direction.

Dawn came over the mountains and into the valleys. Flagstone and Blind Bob trudged on. They were past weary. They numbly walked on. They sucked on a small stone in their mouths. They dreamed of water. The valley they were in widened and became less steep. A dust devil churned along stirring up the hard scabble's dusty covering. They walked on.

They sat in the shade of a low rock formation. Blind Bob dozed, his head on his chest. Flagstone tried to remain alert. He stretched his arms out in front of his chest. His back hurt. He watched a dust devil spin out on the approaching desert edge. There was one up the valley too. No. Wait. Flagstone tried to clear his mind and focus his eyes. It wasn't dust. The horsemen were returning or tracking them. He woke Blind Bob up and pointed up the valley. Blind Bob nodded. The two men struggled to their feet. It

hurt to stand up. It hurt to walk. It would hurt to die if the horsemen caught them.

Flagstone shaded his eyes. Clouds floated overhead. A voice called him. He looked at Blind Bob. Bob was walking slowly along his eyes closed, his sunburned lips peeling. Wonder if I look like that thought Flagstone in a remote corner of his mind. The voice called again. I know that voice he thought. A shadow passed overhead. Flagstone gripped his knife stuck in his belt. He had heard that vultures were good eating raw. Juicy they were. He giggled at the thought.

Something huge landed on the valley floor ahead of him. He was hearing the voices again. He and Blind Bob stumbled slowly toward the big shape.

Olivia put the cup of water to Flagstone's lips and trickled a little into his mouth. He grabbed the cup and gulped it dry. Olivia was crying. Blind Bob was lying beside Flagstone on the gondola deck. Marcello and a bearer were trying to rouse him. Blind Bob moaned. Moan all you want, it proves we aren't dead, thought Flagstone. He fell asleep in Olivia's arms.

On the long flight back toward Jimville Flagstone told Olivia of what they had found and what had occurred. He showed her the metal flask. They locked it in the small gondola safe. She in turn described the repairs to the balloon. She said it was good fortune that they found the two men. Olivia had been trying to follow the Sheik, but it was getting risky. They had taken several bullet hits in the gondola from the desert horsemen. She had begun to fear the worst.

"Feeling better?" she asked laying a hand on his shoulder.

"Yes, stronger, much better." He patted her hand. It was trembling. He looked at Olivia who was fighting back her tears. "We made it, dear. We'll be ok. Even Bob is getting grumpy."

Olivia took a deep breath and smiled. She stopped trembling. Flagstone squeezed her hand. She squeezed back.

"I'm wearing the green robe tonight," she said. Flagstone smiled.

"About time," Flagstone said. "Lock the doors too."

Olivia's laughter floated across the desert.

Report 195 - FLAGSTONE EXPEDITION COMPLETES HISTORIC FLIGHT.

Date: 2004-02-18

FLAGSTONE EXPEDITION COMPLETES HISTORIC FLIGHT

Julius Flagstone and his brave Expedition have completed their Historic Flight across the vast Great Desert of Jimland. Although Flagstone will comment little on where he went, he did share these comments with the Herald.

Herald: Mr. Flagstone, where did you go during your historic balloon flight?

Flagstone: We went up. We went down. We went across a trackless desert. We actually went off the edge of all the maps of Jimland that I possess.

Herald: Off the map. Where did you go to accomplish such a feat?

Flagstone: I'm sure where we went has a name. But the curious among your vast collection of readers will have to buy the most up to date maps in the near future drawn by the Intrepid Scout Blind Bob and myself during the flight to find out what it is. We also corrected the routes of several rivers that will be of use to many Fearless and Famous Explorers.

Herald: Then they too will be able to travel to your destination, which was?

Flagstone: Far away, and damn difficult to get to and away from.

Herald: Did you use the Balloon for the complete trip to what was its name again?

Flagstone: Yes, Olivia Fate and Marcello Viggio piloted the balloon throughout the Expedition and repaired its damage when we were forced to crash-land during a storm.

Herald: Exactly where did you crash-land, Mr. Flagstone?

Flagstone: On a mountainside. It was touch and go. Only the Skill of Ms Fate and Mr. Viggio saved us that day.

Herald: I'm sure, Mr. Flagstone. Then you were able to continue to your destination that was?

Flagstone: Yes, we faced many difficulties and perils during our journey, but we have returned safely.

Herald: Where will you be going next?

Flagstone: I'm not sure. I have a couple of ideas kicking around. We plan to modify the balloon a little and run a few more test flights. Then all of Jimland is ours to explore.

Herald: Aren't you afraid the other Fearless and Famous Explorers will all now get balloons and start crowding the skies of Jimland following your route to, uhm, where was that again?

Flagstone: No, I'm not the least bit worried. They are welcome to give it a try. It is quite exhilarating when all goes well. There are many lessons to be learned.

Herald: Thank you, Mr. Flagstone. We hope you have a safe journey back to wherever.

Flagstone: I'm sure I will, the Empress is just across the street.

DULLCOTES REMAIN MISSING

Norton and Constance Dullcote remain missing. Who had abducted them and why remain a mystery. Hope still lives in Jimville for their safe return. See our Report 155 for details of Dear Constance's kidnapping. See our Report 178 for details of Norton's disappearance. When, oh, when, Dear Reader, will a Real Man step up and rescue this lovable pair of disgustingly rich dilettantes? We can only wait and hope.

COMING AND GOINGS

The Jimland Bitch is back in Jimland tied up to the Main Pier. Cap'n Jack is now accepting passengers for next week's projected journey up the River Jim. He can be reached at the bar in the Jimland House of Girls and Casino. Approach cautiously. Cash only, no refunds.

Report 196 - DULLCOTES RESCUED! FLAGSTONE FETED AS HERO OF THE DAY!

Date: 2004-02-21

DULLCOTES RESCUED! FLAGSTONE FETED AS HERO OF THE DAY!

Julius Flagstone has rescued Norton and Constance Dullcote from the hands of the most vile pirate, Tastimin the Despicable, the Scourge of Jimland. Without warning Flagstone made a daring dash to sea in his steam launch accompanied by only his trusted scout Blind Bob. Together these two Fearless and Famous Explorers succeeded where others have failed to even try. Hats off to our Heroes.

Flagstone left unexpectedly. It was noted by the typically astute Herald Staff that Flagstone left after receiving a mysterious cable from England. Leaving even the fetching Olivia Fate behind, Flagstone, with Blind Bob his trusty scout at his side, headed for parts unknown in his steam launch.

Little is known of his exploits during his brief and very successful rescue effort. Flagstone refuses to talk about the most excellent job he did. His reason, he says, is not to give away secrets to the Evil Elements unfortunately present in our beloved Jimland. Though we promised not to tell the GPE, he remained firm in his decision not to discuss the manner of his rescue.

However little is known about the actual rescue attempt, very much is known about his return. Yesterday afternoon, Flagstone motored his bullet riddled, much battered, and slowly sinking steam launch up to the main Jimville pier.

He quickly sent for medical aid. None other than the Sultan's Personal Physician was summoned. This in itself signifies the importance of the event. After the Doctor's arrival and a short consultation with Flagstone, several parties were seen to leave the shell-torn steam launch.

First off was Blind Bob, Scout Extraordinaire. He was carefully loaded onto a stretcher and gently handed up onto the pier. At this point the Sultan's Doctor personally examined Blind Bob's many wounds and told the cheering crowd that though grievously wounded he would make a full recovery in good time. The Brave Scout was then escorted to a private suite in the Empress.

Next off the slowly sinking steam launch was none other than Norton and Constance Dullcote. Norton appeared to have been wounded in the rescue attempt. He too was examined by the Sultan's Doctor and pronounced in good health suffering only from minor wounds. A full and rapid recovery was expected. Constance Dullcote was reported as exhausted but in otherwise fine health. A cheering crowd of well wishers followed the pair as they slowly walked to the Empress to begin their recovery.

The last off the steam launch was Julius Flagstone. It is reported he looked like a vision from Hell itself. Our sources say he was covered in blood and dirt from head to foot with many minor wounds to confirm his dreadful adventure in places unknown. Flagstone refused comment and was heading for the Cable Office when he was joyously reunited with the Fetching Olivia Fate.

Flagstone later returned to the pier to supervise the beaching of his steam launch before it sank. Rumors abound as to the number of bullet holes in the launch. It is further reported that many of the hull planks had been crushed or broken. The steam launch had definitely seen unusually hard use. But luckily for all of Jimland it remained afloat long enough to return Our Hero to Us.

A FLURRY OF NAVAL ACTIVITY

Whether related or not we are not sure, but British Naval activity in Jimville harbor stepped up a couple of notches shortly after Flagstone's return. Several units of the Naval Brigade were loaded aboard two swift coastal craft and immediately left for parts unknown.

SCIENCE CLUB

The Science Club has postponed this week's meeting in Honor of the Rescue of the Dullcotes and the Return of the Hero who accomplished this Feat. Meetings will resume in two weeks as usual. The Science Club would like to remind everyone that Olivia Fate is the First Female Member of the Science Club and the Lovely Companion of Our Hero, Julius Flagstone.

The Science Club tips its hat and says very well done to Mr. Flagstone.

TASTIMIN REWARD INCREASED

The Sultan today announced an increased reward for information leading to the capture, fair trial, and subsequent hanging of Known Pirate and Rogue, Tastimin the Despicable, the Scourge of Jimland. All information should be submitted at the main Palace Gate during normal business hours.

Report 197 - 5.1 - ORDERS.

Date: 2004-02-23

5.1 - ORDERS.

Julius Flagstone returned from dinner alone. Olivia was visiting the Lovely Marie, companion of the Fearless and Famous Explorer Casimir Ponatowski, at the Vistula Villa, Casimir's residence on the outskirts of Jimville. Casimir and team were in the field, so Julius was using the time alone to write his journal and catch up on correspondence from around the world. A job that is never done he thought as he unlocked and opened the door to his suite in the Empress.

The Empress was the largest and finest Hotel in all of Jimville. It was also the only hotel in all of Jimville. Julius shut the door and fumbled for a match in the dark room. An oil lamp flamed into light. Flagstone whipped out his small "town gun."

"Easy, Flagstone, easy."

It was the British Consul sitting casually on Flagstone's sofa in the main room of the suite. Flagstone wondered if anyone would convict him of murder if he shot the man. He decided it wasn't worth the risk. He tucked the "town gun" back into the rear of his waistband.

"Nice to see you too, Mr. Consul," said Flagstone coolly. He stood waiting.

"Sorry to startle you," said the Consul.

"Sorry to almost shoot you, Mr. Consul." Flagstone still stood, waiting.

"I needed to talk to you, uh, privately, Mr. Flagstone."

"About?" Flagstone didn't move. The Consul seemed very comfortable on the sofa. Let him eat cake thought Flagstone dryly. He waited.

Finally the Consul rose and walked to Flagstone. He handed him a sealed official looking envelope. "Your eyes only," he said and left the suite.

Flagstone stood holding the envelope. Should have shot him, he decided after a moment. He laughed. He threw the envelope on the table and poured himself a cool lemonade to which he added some ice cubes. Flagstone was still struck by the icemaker the Empress had. He wondered how the world ever got along without them.

The envelope beckoned. He slid into a chair at the table and opened the envelope. A single sheet of paper was inside. It was typed. It read:

"NAGS Society RFA. Subject: Disappearance of Norton and Constance Dullcote. Proposal accepted. Act on information at hand. Assistance available upon request. Advise on progress through the usual channels. FYI, Viggio returned home safely." This was followed by a single line of ciphers.

Flagstone sat for a moment. He reread the short note. He let out a big sigh. OK, ok, what do you really want, he said to himself? I don't work for you anymore. I never worked for you. He was muttering to himself. He sighed again.

He went to his big stand-alone safe in the corner. He took out a small palm-sized booklet. He worked the cipher in a minute. He grunted. "Well, I'll be", was all he said half to himself. Then he took out his matchbox and lit a match. He held it between his fingers for a long time before he put the flame to the note. It flared up and crumpled into ash. Flagstone swept up the ashes and dumped them in the fireplace. His mind was churning.

He penned a note to Olivia. "Gone Fishing with Blind Bob. Back soon. Love, Julius. PS Marcello got home safely." He propped the note on the small mantle in the suite's main room. He grabbed his light gear and his heavy rifle. In minutes he was banging on Blind Bob's door.

Blind Bob cracked open the door. He smiled at Flagstone taking in his hastily thrown on gear. "We going somewhere?"

"Yes. Now," said Flagstone.

Blind Bob closed the door. Flagstone began adjusting his belts, pack and canteen. He heard a feminine voice behind the door. It didn't sound happy. Blind Bob appeared as hastily garbed as Flagstone. He nodded. Flagstone strode purposely off. Blind Bob followed. Neither man looked back.

Flagstone's steam launch had pressure up by the time he arrived. Only three crewmen were aboard. It would have to do he thought. He threw off the lines himself and hopped aboard. Soon the Jimville harbor was disappearing behind them. Flagstone hummed tunelessly to himself. Blind Bob arranged their scant gear and carefully went over their weapons. He knew from past experience that a hasty departure usually meant trouble and trouble usually meant shooting to get your point across. He whistled while he checked the guns and loaded each carefully.

The sun went down unadmired. The steam launch sped along. No one said much. Flagstone gave the helm to one of the crewmen and went below. The smell of food being prepared crept up on deck. The helmsman smiled. Blind Bob grinned. Just like the old days, he thought. No big Expedition. Just the two of us having an adventure. No women to get in the way. He pulled a flask out of his pack and took a pull. It passed around the crewmen. Flagstone appeared on deck with a tray of hot food. He took a long drink on the flask. All them then ate heartily sitting about the deck of the steam launch as it glided across the dark sea.

Flagstone was watching the night sky. It was crystal clear. Uncounted stars twinkled overhead. The steam launch slid quietly across the night sea leaving a fluorescent wake shining behind. Blind Bob was sitting across from him.

"What's up, boss?" Blind Bob asked. Flagstone continued to admire the stars.

"Norton Dullcote has been located. We are going to rescue him."

"Free of charge?" asked Blind Bob.

"Oh, no. There's a hefty fee for this little job. But we must pass it on."

"Ok," was all Blind Bob said.

"Dullcote's been holding out on all of us. Seems that in addition to being a big time industrialist with pile of money taller than you, he also holds the deed to the only known deposit of X-Rock. Norton will be giving us the deed as payment. We will pass that on to interested parties who will pay us handsomely for our services."

"If we don't get killed along the way," said Blind Bob.

"If we don't get killed along the way," echoed Flagstone.

"I love this job," said Blind Bob quietly.

"Me too," said Flagstone to the stars.

Dawn came quickly as the Flagstone's steam launch cautiously approached a tiny island. Flagstone decided there was no way through the surrounding reef and anchored the launch. Strong arms hoisted out the dinghy. Soon it was being rowed over the turquoise water toward the golden beach. Flagstone sat in the stern watching the beach. Blind Bob sat in the bow, his big hunting rifle at the ready.

The little dinghy slid up onto the sand. Blind Bob was out of the boat and moving quickly to the tree line. Flagstone was right on his heels. By the time they reached the palms, the dinghy was half way back to the steam launch. In minutes the steam launch had slowly left the island trailing the dingy behind. Flagstone nodded to Blind Bob. Bob took a deep breath, exhaled slowly and adjusted his pack. He stepped off into the small jungle of the island.

Flagstone followed, his head constantly moving from side to side. His eyes tried to see everything at once. They walked in silence. Twenty minutes later they saw a small hill ahead. Flagstone signaled a halt.

"They should be on the other side," he whispered to Blind Bob.

"They?"

"Dullcote and the men watching him, maybe four or five. We crawl around either side, that's ten minutes. Fire after I do. I'll grab Norton. That's one minute. We come back this way fast, then double back to the crest of the hill and deal with any pursuit. That'll be five minutes. The launch will have returned by then. Then we get the hell out of here."

"Right," was all Blind Bob said. It was short and sweet. If they screwed up they would be dead, but it would over quickly. He loosened his big knife in his belt.

"I'll go round to the right. No firing till I do."

"Right."

The two men slithered through the tall grass and underbrush of the island. Soon Flagstone was around the hill. He could see two simple huts with a fire pit nearby. There was pole between the huts and tied to the pole by a heavy rope leash was Norton Dullcote. He looked done in. Flagstone wasn't pleased. Probably in no shape to run, he thought. Dullcote leaned against the post then walked almost to the door of the nearest hut. He said something.

Two men came out. They brought a board with some fruit and a gourd of water. One man checked the rope bindings to the pole while the other watched from a distance. Then they put the food within Dullcote's grasp. He ate slowly, sitting cross-legged in the dirt leaning against the post.

Flagstone crawled closer. The two men returned to the hut. Dullcote was alone between the huts. Flagstone picked up a stone and tossed it at Dullcote. It landed square on his food. Dullcote's head jerked around. His mouth fell open. Flagstone put a finger to his lips. Dullcote nodded slowly and continued eating. Flagstone gestured toward the huts and shrugged and held up two fingers. Dullcote slowly held up four fingers. He pointed at the hut nearest Flagstone and held up four fingers again. Flagstone nodded. He gestured for Dullcote to call them out.

Dullcote yelled bloody murder. His guards came running out of the hut. Flagstone shot one down. A second fell immediately. The third and fourth shots were fast behind. All four men lay spread in the sand, silent and unmoving. Dullcote was shaking violently. Blind Bob burst from cover. Flagstone ran to Dullcote and hacked furiously at the rope leash. He jerked Dullcote to his feet and the trio began moving as fast as Dullcote could move around the hill.

The huts were soon out of sight. Flagstone stopped only long enough to cut the rope off Dullcote and clap a hand across his mouth. "Shut up," Flagstone said sternly. Dullcote swallowed his words. They climbed the small hill slope and nestled into the undergrowth. They waited.

Half an hour later Flagstone motioned that they should move. Blind Bob took the lead. Flagstone the rear. Dullcote tottered along between the two men. He was still shaking. They made surprisingly good progress. Blind Bob signaled a halt as the jungle thinned out near the beach.

The steam launch was at the edge of the reef and the dinghy was rowing toward them. Flagstone was pleased. So far so good, he thought. The man in the steam launch was yelling and waving at the men in the dinghy. A great shadow flashed by. The men in the dinghy stopped rowing. A great pterodactyl swooped in. A incredibly fast jerk of its head plucked one man from the dinghy and up-end the little boat.

Flagstone ran onto the beach and raised his rifle. It was too late, the great creature was gone. Blind Bob trotted up dragging a wheezing Dullcote with him. The dinghy was nowhere to be seen. Neither was the second rower.

"That sucks," was all Flagstone could think to say. He glanced up and down the beach for some driftwood. There wasn't any worth going after.

"We swim for it," he said slinging his rifle. "You swim, Norton?"

"Only in the spa at home," answered a terrified Dullcote.

"It will be something to tell you grandchildren about. Come on."

Blind Bob and Flagstone waded out with Dullcote between them. The incoming waved knocked them about. Each went down to come up sputtering. Finally they started swimming slowly toward the steam launch. The minutes seemed like hours, but the launch slowly grew larger. Finally a strong arm reached out and hauled them into the launch.

Dullcote lay gasping on the launch deck like a large white fish. Flagstone took the helm and backed off the reef as Blind Bob and the remaining crewman pulled up the small sea anchor. In a minute Flagstone had the launch cruising swiftly through the ocean swells. He looked Dullcote over and wrapped a blanket around him. He tossed an order at the crewman. "Coffee, very black."

He looked at Dullcote dripping on the varnished wood of the steam launch. "This is going to cost you, Norton."

"Fine. And thank you," answered Dullcote.

"No problem," said Blind Bob pouring the water out of his rifle barrel.

"But there is a problem," said Dullcote sadly.

Report 198 - 5.2 - DOUBLE CROSSED.

Date: 2004-02-25

5.2 - DOUBLE CROSSED

Julius Flagstone handed Norton Dullcote a cup of hot coffee and watched the man drip on the deck of his steam launch. Flagstone was doing exactly the same thing. He pulled his blanket closer. Even with the sun beaming down the ocean breeze chilled his wet body. Dullcote sipped the hot coffee.

"What do you mean there is a problem?" asked Flagstone. Blind Bob, his scout, handed Flagstone his hunting rifle cleaned, oiled, and reloaded. Bob sat on the deck and began cleaning his own rifle.

"Constance has lost her mind. She is helping the scoundrels that kidnapped her. She kidnapped me!"

Flagstone and Blind Bob exchanged looks. Dullcote sighed and sipped his coffee. He shivered. Flagstone didn't notice the breeze. "What do you mean kidnapped you?" asked Flagstone.

"I mean kidnapped me as in put a gun in my face, cleaned out my safe, and shoved me off the balcony to her fellow kidnappers. I still can't believe it. Constance!"

"How do you know it was her?"

"I think I know my wife of forty plus years when I see her."

"Don't be so hasty, Norton. Events like that can throw you off," said Flagstone.

"It was Constance. She's the only one besides me that knew the safe combination. She walked right over to it and opened it in a flash. Then she scooped all the papers into a bag. Then they put me off the balcony. I heard them ransacking the room. I guess I blacked out after that."

"That's ok. We'll get you back to Jimville and have doctor take a look at you. I'm sure Constance is not to be blamed."

"It was her, Flagstone."

"Ok, Norton. We'll get you to Jimville, then decide what to do next."

"We can't go to Jimville," Dullcote said flatly.

"Why not?" asked Flagstone.

"Because Constance is on her way to meet with parties unknown to sell them my deed to, uh, my deed to my mine."

"To your X-Rock deposit you mean?" Flagstone tried to say it matter-of-factly. Dullcote's head jerked up.

"Yes."

"That's not good."

"No."

"Who is she meeting and where?" asked Flagstone.

"Don't know who. Do know where. It a little place on the upper coast called James Landing. Do you know it?" asked Dullcote.

"Yes, I've been there on occasion," said Flagstone. Blind Bob coughed several times and managed to calm himself down. He continued cleaning his rifle. Flagstone gave him a warning look. Dullcote continued.

"Constance left in a small sailing boat with some of her men at dawn today."

"We can easily get to the Landing before they do if we head straight there." Flagstone looked at Blind Bob. "Up for it?"

"No time like the present," said Blind Bob slapping the bolt home on his rifle. "The two of us ought to be plenty for sneaking around and stopping evil schemes."

Dullcote interrupted. "I still want my Constance rescued. So far she has harmed no one but me." He looked defiantly at both men.

"If we can, Norton," was Flagstone's answer. He walked to the steering station. Flagstone pushed the throttle forward to full speed. The launch began cutting a sharp wake through the ocean swells. Flagstone turned the wheel watching the compass rose spin around. He steadied her up on his chosen course. "Keep her steady there and keep a sharp lookout," he told the remaining crewman. "Triple wages for you when we get back to Jimville." The man smiled and nodded.

The steam launch knifed across the blue seas.

Flagstone edged his steam launch up to the shore. He and Blind Bob jumped ashore and tied the line from the launch to a large stump. The crewman jumped ashore and began cutting fronds and branches off the trees. He then began hiding the launch as best he could. Flagstone watched for a moment.

"We have only a short day's march to James Landing. Stay here till we come back or five days pass then head for Jimville. Give the note I wrote to Olivia, no one else. Understand?"

The crewman nodded. He looked at Dullcote standing sadly on the launch deck. Flagstone grimaced. Blind Bob spit in the dirt.

"Oh, come on, Dullcote, if you're coming," Flagstone said abruptly. Norton Dullcote scrambled on to the shore. Neither Flagstone nor Blind Bob offered him any kind of weapon. Dullcote didn't ask of one. They set off into the jungle.

A short day's march it was. But in the Wilds of Jimland any march, short or long, is work. The men were soon sweating heavily as they carefully made their way through the jungle. The sea breeze didn't reach very far in shore. Flagstone wiped his brow. Blind Bob slashed at the undergrowth to clear a path.

"I never remember how hot and humid this place is," said Flagstone. Blind Bob only grunted. Dullcote said nothing as he followed panting. The jungle closed in around them like they had never been there.

Suddenly Blind Bob knelt and signaled for a halt. Flagstone and Dullcote crept to his side. They peered cautiously through the fronds. James Landing lay before them. It was a collection of a half dozen ramshackle huts looking particularly run down. A large rowboat was tied to the rickety pier. In the small harbor a large square-rigged sailing ship was anchored. Men could be seen working on the ship. A guard walked lazily around the little huddle of buildings.

Blind Bob scratched his chin and spit onto a nearby plant. "Tastimin or I'm an idiot," he muttered.

"You keep chewing that stuff and you are an idiot," chuckled Flagstone.

Blind Bob spit out his plug. "Don't really like it that much anyway. Just keeps my mouth busy." He wiped his mouth on the back of his dirty sleeve. "But I still say its Tastimin."

"I agree," said Flagstone. They pulled farther back into the jungle.

"Dullcote you will remain here with one of us at all times. Blind Bob and I will take turns watching the camp. Obviously, Constance has not arrived yet. I'm not sure Tastimin is her trading partner. X-Rock is really not his style. Gold, maybe. Lots of gold, but not X-Rock unless things are getting more interesting," Flagstone said.

"More interesting?" asked Dullcote.

"He means more likely to kill us," smiled Blind Bob. "Me first?"

Flagstone nodded. Blind Bob disappeared. Flagstone fashion a small cover for Dullcote and himself out of large fronds and tree leaves. It started to rain lightly. He folded a leaf to catch the water and sat his canteen under its run-off. He smiled at Dullcote. "Welcome to the Wilds of Jimland."

Dullcote forced a smile. "Thanks. I think."

"You really think Constance is selling your X-Rock for some evil scheme?" asked Flagstone.

"Based on what I have seen and heard, yes. Based on my heart, no. Based on the fact that she kidnapped me and stole the contents of my safe what else can I think," said Dullcote.

"Why would she be doing this, Norton?"

"Beats me. We've been married for over forty years. I've never been untrue although young women seem to flock to me." Dullcote blushed.

"True loves or long lost daughters?"

Dullcote laughed. "Those and more. I've have some interesting proposals."

It was Flagstone's turn to laugh. "I'll bet you have." He smiled to himself at a lost memory suddenly floating to the surface. "I'll bet you have."

Dullcote tried to get comfortable. He fell asleep even as the rain dripped on his hat. Flagstone sat leaning against the tree and let his mind wander. Dullcote's comment had released a flood of forgotten memories. He half-closed his eyes and let the memories play.

Dullcote was still sleeping when Blind Bob crept back to their little shelter. He was soaking wet and muddy. He gladly took the canteen offered by Flagstone and took a big drink. Flagstone replaced it under the runoff. "Well", he asked quietly.

"Been clear around the place. Not much going on. About twenty men on shore, don't know how many in the ship. No sign of Constance yet. Think I heard Tastimin but never saw him. It's pretty quiet so far," Blind Bob said.

Flagstone rose and stretched. "Ok, my turn. Keep old Dullcote here, no matter what. I can't be losing him now that we know what is going on."

"Sure thing," said Blind Bob. He dug around in his daypack until he pulled out a piece of jerky. He cut it in thirds with his big knife. He gave a piece to Flagstone who bit off a chunk. Blind Bob nudged Dullcote with his boot toe. Dullcote awoke with a jerk. Blind Bob handed him a piece of jerky. "Dinner is served, Mr. Dullcote." Dullcote nodded his thanks and began chewing the tough meat. He didn't look especially pleased with his dinner. Blind Bob smiled and, leaning against the tree trunk, tipped his hat over his eyes. They chewed in silence. Flagstone disappeared into the jungle.

The soft rain pattered down.

Report 199 - 5.3 - THE LADY AND THE PIRATE.

Date: 2004-02-27

5.3 - THE LADY AND THE PIRATE

Julius Flagstone found a good position from which to watch the huts and the ship anchored in the little harbor. He tried to get comfortable having to settle for least uncomfortable. Blind Bob was right, thought Flagstone, not much was going on in the camp. He watched the guard being changed. Night came quietly.

Four more times Blind Bob and Flagstone changed roles. The jungle was quiet. The soft rain came and went. Flagstone hardly noticed. Dullcote behaved himself. Flagstone had the watch when dawn slowly came. Activity in the camp increased. He smelled food cooking. He tried to count men as they came out to the beach to relieve themselves, but soon gave up. Twenty seemed a good estimate.

Well, well, Flagstone thought to himself. You've moved up a notch in the world. He was silently talking to Tastimin. Tastimin the Despicable, Scourge of Jimland. And not a very nice guy Flagstone chuckled to himself. He put Tastimin in his rifle sight and followed him about the camp. So easy he thought, but he didn't squeeze the trigger. There's something going on that's more important than your miserable hide Flagstone thought.

A shout from the anchored ship got everyone's attention. Tastimin yelled orders. His men ran for their weapons. A big swivel gun on the ship turned toward the sea. Flagstone squirmed back into the jungle.

He hurried back to their shelter. Blind Bob was on his feet rifle in hand when Flagstone arrived. Dullcote was standing behind Blind Bob.

"What are you making such a racket for," asked Blind Bob. "We been found out?"

"No. A ship is coming in. I want everyone together up front. Let's go. Dullcote stay close and keep quite no matter what happens." Flagstone looked sternly at Dullcote who nodded quickly. The trio slowly retraced Flagstone's path. They hunkered down in the undergrowth ignoring the morning flies. Everyone in the camp was focused on the harbor entrance.

Soon a small sloop coasted into the bay on the last of the night breeze. The crew lowered the big mainsail and released the anchor. The vessel snubbed itself to a halt. A dinghy was dropped noisily overboard. Figures climbed into it and began rowing ashore. Flagstone felt Dullcote tense up beside him.

"Easy there, Norton. I don't see a woman in the boat," he whispered. Dullcote relaxed a little.

The dinghy beached on the sand. Three men climbed out. One stayed with dinghy. Two approached Tastimin who was striding toward them.

"Where's the woman?" he asked roughly. One of the men pointed to the little sloop. A figure waved from the sloop's deck.

"Where's the money?" asked the man warily watching Tastimin. Tastimin turned and waved at the huts. Out of one came two men carrying an obviously heavy chest between them. They dropped it with a satisfying thump at the feet of the man in front of Tastimin. The second man knelt and examined the contents of the chest. He turned and held up a gold bar for the figures on the sloop to see. Someone waved. The two men picked up the chest and lugged it back to the dinghy. They rowed back to the sloop.

Tastimin began to fidget after several minutes of inactivity. No one was heading ashore from the little sloop. He slapped his thigh.

"You bring me the map and the deed or I'll have you blown out of the water where you sit," he yelled at the sloop. There was no response and no figures were visible on the sloop's deck.

Tastimin looked around at his men clutching their weapons. He swore an oath. Tastimin walked angrily to the lapping water's edge. He cupped his hands around his mouth.

"Run out your guns and fire on that sloop on my command," he roared. Several figures on the large ship waved and there was a flurry of activity. Several guns were pointed ominously toward the little sloop. Tastimin stood fuming with his hand on his hips. He spit into the sea. "I'll give you two minutes, lady, then you're dead."

"Constance," squeaked Dullcote. Blind Bob clamped a big hand across Dullcote's mouth.

"Say that again and you're the deadman," whispered Blind Bob in Dullcote's ear. Dullcote's eyes widened. He nodded. Blind Bob did not remove his hand. Flagstone had Tastimin in his rifle sight again. Give that command, he thought, and you're the deadman.

A female voice cut through the air. "No so fast, Captain. I'm here."

Tastimin and his men whirled around. Between Tastimin and the huts stood a woman and twenty armed men. She smiled. A muffled cry came from Dullcote. Flagstone couldn't believe his eyes. Constance Dullcote was standing not fifty yards from him with a pirate crew at her side. Flagstone stole a glance at Blind Bob who just grinned and shrugged. Dullcote wiggled where he lay. Blind Bob held his hand hard across Dullcote's mouth.

Constance held up some papers. Tastimin took a step toward her. Constance raised a rather large revolver and pointed it at Tastimin. "Stop right there," she said.

Tastimin halted immediately. He wasn't smiling. Constance spoke again. "Tell your men to drop their weapons, Captain. It's just a precaution against one accidentally going off, you understand." She raised the papers above her head. "You following me here," she asked.

Tastimin motioned to his men. No one moved. Tastimin yelled an order. The men reluctantly laid their weapons on the sandy beach. "You double cross me, and you're dead," he hissed at Constance.

"No double cross intended. Just a little safety measure or two before we talk. You do want to talk to me don't you," she asked.

"I'll sink your ship then where will you be," threatened Tastimin in a low voice that only Constance could hear.

"Who says that's my ship," she calmly replied. Tastimin looked at her then at the little sloop. He slowly turned his head back to Constance. He began to laugh to himself. He nodded to her.

"Let's talk. In private if you don't mind."

"Agreed." Constance pointed to the hut nearest where Flagstone lay. "Over there. Tell your men to stay where they are." Tastimin barked an order. His men relaxed. Constance barked an order. Her men did not relax at all. She took off her big sun hat and waved it back and forth. Figures came out on deck of the sloop and began hauling in the anchor. In minutes the sloop was lazily tacking out of the harbor.

Constance gestured Tastimin into the hut with her revolver. Flagstone looked at Blind Bob with his hand over Dullcote's mouth. "Stay here. If anything happens go to the launch and make sure Olivia gets the note I wrote."

Blind Bob nodded silently. Dullcote wiggled around. Blind Bob put a big strong arm around Dullcote. "We will, won't we, Mr. Dullcote," Blind Bob said with menace. Dullcote relaxed and simply nodded. Flagstone crawled off into the undergrowth.

Flagstone crawled nearer to the back of the hut. He was twenty feet away. There were no men between him and the rear of the hut. There was no cover between him and the rear of the hut. He looked both ways.

Flagstone raced up to the hut and threw himself down at the base of the wall. He could hear voices. No alarm was sounded. He got to his knees and strained to hear through the rear window of the hut. The wooden shutters muffled the voices. He concentrated. He peeked through the shutter.

Constance Dullcote stood in the hut with her pistol aimed squarely at Tastimin who stood with his arms crossed. Constance tossed the papers on the rough table. Tastimin stepped to the table and picked them up. He read them for a moment.

"You say this will make me the rightful owner of the mine," he asked.

"Yes," Constance answered. The gun barrel never left Tastimin. It never wavered.

"Even under the law?"

"Yes."

Tastimin read the papers again. He smiled. "Nice doing business with you," he said. Tastimin turned and faced Constance. He held out his hand. "Enjoy your gold, Ms. Dullcote."

Constance waved him out the door with the revolver. Tastimin laughed and walked out. Constance followed him out. She paused by the door. She put her fingers to her mouth and whistled loudly. Her men backed toward the jungle, their guns on Tastimin's crew. Tastimin stood with his hands on his hips smiling. "Let them go," he ordered.

Flagstone threw himself on the ground. Constance and her men disappeared into the jungle. He heard Tastimin laugh, then give orders to make ready to leave the harbor. His men were soon back aboard the ship making ready to sail. Flagstone crawled back into the jungle. He found Blind Bob and Dullcote where he had left them. Flagstone motioned back into the jungle. The three men crept away from the huts.

They returned to their makeshift shelter. Flagstone shouldered his daypack. Dullcote stepped forward and raised his hand, but before he could say a word, Flagstone spoke.

"Let's go get Constance."

Flagstone and Blind Bob stepped into the undergrowth. Dullcote stood for a moment then quickly followed them.

Report 200 - 5.4 - BOAT RACE.

Date: 2004-02-29

5.4 - BOAT RACE

Julius Flagstone swore in disgust as he watched the large sloop slowly leaving the Jimland shore. Blind Bob and Norton Dullcote were standing beside him breathing hard. They had just missed catching the boat with Constance Dullcote aboard. Their run through the jungle had his blood pumping. "Ok, back to the launch. Fast!" Flagstone turned and dived into the undergrowth.

They reached Flagstone's steam launch out of breath. Flagstone started tearing the leaves and fronds off the boat. He yelled orders at the crewman. The crewman ducked belowdeck. Blind Bob and Dullcote continued throwing the camouflage overboard. Flagstone checked his position on the pathetic chart that served as the Official Chart of the Coast of Jimland. He measured off a distance and scribbled some numbers on a scrap of paper.

Flagstone tapped the pressure gauge beside the steering station. It was just beginning to register. Flagstone walked forward and cast off the bow-line. He walked aft avoiding flying tree branches to cast off the stern-line. Back at the steering station he tapped the pressure gauge again. Not much, he thought, but something is better than nothing. He pushed the throttle forward. The steam launch sluggishly moved forward. "Come on, girl" he whispered. The launch swung away from the shore.

Blind Bob and Dullcote had nearly cleared the branches and leaves off the launch. Flagstone beckoned Blind Bob to the steering station. He pointed at the compass. "Hold it there," he said. Blind Bob nodded. Flagstone plunged belowdeck to help fuel the boiler.

Some time later the steam launch was well clear of the shore and building speed. Flagstone reappeared soaked in sweat and covered in grime. He smiled at Blind Bob.

"You love working this old bucket don't you," said Blind Bob.

"You bet," answered Flagstone happily. He tapped the pressure gauge. It registered nearly full pressure. Flagstone walked over to where Dullcote sat. "Norton, time to get your hands dirty."

"How so," asked Dullcote.

"Go to the boiler room. The man there will show you what to do. Blind Bob will be down later to relieve you."

Flagstone's manner said don't argue. Dullcote rose slowly and went below. Flagstone stood by Blind Bob as the launch raced across the sea.

"That will keep him busy for awhile," said Flagstone.

"What are we going to do when we catch that sloop," asked Blind Bob.

"I don't know. I'm making this up as I go," grinned Flagstone. Blind Bob grinned back. The steam launch sped across the serene blue sea.

Flagstone idled his steam launch, hiding behind a point of the coast. He could clearly see the top of the big sloop's mast over the low trees along the point. What disappointed Flagstone was that he could also see the mast top of the second, smaller, sloop. He hadn't counted on two pirate vessels. His brow was furrowed as he tried to devise a plan.

Blind Bob was double-checking their rifles and pistols. Dullcote sat listlessly near the steering station. The crewman nervously watched Blind Bob's preparations. The sun was starting to go down, but darkness was still an hour or more away. Flagstone couldn't wait. The sloops might slip away or worse, discover him and foil his plans. Plans, he thought, what plans?

He walked over to Blind Bob. "Get all the buckets, pots, pans and such we have and bring them here." Flagstone looked at Dullcote. "You help him."

Dullcote nodded and followed Blind Bob belowdeck. Next he sent the crewman to the refueling cap of the fuel tank with simple orders. As Blind Bob and Dullcote brought containers on deck, the crewman filled each with fuel. Soon the deck was littered with pots and pans and reeking highly combustible fuel oil.

"Here's the plan," Flagstone said addressing his assemble crew, all three of them. "We head hell bent for leather around the point. We attack the big sloop first. As we go by throw the containers of fuel at the ship. Try to get over the rails. Then we do the same for the small sloop. Second pass we throw some torches and hope they both start burning. Then we board the big sloop, snap up Constance, and escape."

Flagstone pointed to the crewman. "You steer, and steer as close to the sloops as you can. Don't worry about the paint job, just don't get fouled." The man nodded.

Flagstone pointed to Dullcote. "You throw pots and torches." Dullcote nodded. Flagstone pointed a Blind Bob; "You give us covering fire and board with me." Blind Bob nodded. Dullcote started to speak.

"No, Norton, you are not boarding. Sorry, but this is a younger man's game today. When we board you give us covering fire and keep the pirates out of the launch." Dullcote's shoulders sagged. "It's important, Norton, or nobody goes home, including Constance." Dullcote nodded affirmative.

"Ok. Bob, make some torches from whatever you can. You have five minutes."

Flagstone went belowdeck to the boiler room. He inspected it from top to bottom rapidly. He tapped the pressure gauge and adjusted a valve. He patted the hot boiler. "Ok, girl, don't fail me now."

When he came on deck again, everyone was at their appointed station. Flagstone gave the signal to go. The launch gained speed and quickly was racing over the gently swells. The launch rounded the point at full speed.

The launch shot toward the large sloop. For several moments all was quite. Then a shout went up. Heads appeared at the stern of the sloop. Arms began pointing and waving. Blind Bob took careful aim. He fired. A man tumbled into the sea. More shouts from the sloop. The launch raced toward it. Flagstone and Dullcote braced themselves.

The launch slid along the big sloop's side. Flagstone and Dullcote heaved pots and buckets over the rail and through openings in the hull. The crewman turned hard around the big sloop's bow. He aimed directly for the smaller sloop. The engine whined at full speed. The wake churned.

They slammed into the small sloop. Flagstone and Dullcote jumped back to their feet and threw the fuel oil over the rails. Suddenly they were free and circling around to the big sloop's stern again. The steam launch was flying. The crewman steering had a wild wide-eyed look on his face. He was yelling up a storm. Flagstone lit some torches and began yelling himself. Dullcote was hollering at the top of his lungs.

The steam launch flung itself down the side of the big sloop. Torch after torch sail over the rail or through the hull openings. Flames jumped up. The shouting on the sloop reached new heights. Shivering the launch jumped for the second sloop. More torches, more yelling, more flames.

Flagstone motioned for the far side of the big sloop. The launch bounced roughly across its own wake. The big sloop rose up before them. The launch crashed into it. Suddenly Blind Bob was beside Flagstone. Dullcote was firing at the ship. Flagstone and Blind Bob were on the deck in an instance, revolvers drawn.

They fired. Four men were down. Others were trying to fight the fires. The smoke was growing quickly, dark and dense. Suddenly Constance Dullcote appeared out of the smoke. Flagstone yelled at her. She lunged at Flagstone with a sword. He jumped aside and grabbed her sword-arm.

"Constance! Its me, Jules!"

She hit him in the jaw with a jab and kneed him in the stomach. Blind Bob came out of the smoke. Constance picked up a loose pistol and fired from the hip, Blind Bob hollered and dodged into the heavy smoke. Flagstone leaped up and grabbed for Constance who was clearly out of her mind. She jerked away from him and vanished in the black smoke. Flagstone was left holding a shirtsleeve and a handful of hair. He looked again. A wig! He cast it aside. More shots roared in the dense black smoke. Rigging and sails were burning and falling all about the deck.

Flagstone bellowed Blind Bob's name. The scout came darting through the darkness. A man charged Blind Bob's back, sword in hand. Flagstone clubbed the man senseless. He stepped over the body and began to descend belowdeck. Blind Bob fired as a pirate appeared out of the smoke. The man tumbled to the deck. Blind Bob followed Flagstone below.

There was fire and suffocating smoke belowdeck. Men were shouting and running about. Flagstone tripped then shot one. Blind Bob whacked another in the face with his big pistol. Flagstone was yelling Constance at the top of his lungs. A muffled yell came from forward. Flagstone and Blind Bob charged through the smoke.

A man appeared. He fell, shot twice. A small door loomed up. Flagstone yelled again. The voice answered. Flagstone threw himself at the door. It didn't budge. He stepped back and fired at the lock. The door swung open. Flagstone and Blind Bob entered.

Constance Dullcote huddled in the corner coughing in the smoke. She was shackled to a bolt in the deck. Flagstone and Blind Bob exchanged a bewildered look. Blind Bob fired and the chain splintered apart. Each quickly reloaded their pairs of pistols. They didn't remember firing that many times. Flagstone picked Constance Dullcote up roughly.

"Do you know who I am," he yelled.

"Of course, Jules. Don't be silly," she answered tiredly.

"Can you walk", he yelled over the commotion on the ship. She nodded yes. "Go," yelled Flagstone at Blind Bob, "Out the first port you can find."

Blind Bob slammed the door open and fired at a man outside. The man fell back. Flagstone and Blind Bob stormed out of the little room with Constance Dullcote holding onto their shirttails. They each fired at shadows in the smoke. Flagstone could hear the firing of heavy rifles outside.

A dull light through the smoke appeared on the left. Flagstone jerked Constance toward the port. Blind Bob fired several times into the smoke. Bullets thudded into the hull timbers in reply. Flagstone shoved Constance headfirst out the port. She gave a little squeak and disappeared. Flagstone slapped Blind Bob on the back and pointed. Blind Bob dove out the port. Flagstone clubbed a man coming out of the smoke. He shot him where he lay. Flagstone turned and jumped through the port.

The launch nearly ran over him as the crewman tried to jockey for position. Dullcote was firing Flagstone's hunting rifle. Blind Bob's rifle lay at his feet. The crewman spun around and dropped to the deck. Blind Bob pulled himself over the launch's low rail. A bullet dug a huge splinter from the deck and stuck it in Blind Bob's thigh. He yelled in anger. Reaching the side he roughly jerked Constance aboard and pitched her behind the little cabin.

Dullcote was down on the deck. Constance was crawling on her hands and knees toward him. Blood trickled through his fingers clutching his lower arm. Flagstone was hanging on the anchor. He waved to Blind Bob and yelled. "Get the hell out of here."

Blind Bob waved and jumped to the steering stations. He slammed the throttle forward. The steam launch lurched, then jumped forward. Flagstone was pounded against the launch's hull by the bow wave. He held on for dear life. The launch raced away from the two smoking sloops. Flagstone felt he was drowning. The steam launch raced on. A point of land appeared ahead.

Flagstone was losing his grip, starting to slide off the anchor. The ocean clawed at him as the launch thundered around the point.

Blind Bob slowed the launch and threw a small loop of rope over a spoke on the little steering wheel. The launch kept churning through the sea. Blind Bob hopped on one leg up to the bow and helped Flagstone scramble aboard. Blind Bob fell back into the bow. He waved Flagstone off. Flagstone ran to the steering station, threw off the loop, and pushed the throttle forward. The launch continued to race due west, toward Jimville.

Flagstone looked at the blood-covered deck of his little steam launch. The crewman was lying glassy-eyed in a huge pool of drying blood. Constance was tearing cloth from her skirt hem to bandage Norton's arm.

"Constance," Flagstone yelled. She snapped around to look at him. "Come here. Now."

He pointed at the compass rose and put her hand on the wheel. "Hold that course." Constance nodded. Dullcote stumbled into the little cabin and plopped on the bench. Flagstone quickly went forward to find Blind Bob holding his camp knife and looking at the splinter in his leg. He grimaced every time the launch bounced.

"What do you think you are doing?" yelled Flagstone.

"Waiting on you, you know," said Blind Bob wincing. Flagstone realized he didn't need to shout. He torn open Blind Bob's pant leg. The big splinter stood upright in Blind Bob's thigh. He grimaced again.

"I'll get it out," said Flagstone with a dry mouth.

"Damn right you will," answered Blind Bob through his clenched teeth. Flagstone touched the splinter. Blind Bob let out a yell.

"I've got to grab it," said Flagstone.

Blind Bob grabbed a bow side in each big hand. He nodded. Flagstone grabbed the huge splinter. Blind Bob yelled, then slumped unconscious. Flagstone gently pulled the splinter out. It was thicker than his big thumb. He tore off a piece of his shirt and tied it around Blind Bob's thigh. Then he dragged the big scout back to the little cabin and its steering station.

Constance was crying, wiping away her tears to look at the compass then at Norton sitting on the bench. She let out a small moan as Flagstone dragged Blind Bob around to the open rear of the cabin. Flagstone reached in a locker and got the launch's small medical kit. He proceeded to clean Blind Bob's wound and wrapped a strong bandage around it. This task finished he leaned over the rail and threw up, twice.

Wiping his mouth on his blood-caked sleeve he propped the still unconscious Blind Bob up and tried to make him comfortable. Finally he rolled the dead crewman to the side, hoisted him up, and after saying something in his unhearing ear let him slide over the side.

Constance was wide eyed as the bloody and grime smeared Flagstone loomed into the little cabin. Flagstone reached into a locker and pulled out a bottle.

He took a healthy drink. He handed it to Norton who took a long pull and coughed as he swallowed. He nodded thanks to Flagstone. Flagstone rose and stepped to Constance's side. He handed her the bottle. "I'll take it now."

Constance sat by Norton. She wiped the mouth of the bottle on her filthy skirt and took a drink. She coughed, her face flushing. She held Norton's hand and stared into the softly falling night. She took another drink.

One down, one to go, thought Flagstone grimly.

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