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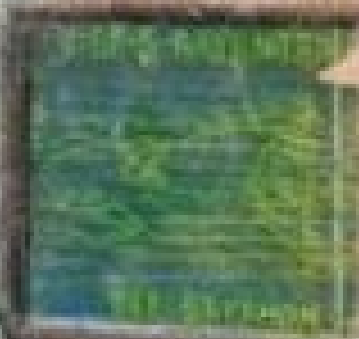


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H. BEAM PIPER'S LAST STORY: DOWN STYPHON

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# DOWN Styphon!

H. BEAM PIPER

The last story Beam Piper finished  
before his death—another tale of the  
Pennsylvania State Trooper thrown on  
his own in another time-line.  
With one great advantage—he knew  
military history those folks never heard of!

In the quiet of the Innermost Circle, in Styphon's House Upon Earth, the great image looked down, and Sesklos, Supreme Priest and Styphon's Voice, returned the carven stare as stonily. Sesklos did not believe in Styphon, or in any other god; if he had, he would not be sitting here. The policies of Styphon's House were too important to entrust to believers. The image, he knew, was of a man—the old high priest who, by discovering the application of a half-forgotten secret, had taken the cult of a minor healer-god out of its mean back-street temples and made it the power that ruled the rulers of all the Five Great Kingdoms. If it had been in Sesklos to worship anything, he would have worshiped that man's memory.

And now, the first Supreme Priest looked down upon the last one. He lowered his eyes, flattened the parchment on the table in front of him, and read again:

PTOSPHESES, *Prince of Hostigos*, to SESKLOS, *calling himself Styphon's Voice*, these:

*False priest of a false god, impudent swindler, liar and cheat! Know that we in Hostigos, by simple mechanic arts, now make for ourselves that fireseed which you pretend to be the miracle of your fraudulent god, and that we propose to teach these arts to all, that hereafter Kings and Princes minded to make war may do so for their own defense and advancement, and not to the enrichment of Styphon's House of Iniquities.*

*In proof thereof, we send you fireseed of our own make, enough for twenty musket charges, and set forth how it is made, thus:*

*To three parts of refined saltpeter add three fifths of one part of charcoal and two fifths of one part of sulfur, all ground to the fineness of bolted wheat flour. Mix these thoroughly, moisten the mixture and work it to a heavy dough, then press the dough to cakes and dry them, and when they are dry, grind and sieve them.*

*And know that we hold you and all in Styphon's House of Iniquities to be our mortal enemies, and the enemies-general of all men, to be dealt with as Wolves are, and that we will not rest content until Styphon's House of Iniquities is utterly cast down and ruined.*

PTOSPHESES

That had been the secret of the power of Styphon's House. No ruler, Great King or petty lord, could withstand his enemies if they had fireseed and he had none. Given here, armies marched to victory; withheld there, terms of peace were accepted. In every council of state, Styphon's House had spoken the deciding word. Wealth had poured in, to be lent out at usury and return more wealth.

And now, the contemptible prince of a realm a man could ride across without tiring his horse was bringing it down, and Styphon's House had provoked him to it. There were sulfur springs in Hostigos, and of Styphon's Trinity, sulfur was hardest to get. When the land around the springs had been demanded of him, Ptosphes had refused, and since none could be permitted to defy Styphon's House, his enemy, Prince Gormoth of Nostor, had been raised against him, with subsidies to hire mercenaries and gifts of fireseed. When Gormoth had conquered Hostigos, he was pledged to give the sulfur springs to Styphon's House. Things like that were done all the time.

But now, Ptosphes was writing thus, to Styphon's Voice Himself. For a moment, the impiety of it shocked Sesklos. Then he pushed aside Ptosphes' letter and looked again at the one from Vyblös, the high priest of the temple at Nostor Town. Three moons ago, a stranger calling himself Kalvan and claiming to be an exiled prince from a far country—the boast of every needy adventurer—had appeared in Hostigos. A moon later, Ptosphes had made this Kalvan commander of his soldiers, and had set guards on all the ways out of Hostigos, allowing any to enter but none to leave. He had been informed of that at the time, but had thought nothing of it.

Then, six days ago, the Hostigi had captured Tarr-Dombra, the castle guarding Gormoth's easiest way into Hostigos. The castellan, a Count Pheblon, cousin to Gormoth, had been released on ransom-oath, with a letter to Gormoth in which Ptosphes had offered peace and friendship and the teaching of fireseed making. A priest of Styphon, a black-robe believer, who had been at the castle, had also been released, to bear Ptosphes' letter of defiance to him.

It had, of course, been the stranger, Kalvan, who had taught Ptosphes' people the fireseed secret. He wondered briefly if he could be a renegade from Styphon's House. No; only yellow-robe priests of the Inner Circle knew the full secret as Ptosphes had written it, and had one of these absconded, the news would have reached him as swiftly as galloping relays of horses could bring it. Some Inner Circle priest could have written it down, a thing utterly forbidden, and the writing fallen into unconsecrated hands, but he questioned that. The proportions were different, more saltpeter and less charcoal. He would have Ptosphes' sample tried; it might be better than their own.

A man, then, who had re-discovered the secret? That could be, though it had taken many years and many experiments to perfect the processes, especially the caking and grinding. He shrugged. That was not important; the important thing was that the secrecy was broken. Soon anyone could make fireseed, and then Styphon's House would be only a name, and a name of mockery.

Perhaps, though, he could postpone the end for as long as mattered. He was near his ninetieth year; soon he would die, and for each man, when he dies, the world ends.

Letters of urgency to the Arch-priests of the five Great Temples, telling them all. A story to be circulated among the secular rulers that fireseed, stolen by bandits, was being smuggled and sold. Prompt investigation of all stories of anyone collecting sulfur or saltpeter or building or altering grinding mills. Immediate death by assassination for anyone suspected of knowing the secret.

And, of course, destruction of Hostigos; none in it to be spared, even for slavery. Gormoth had been waiting until his crops were harvested; he must be made to strike now. And as Archpriest of Styphon's House Upon Earth to Nostor, this was quite beyond poor Vyblös' capacities, with more silver, and fireseed and arms, for Gormoth.

He glanced again at Vyblös' letter. A copy of Ptosphes' letter to him had been sent to Gormoth; why, then, Gormoth knew the fireseed secret himself! It had been daring, and fiendishly clever, of Ptosphes to give this deadly gift to his enemy.

And with the archpriest, fifty mounted Guardsmen of the Temple, their captain to be an Inner Circle priest without robe, and more silver to corrupt Gormoth's nobles and his mercenary captains.

And a special letter to the high priest of the temple at Sask Town. It had been planned to use Prince Sarrask of Sask as a counterpoise to Gormoth, when Gormoth had grown too mighty by the conquest of Hostigos. The time for that was now. Gormoth was needed to destroy Hostigos; then he, too, must be destroyed, before he began making fireseed in Nostor.

He struck the gong thrice, and as he did he thought again of the mysterious Kalvan. That was nothing to shrug off; it was important to learn whence he had come before he appeared—he was intrigued by Vyblos' choice of that word—in Hostigos, and with whom he had been in contact. He could have come from some distant country, in which fireseed was commonly made by all. He knew of none such, but it could well be that the world was larger than he thought.

Or could there be other worlds? The idea had occurred to him, now and then, as an idle speculation.

It was one of those small late-afternoon gatherings, with nobody seeming to have a care in the world, lounging indolently, smoking, sipping tall drinks, nibbling canapes, talking and laughing. Verkan Vail, who would be Chief of Paratime Police after Year-End Day, flicked his lighter and held it for his wife, Hadron Dalla, then applied it to his own cigarette. Across the low table, Tortha Karf, the retiring chief, was mixing another drink, with the concentrated care of an alchemist compounding the Elixir of Life. The Dhergabar University people—the elderly gentleman who was head of the department of Paratemporal Theory, the lady who was professor of Outtime History (IV), and the young man who was director of outtime study operations—were all smiling like three pussycats at a puddle of spilled milk.

"You'll have it all to yourselves," he told them. "The Paratime Commission has declared that time-line a study area, and it's absolutely quarantined to everybody but University personnel and accredited students. And five adjoining, near-identical, time-lines for comparison study. And I will make it my personal business to see that the quarantine is rigidly enforced."

Tortha Karf looked up. "After I retire, I'll have a seat on the Commission, myself," he said. "I'll make it my business to see that the quarantine isn't revoked or diluted."

"I wish we could account for those four hours after he was caught in the transposition field and before he came to that peasant's farm," the paratemporal theorist fretted. "We have no idea what he was doing."

"Wandering in the woods, trying to orient himself," Dalla said. "I'd say, sitting and thinking, for a couple of hours, trying to figure out what happened to him. A paratemporal shift like that is a pretty shattering experience for an outtimer. I don't think he was changing history all by himself, if that's what you're worrying about."

"You can't say that," the paratemporal theorist reproved. "He might have killed a rattlesnake which would otherwise have fatally bitten a child who would otherwise have grown up to be an important personage. That sounds farfetched and trivial, but paratemporal alternate probability is built on such trifles. Who knows what started the Aryan migration eastward instead of westward on that sector? Some chief's hangover, some tribal wizard's nightmare."

"Well, that's why you're getting those five control-study time-lines," the operations director said. "And that reminds me; our people stay out of Hostigos on all of them for a while. We don't want them massacred along with the resident population by Gormoth's gang, or forced to use First Level weapons in self-defense."

"What bothers me," the lady professor said over the rim of her glass, "is Vall's beard."

"It bothers me, too," Dalla said, "but I'm getting used to it."

"He grew it when he went out to that time-line, and he hasn't shaved it off since. It begins to look like a permanent fixture. And Dalla's a blonde, now; blondes are less conspicuous on Aryan-Transpacific. They're both

going to be on and off that time-line all the time, now."

"Well, your exclusive rights don't exclude the Paratime Police. I told you I was going to give that timeline my personal attention."

"Well, you'll not introduce a lot of probability contamination, will you?" the paratemporal theorist asked anxiously. "We want to observe the effect of this man's appearance on that time-line—"

"No, of course not. But I'm already established with these people. I am Verkan, a free-trader from Grefftscharr, that's the kingdom around the Great Lakes. I am now supposed to be traveling on horseback to Zygos, about where Quebec is on Europe-American; I have promised Lord Kalvan to recruit brass-founders to teach the Hostigi how to cast brass cannon. He needs light field-pieces badly."

"Don't they have cannon of their own?" the historian asked. "I thought you said—"

"Wrought iron, welded up and strengthened with shrunk-on rings. They have iron works, there's a lot of bog iron mined in that section, but no brass foundries. There are some at Zygos, they get their copper and tin by water from the west." He turned to the operations director. "I won't be able to get back, plausibly, for another thirty days. Can you have your first study team ready by then? They'll be the Zygorosi brass founders."

The young man nodded. "They have everything now but local foundry techniques and correct Zygorosi accent. They'll need practice, you can't get manual dexterity by hypno-mech. Yes, thirty days'll be plenty."

"Good. We have two Paratime Police agents in Hostigos now, a supposed blind minstrel and a supposed half-witted boy. As soon as I show up with your crowd, they can take off their coats and go to work, and they won't even have to hunt for coathooks. And I'll set up a trading depot to mask your conveyor-head. After that, you'll be in business."

"But you're helping him win," the paratemporal theorist objected. "That's probability contamination."

"No, it isn't. If I didn't bring in fake Zygorosi brass founders, he'd send somebody else to get real ones. I will give him information, too, just what any other wandering pack trader would. I may even go into battle with him, as I did at Tarr-Dombra, with a local flintlock. But I want him to win. I admire the man too much to hand him an unearned victory."

"He sounds like quite a man," the lady historian said. "I'd like to meet him, myself."

"Better not, Eldra," Dalla warned. "This princess of his is handy with a pistol."

"Yes. The man's a genius. Only a police corporal on his own timeline, which shows how outtimers let genius go to waste. We investigated his previous history. Only son of a clergyman; father named him for a religious leader, and wanted him to be a clergyman, too. As a boy, he resisted, passively; scamped all his studies at college except history, and particularly military history, in which he was much interested. Then they had this war in Korea, you know what that was, and it offered him an escape from the career he was being forced into. Father died while he was at war, mother a year later. After the war he entered the Pennsylvania State Police. Excellent record, as far as his opportunities went; held down by routine because nobody recognized him for what he was. Then he blundered into the field of that conveyor, just when it went weak, and—"

Three months ago—no, just "at another time," he was sure of that—he had been Corporal Calvin Morrison, Pennsylvania State Police. Now he was the Lord Kalvan, in command of the army of Prince Ptosphes of Hostigos, and soon he would marry Ptosphes' daughter Rylla and become heir-matrimonial to the princely throne. That couldn't have happened in his own world.

Hostigos, of course, was no vast realm. It was only as big as Centre and Union Counties, Pennsylvania, with

snips of Clinton and Lycoming. That was precisely what it was, too, except that here-and-now there was no Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, it was part of the Great Kingdom of Hos-Harphax—*Hos-* meant great—ruled by a King Kaiphranos. No, just reigned over lightly; outside his own capital at the mouth of the Susquehanna, Kaiphranos' authority was nonexistent, the present situation for example.

*When* he was was less evident. Going to arrest a perfectly routine hillybilly murderer, he had entered what could only have been a time-machine; emerging from it, he had landed on what could only have been another time-dimension. He had theorized a little about that, and his theories had demolished themselves half constructed. Then he had given it up and dismissed the whole subject. He had other things to think about.

Rylla, for one; it was hard not to think about her all the time. And commanding an army, once he got it made into one. And manufacturing gunpowder in competition with Styphon's House. And fighting a war, against uncomfortably steep odds. And, at the moment, a meeting of the General Staff, all of whom were new at it. So, for that matter, was he, but he had a few vague ideas of military staff organization which put him several up on any of the others. And he was hot and sweat-sticky, because he was wearing close to thirty pounds of armor, to accustom himself to the weight.

They all stood around the big table, looking at the relief map of Hostigos and surroundings which covered the entire top. Just to show you, none of this crowd had ever realized that maps were weapons of war. Maps, here-and-now, were illuminated parchment scrolls, highly artistic and wildly inaccurate. This one had taken over a month, he and Rylla doing most of the work, from what he remembered of the U.S. Geological Survey maps he'd used on the State Police, from hundreds of talks with peasants, soldiers, woodsmen and landlords, and from a good deal of personal horseback reconnaissance.

"The bakeries in Nostor work night and day." That was old Xentos, the blue-robed priest of Dralm, who was also Prince Ptosphes' chancellor and because of contacts with his co-religionists in Nostor, head of espionage and fifth-column operations. "And milk cannot be bought at any price, it is all being made into cheese, and most of the meat is being ground for smoked sausages."

Field rations, stuff a soldier could carry in his haversack and eat uncooked. That could be stored, but Xentos also had reports of wagons and oxen being commandeered and peasants impressed as drivers. That wouldn't be done too long in advance.

"Then they'll strike soon," somebody said. "Taking Tarr-Dombra hasn't stopped Gormoth at all."

"It delayed him," Prince Ptosphes said. "He'd be pouring troops in through Sevenhills Valley now if we hadn't."

There was a smile on the thin lips, between the pointed gray mustache and the small chin-beard. Ptosphes had been learning to smile again, since the powder mill had gone into production. He hadn't, before.

Chartiphon, bulky and grizzle-bearded, stood glowering at the map. He had been chief captain of Hostigos for as long as Ptosphes had been Prince; now he was second in command—Field Marshal and Chief of Operations—and gratifyingly unresentful at Lord Kalvan being placed over him. His idea of war was to hit every head you saw, and whoever hit the most heads first won. All this staff-stuff, maps and fifth columns and logistics and intelligence and security, he did not understand, and he was happy to let somebody do it who did. He'd been informed that Lord Kalvan had been hurled into the past from a thousand years in the future by sorcery, and he probably half suspected that Lord Kalvan was a sorcerer, himself.

"Yes, but where?" he wanted to know.

Ptosphes drew his sword. It was a rapier; the bladesmiths at Tarr-Hostigos had been swamped with orders for rapiers, since this crowd had learned that a sword has a point and that a thrust beats a swinging cut. He used his point now to trace the course of the West Branch—the Athan, here-and-now—from the otherwhen site of Muncy down to where Milton ought to be. The point rested on the river midway between them.

"Marax Ford," he said.

"Oh, no, Prince!" Chartiphon growled. "Go all the way around the mountain and all the way up East Hostigos?"

He won't do that. Here's where he'll try to come in."

He drew his own sword—long, heavy and double-edged, none of these newfangled pokers for him—and pointed to the juncture of Bald Eagle Creek and the river, at the site of Lock Haven.

"Listra Mouth," he said. "He can move his whole army west along the river, cross here—if we let him—and go up the Listra Valley to the Saski border. And that's where all our ironworks are."

Now that was something. Not so long ago, Chartiphon had taken weapons for granted. Now he was realizing they had to be produced.

That started an argument. Somebody thought Gormoth would try to force one of the gaps. Not Dombra—Antes Gap—that was too strong. Maybe Vryllos—McElhattan—or the gap back of where South Williamsport ought to be.

"He'll attack where he can best use his cavalry," young Harmakros, who was a cavalryman himself, declared. "That's what he has the most of."

That was true. Gormoth's cavalry superiority was something to worry, not to say be frightened, about.

"He'll attack where we don't expect him to."

That was Rylla, in male riding dress, a big dagger on her belt and a pheasant feather in her cap, leaning forward on the map table across from him.

Rylla was the nicest of many nice things, here-and-now. She was beautiful—blond hair almost shoulder-length, laughing blue eyes, impudent tilty little nose dusted with golden freckles—gay and fun-loving. She was utterly fearless; he'd first seen her riding into a cavalry skirmish at the head of her father's troopers. But best of all, after the wonderful very-best that she loved him and was going to marry him, the girl had a brain and wasn't afraid to use it.

"That's right," he agreed. "Where don't we expect him?"

"You know what that means?" Ptosphes asked. He had a pretty good brain, himself. "It means we'll have to be strong enough to resist everywhere." His rapier point swung almost from one end of the map to the other.

"With five thousand, and that counts boys with bows and arrows and peasant grandfathers with pitchforks?" Chartiphon demanded. "Don't joke about such things, Prince."

It came to a little over that, but not much. Twenty-five hundred regular infantry, meaning organized into something like companies and given a modicum of drill, a thousand arquebusiers and calivermen, with fifteen hundred pikemen to keep the cavalry off them. Two thousand militia, peasant levies, anybody who could do an hour's foot-drill without dropping dead, armed with anything at all. And slightly less than a thousand cavalry, with steel cuirasses, helmets and thigh-guards. And against that, Prince Gormoth had four thousand of his own subjects, including neither the senile nor the adolescent and none of them armed with bows or agricultural implements, and six thousand mercenaries, of whom four thousand were cavalry.

"Then we'll just have to be able to move what men we have around faster," Rylla said.

Well, good girl! She'd grasped what neither her father nor Harmakros had, that mobility can make up for a numerical inferiority.

"Yes. Harmakros, how many horses can you find to mount our infantry? They don't have to be good horses, just good enough to get the men where they can fight on foot."

Harmakros was scandalized. Mounted soldiers were *cavalry*; anybody ought to know it took years to train a cavalryman. So was Chartiphon; infantry were *foot* soldiers, and had no business on horse-back.



"It'll mean one out of four holding horses in a battle, but they'll get to the battle before it's over, and they can wear heavier armor. Now, how many infantry can we mount?"

Harmakros looked at him, decided that he was serious, and was silent for a while. It always took Harmakros a little to recover from the shock of a new idea. Then he grinned and nodded. "I'll find out," he said, grabbing the remount officer by the arm and pulling him off to the side. Rylla joined them with a slate and a piece of soapstone. Rylla was the math wizard; she'd learned how to do up to long division in Arabic numeration. While they argued, he began talking to Ptosphes and Chartiphon about artillery.

That was the one really hopeful thing about the situation. Here-and-now cannon didn't have trunnions. The guns were bedded into timbers like huge gunstocks, or timber frames for the heavier pieces. What passed for field artillery was mounted on four-wheeled carts, usually ox-powered. He blamed Styphon's House for that. They did the weaponing, and they didn't want bloody and destructive wars, which were bad for business, or decisive wars which established peace, which were worse. They wanted a lot of little wars, all the time, to burn a lot of fireseed.

In the past two months, along with everything else and by methods which would have made Simon Legree look like the Model Employer, he had ordered six new four-pounders built, with trunnions, on field carriages with limbers. Drawn by four horses apiece, they would keep up with cavalry on any sort of decent ground. He had also had trunnions welded onto some old pieces, mostly eight-pounders, and mounted them on makeshift field carriages. They would *not* keep up with cavalry, but they were five hundred per cent better than anything Gormoth had ever heard of.

They were still talking when Harmakros and Rylla came over.

"Two thousand," Rylla said. "They all have four legs. We think they were all alive yesterday evening."

"We'll need some for pack train and replacements. Sixteen hundred mounted infantry. Eight hundred arquebusiers, with arquebuses, not rabbit guns, and eight hundred pikemen, with pikes, not hunting spears or those scythe-blade things." He turned to Chartiphon. "Can you manage that?"

Chartiphon could. Men who wouldn't fall off their horses, too.

"And all the riflemen." Fifty of them, all the muskets and calivers and arquebuses he'd been able to get rifled to date. That was fifty more than the combined rifle strength of all five Great Kingdoms. "And five hundred cavalry, swords and pistols, no lances or musketoons."

Everybody heard that, and everybody howled. There weren't that many, not uncommitted. Swords flashed over the map, pointing to places where there were only half enough now. One of these days, somebody was going to use a sword in one of these arguments for something beside map-pointing. Finally, they scraped up five hundred cavalry for the new Mobile Force.

"You'll command," he told Harmakros. "You'll have all six four-pounders, and the best four eights. You'll be based in Sevenhills Valley; be ready at any notice to move either east or west from there."

"As soon as I get it organized, which will be tomorrow afternoon at latest, I'll be ready to go to Sevenhills. I can promise I'll be there by noon the next day."

That meant he'd be there before that; that was another thing about Harmakros.

"Oh, and before I forget." He addressed them all. "Battle cries." They had to be shouted constantly, to keep from being killed by your friends. "Beside 'Ptosphes!' and 'Hostigos!' we will also shout, '*Down Styphon!*'"

That met with general approval. They all knew who the real enemy was.

Gormoth, Prince of Nostor, set down the goblet and wiped his bearded lips on the back of his hand. The candles in front of him and down the long tables to the side flickered slightly. Tableware clattered, voices were loud.

"Lost everything!" The speaker was a baron driven from Sevenhills Valley when Tarr-Dombra had fallen. "My house, a score of farms, a village—"

"You think we've lost nothing? They crossed at Vryllos and burned everything on my land; it was a Styphon's miracle I got out at all."

"For shame!" Vyblos the high priest cried rebukingly. "What of the Sevenhills temple farm, a holy place pillaged and desecrated? What of the blood of fifteen consecrated priests and novices and a score of lay guards, all cruelly murdered 'Dealt with as wolves are,'" he quoted.

"Well, we have an army, haven't we?" somebody at the side table on the left hectored. "Why don't we use it?"

Weapons clattered outside, and somebody else sneered, "That's Ptosphes, now; under the tables, everybody." A man in black leather entered, advancing and saluting; the captain of the dungeon guards.

"Lord Prince," he said, "the special prisoner will tell all."

"Ha!" He knew what that meant. Then he laughed at the anxious faces along the tables; not a few of his nobles dreaded the thought that somebody was telling all about something. He drew his poniard and cut a line across the candle in front of him, a thumbnail's length from the top.

"You bring good news. I'll hear him in that time."

He nodded in dismissal. As the captain backed away, he rapped loudly on the table with the dagger-pommel.

"Be silent, all of you. I've little time, so give heed." He turned to Klestreus, the elected captain-general of the mercenaries. "You have four thousand horse, two thousand foot, and ten cannon. Add to them a thousand of my infantry, choose which you will, and such cannon of mine as you need. You'll cross the river at Marax Ford. Be on the road before the dew's off the grass tomorrow before dawn the next day, take and hold the ford, put the best of your cavalry across, and let the others follow as speedily as they can.

"Netzigon," he addressed his own chief captain, "you'll gather every man you can, down to the very peasant rabble, and such cannon as Klestreus leaves you. With half of them, confront all the gaps into Nostor, from Nirfe up. You'll take the others opposite Listra-Mouth and Vryllos Gap. As Klestreus moves west through Hostigos, he will attack each gap from behind. When he does, your men will cross the river and attack from the north. Dombra we'll have to starve out; the rest must be stormed. When Klestreus is back of Vryllos Gap, the force you have at Listra-Mouth will cross and move up Listra Valley. After that, we'll have Tarr-Hostigos to take, Galzar only knows how long we'll be at that, but by the end of the moon-half, all else in Hostigos should be ours."

There was a gratified murmur along the tables; this made good hearing to all. Only the high priest, Vyblos, was ill-pleased.

"But why so soon, Prince?" he asked.

"Soon?" he roared. "By the mace of Galzar, you've been bawling for it like a weaned calf! Well, now you have your invasion; thank your god for it."

"A few more days would not be too much, Lord Prince," Vyblos said mildly. "Today I had word from Styphon's House Upon Earth, from the pen of His Divinity Himself. An Archpriest, His Holiness Krastokles, is coming here to Nostor, with rich gifts of fireseed and money, and the blessing of Styphon's Voice. It were poor reverence not to await His Holiness' coming."

He turned to the two captains. "You heard me," he said. "I rule here, not the priest. Be about it; send orders at once. You move tomorrow."

Then he rose, pushing back his chair before the servant could withdraw it. The line was still visible at the top of the candle.

Guards with torches attended him down the winding stairs into the dungeons. The air stank. His breath congealed; the heat of summer never penetrated here. From the torture chambers shrieks told of some wretch being questioned; idly he wondered who. Stopping at an iron-bound oaken door, he unlocked it with a key from his belt and entered alone, closing it behind him.

The room within was large, warmed by a fire on the hearth in the corner and lighted by a great lantern from above. Under it, a man bent over a littered table. He had a bald head and a straggling beard, and wore a most unprisoner-like dagger on his belt. A key for the door lay on the table, and a pair of heavy horseman's pistols. He straightened, turning.

"Greetings, Prince. It's done. I tried it; it's as good as they make in Hostigos, and better than the priests' trash."

"And no prayers to Styphon, Skranga?" he asked sarcastically.

Skranga was chewing tobacco. He spat brownly on the floor.

"In the face of Styphon! Try it yourself, Prince; the pistols are empty."

There was a dish half full of fireseed on the table. He measured in a charge, loaded and wadded a bullet on top of it, primed the pan and readied the striker, then fired into a billet of wood by the fire and went to probe the hole with a straw. The bullet had gone in almost a little finger's length; Styphon's powder wouldn't do that. He carried the pistol back and laid it on the table.

"Well, Skranga," he laughed. "You'll have to bide here a while, but from this hour you're first nobleman of Nostor after me. Style yourself Duke. There'll be rich lands for you in Hostigos, when Hostigos is mine."

"And the Styphon temple farm of Nostor," Skranga grinned. "If I'm to make your fireseed, there's all there that I'll need."

"Yes, that too, by Galzar! After I've downed Ptosphes, I'll deal with Vyblos, and he'll envy Ptosphes before I let him die."

Snatching up a pewter cup without looking to see if it were clean, he went to the wine keg and drew for himself, tasted the wine, then spat it out.

"Is this the swill they've given you?" he demanded. "By Galzar, whoever's at fault won't see tomorrow's sun set!" He flung open the door and bellowed into the hall: "Wine! Wine for Prince Gormoth and Duke Skranga! And silver cups! And see it's fit for nobles to drink!"

Mobile Force HQ had been the mansion of a Nostori noble driven from Sevenhills Valley on D-for-Dombra Day; his name had been shouted ahead as he rode through the troop-crowded village, and Harmakros and his officers met him at the door.

"Great Dralm, Kalvan!" Harmakros laughed, clasping his hand. "Are you growing wings on horses, now? Our messengers only got off an hour and a half ago."

"I know; I met them back of Vryllos Gap." They crossed the outer hall and through the doorway to the big room beyond. "We got the news at Tarr-Hostigos just after dark. What have you heard since?"

At least fifty candles burned in the great central chandelier. Evidently the cavalry had arrived here before the peasants, and hadn't looted the place too destructively themselves. Harmakros led him to an inlaid table on which a map, scorched with hot needles on white doeskin, was spread.

"We have reports from all the watchtowers along the mountain. They're too far back to see anything but dust,

but the column's three miles long; first cavalry, then infantry, then wagons and guns, and then more infantry and cavalry. They halted at Nirfe at dusk and built hundreds of campfires. Whether they left them burning and marched on after dark, and how far ahead the cavalry are, we don't know. We expect them at Marax Ford by dawn."

"We got a little more than that. The priest of Dralm at Nostor Town got a messenger off a little after noon; it was dusk before he could get across the river. Your column's commanded by Klestreus. Four thousand mercenary cavalry, two thousand mercenary infantry, a thousand of Gormoth's infantry, fifteen guns, he didn't say what kind, and a wagon train that must be creaking with loot. At the same time, Netzigon's moving west, probably toward Listra-Mouth and we don't know what with. The messenger had to dodge his troops all the way up to Vryllos. Chartiphon's going to Listra-Mouth with what he can scrape up; Prince Ptosphes is occupying Vryllos Gap."

"That's it; a double attack," Harmakros said. "We can't help Chartiphon, can we?"

"We can help him by beating Klestreus." He got out his pipe; as soon as he had filled it, one of the officers provided a light. "Thank you. What have you done so far?"

"I started my wagons and the eight-pounders down the main road. They'll stop just short of Fitra, here"—he pointed on the map—"and wait for us. As soon as I'm all collected, I'm taking the cavalry and mounted infantry and the four-pounders down the back road. After we're on the main road, the wagons and the eights will follow on. I have two hundred militia, the usual odds-and-ends, marching with the wagons."

"That was smart."

Puffing on his pipe, he looked at the map. The back road, adequate for horsemen and the four-pounders but not for wagons, followed the mountains and then bent south away from them to join the main valley road at the village of Fitra. Harmakros had started his slow stuff first, and could overtake without being impeded by it, and he was waiting till he had all his striking force in hand and not dribbling it in to be chopped up by detail.

"Where had you thought of fighting?"

"Why, on the Athan, of course." Harmakros was surprised that he should ask. "Klestreus will have some cavalry over before we get there, that can't be helped, but we'll wipe them out or chase them back, and then defend the line of the river."

"Huh-uh." He touched the Fitra road-junction with his pipe stem. "We fight here."

"But that's miles inside Hostigos!" one of the officers cried. Maybe he owned an estate down there. "We can't let them get that far."

"Lord Kalvan," Harmakros began stiffly. He was going to be insubordinate, he never bothered with titles otherwise. "We must not give up one foot of ground; the honor of Hostigos forbids it."

Here we are, back in the Middle Ages! He seemed to hear the voice of a history professor, inside his head, calling a roll of battles lost on points of honor. Mostly by the French; they'd been the worst, though not the only, offenders. He decided to fly into a rage.

"To Styphon with that!" he yelled, banging his fist on the table. "Honor won't win this war, and real estate won't win this war. The only thing that'll win this war is killing Nostori!"

"Now here," he continued, quietly, the rage having served its purpose, "is where we can kill the most of them, and get the fewest of our own men killed doing it. Klestreus will cross the Athan here, at Marax Ford." That would be a little below where he remembered Watsonstown to have been. "He'll rush his best cavalry ahead to secure the ford, and the rest of the cavalry will cross next. They'll want to get in on the best looting ahead of the infantry; they'll push ahead without waiting. By the time the infantry are over, they'll be stringing west in bunches.

"Now, that army Klestreus has could walk all over us, if they were all together. But they won't be. And they'll

be tired, and we'll have reached Fitra by daylight, have our position prepared, our men and horses will be rested, we'll even be able to give everybody a hot meal. And Klestreus will be strung out for ten miles by the time his advance elements come up to us. Now, what kind of troops have we east of here?"

"A hundred cavalry along the river, and a hundred and fifty regular infantry and about twice as many militia; about five hundred, militia and regulars, at posts in the gaps."

"All right; get riders off at once. Somebody who won't be argued with. Have all that force along the river moved back; to Fitra if possible, and if not they can reenforce the posts at the gaps. The gaps'll have to look out for themselves, we can't help them. The cavalry will keep just in front of Klestreus, skirmishing but doing nothing to delay him."

Harmakros looked at the map, thought for a little, and nodded.

"East Hostigos," he said, "will be the graveyard of the Nostori."

That was all right; that took care of the honor of Hostigos.

"Well, mercenaries from Hos-Agrys and Hos-Ktemnos, anyhow." That reminded him of something. "Who hired those mercenaries; Gormoth, or Styphon's House?"

"Why, Gormoth. The money came from Styphon's House, but the mercenaries contracted with Gormoth; they serve him."

"The reason I asked, the Rev. Whatshisname in Nostor included a bit of gossip in his message. It seems that this morning Gormoth had one of his under-stewards put to death. Had a funnel forced into his mouth and half a keg of wine poured into him. The wine was of inferior quality, and had been given to a prisoner for whom Gormoth had commanded good treatment."

One of the officers made a face. "Sounds like Gormoth," he commented. Another laughed and said he could think of a few tavern keepers in Hostigos Town who deserved that.

"Who was the prisoner?" Harmakros asked. "Count Pheblon?"

"Oh, no. Pheblon's out of favor, but he isn't a prisoner. You know this fellow. Agrysi horse-trader named Skranga."

"Yes, he got caught in Hostigos during the Iron Curtain." Like Fifth Column, Iron Curtain was now part of the Hostigi vocabulary. Then he blinked. "He was working in the fireseed mill, while he was here! You think he might be making fireseed for Gormoth?"

"He is if he's doing what I told him to." There was an outcry at that. He laughed. "And if Gormoth begins making his own fireseed, Styphon's House'll hear about it, and you know what'll happen then. That's why I asked about those mercenaries. I was wondering whether Gormoth would use them against Styphon's House, or Styphon's House against Gormoth." He shrugged. "Not that it matters. If everybody does his job tomorrow, nobody'll use those mercenaries. Except, maybe, us. That's another thing. We don't bother with Nostori prisoners, but take all the mercenaries who'll surrender. We may need them later."

Dawn was only a pallor in the east, and the whitewashed walls were blurs under dark thatches, but the village of Fitra was awake, light pouring from open doors and a fire blazing on the small common. There was a crowd, villagers, and cavalymen who had ridden ahead. Behind him, hoofs thudded and armor and equipment clattered; away back, he could hear the four-pounders thumping over the pole bridge at the mill. The shouting started, of course: "Lord Kalvan! Dralm bless Lord Kalvan!" He was used to it, now; it didn't give him the thrill it had at first. He had to make a speech, while orders were shouted and re-shouted to the rear, and men and horses got off to the sides of the road to make way for the guns.

Then he and Harmakros and four or five of the officers turned left and cantered down the main road, reining in where it began to dip. The eastern pallor had become a bar of yellow light. The Mountains of Hostigos were blackly plain on the left, and the jumble of ridges to the right were taking shape. Nearby trees began to detach themselves from the obscurity. In a few hours, they'd all be down. He pointed to the right.

"Send two hundred cavalry around that ridge, over there, to where those three farms are clumped together," he told Harmakros. "They're not to make fires or let themselves be seen. They're to wait till we're engaged and the second mob of Nostori cavalry come up; then they'll come out and hit them from the flank and rear."

An officer galloped away to the rear to attend to it. The yellow light was spreading upward in the east, only the largest and brightest stars were still visible. In front, the ground fell away into a little hollow, with a brook running through it to the left, to join a larger stream at the foot of the mountain, which rose steeply, then sloped up to the summit. On the right was broken ground, mostly wooded. A few trees around them, in the hollow, and on the slope beyond; open farmland in front. This couldn't have been better if he'd had Dralm create it to order.

The yellow light was past the zenith, and the eastern horizon was a dazzle. Harmakros squinted at it and said something about fighting with the sun in their eyes.

"No such thing; it'll be overhead before they get here. Now, you go take a nap. I'll wake you in time to give me some sack-time. As soon as the wagons get here, we'll give everybody a hot meal."

An ox cart appeared on the brow of the little hill across the hollow, piled high, a woman and a boy trudging beside the team and another woman and more children riding. Before they were down to where the road crossed the stream, a wagon was coming up.

"Have them turned aside," he ordered. "Don't let them get into the village." This was only the start; there'd be a perfect stream of them before long. They couldn't be allowed on the main road past Fitra, not till the wagons and the eight-pounders got through. "And use wagons for barricades, and the oxen to help drag trees."

The village peasants were coming out, now, leading four- and six-ox teams, chains dragging. Axes began thudding. One thing, if anybody was alive here then, this village wouldn't have to worry about winter firewood. More refugees were coming in; loud protests at being diverted, and at the seizure of wagons and teams. The axemen were across the hollow, now, and men shouted at straining oxen as trees were dragged in to build an abatis.

He strained his eyes against the sunrise; he couldn't see any smoke. Too far away. He was sure, though, that the mercenary cavalry was across the Athan, and they ought to be burning things. Pyromania was as fixed in the mercenary character as kleptomania. Of course, he could be misjudging here-and-now mercenaries; all he knew was what he'd learned reading Sir Charles Oman's "History of the Art of War," when he should have been studying homiletics and scriptural exegesis and youth-organization methods at college, but there were universal constants. One was that mercenary soldiers' hearts were full of larceny. Another was that they liked being alive to spend their loot. He was pretty confident of what Klestreus' cavalry were doing down toward the river.

The abatis began to take shape, trees dragged into line, the tops to the front, with spaces for three of the four-pounders on either side of the road, and a barricade of peasants' wagons at either end. He rode forward a couple of times, to get an enemy's eye-view of it; he didn't want it to look too formidable. He made sure that none of the guns would be visible. Finally, he noticed smears of smoke against the horizon, maybe five or six miles down the valley. Klestreus' mercenaries weren't going to disappoint him, after all.

A company of regular infantry, a hundred and fifty, three pikes to two calivers, came up in good order. They'd marched all the way from the Athan, reported firing behind them, and were disgusted at marching away from it. He told them they'd get all the firing they wanted by noon, and to fall out and rest. A couple of hundred militia dribbled in, some with crossbows. There were a few more smokes in the east, but he still couldn't hear anything. At seven-thirty, the supply wagons and the eight-pounders, and the two hundred militia wagon-guards, came in from the west. That was good; the refugees, now a steady stream, could be sent on up the main road.

He found Harmakros asleep in one of the village cottages, wakened him, and gave him the situation to date.

"Good; I'll get the men fed. When do you want me to wake you?"

"As soon as you see smoke two miles down the valley, as soon as our cavalry from the east begin coming in, and in any case in two hours."

Then he pulled off his boots and helmet, unbuckled his belt, and lay down in the rest of his armor on the cornshuck tick Harmakros had vacated, hoping that it had no small inhabitants or, if so, that none of them would move in under his arming-doublet. It was comparatively cool in here, behind the stone walls and under the thick thatch; the wet heat of his body became a clammy chill. He shifted positions a couple of times, finally deciding that fewer things dug into him if he lay flat on his back.

So far, everything had gone nicely; all he was worried about was who would let him down, and how badly. If some valiant fool got a rush of honor to the head and charged at the wrong moment—

If he could bring this off just half as well as he'd planned it, which would be about par for the course for any battle, he could go to Valhalla when he died and drink at the same table with Richard Coeur-de-Lion and the Black Prince and Henry of Navarre. A complete success would entitle him to take a salute from Stonewall Jackson. He fell asleep receiving the commendation of George S. Patton.

An infantry captain wakened him a little before ten.

"They're burning Systros, now." That was a town, about two thousand, two and a half miles away. "A couple of the cavalry who've been keeping just in front of them came in. The first batch are about fifteen hundred; there's another lot, maybe a thousand, two miles behind them. We don't know where the infantry and the wagons are, but we've been hearing those big bombards at Narza Gap."

That would be Klestreus' infantry on this side, probably supported by Netzigon's ragtag-and-bobtail from the other side. He pulled on his boots and buckled on his sword, and, after eating a bowl of beef stew with plenty of onion in it, he put on his helmet and drank a mug of wine. Somebody brought his horse, and he rode up to the line. On the way, he noticed that the village priest of Dralm and the Mobile Force priest of Galzar had set up a field hospital on the village common and that pole-and-blanket stretchers were being prepared. No anesthetics, here-and-now, though the priests of Galzar used sandbags. He hoped he wouldn't be wounded, himself. The last time had been bad enough.

A big column of smoke dirtied the sky above Systros. Silly buggers; first crowd into it had fired it, here-and-now mercenaries were the same as any other, and now the ones behind would have to bypass it. They'd be handling Klestreus' army in retail lots.

The abatis was finished, over a hundred felled trees ox-dragged into line, butts to the rear and tops to the front. Between them, men sat smoking or eating, or lay on the ground resting. The horse lines were back of the side road, with the more poorly-armed militiamen holding horses. At each end of the abatis were two of the four eight-pounders, then an opening big enough for cavalry to sortie out through, and then barricades of farm carts.

He could hear a distant, and then not so distant, popping of small arms. Away off, one of the bombards at Narza Gap boomed, and, after a while, the other. Good; they were still holding out. Cavalry came drifting up the road, some reloading pistols. The shots grew louder, and more cavalry, in more of a hurry, arrived. Finally, a dozen or so topped the rise across the hollow and galloped down; the last one fired a pistol over his shoulder. By the time he was splashing across the brook, Nostori cavalry appeared, ten or fifteen of them.

Immediately, an eight-bore rifled musket bellowed from behind the abatis. His horse dance-stepped daintily; another, and another, roared. Across the hollow, a horse went down kicking, and another just went down. Another, with an empty saddle, trotted down to the stream and stopped to drink. The Nostori turned and galloped back out of sight. Nobody else had fired; riflemen were a law to themselves, but the arquebusiers were waiting for orders. He was wondering where the rest of the rifles were when a row of white smoke puffs blossomed along the edge of the

bench above the creek on the left, and shots banged like a string of firecrackers. There were yells from out of sight across the hollow, and musketoons thumped in reply.

Wasting Styphon's good fireseed; four hundred yards, they couldn't hit Grant's Tomb at that range with smoothbores. Along the abatis, everybody was on his feet, crowding into position; there were a few yells of "Hostigos!" and "Down Styphon!" More confused noise from the dead ground beyond the brow of the other hill, a steady whipcracking of rifles, fired as fast as they could be reloaded and aimed, from the bench. He wished he had five hundred rifles up there.

Hell, while he was wishing, why not wish for twenty medium tanks and a dozen Sabre-Jets?

Then the mercenary cavalry came up in a solid front on the brow of the hill, black and orange lance-pennons and helmet-plumes and scarves, polished breastplates. Lancers all in front, musketoon-men behind. A shiver ran along the line as the lances came down; the advance paused to dress front.

As though that had been the signal, which it had been, six four-pounders and four eight-pounders went off as one, not a noise but a palpable blow on the ears. His horse started to buck; by the time he had him under control again, the smoke was billowing out over the hollow, and several perfect rings floated up against the blue, and everybody was yelling, "*Down Styphon!*"

Roundshot; he could see the furrows it had plowed into the block of black and orange cavalry; men yelling, horses rearing, or down and screaming horribly as only wounded horses can. The charge had stopped, briefly, before it had started. On either side of him, gun captains were shouting, "Grapeshot! Grapeshot!" and cannoneers were jumping to their pieces before they had stopped recoiling with double-headed swabs, one end wet to quench lingering powder-bag sparks and the other dry.

The charge slid forward in broken chunks, down the dip into the hollow. When they were twenty yards short of the brook, four hundred arquebuses blazed; the whole front went down, horses behind tripping over fallen horses in front. The arquebusiers stepped back, drawing the stoppers of their powder flasks with their teeth. *Memo: self-measuring spring powder flask; start making them as soon as possible.* When they were half reloaded, the other four hundred arquebuses crashed. The way those cavalry were jammed, down there, every bullet must have hit something. The smoke was clogging the hollow like spilled cotton, now; through it he could see another wave of cavalry come up on the brow of the hill. A four-pounder spewed grape into them, and then another. Down Styphon! Before they could begin the descent, another four-pounder went off.

Gustavus Adolphus' four-pounder crews could load and fire faster than musketeers, a dry lecture-room voice was telling him. Lord Kalvan's weren't doing quite that well, but almost. The first one had fired close on the heels of the third arquebus volley. Then one of the eight-pounders fired, and that was a small miracle.

A surprising number of Klestreus' cavalry had survived the fall of their horses. Well, horses were bigger targets, and they didn't wear breastplates. Having nowhere else to go, they were charging up on foot, their lances for pikes. Some of them were shot in front of the abatis, quite a few were piked trying to get through it. A few did get through. As he galloped to help deal with one party of these, he could see militiamen with scythe-blade things, he had never decided on the correct name for those weapons, and billhooks and axes, running forward from the horse lines. At that moment, a trumpet sounded on the right, and another on the left, and there were great shouts of "*Down Styphon!*" at both ends. Harmakros and the cavalry.

Then he was in front of a dozen Nostori mercenaries, pulling up his horse and aiming a pistol at them.

"Yield, comrades! We spare mercenaries!"

An undecided second and a half, then one raised his reversed musketoon over his head.

"We yield; oath to Galzar."

That they would keep. Galzar didn't like oath-breaking soldiers; he always let them get killed at the next



opportunity. *Memo: cult of Galzar; encourage.*

Some peasants ran up, brandishing axes. He waved them back.

"Keep your weapons," he told the mercenaries. "I'll find somebody to guard you."

He found a couple of Mobile Force arquebusiers, and then had to save a couple more mercenaries from having their throats cut. Damn these civilians! Have to detail prisoner guards. Disarm the mercenaries, and the peasants would butcher them; leave them armed in the rear, and maybe the temptation would be too great even for the fear of Galzar.

Along the abatis, the firing had stopped, but the hollow below was a perfect hell's bedlam—*Down Styphon!* and, occasionally, *Gormoth!* Pistol shots, clashing steel. Over his shoulder, he could see villagers, even women and children, replacing the militia at the horse lines. Captains were shouting, "Pikes forward," and pikemen were dodging out among the felled trees. Dimly, through the smoke, he saw red and blue colors on horsemen at the brow of the opposite hill. The road had been left open; he trotted forward and down toward the brook.

What he saw in the hollow made his stomach heave. After being demob-ed on the West Coast, he had made a side trip into Mexico on the way home, and seen a bullfight in Juarez. One horse gored to death by a bull hadn't bothered him much, but this would have sickened the most hardened *aficionado*. The infantrymen, going forward, were stopping to brain wounded horses or cut their throats or shoot them with pistols from saddle holsters. They oughtn't to stop to do that, but he couldn't blame them. The Hostigi soldier was a farmer and couldn't let horses suffer.

Stretcher-bearers were coming forward, too, and so were villagers to loot. Corpse-robbing was the only way the civil population, here-and-now, had of getting some of their own back after a battle. Most of them had clubs or hatchets, to make sure that what they were robbing really were corpses. A lot of good weapons lying around, too. They ought to be collected before they rusted into uselessness, but no time to do that now. Stopping to do that, once, had been one of Stonewall Jackson's few mistakes.

Away ahead, there was another uproar of battle, and more *Down Styphon!* That would be the two hundred cavalry from the far right hitting the second batch of mercenaries, who would be disorganized, by now, by fugitives from the fight at the hollow. Gormoth wasn't going to have to pay a lot of mercenaries, if this kept up. The infantry were beginning to form up on the opposite hill, blocks of pikemen with smaller blocks of arquebusiers between, and some were running back to fetch the horses. And Nostori cavalry were coming in in small groups, holding their helmets up on their sword points and crying, "We yield; oath to Galzar." One of the officers of the flanking party, with four men, was bringing in close to a hundred of them. He was regretful that so many had escaped. The riflemen on the bench were drifting east, firing as they went. All the infantry from the Athan and many of the militia had mounted themselves on captured horses.

There was a clatter behind him, and he got his horse off the road to let the four-pounders pass in column. Their captain waved to him and told him, laughing, that the eights would be along in a day or so.

"Where do we get some more shooting?" he asked.

"Down the road a piece. Just follow along; we'll show you."

He looked at his watch. It was still ten minutes till noon, Hostigos Standard Sundial Time.

By 1700, they were well down the road, and there had been a lot of shooting on the way. Now they were two miles west of the Athan, where Klestreus' wagons and cannon were strung out for half a mile each way along the road, and he was sitting, with his helmet off, on an upended wine keg, at a table made by laying a shed door across a couple of boxes, with Harmakros' pyrographed doeskin map spread in front of him and a mug where he could reach it. There were some burned-out farm-buildings beside the road, and the big oaks which shaded him had been yellowed on one side by the heat. Several hundred prisoners were squatting in the field beyond, eating food from their own wagons. Harmakros, and the chief captain of mounted infantry, he'd be about two-star rank, and the major-

equivalent Galzar chaplain, and the brigadier in direct command of the cavalry, sat or squatted around him. The messenger from Sevenhills Valley, who had just caught up with him, was trying to walk the stiffness out of his legs, carrying a mug from which he drank as he paced and talked.

"That's all we know," he said. "All morning, there was cannon fire up the river, and then small-arms fire, a lot of it, and when the wind was right, we could hear shouting. A little after noon, some cavalry who had been patrolling the strip between the river and the mountain came in; they said Netzigon was across in force in front of Vryllos Gap, and they couldn't get through to Ptosphes and Princess Rylla."

He cursed; some of it was comprehensible in local cursing terms. "Is she at Vryllos, too?"

Harmakros laughed. "You ought to know her by now, Kalvan. Try and keep that girl out of a battle."

He'd probably be doing that the rest of his life. Or hers, which mightn't be so long, if she wasn't careful. The messenger stopped, taking a deep drink, then continued:

"Finally, a rider came in from this side of the mountain. He said that the Nostori were over the river and pushing Prince Ptosphes back into the gap. He wanted to know if the captain at Tarr-Dombra could help him."

"Well?"

"We only had two hundred regulars and two hundred and fifty militia, and it's ten miles up to Vryllos along the river, and the Styphon's own way around the mountains on the south side. So the captain left a few cripples and kitchen women to hold the castle, and took everything else he had across the river. They were just starting when he sent me off. I heard cannon fire when I was crossing Sevenhills Valley."

"That was about the best thing he could do."

There'd be a couple of hundred Nostori at Dyssa—about Jersey Shore—just a holding force. If they could run them out, burn the town, and start enough of a scare, it might take some of the weight off Ptosphes at Vryllos and Chartiphon at Listra-Mouth.

"I hope nobody expects any help from us," Harmakros said. "Our horses are ridden into the ground; half our men are mounted on captured horses, and they're in worse shape now than the ones of our own we have left."

"Some of my men are riding two on a horse," Phrames, the mounted infantry CO, said. "You figure what kind of a march they can make."

"It would be midnight before any of us could get to Vryllos Gap," he said. "That would be less than a thousand."

"Five hundred, I'd call it," the cavalry brigadier said. "We've been losing by attrition all the way east."

"But I'd heard that your losses had been very light."

"You heard? From whom?"

"Why, from the men guarding prisoners. Great Dralm, Lord Kalvan, I never saw so many—"

"That's our losses; prisoner-guard details, every one as much out of it as though he'd been shot through the head."

But Klestreus' army had simply ceased to exist. It was not improbable that as many as five hundred had safely crossed the Athan at Marax Ford. There would be several hundred more, singly and in small bands, dodging through the woods to the south. And some six hundred had broken through at Narza Gap. The rest had either been killed or captured.

First, there had been the helter-skelter chase east from Fitra. For instance, twenty-five riflemen, firing from behind trees and rocks, had stopped and turned back two hundred cavalry who were making for the next gap down. Mostly, anybody who was overtaken held up an empty hand or a reversed sword and invoked Galzar. He only had to fight once, himself; he and two Mobile Force cavalrymen caught up with ten fleeing mercenaries and charged them, shouting to them to yield. Maybe the ten were tired of running, maybe they thought it was insulting for three men to try to capture them, or maybe they were just contrary. Instead, they had turned and charged. He had half-dodged and half-parried a lance and spitted the lancer through the throat, and had been thrusting and parrying with two swordsmen when a dozen mounted infantrymen came up.

Then, they had fought a small battle half a mile west of Systros. Fifteen hundred infantry and five hundred cavalry, all mercenaries, had just returned to the main road after passing around both sides of the burning town and were forming up when the wrecks of the cavalry from Fitra had come pelting into them. Their own cavalry and the fugitives were trying to force a way of escape, and the infantry were trying to pike them off, when the Hostigi arrived, mounted infantrymen dismounting to fight on foot. Then the four-pounders arrived and began throwing case-shot, leather tubes full of pistol bullets. Gormoth's mercenaries had never been exposed to case-shot before. Several hundred were killed, and the rest promptly hoisted their helmets, tore off Gormoth's colors, and cried for quarter.

That had been where the mercenary general, Klestreus, had surrendered. Phrames had attended to that; he and Harmakros had kept on with the cavalry, now down to three hundred, pistoling and cutting down fugitives. A lot of these turned left toward Narza Gap.

Hestophes, the Hostigi CO there—about United States captain equivalent, he'd be a full colonel this time tomorrow—had been a real cool cat. He'd had two hundred and fifty men, mostly regulars with calivers, two old twenty-pound bombards, and several smaller pieces. Klestreus' infantry had attacked Nirfe gap, the one below him, and, with the aid of Netzigon's men from the other side, had swamped it. A few survivors had escaped along the mountain top and brought the news to Narza. An hour later, Hestophes' position was under attack from both sides, too.

He had beaten off three assaults, a probable total of a thousand men. Then his lookout on the mountain reported seeing the Fitra-Systros fugitives streaming east. Hestophes promptly spiked his guns and pulled his men up out of the gap. The infantry who had been besieging him were swept along with the fleeing cavalry; from the mountainside, Hestophes spattered them with caliver bullets to discourage loitering and let them escape to spread panic on the other side. By now, they would be spreading it in Nostor Town.

Fitra had been a turkey shoot, Systros had been a roundup, and the rest of it had been a fox hunt. Then they had run into the guns and wagon train, inching along under ox power. There had been, with the train, a thousand of Gormoth's own infantry, and five hundred mercenary cavalry. This had been Systros all over, but a massacre. The fugitive cavalry had tried to force their way through, the infantry had resisted, and then the four-pounders—only five, one was off the road below Systros with a broken axle—had arrived and begun firing case-shot, and then one of the eight-pounders arrived. Some of the mercenaries tried to put up a serious fight; when they found the pay chests in one of the wagons they understood why. The Nostori infantry simply emptied their calivers and threw them away and ran. Along with *Down Styphon!* the pursuers were now shouting, *Dralm and No Quarter!* He wondered what Xentos would have thought of that. Dralm wasn't supposed to be that kind of a god.

"You know," he said, getting out his pipe and tobacco, "we didn't have a very big army to start with. Just what do we have now?"

"Five hundred here, and four hundred at the river," Phrames said. "The rest are guarding prisoners all the way back to Fitra."

"Well, I think we can help Ptosphes and Chartiphon best from here," he said. "That gang Hestophes let through at Narza will be panting out their story all the way to Nostor Town." He looked at his watch again. If he ever broke that thing, he'd be sunk! "By this time, Gormoth will be getting ready to fight the Battle of Nostor." He turned to Phrames. "How many men do you absolutely need, here?" he asked. "Two hundred?"

Phrames looked up and down the road, and at the prisoners in the field, and then, out of the corner of his eye, at

the boxes under the shed door that formed the table top. They hadn't got around to weighing all that silver yet, but there was too much to be careless with.

"I ought to have twice that many, Lord Kalvan."

"The prisoners are mercenaries, and they have agreed to take Prince Ptosphes' colors," the priest of Galzar said. "Of course, they cannot bear arms against Gormoth or against any in his service until released from their oaths to him by the end of the war. In the sight of the Wargod, helping you to guard these wagons would be bearing arms against Gormoth, for it would free your own soldiers to do so. But I will speak to them, and I will answer that they will not break their oath of surrender. You will need no guards for them."

"Two hundred, then," Phrames said. "I can use walking wounded for some things."

"All right; take two hundred, the ones with the worst beat up horses, and mind the store. Harmakros, you take three hundred and two of the four-pounders and cross at the next ford down. I'll take four hundred across at Marax and work east and north. You can divide into two columns of a hundred men and one gun apiece, but no smaller. There will be companies and parts of companies over there trying to reform. Break them up. And burn the whole country out, set fire to everything that'll make a smoke, or a blaze after dark. Any refugees going north, give them a good scare, but don't stop them. We want Gormoth to think we have three or four thousand men across the river. That'll take the pressure off Vryllos Gap and Listra-Mouth."

He rose, and Phrames took his seat. Horses were brought; he and Harmakros and the others mounted. The messenger from Sevenhills Valley refilled his mug and sat down, stretching his legs in front of him. He rode along the line of wagons, full of food the people of Nostor wouldn't eat this winter, and curse Gormoth for the lack, and kegs of fireseed the slaves in Styphon's temple farms would have to toil to replace. He came to the guns, and saw one at which he stopped. A long brass eighteen-pounder, on a two-wheeled cart, with a four-wheeled cart for ammunition and to support the tail of the heavy timber stock. There was another behind it, and an officer in gilded armor sitting on the cart, morosely smoking a pipe.

"Your guns, captain?" he asked.

"They were. Prince Ptosphes' guns, now."

"They're still yours, and good pay for their use. Gormoth of Nostor isn't our only enemy."

The mercenary artilleryman grinned. "Then I'll take Ptosphes' colors, and my guns with me. You're Lord Kalvan? Is it really true that you make your own fireseed?"

"What do you think we were shooting at you today, sawdust?" He looked at the guns again. "We don't see brass guns around here."

They'd been made, as he suspected, in Zygro. He looked at them again, critically; there wasn't a thing wrong with Zygro's brass-casting. The captain was proud of them, and glad he wasn't going to lose them; he boasted about good shots they had made.

"Well, you'll find one of my officers, Count Phrames, back by that burned house and those big trees. Tell him I sent you. He's to do what he can to help you get those guns to Hostigos Town. Where are your men?"

"Some of them got killed, before we cried quits. The rest are back there with the others. They'll all take the red and blue along with me."

"I'll talk to you later. Good luck, captain, and glad to have you with us."

There were dead infantry all along the road, mostly killed from behind, while running. Infantry who stood firm had a chance, usually a very good one, against cavalry. Infantry who ran had none at all. It grew progressively worse until he came to the river, where the four-pounder crews were swabbing and polishing their pieces, and dark birds rose cawing and croaking and squawking when disturbed at their feast. Must be every crow and raven and buzzard in Hos-Harphax; he even saw a few eagles.

And the river, horse-knee deep at the ford, was tricky. Crossing, their mounts stumbled continuously on armor-weighted corpses. This one had been a real baddie for Nostor.

"So your boy did it, all by himself," the lady history professor was saying.

Verkan Vail nodded, grinning. They were in a seminar room at the University, lounging in seats facing a big map of Fourth Level Aryan-Transpacific Hostigos, Nostor, northeastern Sask and northern Beshta.

"Didn't I tell you he's a genius?"

"Just how much genius did it take to lick a bunch of klunks like that?" the operations director challenged. "From all the reports I got on it, they licked themselves."

"Well, a great deal, accurately to predict the mistakes they'd make, and then plan to take advantage of them," the elderly professor of paratemporal probability theory pronounced. He saw it as a brilliant theoretical accomplishment, vindicated by experiment. "I agree with Chief's Assistant Verkan; the man is a genius. Wait till we get this worked up a little more completely!"

"He knew the military history of his own time line," the historian said. "And he knew how to apply it." She wasn't going to let her own subject be ignored. "Actually, I think Gormoth planned a good campaign—against Ptosphes and Chartiphon. Without Kalvan, they'd never have won."

"Well, Ptosphes and Chartiphon fought a battle of their own and won, didn't they?"

"More or less. Netzigon was supposed to wait across the river till Klestreus got up to Vryllos Gap, but Chartiphon started cannonading him—ordnance engineering by Kalvan—and Netzigon couldn't take it."

"Well, why didn't he pull back out of range? He knew Chartiphon couldn't get his cannon over the river."

"Oh, that wouldn't have been honorable. Besides, he didn't want the mercenaries to win the war, he wanted the honor of winning it."

"How often I've heard *that* one!" the historian laughed. "But don't the Hostigi go in for this honor jazz, too? On that cultural level—"

"Sure, till Kalvan talked them out of it. As soon as he started making better-than-Styphon's powder, he gained a moral ascendancy over them. Indispensable Man. And then, the new swordplay, the new tactics, the artillery improvements; now it's 'Trust Lord Kalvan; Lord Kalvan is always right.'"

"He'll have to keep working at that. He won't dare make any mistakes. But what happened to Netzigon?"

"He made three attempts to cross a hundred yards of river in the face of an artillery superiority. That was when he lost most of his cavalry. Then he threw his infantry across at Vryllos, pushed Ptosphes back into the gap, and started a flank attack on Chartiphon up the south bank of the river. Ptosphes didn't stay pushed; he counter-attacked and flanked Netzigon. Then the girl, Rylla, took a hundred-odd cavalry across, burned Netzigon's camp, slaughtered a lot of camp followers, and started a panic in Netzigon's rear."

"That was too bad about Rylla," the lady historian said.

He shrugged. "That can happen in battles, any size. That's why Dalla's always worried when she hears I've been in one. Well, then everything went to pieces and the pieces began breaking up. We had a couple of conveyors in on antigrav last night. They had to stay above twenty thousand feet, we didn't want any heavenly portents on top of everything else, but they got some good infrared telephoto pictures. Fires all over the western end of Nostor, and for a two-mile radius around Dyssa, and in the southeast, that was Kalvan and Harmakros. And a lot of entrenching and fortifying around Nostor Town; Gormoth thinks he's going to have to fight the next battle there."

"That's ridiculous!" the operations director declared. "It'll be a couple of weeks before Kalvan has his army reorganized, after those two battles. And powder; how much do you suppose he has left?"

"Five or six tons. That just came in a little after noon, from our people in Hostigos Town. After he crossed the river, Harmakros captured a wagon train. An Archpriest of Styphon's House, on his way to Nostor Town, with four tons of fireseed for Gormoth—and seven thousand ounces of gold."

The operations director whistled. "Man! That's making war support war, now!"

"And another ton or so in Klestreus' supply train, and Klestreus' pay chest," he added. "Hostigos came out of this deal pretty well."

"Wait till we get this all worked up," the paratemporal probability theorist was cackling. "Absolute proof of the decisive effect of one superior individual on the course of history. Kalthar Morth and his Historical Inevitability, and his vast, impersonal, social forces, indeed!"

Gormoth of Nostor stood with an arm over his companion's shoulder—nobly clad, freshly bathed and barbered, with a gold chain about his neck, Duke Skranga looked nothing like the vagrant horse trader who had come to Nostor half a moon ago. Together they stared at the crowd in the Presence Chamber. Netzigon, who had come stumbling in after midnight with all his guns and half his army lost and the rest a frightened rabble; his cousin Pheblon, his ransom still unpaid; the nobles of the Elite Guard who had attended him yesterday, waiting with him for news of victory until news of defeat had come; three officers of Klestreus' mercenaries who had got through Narza Gap, and several more who had managed to cross at Marax Ford alive. And Vyblos, the high priest, and with him Krastokles, the Archpriest of Styphon's House Upon Earth, and his black-armored guard captain, who had arrived with half a dozen men on broken-down horses at dawn.

He hated the sight of all of them, and the two priests most of all, and wasted no words on them.

"This is Duke Skranga. Next to me, he is first nobleman of Nostor. He takes precedence of all here." The faces in front of him went slack with amazement, then stiffened angrily. A mutter of protest was hushed almost as it began. "Do any object? Then he'd better be one who's served me half as well as Skranga, and I see none such here." He turned to Vyblos. "What do you want here, and who's this with you?"

"His Sanctity the Archpriest Krastokles, sent by His Divinity Styphon's Voice," Vyblos began angrily. "And how has he fared, coming here? Set upon by Hostigi heathens, hounded through the hills like a deer, his people murdered, his wagons pillaged—"

"His wagons, by the mace of Galzar! My gold and fireseed, sent me by Styphon's Voice in his care, and look how he cared for it! He and Styphon between them!"

"Blasphemy!" A dozen voices said it at once. Vyblos', and Krastokles', and the guard captain's. And, among others, Netzigon's.

Now, by Galzar, didn't he have a fine right to open his mouth here? Anger sickened him; in a moment he thought he would vomit pure bile. He strode to Netzigon, snatching the golden chief captain's chain from over his shoulders and striking him in the face with it, reviling him with obscenity upon malediction.

"Out of my sight! I told you to wait at Listra-Mouth for Klestreus not to throw your army away with his. By Galzar, I ought to flay you alive! Go, now, while you can!"

"Speak not of your fireseed and your gold," Krastokles told him. "They were the god's gold and fireseed, to be given to you for use in the god's service at my discretion."

"And lost at your indiscretion; you witless fool in a yellow bed-gown. Didn't you know a battle when you saw one in front of you? Vyblos, take this fellow you brought, and get you back to your temple with him, and come here again at my bidding or at your peril. Now go!"

He looked at the golden chain in his hand, then tossed it over the head of his cousin Pheblon.

"I still don't thank you for losing me Tarr-Dombra, but that's a handful of dried peas to what that son of a horseleech's daughter's lost me. Now, Galzar help you, you'll have to make an army out of what he's left you."

"My ransom still needs paying," Pheblon reminded him. "Till that's done, I'm still oath-bound."

"So you are. Twenty thousand ounces of silver, do you know where I can find it? I don't."

"I do, Prince," Skranga said. "There should be five times that much in the treasure vault of the temple of Styphon, here."

His horse stumbled, jerking him awake, and he got back onto the road. Behind him clattered fifty-odd men, most more or less wounded, but none seriously. There had been a score on horse-litters or barely able to cling to their mounts, but they had been left at the base hospital in Sevenhills Valley. He couldn't remember how long it had been since he had had his clothes off, or even all his armor. Except for pauses of a quarter-hour now and then, he hadn't been out of the saddle since daybreak, when he had crossed the Athan with the smoke of southern Nostor behind him.

That had been as bad as Phil Sheridan in the Shenandoah, but every time some peasant's thatch blazed up, he knew it was burning holes in Prince Gormoth's morale. He had felt better about it after seeing the mile-wide swath of devastation along the main road in East Hostigos; at Systros, there wasn't a house unburned. It stopped dramatically short at Fitra, and that made him feel best of all.

And the story Harmakros' stragglers had told him—fifteen eight-horse wagons, four tons of fireseed, seven thousand ounces of gold, that was at least one hundred fifty thousand dollars, three hundred new calivers and six hundred pistols; a wagon-load of plate armor. Too bad that archpriest got away, his execution would have been a big public attraction in Hostigos Town.

He had passed prisoners marching west, mercenaries, under arms and in good spirits, at least one pike or lance in each detachment sporting red and blue colors. Some of them shouted "Down Styphon!" as he rode past. The back road from Fitra to Sevenhills Valley had not been so bad, but now, in what he had formerly known as Nittany Valley, the traffic became heavy again. Militia from Lистра-Mouth and Vryllos, marching like regulars, which was what they were, now. Lines of farm wagons, piled with sacks and barrels and furniture that must have come from manor houses. Drove of cattle, and drove of prisoners not in good spirits and not armed, under heavy guard; Nostori headed for labor camps and intensive Styphon-is-a-fake indoctrination. And guns, on four-wheel carts, that he couldn't remember from any Hostigi ordnance inventory.

Hostigos Town was in an all-time record traffic jam. He ran into the mercenary artillery captain, wearing his sword and dagger, with a strip of blue cloth that seemed to have been torn from a bedspread and a red strip from the bottom of a petticoat. He was magnificently drunk.

"Lord Kalvan!" he shouted. "I saw your guns; they're wonderful! What god taught you that? Can you mount mine that way?"

"I think so. I'll have a talk with you about it tomorrow, if I'm awake then."

Harmakros was on his horse in the square, his rapier drawn, trying to untangle the chaos of wagons and carts and riders. He shouted to him above the din:

"What the Styphon; when did we start using three-star generals for traffic cops around here?"

MP's, of course; how the devil had he forgotten about that. *Memo: Organize, soonest.*

"Just till I can get a detail here. I sent all my own crowd up to the castle with the wagons." He started to say something else, stopped, and asked: "Did anybody tell you about Rylla?"

He went cold under his scalding armor. "Great Draml, no. What about her?" It seemed eternity before

Harmakros answered:

"She was hurt; late yesterday, across the river. Her horse threw her, or something; I only know what one of Chartiphon's aides told me. She's at the castle—"

"Thanks; I'll see you later."

He plowed his horse into the crowd. People got out of his way and yelled to those beyond. Outside town, the road was choked with things too big and slow to get out of the way, and mostly he rode in the ditch. The wagons Harmakros had captured were going up to Tarr-Hostigos, huge covered things like Conestogas with the drivers riding the nigh horses. He thought he'd never get past them, there was always another one ahead. Finally, he rode through the outer gate of Tarr-Hostigos.

Throwing his reins to somebody, he stumbled up the steps to the keep and through the door. From the Staff Room he heard laughing voices, Ptosphes' among them. For an instant he was horrified, then a little reassured. If Ptosphes could laugh, maybe it wasn't so bad.

He was mobbed as soon as he entered; everybody was shouting his name and thumping him on the back, he was glad for his armor. A goblet of wine was thrust into his hand. Ptosphes, Xentos, Chartiphon, most of the General Staff—And a dozen officers decked with red and blue, whom he had never seen before.

"Kalvan, this is General Klestreus," Ptosphes was saying, to introduce a big man with gray hair and a florid face.

"An honor, General; you fought most brilliantly and valiantly." He'd fought like a damned imbecile, and his army had been chopped to hamburger, but let's be polite. He raised his goblet to the mercenary and drank. It was winter wine, set out in tubs to freeze and the ice thrown off until it was almost as strong as brandy. Maybe sixty proof, the closest they had to spirits here-and-now. It made him feel better, and he drank more.

"Rylla; what happened to her?" he asked her father.

"Why, she broke a leg," Ptosphes began.

That scared him. People had died of broken legs in his former world, when the level of the medical art was at least up to here-and-now. They used to amputate—

"She's all right, Kalvan," Xentos was saying. "None of us would be here if she were in any danger. Brother Mytron is with her. If she's awake, she'll want to see you."

"Then I'll go to her." He finished his wine and put the goblet down; drew off his helmet and coif and put them beside it, stuffed his gloves through his belt. "You'll all excuse me—"

Rylla, whom he had expected to find gasping her last, sat propped against a pile of pillows in bed, smoking a pipe with a cane stem and a silver-inlaid redstone bowl. She wore a loose gown, and her right leg was buckled into a huge contraption of saddle-leather. Mytron, the chubby priest-physician, was with her, as were several of the women who functioned as midwives, herb-boilers, hexers and general nurses. Rylla saw him first; her face lighted like sunrise.

"Hi, Kalvan! Are you all right? When did you get in? How was the battle?"

"Rylla, darling!" The women sprayed away from in front of him like grasshoppers. She flung her arms around his neck as he bent over her; he thought Mytron stepped in to relieve her of the pipe. "What happened to you?"

"You stopped in the Staff Room," she told him, between kisses. "I smell it on you."

"Well, what did happen?"



"Oh, my horse fell on me. We were burning a Nostori village, and he stepped on a hot ember." Yes, just like William the Conqueror. Nantes, 1087, the history professor in the back of his mind reminded him. "He almost threw me, and then fell over something, and down we both went. I had an extra pair of pistols down my boot-tops; I fell on one of them. The horse broke a leg, too, and they shot him."

"How is she, Mytron?"

"Nothing to worry about, Lord Kalvan! It's a beautiful fracture. A priest of Galzar set it—"

"And gave me a Styphon's own lump on the head, too. And now, it'll be a couple of moons till we can have a wedding."

"Why, we could have it now—"

"I will not be married in my bedroom. I will be married in the temple, and I won't be on crutches."

"It's your wedding, Princess." He hoped that the war with Sask everybody expected would be out of the way before she was back in the saddle. "Somebody," he said over his shoulder, "go and have a hot bath brought to my room, and tell me when it's ready. I must stink to the very throne of Dralm."

"I was wondering when you'd mention that, darling."

Sesklos, Supreme Priest and Styphon's Voice, rested his elbows on the table and palmed his smarting eyes. Around him pens scratched and parchments rustled and tablets clattered. He longed for the cool quiet of the Innermost Circle, but there was so much to do.

The letter from the Archpriest of the Great Temple of Hos-Agry's lay before him. News of the defeat of Prince Gormoth's armies was spreading, and with it rumors that Ptosphes of Hostigos was making fireseed for himself. Agents-inquisitory reported that the ingredients and even the proportions and processes were being bandied in the taverns. To kill everyone who knew the secret was quite out of the question; even a pestilence couldn't do that. And how to check the spread of the secret without further divulging it?

He opened his eyes. Admit it; better that than deny it and later be proven liars. Let everyone, even the lay guards, know the full secret, but, for believers, insist that special prayers and rites, which only yellow-robe priests could perform, were necessary.

But why? Soon it would be known to all that fireseed made by unconsecrated hands would fire as well.

Well, there were malignant demons of the netherworld. Everybody knew that. He smiled, imagining them thronging about, scrawny bodies, bat wings, bristling beards, clawed and fanged. In fireseed there were many of them, and only the prayers of anointed priests of Styphon could slay them. If this were not done, as soon as the fireseed was exploded, they would be set free into the world of men, to work manifold evils and frights. And, of course, the curse of Styphon was upon all who made fireseed unconsecrated.

But Ptosphes had made fireseed and had not been smitten, and he had pillaged a temple-farm and massacred the priests, and after that he had defeated the armies of Prince Gormoth, who marched with Styphon's blessing. How about that, now?

But wait! Gormoth was no better than Ptosphes. He had made fireseed himself, both Krastokles and Vyblos were sure of it, and he had blasphemed Styphon, and despitefully used a holy archpriest, and forced a hundred thousand ounces of silver from the Nostor temple, at as close pistol-point as didn't matter. To be sure, most of that had been after the battle, but who outside Nostor would know that? Gormoth had suffered defeat for his sins.

He was smiling happily, now. Of course, Hostigos must be utterly destroyed and ruined, and all in it put to the sword; the world must see, once and for all, what befell a land that turned its back on Styphon. Sarrask of Sask would have to do that; Gormoth couldn't, even if he could be trusted to. Sarrask, and Balthar, Prince of Beshta;

Sarrask had been seeking a Beshtan alliance, and now was offering his daughter, Amnita, in marriage to Prince Balthar's younger brother, Balthames. An idea began to seep up into his mind.

Balthames wanted to be a Prince, too. It needed only a poisoned cup or a hired dagger to make him Prince of Beshta, and Balthar knew it. He wanted Balthames and his ambitions removed; should have had him killed long ago. Now, suppose Balthames married this wench of Sarrask's; suppose Sarrask gave up a little corner of Sask, and Balthar a little corner of Beshta, both adjoining Hostigos. Call it the Princedom of Sashta. To it could be added all western Hostigos south of the mountains; why, that would be a nice little princedom for any young couple. He smiled benevolently. And the father of the bride and the brother of the groom could recompense themselves, respectively, with the Listra Valley, rich in iron, and East Hostigos.

That should be done immediately, before winter set in; then, in the spring, Sarrask, Balthames and Balthar could hurl their combined armies out of conquered Hostigos into Nostor. He'd send out another archpriest of Styphon's House Upon Earth ... let's see who that should be ... to Sask, to make arrangements—with lavish gifts of money and fireseed for Sarrask and Balthar. And this time, make sure the treasures of Styphon's House did not fall into the hands of the infidel.

[End of *Down Styphon!*, by H. Beam Piper]