

Le Queux William

The Eye of Istar: A Romance of the Land of No Return



William Le Queux

**The Eye of Istar: A Romance
of the Land of No Return**

«Public Domain»

Le Queux W.

The Eye of Istar: A Romance of the Land of No Return / W. Le
Queux — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

| | |
|-----------------------------------|----|
| Chapter One | 8 |
| Chapter Two | 11 |
| Chapter Three | 16 |
| Chapter Four | 22 |
| Chapter Five | 25 |
| Chapter Six | 28 |
| Chapter Seven | 33 |
| Chapter Eight | 36 |
| Chapter Nine | 40 |
| Chapter Ten | 43 |
| Chapter Eleven | 46 |
| Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. | 51 |

Le Queux William

The Eye of Istar: A Romance of the Land of No Return

Preface

PEACE, O READER! Constant, blessed and abundant salutations.

Of a verity the groves of my hopes have been refreshed by cooling showers from the clouds of Allah's blessing, my rose garden has been weeded of the thorns of despondency, and the tree of my prosperity has become fruit-bearing from the breeze of his bounty. He is the Giver of Gifts, the Source of Liberality, the Sovereign, the dust of whose sandals is deservedly the collyrium of the eyes of mortal men; and I, called by my fellows El-Motardjim, am the servant who, in compliance with the exalted command, have placed my finger of acquiescence on the vision of obedience. During many hopeless nights I waited for the radiation of the sun of the benefits of prosperity, and counted the stars till the rise of dawn, but, by my ill-luck and the machinations of enemies, was deprived of the felicity of penetrating the mystery of the Land Forbidden.

At length, however, on a happy day when the fire of my anguish burned so brightly that it was not easy to extinguish it with the water of patience, the Abolisher of the signs of darkness and aberration invested me with the robe of the favoured, guarded me through the calamities and vicissitudes of fortune during long journeys, directed my footsteps through the mazes of paths untrodden, and revealed unto my dazzled eyes weird and wondrous marvels stranger than men have dreamed.

Therefore, O Reader! wipe the dust of ennui and fatigue from the speculum of thy mind, withdraw the tongue of blame into thy palate, and lend a willing ear to this my Tarik; for, verily, I have elucidated the secret of the mystic Land of the No Return; I have torn the veil that hideth the Great Sin from the eyes of men, and have gazed into the Eye of Istar. "Imsh Allah!"

Prologue

Thrice hath the Fast of Ramadan come and gone since the Granter of Requests last allowed my eyes to behold the well-remembered landscape, scarcely visible in the pale light of dawn. Hills, covered with tall feathery palms, rose abruptly from the barren, sun-scorched plain, and, at their foot, stood the dazzlingly-white city of Omdurman, the impregnable and mysterious headquarters of Mahdiism, while beyond, like a silver ribbon winding through the marshes, the Nile glided, half veiled by its thin white cloud of morning vapours.

Within the walled and strongly-guarded city was a scene, strange and fantastic. The air, heavy with war rumours, was rent by the deafening strokes of enormous brazen tam-tams, mingling with the loud shouts of dark-faced Jalins, half-naked negro fanatics of the Kunjara and the Dinka, armed *cap à pie*, ready for battle at a moment's notice. The excitement, which had increased daily for many months, had risen to fever heat.

Throughout the short, hot night, the great *nahas*— those huge brass war drums of the Khalifa Abdullah, Ruler of the Soudan — had been beaten by relays of perspiring negro slaves, glittering with beads and trinkets, the indescribable monotonous rhythm causing the wildly-excited populace to cry, "*Nakelkum!*" and "*Naktulkum!*" as, in the fresh, cool hour, when the Wolf's Tail — the first brushes of grey light which appear as forerunners of dawn — showed in the heavens, they seized guns, spears and shields, and rushing from their houses across the great square of Abu Anga they congregated in

the wide, open space near the Tree of Hadra, where the Raya Zerga, or dreaded black standard of the Khalifa, hung ominous and motionless in the morning air.

Wild-haired men sped fleetly to and fro, brandishing their gleaming arms and apostrophising Eblis; women left their millet unbeaten and followed, while musicians chanted war songs softly in a sad falsetto, accompanying themselves upon their little *ginkris*— those queer, two stringed guitars, fashioned from a tortoise shell, which give forth a dismal sound like the chirping of a grasshopper of the oasis. The servants of the Merciful are those who walk meekly on the earth, and when the ignorant speak to them, answer, “Peace”; and who pass the night adoring Allah, and standing up to pray unto him, and who say, “O Allah, avert from us the torment of hell, for the torment thereof is perpetual; verily, the same is a miserable abode”; and who, when they bestow, are neither profuse nor niggardly, but observe a just medium between these, and who invoke not another god together with the One Allah, neither slay the soul which Allah hath forbidden to be slain, unless for a just cause. The Dervishes were going forth to battle.

On one side of the spacious review ground frowned the castellated walls of the imposing white fortress, held so long by Faragallah Pasha against the fierce hordes of the Mahdi; on the other, the ill-built quarters of the Genadien, or regular soldiers, while the single tree in the centre was historical by reason of the head of Gordon, the brave Pasha of the Infidels, having been exhibited thereon by order of our tyrannical lord, the Mahdi. It was at this spot that the wild multitude heaped curses upon the last grim relic of the gallant, deserted hero of Khartoum, the man whose matchless bravery and dogged perseverance were alike admired by my own co-religionists, as well as by the Infidels themselves.

But the Mahdi, Khalifat-er-Rasul – the great False Prophet, renowned throughout the world, who, by inducing us to believe that, by his supernatural influence, he could transform the bullets of the white men into water, caused us to flock to his standard and attempt to conquer the Soudan – was now dead, and the power of the Khalifa Abdullah supreme. Seven years ago had the hand of Allah’s justice fallen heavily upon the hypocritical imitator of the Great Prophet, who asserted that he could part the waters of the Nile, that his body was invulnerable, and who was so successful in his ingenious impostures that the people threw themselves down frantically to kiss the spots his crimson slippers had touched, while the water in which he performed his ablutions was drunk as an unfailing remedy for every sort of malady. The very dust of his sandals was declared to be the collyrium of the eyes of men. But the struggle with the English, the fall of El Obeid, the capture of Galabat, and the defeat and death of the King of Abyssinia were events now long past and forgotten.

In this record of fact, adventure and strange marvels, I, Zafar-Ben-A’Ziz, called by some, El-Motardjim (“the translator”), on account of my knowledge of many tongues, am compelled to speak of myself. I am not a Soudanese, but an Arab, son of the Hadj Yakub Sarraf, Kaid of the Aures. I passed my childhood at my birthplace, El-Manäa, two days’ journey from Batna. Then my father, having trading relations with an Arab merchant living in London, the giant city of the English, I was sent there for two years to learn the tongue. But I cared not for the English, nor the ways of life in a city where the women go abroad unveiled and laugh in the faces of the men, where speech is carried along wires, where light is shed by two wires in contact and where carriages are propelled along the roads without horses. Of a verity, the London of the English is a city full of marvels, infidel customs, amazing sights, and the accursed inventions of Eblis himself. To the English the One Accursed has imparted the secret of his wiles and miracles, whereby they are the powerful people on the face of the earth. After two years rubbing shoulders with the white men who believed not in the Prophet, but worshipped a cross as emblem of their deity, I grew weary, for, during the whole time, mine eyes were never refreshed by seeing the interior of a mosque, although once or twice I entered their churches without removing my shoes, as is their custom.

During my absence in the land of the Infidels my mother died, and six moons after my return my father was taken into Certainty. Then life among my people, the Chawi – the beauty of whose women is world famous – had but little charm for me, born Bedouin that I am. I longed for the journeys afar

by camel, the free life, the burning sun and the limitless horizon. I felt the need of the devouring heat. I sighed for the desert and the endless sands, and all my youthful dreams were radiant with rosy anticipations. Therefore, after a few months of idleness, I resolved to quit my studies and travel south across the Great Desert. At sunrise, one day, I left behind my native mountains, and, with a camel caravan, journeyed to Mourkouk. Thence I travelled with various caravans to El Fasher, Dem Zibehr, Lado, and other places in the Soudan, on many occasions finding myself in Khartoum, where several times I saw the grave-faced Gordon, the heroic White Pasha, who was afterwards so treacherously murdered. At the age of twenty-one I had succeeded in establishing a small caravan of my own to journey between Khartoum and Suakin, but suddenly the Mahdi rose against the Christians, and all trade was stopped. Unfortunately, being an Arab from Algeria, I was an alien, therefore my camels were at once seized, and, against my will, I was pressed into military service, forced to take the *bea'a*, and bear my part in the holy war under the dreaded standard of the Mahdi. At Tamai and Abu Klea I fought the English invaders, afterwards carrying arms in Dongola, Berber, Galabat, Karkoj and Kordofan, where I fought Infidels, slave-raiders and rebellious tribes, witnessing many fierce combats and scenes of massacre too horrible to describe. "Allah encompasseth the Infidels," says our Korân. "The lightning wanteth but little of taking away their sight; so often as it enlighteneth them they walk therein, but when darkness cometh on them they stand still." I loved the brilliant nights and the ruddy splendour of the moonbeams reflected on the sands; even the sinister howls of the jackals on the plains of Kababich had become a familiar sound and no longer disturbed me.

Such, briefly, is the story how, from a student at the French Lycée at Algiers, and a clerk in a London merchant's office, I developed into a Dervish.

Now, however, as one of the renowned Ansar-ed-Din of the False Prophet's successor, I, with face seared by sun-scalds, sat my milk-white horse in the square of Abu Anga, ready to take part in the monster parade, prior to setting forth upon an expedition across the Great Desert, westward to Kano, the great capital of the powerful Sultan of Sokoto, which all knew would be fraught with many perils.

But it was the Khalifa's will; none dare demur.

In the Korân, our perspicuous Book of Everlasting Will, it is written that "Allah, the One Worthy of Praise, alone knoweth the heart of man," therefore he is aware that the profane chicanery of the Mahdi had impressed me not, neither did I admire the fanatical teaching of the Khalifa's speeches and sermons. But to speak in Omdurman against Mahdiism, or the Khalifa, meant death, therefore silence and obedience were best. Indeed, life was at all times uncertain in the Dervish capital. The Khalifa was intensely vain and proud, professing the religion of Al-Islâm, but leading an idle, dissolute life, shut up in his great white Palace, surrounded by all the pomp and splendour of a Soudanese Sultan. Cruel, quick-tempered and distrustful, he was fearful and jealous of his authority, and the smallest infringement of it was looked upon as a heinous offence, to be punished accordingly. By an elaborate system, he was surrounded by villainous, despicable spies, who all pandered to his jealous and tyrannical nature. These spies were everywhere, and besides obtaining admission to private houses in order to ascertain if the inmates were loyal, their duty was also to seek out the most attractive girls to grace their master's extensive harem. Wherever a pretty woman was found throughout his dominions he at once received information about her, and in a very short time she was conveyed to the palace of Omdurman, where the hundred fountains were refreshing, the marble courts were cool, and the Garden of Enchantment was red with flowers and green with many leaves.

Chapter One

The Blast of the Onbeia

We were leaving Omdurman, on an expedition to the far west, beyond the high misty mountains of Marran and the great glaring Saharan plains. Our forces, consisting of over fifteen thousand armed warriors, were assembling to parade and receive our Ruler's blessing ere we departed.

Red and fiery the sun rose, the houses shone milk-white against the intense blue of the sky, the monotonous thumping of the *nahas* continued, the yelling of the fanatical multitude increased, and the black silken standard, planted in the centre of the parade-ground, stirred by a breath of hot wind, suddenly spread itself out lazily, revealing its inscription in sprawly Arabic characters of bright yellow. The excited populace, the black-faced warriors of the Tumali, the Tegele and the Fajelu, regarding this as a good omen, shouted themselves hoarse in cursing our enemies, but a few seconds later the sound of loud trumpets echoed across the square, and a silence, sudden and complete, fell upon the multitude. Drawn up in long lines, we were facing in the direction of the Holy City, ranging ourselves in order, attending the commands of Allah and the Khalifa and celebrating the divine praise. From where I sat I had full view of the great arched gate of the Palace, which next second was thrown open as the Khalifa himself, stout, dark-bearded, and hawk-eyed, rode forth, accompanied by his officers and bodyguard. Mounted on a fine camel, and wearing a suit of golden mail armour and a helmet with spotless plume, he was surrounded by about two hundred horsemen also clad in mail, with thick, red turbans around their helmets, their horses all wearing brass head armour to protect them from sword cuts. Four *onbeia* blowers walked in front, and, in turns, sounded the great elephant's tusk, while, headed by the dreaded sable standard and moving very slowly, came the Khalifa, stern, stately, statuesque, with drawn sword. Behind, followed the gaudily-attired *mulazimin*, or body-servants, riding, while his black guards, veritable giants in stature, formed a compact square around him.

The spectacle was brilliant and imposing. In the bright morning sunshine the spears and armour of the cavalcade flashed and glittered, and, as the Khalifa drew up his camel within a few yards of me, his keen black eyes wandered around us, as if in search of absentees. Thrice the deafening plaudits of the multitude rent the air; thrice he bowed an acknowledgment with regal gesture. With one voice the people cried, "Alhamdulillah!" – the pious expression which leaves the lips of True Believers on all occasions of concluding actions – the review began, and the wild enthusiasm and confusion knew no bounds. Remington rifles with ammunition were distributed to us, in addition to the customary three spears and sword, and, amid the endless shouting and recitation of suras from the Korân, with bows and protestations we dashed at a wild gallop hither and thither past the powerful Ruler of the Soudan, raising clouds of white dust. At length, in obedience to a long, loud blast from the *onbeia*, we halted, and the Khalifa – whose custom it was to attend the mosque five times a day and to enforce the presence of all his principal emirs – commenced the second portion of the parade. The review, or *arda*, as it was called, was a religious ceremony, and those who took part in it were supposed to obtain special advantages and blessings.

Gazing slowly around him, with an expression of restlessness and revenge clearly portrayed upon his gross, bloated features, he waved his fat hand, with imperious gesture, exclaiming in a loud, firm voice, —

"Harken unto me, O my people! The believer doth not escape from the chastisement of Allah – whose glory be glorified, – until he leaveth four things – lying, pride, niggardliness and evil-thinking. Paradise desireth four kinds of men: the first of them are they who feed the hungry; the second, they who lend succour unto the naked; the third, they who fast in Ramadan; and the fourth, they who read the Korân. Fear ye Allah in secret, O my people!"

Every head bent low in obedient submission, every voice cried with one accord, “May the peace of Allah cover thee like a cloak, O august Ruler! O Pearl of the conch of Prophecy!”

“Our kingdom is made flourishing through justice, is protected by courage, and ruled by good government,” he continued. “Good government is that the gate of the Chief be guarded in the proper time of being guarded, and opened in the proper time of being open, and the gate-keeper friendly. Verily, the One Merciful hath servants whom he distinguisheth with his favours, and whom he rewardeth for fighting for the Faith with great rewards. To go forth into battle against the Sultan of Sokoto is necessary for the well-being of our State, and of our people; therefore, O men-at-arms, gird your loins and sharpen your spears, so that ye may enter the great city of Kano, vanquish your enemies, trample their country underfoot, deliver it over to fire and sword, and return hither to your ease within yonder walls of this, your dwelling-place. In the darkness of night, as in the sunshine of noon, ye carry with ye upon thy wanderings the ever-anxious thoughts of your Khalifa, into whose keeping the welfare of our kingdom was entrusted by the holy Mahdi whom Allah, who liveth in Heaven, hath been pleased to remove from amongst us.”

“His name be exalted and praised!” roared the excited, dark-faced multitude. “May it endure as long as time lasts!”

“True, O my people,” continued the autocrat, with well-feigned reverence. “May our great Chief, El Mahdi, drink of the stream Al-Cawthar, whiter than milk or silver, and more odoriferous than musk, with as many cups set around it as there are stars in the firmament, of which water whosoever drinketh will thirst no more for ever. May he wander through the groves of Jannat-al-Ferdaws with the glorious Hur-al-oyun, whose dark eyes are a pleasure to beholders, and whose pavilions are as hollow pearls.”

Then, after the people had given vent to loud acclamations, he repeated, in a loud voice, two long prayers from the Korân, followed by the *khutba* for days of the Jihad, “Praise be to Allah, the One Merciful, who is the best of helpers; for we say, verily, help us against the Infidel people. He who is dissatisfied with the licentious, we ask Him, ‘Do help us against the Infidel people.’ Glory to Him who scattereth the strength of the unbelievers; so we say, verily, ‘Do help us.’ He who surroundeth with His aid His grateful worshippers, help us. He whom Allah sent to give vigour unto the lukewarm, help us. Know ye that Allah, whose name be exalted, has written upon you the Jihad against the wicked. Therefore, exert yourselves and say, ‘Help us against the Infidels, and may their place be in Al-Hawiyat.’ And be ye patient in the fatigues of the expedition; for, verily, His help maketh bold those who watch. Then say ye, ‘Help us against the Infidels. Thou art our Allah. Then help us against the people of the Infidels.’”

This concluded, he delivered a further invocation for the victory of the religion of Al-Islâm, long life for himself, and the continual success of his arms, following it up with a prayer, calling down the vengeance of Allah on all unbelievers and those who had erred from the paths of Mahdiyyism, especially the enemies we were about to attack, and asking that their wives and children might be given as booty unto us. At the end of the prayers he repeated the *Fatiha*, the whole gigantic assembly joining in the declaration of the Unity, loud, fervent, impressive.

Every head again bowed for a second, then wild yelling, shrill battle-cries and deafening war gongs sounded, mad, enthusiastic confusion becoming general everywhere as the Khalifa Abdullah and his black bodyguard slowly moved back along the Nile bank towards the great white Palace, the ponderous iron-studded gates of which opened wide to receive them. Men and women, giving vent to cries of “*Sidi! Khalifat el Mahdi!*” and “*Ya Sidi ana mazlum!*” threw themselves upon their faces, craving his blessing as he passed, and some of the more fanatical struggled and fought with his bodyguard of ebon-faced Taisha in a vain endeavour to touch the hem of the garment of the Great Ruler inspired by Allah.

Thus, while the shouting multitude followed our Master, we dismounted, ate the handful of dhurra allotted to each of us, and took leave of our women and relations prior to setting forth on the

first stage of an expedition to Kano, the City of the Mirage, which most probably would occupy us many months, and from which many of us would certainly never return.

Chapter Two

Sun and Silence

Headed by the great Raya Zerga, held in awe throughout the Soudan from Assouan even unto Lado, we of the Jihadieh, two hours later, under the heat of the brilliant sun, rode forth from the city gate, amid the vociferous shouting of the women, the frantic beating of war drums, the ear-piercing blast of great *onbeias* and the encouraging yells of old men and children. Then, with a parting war-cry, our gleaming swords flourishing in air, we left the cupolas and minarets of Omdurman behind, and spurred forward in huge compact bodies towards the low, distant hills, half hidden in their mystic haze, but supposed to be the abode of the Jinns, or genii, which our dead lord, the Mahdi, declared always fought in thousands on our side. Some of my comrades-in-arms declared that they had had visions of these strange creatures, but I confess I have never seen one, and am inclined to agree with what one of the White Fathers once told us in El Obeid, that their existence is purely imaginary. But perhaps I am a sceptic. Indeed, my white skin betrayed my Arab parentage, and, because of it, I had long ago been nicknamed by my dark-visaged comrades, “The Unbeliever.” Not because I had ever expressed doubt as to the truth of the Mahdist teaching, but my pale face was alone responsible for the epithet which had, in fun, been bestowed upon me.

My personal appearance, as a horseman of the great Khalifa, was, perhaps, not such as would commend itself to the Roumis, the enemies of Allah and His Prophet. My Jibbeh, or Dervish uniform coat, was dirty and patched with multi-coloured strips of cotton; on my head was the white skullcap, called the *takia*, bound by a broad white turban; while I wore a pair of loose cotton unmentionables with a red girdle, and my bare feet were thrust into rough slippers of undressed cowhide. My weapons consisted of a circular shield which bore the deep dints of past combats, two small spears, one long one, a rifle, and a heavy sword with cross hilt strapped up under my left arm.

Light-hearted, laughing among ourselves, and eager for the fray, we crossed the hills, but saw nothing of the mysterious Jinns; then, continuing our ride into the stony, waterless desert of Bayuda, that immense country forgotten of Allah, we halted at sundown for the *maghrib*, and journeyed forward yet another three hours before encamping. The expedition was under the leadership of Ali Wad Helu, chief of the Baggara Arabs, upon whose crimson flag, borne before him, was inscribed in gold in the Arabic character, ‘*Nekhrib ed Dunia wa nammir el Akher.*’ (We shall destroy this, and create the next world). This was his motto. A fierce and fanatical warrior, he had acted a conspicuous and unenviable part in that terrible storm of 1885 which deluged the Soudan with blood, and now thought not of sparing the lives of his men, but urged that, by dying by the sword, we should go direct to the Jannat-al-Ferdaws, where the great lote-tree throws a cool shade, and where the houris have lips of musk and eyes bright and sparkling as stars of night.

Resting during the day, on account of the furnace-heat of sunshine, and travelling during the clear, starlit nights over the sands with our black standard ever waving at our head, the hosts of the Khalifa swept onward through the land of sun and silence, like a great swarm of locusts, bent upon ruthless pillage and destruction. Day by day, week by week, we travelled over the immense plain, always in the crimson track of the dying day. Everywhere spread vast solitudes, an interminable country of desolation and sad monotony, without a plant or a vestige of life – only shifting, brown sand-hills, boundless horizons and a blinding glare of sun. Through Foja and El Fasher we passed, then over the great, bare mountains to Kol-Kol. Three journeys from that place, however, Ali Wad Helu, fearing attack by hostile tribes, sent forward fifty spearmen – of whom I was one – to act as scouts. The orders we received we obeyed promptly, and, heedless of heat and sand storms, we travelled rapidly onward to Abu Guerra, across infinite, mysterious solitudes, where the blazing heat

and the loose sand retarded our advance, until, at last, we reached El-Asagga, on the shore of Lake Tsad, exactly one moon after our departure from Omdurman.

Inured as the cavalry of the Khalifa were to the burning breath and silent gloom of the desert, the privations of the march and the fatigue of long travel, we found in this journey that our horses were utterly unfit to negotiate the stony wilderness that lay between ourselves and Kano, known to the desert wanderers as the City of the Mirage by reason of the amazing mirages seen in the vicinity almost daily; therefore, on arrival at the Well of Sabo-n-Gari, four days' journey south from the Lake, and two days' beyond the boundary of the territory of the Sultan of Sokoto, we resolved to encamp under the palms and await our main body in order to utilise the spare camels which they had brought with them in case of need. To attempt to approach nearer to the city we intended to attack would, we knew, result in speedy death.

The last fires had faded from the west; moonless night had fallen. The poison-wind blew in sharp hot gusts, the heat from the sand was reflected into one's face, black clouds hung low and ominous, and the atmosphere, laden with particles of grit, was stifling. We prayed our *isha*, ate our *dhurra*, and leaving three of our comrades on the alert, in case of surprise, stretched ourselves in our tents and endeavoured to snatch a brief repose. The neighbourhood of the well was not a safe place after sundown, for wild beasts came there for water, and we had seen the marks of lions on the sands. Wearied, my eyes at length closed in sleep, and I was dreaming of cool, idle hours at my mountain home in the far-off Aures, and of bygone days amid the civilisation of London, when suddenly I was startled by the quick rattle of musketry, followed by fiendish yells, while, at the same moment, there was a flash of powder as a bullet tore its way through the canvas of my little tent, whistling unpleasantly near my head. Seizing my rifle, I sprang up, and, with my comrades who had been sleeping by my side, rushed forth.

Next second I knew the truth. The place was alive with horsemen, led by a minor sheikh mounted upon a splendid grey. We had fallen into the trap against which our spies had repeatedly warned us, and were evidently being attacked from every side by the Tuaregs. In the Great Desert there are two terrors ever present – the sand and the Tuaregs. The latter are the forbidding-looking pirates of the desert, held in awe from El Fasher to Timbuktu. It is said that ages ago they were compelled to migrate south from the fertile Atlas into the Great Desert, and owing to their eyes being unaccustomed to the terrible glare, nor their lungs to the sand storms, they adopted a head-dress with two veils. One, the *nicab*, is rolled round the temples, hanging down in front to protect the eyes; the other, the *litham*, reaches from the nostrils to the edge of the clothing, completely covering the lower part of the face. Hence they are known to-day, everywhere in the Soudan, as the “Veiled Men of the Desert,” while upon all those who do not adopt their mysterious-looking costume they bestow the sobriquet, “mouths for flies.” The veils are never removed, even at meal times, and the garb has become so much a part of them that any one, being deprived of it, is unrecognisable to his friends and relatives. If one of their number is killed in battle and divested of his veil, no one can identify him until it has been restored to its place. And this, in spite of the fact that the bridge of the nose and the eyes alone are visible. Their power is felt in nearly every part of the Great Desert, and to such an extent have they carried their depredations that until quite recently almost every town was compelled to pay them tribute. These nomads are thieves of the worst character, travellers and merchants being their principal victims. Their vague form of Islâmism they have reduced to a belief in talismans, and their chest and back are covered with bags of black and yellow, like a cuirass. Ruse is their principal weapon, even though they never show themselves without spear or gun, a sword at their side and a poniard attached to the left arm. We, of the Khalifa's army, had bestowed upon them three epithets which epitomise their psychology – “Thieves, Hyenas, and the Abandoned of Allah.”

There had been a deadly feud of long standing between us, and they, learning that a small party of Dervishes was in the vicinity, had apparently come forth to check our advance. But the horsemen of the Khalifa Abdullah, Sultan of the Soudan, know not fear, as their valiant actions at Abu Klea,

Berber, El Obeid and Toski had already proved, and now, even though we saw ourselves surrounded by hundreds of yelling “Veiled Men,” who poured into us a withering fire from their long-barrelled guns, not a man among us was dismayed although many bit the dust ere reaching cover.

That it must be a struggle to the death we knew, therefore, unable to mount, we obtained what protection we could among the few palm trunks, and replied to the hail of bullets with careful precision, picking off a white-robed figure whenever one showed itself. Behind every rock or tree large enough to shelter a human form a veiled man lurked, and, well-practised in the use of firearms, they proved themselves superior shots. As far as we could discern in the gloom they outnumbered us by about ten to one, and their weapons, aimed deliberately at us from the security of the ambuscade, had already taken deadly effect. On every side white robes fluttered as rifles shed their weird red light, and ere long many of our men, stumbling forward, sank upon the sand and died with fierce curses upon their lips. Unable to approach our opponents sufficiently near to effectively use our long spears we continued our erratic fire, determined to make a stubborn stand until the end. During a quarter-of-an-hour this continued, when suddenly wild piercing yells sounded above the incessant rattle of musketry as, with one accord, about two hundred Tuaregs, their villainous faces encircled by their black veils, and standing in their stirrups, swept down upon us with a ringing shout of triumph. In a moment a fierce hand-to-hand struggle ensued, for horses and riders plunged upon our spears, and dozens of the desert pirates fell impaled, their burnouses dyed with blood. One man, tall and sinewy, his breast loaded with talismans, riding a magnificently-caparisoned horse, and evidently a sheikh, I held in the grip of death, and he fell by my hand. Indeed, so strenuous was our defence that, on glancing round, I felt half inclined to believe that the fierce onslaught would not be repeated; yet, almost before this thought had crossed my mind, another shrill war-cry resounded as an additional force on foot emerged from the dark clump of trees with burnouses flying, eyes blazing, and firing as they ran they rushed together upon us in such numbers as to prove absolutely overwhelming. With rifles held high above their heads, and yelling fiercely, they sped onward, driving us from our cover, and shooting us down, although we slashed, stabbed and hacked like very demons. Prodiges of strength and valour were performed by my comrades, the Dervishes, in their last defence. The struggle inflamed them, as it ever does men courageous by nature and born brave. They sold their lives dearly, but to effectually repulse the attack or to crave for quarter were alike futile. Alas, the soldiers of the Black Standard, who for years had fought long and fearlessly for the holy Mahdi and his successor, were now falling helpless victims to the cunning and rapidity with which the Tuaregs had delivered their terrible onslaught.

Full of breathless anxiety were those fatal moments. Elated by their success and filled with a deadly hatred against us, our enemies were evidently determined to sweep us into eternity. The ground was encumbered with dead and dying. Several of my comrades, believing that the Jinns had deserted us, and therefore resistance was useless, threw down their arms, and falling on their knees, cried, in the name of the *One* for their lives to be spared, but the Veiled Men of the Desert only jeered, and shot them down as ruthlessly as they would slaughter dogs, crying, “Kill the black-faced sons of offal! Let not one escape, or he will give warning unto the hosts of the accursed tyrant, the Khalifa. Kill the dogs! Kill them!” My comrades’ death-wail uplifted, and, sharpened in soaring, hung in anguish at its height; then, like hope’s expiring sigh, it faltered downward and fell mute.

Escape was hopeless; we had fallen into an ambush. Our enemies had surrounded us by hundreds. Amid the shrieks, the firing, the fiendish, exultant cries of the victors and the fierce, hoarse curses of the dying, I fought on with spear and shield, unhorsing more than one of our deadly foes. My comrades were apparently all being ruthlessly slaughtered, when suddenly a gigantic son of the desert, lithe as a deer, black-veiled, and sitting his white horse as if he were part of it, galloped straight towards me with a loud cry, his whirling blade flourishing in mid-air ready to match me, strength to strength. In a second my spear left my hand, and striking him full in the breast, felled him to earth a corpse, but ere I could draw breath, another piercing yell sounded behind me, and I felt a sharp twinge

in the left shoulder. Then a horrible, choking sensation seized me, and I have a vague recollection of a man's dark face, hideously distorted by hatred, and with a black *rawani*, or shawl wrapped around it, within a few inches of mine, so near that I could feel his hot, foetid breath upon my cheek.

A sudden darkness next instant fell upon me, and all consciousness became blotted out.

Of events that immediately followed, or of how long I remained insensible I have no knowledge. Thoughts, strange and confused, grim and pleasant, incongruously mixed flitted through my unbalanced mind, but I had no idea of place, of time, of anything. A darkness, black and impenetrable, had obliterated my senses and held me powerless, until a sharp spasm of pain shot through my limbs, and then I recollected, in a half dreamy manner, that I had fallen in the desperate fight. I tried to repeat the first *sura*, but my lips, cold and clammy, refused to utter sound. The pain increased in intensity until my whole body became racked by a torture so acute and horrible that I believe I must have fainted. Many are the scars I had received in battle, but never had I experienced such suffering. Indeed, the pain was so intense that I felt myself writhing in terrible agony, while the perspiration stood in great beads upon my neck and brow, and the tightness in my chest held me, as in a vice, breathless, with all the horrible pangs of asphyxiation.

An interval of senselessness was followed by a brief period of calm; then gradually, with a feeling that I was struggling hand-to-hand with Azrael, the dreaded Angel of Terrors, I slowly struggled back to consciousness. Blindly enduring, I suffered alternately torments of fire and of ice. Memories haunted me, vivid, voluptuous; scenes of a passionate past recurred. I stood in a magical Hall of Echoes, where every echo seemed the voice it mocked, and through some flaw in each illusion drove the shattering spear of truth.

In the impenetrable darkness my fingers wandered involuntarily to seek the objects around. On either side I stretched forth my hands, but clutched at air. Faint sibilations, like the sound of hushed whispering fell upon my ear, and in that moment filled me with a strange fear. My resting-place seemed soft and comfortable, and as again my hands sought to discover something that would give me a clue to my whereabouts, my finger-tips suddenly came into contact with embroidered satin. I could feel the raised pattern upon the smooth, glossy surface at my side, and became aware that I was not stretched upon the sand, where I had fallen, but upon a divan. I felt the cushion upon which my aching head was pillowed. It was also of satin, soft as down. The air seemed heavy with the sensuous intoxicating odour of attar of rose rising from a perfuming-pan – a subtle scent that still vibrates my memory – and as I touched the pillow I made a further discovery. Raising my hand to wipe my clammy brow, I became aware of the reason of my obscurity of vision.

My forehead and eyes had been bandaged with a folded square of thick black silk.

By frantic movement I endeavoured to tear away the tightly-bound fabric, but failed. It had been dexterously knotted, and no effort of mine could remove it. Again, with words of haste upon my lips, I tried to tear it from my eyes, but did not succeed, for when I tried to lift my left hand to my head I again experienced a spasm of pain that was excruciating.

Suddenly I was conscious of the presence of someone near me, and a voice in low, soft, musical tones, scarcely above a whisper, exclaimed in the Hausa tongue, —

“*Barka, sanu sanu.*”

My acquaintance with this language of the people beyond Lake Tsad was very imperfect, but I nevertheless knew that the words gave me peace, and, being translated, were, “Allah, bless thee. Gently, gently.”

“Peace be upon thee, O unknown friend,” I answered fervently, in Arabic. “Thou who hast given succour unto the wounded, I beseech of thee allow mine eyes to behold the mirror of thy face.”

“Of a verity thine eyes shall ere long witness things that, peradventure, will amaze thee,” answered the low voice of the unknown, in tones in which severity and gentleness were strangely mingled.

Soft hands deftly unloosed the double knots at the back of my head, the scarf was drawn away, and on eagerly opening my bewildered eyes they were dazzled by a strange flood of bright light that poured down upon them.

Next second, however, my vision grew accustomed to the extraordinary brilliance, and the scene which met my wondering gaze was so strange and bewildering, so inexplicable and stupendous, so awe-inspiring yet entrancing, that, in sheer amazement, I slowly raised myself upon my arm and gazed aghast in stupefaction, fascinated, open-mouthed, petrified.

Chapter Three

Azala

My transition had been remarkable; the sight that met my eyes was, indeed, sufficient to cause breathless wonderment.

What time had elapsed since, in the darkness of night, I had fallen senseless beneath the palms of the oasis of Sabo-n-Gari, or by what means I had been rescued from the tortures of a lingering death by fever and thirst, I knew not. I had lapsed into unconsciousness at a moment when the last of my brave comrades had been slain, only to awaken and find myself stretched on a divan in a spacious apartment, the walls of which were richly hung with rose-coloured silk. The marble floor was half hidden by the profusion of rugs of beautifully blended hues, while around, near the arched roof, verses and good counsels from the Korân were written in Arabic characters, in long lean letters of gold. There were many dainty coffee-stools of inlaid silver and pearl, and a number of soft divans of gold-coloured silk. The place was windowless, but the sunlight, apparently reflected and intensified by mirrors, was admitted from the roof, and so directed that it fell in a golden bar across my face, presumably for the purpose of bringing me back to consciousness.

At one end of this brilliant apartment was a door with horse-shoe arch, like all the others, leading to a little retreat, the gloom of which was, to me, impenetrable. In a corner, close to me, was a great gold perfuming-pan from which rose sweet odours in a column of thin blue smoke, while two gilded derboukas and a pair of slippers, cast aside upon one of the larger mats, showed that the occupants had indulged in those terpsichorean exercises in which Eastern women delight.

Almost before I could realise the luxury of my surroundings, a soft, cool hand was laid upon my fevered brow, and, turning my head with difficulty, I suddenly beheld a vision of wondrous beauty. Over me there bent a fair face, so perfect in feature that I became entranced. The eyes, dark and large, expressive of the soul that lay behind, held me in fascination, and I gazed, tongue-tied, in amazement.

She was young, not more than twenty, with a countenance white as those of the Englishwomen who come to Algiers at Ramadan; soft brown eyes denoting the mildest, tenderest nature, and a mouth sweetly pursed like the bud of a rose. Tendrils of soft, brown, wavy hair strayed across a fair forehead, hung heavily with strings of golden sequins, the centre of which was formed by a great oval pearl surrounded by diamonds, the finest my eyes had ever beheld, and in her ears were large, delicately-chased rings of gold. Her dress was the gorgeous costume of the harem: the tiny skullcap thickly embroidered with gold and seed pearls, set jauntily upon her head, the zouave of palest amaranth velvet, similarly embroidered, worn over a gauzy, low-necked vest, and the flimsy *serroual* or trousers of pale pink China silk. Her white, delicately-moulded arms were bare, adorned by heavy *mesais* of gold and jingling bangles set with gems, while her feet, likewise uncovered, were thrust into dainty little embroidered slippers of pale green velvet, her *redeefs* being composed of single bands of curiously worked gold set with beautiful jacinths. Her necklets, of which she wore fully a dozen, were of various patterns, several being composed of strings of golden coins, or discs of gold thickly encrusted with rubies and turquoises, her oval perfume bottle, suspended at her breast, being conspicuous on account of the top being formed of a single emerald, while the diamonds set in the ornament itself were of amazing lustre.

My mouth was parched, but she knelt beside me, and supporting me with her left arm, with her right held a goblet to my lips.

How it came about I never knew, but before the draught was finished a change passed over me. Whether it was her soft touch, her strange and fawnlike loveliness, or the tender pity in her eyes matters not, the issue was the same; she struck some chord in my turbulent nature, and in a moment

it was filled full with passion for her. I did not for a moment mistake the significance of the flood of feeling that surged through my veins. I have never shirked facts.

“I thank thee,” I said; “thine hand is kind.”

As she smiled upon me, moving slightly, her sequins tinkled, and the ray of sunlight, streaming full upon her, caused her jewels to flash and gleam with a thousand iridescent fires, producing an effect that was dazzling.

Opening her lips she displayed an even set of beautiful pearly teeth, as she exclaimed, in the soft speech of my mother tongue, —

“Peace, O stranger. May the blessing of the One, whose name be exalted, rest eternally upon thee. Let not fear oppress thee; of a verity thou art with friends.”

“Mine eyes are bewildered, O One of Beauty, whose countenance is as the glorious light of day, and whose eyes are brilliant as stars in the desert. Upon thee be perfect peace and the fervent blessings of one who hath approached near unto Certainty,” I answered with difficulty. Then, as I raised my hand and it came into contact with bandages about my shoulder, I added “The darkness of unconsciousness hath long obscured my mind, and I know not under whose roof I rest. Allah hath been gracious unto me. Verily, He bestoweth abundant provision on such of His servants as He pleaseth.”

“Yea, O stranger,” she answered, piously. “Everything shall perish except Himself; unto Him belongeth judgment. Accursed be those who struck thee down, for Allah, Gracious Bestower of abundant benefits, knoweth both the secret malice which their breasts conceal and the open hatred which they discover.”

In a fit of renewed weakness, brought about by the turmoil of my blood, I lay back upon the silken pillows watching her face. It almost seemed as though something of what was passing in my mind communicated itself to her.

“Knowest thou mine enemies?” I asked, raising myself, and, to my astonishment, discovering, for the first time, that the loose garments I wore were of finest silk, and that I was veiled and disguised as a woman.

“I know that thou wouldst kill me,” she answered briefly, with a curious smile, standing before me with hands behind her back, a veritable houri.

“Kill thee! Why?”

“Because thou art a soldier of the great Khalifa of Omdurman, enemy of my people, and Ruler of the Soudan.”

“What name bearest thou?” I asked.

“I am called Azala Fathma.”

“Daughter of whom?”

“Daughter of 'Othman, Sultan of Sokoto.”

“Thou – Princess of Sokoto!” I gasped, struggling slowly and with difficulty to my feet, scarcely believing my ears. “Where, then, have I taken mine ease?”

“For three days past hast thou been concealed here, in the harem of thine enemy,” she answered, in low, placid tones, looking seriously at me. Then, noticing the uneasy glance I cast in the direction of the dark alcove beyond, she added quickly, “Let not apprehension fall upon thee. To this my apartment none dares enter unbidden, therefore thou art safe, even in the midst of those whom thou didst seek to destroy.”

“Chastise me not with a scourge of words, O Daughter of the Sultan,” I said, apologetically. “Thy servant Zafar-Ben-A'Ziz, Arab of the Chawi, horseman of the Khalifa, armeth not himself against those who give him succour, nor seeketh he the overthrow of the city of thy father.”

Leaning gracefully, with her back against the twisted column of polished marble, inlaid with gold, supporting the arched roof, she clasped her hands behind her handsome head and gazed at me. Then, half reproachfully she said, —

“Whoso doth that which is right, doth it to the advantage of his own soul; and whoso doth evil, doth it against the same: hereafter shall we return unto Allah. Thou earnest with scouts to reconnoitre – perchance to enter this our city singly or in company – so that on the advance of the ruthless legions of thy Sultan thou mightest, by treachery, admit them within our walls. But Allah, who hath placed the twelve signs in the heavens, is merciful and knoweth the hearts of men. Thine encampment was discovered and destroyed.”

“How was my life spared?” I asked.

“I was present when thou wert forced to bite the dust,” she explained. “I had journeyed unto Katsena, where I had lingered one moon, and was returning hither to Kano when my Tuareg guards, warned of thine approach, watched thee by stealth, and in the darkness fell upon thee at a moment when thou wert unprepared. On the rising of the sun I searched the spot, and found that thou alone still lived. Secretly thou wert attired in the haick belonging to one of my handmaidens, and by my orders conveyed hither in a *jakfi* on one of mine own camels. Still dressed as a female slave thou wert able to pass the guards of the outer courts and of the harem, to rest and recover on mine own divan.”

“Then to thee, O Azala, Princess of Sokoto, whose beauty is peerless, I owe my life,” I answered, fervently. “Truly hast thou snatched me back from the grave, even though I sought to assist in the sacking of this, the palace of thy father, and in the holding of thy people in bondage. Tell me, why shouldst thou interest thyself in my well-being?”

Hesitating, apparently confused at my question, Azala moved uneasily, toying with the silken fringe of her broad girdle.

“Is it not written that we should bear no malice?” she answered, after a pause. “Al-Sijil registereth our deeds.”

“Wisdom falleth from thy lips,” I said, smiling. “But hadst thou no motive in bringing me into this thine apartment, even at the imminent risk of detection and disgrace?”

“I am not compelled to answer thy question,” she replied, with a forced laugh. “Reason underlyeth most of our actions.”

“And wilt thou not explain thy reason?”

“No. At present my lips must remain sealed,” she answered calmly, her bejewelled breast heaving and falling in a long-drawn sigh. “Peradventure thou mayest learn my motive some day; then will thine eyes open in astonishment, for thou wilt gain knowledge of things undreamed-of and behold marvels amazing.”

“Thou speakest in enigmas. When may these secrets be revealed unto me? Of what character are they?”

“Seek not to unloosen my tongue’s strings, O mine enemy – ”

“Nay, not enemy, friend, grateful and ever devoted,” I interrupted.

“Then, if thou art my friend seek not to discover mine innermost thoughts,” she said, earnestly. “As the wicked are in Sajin, beneath the seventh heaven, where dwelleth Eblis and his host, so assuredly will those who seek to discover the hidden marvels without mine aid or sanction taste of the bitter fruit of Al-Zakkum.”

“But if thou givest unto me a pledge that thou wilt render explanation, I will be content,” I said.

“Not only will I, when the time is ripe, explain the strange secret unto thee, but, likewise, shall I seek thine assistance in elucidating a strange and incomprehensible mystery.”

“I am thine to command,” I answered gallantly, taking her slim, white hand in mine. “When thou desireth me to serve thee, O Azala, thou wilt find me ever ready, for to thee I owe my life; my future is in thine hands.”

“To seek the key of the hidden mystery, to vanquish the angel Malec who hath charge of the gates of hell, will require a stout heart and lion’s courage,” she said slowly, fixing her clear, wonderful eyes upon mine, and allowing her soft bejewelled hand to linger for a second within my grasp.

“When the day dawneth thou wilt not find me wanting in defiance of danger, for, of a verity, I fear nothing with the beauteous daughter of the Sultan 'Othman as my pole-star.”

For a second a blush suffused her pale cheeks.

“As thou trusteth me, so also will I trust thee,” she said, in deep earnestness. “Even though my position is exalted as Princess of Sokoto; even though I am surrounded by all that is beautiful, with many slaves to do my bidding, yet unhappiness eateth like a canker-worm into my heart.”

“Wherefore art thou unhappy?” I asked, sympathetically.

“Ah! the reason none may know,” she sighed. “Until I call upon thee to render thine aid in seeking to discover things that are forbidden, thou must necessarily remain in the outer darkness of ignorance. Here, in the palace of my father, thou must remain in hiding until the time for action cometh. Then will I show thee that which will fascinate and astound thee.”

“Thy words of mystery arouse curiosity within me,” I said. “Canst thou not reveal to me anything now?”

“Nothing. Save to tell thee that thou canst, if thou wilt, shield me from a fate worse than death. A disaster, horrible and complete, threateneth to overwhelm me, and thou alone canst prevent it.”

“How?”

“By patience, silence, and passive obedience to my commands.”

“I am thine,” I said, as, entranced by her marvellous grace and beauty, my arm slowly encircled her slim waist, begirt with dull gold and flashing jewels. I strove to draw her to me, but without any violence of movement, and with the most perfect dignity, she disengaged herself from my embrace. Yet I held her to me and breathed into her ear words of devotion. Then, as her beautiful head at last turned slowly toward me, and her eyes, looking into mine, spoke mutely of reciprocated affection, our lips met in a hot, passionate caress.

I was trembling upon the pinnacle of Al-Araf, that partition that divides pleasure from misery, love from hatred, hell from paradise. She was the proud and handsome daughter of the Sultan 'Othman, the woman, the fame of whose exquisite beauty had long ago reached us even in far-off Omdurman; I, a mere Dervish, without home or property, one of a band paid by the all-powerful Khalifa to plunder, murder and destroy.

What words of tenderness I uttered I scarcely remember. The sensuous fragrance, rising from the perfuming-pan, seemed to induce a sweet, dreamy half-consciousness, but for the first time I experienced the passion of love. I loved her with all the strength of my being, and the only words that impressed themselves upon me in those moments of mad infatuation were those uttered by the woman I adored, —

“Yea, O Zafar, I will place my trust in thee.” Resting in my embrace, her bright eyes betrayed her perfect happiness, and as I softly stroked her silky hair and implanted a kiss upon her white, sequin-covered brow she clung to me with her long bare arms clasped tightly around my neck in an ecstasy of joy.

“Never will I forsake thee,” I answered, fondly. “With the faithfulness and obedience of a slave will I carry out thy commands, for thou art my queen and I thy devoted bondman.”

Tears dimmed her bright, clear eyes; tears of joy she vainly strove to suppress.

“Truly to-day is the dawn of my life's happiness,” she said, in a low tone, full of emotion. “To-day Allah hath sent me a friend.”

“And, on my part, I pledge myself unto thee with unswerving devotion,” I exclaimed, fervently. “In veiled words hast thou spoken of certain solemn secrets. When thou explainest to me my task of elucidation, assuredly wilt thou find me ready and eager to undertake it. In thine hands thou holdest my future, for life or death.”

“Upon those who seek to come between us may the wrath of the One Granter of Requests fall like an avenging fire; may they find no patron nor defender, nor may they rest beneath the shadow of the lote-tree,” she said. “It is written in the Book of Everlasting Will that Allah, who

knoweth all things, joineth man and woman with his bounteous blessing. Therefore may the rose-grove of thy prosperity and good fortune be increased daily in freshness and magnificence, and in what difficulty thou mayest be placed, or into what evil thou mayest peradventure, fall, bear in thy mind my declaration of love, and remember always that, even though deserts of great space and rapid waters may separate us, I am thine and thou art mine alone. I trust to thee to break asunder the invisible bonds that fetter me unto misery.”

“But surely we shall not be parted,” I exclaimed, the mere suggestion being intolerable.

“Neither sultans nor their kin are capable of ruling events,” she said. “Of what the future may have in store none knoweth but the sorceresses and the wise women, who, alas! holdeth their knowledge to themselves.”

“True, O Azala, my enchantress. In like manner wilt thou remember always, if we part, that I shall be striving to return unto thee; that the one object of my life henceforward is to break asunder the mysterious fetters of thine unhappiness.”

Our hands clasped. She looked straight into my eyes. Hers was no dreamy nature. With her, to resolve was but a preliminary of to execute. No physiognomist would need to have been told that this beautiful woman, so quick in intelligence, so kind in manner, so buoyant and joyous in disposition, was at the same time, in force of character and determination, as firm as adamant.

“And thou wilt not fail to render me assistance in the hour of my need?” she exclaimed.

“May Allah bear witness that I am prepared to strive towards the elucidation of thy mystery while I have breath.”

Pressing my hand with lingering tenderness, she said, —

“Thy words give peace unto me, O Zafar. Henceforth shall I rest in the knowledge that the man who is my friend is prepared to risk his life on my behalf.”

“Yea,” I answered; adding, “of a verity this meeting between enemies hath been a strange one. Hast thou not warned thy father of the approach of the hosts of the Khalifa?”

“Even on the same night as thine encampment was destroyed warning was conveyed unto him, with the result that our troops have been sent forward into the desert with the object of checking the advance of thy tribesmen.”

“They are not my clansmen,” I answered, quickly. “I am an Arab, a native of the Aures, the mountains far north beyond the Great Desert.”

“Then thou art not a Dervish?” she exclaimed, gladly.

“No,” I answered, and at the same moment remembering that the Khalifa’s troops numbered many thousands, and that it was scarcely likely that they would be turned aside in their onward march by a few squadrons of the Sultan of Sokoto, I asked, —

“Have the horsemen of the Black Standard been routed?”

“I know not. Yesterday I overheard the messengers delivering their report to the Sultan in the Hall of Audience,” she replied.

“But if they are still advancing! Think what terrible fate awaiteth thee if the soldiers of the Khalifa loot this thy beautiful palace, and spread death and desolation through thy city with fire and sword!”

“Arrangements have already been made for my secret escape. In case of danger I shall assume thy garments, arms and shield, which I have preserved, and pass as a Dervish.”

“Excellent,” I said, laughing at her ingenuity. “But let us hope that my comrades will never gain these walls. If they do, it will, alas! be an evil day for Kano.”

“The detection and slaughter of thy scouts placed our army upon its guard,” she said. “Already the defences of our city have been strengthened, and every man is under arms. If the Dervishes attack us, of a verity will they meet with an opposition long and strenuous, for by our fighting-men the walls of Kano are believed to be impregnable. See!” she added, drawing aside a portion of the silken hangings close to her, and disclosing a small window covered with a quaintly-worked wooden lattice.

“Yonder our men are watching. Our principal city gate, the Kofa-n-Dakaina, is strongly guarded by night and day.”

Chapter Four

The Mark of the Asps

Stepping to the window, I found that the apartment in which we stood was evidently situated in a tower of the palace – which I had heard was built high on Mount Dala – for the great city, with its white, flat-roofed houses and cupolas, and minarets of mosques, lay stretched beneath us. At the massive gate, in the high frowning walls which surrounded the extensive and wealthy capital of the Empire of Sokoto, the far-famed *entrepôt* of Central Africa, soldiers, attired in bright uniforms of blue and gold, swarmed like flies, while cannon bristled on the walls, and everywhere spears and arms glittered in the sun. She pointed out the Jakara, a wide, deep lake, the great Slave Market crowded with buyers, sellers and human merchandise, the Palace of Ghaladima and the Kofa Mazuger. The city was agog, for the hum of life rose from its crowded streets and busy market-places, mingling now and then with the ominous roll of the war drums, the twanging of *ginkris*, the clashing of cymbals, and the shouts of the eager, ever-watchful troops. By the cloudless, milk-white sky I knew it was about noon, and the sun directly overhead poured down mercilessly upon the immense sandy plain which stretched away eastward and northward until it was lost in the misty haze of the distant horizon. Date palms rose in small clusters near the ornamental lake in the centre of the city; in the square spreading *alleluba-trees* cast their welcome shade, and beautiful *gotuias* unfolded their large, featherlike leaves above slender and undivided stems, but beyond the city walls there was not a tree, not a blade of grass, not a living thing. Out there all was sun, sand and silence.

“Dost thou reside here always?” I asked, as together we gazed down upon the great white city.

“Yes. Seldom are we in Sokoto itself, for of later years its prosperity hath declined, and the palace is of meagre proportions; indeed, it is now half-ruined and almost deserted. The wealth and industry of the empire is centred here in Kano, for our trade extendeth as far north as Mourkouk, Ghat, and even Tripoli; to the west, not only to Timbuktu, but even to the shores of the great sea; to the east, all over Bornu; and to the south, among the Igbira, the Igbo, and among the pagans and ivory hunters of the Congo.”

“True,” I said, gazing round upon the prosperous capital of one of the most interesting empires in the world. “It is scarcely surprising that my ambitious lord, the Khalifa, should desire to annex the land of the Sultan ’Othman. Even our own cities of Omdurman or Khartoum are not of such extent. How many persons inhabit this, thy palace?”

“In this, the Great Fada, nearly three thousand men and women reside. In the harem alone are four hundred women and six hundred slaves and eunuchs, while the Imperial bodyguard numbers nearly a thousand.”

Glancing below, I saw the palace was enclosed by white walls as high and strong as the outer fortifications. It was built within the great Kasba or fortress, a veritable city within a city.

Turning, our eyes met, and pointing to the distant, sun-baked wilderness, I exclaimed, —

“Away there, the vultures would already have stripped my bones hadst thou not taken compassion upon me.”

“Speak not again of that,” she answered. “Thou wert the only man in whose body the spark of life still burned. It was my duty to rescue thee,” she replied, rather evasively.

“Now that we understand and trust each other, now indeed, that we are friends true and faithful, wilt thou not tell me why thou didst convey me hither unto thine apartment?”

She hesitated, gazing away towards the misty line where sky and desert joined, until suddenly she turned, and looking boldly into my face with her clear, trusting eyes, answered, —

“It was in consequence of something that was revealed.”

“By whom?”

“By thee.”

“What revelation have I made?” I asked, sorely puzzled.

She held her breath, her fingers twitched with nervous excitement, and the colour left her cheeks. She seemed striving to preserve some strange secret, yet, at the same time, half inclined to render me the explanation I sought.

“The astounding truth became unveiled unconsciously,” she said.

“My mind faileth to follow the meanderings of thy words,” I said. “What truth?”

“Behold!” she cried, and hitching the slim fingers of both her hands in the bodice of cream flimsy silk she wore beneath her zouave, she tore it asunder disclosing, not without a blush of modesty, her white chest.

“Behold!” she cried, hoarsely. “What dost thou recognise?”

With both her hands she held the torn garment apart, and, as she did so, my eyes became riveted in abject amazement. Bending, I examined it closely, assuring myself that I was not dreaming.

“Hast thou never seen its counterpart?” she asked, panting breathlessly.

“Yea,” I answered, with bated breath. “Of a verity the coincidence astoundeth me.”

The sight caused me to marvel greatly; I was bewildered, for it conjured up a thought that was horrible. In the exact centre of her delicate chest, immediately above her heaving bosom, was a strange, dark red mark of curious shape, deeply branded into the white flesh, as if at some time or other it had been seared by a red-hot iron. The paleness of the flesh and the firm contour of her bosom rendered the indelible mark the more hideous, but its position and its shape dumbfounded me. The strange blemish constituted an inexplicable mystery.

It was unaccountable, incredible. I stood agape, staring at it with wide-open, wondering eyes, convinced that its discovery was precursory of revelations startling and undreamed-of.

The mark, about the length of the little finger, and perfectly defined, was shaped to represent two serpents with heads facing each other, their writhing bodies intertwined in double curves.

In itself this mystic brand was hideous enough, but to me it had a significance deeper and more amazing, for in the centre of my own chest I bore a mark exactly identical in every detail!

For years; nay, ever since I had known myself, the red scar, not so noticeable upon my brown, sun-tanned skin as upon Azala’s pale, delicate breast, had been one of the mysteries of my life. Vividly I remembered how, in my early youth, in far El-Manää I had sought an explanation of my parents, but they would never vouchsafe any satisfactory reply. On what occasion, or for what purpose the mysterious brand had been placed upon me I knew not. Vaguely I believed that it had been impressed as a means of identification at my birth, and until this moment had been fully convinced that I alone bore the strangely-shaped device. Judge, then, my abject astonishment to find a similar mark, evidently impressed by the identical seal, upon the breast of the woman who had thus exerted her ingenuity to save my life – the woman whose grace and marvellous beauty had captivated me, the woman who had admitted that she reciprocated my affection.

In that brief moment I remembered well the strange, ambiguous reply that my mother had given me when, as a lad, my natural curiosity had been aroused, —

“Sufficient for thee to know that the Mark of the Asps is upon thee, O my son. Seek not to discover its significance until thou meetest with its exact counterpart. Then strive night and day to learn the truth, for if thou canst elucidate the mystery, thine ears will listen to strange things, and thine eyes will behold wondrous and undreamed-of marvels.”

Since then, twenty long years had elapsed, and I had wandered far and near, in England, in France, in Algeria and across the Great Desert. Both my parents had died with the strange secret still locked in their hearts, for by no amount of ingenious questioning could I succeed in unloosing their tongues. Now, however, my mother’s prophetic utterance and counsel, spoken in our white house on the green hillside, came back vividly to my memory, and I gazed in silence at Azala full of apprehensive thoughts.

My mother had more than once assured me that she knew not its meaning, and that, although she had sought explanation of my father, he had refused to reveal to her more than she had told me, and he, too, had died with the secret resolutely preserved. But the exact counterpart of the brand burnt into my own flesh was now before me. What could be the significance of the two asps? how, indeed, came the daughter of the great Sultan 'Othman, whom none dare approach, to be disfigured the same as myself, a free-booter of the Khalifa, a Dervish and an outcast?

“How earnest thou to bear the brand of the serpents?” I asked, when again I found speech. “An identical mark is upon my own breast also.”

But ere she could answer my inquiry a stealthy movement behind startled us, and as I turned, two gigantic black eunuchs sprang upon me, while two others appeared from behind the rose silk hangings.

“Behold!” cried a man, whom I knew by his gorgeous dress to be the Aga of the Eunuchs. “It is a man, not a woman! The slave hath not lied. Seize him!”

“May Allah show thee mercy!” gasped Azala, pale and trembling, with clasped hands. “We are betrayed!”

I struggled and fought with all the strength I possessed, but my brutal captors bore me down, and in their sinewy hands I was in a moment helpless as a babe. Then I knew that Azala was, alas! lost to me. Romance, hope, passion, one by one, dropped, emberlike, into the ashes.

Chapter Five

The Black Eunuch

Azala, with blanched face and clasped hands uplifted in supplication, sank upon her knees before the gigantic Chief of the Black Eunuchs, whom she addressed as Khazneh, beseeching him with arguments, persuasive, forcible and passionate, to spare my life.

“All blame be upon my head!” she cried, in earnest appeal. “He fell wounded at the fight of Sabo-n-Gari, and I tended him and brought him hither. Spare him! Let not the keen arrow of sorrow enter the soul of the daughter of thy Master, the Sultan.”

“Thy servant hath already received his orders,” the high and potent official replied with imperturbable coolness, resting his hand on the bejewelled hilt of his great scimitar, looking down at her upturned and agitated countenance.

“From whom?”

“From my Imperial Master, thine august father.”

“May the curse of Eblis rest upon our betrayer!” she cried, with a quick setting of her mouth. “The stranger hath done no harm, but by me, it seemeth, he hath been brought unto his doom.”

“He is thy lover. Thou wert suspected two days ago,” the eunuch answered gruffly, standing statuesque and immovable while my captors held me, apparently reluctant to move, because they desired to overhear the argument between the beautiful Azala and their master.

“I deny thine accusation,” she replied, rising to her feet quite calmly. “Thou, Khazneh, who art powerful here in the harem, shall learn a lesson in politeness thou wilt not easily forget. Lies and insults may fall from thy lips, but they neither injure nor distress the daughter of thy Master, 'Othman.”

“Silence, woman!” he cried fiercely, shaking his fat fist in the face of the trembling, indignant girl, and showing his white teeth. “Thinkest thou that thou canst save a man whom thou bringest unto thine apartment in secrecy, dressed in woman's garments?”

“If thou darest remove him hence I will appeal in person unto my father.”

“Already his Majesty hath full knowledge of this affair,” the great negro eunuch answered, treating her threat with calm indifference. “By his order a watch hath been placed upon thee. We saw the accursed son of offal caress and kiss thee.”

“May Allah cut out thy heart! Am I a slave, that spies should be set to report upon my doings?” she asked, her eyes flashing with indignation. Then, turning to the negroes who held me in iron grip, she said, “I, Azala Fathma, Princess of Sokoto, order ye to release him.”

“And I, Khazneh, Aga of the Eunuchs, order ye to remove him hence. He is a Dervish from Omdurman, a traitor, and an enemy of thy Sultan. Away with him!” cried the black-faced man with big, blood-shot eyes. His gaze was ever on Azala, unless it were fixed on me with a sullen gleam of hate.

But she rushed across to the heavy silken curtain that hid the secret door, and, standing boldly before it, uplifted her long, white arm, and pointing to the towering eunuch, cried, —

“Zafar-Ben-A'Ziz, whom I have long known by report, is not an enemy, but a firm friend of his Majesty, whose despicable slave thou art. Therefore I forbid thee to lay hands upon him. Even though thou findest him here in the place forbidden; nevertheless, I, as Princess of Sokoto, claim for him the protection of the Sultan.”

In silence, unable to extricate myself, I stood while my fate was thus discussed. A spasm wrenched my soul – one of those agonies which leave their trace, mental or physical, forever.

“Knowest thou not the punishment meted out to those who dare to pass the Janissaries and tread the sacred courts of the harem?” asked the Aga, impatiently.

“The punishment is death,” she answered. Her thin nostrils palpitated. She crushed her fingernails against the jewels on her bosom. “But if Zafar, my friend, suffereth the penalty, I warn thee that thine head shall be struck off and thy body be given to the dogs as offal before the going down of the sun.”

“Be it so,” laughed the hulking brute, insolently, his fingers playing with the long, keen *jambiyah* in his belt. Then, turning to my captors, he said, “Come, away with him quickly.”

Next second the hangings were raised, disclosing an open door, through which I was unceremoniously hurried, and as I was dragged out into the dark, inter-mural passage, I heard the Aga of the Eunuchs exclaim tauntingly, —

“Seek his Majesty if thou wilt, but I may tell thee that he set out for Katsena at sunrise, and ere his return thy lover’s bones will lie bleaching in the sun.”

“Farewell, Azala,” I shouted. “Be thou of good cheer. Remember that in my heart the tree of affection hath struck root. I am thy friend always – always – even though our enemies may thus part us.”

“We will never part,” she cried, rushing across to me; but the Aga, catching her roughly by the arm, dragged her away by sheer brute force.

“Whither he goeth there also will I go,” she gasped, struggling to elude his grasp, overturning one of the little mother-of-pearl coffee-stools in her frantic efforts to reach and embrace me.

“Tarry no longer,” cried Khazneh, in anger, addressing my captors. “Let the Sultan’s will be obeyed.”

“Farewell, Azala! Farewell,” I cried, paralysed with fury as I saw her bow her head upon her arms and weep.

But she answered not, for, as I was dragged fiercely from her sight, I saw her struggling with the chief eunuch, endeavouring to follow us. With brutal disregard of her sex, the big, gaudily-attired brute had seized her by the throat. Her dress was torn, her hair dishevelled, and her jewels lay scattered and trodden under foot. Suddenly a scream sounded, dull and muffled, and, just as I was dragged away into the dark passage, I witnessed the woman who had entranced me hurled backward. I saw her reel, stagger, and fall senseless upon her divan.

The grinning negroes who held me laughed aloud, and hurried me along the short, close passage, and down flight after flight of broken, time-worn steps, while Khazneh, closing the small, heavy door, barred and bolted it securely. Then he followed us, biting his finger-nails in deep thought. Whither they were conducting me I knew not, neither did I care. Azala and I had, by the treachery of some unknown slave, been torn asunder, perhaps never again to meet. Only death would, I knew, expiate the crime of being found in disguise in the Sultan’s harem, and towards the bourne whence none return was I being conveyed.

My anticipations of immediate death were not, however, realised. Deep down into the foundations of the ancient palace the eunuchs conducted me, along a labyrinth of gloomy passages that showed the great extent of the Fada, until we came to a long, subterranean corridor where, on entering, I saw, behind iron bars, the lean, emaciated figure of a man, haggard, unkempt, with the gleam of madness in his eyes. Shaking the bars wildly with the strength of a wild beast, he cried as we passed, —

“Strangers! Have compassion. Have pity. In the name of Allah, who both heareth and knoweth, remove these fetters which for fourteen long years have held me captive.”

“*Na’al abuk!*” (Curse thy father) growled Khazneh, lifting his trailing scimitar in its scabbard and striking the wretched prisoner a heavy blow as he passed. But the man tearing at the bars shrieked and howled in his madness, —

“May the venom of vipers consume thy vitals, and may the kisses of thy women poison thee, thou black-faced son of offal! I recognise thee, thou fiend. Thou art the Aga of the Eunuchs; the

incarnation of Eblis himself. May thy body be cast upon a dungheap and thy soul be delivered unto the tortures of Al-Hawiyat!”

Leaving the wretched man hurling his horrible imprecations, we passed onward along the dark corridor of filthy dens, each protected with strong bars of iron, several being occupied by men, lean, wild-haired and half-clad, who looked more like animals than human beings crouching on their heaps of dirty, mouldy straw. No sunlight ever penetrated there, and the only air or light admitted entered between the crevices of the massive paving stones of the court above. The walls of this Dantean dungeon were black with damp and age, the floor was encrusted with all kinds of filth, and the air was hot, foetid, and so overpowering that Khazneh himself was compelled to take the corner of his silken robe and hold it to his nostrils.

At length, however, on arrival at the further end of the passage, a small door with an iron grating swung open and I was thrust in and there left, the door being immediately closed and secured. In the almost impenetrable darkness I could distinguish nothing, but when I heard the footsteps of my captors receding, my heart sank within me. Noises sounded weirdly in the cavernous blackness; the groans, curses and prayers of my fellow-prisoners. Who were these emaciated, half-starved wretches? What, I wondered, had been their crimes?

Chapter Six

Rage and Remorse

With my feet upon the heap of dirty, evil-smelling straw, I stood hesitating how to act. Of the size or character of my cell I knew nothing; therefore, after reviewing the situation as calmly as I could, I started to feel the walls and ascertain their exact proportions. The place, I found, was small, horribly small. Its height was only just sufficient to allow me to stand upright, while it was not long enough to allow me to lie down except in a crouching, uncomfortable position, its breadth being just two paces.

When, after making myself acquainted with these details, I stood reflecting upon my position, I heard a slight movement in the straw at my feet, and as I bent to ascertain the cause my hand came into contact with the chill, smooth body of a large snake which I had evidently disturbed.

Its contact thrilled me. I drew my hand away in horror, springing back towards the wall, expecting each moment to feel my leg bitten. Straining my eyes into the darkness I did my utmost to discover the whereabouts of the reptile, believing that if it had its bead-like eyes fixed upon me I could detect their brightness. But though I heard a slow rustling among the straw, my enemy seemed in no mood for attack, and I waited motionless, not daring to stir. To be doomed to live and sleep in company of a snake was certainly one of the most hideous tortures to which a man could be subjected, and was a refinement of cruelty equal to any of the revolting barbarities I had witnessed while serving under the standards of the Mahdi and the Khalifa. But the hours dragged on, and although my fellow occupant of the cell remained silent, apparently content, the dungeon itself was weirdly horrible. The cries of my fellow captives, some of whom were perfectly sane and others palpably mad from torture and long confinement, resounded through the place with startling suddenness, and I could hear those whose minds were unhinged gnashing their teeth and beating their bars in vain, frantic effort to obtain release.

With these horrors about me, the whole of my past seemed to flit through my mind – a panorama of wild free life and exciting adventure. My sudden unconsciousness after my fall at the well of Sabo-n-Gari, my strange awakening, and the vision of incomparable beauty that had risen before my wondering, fevered eyes, all recurred to me in hazy indistinctness, like some weird, half-remembered dream. But the pale, anxious face of Azala, who had fought so hard to save me falling into the merciless clutches of my pitiless captors, came before me – vivid, distinct, entrancing. Her every feature was engraven indelibly upon my memory, and her voice seemed to repeat in soft, musical Arabic those strange, mysterious words that had thrilled and entranced me.

She trusted me, she had said. Would she, I wondered, be successful in releasing me from this horribly maddening captivity? That she would use every endeavour of which she was capable I was confident; nevertheless, I knew well the enormity of my crime, and feared that even her earnest words would not soften the flint heart of the relentless Sultan 'Othman, whose every whim was law within his own extensive kingdom.

Well I knew the manner of living of this dreaded ruler of the Western Soudan. He formed the etiquette of his brilliant court upon that of the Khalifa's, keeping himself strictly invisible to the vulgar gaze. He seldom exposed himself to perish of the evil eye. It was he who compelled the women throughout his empire to lead the life of the Eastern harem, and forbade that any (married or single) should show themselves unveiled, making his own family set the example. People approaching the Sultan in audience covered their heads with dust: he never spoke directly to assemblies nor to the people, but always dealt with them through the medium of a herald. Upon the occasions of his going out, his *cortège* was preceded by musicians, drums, and trumpets, and he rode in solitary state, with his suite at a respectable distance behind. Servants marched surrounding his horse, and holding by

turns to his saddle; they were called foot companions, and their headman was the “master of the road.” Only one drum was allowed to precede them, and musicians kept silent when in sight of a town in which the Sultan was residing.

She had spoken of strange marvels, of hidden mysteries that require elucidation, of perils, and of her own misery. Why had unhappiness consumed her? Why, indeed, had she concealed so much from me? For hours I pondered over the veiled words she had uttered, seeking in them some explanation, but finding none.

Then I remembered the hideous blemish upon her fair breast – that mystic mark exactly identical with mine. What, I wondered, could these entwined asps denote? The words of my dead mother rang in my ears: “Seek not to discover its significance until thou meetest with its exact counterpart. Then strive night and day to learn the truth, for, if thou canst elucidate the mystery, thine ears will listen unto strange things, and thine eyes behold wondrous marvels.”

Upon the breast of Azala, the Princess, I had discovered that which I had sought throughout my eventful life, yet even in that moment evil fortune had befallen me, and now, instead of being free to strive towards solving the enigma, I was held captive in that dismal, evil-smelling dungeon, under sentence of death.

Days dragged by – dull, dismal, dispiriting. Suffering the anguish of separation and lost happiness, my whole life seemed wounded. In the dark, damp cell, surrounded by a thousand horrors, oppressed by a thousand vague regrets and bitter thoughts, I awaited the end. Indeed, as the long hours slowly passed, it surprised me that my captors did not drag me forth to die. Once a day three negro guards, heavily armed, appeared and cast to us a little *dodowa*, or kind of cake made of vegetables, with as little ceremony as if they were giving food to dogs, while a slave filled our earthen vessel with water; but we had no exercise, and were compelled to remain behind our bars like animals entrapped.

My cell had been occupied quite recently by some poor wretch, who, according to the story of a half-starved Arab in captivity near me, had died of fever only a few days before my arrival, and with whom the serpent who made his abode there had apparently been on friendly terms. At first both the reptile and myself were consumed by a mutual fear of one another, but on close acquaintanceship he grew to regard me as harmless, and really performed me a service by clearing the mice and other vermin from my narrow, suffocating den.

Once a loud, piercing shriek escaped one of my half-demented fellow captives, who declared he had been bitten by a scorpion, and, to my dismay, the same reptile found its way through the bars of my cell some hours later, but fortunately I detected it in time, driving it out before it could attack me. Hour by hour, day by day, I crouched, disconsolate and despairing, in the almost impenetrable gloom. Accustomed as I was to the wild life of the plains, confinement amid such loathsome surroundings was doubly irksome and nauseating.

In that Stygian darkness day was like night, and I could keep no count of time; but with the harsh gibberings of idiots always grating on my ears, I grew apprehensive that ere long I, too, must become demented. My respite from death I attributed to the intervention of the fair woman whose wondrous beauty had enmeshed me, and whose words of mystery had aroused in me an intense, unconquerable desire to solve the one great enigma of my life.

Yet as time went on and relief came not, I began to fear that the eunuch had spoken the truth when he informed Azala of the Sultan’s absence, and that, fearing to order me to execution, Khazneh had resolved that I should be driven to madness in that foul, foetid dungeon, where so many captives had pined and died. Many times I had heard how the great Sultan ‘Othman was ruled almost entirely by harem influence; how the bright-eyed, imperious Sultana of to-day might be a mangled corpse torn to pieces by the yelping jackals at the city gate to-morrow; how a single word whispered by a dark-haired houri into the ear of her lord might either cause a courtier’s head to fall, or secure for some menial an exalted office of power, with many slaves and fat emoluments. Indeed, it was notorious throughout the Soudan that in the great Fada of the Sultan of Sokoto none was safe. Wives,

courtiers, guards, eunuchs, slaves, all trembled, fearing to arouse the anger of the brutal autocrat, for well were they aware that the keen *doka* of the black executioner was kept ever busy, and none knew whose head next might fall. Black plots and dastardly intrigues were constantly at work within the great Courts of the Harem. The favourite, one day loaded with costly jewels, basking in the smiles of her august master, radiant upon her divan and ruler of the gilded Courts of Enchantment, would assuredly sooner or later fall a victim to the jealousy of her less fortunate sisters, and be compelled to wash the feet of the bright-eyed slave her whilom handmaiden, become the wife of some common soldier, or drink the fatal draught from the golden Cup of Death.

Yet amid such surroundings, continually witnessing the complicated plots and counter-plots engendered by the fiercest feminine hatred, with unceremonious strangling, poisoning or decapitation as the inevitable result, lived Azala, pure as the jasmine-flower, bright as the sunrise on the Great Desert, graceful as the rose bending beneath the evening zephyr, a maiden of absolutely incomparable countenance and entrancing loveliness.

For nearly a whole moon had I remained in my foul, dank kennel, when one morning four gaudily-attired Janissaries released me, and, without deigning to reply to my eager questions, conducted me out of the dungeon and up the worn and broken flight of stairs to the blessed light of day. So long had I been in darkness that the sun's glare blinded me, and keenly apprehensive that Azala's efforts had been unavailing, and that I was at last being led to execution, I walked on between my guards, inert, dejected and despairing.

A dozen Janissaries, each armed with gleaming scimitar and *jambiyah*, joined us, as across one great open courtyard after another was I conducted in procession solemn and funereal. The magnitude and magnificence of those squares, with great plashing fountains, tall palms and colonnades of dead-white horse-shoe arches, astounded me. Evidently they were the outer courts of the palace, for at each gate there stood Janissaries in uniforms of blue and gold, with drawn swords, erect, silent, statuesque. Leaving the Courts of Love, the innermost centre of the great Fada, we crossed the Court of the Grand Vizier, the Court of the Gado (Lord of the Treasury), the Court of the Eunuchs, the Court of the Janissaries, the Court of the Armourers and many others, each larger and more massive in construction, until at length we came to the great, arched outer gate, the only entrance to this sumptuous and gigantic dwelling-place of one of the most powerful potentates of Al-Islâm. Here my heart sank within me, for awaiting us was the executioner, a big, brutal negro, who carried over his shoulder his great *doka*, or keen, curved sword, that had smote off so many heads of men and women.

Instinctively I knew my fate. I was being conducted to the Kaboga, or place of execution, there to die.

As we approached, the ponderous gate opened and with a loud blast from a dozen blatant wind instruments of curious shape there entered a man attired in white, sitting erect on a richly-caparisoned, coal-black Arab horse, and followed by a crowd of mounted attendants and guards on foot.

"May Allah, the One Granter of Requests, envelop our lord the Sultan with the Cloak of Peace," cried the guards, lifting their bass voices with one accord, salaaming before the sharp-eyed man, whose black beard was well trimmed, and in whose crimson turban gleamed a magnificent aigrette of diamonds.

Three loud blasts and the roll of a drum announced the return of the Sultan 'Othman. Each time slaves and guards bent low with reverent genuflexions, and each time they lifted aloud their voices in praise of his Imperial Majesty.

As, tongue-tied in amazement, I gazed upon the brilliant cavalcade of the powerful autocrat whose fame had been carried over the boundless deserts even to Omdurman, his keen glance fell upon me. Upon his dark, sensual face, in which cruelty was strongly marked, there rested for a second a shadow of displeasure, then reining his horse close to me his searching eyes wandered to the executioner and the Janissaries. Scarcely had I sufficient clothes to cover me, and what I wore were ragged and dirty, yet with the pride of my race I drew myself up, facing him boldly.

In deep, stern tones he demanded of his Grand Vizier beside him, whose name was Mahaza, son of Alhan, the nature of the crime for which I was to suffer.

“During thine absence, O Mirror of Virtue, yonder spy, an accursed Dervish from Omdurman, hath been discovered by Khazneh, Aga of the women, attired in a woman’s haick, concealed within thy Courts of Enchantment.”

“In my harem?” exclaimed the Sultan, whose angry eyes flashed in my direction. “By what means did the dog obtain admission?”

“I know not, O Branch of Honour,” answered the Grand Vizier, but at that moment Khazneh, in robes of bright yellow silk, pushed forward, and making a deep obeisance, exclaimed, —

“Give leave unto thy servant to speak, O lord, our Sultan. I found the Dervish spy concealed within the pavilion of thy daughter Azala.”

The Sultan ’Othman glared at me with brows contracted, and uttered a fierce and terrible curse upon his enemy the Khalifa. His soul in an instant filled with bitterest rage and hate.

“How camest thou, son of *sebel* to pass the guards of mine innermost court?” he demanded, in wrathful tones that caused all to tremble.

“I, an Arab of the North, was wounded in battle, and thy daughter, upon whom may the blessing of the One Bountiful rest, gave unto me succour. If thou sparest me — ”

“Silence, dog!” he roared; then, with a gesture of impatience, turned to his councillor, saying, —

“Let the spy’s head be struck off and placed upon the palace gate as a warning.”

The eyes of my guards, on hearing this, brightened, and they cried: “Thy will, O Mighty Ruler, is our command,” and those holding me pushed me forward so roughly that my ragged jibbeh was torn from the neck to the waist, displaying my chest.

The Sultan, with a parting injunction to my captors to place my head upon the gate and to announce throughout the city that a spy of the Khalifa had been captured and executed, was about to ride away when suddenly I noticed that he again fixed his gaze full upon me and sat for a few seconds perplexed and thoughtful.

“Bring hither thy prisoner. Let him approach me closely,” he shouted to the Janissaries, who were at that moment hurrying me away.

Amazed at the Sultan’s sudden change of manner, the Aga of the Eunuchs and his menials dragged me back before their ruler, who, with his startled eyes fixed upon my uncovered breast, asked in a tone of awe, —

“Speak, slave! How earnest thou by that mystic mark of the serpents?”

His anger had instantly cooled. He had detected the strange red scar, and for him it evidently had some serious significance, for he had grown pale under his manly bronze, and the bejewelled hand that held the reins trembled slightly.

“Of its origin I have no knowledge,” I answered, glancing quickly round and noticing the effect produced by the monarch’s sudden change of manner.

“Whence comest thou?” he asked, with eagerness unusual to an autocrat.

“From Omdurman. I am of the Ansar of the Khalifa.”

“And thy parentage?”

“I was born in the Mountains of Aures, two days’ journey from Batna. My father was the Hadj Yakub Sarraf.”

“Yukub Sarraf, the Kaid of El-Manaa?” he inquired quickly, his sinister face betraying an expression of combined surprise and fear.

“Even so, O Sultan.”

The excess of his rage was only equalled by the promptness of his remorse.

Bending in his saddle for a moment, he examined closely the puzzling mark upon me, and then, after a few moments’ silence, he turned to Khazneh, who had been standing aghast and amazed, and said, —

“Let the spy’s life be spared, but let him be expelled from our midst. If thou findest him within the confines of our empire after three suns have set, then let him die. Mount him upon the swiftest *meheri*, and let twenty guards similarly mounted journey with him until he hath passed beyond the boundary of Sokoto. I have ordained it. Let it be done accordingly.”

Turning to me he said: “If thou ridest on the wings of haste thy life shall be spared; but enter not again into this my kingdom, or of a verity thine head shall fall.” And as he turned to ride forward, he added, in a harsh, strained voice that became softened towards me: “Go, leave my rose-garden of happiness quickly. Go, and may the peace of Allah, the Omniscient, rest upon thee in the hour of thine adversity.”

The all-powerful Sultan, with face pale and agitated, moved slowly onward across the great court with bowed head, followed by his wondering councillors and cringing slaves. Next second I was free.

Chapter Seven

The White City

All sounds had gradually died away in the town. A marabout had climbed to the terrace of the great mosque and was crying "Allah is great! Allah is great!" The surrounding terraces were peopled with white forms which stood out against the summits of the palm trees and the green of the baobab. Their backs were turned to the purple splendours of the dying light, for their faces looked towards the already darkened east, lighted for them by that eternal light in which Mecca is to be found. The silence was harshly broken by a brazen sound. It was the tam-tams in the Kasbah sounding the call for prayer.

The plain was now a vast desert phantasmagorically illuminated. Above, the sky flamed into every imaginable colour, and the small water-channel, scarcely visible a moment before, blazed into a reflection of the ardour of the sky, while the rows of ospreys on its banks looked like necklaces of pink pearls. Then all the enchantment was overwhelmed by the sudden twilight that heralds the tropical night.

Well mounted on a swift camel, with water-skin and provision-bag filled, and escorted by my guards, I had ridden through the crowded markets, and passing out of the Kofa-n-Magaidi, or eastern gate, set forth across the wide, sandy plain in the direction of prayer. The brief glimpse I caught of the place as I passed hurriedly through its streets surprised me. The inhabitants seemed to some extent a cultured people, and the women apparently enjoyed considerable personal freedom, although the majority were veiled. The men, despite their bellicose spirit and the chronic state of warfare maintained, were not naturally cruel, and treated their slaves kindly.

The towers, cupolas and high white walls of the great, impregnable palace, wherein dwelt the woman who had enchanted me, stood dark and frowning against the crimson brilliance of the afterglow, and from my exalted position on the back of my *meheri* I turned once to glance at them, wondering if Azala knew of my expulsion. Perhaps from her lattice in the great square tower rising above the city she was watching my departure, but she had given no sign, and sorrowfully I at length turned my back upon the White City of the Sultan 'Othman, and urged my camel onward towards the horizon, which seemed a sea of mirage, with a feeling that Fate had, indeed, laid her hand upon me with undeserved harshness.

In the cooler hours that succeeded, when the light had entirely faded, and the wind, whirling up clouds of fine sand into our faces, compelled us to cover them as we rode on, leaving only our eyes visible, Shu'ba, the chief of the black horsemen accompanying me, declared that if we were to reach Kukawa, in Bornu, within three days, we should be compelled to press forward constantly, resting but a few hours during the heat of noon. My guards were heavily armed, each carrying a very keen, straight sword, a dagger suspended from the left wrist, and a spear six feet long, while with several this arsenal was also supplemented by a rifle. Acting no doubt under the Sultan's orders, they treated me with every consideration, and proved themselves light-hearted, genial fellows; yet the long ride through the great, silent wilderness, eternally warm, eternally gloomy, gave me many opportunities for dismal reflections upon the strange turn events had taken. Azala had fascinated, entranced me, and I loved her with all the strength of my being. Yet I had been thus forcibly torn from her, never to return on penalty of death. Each long stride of the animal beneath me took me further from her, yet she trusted in me to save her. From the words uttered by Khazneh in reply to the Sultan, it was evident that the latter had had no knowledge of my capture and imprisonment, and Azala had, on account of her father's absence, been unable to secure my release.

The mysterious symbol that seemed to link me in some inexplicable manner to the woman I loved had apparently produced in the Sultan a feeling of dismay, for when he noticed it a sudden terror had enthralled him. Awe-stricken at its significance, he had instantly rescinded the order for

my execution, sending me forth from his empire as if apprehensive that my presence was a harbinger of some dreaded evil.

For a brief space we halted in the date-grove of Maifoura at midnight, eating a little *tiggra* with curdled milk diluted with water, and some *ngaji* or paste of sorghum, and having thus recruited our strength the cry of “*Ala e’dhahar! ala e dhahar!*” (Mount! mount!) sounded, and we resumed our ride over the low hills of Kobiri, and through the great, gloomy forest of Gounel. South of the Lake Tsad the country is fertile, and only here and there are there wide, sandy deserts reminding one of the waterless, sterile regions of Azawagh and Taganet in the Great Sahara, that arid, monotonous, and almost impassable gulf that separates the regions of Sokoto, Bornu, Baguirmi and Gando from the European civilisation of Northern Algeria. Having passed through the forest, the wooded level became interrupted from time to time by bare-naked concavities, or shallow hollows, consisting of black, sedimentary soil, where, during the rainy season, the water collects, and drying up gradually leaves a most fertile sediment for the cultivation of the *masakwa*, a kind of holcus which is the most important article in the agriculture of Sokoto. We saw herds of ostriches, troops of gazelles and many moufflons as, on our forced march, we passed the great ruins of Thaba, grim, grey, time-worn monuments of the Roman occupation, forded the Yoobe river at Ngouroutoua – where my guards told me an English traveller named Richardson had died many years ago – skirted the lagoon of Mouggobi, and continuing for nearly eight hours along narrow, verdant valleys, where, side by side with the diminutive, stunted palms, grew the colossal baobabs, the mastodons of the vegetable kingdom, whose gigantic branches were inhabited by vultures, serpents, bats and lizards. Then at last we passed out upon the great granite plateau of Koyam, dotted over with hillocks and in part strewn with quartz sand, home of the nomad Uled-Delim, “pirates of the desert,” a sun-baked, stony wilderness devoid of any living thing. The third day was occupied wholly in crossing this vast solitude, where incessantly we were compelled to shout “*Hai! Hai!*” the ejaculation of caution to our camels, as the beasts, weary and jaded, plodded on until, about an hour after we had knelt to repeat our *majhrib*, while the shadows were lengthening as the sun declined, the tall, white watch-tower at the principal gate of Kukawa rose before us, and beyond lay the waters of Lake Tsad shimmering like liquid gold in the glorious evening light.

When the cry was raised that the town was in sight, my guards held consultation and halted. Then Shu’ba, drawing up his camel close to mine, exclaimed, —

“Thou hast performed the journey within the time stipulated by our lord the Sultan, therefore we now leave thee to continue thy way alone.”

“Wilt thou not rest yonder for a while before returning?” I asked, surprised.

“Nay,” he answered, shrugging his shoulders significantly. “The people of Bornu are our enemies. We would rather take our ease upon the plains than within the city of those who seek our overthrow” – a speech that was greeted by low, guttural sounds of approbation by the others perched on their camels around. Then, continuing, he said, “It is our Sultan’s will that the *meheri* thou ridest shall be given unto thee, together with this rifle, ammunition and *jambiyah*,” and as he uttered these words he handed me the gun he carried, together with his pouch and a crooked knife in a silver scabbard he drew from his sash.

“Alone in these regions thou mayest require them,” observed a light-hearted young negro, with a broad grin.

“Unto thy Sultan, whose dignity be increased, render thanks in my name. Tell him that Zafar-Ben-A’Ziz is his grateful servant, and that he beareth neither malice nor hatred,” I answered.

“Behold, I am also charged with a further duty,” said Shu’ba, with a solemnity quite unusual to him. “Before we left the Fada one of the eunuchs of the Courts of Enchantment gave this unto me to deliver into thine hands,” and he drew from the breast of his gandoura a small box of delicately-chased gold, securely sealed.

“Whence didst thou obtain it?” I asked, in surprise, taking it in my hands.

“From Hisham, the eunuch. He refused to tell who had given it unto him, but gave me strict command to place it in thine hands at the moment when we parted, with an injunction that it must not be opened until thou art actually within the walls of Kukawa.”

“May I not investigate its contents now?” I asked, puzzled.

“Nay, curb thine impatience. Behold, the sun is already declining,” he answered, glancing around. “Spur onward, or, of a verity, thou wilt not obtain entrance to yonder city ere its gate is closed.”

His prompting influenced me to make hurried adieu, and, as with one accord they gave me “Peace,” I sped away in the direction of the town, turning once to wave back a farewell. As I rode forward, four armed horsemen, their white burnouses flying in the wind, sped across the plain to meet me. With rifles held high in air with threatening gesture, they in a few minutes pulled their horses to their haunches before me, loudly demanding whence I came.

“I am Zafar-Ben-A’Ziz of the Ansar of thine ally, the Khalifa of Omdurman,” I replied, laughing a moment later at the effect my words had produced.

“From Omdurman?” they gasped. “How earnest thou hither in company with horsemen of the Sultan ’Othman, who fled at our approach?”

Briefly, I told them how I had been held prisoner, and subsequently expelled by the Sultan.

“Allah hath indeed covered thee with the cloak of protection,” observed one of the men, “None who descends to the terrible dungeons beneath the Fada of Kano ever comes forth alive.”

“Yea, thou hast assuredly narrowly escaped,” agreed another, and, as they turned to ride back with me, they related news of how, on the advance of the Khalifa’s troops towards Sokoto, the iron cymbals of war had been silenced, for the Dervishes had been attacked and routed by the Kanouri and Tuaregs in the swamps outside Massenya, after which it was believed the survivors had returned in confusion to Omdurman. Thus I found myself in sorry plight, without resources, and with a thousand miles of gloomy forest and burning desert between myself and the Dervish headquarters beside the Nile. With my companions I entered the ponderous gate which was being kept open for our arrival, and, passing the little daily market (the *dyrriya*), which was crowded, we rode along the *deudal*, or promenade, past groups of Arabs and native courtiers in all the finery of their dress and of their brightly-caparisoned horses, until we came to the house of the sheikh, a spacious place with a single *chedia* or caoutchouc-tree in front. But the sand into which we had floundered as if it were a mire pursued us everywhere – in the streets, in the houses. The lounging slaves stared at my ragged attire, but the Sheikh Mohammed Ben Bu-Sad, to whom I was conducted, was very gracious, and after hearing the story of the defeat of my comrades-in-arms, my captivity, and my narrow escape, gave orders that for the present I should be lodged with one of the horsemen who had met me, and whom I discovered was named Lamino (properly El-Amin), his confidential officer. Thus, an hour later, I found myself installed in a small, clay-built house in the *billa gedibe*, or eastern town, and when alone I drew forth the small, golden box Shu’ba had given me. It was square, about the length of the middle finger, covered with quaintly-graven arabesques, and securely sealed with yellow wax.

Chapter Eight

Veiled Men of the Desert

Eagerly I broke the seals and tremblingly opened the lid of the tiny casket, taking out a folded piece of paper covered with lines of Arabic hastily-scrawled in yellow ink. These, in the dim twilight, I deciphered only with difficulty, and found they read as follows: —

“Know, O Stranger, now thou hast escaped from the wrath of our lord the Sultan, that thy presence within the walls of the Fada hath placed Azala, Princess of Sokoto, in deadly Peril. If thou wilt lend her thine aid, return, for thou alone canst solve the mysterious symbol of the asps, rescue her from death, and bring her unto the garden of happiness. Know, O Stranger, that even though she cannot communicate or have speech with thee, that she loveth thee; that each hour of thine enforced absence is as a year, and that the gilded pavilion wherein she dwelleth is but a house of sorrow because of thy departure. Keep the seal of silence ever upon thy lips and obey the command of Azala Fathma quickly, that thine endeavours may be approved. Return unto her speedily in such disguise that thou canst not be recognised; then will she tear aside the veil of secrecy and reveal unto thee strange marvels. Pause not in thine efforts to return, for each day bringeth her nearer unto cruel and ignominious Certainty. May the rose-grove of thy prosperity and good fortune be increased daily in freshness and magnificence, and the foundation of thy belief in the purity of thy One of Beauteous Countenance be more firmly established from hour to hour. — Thy Friend.”

After the heat and burden of the long African day the respite at twilight always gives one a sensation of physical solace, yet nevertheless it brings with it a feeling of intense sadness and melancholy.

Again and again I read the curious missive. Evidently at Azala’s instigation it had been penned in order to reassure me, and to induce me to return so that I could assist her in solving the mysterious problem to which she had hinted so pointedly when we had been alone. But foreseeing plainly the serious risk I should run if I attempted to re-enter Kano, and the absolute impossibility of obtaining access to the innermost courts of the Fada, I regarded the suggestion as utterly hopeless. Had not the Sultan warned me that if I again set foot within his empire my life would pay the penalty? Might not his dread of the mysterious evil that I might bring upon him cause him to take my life, notwithstanding his daughter’s fervent supplications?

Yet Azala was in sore need of help, and sought my aid. Her promise to “tear aside the veil of secrecy” I felt inclined to construe into a pledge to render me explanation of the curious marks that both of us bore. Was it not more than an extraordinary coincidence that with a thousand miles of arid, stony desert, and a similar distance of fertile land separating us at our birth, we should each bear the Brand of the Asps – the mystic symbol the sight of which terrified even the powerful Ruler of Sokoto.

From the demeanour of both the Sultan and his daughter I felt that the strange device was the key of some greater secret underlying it, and the thought of Azala in peril, and trusting in me alone for assistance, urged me to a resolution to obey the injunctions of my anonymous correspondent. I had both a stout heart and a strong arm. My true Bedouin parentage had imparted to me the reckless *nonchalance* of the vagabond adventurer, and my life during the past ten years had been a strange series of nomadic ups and downs, desert wandering, fighting, slave-raiding, trading; in fact, I had picked up a precarious livelihood in the same manner as the majority of Sons of the Desert whose camels are their only wealth, and whose ragged tents their only dwelling-place.

The Mystery of the Asps seemed inexplicable, but in that cool night beneath the stars in the little open court I made solemn determination to return to Kano and seek its solution, even though compelled to risk my life in the attempt.

Until the going down of the sun on the Nahr-el-arba following my arrival at Kukawa was I the guest of Lamino; then, refreshed by rest, I prayed my *Fatiha* in the Great Mosque, and assuming the loose robe of dark blue cotton, wrapping a white litham around my face and twisting some yards of camel's hair around my head, set out upon my *meheri* to accompany a caravan of Buzawe conveying merchandise to El Fasher, whence I intended to travel alone back to Omdurman, there to report the annihilation of my comrades.

In the whole of that vast region from Lake Tsad to El Fasher, comprising thousands of square miles, there is not a single carriage road, not a mile of navigable waters, not a wheeled vehicle, canoe or boat of any kind. There are scarcely any beaten tracks, for most of the routes, though followed for ages without divergence to right or left, are temporarily effaced with every sandstorm, and recovered only by means of the permanent landmarks – wells, prominent dunes, a solitary knoll crowned with a solitary bush, or perchance a ghastly line of bleached bones of men and animals, the remains of slaves, camels, or travellers that may have perished of thirst or exhaustion between the oases. Few venture to travel alone, or even in small parties, which could offer but little resistance to the bands of marauders hovering about all the main lines of traffic. Hence the caravans usually comprise hundreds and even thousands of men and pack animals, all under a *kebir*, or guide, whose word is law. Under him are assistants, armed escorts and scouts to reconnoitre the land in dangerous neighbourhoods, besides notaries to record contracts and agreements, sometimes even public criers, and an *imam* to recite the prescribed prayers.

The caravan, belonging to Abu Talib, a wealthy merchant of Yô, was a small one, consisting of about one hundred camels heavily laden with ivory, kola nuts, spices, and other goods from the far south, destined for the great market at El Fasher, and was guarded by twenty fierce-looking Arabs and a number of negro and Arab drivers, all well-armed, for the country through which we were to pass was infested by the marauding Tuaregs, those black-veiled terrors of the plains, who know nothing of anything but the desert and the implacable sun.

Abu Talib, who accompanied us in person, was an aged, good-hearted man of the tribe of Aulad Hamed, who had spent the greater part of his life trading between In Salah and Timbuktu, or between Yô and Mourkoug, over the boundless Sahara, and in the darkness, as we rode together and our camels with silent tread loomed like phantoms in the midnight air, we told each other of our journeys and adventures. His companions were true sons of the sands, active, vigorous and enterprising, inured to hardships, and with the mental faculties sharpened almost to a preternatural degree by the hard struggle for existence in their arid, rocky homes. In making their way across those trackless solitudes they seemed endowed with that “sense of direction,” the existence of which has recently been discussed by students of psychology. In the whole of the Great Sahara no race is more shrewd or cunning than the Buzawe, and their tact and skill enable them to get the better both of Arabs and negroes in the markets of the oases. Greed and harshness were stamped upon their hard features, but nevertheless they treated me, a lonely wanderer, with considerable kindness.

On leaving Kukawa we passed across a great plain, then through a dense forest, afterwards entering a fine, undulating country, covered with a profusion of herbage, with here and there large gamshi-trees with broad, fleshy leaves of brightest green. The moon shone bright as day, and as our file of camels strode on with slow, rhythmic movement under their burdens, the drivers would now and then sing snatches of wild songs of daring in the Hausa tongue.

Thus, resting by day and journeying by night, we moved forward around the marshy shore of Lake Tsad to Missene, thence through the cool, shady forest of Dekena Kreda, enlivened by many birds, along the densely-populated valleys of Boulala to the strange little town of Amm Chererib situate in the hollow formed between four great mountains, at length, when the moon was again at the full, reaching Abecher, at the foot of the hills of Outoulo, without much exciting incident. Halting for one day under the fortified walls to fill our camels' *kewas* with provisions, we again pushed forward unceasingly in order to accomplish the two hundred and fifty miles of barren, waterless land

unmercifully scorched and burnt by a devouring sun, that stretches between the capital of Darmaba and El Fasher. This portion of the journey was the most difficult we had encountered, for the rough stones played terrible havoc with the spongy feet of our camels, and the heat was insufferable, even at night, on account of the poison-wind sweeping across us continuously. For five days we pushed forward by short stages only, until at sunrise one day we espied an oasis, and, encamping in the small shade it afforded, Abu Talib decided to give the animals rest. The packs were therefore removed, our tents erected, and having eaten our *dakkwa*, a dry paste made of pounded Guinea-corn with dates and pepper, washed it down with some *giya* made of sorghum, we reclined and slept during the warm, drowsy hours of the siesta.

Some noise had awakened me, and lighting my keef-pipe I was squatting in the shadow cast by one of the camel's packs, deep in my own sad thoughts, when the crack of a rifle startled me. Next second, even before my companions could seize their arms, the whole neighbourhood was alive with yelling Tuaregs on horseback, armed to the teeth, with their draperies floating in the wind. I saw they all wore the black litham about their faces. One, as he advanced on foot, levelled his gun at me and fired, but missed. In a moment I threw myself full length upon the sand behind a camel's pack, and opened fire upon our enemies. With deliberate aim I had picked off three with as many shots, when suddenly I heard old Abu Talib cry, —

“Lost are we! Our enemies are the Aoulemidens!”

Almost before the words died upon his lips a bullet struck the old man full in the breast; he staggered back and fell, within a few yards of me, a corpse. To resist these fierce outlaws, the most relentless tribe of Tuaregs who lived in the depths of that arid, desolate country, with no knowledge of the outside world, was, we knew, hopeless, for there were fully three hundred of them, and as they found our little band disinclined to surrender, they began shooting us down ruthlessly. Already four of our party had been captured and bound, while three were lying dead, nevertheless our rapid fusillade kept at bay those preparing to dash in and seize our camels' packs.

Fiercely we fought for life. We knew that if we fell into the hands of this brigandish tribe who called themselves “The Breath of the Wind,” by which their victims were to understand that they might as well seek the wind as hope to recover their stolen property, we should either be sold at the nearest market, or placed under some horrible and fiendish torture to die a slow, agonising death. Suddenly a wild yell rent the air, and before we were aware of it a troop of some fifty horsemen dashed in among us, so quickly that resistance was impossible. Hand-to-hand we struggled, straining every muscle to evade our enemies, but ere long the obstinate, heroic courage of my companions could no longer blind them to the approach of the inevitable, and we were each secured and bound, captives in the hands of the merciless veiled men of the desert, whose fierce brutality was feared alike by slaves and Sultans throughout the sun-parched land.

Our arms were twisted from our grasp, our camels' packs seized, and, linked together ignominiously by chains around our necks, we were secured to three palm trunks, under a strong guard with loaded rifles, to wait while our captors investigated their booty and reloaded our camels. Nearly two hours this occupied, when at length the grey-bearded, sinister-faced leader of the band of free-booters gave the order to mount, and before long the party, numbering nearly three hundred horsemen armed to the teeth, moved away into the sandy wilderness, compelling us to trudge over the hot, stony ground on foot under the fiery rays of the blazing sun. It was evident that we were to be sold as slaves. One unfortunate camel-driver, who had been wounded, fell from sheer exhaustion within the first hour, and was left to die, for slave-raiders like “The Breath of the Wind” regard the wounded only as an encumbrance, and as they will not sell they are either put out of their misery by a shot, or left to die of thirst and become food for the vultures. Fortunately, with the exception of a slight cut on the left hand received from a *jambiyah* with which one of my captors had slashed at me, I sustained no injury, and with my companions, a little band of silent, despairing men, I plodded wearily onward — onward to be sold into slavery.

Upon all the perpendicular rays of the sun beat down with a heat as burning and intense as that of a fiery furnace, and always – always for a horizon – the desert, the infinite breadth of glaring sands.

Chapter Nine

An Audience of the Khalifa

Those days of burning heat were full of horrors. Treated with scant humanity, we were half-starved, allowed only sufficient water to slake our thirst once a day, and beaten mercilessly with thongs of rhinoceros hide whenever one, more faint and weary than the rest, lagged behind. Eastward we travelled for six days, until, at the well of Lassera Dar Abd-er-Rahman, we were sold for two small bags of gold to some nomad Dasas encamped there. The Tuaregs dare not enter a town in the Eastern Soudan, although, in the West, they are universally dreaded on account of their depredations; therefore they always sell their captives to other slavers, who dispose of their human wares at the nearest trade centre. Hence, by our new masters we were conveyed to Dara, a town one day's journey south of El Fasher, placed in the slave market, and, after considerable haggling, disposed of.

My new master was a well-dressed, keen-eyed, wizen-faced old Arab of the tribe known as Jalin, who, after inspecting me and looking into my mouth as he would a horse, handed payment with ill grace to the black-faced scoundrel who sold me, and ordered me to follow him. Together we passed out of the busy, bustling crowd, when he addressed me, asking my name.

“Art thou an Arab from the North?” he exclaimed in surprise, when I had told him who I was, and the place of my birth. “How earnest thou hither?”

“I fell into the hands of the Tuaregs, upon whom may the curse of Eblis rest!” I answered, hesitating to inform him at present that I was a Dervish.

As we walked to the city gate, where he said his camels were tethered, he told me his name was Shazan, and, judge my extreme satisfaction when he added that he was about to return to Omdurman, where he lived opposite the Beit-el-Amana. Hence, my stroke of ill-fortune turned out advantageous, for within a week I found myself once again within the great walls of the Khalifa's stronghold. Then my new master having treated me harshly, I resolved at last that he should suffer, therefore I applied to the Kaid for release from slavery, on the ground that I was a member of the Ansar of the Khalifa. Old Shazan, amazed that his latest purchase should turn out to be one of his great ruler's bodyguard, rated me soundly for not informing him at first, but I laughed, telling him that I had desired to get to Omdurman, and kept my own counsel, until such time as it suited me. Knowing that he would lose the money he had paid for me, the close-fisted old merchant refused to comply with the order made by the Kaid for my release, but the rumour of my escape from Kano, coming to the ears of the great Abdullah, the latter one day sent six of his personal attendants with orders to release me, and to bring me before him.

The shadows were lengthening in the marble courts of the “Bab,” or great palace of the Mahdi's tyrannical successor, when I was conducted across the outer square, where brightly-dressed guards were lounging on their rifles, or playing *damma* beneath the cool, vine-veiled arches. Never before had I been permitted to set foot inside the court, although many times had I passed under the shadow of the Iron Mosque near by, and gazed with curiosity at the high walls, smeared with red sand, which encircled the marble courts, gilded pavilions and cool gardens of the ruler of the Soudan – the ruler whose only idea was self-aggrandisement. The extent of the palace amazed me, for, even if it was scarcely as luxurious as the wonderful Fada at Kano, it was assuredly quite as large. Through one open, sunlit court after another we passed, until we were challenged by four of the royal bodyguard with drawn swords, but a word propitiated them, and a few seconds later I found myself in the great, marble-built Hall of Audience, in the presence of the stout, sinister-faced man of middle age and kingly bearing, with black, scraggy beard, whose name was a power throughout the Soudan. He wore a robe of bright purple, embroidered with gold, a turban of white silk, and his fat, brown hands were loaded with rings of enormous value.

Beneath a great baldachin of bright yellow silk, with tassels and fringes of gold, surmounted by the standard of the Mahdi, the powerful Abdullah, the ruler before whom all trembled, reclined upon his luxurious silken divan, fanned by black slaves on either side, while a negro lad sat at his feet, ready to hand him a pipe, the mouth-piece of which was studded with diamonds. Around him were grouped his body-servants, the *mulazimin*, and officers, while near him was Abdel Gayum, the chief eunuch, his hand resting upon his sword, and Ali Wad Helu, chief of the Baggara, who had led the ill-fated expedition of which I had been a member.

Conducted by my guides up to the scarlet mat spread before the potentate, who thought himself master of the whole world, I fell upon my knees in obeisance, expressing thanks for my rescue from bondage.

“Let him be seated,” the Khalifa ordered, turning to his slaves, and in an instant cushions were brought, and I sat myself, cross-legged, awaiting questions to fall from his lips. “What, I wondered, had I done that I was allowed to sit in the royal presence?”

“So thou art the Arab Zafar-Ben-A’Ziz, the horseman who alone escaped death at the well of Sabo-n-Gari?” exclaimed the vain, cruel, quick-tempered man who ruled the Soudan under the guise of Mahdiism.

“I am, O King,” I answered, bowing until my forehead touched the carpet.

“Of a verity will I punish those enemies who attacked my Jehadieh,” he cried suddenly, in fiercest rage. “Where be those owls, those oxen of the oxen, those beggars, those cut-off ones, those aliens, those Sons of Flight? Withered be their hands! palsied be their fingers! the foul moustachioed fellows! basest of the Arabs who ever hammered tent-peg! sneaking cats! goats of Al-Akhfash! Truly will I torture them with the torture of oil, the mines of infamy, the cold of countenance! By Allah, and by Allah, and by Allah, we will crush those sons of Ach Chaitan like snakes, and throw their bodies to the dogs!” Then, turning to me in calmer mood, the autocrat of the Soudan exclaimed, “Some of thine adventures have already reached mine ear, and I would hear from thine own lips how thou didst escape and how farest thou in the Fada of ’Othman of Sokoto. Let not thy tongue hurry, but relate carefully in thine own words what things occurred to thee.”

“Thy servant is honoured, O Ruler of our Empire,” I answered. “Under thy Raya Zerga did I go forth, but returned hither as the slave of the merchant Shazan – ”

“Already have we full knowledge of that,” the tyrannical monarch interrupted, and turning to one of his officers he added, with an imperious wave of his fat hand, “Let the merchant Shazan, the dog of a Jalin, receive fifty strokes with the bastinado and be fined two bags of gold for purchasing a slave belonging to his Sultan.”

Then, as the official hastened out to do his capricious master’s bidding, the Khalifa turned towards me, his thick red lips parted in a smile, lolling back lazily on his divan as he exclaimed, —

“Continue thy story. Our ears are open for information regarding the city of ’Othman, therefore describe in detail all that thou knowest.”

Briefly I related how we had been attacked at night by the Tuaregs, how my comrades had been slaughtered fighting till the last, and how I awoke to find myself within the palace of the Sultan ’Othman, when suddenly the injunction contained in the anonymous letter recurred to me: “Keep the seal of silence ever upon thy lips.” Therefore I deemed it expedient to omit from my narrative all reference to Azala, making it appear that I had been rescued by a kind-hearted soldier of the palace guard. I knew that Abdullah delighted in listening to calumnies and hearing evil spoken of other people, and for half-an-hour entertained him by describing the situation and aspect of Kano, the dimensions of the Fada, the horrors of my dungeon, and the personal appearance and character of the Sultan ’Othman, to which all listened with breathless attention.

When I had finished he remained silent a moment, as if reflecting, then raising his head he bestowed a few words of commendation upon me, concluding by the declaration, —

“Of a verity thou art a faithful and valiant servant. Henceforward thou shalt be chief of my *mulazimin*, and honoured among men.”

I was expressing thanks in flowery speech to the autocrat for this appointment, which, as chief of his Majesty's body-servants, was a position of great honour, with substantial emoluments, when suddenly the silk-robed heralds posted at the entrance to the Hall of Audience sounded three loud blasts upon their shining *onbeias*. Then, as every one's attention was directed towards the great horse-shoe arch from which the curtains of blue silk were ceremoniously drawn aside by black guards, there entered a tall, commanding figure in gorgeous robe, attended by a dozen followers less showily dressed, but all armed, making great show of ostentation. With swaggering gait the stranger strode up the spacious hall, and as the Khalifa motioned me to rise and step aside to allow the new-comer to make obeisance in the royal presence, I was amazed and alarmed to suddenly recognise in him the man I least desired to meet.

It was Khazneh, the brutal Aga of the Eunuchs at the court of 'Othman, Sultan of Sokoto.

Chapter Ten

By Imperial Request

In fear of recognition I held my breath, and, withdrawing among the crowd of guards and courtiers assembled around the royal divan, watched the obsequious homage paid the Khalifa by Khazneh, who I discovered was accompanied by Mahaza, Grand Vizier of Sokoto.

Abdullah, reclining lazily upon his silken cushions, at first paid little heed to their salaams. On his brow was a dark, forbidding look; probably he was thinking of the ill-fated expedition he had dispatched, and the apparent hopelessness of ever conquering his enemy 'Othman. Long ago had he overstepped the dignity of a sovereign, and now coveted the honours of a god. The two ambassadors from the Fada at Kano prostrated themselves, pressing their foreheads to the ground, and assured the powerful head of the Mahdists that they were charged by their Sultan to convey to him most fervent salutations. Yet he affected not to notice their presence.

Surprised at the haughty coolness of his reception, Khazneh, still upon his knees, continued to address the mighty Khalifa.

“Know, O One of Exalted Dignity, Ruler of the Soudan, who holdeth thy servants’ destinies in the hollow of thine hand, the object of our journey hither is to spread out the carpet of apologies, to become ennobled by meeting thine exalted person, to regenerate and to refresh the meadow of our expectations by the showers of the fountain-head of thy wisdom, and to see the rosebuds of our hopes opening and smiling from the breeze of thy regard. Our lord the Sultan has sent us to deliver this, therefore command and deal with us as thou listeth,” and from the breast of his gorgeous robe he drew forth a sealed letter, which was ceremoniously handed to the reclining potentate by one of the black slaves.

The Khalifa Abdullah, suddenly interested, opened it, and, having read the missive, crushed it in his hand with impatient gesture.

“Behold,” added Khazneh, “we are charged to deliver unto thee a few gems for thine acceptance as a peace-offering, and to assure thee of our lord 'Othman’s good will and high esteem,” and as he uttered the words, the gaudily-dressed members of the mission advanced, and, kneeling, deposited before the royal divan a golden salver heaped with costly jewels.

With a cursory glance at them, the occupant of the divan at length motioned the ambassadors to rise, saying in a deep, impressive voice, —

“The request of the Sultan is granted, and his presents accepted, O messengers. Assure thy lord that the knot of our amity is to-day strengthened by this invitation to travel unto Kano, and that ere many moons have risen we shall have the felicity of conversing with him. At present Allah hath not on the face of the earth a servant more excellent nor wise than he, and we are invested with the robe of being the elect and favoured. May the path of our association never become obstructed.”

The dead silence that had fallen upon the Court was broken by rustling movement and low murmurings of approbation.

“Truly thou art wise and generous, O Ruler, upon whom be the blessing of the pardoning Sovereign,” exclaimed Mahaza. “Thou, who art distinguished by great possessions, abundant revenues, innumerable quantities of cattle, and multitudes of servants and slaves, showerest upon thy servants copious favours. May the enemies of the threshold of thy dignity and station be overtaken by the deluge of affliction, and may they in the sea of exclusion be drowned by the waves of perdition.”

“Verily, if thou comest unto Kano, our lord will receive thee with befitting welcome,” added Khazneh.

“Thou, successor to the holy Mahdi who possessest the three greatest blessings, namely, meekness in the time of anger, liberality in the time of dearth, and pardon in a powerful position, wilt

find a reception awaiteth thee such as none have hitherto received within the walls of our city. The relation of a king unto his subjects is like the relation of a soul to the body; in the same way as the soul doth not neglect the body for a single instant, so the king must not forget the care of his subjects even during the twinkling of an eye. Thou hast never swerved from the straight path, hence thou art honoured throughout the Soudan, even to the uttermost ends of Sokoto, and if thou wilt deign to visit our Sultan he will offer unto thee and thine officers, guards and slaves, generous entertainment within the Fada, for he desireth an understanding with thee that our countries may unite to defeat and discomfort our mutual enemies.”

The reason of the unlooked-for invitation to visit the great White City he had plotted to besiege immediately commended itself to the Khalifa, who, with a benign smile, took from his finger two great emerald rings, and, handing one to each of the Sultan’s ambassadors, assured them that the sun of his personal favours shone upon them, adding, in prophetic tones, —

“Take your ease here, for ye must be spent with long travel. I know not the day when I can set forth, for I act according to hidden knowledge, the visible effects of which are oftentimes evil, but the consequences always beneficent and salutary.”

Then, as the two men from Kano again pressed their brows to the carpet, renewed laudations and gratitude for blessings received emanated from their lips, and from those assembled there rose panegyric murmurs that Abdullah had decided to visit the Sultan ’Othman as honoured guest instead of arrogant conqueror.

Thus was the meeting between the two powerful rulers of the Sahara and the Soudan arranged, a meeting destined to mark an epoch in the history of Central Africa. The Khalifa’s curiosity to investigate the extent of the wealthy country which acknowledged ’Othman as Sultan probably accounted for his sudden decision to undertake the long and tedious journey. Although the invitation had been sent with a view to effecting an offensive and defensive alliance between the two peoples, yet, in my new office as chief of the Khalifa’s body-servants, I had ample means of knowing that he still cherished hopes of eventually overthrowing his whilom ally, and annexing the Empire of Sokoto. Two days after the reception of the envoys, Mahaza left on his return to inform ’Othman of his friend’s intended visit, while Khazneh remained to accompany his master’s guest. Being permitted as a favoured servant to approach Abdullah closely, I was fortunately enabled to express to him a hope that the Aga of the Sultan’s Eunuchs would not be made aware of my identity with the hapless victim of his wrath, and it was with satisfaction I found that in my silk robes of bright crimson and gold and picturesque head-dress my enemy failed to recognise me.

The day was an eventful one in Omdurman when, at first flush of dawn, my royal master seated himself under the thatched *rukuba* and addressed his Ansar, urging upon them the necessity of loyalty and discipline during his absence. Then, after a great review of seventy thousand troops in the square of Abu nga, the Mahdist chieftain, with a portion of his harem, one thousand male slaves and four thousand courtiers and picked horsemen with banners, moved down the Road of the Martyrs on the first stage of the long journey westward. Prayers for the safety of the Khalifa were at that moment being said by nearly one hundred thousand men and women in the Great Mosque – not a mosque in its usual sense, but a huge yard – and their murmurings sounded like a distant roar as, in the cool hour before sunrise, we rode at walking pace along the winding Nile bank towards the misty hills where dwelt the Jinns.

Eager as were my companions to feast their eyes on the glories of Kano, none was so eager as myself to pass the grim, prison-like portals of the great Fada and rest beside those cool, ever-plashing fountains within the wonderful labyrinth of wide courts and shady arcades. The wheel of fortune had indeed taken a strange turn and was spinning in my favour, for I was actually returning to Azala in disguise so effectual that even Khazneh could not detect me, and as each day brought me nearer to her I racked my brain in vain to devise some means by which I could, on arrival, inform her of my presence and obtain an interview.

To fathom the hidden secret of the Mark of the Asps I was determined, and on the hot, tedious journey across the dreary, sandy waste, infested by marauders, and known by the ominous name of *Ur immandess*– “He (Allah) hears not;” that is, is deaf to the cry of the waylaid traveller – I served my capricious master with patience and diligence, awaiting such time as I could seek the woman who had entranced me, and learn from her lips the strange things she had promised to reveal.

By day the journey was terribly fatiguing, but in the cool nights, when we encamped for our *kayf*, there was feasting, dancing and merry-making. The night hours were enlivened by *Safk* (clapping of hands) and the loud sounds of songs. There were many groups of dancing-girls, surrounded by crowds of onlookers. Though sometimes they performed Al-Nahl, the Bee dance, their performances were wild in the extreme, resembling rather the hopping of bears than the graceful dances of the harem, and the bystanders joined in the song – an interminable recitative, as usual in the minor key, and so well tuned that it sounded like one voice, with the refrain “La Yayha! La Yayha!” Through the brief, brilliant night always “La Yayha!”

Chapter Eleven

Tiamo the Dwarf

A whole moon passed ere the sun-whitened walls and minarets of Kano became visible. The sandy approaches of the city were strewn with bones and carcasses that had been disinterred by wild beasts, the remains of camels, horses and asses that had fallen and died in the last stages of the journey. The cities of the desert are invariably encircled by their bones, and the roads across the glaring wilderness are lined by their bodies. The sun had risen about four hours when the advance guard of the Ansar spurred hurriedly back to announce that the town was in sight, and very shortly the details of the distant shape grew clearer, and we espied a body of troops, bearing the green-and-gold standard of the Sultan, riding forth to welcome us. They were gaudily-attired in bright blue, and, as they dashed forward, indulged in their La'ab al-Barut (gunpowder play) while their bright shields and unsheathed swords flashed and gleamed in the sun, as now and then the wind parted the cloud of dust and smoke which enveloped them. The faint sound of trumpets and clash of cymbals came from the distant city, enthroned upon the horizon a dark silhouette, large and long, an image of grandeur in immensity, wherein all my hopes were centred, and as we approached we saw that Mahaza, the Grand Vizier, had been sent by the Sultan 'Othman to give us peace and conduct us into the Fada.

My master's retinue, consisting as it did of nearly five thousand persons, was indeed an imposing one, and when an hour later we entered the city gate and passed up the hill to where the well-remembered tower of the Fada stood white against the intensely blue sky, the brass cannon mounted on the walls belched forth thundering salutes, and a cloud of soft white smoke floated up in the still, warm air. Strange it was, I reflected, that the houses of Kano everywhere displayed that essential characteristic of early Egyptian art – the pyramidal form, which represented solidity to those ancient architects. The walls of the oldest constructions had a slight inward inclination, and possessed no windows, or only the roughest sketch of them. Light and air entered through openings cut in the roof. The summits of the dwellings were ornamented by those triangular battlements which may be seen on the palaces of Rameses Meiamoun. The pylon, which is another characteristic of Egyptian architecture, gave access to the dwellings. In short, the effect of the whole, their harmonious proportions, the symmetrical distribution of their ornamental mottoes, and their massiveness, proclaimed the art of Egypt, bearing out the legend that the people of Sokoto came originally from the far east. The multitude was wild with excitement. In their eagerness to catch a glimpse of the Khalifa, world-famous for his piety and his cruelty, they rendered the streets almost impassable, shouting themselves hoarse in welcome. Blatant tam-tams beat a monotonous accompaniment to the roar of artillery, and as the Sultan's guest, mounted on a magnificent camel at the head of his black Jihadieh, passed onward, the shout of "*Alhahu Akhbar!*" rose from fifty thousand throats, echoing again and again. Progress was slow on account of the immense crowds, and even the Sultan's spearmen, who preceded us, had considerable difficulty in clearing a path. Numbers were bruised, kicked by the horses or fatally injured by the long spears, but they were left unnoticed – a mere remark "*Umru Khalas,*" (It is the end of life) being all the sympathy ever offered. Yet the impetuous populace continued to yell enthusiastic words of welcome, the guns thundered, and the three stately men preceding the Khalifa blew long, piercing blasts on their immense *onbeias* fashioned from elephants' tusks.

At length, on arrival at the great, gloomy portal of the Fada, the iron-studded gates suddenly opened, revealing the Sultan 'Othman clad in golden casque and royal robe of amaranth velvet, with a handsomely-caparisoned, milk-white horse curveting under him, and surrounded by his gaudily-attired bodyguards and mukuddums, who filled the air with their adulations, declaring that their Imperial master was *Ma al-Sama* (the splendour of Heaven).

Alone he came forward wishing his guest "Peace" in a loud voice, then adroitly dismounting, embraced the Khalifa. Abdullah, much pleased at this mark of respect and homage, greeted him warmly and ordered him to remount, but the Sultan remained on foot, uttering some rapid instructions to his emirs, who had also dismounted to stand beside him.

Passing through the archway into the great outer court, the Jihadieh and the Ansar remaining outside, we all dismounted with the exception of my royal master and the ladies of his harem, whose camels were led onward to the inner pavilion that had been set apart for them. As chief of the *mulazimin* I followed my royal master, and as we passed from court to court, Janissaries, eunuchs, slaves and courtiers made salaam and raised their voices in shouts of welcome. The reception was throughout marked by the most frantic enthusiasm, even the two gigantic negro mutes at the gate of the Imperial harem – who usually stood with drawn swords motionless as statues – raising their hands to give peace unto the great Ruler of the Soudan.

The extensive palace echoed with the sounds of feasting and merry-making. The Ansar fraternised with the Janissaries, the Jihadieh with the Sultan's bodyguards, and the slaves of the Sultan 'Othman with those of the Ruler of the Soudan. The Khalifa, as religious head of the Dervishes and successor of the holy Mahdi, stood upon his "farwa" or white sheepskin, under the shadow of an ilex-tree in the Court of the Eunuchs, and conducted prayers in which all joined. Such was the wild fanaticism and enthusiasm that had prevailed during the firing of salutes that several men had dashed up to the very muzzles of the guns on the walls of the palace and were blown to pieces. The souls of these unfortunate people had, the Khalifa assured us, gone straight to Paradise, there to have their abode among lote-trees free from thorns, and fruitful trees of mauz, under an extended shade near a flowing water in gardens of delight, and every word that fell from his lips was regarded as the utterance of a prophet by the people as they murmured and told their beads.

After prayers, when the sura entitled "The Inevitable" had been recited, a great feast was held in the Sultan's sumptuous pavilion. The Khalifa was seated on his Imperial host's right hand, and over five hundred officials and courtiers were present. The dishes upon which the viands were served were of beaten gold, the goblets of chased gold studded with gems, while in the centre of the gilded pavilion a large fountain of crystal diffused a subtle perfume. Behind both the Sultan and his guest stood court tasters, who broke the seal of each dish and ate portions of the food before it was handed to their masters, lest poison should be introduced.

After the meal, jugglers entered and performed clever feats of magic, dancing-girls of every tribe under the Sultan's rule performed in turn various terpsichorean feats upon the great mat spread in the centre of the pavilion, and to the loud thumping of derboukas and the plaintive twanging of curiously-shaped stringed instruments, they danced until they sank upon their cushions from sheer exhaustion. These were followed by snake-charmers, wrestlers of herculean strength and story-tellers – the entertainment, which was on the most lavish scale, being continued until, at the going down of the sun, the clear voice of the *mueddin* was heard droning the *azan*.

The leisure at my disposal when, after the shadows lengthened and declined into the glory and vivid charm of the tropical twilight the Khalifa had retired to his private pavilion, I occupied in exploring those parts of the palace to which I had free access. Its vast proportions and its sumptuous decorations and appointments surprised me. When, on the previous occasion, I had passed through its great arcaded courts I was on my way to execution, therefore little opportunity had been afforded to me of ascertaining the full extent of the buildings; but now, in the cool evening hour, as, alone and thoughtful, I strolled under the dark colonnades and across the great open squares with their tall palms, time-worn fountains and wealth of roses, I noted its magnificence.

Around me on every side were sounds of revelry – barefooted girls were trilling and quavering, accompanied by noisy tambourines and serannel pipes of abominable discordance and the constant beating of derboukas and the clapping of hands; but holding aloof from my companions, I wandered from court to court in order to obtain a view of the great square tower wherein Azala's chamber was

situated. At last, on entering the court where dwelt the serving-men of the Grand Vizier Mahaza, the tower rose high in the gathering gloom. From which of its small, closely-barred lattices had the city been revealed to me? Halting in the garden and looking up at its white walls, I tried in vain to recognise the window of the apartment where Azala had nursed me back to consciousness. Had she, I wondered, lonely and sad, watched from behind the lattice the festivities in the courts below? If so, might she not discern me now, gazing up at her chamber, and by some means or other contrive a meeting! Yet to deceive the watchfulness of the Grand Eunuch and his satellites was impossible. The square wherein I stood was almost deserted, for in the court beyond there was feasting and marissa-drinking among the Janissaries and the Jehadieh, and all had been attracted thither. I must have been standing there, oblivious to my surroundings, a considerable time, for it had grown almost dark, when a voice behind me brought me back to a knowledge of things about me.

“Why standest thou here aloof from thy comrades, O friend?” the voice inquired, and on turning quickly I was confronted by a black dwarf, whose face was the most hideous my eyes had ever witnessed, and his crooked stature certainly the smallest. His head, which scarcely reached to my hip, seemed too large for his hump-backed body, while his hands and feet were abnormal. Indeed, his personal appearance was the reverse of prepossessing, even though he was well-dressed in an Arab fez and a robe of bright blue silk with yellow sash. His age was difficult to guess. He might have been any age between thirty and fifty, but his thin, squeaking voice suggested senile weakness. His smile increased his ugliness as, perpetually, his eyes, like flaming fire-lances, darted towards me.

“The cool air of this thy garden is refreshing after the heat of the desert,” I replied in Arabic, as he had addressed me in that language.

“But I have been watching thee,” the human monstrosity continued, looking up at me as his mouth elongated, showing an even set of white teeth. “While thy fellows have been making merry thou hast been gazing up at yonder lattice? Hast thou seen her?”

“Whom dost thou mean?” I inquired, startled that this ugly imp should be aware of my quest.

“Affect not ignorance,” he said, lowering his voice to almost a whisper. “Thou hast knowledge as full as myself that high up yonder there dwelleth the Lalla Azala, the beauteous daughter of his Majesty.”

“Well,” I said, anxiously, “tell me of her. I know so little.”

“She hath rescued thee from death, and for many moons hath awaited thy return. She sendeth thee health and peace,” he answered, slowly.

“But how dost thou know my innermost secrets?” I inquired, regarding the strange, unearthly-looking figure with some suspicion.

“Fear not betrayal, O friend,” he replied. “I am called Tiamo, *khaddan* (servitor) of the Lalla Azala, and thy devoted servant. By day and night alike hath her bright eyes sought for sign of thee, for she ascertained, through one of our spies in Omdurman, of thy promotion unto the chieftainship of the Khalifa’s body-servants, and knew that thou wouldst accompany him hither.”

“Art thou bearer of a message from her?” I asked, bending towards him in eagerness.

“Yes. Hers is indeed a joyless life. Through the long day hath she stood at her lattice trying in vain to distinguish thee amid the crowds. Yet even now she is most probably standing there, and hath recognised thee. Yea. Behold!” he cried, excitedly. “See! There is the sign?”

I strained my eyes upward, and could just distinguish in the darkness something white fluttering from a lattice high up near the summit of the tower. It showed for an instant, then disappeared; but it was sufficient to tell me that I was not forgotten.

“Such means of communication are unsafe,” the black dwarf growled, as if to himself.

“What message bearest thou?” I asked, turning to him and remarking the frown of displeasure that had overspread his hideous countenance.

“The One of Beauty hath ordered me to tell thee to wait patiently. She is in sore peril, being so zealously watched by eunuchs and harem-guards that at present she cannot have speech with thee. Wait, and she will communicate with thee when it is safe.”

“What is the nature of her peril?” I inquired.

But the dwarf frowned, glanced up at the little lattice to assure himself that there was no longer a signal there, sighed, and then replied, —

“I am forbidden to tell thee. Rest in the knowledge that Tiamo, her servant and thine, will render thee what assistance thou requirest.”

“Is the Lalla so carefully guarded that none can approach her?” I asked, as together we moved on into the adjoining court, where the fighting-men were making merry.

“Alas!” he answered, “she leadeth a lonely life. Forbidden to enter the great Courts of Enchantment wherein dwell the wives and houris of the Sultan amid every luxury, and where every diversion and gaiety is provided, she is compelled by the Sultan, whom she hath displeased, to live alone with her companions, slaves and waiting-women, in the rooms in yonder tower until such time as she shall be given in marriage.”

“And shall I see her?”

“She is striving toward that end,” the dwarf answered briefly, adding, “May thine Allah, who hath created seven heavens, and as many different stories of the earth, keep thee in peace and safety.”

Gradually I overcame the distrust with which I at first regarded the hideous little pagan. From words he let drop in our subsequent conversation it was evident he was Azala’s trusted servant, and was no doubt admitted to her apartments because of his personal deformity and ugliness of countenance. Until near midnight we squatted together in his little den in the Court of the Eunuchs, smoked, drank marissa and chatted; but he was discreet, silent as the Sphinx upon the affairs of his mistress, and to all my questions made the stereotyped reply, “Wait; a message will be conveyed unto thee.”

Day by day, amid the round of bountiful entertainment, I waited in patience, glancing ever and anon up at the dwelling-place of the woman who besought my aid. Still no message came. Sometimes after the *isha* had been prayed I met Tiamo, but to all inquiry he remained practically dumb. “The Lalla is still unable to see thee,” he always replied, if I expressed surprise that the promised message had not reached me. But he would invariably add a word of hope, expressing regret that circumstances had conspired against us.

One night, after superintending the duties of the *mulazimin*, I was crossing the Court of the Grand Vizier when Tiamo hurriedly approached me. By his face I could see that something had occurred, and as he brushed past me in full view of others about him he whispered, “Come to me one hour after midnight.” Then he walked on without waiting for me to reply.

Punctually at the hour appointed I entered his little den with beating heart. The shutter was closed, therefore we were unobserved.

“Hasten. There is but brief space,” he exclaimed quickly, and pulling from beneath his divan a blue silk robe and yellow turban similar to those worn by the eunuchs, he added, “Attire thyself in these. The Lalla biddeth thee repair unto her chamber.”

I obeyed him without doubt or hesitation.

“Now, come with me,” he said, when at last I had buckled on a scimitar and thrust my feet into slippers of crimson leather, and together we went out into the open court.

A deep silence rested on the great palace, broken only by the cool plashing of the fountains in their marble basins. The heavens, blue as a sapphire, were profound and mysterious. Myriads of stars twinkled in the clear depths of the skies, and all objects were defined with a wonderful accuracy in the silver moonlight. The Fada was hushed in sleep. On the marble steps of the Bab-Seadet, the gate of the Imperial harem, the black guards stood on either side, mute, erect, motionless, their naked swords gleaming in the moonbeams. How many scenes of gorgeous festivity had been witnessed beyond that great door of iron! how many terrible and bloody dramas had been enacted within those grim,

grey walls – dramas of love and hatred, of ambition, disappointment and revenge, of all the fiercest passions of the human heart! By night and day the bewitching pearls of the harem intrigued, schemed and plotted – themselves, through their Imperial Master, ruling the world outside. Too often, alas! in the history of the Empire of Sokoto it had occurred that some dark eye, some bewitching face masking a beautiful slave's ignorance and cunning, had mastered her irresponsible and irresistible lord, and been the means of striking off the heads of not only her rivals within the harem, but those of even the wisest councillors and the bravest fighting-men outside.

As together we crossed the silent court our echoing footsteps broke the quiet. In the gateway of the harem a single light glimmered yellow in contrast with the white moonbeams; but turning our backs upon it we passed through one court after another, receiving salutes from the guards at each gateway. My disguise as eunuch was complete, and as we strolled onward without apparent haste my confidence grew until, on crossing the Court of the Armourers and entering the Court of the Pages, we discerned a white-robed figure enveloped in a haick and wearing the ugly baggy trousers which are the out-door garments of Moslem women.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.