

Le Queux William

Zoraida: A Romance of the Harem and the Great Sahara



William Le Queux

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Содержание

Chapter One.	5
Chapter Two.	8
Chapter Three.	10
Chapter Four.	14
Chapter Five.	19
Chapter Six.	21
Chapter Seven.	24
Chapter Eight.	27
Chapter Nine.	30
Chapter Ten.	32
Chapter Eleven.	35
Chapter Twelve.	38
Chapter Thirteen.	41
Chapter Fourteen.	46
Chapter Fifteen.	49
Chapter Sixteen.	53
Chapter Seventeen.	56
Chapter Eighteen.	59
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	63

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Chapter One. Ali Ben Hafiz

The adventure was strange, the mystery inexplicable.

A blazing noontide in the month of Moharram. Away across the barren desert to the distant horizon nothing met the aching eye but a dreary waste of burning red-brown sand under a cloudless sky shining like burnished copper. Not an object relieved the wearying monotony of the waterless region forsaken by nature, not a palm, not a rock, not a knoll, not a vestige of herbage; nothing but the boundless silent expanse of that wild and wonderful wilderness, the Great Sahara, across which the sand-laden wind swept ever and anon in short stifling gusts hot as the breath from an oven.

Far beyond the Atlas mountains, under the fiery rays of the African sun, I was riding with all speed in order to overtake a caravan which I had been informed by the *cadi* at Wargla had started for Noum-en-Nas, the small town in the Touat Oasis, two days before my arrival. The caravan, I learned, was composed of camels, therefore, mounted as I was on a fleet Arab stallion, and guiding myself by my pocket compass and the very inadequate map of the *Dépôt de la Guerre*, I expected to come upon them ere two suns had set.

Four long breathless days had now passed, yet I could detect no living thing.

In the far south of Algeria the intense dry heat of summer always affects Europeans, and although clad lightly in haick and burnouse, with my feet thrust into rough slippers, I was no exception. Alone in that trackless, arid desert, with my food and water nearly consumed and my brain aflame with fever, I was bound to admit my position decidedly unenviable. I was afflicted by a hundred miseries. Into my face the glaring noonday heat was reflected by the sand; I was hungry, my throat was parched, the racking pain of fatigue cramped my bones, and my horse, weary and jaded, stumbled now and then as he plodded slowly onward under the fierce, pitiless rays.

The two *Chasseurs d’Afrique* who had been sent with me for protection by my friend the General of Division, had foolishly partaken of melons soon after leaving Tuggurt, and had been stricken down with illness in consequence; therefore I had been compelled to set out upon my journey into the *Areg* alone.

Suddenly, about an hour after noon, my eager eyes were rewarded by a sight in the far distance of a cloud of dust. Spurring my horse, I galloped onward, and in half an hour the bells of the camels and the jingle of the horses’ trappings fell upon my ears. The dense whirling cloud of sand preceded the cavalcade, and whenever a gust of wind parted it, slow-plodding camels heavily laden with merchandise, glittering arms, and flowing scarlet and white burnouses could be seen. In this way the caravan presented itself as I pressed on towards its flank.

Within fifty paces of the vanguard I dug my heels into the horse’s sides and bounded across to the head of the convoy of a dozen *Spahis*. A solitary rider journeying across the desert is such an unusual spectacle that the ferocious-looking advance guard, fearing attack, shouted and lowered their rifles.

“*Phtaris!* Peace be upon thee!” I cried in Arabic, seeing myself received in such a hostile manner. “Cowards! Thou seemest afraid that a single Englishman will attack thy caravan!”

The guards, thus reproached, muttering that they were pressing through the turbulent country of the Beni Zougs, raised their weapons with a look of shame upon their dark-bearded faces, while their chief reined his horse to interrogate me.

“Whose is this caravan?” I asked, disregarding his string of rapidly-uttered inquiries.

“It belongeth to Ali Ben Hafiz, the merchant of Biskra,” he replied.

“And thou art on thy way to Noum-en-Nas?”

“True,” he answered, with a puzzled look. “But how dost thou know? What dost thou want with us?”

“Conduct me to thy master,” I said. “It is imperative that I should speak with him.”

As I uttered these words, an elderly grave-faced man, with a long white beard flowing over his spotless burnouse, rode up, and, judging him to be the merchant for whom I had been searching, I greeted him and gave him peace.

“*Aish ism arrajol di?*” (“What is the name of this man?”) he asked suspiciously of the chief of the convoy.

“My name,” I exclaimed, “is Cecil Holcombe, an Englishman who desireth to travel to the Touat Oasis. The Director of Fate turned the bridle of my horse towards thee and allowed me to hear the bells of thy camels from afar; the Guide of the Reins of Destiny moved my intention so that I came hither to meet thee. Behold! I bear unto thee a letter from our mutual friend, General Malezieux, Chief of Division.”

The name of that high official caused him to open his keen dark eyes wider, and, taking the letter from me, he quickly read it. In Arabic my friend the General greeted his brother Ali Ben Hafiz with strings of salutations and references to the Prophet, and implored him to take under his protection the adventurous Englishman.

When the old merchant had read it through twice, he slowly stroked his patriarchal beard. Then, looking up, he said in his own language —

“M’sieur Holcombe, be welcome to our shade. Allah, the One Merciful, is mighty: Allah, Lord of the Three Worlds, is wise. He ordaineth that although thou art an unbeliever, we should nevertheless be companions. It giveth me pleasure to succour thee — but before all take salt with us.”

The order was given to halt, a tent was quickly pitched, and we took salt and ate our kousskouss together, afterwards smoking our long haschish pipes until the noon was far spent. About five o’clock we resumed our journey again over the barren plain, the venerable-looking old Arab, in whom I found a most prayerful, pious, and entertaining host, riding by my side. The convoy of dark-faced Spahis, who, picturesque in their scarlet burnouses, had viewed me with such distrust, now regarded me as a distinguished guest, and were ready at every moment to do my bidding. To those who, like myself, have learned in the desert to regard life steadily, nothing temporal seems of moment when travelling by caravan, and our civilisation, of which we in Western Europe pride ourselves, seems but a frivolous thing of yesterday. Desert life to-day is the same as it was ten centuries ago; the same as it will ever be. Free and charming in its simplicity, yet with certain terrors ever-present, it offers many attractions to those in search of change and excitement. Thus, with the fiery sunset flooding the boundless wilderness, we wended our way due westward in the blood-red track of the departing day.

When the last rays were fading, another halt was made, the mats were spread, and Ali Ben Hafiz with his convoy and camel-drivers knelt, and, turning their faces towards Mecca, repeated their evening prayer, afterwards reciting with fervent devotion the Fâtiha: “Praise be to Allah, Lord of all creatures; the most merciful, King of the day of Judgment, Thee do we worship, and of Thee do we beg assistance. Direct us in the Right Way, in the way of those to whom Thou hast been gracious; not of those against whom Thou art incensed, nor of those who go astray.”

Then in the falling gloom we again moved on. Slowly our camels plodded, the rhythmic movement of their heads causing their bells to jingle, and now and then an Arab would chant a weird

Bedouin song, or goad on his animals, administering heavy blows emphasised by sundry forcible imprecations with frequent references to Eblis.

Old Ali – who was a native of Morocco and still acknowledged Mulai Hassan as his ruler, although he lived under the French flag – asked me to relate my history, and tell him of England and the Great White Queen; therefore, as we rode together, I entertained him with descriptions of my distant home, explaining to him our insular manners and customs, until the bright moon rose and the stars twinkled like diamonds in the cloudless vault of blue. At last, having entered a wild ravine, where some prickly acacias, dusty aloes, and patches of coarse hulfa grass grew, under the shadow of the rocks we encamped for the night. Our kousskouss was cooked and eaten, our horses fed and watered at the well, and while the Spahis were posted as sentinels to raise the alarm in the event of a raid by any of the fierce marauding bands that constantly prowl about that region, we wrapped ourselves in the ample folds of our burnouses and rested our weary heads upon our saddles.

Chapter Two. The Omen of the Camel's Hoof

On over the barren sand-hills, always in the track of the setting sun, each day passed much as its predecessor. I was no stranger to Northern Africa, for the wild, free life, unshackled by conventionalities, had a fascination for me, and consequently I had accompanied caravans through Tunis and Tripoli, and had wandered a good deal in Morocco. In the course of these journeys I had learned to love the Arabs, and had formed the acquaintance of many powerful Sheikhs, several of whom I now counted among my most faithful and devoted friends. Indeed, it was to join one of them, the head of the Tédjéhé-N'ou-Sidi, that I was now on my way south to Zamlen, in the Afelèle region.

After three years among the True Believers, I had at last overcome most of the difficulties of language, and could converse with them in their own tongue. It may have been this which commended itself to pious old Ali Ben Hafiz, for throughout our journey he was particularly gracious, though he bored me sometimes with his constant objurgatory remarks regarding Infidels in general and myself in particular. Once in exuberance of spirits I so far forgot myself as to whistle a popular English air, and although we were excellent friends, he reprimanded me so severely that I am not likely to forget that among the followers of the Prophet whistling is forbidden.

One morning, while riding together soon after dawn, he surprised me by suddenly observing in a grave tone —

“Thou art young and of good stature. It surpriseth me that thou dost not return to thine own people and take a wife from among them.”

“Why should I marry?” I asked, laughing. “While I am alone, I wander at my own inclination; if I married, my actions would be ruled by another.”

“Because ere the sun had risen this morning a camel had placed its hoof upon thy spittle,” he answered, looking at me with his keen serious eyes that age had not dimmed. “It is an omen. *Ty-ib bi'chire Allah yosallimak!*”

“An omen! Of what?” I asked.

“Of impending evil.”

“But we English believe not in superstition; neither have we witches nor sorcerers,” I replied, smiling.

“Infidels have no need of them,” he retorted, angrily. “Only True Believers will behold the great lote tree, or quench their thirst at Salsabil, Allah be thanked!”

“But this strange omen – what particular misfortune is it supposed to presage?” I inquired eagerly, astonished at the vehemence of his denunciation.

“Hearken, and take heed,” he said, earnestly. “Thou art young, and as yet no woman hath captivated thee. Do I give utterance to the truth?”

“Yes,” I answered. “As yet I have never been enmeshed.”

“Then beware! There will be a day when thy life will be lightened by the rays of a woman's face, rivalled only by the sun. Her eyes will be brilliant as the gazelle's, her cheeks will bear the bloom of the peach, and her lips will be sweet as the fresh-blown rose. In those eyes the love-light will flash, those cheeks will blush at thine approach, and those lips will meet with passion thy caress. Then remember the words of Ali Ben Hafiz. Remember the Omen of the Camel's Hoof!” We rode on together in silence for some minutes. I was pondering over his strange words.

“On the auspicious day when I meet this paragon of beauty which you prophesy, how am I to act?” I asked presently.

“Act?” he cried. “Do nothing. Return not her caresses. Cast her from thee even though she be one of the houris of Paradise, and – ”

“Will she be a Moor, an Arab, or one of mine own people?” I inquired, interrupting him.

“Ask me not. I am no prophet, though this is not the first time I have seen similar cases to thine. The Omen of the Camel’s Hoof hath been revealed – and it is fatal.”

“Fatal?” I cried in alarm. “What dost thou mean? Am I to die?”

“It resulteth in death – sometimes. It is always fatal to love.”

“Have others succumbed, then?” I asked.

“Yes, alas!” he said, with knit brows and a curiously thoughtful expression. “One case occurred in mine own family. My nephew, who was of about the same age as thou art, had the distinctive mark between the eyes, the same as thou hast upon thy countenance. After the last Fast of Ramadân, he took the caravan of his father and journeyed for one moon west to Duera, in Morocco. Before the sun had risen on the last day of Doul Hadja, the camel he was riding, alas! stepped upon his spittle. His tent-man, a Biskri well versed in anthroposcopy, told him of the ominous warning, but he ridiculed it, saying that Kamra Fathma, the daughter of the cadi at Bona, was already betrothed unto him, and that he could never look with admiration upon another woman’s face. The Omen had been revealed; its warning was, alas! disregarded.”

“What was the result?” I inquired, rather alarmed at my friend’s extraordinary prophetic demeanour.

“Ah, the result? It was fatal! A week later he who scoffed at the humble tent-man’s words crossed the Figuig into the land of our lord the Sultan. There, at Sidi Mumen, he chanced to pass the daughter of the Basha on foot. An ill wind blew aside her veil, and he gazed for a second upon her uncovered face. The lines of her fatal beauty were in that instant graven deeply upon his heart, and he loved her violently, casting aside the pretty Kamra, his betrothed at Bona. Tarrying long near the woman who had fascinated him, he succeeded in earning the good graces of the Basha, and at length married her.”

He paused, and, drawing a long breath, pulled his burnouse more tightly around his shoulders.

“Well, if he succeeded in marrying her, the Omen of the Camel’s Hoof could not have been fatal to love,” I argued.

“But it was!” he replied quickly. “After his marriage, he remained in Sidi Mumen, and set up a large house, and his wife had many slaves.”

“Was he not happy?”

“For three moons, and then – ”

“And then?”

“The prophecy was fulfilled. He took a cup of tea too much. (An expression used by the Moors, poison being invariably administered in tea.) The woman who had entranced him and obtained his money was verily a daughter of Eblis. She poisoned him!”

“Horrible!” I said. “I hope mine will not be a similar fate.”

The old man, who, before setting out on his journey, had without doubt promised a feast to his favourite marabout in return for the latter’s all-powerful prayers for his safety, shrugged his shoulders, but answered nothing.

Chapter Three.

Entrapped

The curiously prophetic utterances of Ali Ben Hafiz caused me to reflect. I knew much of Moslem superstition, – in fact, I had collected many of the strange beliefs of the Arabs, Moors, and Koulougdis, with the intention of including them in a book I was writing, – but this extraordinary *avant-coureur* of evil was new to me. During the blazing day, as we toiled on over the sun-baked plain, again and again I recalled his ominous words. The prophecy made me feel uncomfortable. Somehow, try how I would, I could not rid myself of the thought that some untoward event would ere long occur.

In this record of facts I am compelled to speak briefly of myself. Life had indeed been a strange series of ups and downs. Being left an orphan, I had early in life imbibed the reckless Bohemianism of the Quartier Latin, and my later years had been almost equally divided between the conventionalities of London and Paris and the wild, free life of the Bedouins of Northern Africa. Truth to tell, civilisation, with its hollow shams and its *décolleté* and frock-coated *beau monde*, had no charm for me. The leaden skies of London and the glitter and artificiality of Paris were alike hateful. I only enjoyed happiness when, attired in haick and slippers, I sat cross-legged with the people of Al-Islâm, studying their grave, interesting characteristics, and perfecting my knowledge of that most wonderful of languages, Arabic.

Fettered no longer by the shackles of Society, I wandered, explored, and studied, the reason of this restlessness being most likely due to the fact that I had never gazed upon a woman with thoughts of love. The Bohemianism of the Seine-bank had distorted my views of life, so that I regarded woman as a heartless coquette, and perhaps had become cynical, even misanthropic. Therefore, on thinking over old Ali's warning, I grew at length to regard it as a mere superstition of the mystic Moslem, and succeeded at last in dismissing it from my mind.

The blazing day wore on, and was succeeded by a glorious evening. We were in that wild, inhospitable region known as the Adjemor, about midway between the little Arab settlement of El Biodh and the palms of Aïn-el-Redjem. Away on the misty horizon the rising ground of the great plateau of Tademait was tinged with orange and gold, but as my fellow wanderers knelt upon their carpets, cast dust over their feet, and, salaaming, droned forth passages of the Saba in a monotone, the deep well of the west was still ablaze with crimson and silver. It was a bad sign, for the thin haze which hung upon the ground warned us that ere long we should be overwhelmed by one of the terrors of the desert – the sandstorm. Its stifling clouds of whirling sand might sweep down upon us immediately, or might not reach us for twelve or fourteen hours; but we were all aware that assuredly it must come, therefore, before throwing ourselves down to rest, we took necessary precautions to ensure our safety.

Alone in my tent, I lay unable to sleep, for before the sirocco the heat always becomes unbearable. The dead silence of the wilderness was only broken by the champing of the camels and the jingle of the single Spahi, who, mounting guard over us, marched slowly up and down, his footsteps sounding muffled in the sand. Through the open door of the tent I could see how clear and bright was the night, how brilliantly the big moon of the East shone white over the desert, and for a long time I lay thinking of home and of the strange words of Ali, until sleep at length came to my aching eyes.

Loud shouting and rifle-shots rapidly exchanged awakened me. For a moment I was dazed by the weird, exciting scene. White-robed figures on horseback tearing past my tent were firing their long-barrelled guns, and our men were repelling the assault vigorously with their Winchesters.

We were being attacked by a band of marauders; I knew it would be a fight to the death!

Grasping my revolver, I sprang to my feet and rushed forth. As I did so, a gigantic Arab barred my passage. The fierce, dark-faced fellow had just swung himself from his horse, and in his sinewy hand there gleamed a long curved knife.

In a second we had closed in deadly embrace. Clutching me by the throat, he forced me backwards, at the same moment uttering a curse and raising the keen blade above his head. For a second it was poised in mid air, but quick as thought I managed to wrench away my right hand, and, bringing it across my breast, fired my revolver full into his dark, sinister face.

With a cry he staggered. The knife fell, but I evaded it, and, gradually loosening his hold upon my throat, he stumbled backwards, and, tottering, sank heavily to the ground.

Leaving him, I rushed out to assist my companions, for the rattle of musketry was incessant, and bullets were singing about us in a manner that was particularly disconcerting. Dashing forward, I saw our Spahis had apparently been taken completely by surprise, four of them having fallen dead, and two were lying near, writhing under the agony of their wounds.

The shouting and firing were deafening, the flashing of guns shedding a lurid glare, while, to add to the horror of those moments, the storm had burst upon us, choking clouds of sand enveloping both enemy and friend.

Once only, amid the whirling cloud of dust and smoke, I caught sight of the hospitable old merchant. Two of the robbers had seized him, and were securing his arms and legs with cords, when suddenly he turned upon them with the ferocity of a tiger, and, drawing a knife from his crimson sash, plunged it into the heart of one of his captors.

The man staggered and fell backwards dead, like a stone.

A second later there was a bright flash from a rifle fired by a man near me, and Ali Ben Hafiz, throwing up his arms with a cry, fell forward over the corpse of the man he had killed. Just at that moment I felt myself seized from behind. Turning quickly, intending to use my revolver, the weapon was snatched from my hand, and a cord with a noose passed quickly over my head. I fought hard; but how long can one fight against a score? The flash of the guns illumined for a second the faces of the fierce bandits into whose power I had unfortunately fallen. All were big, desperate-looking Bedouins of the tribe of the Ennitra, who live away south in the Ahaggar region, and whose men, reputed to be the worst of desperadoes, were the terror of the caravans.

While they forced my hands behind me and secured them, my brave companions, the Spahis and camel-drivers, after making a most desperate resistance, were one after another shot down before my eyes. The band outnumbered us by six to one, and already the camels, with Ali's valuable packs of textile fabrics, arms and ammunition, had been captured and driven off.

"Devils!" I cried, as I watched the sickening slaughter. "Why not complete thine hideous work and shoot me also?"

"Behold! he hath a pale face!" cried one of my captors, peering into my eyes and showing his white teeth as he grinned viciously. "See! he is not an Arab! He is a dog of an Infidel!"

"Kill him! kill him!" cried one of the others, excitedly brandishing a knife. "His touch will contaminate. The Roumi will bring the curse of Sajin upon us!"

His words and threatening attitude alarmed me, for, remembering that these men were of the sect of the Aïssawà, the wildest of the fanatics of Al-Islâm, I knew they were not likely to show much mercy to one who had not embraced their religion or gone through their hideous rites. Whoever Sidi ben Aïssa, the patron saint of this strange sect, might have been, he certainly numbers among his followers some of the worst malefactors of Algeria. Any Mohammedan may be initiated into the Aïssawà. He makes a pilgrimage to Mequinez, in Morocco, calls upon the representative of Sidi ben Aïssa's family, to whom he offers prayers and money. This over, the priest blows upon him, and the devotee arises and departs, firmly believing that however many venomous snakes may bite him, no harm will befall him.

Although in a frenzy of excitement over their terrible work of slaughter, they seemed in no mood to kill me. As the sandstorm abated, and dawn spread, the scene was awful. The whole of our men had, I saw, been ruthlessly massacred, and I alone remained the sole survivor.

Breathlessly I stood, my arms bound so tightly as to cause me pain, awaiting my fate. How, I wondered, would it end? Presently, when the contents of our camels' packs had been cursorily inspected, I was tied to a mule, and dragged on over the desert in the direction of the rising sun. Through the long hot day I was forced to trudge wearily onward into that region of the Ahaggar where no Bedouins dare penetrate. Jeering, they refused my request for water to moisten my parched throat, and it was not until long after noon that they tossed me a handful of dates to satisfy my hunger.

Just before sundown we came upon an oasis where the palms grew high, and there came out to meet us a dirty, ferocious rabble, shouting, gesticulating, and rejoicing that the raid had been successful. My captors were cheered again and again, while I, as an unbeliever, was cuffed and spat upon. Between two tall bronzed ruffians I was led straightway among the scattered tents to the Sheikh of the marauders, whom I afterwards learned was Hadj Absalam, the notorious outlaw upon whose head a price had long been set by the French Government.

He was a sinister-looking old man, with a pair of black, gleaming eyes, a long grey beard, and an ugly cicatrix across his tawny forehead. As his name denoted, he had made the pilgrimage earlier in life, but the criminal was stamped in every line of his face, and I could quite believe him capable of the many barbarous cruelties attributed to him.

The marauders explained how they had attacked and captured our caravan, and, finding that I was an Englishman, they had spared my life and brought me to him.

The robber Sheikh of the Ennitra heard all without removing his long pipe from his lips or betraying the least excitement. Suddenly turning his piercing eyes upon me, he exclaimed —

“Thou art an unbeliever that Allah hath delivered into our hands for punishment. Verily, Allah hath cursed the Infidels, and hath prepared for them in Al-Hâwiyat a fierce fire wherein they shall remain for ever. They shall find no patron or defender. Death by the knife is too merciful an end for dogs of thy mongrel breed.”

“But, my father,” I exclaimed, “I have not offended against thee. I am merely journeying here to study thy tongue.”

“Silence, Infidel!” he roared. “Speak not to Allah’s chosen. Thine accursed body shall be racked by the torture ere thou goest unto the Kingdom of Shades.”

Then, turning to the men who held me, he said, “Take him out among the rocks and let the punishment commence.”

Heedless of my vigorous protests, I was hurried along, followed by the ragged crowd of excited fanatics, who still jeered and spat upon me, until we reached the edge of the oasis, which, as I afterwards learned, was named the Igharghar. It was die game, or die coward. I remembered the strange Omen of the Camel’s Hoof!

At a spot where great grey rocks cropped out of the sand, my captors halted, and, forcing me to the ground, lashed me to the trunk of a date palm. The rope was passed under my arms and fastened to the base of the trunk, leaving about four feet of slack rope between my head and the tree. Then, my feet being bound, they drove a stake into the ground and tied them to it. Thus I lay stretched upon the ground, and, struggle as I would, I was unable to move. The cords sank into my flesh, and the crowd around me laughed and shouted when they saw my face distorted by pain.

I knew no mercy would be shown me by Hadj Absalam’s band, who delighted in cruelty to their victims, and whose religious rites were practised amid scenes of horror and bloodshed. Yet if they meant to simply leave me there to starve and die under the blazing sun, why did they secure me in this fashion? They could have maimed my feet and hands, and there would have been no need of this elaborate preparation.

A sudden shout caused me to try and look up. Several men were running towards me, their white burnouses flowing behind them. One of them carried in his hand a little stick with a noose on the end, and in the noose there writhed a large black asp, one of the deadly denizens of the rocks.

The sight froze my blood. I knew that they meant to kill me.

Amid the wild excitement of the crowd, who had now gone half mad at the prospect of seeing an Infidel done to death, two long thin thongs of mule-skin were placed through the skin and muscles of the snake, close to its tail. The serpent squirmed under the pain, but his head was held fast in the loop.

Within four feet of my face another stake was driven into the ground, and to this the loose ends of the thongs were fastened. The Arabs sprang back. The snake was free from the noose, but bound fast by the thong through its tail.

My face was directly before it; yet I could not move! In an instant the snake was in a half coil, with its bead-like eyes fixed upon mine.

As I held my breath in that brief second, the warning of Ali Ben Hafiz again flashed through my mind. The sweat stood upon my brow. The crowd pressing around me became hushed in expectancy. To have been murdered with my fellow-travellers would have been far preferable to this torture.

The horror of that moment was awful.

The serpent, enraged by pain, raised its flat head ready to strike. I set my teeth and closed my eyes, waiting to feel its deadly fangs upon my cheek.

Another instant, and its venom would be coursing through my veins!

Chapter Four. A Veiled Face

But my cruel captors intended to torture me; to delay my death as long as possible.

Like a flash the head of the gliding serpent shot out. The thong withstood its spring. It fell two inches short of my face. A tiny drop of liquid spurted upon my temple and ran down my cheek. It was the venom from the fangs that failed to reach! The Arabs roared with laughter.

But they were wasting time. From their conversation I gathered that a squadron of Spahis were in search of them to punish them for the many robberies and murders they had committed, and that they were moving at dawn towards the Tanezrouft, a waterless desert that has never been wholly explored by Europeans. They had to examine the packs of Ali Ben Hafiz's camels, so, after laughing and jeering at me for some time, they teased the asp, and then returned to their encampment.

Through the long brilliant evening I lay there alone, the snake's head playing before my eyes, more of the venom being spat into my face.

The sun at last disappeared in a blaze of crimson, and the clouds covered the heavens.

The snake had learned that it could not reach my face. It lay coiled at the foot of the stake watching. For a while longer it struck each time I moved my head, but presently it lay again in its sullen coil. The strain of holding my head back, back, until the cords fairly cracked, was awful. How long, I wondered, would it be before my mind would give way and madness relieve me from this deadly terror?

Darkness crept on. Above the low Iraouen hills the moon rose, and shone full upon my face. The beating of *derboukas*, the playing of *kánoons*, and sounds of singing and dancing made it plain that the marauders had discovered the great value of the merchandise they had stolen, and were making merry. Slowly the moments dragged. Time after time I struggled to get free, but in vain. The outlaws had bound me in such a manner that the more I struggled the deeper sank the cords into my flesh. Presently I heard shuffling footsteps, and, looking up, saw approaching two of the villainous men who had assisted to bind me. One of them carried a pitcher of water he had procured from the well.

"Take thy knife and kill me," I cried. "Death is better than this horrible torment."

They both laughed derisively, and, bending, poured water upon the rope that held me and upon the serpent's thongs.

"Thou wilt be claimed by Eblis soon enough," one of the men replied, grimly.

"My throat is dry. Give me a drop of water – one mouthful – that I may quench this terrible thirst consuming me," I implored.

But again they only laughed, and, flinging the water from the battered copper pitcher upon the sand, the man said, "Thou art accursed of Allah, and our father hath decreed that thou shalt die."

"Then kill me! kill me!" I cried in agony. "I am going mad."

"That is part of thy punishment," replied the other man, unconcernedly shrugging his shoulders and walking away, followed by his laughing companion. My heart sank within me.

The cool wind that had sprung up revived me, and I felt the pangs of hunger. Still before me I saw those coils and that flat head. In the white moonlight I could distinguish the snake's tongue darting out; he was preparing for another spring.

He struck, but still he could not reach. An inch more, and his venomous fangs would have buried themselves in my cheek!

I rubbed my face in the sand to clear it of the horrible poison now thickening upon it.

I must have lapsed into unconsciousness for a long time, but on awaking, all was silent as the grave. The nomads of the Ennitra, who had long been hunted in vain by the Algerian soldiers, were

asleep. I felt the strain of the rope growing more painful. I had been pulling back on it with all my force, but now I felt a counter-pull that was slowly drawing me towards the asp and death.

Why did I not push my face towards the serpent and end the torture? I had a presentiment that I should die from the moment I had fallen into the hands of these robbers. I knew that I must succumb to hunger and thirst, even if the asp did not reach me. But life is always sweet. I could not bring myself to die. My mad brain refused to order the muscles to meet the reptile.

The rope pulled harder. Then I knew. The water those brutes had poured upon it was shrinking it! The distance between my face and the fangs of my black enemy was gradually being lessened. An inch more would mean death!

I dug my toes into the ground. I pulled back until the rope cut deeply into my flesh and the blood flowed. The cords that bound me were shortening!

Water had also been poured upon the thongs that held the snake. The mule-hide swelled and stretched, while the hempen rope shrank.

The snake tried to crawl away. The strings in its flesh held it back. The pain enraged it, and its head shot forth once again. Its tongue came within half an inch of my forehead!

Closing my eyes, I must have once more lapsed into a state of half-consciousness, knowing that the thongs which held the reptile were stretching, and that in a few minutes death would release me from the torture.

Suddenly the *frou-frou* of silk greeted my ears, and a second later I became aware of someone leaning over me.

“Hist! Peace be upon thee!” exclaimed a soft voice in tuneful Arabic. “*Lissa fih wákt!*” (“There is yet time.”) The face bending over me was closely veiled, but above the *adjar* a pair of bright sparkling eyes peered into mine, while across the white forehead hung rows of golden sequins. I was amazed. Whether my strange visitant were young or old I could not tell, but her splendid eyes had a curious fascination in them such as I had never before experienced.

Her arm, bare to the shoulder, was white and well rounded; on her slim wrists were heavy Arab bracelets of gold and silver, studded with jacinths and turquoises, and in her hand was a long thin knife, the blade of which flashed in the moonlight.

“What art thou?” I gasped. “Who art thou?”

“Thy friend,” she replied, quietly. “Make not a sound, for my life as well as thine is at stake. See! I cut the cords that bind thee!” and so saying, she severed my bonds quickly and deftly with her curved dagger, the jewelled scabbard of which hung upon her girdle.

Half dazed, but finding both hands and feet free, I jumped up, and, stepping aside from the spot where the serpent darted forth, stood before my mysterious deliverer.

She was of medium height, slim and graceful. The hideous haick and baggy white trousers which always shroud the women of the Arabs when out of doors were absent, for apparently she had stolen from her tent, and, with the exception of the flimsy veil across her face, she was still in her harem dress. Set jauntily upon her head she wore the usual dainty little skull-cap of velvet thick with gold and seed pearls, her *serroual* of pale blue China silk were drawn tight midway between the knee and ankle, her rich velvet zouave was heavily trimmed with gold, and her bare feet were thrust into tiny velvet slippers. A wide sash of silk encircled her waist, and the profusion of gold bangles on her ankles had been tied together so that they should not jingle as she walked.

“*Al’hamdu lillâh dâki lakom!*” she exclaimed solemnly, which translated meant, “Praise be unto Allah, praying for thee.”

“Allah be praised!” I responded fervently. “Thou art my deliverer. How can I ever sufficiently thank thee?”

Shrugging her shoulders with infinite grace, she replied, “Thanks are not necessary. The knowledge that thou hast escaped a horrible death is all the reward I require.” She spoke in low musical tones, and her accents were those of a town-dweller rather than of a nomad of the Sahara.

“But why dost thou run such risks in order to deliver me – an Infidel?” I asked, recollecting that if detected, little mercy would be shown her by that barbarous fanatical band.

“I watched thee brought before the Sheikh, and I heard him condemn thee to the torture. For hours I have been awake thinking, and at last determined to save thee. Come, make no noise, but follow.”

Cautiously she moved away, taking care to keep in the shadow of the rocks. So graceful was her carriage, so supple was her figure, that, as I walked behind her, I felt convinced that she must be young. Once she halted, and, turning her splendid eyes upon me, said —

“Thou wilt forgive my people, wilt thou not? I make no excuse for their barbarities, I only ask thee to forgive.”

“Thou hast saved my life,” I replied. “How can I refuse any request thou makest?”

She laughed a short, silvery laugh, and, turning, sped on again, her little slippers coming to sad grief over the rough stones. Presently I stopped her, and, placing my hand lightly on her shoulder, said —

“May I not gaze upon thy face for one brief moment?”

“I cannot permit,” she cried, shrinking from me. “Remember, thou art an Infidel!”

Her answer was a stinging rebuff.

“None of thy people are here to witness,” I urged. “Let me for one second unclasp thy *adjar* and gaze upon thy countenance;” and at the same time I made a movement as if to tear away the tantalising veil that concealed her features.

“No! no!” she cried in alarm, stepping back and covering her face with both hands. “Thou must not! Thou shalt not! This, then, is thy reward to one who has risked so much to save thee?” she said reproachfully.

“Forgive me,” I exclaimed quickly, dropping upon my knee and raising her soft, delicate hand to my lips. But she drew it away firmly, as if my touch stung her.

“Rise,” she said, rather harshly. “I forgive thee, of course, but there is no time for courtesies. Come.”

Passing round to the other side of the rock, I found tethered in the centre of a patch of tamarisk a splendid Arab horse with handsome trappings.

When she approached, the animal pawed, rubbing its nose upon her hand.

“It is mine,” she said, “and I give it to thee in the hope that Allah may guard thee, and that thou wilt get away to the Atlas in safety. I saddled it with mine own hands, so in the bags thou wilt find both food and drink. On leaving here, keep straight over yonder hill, then spur with all speed always towards the east. Before three suns have set, thou wilt rest on the Oasis of Meskam, where are encamped the Spahis who are in search of us. Thou wilt be safe with them, although thou wilt not inform them of our whereabouts?”

“No, I promise to preserve thy secret,” I said.

Dawn was spreading quickly, and in the grey light I could see more distinctly the part of her countenance left uncovered.

Grasping her slim, white hand, with its fingers laden with roughly-cut gems, I looked earnestly into her magnificent eyes, and again asked, “Is thy decision utterly irrevocable? May I not look for once upon thy face? Think, I have been delivered from a horrible death, yet to recognise my deliverer again will be impossible!”

“You and I are strangers,” she replied slowly. “Thou art a European, while I am a homeless wanderer of the desert. If thine eyes do not gaze upon my countenance, I shall have committed one sin the less, and thou wilt never be troubled by any recollections. Memories are apt to be tiresome sometimes, and it is written that the True Believer is — ”

“With me thy memory will always remain that of a brave, tender, but mysterious woman, to whom I owe my life.”

“That is how I wish thee to think of me. Perhaps I too may remember thee sometimes, though it would be sinful for me to do so. What is thy name?”

“Cecil Holcombe.”

She repeated the four syllables with a pretty Arab accent.

“And thine?” I asked, still holding her white hand and gazing into her eyes.

She hesitated. I felt she was trembling. Her breath came quickly.

“Mount, and go,” she said. “I – I have risked too much. Besides, thou mayest not discover who I really am. It would be *fatal!*”

“But thy name?” I urged. She seemed bent upon preserving her incognita, and I was growing impatient. That she was lovely I felt sure. No face could be ugly with those magnificent eyes. “Surely thou wilt not withhold from me thy name?”

She was silent. Her slim, bejewelled fingers closed over mine with a slight pressure as she sighed. Then, lifting her eyes, she replied —

“I am called Zoraida.”

“The daughter of whom?”

“Daughter of the Sun,” she replied, smiling.

“Then thou wilt not tell me the name of thy father?” I said, disappointedly.

She shook her head, replying, “No. To thee I am only Zoraida. My father’s name is of no concern.”

“And may I not carry with me some little souvenir of this strange meeting?” I asked.

Slowly she drew a quaint, old-fashioned ring from her finger and placed it upon my hand, laughing the while, saying —

“When thou art far beyond the mountains, this will remind thee how near thou hast been to death;” adding anxiously, “Now go, I beg. See! the sun will soon break forth! Do not tarry another instant – for my sake!”

“Zoraida, shall we never meet again?” I asked desperately, for the mystery surrounding her and her strange words caused me to forget the danger of lingering. “Art thou never in Algiers or Oran, or any of the towns by the sea?”

“Sometimes in Algiers. But very, very seldom. Yet even if I were, we could not meet. The Korân forbids.”

“When wilt thou visit Algiers again?”

“Perhaps in the month of Rbi-el-tani. Then I go to the koubba of Sidi-Djebbar.”

“On what day?” I asked, eagerly.

“Probably on the first Al-go’omah,” she replied. “But why dost thou ask? To attempt to meet again would only bring disgrace upon me – perhaps death. Thou knowest full well how strict is our religion, and how terrible is the punishment meted out to those of my sex who hold converse with the Roumis.”

“Yes, alas!” I said. “Nevertheless, we shall meet again, I feel certain, because we – ”

“I make no promise. But if ever we chance to cross each other’s path, thou wilt not compromise me in the eyes of my people?” she urged, with terrible earnestness.

“Never,” I replied, fervently. “None shall ever know of our meeting.”

“Now mount and go, or we shall be discovered,” she begged, in evident alarm. “Remember the directions I have given thee, and know that thou hast my blessing.”

With a last look into her big, wonderful eyes, I raised the tiny white hand I had held and kissed it. Then, vaulting into the saddle, I uttered profound thanks for my deliverance, and bade her adieu.

“*Slama!*” she cried, standing erect with both bare arms outstretched towards me. “*Allah Iselemeck. Slama!*”

And digging my heels into the splendid Ku-hai-lan horse she had given me, I shot away like an arrow, and rode for life towards the sand-hills of the Iraouen that looked black and bare against the streak of saffron dawn in the sky beyond.

Chapter Five. Zoraida's Pledge

Over the dunes, regardless of the dust and heat, I rode, well knowing that my life and that of my fair rescuer depended upon my successful escape.

Glancing back now and then, I strained my eyes in the direction of the oasis, half expecting to see a party of Arabs with their long guns held aloft bearing down upon me; but not a living thing was in sight. Again I was alone in that vast, silent wilderness.

About noon, at a spot where a few dry plants and tufts of hulfa grass struggled to maintain a miserable existence, I dismounted in order to rest my tired horse, and eagerly searched the saddle-bag. It had been packed by the mysterious Zoraida herself, and as I drew forth one package after another, I saw how thoughtful she had been. In addition to dates, figs, Moorish biscuits, and a little skin full of water, I drew from the bottom of the bag a bulky Arab purse. Roughly made of crimson leather, ornamented with a crescent and star embroidered in silver thread, it had evidently been well worn. Opening it, I was astonished at finding it full of French napoleons, while in the centre compartment, secured by a tiny flap, was a little scrap of paper. Upon it, traced in pencil in a hurried, uncertain hand, were a number of Arabic characters.

For a long time I puzzled over them. Some of the characters were illegible, and, being run into one another, they appeared to have been written in the dark. At length, however, I succeeded in satisfying myself as to their purport, for they read as follows: —

“Know, O Unbeliever, that thou art welcome to this poor assistance that I can offer thee. Thou, a stranger from far beyond the sea, may some day be able to render assistance to the unhappy woman who severed thy bonds. Thou art named *Amîn* (‘the Faithful’). It is by that name that thou wilt be remembered if ever we should chance to meet. Allah, the One Merciful, is gracious, and will guide thee – praised be His name.”

This strange note caused me a good deal of thought, as, sitting upon a stone, I ate the dates my mysterious rescuer had provided for my sustenance. Not content with releasing me from certain death, she, a member of a notorious robber band, had given me her purse! Doubtless she was well aware that her people had taken from me everything I possessed, and as reparation had placed some of her own money in the bag. The note, however, was curious, because it made plain the reason why this mysterious Queen of the Desert had taken so much trouble to accomplish my release. She was unhappy, and I could assist her! How? Who was she? what was she? I wondered. Visions of neglect and ill-treatment were immediately conjured up before my eyes; for woman in Algeria is not better off than in other Oriental countries. The victim of a stupid and brutalising social code founded on a religion whose theory is pure, but whose practice is barbarous, she is always contemned or maltreated, a toy to the wealthy, a beast of burden to the poor.

What, I mused, could be the cause of Zoraida's infelicity? Was she, as the daughter of the murderous old Sheikh, leading the usual wretched existence of Arab girls, neglected by her mother and relegated to a corner of the harem in the charge of some ugly old negress? Every Arab woman looks upon a son as a blessing and a daughter as an incubus; therefore it is little wonder that the life of the daughters of wealthy Moors and Arabs is a truly pitiable one. But on due reflection I saw how improbable it was that an outlaw like Hadj Absalam, who, being continually hunted by the French soldiers sent out to capture him, and compelled to be ever on the move in the most inaccessible spots, would cause his family to travel with him. In case of a sudden attack by the Spahis or Turcos, the paraphernalia of a harem would considerably hamper his movements; and that he could be exceedingly active and show serious fight had already been proved times without number.

No. A man of his stamp would never be troubled with his daughter while bent on plunder and murder. There were, therefore, but two other suppositions. Zoraida was either a captive, or Hadj Absalam's wife. This caused me to remember that if a captive she certainly would have endeavoured to fly with me; while the possession of horses and money, her refusal to allow me to gaze upon her face, and her agitation when I pressed her hand to my lips, all pointed to one fact, namely, that my mysterious deliverer, the woman who by her exquisite form and grace had enchanted me, was none other than the wife of the brigand whose many atrocious crimes had from time to time sent a shudder through the readers of European newspapers.

Zoraida the wife of a thief and murderer! No! I could not bring myself to believe it. She was so young, with arms and hands so delicately moulded and eyes so clear and wide open, that it seemed impossible that she was actually wedded to a villain like Hadj Absalam.

Again I read through her note, carefully tracing each of the hastily-scrawled characters. Though ill-formed, it was not owing to lack of education, for the vowels were marked in position correctly in order to make it easier for me to translate. As I held the paper in my hand, it emitted a pleasant sensuous odour. The perfume that clung to it was geranium, the same sweet scent that had pervaded Zoraida when with her keen knife she had bent and freed me from the poison of the asp.

Sitting in the noonday sun, with my burnouse loosened and my arms resting on my knees, that sweet odour brought back vividly the events of the previous night, its horrors, its surprises, its joys. Again I saw Zoraida, gorgeous in her silk and gauze, a vision of loveliness, an ideal of Arab beauty, ready to risk her life to save mine. But it was only for a second; then my memory became hazy again, and it all seemed like some strange, half-remembered dream.

A desert lark rose near me and burst into joyous song. My horse turned its head slowly, and regarded me steadily for a few moments with his large, serious eyes. The utter loneliness in that arid waste, one of the most dreary regions of the Sahara, was terribly depressing.

But on my finger was her ring. The souvenir was by no means a valuable one, yet so dearly did I prize it that I would not have given it in exchange for anything that might be offered. It was of a type common among Arab women; heavy oxydised silver, and around it, in small Arabic characters of gold, ran a text from the Korân, "Allah is gracious and merciful." Taking it off, I examined the inside, and found it quite bright and smooth by constant wear.

Whatever my mysterious enchantress was, or whoever she would prove to be, this was her pledge of trust. And she, whose face I had not looked upon, had named me "the Faithful!"

Yet as I sat thinking, grim, uncanny feelings of doubt and insecurity filled my mind, for I remembered the strange words of Ali Ben Hafiz, and the fateful Omen of the Camel's Hoof.

I had at last become enmeshed as the dead man had prophesied!

Chapter Six.

The Man with a Secret

At sundown, three days after my escape from the Ennitra, my eyes distinguished the palms of the Meskam Oasis standing at the foot of a large sand-hill. Zoraida had correctly informed me, for under feathery trees, amid the luxuriant vegetation which one finds here and there in the Sahara, the Spahis and Chasseurs d’Afrique had established an advanced post.

In an hour I had entered the camp, and being taken before the French commandant, related my story. I told him of my journey with Ali Ben Hafiz, of the attack, and of the massacre.

“*Bien!* and you alone escaped!” exclaimed the officer, a thorough boulevardier, who sat before his tent with outstretched legs, lazily puffing a cigarette.

“Yes,” I replied.

He was as well groomed, and his moustache was as carefully waxed, as if he were lounging outside the Café de la Paix.

“You were exceedingly fortunate,” he exclaimed, rolling his cigarette carelessly. “Those who fall into Absalam’s clutches seldom escape. *Diable!* he’s the most fierce cut-throat in all Algeria. How did you manage it?”

I hesitated. Had I not promised Zoraida to preserve the secret of their whereabouts for her sake? If her people were to escape, I should be compelled to make misleading statements. At last I replied —

“They left me bound to a tree during the night, and I succeeded in loosening the cords. Finding a horse ready saddled, I jumped upon it and rode away.” After I had uttered the words, I saw how lame was my story.

“But how did you know we were here?” asked the commandant, blowing a cloud of smoke from his lips, regarding me rather critically, and then offering me a *chebli* from his case.

“I had no idea,” I replied. “Seeing the palms from yonder ridge, I came here to rest. Had I not discovered the oasis, I should most likely have perished.”

“You certainly would not have lived many days,” he said. “The nearest well is two hundred miles in any direction, therefore, if you had missed this, the vultures would soon have made a meal off you. But,” he continued, “describe to me where we are likely to find Hadj Absalam. We have been in search of him these three months, but, strangely enough, his spies appear to watch all our movements, with the result that he evades us in a manner simply marvellous.”

I was silent for a moment, thinking.

“I have travelled for three days due north,” I said, apparently reflecting. “If you send your men due south three days’ journey, they will come upon a small oasis. This must be passed, and still south again, a three hours’ ride, there is a larger oasis on the further side of a high ridge. It is there that Hadj Absalam is taking his ease.”

“Good!” exclaimed the officer, calling over a Chasseur who was sauntering past with his hands in his pockets and ordering him to send immediately a *sous-officier*, whom he named.

“It’s a fine night,” he said. “We will start when the moon rises, and, *mon Dieu!* it will not be our fault if we do not exterminate the band, and bring the black-faced old scoundrel back with us. The caravans will never be safe until his head is in the *lunette*.”

“But he may have moved by this time,” I suggested.

“Then we will follow and overtake him,” he replied, brushing some dust from his braided sleeve. “He shall not escape us this time. When I was quartered in Biskra, I knew old Hafiz well. Though prejudiced against France, he was always good to our men, poor old fellow.”

“Yes,” I said. “Though a strict Moslem, he was most amiable and generous.”

At that moment a lieutenant of Chasseurs strode up and saluted.

“Victor,” the commandant exclaimed, addressing him, “we leave at once, with the whole of your *enfants d’enfer*, in search of Absalam, who is three days’ journey south. This time we will pursue him till we run him to earth. The Spahis will remain;” and, turning to me, he added: “M’sieur Holcombe, you are welcome to stay here also, if it pleases you.”

Thanking him, I assured him how deeply I appreciated his hospitality, and then, having been handed over to the care of a *sous-officier*, I was shown to the tent which the commandant ordered should be placed at my disposal, while the Spahis – or *homards*, as they are termed in the argot of the 19th Army Corps, because of their red burnouses – were busy assisting their comrades to prepare for departure.

Our evening meal of thin onion soup, black bread, and rough, bitter coffee having been disposed of, the Chasseurs, numbering about two hundred, paraded with their horses, and were briefly but keenly inspected by the officer in command, whose name I learned was Captain Paul Deschanel. The inspection over, the commandant addressed his men, and the order was given to mount. Then, amid the shouts of “*Vive les Chasseurs! À bas les Ennitra! Vive la France!*” from the assembled Spahis, the smart troop of cavalry, with the captain at their head, galloped away into the moonlit desert, and were soon lost in the gloom.

As I sat watching the receding horsemen, and inwardly chuckling that by sending them three days’ journey into the country of the Inemba-kel-Emoghri, Absalam and his people would be six days’ journey distant in an opposite direction, I was startled by a hand being laid upon my shoulder. Turning quickly, I found it was a Spahi.

“M’sieur is English, if I mistake not?” he inquired, with a pleasant smile upon his swarthy but refined face.

“True,” I replied. “And, judging from your accent, you are not an Arab, but a Parisian.”

“Yes,” he said, speaking in fairly good English. “I have been in England once. If you care to spend an hour in my tent, I can offer you absinthe and a cigarette. That is about the extent of the hospitalities of the oasis.”

Thanking him for his invitation, I accompanied him, and a few moments later we were sitting in the bright moonlight on a mat spread outside his small tent.

“So you have been in England?” I said presently, when he had told me his name was Octave Uzanne.

“Yes,” he replied, with a slight sigh, allowing the water to trickle slowly into his absinthe, and drawing his scarlet burnouse closer about him. It was strange to hear English in this region of silence and desolation.

“Is not the recollection of your visit pleasant?” I asked.

“Ah! forgive me, m’sieur,” he exclaimed quickly; “I can never hear your tongue, or think of London, without becoming *triste*. I associate with your great gloomy city the saddest days of my life. Had I not gone to London, I should never have been here, leading the wild semi-barbarous life in an Arab regiment of the Army of Africa. We of the Spahis have a saying, ‘*N’éveillez pas le chat qui dort*’ – but sometimes –”

“It is a good adage, but we cannot always let our sorrows lie,” I interrupted sympathetically. He had spoken with the accent of a gentleman, and with the white light of the moon streaming upon his face, I saw that he was about thirty years of age, with a countenance clean-cut and noble, refined and somewhat effeminate. His dark eyes were deep-set and serious, yet in his face there was an expression of genuine *bonhomie*. The average Spahi is feared by Moor and Jew, by Biskri and Koulougli, as the fiercest and most daring of soldiers. In drink he is a brute, in love he is passionate, in the saddle he is one of the finest riders in the world; in the town he is docile and obedient, fond of lounging in the cafés, idling over his eternal cigarette; yet away in the desert, all his old instincts return; he is an Arab again, and knows no measure either in attachment or in hatred. A blow from his scabbard is

the only payment when scouring the country for food, a thrust of his sabre the only apology to those he insults, while in the field, seated on his fleet horse, he rides like the wind, and has the strength and courage of a lion.

This quiet, intellectual, bearded young Frenchman sitting cross-legged on the mat beside me, was, I felt sure, a man with a past. One of his comrades came up and asked him a question in Arabic, to which he replied, speaking the language of his regiment like a true-born Bedouin. As we sipped our absinthe in silence for some minutes, watching the camp settling down for the night, it struck me as curious that, instead of being in the Chasseurs d’Afrique, he should be masquerading in burnouse in an exclusively native regiment.

We began talking of England, but he was not communicative regarding himself, and in reply to my question said —

“I desire to live here in the desert and to forget. Each time we return to Algiers, the glare and glitter of the European quarter unlocks the closed page of my history. It was because this wild roving beyond the pale of civilisation was suited to my mood that I became a *homard*.”

“Has your experience of life been so very bitter, then?” I asked, looking into the handsome face, upon which there was a shadow of pain, and which was set off by the spotless white haick surrounding it.

“Bitter? – Ah!” he exclaimed, with a deep sigh. “You see me now, dragging out a wretched existence in this wilderness, exiled from my home, with name, creed, nationality – everything changed.”

“In order to conceal your identity?” I hazarded.

“Yes, my past is erased. Dead to those who knew me, I am now merely known as Octave Uzanne. I have tasted of life’s pleasures, but just as I was about to drink of the cup of happiness, it was dashed from me. It is ended. All I have now to look for is – is a narrow bed in yonder sand.”

“My dear fellow,” I exclaimed, “don’t speak so despondently! We all have our little debauches of melancholy. Cannot you confide in me? Perhaps I might presume to give advice.”

Silently and thoughtfully he rolled a cigarette between the fingers of his bronzed hand, completing its manufacture carefully.

“My story?” he said dreamily. “Bah! Why should I trouble you – a stranger – with the wretched tragedy of my life?”

“Because I also have a skeleton in my cupboard, and I can sincerely sympathise with you,” I answered, tossing away my cigarette end and lighting a fresh one.

Murmuring some words that I did not catch, he sipped his absinthe slowly, and, passing his sinewy, sun-tanned hand wearily across his forehead, sat immovable and silent, with his eyes fixed upon the dense growth of myrtle bushes and prickly aloes before him.

Lighted candles stuck upon piles of rifles flickered here and there among the tents, the feathery leaves of the palms above waved in the night breeze like funeral plumes, the dry hulfa grass rustled and surged like a summer sea; while ever and anon there came bursts of hearty laughter from the Arab soldiers, or snatches of a *chanson eccentricque* with rollicking chorus that had been picked up a thousand miles away in the French cafés of Algiers.

Chapter Seven.

A Forgotten Tragedy

Octave Uzanne roused himself.

“My career has not been brilliant,” he said slowly, and with bitterness. “It is only remarkable by reason of its direful tragedy. All of us keep a debtor and creditor account with Fortune, and, *ma foi!* my balance has always been on the wrong side. Seven years ago I left the university at Bordeaux with honours. My father was a Senator, and my elder brother was already an *attaché* at our Embassy in London. In order to study English, with the object of entering the diplomatic service, I went over to reside with him, and it was he who, one night, when leaving a theatre, introduced me to the goddess at whose shrine I bowed – and worshipped. We became companions, afterwards lovers. Did she love me? Yes. Though she was a butterfly of Society, though it is through her that I am compelled to lead this life of desert-wandering, I will never believe ill of her. Never! Violet Hanbury – why should I conceal her name – had a – ”

“Violet Hanbury?” I cried, starting and looking to his face. “Do you mean the Honourable Violet Hanbury, daughter of Lord Isleworth?”

“The same,” he replied quickly. “What! – are you acquainted with her?”

“Well, scarcely,” I answered. “I – I merely know her by repute. I have seen her photograph in London shop-windows among the types of English beauty.”

I did not tell him all I knew. Vi Hanbury, the beauty of a season, had been mixed up in some unenviable affair. The matter, I remembered, had been enshrouded in a good deal of mystery at the time, but gossips’ tongues had not been idle.

“Ah!” he continued, enthusiastically; “I have no need then to describe her, for you know how handsome she is. Well – we loved one another; but it was the old story. Her parents forbade her to hold communication with me for two reasons – firstly, because I was not wealthy, and secondly, because they were determined that she should marry Henri de Largentière, a sallow, wizened man old enough to be her father, but who had been Minister of Education in the Brisson Cabinet.”

“Yes,” I said; “the engagement was discussed a good deal in the clubs after its announcement in the *Morning Post*.”

“Engagement? *Sacré!*” he exclaimed, with anger. “She was snatched from me and given to that old imbecile. I was compelled to fly from her and leave her, a pure and honest woman, at their mercy, because – because – ”

He paused for a moment. His voice had faltered and the words seemed to choke him. Flinging away his cigarette viciously, he took a gulp from the tin cup beside him, then, continuing, said —

“Because Violet’s cousin, Jack Fothergill, who was one of her most ardent admirers and had declared his love, was discovered one night dead in his chambers in St. James’s Street – he had been murdered!”

“Murdered?” I ejaculated. “I don’t remember hearing of it. I must have been abroad at the time.”

“Yes,” he said, speaking rapidly. “Jack Fothergill was brutally done to death with a knife that penetrated to the heart. But that was not all: the stiletto left sticking in the wound was discovered to be mine, a gold pencil-case belonging to me was found upon the floor, and the valet gave information to the police that at ten o’clock that night he had opened the door to allow me to depart!”

In the moonlight his eyes had a fierce glitter in them and his bare brown arms were thrust through the folds of his burnouse as he gesticulated to emphasise his words. There was a silence over the camp, but the gay café-chantant song of Mdlle. Duclerc, with which one of the Spahis was entertaining his comrades, sounded shrill and tuneful in the clear bright air —

“Je jou’ très bien d’ la mandoline,
Ça fait moins d’ train que le tambourin;
Puisque quand on a la jambe fine,
Ça permet d’ la faire voir un brin.”

“Strangely enough,” my companion continued, after a pause; “I remained that night with a friend, and judge my horror and amazement when next morning I read in the newspapers of the tragedy, and learned that I was suspected of the crime! It was true that I had called upon the murdered man just before ten o’clock, that the pencil-case had been in my pocket, but of the murder I was entirely innocent. Yet how could I prove an alibi, especially when the doctor had given an opinion that death had occurred at ten o’clock – the hour I left! The police were searching for me, but through that long and terrible day I remained in hiding. Once or twice I was tempted to give myself up and bravely face the awful charge; but there was one thing which prevented this. All interest in life had been crushed from my heart by an announcement of two lines in the same issue of the paper, stating that a marriage had been arranged and would shortly take place between Violet and De Largentière. My hopes were shattered, for my love had been cast aside. She had actually accepted the man she had professed to hate!”

“But did you not clear yourself?” I asked. “Surely you could easily have done so?”

“How could I? Were not the suspicions rendered more justifiable by reason of my visit just prior to the crime. Again, I had not returned to my chambers that night, so day after day I remained in hiding. Though innocent, I was not wholly prepared to meet the charge, for I saw clearly that Jack and I had fallen victims of a foul plot. The crime that cost my friend his life was attributed to jealousy on my part, and with an incentive thus invented, I clearly saw that the circumstantial evidence was strong enough to convict me. I sought my brother’s assistance, and, half mad with terror and despair, I escaped from England. To return to France would be to run into the arms of the police, so I resolved to come here and in the wild life of the desert to bury the past.”

“But by whom was your friend Fothergill stabbed?” I asked.

“Let me tell you,” he replied. “Since that day, when like a criminal I fled from the trial I was afraid to face, I have learned only one fact, though not until a year ago did it come to my knowledge. It appears that on the evening of the murder, Fothergill wrote telling me that during a visit to Paris he had discovered certain details connected with the relations between Mariette Lestrade, a pretty singer whose *chansons de poirrot* were well known at the Moulin Rouge and Ambassadeurs and the ex-Minister of Education. He had that day called at Long’s Hotel, in Bond Street, where the General was staying, and in the course of a stormy interview threatened that if he still continued his suit, he would expose his secret attachment to this star of the café-concert, and take his cousin to her, so that she might investigate for herself. Lord Isleworth’s daughter would have a handsome dowry which was much needed to renovate the departed splendour of the ex-Minister’s estate in the Charente, therefore he was obstinate, laughed, snapped his fingers, and defied Jack. This interview took place at four o’clock in the afternoon, and Jack wrote to me from the Naval and Military Club, telling me everything, and stating that De Largentière had threatened his life. This letter was delivered at my chambers the same night, but I was not there, nor did I return, therefore my brother took charge of it and after nearly two years it reached me out here, unopened.”

“In face of such evidence as that,” I said, “the identity of the actual murderer is not very far to seek.”

“No,” he said, in a low, harsh tone.

“Why do you not take that letter, face the charge against you, and bring the criminal to his punishment?”

“Why?” he echoed, starting to his feet and looking me full in the face. “Why do I not denounce him, and return to civilisation? Because,” he said slowly, in a voice trembling with emotion, “because

Violet – the woman I love – is Madame de Largentière. I think only of her. I adore her still. She shall never know of her husband's terrible secret. Her innocent children shall never be branded as the spawn of a murderer!”

As he spoke, there was a bright flash in the dark clump of aloes immediately opposite us, and at the same instant the report of a rifle fired at close quarters caused me to start violently.

Octave Uzanne threw up his arms with a loud piercing cry, and, reeling, fell heavily backward, struck down by a coward's bullet!

Chapter Eight.

The Fight in the Meskam

Our eyes were in a moment blinded by a flash, as fifty rifles opened fire upon us from every cover the thick bushes afforded.

For a few seconds, as the sounds of the first volley died away, there was a dead silence. So sudden had been the attack, that my comrades the Spahis stood dumbfounded, but ere the rifles of our unknown enemies were reloaded, fierce shrill yells rent the air, the arms that had been piled were snatched up, horses were untethered, and almost simultaneously with a second volley from the ambush, the *homards*, displaying cool courage, poured into the thick growth of myrtles, hulfa, acacias, and dwarf palms, a terribly withering fire.

The whole scene was enacted ere I could draw breath. The moon had disappeared, and in the darkness rifles seemed to pour forth flame on every hand. Evidently our enemies had been watching their opportunity, and while the camp was busy preparing for the departure of the Chasseurs, they had killed the three men on sentry duty on the other side of the sand-hill, and then crept into ambush, and lay there until the signal was given to open fire.

As the desperate combat commenced, and the fusillade burst forth with deafening report, I felt for my revolver, but my heart sank within me as I remembered that the Ennitra had relieved me of it, and I found myself standing alone and unarmed. A few feet away Uzanne's rifle was lying, together with his bag of cartridges. I dashed towards them and bent to pick them up, but ere I could do so, a big fierce-looking Arab sprang from the myrtles towards me, yelling and whirling his knife above his head.

It was the work of an instant.

I remember feeling his sinewy grasp upon my shoulder, I saw his flashing blade above me, and heard him cry in Arabic —

“Let the dogs perish! Kill them! Kill them all!”

The heavy knife whistled in the air as uplifted it poised aloft for a moment.

Suddenly a shot sounded behind me. My assailant clapped his left hand to his breast and staggered back a few steps, then clutched violently at the air and fell. Glancing quickly in the direction whence the shot had come, I saw my friend Uzanne had with difficulty raised himself on one arm, and, drawing his revolver, had with unerring aim shot the Arab through the heart.

Octave Uzanne had saved my life.

“*Sapristi!*” he shouted, with a laugh, as I dashed towards him. “That was a close shave! *Je lui ai collé un atout sur le nez!*”

“Are you seriously hurt?” I gasped; noticing as the rifles flashed that blood was streaming from his shoulder.

“No,” he replied quickly. “I think not. Don't trouble after me now, for I'm no good. I'll patch myself up. Take my rifle and help the others.”

Snatching up the weapon, I loaded it, and, flinging myself on the ground behind the root of a fallen palm, I opened fire upon the thick bushes before me. In this way the minutes, full of anxiety, passed in ignorance of our foes. The deafening explosions were incessant, yells and cries of enemy and friend now and then sounded above the firing, and the air grew so thick with smoke, that I could scarcely distinguish the bushes where the Arabs lay in ambush.

As the terrible moments went by, I knew we were fighting for our lives. Altogether our force in camp only amounted to sixty, while we were, as yet, unaware of the character or number of our assailants. That they had dared to attack a military post showed they were present in overwhelming

numbers, and, further, that they had waited until the Chasseurs had got away before swooping down to annihilate us.

Lying along the ground near my red-burnoused comrades, I fired as regularly as I was able, until suddenly a bugle sounded. It was the order to mount!

My comrades dashed towards their tethered horses, a number of which had been shot down, and I followed. In the excitement I jumped upon the saddle of the first animal I could reach, and as I did so, the bugle again sounded.

“*Ihtaris! sidi!* Keep beside me,” shouted a lithe, muscular Spahi, vaulting upon a horse a few yards away. “We’ll soon clear out these vermin.”

Then, as my companion yelled an imprecation in Arabic and held his rifle high above his head, we all, with one accord, spurred on our horses, and, swift as the wind, tore across the open space between the line of tents and low bushes, dashing into the cavernous darkness of the ambush ere our enemy could be aware of our intention. The result was frightful. Carried on by the wild rush, I found myself in the midst of a sanguinary *mêlée*, where one had to fight one’s adversaries literally hand to hand. My companions, whirling their keen blades, and shouting prayers to Allah the while, fell upon their assailants with piercing yells and cut them down in a manner that was truly awful, but it was not until this moment that I discovered that the officer in command of the Spahis had cleverly divided his small force into two detachments, one of which was repulsing the enemy from the front, while the other had made a circuitous charge, and was now outflanking our opponents and slaughtering them in the rear.

Thus the outlaws were quickly hemmed in, and although we were unable to follow them far, owing to the dense undergrowth, yet we silenced their fire.

Then it was that we made a discovery. The Spahi beside whom I had ridden – a splendid fellow, who sat as firmly in his saddle as if he were part of it, and who, while galloping, could fire his rifle with deadly effect – shouted as he drew rein for a moment —

“*Diable!* They are the children of Eblis – the Ennitra!” Hadj Absalam’s band had followed me!

The cry was taken up. The news spread rapidly from mouth to mouth, and the knowledge that they were being attacked by the daring marauders for whom they had been searching so long and so fruitlessly, caused every *homard* to redouble his energy, and strike a blow towards their extermination. The audacity of the outlaws roused the ire of these fierce native troopers, for the fact that several Spahis had been shot dead in the first moments of the attack, caused an unanimous resolve to follow up the thieves and give them no quarter.

But scarcely had this decision been arrived at, when the attack was renewed even more vigorously. Concealed amidst the dense tropical foliage, they opened fire with their rifles from a quarter whence we least expected it, and in this direction we rode, only to be received by a fusillade more galling than any that had been previously poured upon us.

Their success, however, was not of long duration. A bugle brought our horses in line, and then, with a terrific rush that none could withstand, we dashed upon them, felling them to earth with shot or sabre thrust.

Suddenly a sharp sting in the left side caused me a twinge, and I felt the warm blood trickling. I hesitated a moment, knowing that I was wounded. With an imprecation the Spahi officer shouted to his men to sweep the marauders away, and in the sudden rush and intense excitement that followed I forgot my mishap. Just, however, as I became separated from my companions-in-arms, my wound gave me a second twinge of pain, and there shot up from the tall grass at my side a brawny Arab, whose white burnouse showed distinctly in the semi-darkness, and whose eyes flashed with the fire of hatred. Seizing my horse’s head, he swung round his *jambiyah*, but by good fortune I pulled the trigger of my rifle just in time. The bullet entered his throat, and he tumbled back into the rank grass with a curse upon his lips.

The fight was long and desperate; not merely a skirmish, but a thoroughly well-planned attack by Hadj Absalam's men to annihilate the Spahis for the purpose of securing arms, ammunition, and horses. Whether Absalam himself was present directing the operations we could not learn, although two prisoners we captured both denied that he was with them.

Presently the moon shone out again brightly, showing up both friend and enemy, but the silence of night was still broken by rapid shots, mingled with the loud, exultant shout of the victor and the hoarse, despairing cry of the dying. In that brief hour the scenes of bloodshed were terrible. Little did either the Ennitra or the Spahis value life, and as they struggled desperately for the mastery, they fought with that fierce courage characteristic of the barbarian of the desert.

Amid the wild massacre, when at last my comrades catching their enemies unprepared and making a sudden onslaught cut through them with fire and sword, the thought suddenly occurred to me that this fierce nomadic tribe who had dared to attack us had been spoken of by Zoraida as "her people." Now at last they were being outflanked, unable to reach their horses which had been captured by our detachment operating in their rear, and we were sweeping them down – slaughtering them without mercy!

Sickened by the bloody fight in which I had involuntarily borne a part, and feeling rather faint owing to my wound, – which happily, however, proved a very slight one, – I left my comrades to complete their work of annihilating the murderous band, which they did by following them as they fell back through the tangled vegetation and away across the oasis into the desert beyond, where, with the exception of eighteen who were taken prisoners, the whole of those who had attacked us so desperately were killed or wounded.

Where was Zoraida? As hot and faint I rode back to the spot where my whilom companion Uzanne was lying, I wondered whether the woman, whose half-veiled face seemed ever before my eyes with tantalising distinctness, had accompanied the unfortunate men of her barbaric tribe, or was she waiting with the notorious old cut-throat at a safe distance from the oasis, expecting each moment to learn of a brilliant success, and impatient to assist in the high revelry and divide the plunder?

None of those of her people who had gone forth to attack us would, however, return.

Seventy of them were stretched dead under the bright stars of the Eastern sky, and nearly a hundred were lying with great ugly stains of blood upon their burnouses, racked by the agony of their wounds, and well knowing that ere the morrow's sun would set they would succumb to heat and thirst; that in a few short hours the vultures would lay bare their bones and leave them whitening on the glaring sand.

Chapter Nine. Uzanne, the Outcast

The wild turbulence of that terrible night was succeeded by a peaceful, brilliant dawn.

Already my comrades were preparing to move south, for immediately upon the conclusion of the fight, messengers had been hastily despatched to overtake the commandant, and the detachment would also move on after the Chasseurs at sunset, as the unburied bodies of the marauders would prevent them remaining longer on the Meskam.

My wound – a deep laceration of the flesh where an Arab's bullet had grazed me – proving more painful than at first, I had decided to accompany the messenger who, with an escort, would leave the camp at sundown to travel due north by way of Zaouïa Timassanin and over the barren Areg, bearing the intelligence of the annihilation of the marauders to the headquarters of the Spahis at Tuggurt. For some time I was undecided whether to remain with the military post, or return to civilisation. It was six months since I had left Oran, and for the greater part of that time I had been travelling. I was by no means tired of life in the desert, but the recollection that the mysterious Zoraida intended to perform a pilgrimage to the popular shrine on the outskirts of Algiers, and that if I went south to Zamlen as I had intended, I should certainly lose all chance of seeing her again, caused my decision to recross the Atlas and return.

Late that afternoon, while the glaring sun blazed down upon the motionless bodies of the marauders over which the great dark vultures now hovered, I sat in Uzanne's tent. Stretched upon the ground, my friend, half-dressed, lay with his head upon his saddle. The wound in his shoulder had been roughly bandaged, pending an examination by the surgeon who had gone south with the Chasseurs, and although his bronzed face was a trifle paler, he nevertheless wore an air of utter carelessness.

It was our last chat together, and I had been thanking him for the lucky shot that had knocked over the Arab who had pinned me down.

“*Zut!*” he replied, laughing. “*Eh bien*, old fellow! It was the only man among old Absalam's gang that I could pot. If they had given me a chance, I would have bagged one or two more, but, *diable!* they didn't.”

“No,” I replied. “They apparently fired point blank at you.”

“I don't know why they were so particularly malicious towards me. But there, I suppose it's only my usual bad luck,” and he smiled grimly. “One thing is certain, however, we shall not be troubled by old Absalam again for some time.”

“Do you think we have entirely broken up his band?”

“No. His people are born marauders, and will continue to plunder and murder until he is captured or shot. He will break out in a fresh place before long. Strange that we can never catch him! He really seems to lead a charmed existence.”

“Yes,” I said. “He's a clever old villain.” Then I commenced to talk to him of his return to France.

“I shall never go back,” he snapped, frowning. “Have I not already told you that I have no further interest in life among the people I once knew? When now and then we are quartered in Algiers, its civilisation palls upon me and carries me back to days I am trying to forget. I'm a social outsider; a fugitive from justice. If I cleared myself, it would be at the cost of *her* happiness – why should I go back?”

“But you don't intend to spend the remainder of your days here, in the desert, do you?” I asked.

“Why not? We Spahis have a saying, ‘*Attaslim éhire, rafik!*’” (“Resignation is the best companion.”) Then, grasping my hand and looking seriously into my eyes, he added, “There is but one thing that troubles me. Violet! – Violet herself believes that I am her cousin’s murderer!”

I was silent. How strange it was that I should meet here, so far removed from civilisation as we in Europe know it, a man who held a secret which, if made known, would cause one of the greatest scandals that has ever shocked Society! How bitter were his thoughts; how utterly wrecked was his life! in order that a leader of smart Paris – a woman over whose beauty London had raved – should live in blissful happiness with her husband, this man was leading an aimless, hopeless life, condemned by his friends as a coward and a criminal.

He noticed my look of sympathy, and pressed my hand a trifle harder.

“I do not usually wear my heart on my sleeve,” he said, at last. “Indeed, I have told my secret to no one beside yourself; therefore consider what I have said is in confidence. You are returning to the world I have so ignominiously left, and in all probability we shall not meet again. If we do, and you require a friend, remember you will find him in the Spahi, Octave Uzanne.”

“A thousand thanks,” I said. “You, who have saved me from an Arab’s sword, may always rely upon my devoted friendship. Expressions of vague regret are useless. A stout heart, a clear conscience, and a fixed determination may accomplish many difficulties – they may even effect one’s social resurrection – one’s –”

“With me, never,” he interrupted, despondently. “But see! your horse is ready,” he added, glancing at the tent door, before which a soldier stood, holding the fine Ku-hai-lan that Zoraida had given me. “You will have a long ride to-night, and the dispatches cannot wait. You must go.”

“Then adieu,” I said, rising and shaking his sun-tanned hand heartily. “I hope you’ll soon be right again. Till we meet, *au revoir*.”

He smiled rather sorrowfully, and his dark eyes wore a wistful look. But it was only momentary. “*Bon voyage*,” he said, gaily. “Accept the good wishes of an outcast.”

The dispatch-bearer was outside, speaking impatiently and shouting to remind me that we had a long and fatiguing journey before us; therefore a few moments later I was in the saddle, and the messenger, six Spahis, and myself were soon galloping away past the ghastly corpses of Hadj Absalam’s followers and out into the trackless appallingly-silent wilderness.

Chapter Ten. Humours from the Desert

Twelve weary days after leaving the Meskam, journeying due north over the hot loose sands of the Great Erg, the hill crowned by the imposing white cupolas and towers of the desert town of Tuggurt came into view.

The scene was charming. It was an hour before sundown, and as we ascended the long caravan route from Ngoussa, a foot deep in dust, the place presented a purely Oriental aspect. Against a background of cool-looking palms, the white flat-roofed houses, the grim walls of the Kasbah, and the domes of the many mosques stood out in bold relief. Riding on, we entered a beautiful grove of tall date palms, the trees which the Arabs say stand with their feet in the water and their heads in the fire of heaven. Under their welcome shade a rivulet flowed with rippling music over the pebbles, and fruit trees and corn were growing luxuriantly, for the oasis is most fertile, although, strangely enough, the abundance of water throughout the Oued Gheir causes a malignant fever which proves fatal to Europeans. The beautiful palm-groves and wealth of vegetation was unutterably refreshing after the heat and glare of the waterless regions of the south; and as we approached the gate, a strange motley crowd of gaily-dressed Arabs of the Beni Mansour, Jews, Biskris, and Negroes came forth to meet us and inquire what news we brought.

Our statement that Hadj Absalam's men had been repulsed and defeated caused the wildest rejoicings, and we made a triumphant entry into the place, followed by a gesticulating throng who apparently regarded us as heroes.

Tuggurt is a curious old town. European civilisation has not yet reached it, for, with the exception of one or two French officers, there are no Christian residents. Built almost entirely of bricks baked in the sun, its low houses join one another, and present an unbroken line save for the two town gates. Secure from attack, its moat is now filled up, and in front of the stone-built Kasbah stands the principal of the twenty mosques, with its high dome and tall slender minarets. Around its ancient market-place, where for hundreds of years slaves were bought and sold, are cool arcades with crumbling horse-shoe arches, while beside it there rises the dilapidated dome of a disused house of prayer, bearing some curious plaster arabesques. Within the *enceinte* of the Kasbah – the scene of a horrible massacre during the revolt of the Cherif Bou Choucha in 1871 – stands the barracks, the commandant's house, and the hospital, and it was within those walls, in an inner court beside a plashing fountain, that in the twilight I sat explaining to Captain Carmier, the commandant, how the attack was frustrated.

A French dinner was an appreciable change after the eternal kousskouss, dates, and kola nuts that form one's sustenance on the plains, and as the Captain, a lieutenant, and myself sat over our cognac and cigarettes, I told them of my adventures with Ali Ben Hafiz, and the surprise by the Spahis in the far-off Meskam.

The cool peacefulness of that ancient Kasbah garden, where the veiled houris of Bou Choucha once lounged and plucked the roses, was delightful, and, sitting with the foliage rustling above, there was an air of repose such as I had not experienced for months.

"So the *homards* have gone south to overtake the Chasseurs," Captain Carmier said, as he struck a match on his heel and lit his cigarette after I had told him how valiantly my companions had fought. "How aggravating it is that Hadj Absalam always escapes us!"

"Extraordinary!" remarked the lieutenant, a thorough Parisian, who had just been grumbling at his lot, he having been sent to the desert for three years, instead of to Tonquin, where he might earn distinction and the yellow and green ribbon, as he had expected. "Nothing would please me better than to command an expedition in search of him."

“Search? What’s the use?” asked the commandant. “The rapidity with which the old scoundrel travels is simply miraculous. To-day he’s here, to-morrow he disappears, and on the third day he is reported completely out of our reach. As on previous occasions, he has, I suppose, retreated beyond Mount El Aghil, and there, idling in his harem, is snapping his fingers and defying us. It is always the same – always.”

“Are his headquarters on Mount Aghil, then?” I asked, for amid all the conflicting reports I had never been able to learn the outlaw’s actual place of abode.

“It is said that his stronghold is perched on an almost inaccessible rock not far from Tiouordeouïn, and that his household consists of nearly a thousand persons.”

“Of whom about half are inmates of his harem,” added the lieutenant, smiling. “According to report current among the neighbouring tribe, the Tédjéhé N’ou Sidi, the ladies of his household include a number of Europeans who have from time to time fallen into his merciless clutches. The favourites are surrounded by every luxury, the proceeds of his raids, while those who fall into disfavour, or whose personal charms deteriorate by age, are disposed of in the very simple method of being thrown over the cliff and dashed to pieces upon the rocks beneath.”

“Horrible!” I exclaimed. “But why does not the Government send a sufficient force to follow him into his fastness and capture him?”

“For several reasons,” answered the commandant. “Firstly, because that portion of the Ahaggar where he has his abode has never been explored; secondly, because, by reason of the zealously-guarded mountain pass by which it is approached, access is impossible except by a strong column, who would meet with a most desperate resistance, and would have to take it by storm. The third, and perhaps most important, reason is, because the region of the Ennitra is declared by all the neighbouring nomad tribes to be a sacred place, where several miracle-working marabouts are buried, and any attempt at desecration by Europeans would certainly cause a holy war all through the Sahara. Therefore the War Department, although the General has urged them times without number to send a column in pursuit of Hadj Absalam, prefer to wait and capture him when in the act of plunder.”

“That will never be, it seems,” I remarked.

“No. *Il sait le fin des fins*,” laughed Carmier. “It is said that he attributes his extraordinary success in evading us to a woman who is gifted with second sight.”

“A woman?” I exclaimed, surprised. “She’s believed to be a witch, I suppose?”

“Yes, and a young and very pretty one, too. They say her beauty is marvellous, and her power supernatural. While I was in command of the advanced post at Tihodayen, near the salt mines of Sebkhah d’Amadghor, three Spahis ventured into the Ikerremoïn Oasis in search of forage, and they declare that they came across her. She was surrounded by a number of slaves, and was lying unveiled under a canopy of white and gold. According to their account, she possesses the *beauté du diable*, her women make obeisance to her, and the men who approach fall upon their knees before her, kiss the ground, and ask her blessing. It is said, too, that Mulai Hassan, Sultan of Morocco, saw her on one occasion when he crossed the frontier, and offered Hadj Absalam an enormous sum for her, but the superstitious Ennitra threatened a revolt if she were sold. Whether that’s true I don’t know,” he added, shrugging his shoulders and sipping his cognac. “She is evidently Queen of the Desert, and I merely tell you what’s rumoured.”

“But is she Moorish, Arab, or a Negress?” I asked. “What is her name?”

“She is from the mountains, they say, and the Ennitra know her as Daughter of the Sun.”

“Daughter of the Sun?” I cried, starting. I remembered that Zoraida had, in reply to my questions, told me that that was her name. Could this strange woman of incomparable beauty, who was believed by her people to be possessed of supernatural power, be none other than my mysterious Zoraida, the woman whose veiled face was in my waking hours and in my dreams constantly before my eyes?

“Is her name familiar?” asked the Captain, noticing my ill-concealed surprise.

“No – not at all!” I stammered. “Surely that designation is common enough among the Arabs! It seems an extraordinary fact, nevertheless, that a young and beautiful woman should direct the movements of a band of outlaws.”

“True,” replied Carmier, thoughtfully twisting his waxed moustache. “And there is, moreover, considerable mystery with regard to her which nobody has up to the present been able to solve. One thing, however, appears certain, that this veiled prophetess is an inmate of Hadj Absalam’s harem.”

His words stung me. Could it be possible that this woman who held the murderous nomads under her sway was the same to whom I owed my life? Nay, was it not most probable that she, the graceful incarnation of Eastern beauty whom I adored, was one of the four wives allowed to Hadj Absalam by the Prophet? The mystery was bewildering. The very thought drove me to despair, for I confess I loved her to the verge of madness.

My companion smoked on in lazy contemplative silence. Above, the stars were bright in a steely sky; the ancient court, with its horse-shoe arches, wide arcades, and trailing vines, looked ghostly in the dim light. The quiet was only broken by the running water of the fountain as it fell with pleasant music into its time-worn blue-tiled basin, and the measured tramp of the sentry in the outer court beyond. Upward the cigarette smoke dissolved into the cool night air, carrying with it bitter thoughts of the past, and strange, dreamy visions of an unknown future.

Chapter Eleven.

The City of the Sun

I was awaiting Zoraida, my enchantress.

After a few days in Tuggurt, and a lengthened stay in the date-groves of Biskra with my genial friend the General of Division, I found myself once again in old El Djezaïr, that quaint Franco-Arab city known to Europeans as Algiers. Here Western civilisation and Oriental fanaticism mingle, but never blend. It is a city of glare and darkness, of mosques and marabouts, of Parisian politeness and Berber barbarity, of wide, modern-built boulevards and narrow, crooked streets, as yet untouched by the hand of the colonising vandal.

Till a comparatively recent date it was a nest of fierce pirates who were a terror to Europe, and even now one cannot look upon the gigantic mole and other works prior to the French occupation without remembering that they were constructed by Christian slaves, who were beaten, tortured, and made to toil under the blazing sun until their gyves wore into their flesh, and death relieved them of their miseries. The great white Kasbah on the hill-top, once the gorgeous Palace of the Deys, now echoes to the tramp of Zouaves and artillery. If those gigantic walls could speak, what tales of outrage, torture, and butchery they, alas! could tell! In the great harem, where hundreds of English and French women captured by the Corsairs have pined and died, smart officers on colonial service now lounge, smoke, and discuss the topics of their beloved Paris as revealed by the *Petit Journal* and the *Figaro*; while down in the Rue de la Lyre British tourists in suits of astounding check stare in abject astonishment at Fathma or Khadidja, who, veiled and shrouded in her white haïck, has descended the ladder-like streets of the native quarter to make purchases in the Rue de Constantine or the Marché de la Lyre.

This City of the Sun is one of violent contrasts. Seen from the sea, it fully bears out its Arab comparison of being a “diamond set in emeralds,” for in terraces of intensely white, flat-roofed houses, each with little square windows like pips upon a dice, it rises high upon the bright green Sahel hills. In the centre the Arab town with its cupolas and minarets is crowned by the great fortress, while right and left are the pleasant suburbs of St. Eugène and Mustapha, their white houses and handsome villas gleaming forth from dark luxuriant foliage.

In the French quarter, the Boulevard de la République, running along nearly the whole front of the town facing the sea, the wide Place du Gouvernement, with its oasis of palms, and the Rue d’Isly, with its avenue of trees, are all hot and full of busy, bustling French; but turn away up any of the side streets from the Rue de la Lyre, cross the Quartier Juif, and in a few moments one is in a bewildering labyrinth of steep, shady, and tortuous streets, so narrow in places that two asses cannot pass with their panniers.

Herein lies the charm of Algiers. Those narrow passages, where the Arabs sit on rush mats outside the *kahoua*, drinking tiny cups of coffee, smoking cigarettes, and killing time by playing *damma*, are the same at this moment as they were in the days of Yousuf Zeri; and although the religious prejudices of the Arab, the Moor, the Jew, and the Biskri have perhaps become somewhat modified by contact with the civilising Roumis, yet their mode of life is still the same, and at heart they hate the Christians as fiercely as ever. Indolent and content, they love to lean upon the long parapet of the Boulevard de la République, gazing with deep-set, thoughtful eyes away over the bright blue sea, to lounge in groups at street corners gossiping, to sit at the garish French cafés driving bargains with European merchants, or hand-in-hand to stroll leisurely across to the mosque to their daily prayers. Side by side with dainty ladies in Paris-made gowns and the high-heeled boots of fashion, Arab women, with foreheads heavily laden with tinkling sequins, their dark, flashing eyes peeping over their veils, and all looking exactly the same in their spotlessly white but hideous out-

door dress, shuffle along with waddling gait, and turn to glance surreptitiously at the stranger after he or she has passed.

This wonderful old city of sunlight and shadow, of dazzling brightness and sombre gloom, of strange incongruities of dress, of language, and of religion, was by no means fresh to me. On taking up my quarters at the Hôtel de la Régence, in the Place du Gouvernement, I was welcomed as an old friend, for on several previous occasions, while idling in El Djezaïr, I had made it my headquarters in preference to the suburban hotels on the hill at Mustapha. Before the house a cluster of fine date palms throw a welcome shade, and beyond lies the bay, with the great, misty mountains of Kabylia in the distance. Forming one side of the Place stands the Djamâa el-Djedid, with its plain windowless walls, dazzlingly white dome, and square minaret, whereon at sunset the *mueddin* appears and calls the Faithful to prayer. Here, again, extremes meet. The monotonous voice of the priest mingles with the jingle and chatter of the French café opposite, and Europeans, sipping their bock or mazagran, watch the devout Moslems trooping into the courtyard to wash before entering the house of Allah.

Here, in this the most charmingly cosmopolitan city in the world, where subjects for the artist are presented in perfect panorama at every turn, I wandered and idled at cafés, killing time impatiently, and eagerly awaiting the day on which my mysterious desert acquaintance would go upon her pilgrimage. At last that long-wished-for Friday dawned, and leaving the city early by the gate Bab-el-Oued, I strolled through the charming Jardin Marengo, under the intensely white walls of the handsome mosque built over the shrine of Sidi Abd-er-Rahman, and then out on the road which wound up through the dark, wild ravine of the Bou-Zarea.

In the fresh, cool morning air the walk up that well-shaded road to the Frais-Vallon was delightful, even though the aloes and prickly pears were white with dust and the sun had scorched the foliage of the almond and orange trees. At the top of the glen, where the road narrowed into a footpath, I found a little Arab café, and upon a stone bench before it I seated myself to watch for the woman who held me under her spell.

This smiling, fertile country beside the sea, where grapes, olives, and sweet flowers grew in such wild abundance, was charming after the great wastes of arid sand; and while the birds sang gladly above in the cloudless vault of blue, I sat alone, smoking and sipping a tiny cup of coffee, watching the veiled women in their white baggy trousers and haicks, in pairs and singly, slowly toiling past up the steep road on their way to adore the koubba of Sidi-Djebbar.

That Zoraida should repair to this shrine was puzzling. It added considerably to the mystery which enveloped her. Sidi-Djebbar is the patron saint of divorced Arab women, and, according to a local tradition, whenever a divorced lady makes three pilgrimages to his tomb and drinks of the waters of Aioun Srakna, she will marry again before the next fast of Ramadân. Was Zoraida the divorced wife of some man who had bought her from her parents and had soon grown tired of her? Was she an outcast from the harem?

Thoughts such as these filled my mind as I watched the veiled houris pass in silent, pious procession. To distinguish one from another was impossible. The only way in which I could tell a lady from a woman of the people was by her feet and by the texture of her haick. The feet of the lower classes were bare and thrust into heavy, roughly-made slippers, while on the neat ankles of wealthier women gold bangles jingled, their feet were encased in stockings of silk, they wore tiny Paris-made patent-leather shoes, and as they brushed past, they left upon the air a scent of attar of rose. The women of Al-Islâm are seldom allowed to visit the mosques, so on Friday, their day of prayer, they go on foot to venerate the koubbas of their saints instead.

A weary journey extending over a month, had brought me at last to this spot, yet how among all these shrouded figures could I distinguish the woman I adored? Suddenly it occurred to me that, although I had taken up a position of vantage, Zoraida would not approach me, an Infidel, at any spot where she might be observed; therefore I rose and strolled leisurely on up the steep shaded track that led in serpentine wanderings among the fig trees, oranges, and vines.

Half convinced that her promise would never be kept, and that she was still in the far Sahara, I walked on very slowly for some distance. Suddenly, at a bend in the hill-path, where the wide branches of the cork oaks, the ilex, and the *chêne-zeen* met overhead, and the giant aloes grew abundantly, a voice amongst the leafy scrub startled me, and a short, stout figure appeared from among the foliage. Glancing round to reassure herself she was unobserved, she ran towards me. Only her eyes were visible, but they disappointed me, for I could see that they were not those of the woman for whom I was searching. She was old; her forehead was brown, wizened, and tattooed.

“Art thou the Angleezi whom Allah delivered into the hands of our master Hadj Absalam? Art thou named the Amîn?” she asked, almost breathlessly, in Arabic.

“Yes,” I replied. “Who art thou?”

“Know, O Roumi, that I have been sent by my mistress, Zoraida Fathma,” she said, drawing her haick closer with her brown, bony hand. “My lady of exalted dignity said unto me, ‘Go, seek the foreigner Cecil Holcombe, *wâkol loh inni moshtâk ilich*.’” (“Tell him that I am desiring to see him.”)

“To see her? I expected she would be here!” I said.

“Alas! no. The koubba of Sidi-Djebbar cannot be graced by my lady’s presence this moon.”

“Is she here, in El Djezaïr?” I asked quickly.

“Yes. Although thou hast not known it, her lustrous eyes, the Lights of the Harem, hath already gazed upon thee since thy sojourn here. She desireth to have speech with thee.”

“When?”

“Two hours after the sun hath set.”

“And where may I see her?” I asked, impatiently.

“Knowest thou, O Roumi, that in the Jardin Marengo there is a path under the wall of the holy Zaouia of Sidi Abd-er-Rahman. If thou wilt meet me there under the great cedar tree when the moon hath risen, I will conduct thee to her presence. My lady hath named thee Amîn, and must see thee.”

“I will await thee,” I replied. “Go, tell thy mistress that the hours have passed at snail’s pace since we met, that the Amîn weareth her ring, and that he hath not forgotten.”

“Behold! Some one cometh!” she exclaimed in alarm, as a tall Arab appeared at the bend of the path sauntering slowly in our direction. “I must not be seen speaking with thee, an Infidel, within the sacred precincts of the koubba. Till to-night, *sidi, slama*.”

And, turning quickly, the messenger from my mysterious enchantress strode onward towards the tomb of the patron saint of divorce.

Chapter Twelve.

An Oath to Messoudia

With eager anticipation of once again meeting Zoraida, I left the Place Bab-el-Oued, and, ascending the steep incline, entered the Jardin Marengo.

The sun had disappeared into the broad Mediterranean, flooding the sea with its lurid blaze of gold; the light had faded, the *muddenin* had, from the minarets of the mosques, called the Faithful to their evening devotions, and the dusky, mystic gloom had now deepened into night. From the garden, situated a hundred feet or more above the sea, on the edge of the city but within the fortifications, a beautiful picture was presented. Above, the square castellated minaret of the mosque of Sidi Abd-er-Rahman stood out distinctly against the calm night sky; below, in the hollow, the houses of the lower town clustered with a dream-like picturesqueness in every line and angle. Beyond, lay the harbour with its breakwater and tall white lighthouse; in the gently undulating water were long perpendicular twinklings of light, and against the darkness, which was not wholly dark, the bold lines and tapering masts of half a dozen vessels were sharply silhouetted. The distant strains of one of the tenderest airs from “Carmen,” played by the fine Zouave band, floated upward out of the shadow; and as I stood under the giant cedar which the old Arab woman had indicated, it was hard to say whether one’s looking or one’s listening brought a finer sense of restfulness and remoteness. It was probably the alliance of the two that gave to those moments their special fascination.

The ancient mosque, under the walls of which I waited, was silent. Among the dark foliage lights glimmered, and overhead in the spacious quiet were a few stars. At last the air from “Carmen” died in its final poignant chords, the succeeding silence remained for a long time unbroken, and the moon shone forth from behind the light scud. Its white brilliance was shedding a silvery light over the trees and gravelled walks, when suddenly I saw, moving slowly in the shadow of the ilex trees, a shrouded figure approaching noiselessly, like some ghostly visitant from the graveyard of the mosque.

A few moments later the old Arab woman with whom I had made the appointment, emerged into the moonlight and halted before me.

“Thou, the Amîn, the stranger from over seas, hast kept thy promise,” she said, slowly. “Know, O Roumi, that my lady awaiteth thee.”

“Whither wilt thou conduct me?” I asked. “Is the journey long?”

“No,” she answered. “First, before I, Messoudia, conduct thee to her, thou must swear by thine own Deity never to reveal to any one, Mussulman or Christian, her whereabouts, or, even though strange things may occur, – more remarkable than thou hast ever dreamed, – thou wilt never seek to discover their cause, neither wilt thou approach her in the future unless she commandeth thee.”

The weird old woman’s words mystified me. In the moonlight her white-robed figure looked ghostly and mysterious, and her small dark eyes peered earnestly at me over her veil.

“Why should I give such an undertaking?” I asked.

“Because – because it is my lady’s desire. It is her words I deliver unto thee; if thou dost not obey, thou canst never enter her presence.”

I hesitated. Perhaps, after all, it would be best not to go, for if I were discovered, Zoraida’s life as well as mine would most probably pay the penalty. Besides, she might be already married! Some questions I had asked of her servant, when we met at the Frais-Vallon earlier in the day, were directed towards clearing up that point, but I had only received vague, evasive answers.

Noticing my indecision, the old woman continued – “Thy thoughts, O Roumi, are that thy presence in my lady’s apartment would be an insult to our creed. *O’ há kki k lak annoh lise fi hâtha al-amr éhâtar.*” (“I assure thee there is no danger in that matter.”)

“And if I undertake to respect her wishes although my curiosity be aroused, what then?” I asked, still undecided.

“My lady will admit thee to her presence, and have speech with thee alone. Remember, O Infidel, she risked her life to save thee, and thou, in return, may now redeem thy promise to her.”

“Then I will accompany thee,” I said at last, determined to see my fair Enchantress of the Desert again. “And if her commands are imperative, I give my word of honour as an Englishman that I will never make inquiry regarding things I may witness, unless she giveth me sanction.”

“May all the blessings of Allah be extended unto thee!” she replied, with evident satisfaction at my resolve, for seldom will a True Believer express such a wish to an Infidel. “I, a Moslem, cannot walk with thee, but follow me, and I will lead thee unto her.”

Then, drawing her haick closer, she moved onward in the deep shadow of the orange and ilex trees, while I, with mixed feelings of pleasure and distrust, strode on after her.

I had exchanged my haick and burnouse for European dress, now that I was back in Algiers. The spirit of adventure was strong within me, yet I felt curiously apprehensive of some untoward event. I was about to enter the abode of some fanatical Moslem, to converse with a woman of Al-Islâm, to tread upon ground that must always be highly dangerous to a Christian. Yet the world was before me, and there is always pleasure and excitement in plunging single-handed into its chilling depths.

Ascending the short flight of steps at the side of the mosque we emerged from the Jardin Marengo, and, turning into the broad but unfrequented Boulevard Valée, the highest point of the ancient town, we walked for some distance until nearly opposite the great grey walls of the prison, when suddenly my guide crossed the road and dived into the Arab quarter, a puzzling labyrinth of narrow crooked streets and gloomy little passages, of maze-like windings and dark *impasses*. As we passed down the steep, ill-lit streets, white-burnoused men were squatting in groups on the mats outside their cafés, drinking coffee, playing *damma*, and smoking “the pipe of permanence;” or inside the *kahoua* they lounged upon the benches, discussing the topics of the day. In the deep dens that serve as shops, shoemakers were still plying their trade, makers of horn rings were still at their primitive lathes, and embroiderers were still busily sewing in the yellow lamplight.

The streets were crowded, for it was pleasant in the evening hour, and amid the chatter of Arabic we sped on, wending our way in and out the tortuous turnings until I had no idea in what portion of the Arab quarter we were. The streets bore names in French on little plates, it is true, but after we had crossed the Rue de la Kasbah, the principal native business street, I discovered nothing that gave me a clue to the direction in which I was going. A dozen turns to right and left, now ascending through some dark tunnel-like passage, now descending where the ancient thoroughfare was wide enough to admit three asses abreast, we at last came to where two narrow streets met. Straight before us was an arched door in a great, gloomy, whitewashed house, windowless except for a few little square holes high up, protected by lattices of thick iron bars. The house was very old, built in the time of the Deys, and as my guide rapped upon the door, I noticed that the step was worn deeply by the feet of generations, and above the arch the hand of Fathma in brass was nailed to avert the evil eye.

It was a strange inartistic-looking exterior, but, ere I had time to gaze around, the heavy iron-studded door swung open, and, entering, we passed through a narrow vestibule, or *skiffa*, into a spacious *oust*, or open court, where a vine trailed above and a fountain fell gently into its marble basin. Then, for the first time since we left the Jardin Marengo, my guide spoke. In a low half-whisper, she said —

“Thy voice must not be heard. This meeting is strictly secret, therefore follow me in silence and noiselessly.”

“*Ma ansash*,” I replied.

“And thy promise?” she whispered.

“My oath bindeth me to obey her.”

“Then thou art truly the Amîn. Peace be unto thee, and upon thy descendants and companions,” she said. “Hush! make no noise. Let us seek her.”

Crossing the dark courtyard, she unlocked a small door, and I followed her in. The mingled perfume of musk, geranium, and attar of rose was almost overpowering, and my feet fell with noiseless tread upon a thick, soft carpet. A great hanging lamp of filigree brass shed a welcome ray, and as we ascended the broad stair, I thought I heard whisperings and the rustle of silken garments. Upstairs, a big, handsomely-dressed negro stood apparently awaiting us, for, with a sharp, inquiring glance and the exchange of some whispered words in Kabyle dialect, which I could not distinctly catch, he conducted me along a well-carpeted passage to the end, where closed plush curtains barred our passage.

As I advanced, he suddenly drew them aside, and in a low deep voice announced me in Arabic, inviting me to enter.

Stepping forward, I gazed around in curiosity and amazement.

I was in the harem!

Chapter Thirteen.

Night in the Harem

“Ah, Ce-cil! At last! – at last! *Marhaba.*”

There was a movement on the other side of the dimly-lit, luxurious chamber, and from her silken divan Zoraida half rose to greet me. Reclining with languorous grace upon a pile of silken cushions, her hand outstretched in glad welcome, the jewels she wore flashed and gleamed under the antique Moorish hanging lamp with an effect that was bewildering. But alas! from her eyes to her chin a flimsy veil still concealed her features.

Taking her small white hand, I stood by the divan and looked down at her steadily in silence, then raised her fingers slowly and reverently to my lips.

The curtains had fallen; we were alone.

Presently, when we had gazed into each other's eyes with tender, passionate earnestness, I addressed her in Arab simile as light of my life from the envy of whose beauty the sun was confused, and told her how slowly time had dragged along since I had escaped from the poison of the asp; how glad I was to bow once again before the Daughter of the Sun.

She listened to my affectionate words without replying. One of her little pale green slippers had fallen off, leaving a tiny bare foot lying white upon the dark silk.

Her dress was gorgeous, fully in keeping with her costly surroundings. She was a veiled enchantress in gold-spangled embroidery, filmy gauzes, and silver brocade. Her dark crimson velvet *rlila*, or jacket, cut very low at the throat, exposing her white, bare breast, was heavily embroidered with gold, the little *chachia* stuck jauntily on the side of her head was of the same hue, thickly ornamented with seed pearls, while her wide, baggy *serroual*, reaching only mid-leg, were of palest *eau de nil* silk, fine as gauze, and brocaded with tiny coloured flowers. Her vest, that showed below the *rlila*, was of silver brocade, and her sash, of many-coloured stripes, was looped in front, the fringes hanging gracefully. Across her forehead a string of gold sequins was stretched, with a centre-piece consisting of a great cluster of lustrous diamonds, while three particularly fine gems, set in pendants, hung upon her white brow. Around her slim, delicate throat were two splendid diamond necklaces, a dozen rows of seed pearls, and a necklet composed of large, golden Turkish coins. Suspended by four heavy gold chains about her neck was her golden perfume-bottle, encrusted with roughly-cut diamonds and sapphires; on her arms she wore *mesais* of gold and silver studded with gems, her fingers glittered with diamonds, and on her neat, bare ankles golden *redeefs* jingled.

Indeed, she was the fairest and most dazzling woman my eyes had ever gazed upon.

The air of the harem was heavy with sweet perfumes, mingling with the sensuous odour of burning pastilles. In the apartment everything betokened wealth and taste. The silken divans, with their downy, brightly-coloured cushions, the priceless inlaid tables, the genuinely antique cabinets with doors of mother-of-pearl, the Eastern rugs of beautifully-blended shades, the rich embroideries, and the profusion of flowers, all combined to render it the acme of comfort and luxury, and graced by such a bewitching vision of Eastern beauty, the scene seemed more like a glimpse of fairyland than a reality.

“Thou hast not forgotten me, then?” she said, raising herself slowly, and placing under her handsome head a cushion of pale primrose silk.

“No,” I replied. “How can I ever forget thee?”

Her white breast rose and fell in a deep-drawn sigh.

“Already Allah, the Most Merciful, hath directed thy footsteps and vouchsafed me the felicity of conversing with thee. Thou hast kept thy promise unto me, O Cecil, for when the *homards* would follow us, thou didst not betray our whereabouts. Therefore I trust thee.”

“I assure thee that any confidence thou placest in me shall never be abused,” I replied. “Yet,” I added, “thou dost not place in me that perfect trust that I have.”

“Why?” she asked, in quick surprise.

“Still hidden from my gaze is that countenance I am longing to look upon.”

“Wouldst thou have me cast aside my religion? I am a woman; remember what is written,” she exclaimed, half reproachfully.

“The adoration of the Christian is none the less passionate than the love of the True Believer,” I said. “A woman is not defiled by the gaze of the man she loveth. But,” I added thoughtfully, “perhaps, after all, thou hast no thought of me, and my fond belief that in thy breast burneth the fire of love is only a vain delusion.”

“Thou – thou thinkest I can care nothing for thee – a Roumi? Why?” she cried, starting up.

“Because of thy refusal to unveil.”

She hesitated; her brows were momentarily contracted. Her hand trembled.

“Then, though I cast aside the creed of my forefathers and the commands of the Prophet, I give thee definite answer. See!” With a sudden movement she withdrew a golden pin, and, tearing away her white silken veil, her countenance was revealed.

I stood amazed, fascinated, half fearing that the wondrous vision of beauty was only a chimera of my distorted imagination that would quickly fade.

Yet it was a reality. The face turned upward to mine with a merry, mischievous smile was that of Zoraida, the woman who had now so plainly demonstrated her love.

“Well,” she asked, with a merry, rippling laugh, “art thou satisfied? Do I please thee?”

“Thou art, indeed, the fairest daughter of Al-Islâm,” I said, slowly entwining my arm about her neck and bending to kiss her. She was fair as the sun at dawn, with hair black as the midnight shades, with Paradise in her eye, her bosom an enchantment, and a form waving like the tamarisk when the soft wind blows from the hills of Afiou.

Her lips met mine in a long, hot, passionate caress; but at last she pushed me from her with firmness, saying —

“No, I must not – I must not love thee! Allah, Lord of the Three Worlds, Pardoner of Transgressions, knoweth that thou art always in my thoughts – yet we can never be more than friends.”

“Why?” I asked, in dismay. “May we not marry some day?”

“Thou art a Roumi, while I – I am a dweller in the mansion of grief.”

“But all things are possible,” I said. “If thou art afraid of thy people, trust in me. Meet me clandestinely, attired in European garments, and we will leave by the steamer for Marseilles, where we can marry.”

I uttered these passionate words scarce knowing what thoughts I expressed. As soon as they had left my mouth I was filled with regret.

“No. Ask me not,” she replied, firmly. “Already, by bringing thee hither, by unveiling before thee, and by suffering thee to kiss me, I have invoked the Wrath. The curse is already upon me, and – and, alas! I shall pay the penalty soon enough,” she added, with a touch of gloomy sadness.

“What dost thou mean?” I asked, gazing into her beautiful, entrancing face.

“It meaneth that I, Zoraida Fathma, am consumed by that sorrow and despair that is precursory of death; that Eblis hath set his fatal seal upon me – that I am doomed!”

Her lustrous eyes, with their arched and darkened brows, looked into mine with an expression of intensity and desperation, and she glanced furtively, as if in fear, into the distant corner of the room, where the light from the great lamp of beaten brass did not penetrate.

“Thine enigmas are puzzling,” I said. “What evil canst thou fear?”

A shudder ran through her slim frame. Then she clutched my hand and tightly held it.

“I cannot – I – It is forbidden that I should love thee, O Cecil,” she said, sighing and setting her teeth firmly.

“Why?”

“Because a greater and more insurmountable obstacle than our difference of race and creed preventeth it.”

“But tell me what it is?” I demanded.

“*Isbir showhyyah*,” (“Have patience a little”), she replied. “Though I may love thee, my Amîn, thou canst never be my husband. I am as much a captive as any of my slaves, and, alas! far, far more unhappy than they.”

Why did she have slaves? I wondered. Slavery in Algeria had, I knew, been abolished since the overthrow of the Dey, although in the far south, beyond the Areg, the tribes still held many in bondage.

“Unhappy?” I cried. “What is the cause of thy misery? Art thou thyself a slave, or – or art thou wedded?”

She started, staring at me with a strange expression.

“I – I love thee!” she stammered. “Is not that sufficient? If I wish at present to conceal certain facts, why dost thou desire me to tell lies to *thee*? To my woman Messoudia thou didst take oath to seek no further information beyond what I give thee.”

“True, O Zoraida,” I said. “Forgive me. Yet the mystery that surroundeth thyself is so puzzling.”

“I know,” she said, with a tantalising laugh. “But when a woman loves, it is imprudent of her to compromise herself;” and she beat an impatient tattoo with her fingers, with their henna-stained nails, upon a *derbouka* lying within her reach.

I did not reply. I was engrossed in thought. All that she had said made it plainer to me that she was the wife of Hadj Absalam.

She watched me in silence. Then, with a sudden impetuosity, she sprang from her divan, and, standing up, flung her arms about my neck, kissing me passionately. The silk of her *serroual* rustled, her bangles jingled, and in her quick movement she lost her remaining slipper, and stood barefooted, a veritable Queen of the Harem, a *hourî* of Paradise.

“Hark!” she whispered, starting in alarm as we stood locked in each other’s arms, while I rained kisses upon her fair face. “Hark!” she cried. “Listen! What was that?”

I held my breath, but could detect nothing.

“My foolish fancy, I suppose,” she added, a few moments later, after she had strained her ears to again catch the sounds that had alarmed her. “Think! If we were betrayed! It would mean torture and death!” she said hoarsely, and, disengaging herself from my arms, she walked quickly over to the opposite wall, and, drawing aside a heavy curtain, reassured herself that a door it concealed was securely bolted.

Returning, she flung herself upon her divan among her cushions and motioned me to a seat beside her. Then, taking from the little mother-of-pearl stool a box of embossed gold filled with cigarettes, she offered me one, and, lighting one herself, reclined with her head thrown back gazing up to me.

“We are more than friends, Ce-cil,” she said presently, thoughtfully watching the smoke that curled upward from her rosy lips. “I only wish it were possible that I could leave this land and go to thine. Ah! If thou couldst but know how dull and colourless is my life, how rapidly my doom approaches – how horrible it all is!”

“What is this strange destiny that the Fates have in store for thee?” I asked, mystified.

“Have I not already told thee that thy curiosity cannot be satisfied?”

“Yes. But I love thee,” I protested. “Surely I may know the character of any danger that threateneth?”

She shook her head, and, taking my hand, noticed upon my finger a plain gold signet ring that had belonged to my father. Slowly she drew it off and placed it upon her middle finger, saying, “I take this in remembrance of to-night.”

“But is there nothing I can do to avert this mysterious evil which thou apprehendest?” I asked.

She did not reply. With her face turned towards the painted ceiling, her dark, serious eyes gazed away into space. Her bare breast, with its profusion of pearls and diamonds, heaved and fell as she breathed, and the sweet odour of rose and geranium that pervaded her filled my nostrils with intoxicating fragrance.

“Why canst thou not escape from here?” I continued. “If danger threateneth, fly from it. I will assist thee. And is not Allah merciful? He giveth life and death.”

“*Hákk*,” she replied. “Yet to leave this place unobserved would be impossible. I have been able by a ruse to gain thine admittance here, but any attempt to leave would only result in my death.”

“Are not thy servants amenable to bribery?” I suggested.

“Alas! as they are my slaves, so are they my gaolers. They are charged with my safe custody, and if I eluded their vigilance, they would pay the penalty of their negligence with their lives. Ah! thou knowest not the more terrible of the tortures practised by my people. Thou knowest not the Ennitra. Soon I shall return again to the Ahaggar, and then the Great Desert and the Atlas will separate us. For me escape is impossible. Thou wilt go to thine own land ere many moons, and – and forget me!”

“Never!” I exclaimed, vehemently.

“Thou wilt marry one of thine own women who have no prejudices, and who may go unveiled, like those who come to Mustapha at Ramadân.”

“No, Zoraida,” I said; “I love only thee.”

She gazed long and earnestly into my eyes, at the same time toying with my ring.

“And thou art ready to serve me implicitly?” she inquired eagerly.

“I am. Command me.”

“Then know, O Cecil, my life is at stake,” she said, in a low, hoarse whisper, drawing herself up with one arm still entwined tenderly about my neck.

“Why art thou threatened?” I asked, in surprise.

“Because I – because I am guilty of a crime; I possess the secret of a hidden marvel. Having dared to penetrate the hideous mysteries of Eblis, one of them, undreamed of and astounding, hath been revealed unto me. Its knowledge placeth in my hands a secret power that I might use with fearful effect, but the awful curse hath now fallen upon me, and I am doomed. Only thy willing assistance can save me. Yet” – and she paused. “Yet I feel doubtful whether thou, a Roumi, wouldst dare to undertake the mission that is necessary for my safety; whether thou couldst place sufficient confidence in me to carry out instructions which to thee may seem so extraordinary.”

“I have perfect trust in thee,” I said. “I am ready from this moment to serve thee blindly, implicitly, if I can save thee and further the prospect of our marriage.”

“Marriage? No! no! Do not speak of it now,” she exclaimed hastily. “Hast thou never heard of the truth uttered by our Harikar al-Hakim, who said, ‘Marriage is a joy for a month and a sorrow for a life, and the paying of settlements, and the breaking of the back under a load of misery, and the listening to a woman’s tongue.’ To thee I can promise nothing, for my life may end at any moment.”

“But thy death can be averted. How?”

“By rendering me assistance thou canst save me from the awful physical and mental torture – from the horrors of the grave. Wilt thou consent to become my secret agent?”

“Yes. I am ready to perform any task thou mayest require of me.”

“Then remember the oath of secrecy thou didst take before Messoudia brought thee hither; for, first of all, thou, trusting to thine own Deity, must enter with me into the presence of the Great Unknown.”

And as she touched a little silver gong, the great negro in handsome blue livery, who had announced me, entered the harem and prostrated himself before his mistress until his forehead touched the carpet; while two houris, in clinging robes of white silk, entered bearing a great gold bowl of sweet perfume in which Zoraida, with an imperious gesture, washed her hands, and bade me follow her example.

“Thou wilt not be timid,” she asked, “even though we go voluntarily together to the very threshold of the grave; even though we may peradventure taste of the horrors of death?”

“No,” I replied, endeavouring to remain calm.

My nerves were strung to their highest pitch, and my heart beat quickly. I stood breathless, watching one of the houris, who lit a small gold lamp that burned with a thin blue flame. What, I wondered, was the character of the strange scene I was about to witness? Zoraida, my enchanting Pearl of the Harem, and I were going together voluntarily into the presence of the Great Unknown!

Chapter Fourteen. Seeking the Unknown

Having placed the quaintly-shaped lamp on the pearl and silver stool in the centre of the harem, the negro went out, returning immediately with a small bronze urn marvellously chased, which on bended knee he carefully handed to his mistress. At a word from Zoraida, her women and the tall Soudanese prostrated themselves facing the table, pressing their foreheads to the carpet. Then, turning to me, she said in deep earnestness —

“Knowest thou that the deeds we are about to commit are a terrible sacrilege? Though thou wilt witness strange things, yet peradventure they may cost us our lives – nay, our very souls.”

“Why?” I asked, somewhat alarmed at her sudden seriousness. “Is it imperative that we should risk everything?”

“Every sin beareth its fruit,” she replied, as, slowly rising from her divan and holding above her head the urn the negro had brought, she added, “Hath not the Prophet told us that when the earth shall be shaken by a violent shock, and the mountains shall be dashed to pieces and shall become as dust scattered abroad, we shall be separated into three distinct classes? Those who have preceded others in the Faith shall precede them to Paradise. The Companions of the Right Hand shall go and dwell in the Gardens of Delight, among lote trees free from thorns and trees of mauz always fruitful; but the Companions of the Left Hand – how miserable shall they be! They who, like ourselves at this moment, invoke the secret power of Eblis the Terrible, will dwell amidst the burning winds under the shade of the great black smoke. They are the damned, for they, in their error, have gone astray in the Valley of Perdition. Then know, O Rumi! that thou hast chosen to accompany me unto the dreaded Shrine of Darkness, to seek of the beneficent Granter of Requests what is hidden, to face the terrors of the tomb, so that thou mayest hold over thy fellows a power terrific, fatal, awful!”

Her eyes were dilated, filled with a strange, unnatural light, and I stood aghast at her solemn speech.

“Art thou not one of the chosen?” I asked. “Art thou not – ”

“Hold thy peace!” she commanded. Then, holding forth the bronze urn, she exclaimed, “See! in this vessel are the ashes of the great Masinissa, the Numidian king, whose body was entombed at Medrassen two thousand years ago. By their light we will search for the Great Unknown.”

With a sudden movement she took from the urn a small handful of white dust, and, holding it high over the lamp, sprinkled it slowly into its faint blue flame. In a moment the place was illuminated by a white glare so brilliant that I was compelled to shade my blinking eyes with my hands, while at the same time the apartment was filled with a dense smoke of a light green hue, but so pungent as to plunge me into the agonies of asphyxiation.

Thrice she threw into the flame the ashes of the King; thrice she uttered strange words in a drawling monotone, that were repeated by the three servants who lay prostrate and appalled. Then, dipping her finger in the dust, she drew it across my forehead from left to right, and afterwards made the same sign across her own jewelled brow and across her bare breast.

“Rise,” she said, turning to her servants. “Bring hither the elixir. Then leave us.”

All three scrambled to their feet in haste to do the bidding of their imperious mistress, and, after the lapse of a few moments, the two houris in white reappeared, one bearing a tiny bowl containing a colourless liquid, while the other brought between her fingers a long thin poignard, the hilt of which was studded with rubies and turquoises. When they had placed them beside the lamp, and the heavy curtains had fallen behind the two girls, Zoraida turned her great dark eyes upon me, exclaiming —

“Thou wilt ere long learn a wonderful secret which hath been revealed to none on earth except myself. Already hast thou taken an oath never to disclose what thou mayest see between these walls.

Know, O Cecil! that by thy passionate love for me thou wilt bind thyself to one who can produce strange effects from simple causes, and who can show thee wonders undreamed of. Yonder knife and potion will bind thy soul unto mine; thou wilt become one of the Companions of the Left Hand, whose habitation is the shadowless Land of Torment, where the burning wind scorches and water scalds like boiling pitch.”

“Is there then no hope for those who love thee?” I asked, so mystified and my senses so dulled by the curious odour of the smoke, that I scarce knew what words escaped me.

“None,” she replied, sighing. “Neither rest, mercy, nor the Garden of Delights can fall to the lot of he who loveth me.”

“Why?”

“Because, by regaining the wondrous secret lost to the world for so many ages, the mark is set indelibly upon thee. Knowest thou not what is written in Al Korân? The Prophet hath declared that when the heavens shall be rent in sunder and shall become red as a rose and shall melt like ointment, then neither man nor genius shall be asked concerning his sin. The wicked will be known by their marks, and they shall be taken by the forelocks and the feet and cast into the place of grievous torments.”

“Yes,” I said. “But why is the search after this hidden force an act of such heinous wickedness?”

“Because the secret is only to be obtained at the Shrine of Darkness. Dost thou, after the warnings I have given thee, still consent to accompany me among the Companions of the Left Hand – to gain the knowledge that is forbidden?”

I gazed upon her marvellous beauty. Her magnificent eyes, bright as those of the gazelle, were turned to mine with a look of earnest appeal as the little hand I held trembled with suppressed excitement. The mystic rite she had practised had intoxicated me with a burning desire to learn more of these strange revelations that she promised, and, dazzled by her loveliness, I was utterly reckless of the future.

“I do not fear,” I replied. “I place implicit confidence in thee, and am prepared to serve thee, and to seek the wisdom so long withheld.”

“*Ibtidâ-an*,” she exclaimed. “Thou, the Amîn, must be inoculated with the elixir;” and, taking up the gleaming poignard, she felt its point. “It is a deadly decoction. One drop is sufficient to cause death, yet, strangely enough, three drops have only the effect of stimulating the brain and preparing the vision for the strange things of which thou must remain a silent witness.”

Taking my hand in hers, she pushed back the sleeve of my coat, exposing my arm. Then, grasping a small rod of glass that lay beside the bowl, she dipped it in the liquid and allowed a single drop to fall upon my flesh. It burned and ate into my arm like an acid, causing me to draw back quickly in pain, but ere I realised her intention, she had raised the dagger and made a punctured wound, thus allowing the poison to enter my veins and mingle with my blood.

“Quick! The second drop!” she cried, dipping the rod into the bowl again.

“It feels like molten metal,” I gasped, drawing my arm away. “It – ”

“Do not hesitate,” she exclaimed concernedly. “If thou dost not receive the three drops into thy veins, the poison will prove fatal. Come, let me conclude the formality;” and, grasping me firmly, she placed another spot of the acid upon my arm and punctured the flesh with her knife, repeating the operation a third time, until I had been fully inoculated with the mysterious virus.

Then, stretching forth her own well-moulded white arm, whereon I noticed several small red spots, – which she explained were the marks of previous inoculations, – she stuck the point of the dagger three times into her own delicate flesh, until the blood flowed and the fluid she had placed upon the spots was wholly absorbed.

Casting the dagger from her with an expression of repugnance, she passed her hand quickly across her brow, saying —

“Henceforward, O Cecil, an affinity existeth between us. Though deserts, mountains, and rolling seas may separate us, our souls will hold converse. We shall no longer be strangers.”

The poison was taking effect upon me. Its action was slow, but a strange, sickening giddiness crept over my brain, a feeling that the objects around me were gradually fading. Even Zoraida’s voice sounded hollow and distant in the dreamy half-consciousness that the secret decoction of my enchantress produced.

Was she, so young, so eminently handsome, so bewitching, the ingenious sorceress who, according to the rumour current among the Spahis, directed the movements of Hadj Absalam and his daring band of outlaws? Could it be possible that beneath those fair features was a heart so brutal and depraved as to plot murder, robbery, and horrible atrocities? As she stood before me in her dainty silks and flashing gems, she had no appearance of a wild freebooter and desert-wanderer, but rather that of an Oriental child of Fortune into whose languorous life the demon ennui had entered.

Had she not, however, called herself the Daughter of the Sun? Was not that the name by which the *homards* knew the guiding star of the murderous Ennitra?

“Hearken, O Cecil!” she said, placing her hand suddenly to her breast as if a pain shot through her heart. “The inoculation is accomplished, and life is now fast ebbing – we are dying – ”

“Poisoned!” I gasped, alarmed. “Thou dost not mean that the three punctures will prove fatal?”

“Thou, the Amîn, hast placed thy faith in me. Of a verity will I reveal unto thee that which is known to me alone. Only by thus inviting death can we seek converse with the Great Unseen who ruleth the Kingdom of Shades. Our mental power, our sensibility, our very souls must be severed from our bodies and concentrated into separate existence, ere we may seek the knowledge that giveth us power. Even now at this moment our souls are parting from our bodies, the dim spark of life flickers, and we stand together on the threshold of the grave!”

I was touched and awed by the extraordinary change that came over her while she had been speaking. Something in her tone appealed to my sympathy, while at the same time her words made my heart sink. A woman lying in her coffin, ready to be buried alive, might have had such a strain in her voice. Her face was white, with that ghastliness which comes in extreme moments to a brunette, and her eyes, starting from their sockets, burned with a dusky, deep-set brilliance. When her voice, that sounded in my ears like a far-off wail, had ceased, she stood motionless, and her countenance assumed an inscrutable mask of quiet, almost serene resignation, behind which something suggested immeasurable depths of poignant suffering. Pale, haggard, and deathlike, she gazed at me with dry, half-parted lips. Then I saw in her wild eyes the fearful but unmistakable light of madness!

I was appalled at the slow, mysterious transformation of the woman I loved.

Chapter Fifteen. At the Shrine of Darkness

Under the singular magnetism of her lustrous eyes, I stood dazed, speechless, fascinated. My head throbbed with the burning of fever, my throat contracted, my limbs trembled as if palsied, and my heart was filled with an all-consuming terror.

Truly I was on the brink of the grave; I was peering into the yawning chasm of the Unknown. Suddenly an awful thought occurred to me. Was Zoraida, my idol, insane?

Bewildered and blinded in the rose-mist of happiness, the deepest significance of her strange actions had been entirely lost to me. Love had predominated everything, for the gracefulness of my Pearl of the Harem had so far surpassed expectation, so dwarfed all former visions of feminine attractiveness, that I had been struck to the heart by her first glance after the veil had fallen from her countenance. Therefore, was it not possible that, in failing to regard her extraordinary acts as those of a person whose mind was unbalanced, I had foolishly allowed myself to fall a victim to her homicidal tendencies? Though I strove to remain calm, I involuntarily shuddered. I tried to speak, but my tongue clave to the roof of my mouth and refused to articulate.

“*Al-ân*. We are ready,” she exclaimed at last, still keeping her bright eyes fixed upon me. “With our souls distinct from our bodies, we may now seek the knowledge withheld from mankind. Thou hast, I know, believed me to be a common charlatan, a sorceress who imposeth upon those who put their faith in occult arts. Now, however, that we love each other; now that our souls are wedded in the Unseen, I will invoke the revelation of the extraordinary secret, which, if it pleaseth the Great Unknown, thou shalt hold as my pledge. Prepare thine eyes for the witnessing of strange marvels, and follow me.”

Walking towards me, she raised her face to mine, kissing me fondly, then, slowly drawing back, she passed her hand quickly over her aching forehead, and, bidding me accompany her, tottered forward to the hidden door which previously in the evening she had ascertained was secure.

“*Addonya dêr gorour*,” (“The world is a house of deceit”), she said, drawing a small key from her bosom. “In the grave there is none. Hovering as we now are, between life and death, with the conquest of the soul over the impulses of the body, we may catch a glimpse of the Unknown. Therefore, let us go down and search for light at the Shrine of Darkness. *Nâhhi hâtha*.”

The ancient key grated in the lock, and the ponderous door swung slowly open, revealing a narrow stone passage, the darkness of which was cavernous and impenetrable. Taking up the lamp into which she had sprinkled the ashes of Masinissa, she passed through the door, bidding me close it and follow her. Her face was pale and determined, and her wealth of dark hair, that had become unbound, fell to her waist in luxuriant profusion. I crossed the threshold into the close, damp passage, and pulling the door behind me it clanged loudly, the lock securing itself with an ominous snap.

I knew I was a prisoner in this, the innermost and secret chamber of the harem, and held my breath in expectation and alarm. Her sequins tinkled as she walked firmly and upright with the little lamp held high above, as down the long stone corridor that was evidently cut in the thickness of the wall I stumbled on after her, with reeling head and unsteady gait. A strange, sickly odour of cinnamon and musk filled my nostrils, the air was hot and offensive, and upon the rough-hewn walls lodged the dust of ages. A door at the end of the passage groaned as she pushed it open, and the dim light revealed a passage still narrower, running at right angles to that which we had traversed. Down this we walked in silence, until our progress was barred by a thick curtain of dark plush.

Halting, she turned towards me. In her countenance a change had been effected that startled me. The poison with which she had inoculated herself had wrought a terrible transformation. Round her fine, clear, luminous eyes were large dark rings that gave her bloodless face an expression of

haggard hideousness, the bloom of youth had faded from her cheeks, now sunken, and her mouth was hard and drawn, showing the agony she was suffering.

“Thou art ill,” I exclaimed in alarm. “Let me assist thee.”

“No,” she replied huskily. “It is the crucial test. Preserve thine own courage, and now, ere we enter the Shrine of Darkness that is the portal of the Kingdom of Shades, let me urge thee, O Cecil! to maintain a level head and clear judgment. Examine what thou seest by the light of reason. Thou hast bound thyself irrevocably to me by the burning of the ashes and the puncture of the poignard, and together we are seeking that knowledge that will give us power over our fellow-creatures. Ours is a solemn investigation, to be undertaken in no spirit of idle curiosity or frivolity, for of a verity we are both fast sinking to the grave, and it is only in our dying moments that the Great Secret of the Unseen World that is forbidden to the living may be revealed unto us.”

“I fear not while thou art my companion,” I replied, determined not to betray nervousness, although the sickening and excruciating pains in my head caused everything to appear dim and hazy as a dream.

“And to the world thy lips will remain for ever sealed? *Awa lam?*” she asked in earnestness.

“I have pledged myself to preserve silence,” I replied.

“Then enter to the Shrine, and perfect peace be upon thee,” she said, summoning all her courage and drawing aside the curtain.

Upon the threshold of a grim, dark chamber I stood dumbfounded and amazed at the strange sight that presented itself to my gaze. The apartment was not very large, but the roof was vaulted, the arches were curiously wrought, and by the ruddy light diffused by a single hanging lamp, I saw it was a weird and altogether extraordinary place. Upon the floor was a black carpet, soft as velvet, around the walls were several rich divans, and behind a fine latticework of marble at the farther end of the luxurious dungeon – for such it seemed to be – was a circular altar of agate, jasper, and gold, over which a burning censer of gold was swung by an unseen hand. Behind the altar a large luminous star shone above with a dull red glow, and upon the altar itself stood a small brazier which, burning brightly, rendered the atmosphere close and oppressive.

Such was the extraordinary scene that met my dazzled eyes as I moved forward into the secret chamber.

Zoraida, rushing wildly on before me and uttering a loud cry, fell upon her knees before the altar, bowing until her lips touched the carpet, at the same time murmuring some strange incantation that I could not understand. So rapidly did she repeat the words, and so quickly she swayed her body backwards and forwards, that she was at last seized with hysteria. Suddenly regaining her feet, she raised her hands above her head, uttering a curious supplication in some language with which I was unacquainted.

At that moment I made an alarming discovery. There was a slight movement on the carpet, and, bending to examine it, I was horrified to find that upon the floor were venomous snakes! On the divans asps were lying, with their flat heads erect within their coils, together with vipers and scorpions. On every side tiny brilliant eyes seemed watching us, and now and then a slight hiss was heard from the remoter corners of the place. But Zoraida heeded them not. At the door she had kicked off her embroidered slippers, and now walked barefooted among the reptiles.

When she had concluded her strange prayer, she crossed the chamber hastily, and, tossing the velvet cushions and striped silk covering from one of the divans, there was disclosed an ancient tomb of carved sardonyx that was crumbling by age.

Grasping my hand, she then led me to the altar, whispering to me to prostrate myself before it. Hand in hand we passed the marble screen and threw ourselves down, kissing the ground; then, as we rose, she drew from her breast a small stiletto and pricked her wrist three times with its keen point. Holding it over the burning brazier, she allowed the blood to drip slowly into the fire, each drop hissing loudly as it touched the live coals.

Once she groaned, and a shudder went over her like the passing of the wind of sundown over still water. Then, in a firm voice, she exclaimed —

“Blessed be they who overcome human folly, vanity, and error. Blessed be they to whom the wondrous manifestations of the Terrible Unknown are accorded, for they shall be concealed under the dome of magnificence, and veiled by the curtain of purity. We, Companions of the Left Hand, on whom, alas! no peace resteth, present ourselves in quest of the knowledge of the Crescent of Glorious Wonders, so that our lives may be united and our happiness assured. Fervently pray we that an assurance of favour may be granted unto us, and that the Great Secret, dead to the world through so many ages, may be revealed.”

Scarcely had she uttered these words, when from the still swinging censer there rose a single puff of thick smoke. Zoraida was watching for it, and as the smoke dissolved, she remarked to me in low, impressive tones —

“Behold! our petition hath been stamped by the seal of response! It is well. Our quest will not be in vain.” Then, after a pause, she added, “Thou, O Rumi! hast believed I am a sorceress and a charlatan. Come hither.”

She walked to the sarcophagus, and, grasping the stone that formed the lid, pushed it off with almost superhuman effort, so that it fell heavily down behind. Then, taking up the lamp she had brought, she held it over the stone coffin and bade me gaze into it. With eager eyes I obeyed her, but started back in horror.

It contained a corpse!

An old man of pale complexion, with long white beard, and dressed in the habiliments of the grave, lay stretched with upturned face, motionless in death.

“This man, a holy marabout, died, and entered the Garden of Delights three years ago, yet, behold! his body hath not decayed. His misery hath been changed to peace and his grief to tranquillity,” she observed. “That he is actually dead prove for thyself. Touch him.”

I bent, placing my hand upon his white cheek. Its contact thrilled me. It seemed icy as marble! The sightless eyes seemed to gaze into mine with a grim, stony stare, and I drew away my hand as if I had been stung.

“*Howa-thâ!*” she cried. “I will prove further that there is no life;” and, raising the knife in her hand, she plunged it into the breast of the corpse.

“Art thou satisfied that he is really dead?” asked Zoraida grimly.

“Yes,” I answered, shuddering, for my whole surroundings in that subterranean Chamber of the Serpents were so uncanny, that I began to long for light and fresh air. Was she performing all these strange rites merely for the purpose of impressing and mystifying me; or was she an enthusiastic devotee of some secret sect of Al-Islâm? To poison one’s self before invoking the aid of the occult seemed an extraordinary proceeding, and the whole of the rites were so curious, that, fascinated as I was by the mysticism of the East, I regarded them with the most intense interest.

“At the Shrine of Darkness death loseth its sting,” she said. “To communicate with Eblis, the Terrible, it is necessary that one who is already a dweller in the Garden of Delights shall return to life and assist us. Here, in this charnel-house, the abode of death and of the serpents, strange knowledge may be imparted; but ere we proceed further, the sacrifice must be made.”

Snatching up a viper that lay coiled upon one of the divans, she grasped it dexterously near the head, and, walking to the altar, held it for a few moments above the burning brazier, repeating some weird word’s, then, as the reptile squirmed under the pain, she dropped it upon the burning coals.

Flinging herself upon her knees, with her hands outstretched above her head, she again invoked the aid of the mysterious Power. Pushing back her hair, that had fallen over her shoulders, she again rose, and, coming towards me, exclaimed —

“Watch, and I will reveal unto thee the terrible power of Eblis that hath been imparted unto me. *Cathâ!*”

She looked more haggard than before. The strain upon her nerves was evidently awful. Taking my hand, she led me back to the sarcophagus, repeating some words in such a low tone as to be inaudible. Suddenly she dashed forward, and with her right hand made mysterious passes over the face of the corpse.

“Sidi Mammam ben-Mokhala, chosen of the Merciful. Peace! Again I call upon thee, holy man of the Faith, tenant of the tomb of dignity and light of the eyes of the discerning, to assist this Roumi to the sight of the Crescent of Wonders, for none save myself knoweth aught of the way thither. Blessing upon thee, and great peace on those who went before thee!”

She paused. There was a wild look in her eyes, and her bare bosom heaved and fell quickly.

“Arise!” she cried in a loud voice. “I, Zoraida Fathma, Daughter of the Sun, command thy soul and body to reunite for brief space, so that thou mayest minister at this our sacred Shrine.”

A sound came from the ancient stone tomb like a long, deep-drawn sigh. There was a slight movement, and then, as I gazed in speechless expectancy, the corpse of the aged marabout slowly rose from its resting-place, white, rigid, and ghastly. The amazing resurrection appalled me. I stood with bated breath, my eyes were riveted upon the weird figure, and I was rooted to the spot. The hair upon my head was lifted as corn is lifted when the wind ceases suddenly, and the sweat rolled from my brow. Truly, this mysterious woman to whom I had voluntarily and blindly bound myself was gifted with some weird power that was utterly amazing and incomprehensible.

Chapter Sixteen.

The Crescent of Glorious Wonders

Slowly the dead marabout stepped from his tomb and stood erect before me.

He glided mechanically, rigidly; his limbs did not bend, neither did his eyes move. In his grave-clothes he looked hideous, for so thin was his face that the bones could be seen beneath the brown withered skin, and his fleshless fingers with long nails had the appearance of talons.

“Thou hast never before witnessed the return of the dead to the world!” Zoraida exclaimed, noticing how scared I was.

“Is he really dead?” I asked, feeling somewhat sceptical, and beginning to think I was being imposed upon by some ingenious trickery.

“Dead? I call thee to witness!” she cried, and again drawing her long, keen dagger, she plunged it for the second time into his side.

There was no doubt that it had penetrated.

“Enough!” I gasped. “It is sickening.”

“Thou art at last convinced. Good!” she said, withdrawing the knife. Then, turning to the man she had recalled from the grave, she addressed him —

“Greeting to thee who followeth the guidance. Thou who hast enjoyed the pleasures of the Garden of Delights among the Companions of the Right Hand, and hast tasted the sweet waters of Salsabil, knowest the Secret of the Crescent. I, who fear the Omnipotent Avenger, command thee to intercede, that I may gain knowledge whereby to triumph over the Satans of Eblis – on whom may the Merciful not have mercy – and henceforward find perfect peace.”

Zoraida looked frightened herself, trembling like a slender cord suspended in a well, yet standing erect and queenly, with her jewels flashing and gleaming with dazzling brilliancy. To her words, however, the marabout made no reply. He remained motionless as a statue, gazing straight at me with his black glassy eyes.

Picking up an asp, a symbol of the Aïssáwà, that was darting over the carpet, Zoraida placed it in his icy hand. His bony fingers gripped the reptile as in a vice as slowly he moved across the strange apartment, and, without uttering a sound, sacrificed it on the blazing brazier.

Motioning me to kneel, and sinking upon her knees at my side, the woman I adored twisted a serpent around her head, and flung herself forward with her lips pressed to the sable carpet. Venomous reptiles were around us, but none ventured to attack. Indeed, she had kicked a viper aside with her bare foot as unconcernedly as if it had been an almond husk.

Strange passes were being made by the dead saint, standing at the altar with his back to us, and as he performed the mystic rite in silence I noticed that the smoke from the censer became thicker, and the fire in the brazier glowed until the iron seemed at white heat. Bowing slowly three times, the marabout stretched forth his hands above his head, and, turning, faced us.

Zoraida’s strained voice broke the silence.

“Blessed be he to whom the lifetime of the ruby is as the lifetime of the rose. O thou of exalted dignity, behold me, the least and least worthy of all them that praise the One worthy of praise. May I never endure prosperity as a gift from the accursed, for I seek the Secret of the Crescent, and ask of the One of unbounded favour and infinite bounty that which thou alone canst reveal.”

Again the marabout faced the altar, again he made passes over the fierce fire. The censer, still kept swinging by some unseen power, emitted a column of thick smoke, the odour of which, at first sulphurous, then sensuous and overpowering, caused me to feel intolerably drowsy. Then suddenly, with a noise as loud as the firing of a pistol, a great rent appeared in the stone front of the altar, as the slab of jasper broke in twain and a portion fell to the ground.

“Lo! it is at last revealed!” cried Zoraida, turning to me excitedly. “Life remaineth unto us! The poison will take no further effect, since we shall possess the Great Secret.”

Bowing to earth, the marabout approached close to the altar, and, dropping upon one knee, placed his hand in the aperture that had been so suddenly created. From the hole he drew forth a semicircular box of time-stained leather, about twelve inches across, and, opening it carefully, took therefrom a piece of rusted iron, shaped in the form of a crescent, about two inches wide in the centre and tapering to horns at each end. Its form was almost like a sickle, covered with strange hieroglyphics deeply graven, and it was about a quarter of an inch in thickness in every part, with a notch in the centre, as if another portion that had once been welded to it had been broken away.

Zoraida, still kneeling, eagerly watched the ghastly figure, who, bowing once again, held the strange object over the flame until it became heated.

“Beseech of the Power, O Sidi Mammar ben-Mokhala, if the secret may be wholly revealed unto the Roumi,” she said in a loud, clear voice.

Again the corpse that had been awakened from its sardonyx casket bowed and raised its hands aloft in obedience to her request, as we all three watched the censer. The thin column went slowly up, but the puff of thick smoke – that seemed to be regarded as a sign of the affirmative – was not emitted. Yet again the marabout bowed in silent intercession, but, though we waited for some minutes, no reply was vouchsafed.

“Thou art not a True Believer, O Cecil,” Zoraida said, in bitter disappointment. “The Great Secret, although revealed unto me, is withheld from thy knowledge. Alas that it should be so! Truly I bear the yoke of misfortune and taste the venom of grief.”

“Of what use is the Crescent?” I said, regarding with curiosity the rusted relic in the bony hand of the aged marabout.

“It is the will of the Unseen that thou mayest not know its Secret,” she replied. “Therefore I can reveal nothing.”

“But surely thou mayest tell me what it is for?”

“Not at present. Have patience until thou hast passed beyond the portals of this, the Kingdom of Shades.”

The silent priest, having heated the iron sufficiently, placed it upon a great gold tray, which Zoraida procured from a corner of the chamber and held for him; then she went out, bearing it with her, and announcing her intention of returning again immediately. Before the broken altar the man from the tomb stood immovable as a statue, his hands uplifted; and there was no sound save the hissing of a snake, hiding in a corner where the light did not penetrate.

Five minutes elapsed; they seemed an hour. When Zoraida re-entered, she bore the mysterious Crescent in her hand, and, strangely enough, her face had assumed much of its usual beauty. In her eyes a look of happiness and contentment had succeeded that expression of mad despair that had for the last half-hour spoiled her countenance, and she appeared to have derived every satisfaction from the strange rites she had practised.

“At last,” she cried, “the Great Secret is again mine! A year ago I discovered its existence, but the mere suggestion of its use seemed so utterly absurd, that I hesitated to seek death by the deadly potion until absolutely compelled.”

“Wert thou compelled to-night?” I ventured to inquire.

“Yes. Thou knowest I love thee. It was for thy sake that I sought the Great Secret. Thou wert not afraid, and gave me courage to knock at the gate of the dreaded Kingdom of Shades – to face the King of Terrors.”

“And yonder marabout? What of him?”

“He will return to the green banks of the river Al Cawthar, whence I called him to do my bidding and act as intermediary. See! I will send him back unto his sepulchre.”

Advancing to where the ghastly figure was standing with transfixed gaze without moving a muscle, she placed her hand firmly upon his shoulder.

“Know, O Sidi Mammam ben-Mokhala! thy work hath ended. Thou mayest return to the Shadow of the Lote Tree, and to the houris awaiting thee in the Garden beside the ever-flowing stream. May the blessing of Allah – Gracious Bestower of abundant benefits – ever rest upon thee and thy sons’ sons, and may the Destroyer of Mankind – on whom may the Merciful not have mercy – have no power over them. To thy grave I command thee to return, to rest until I again seek thine aid to triumph over Eblis.”

She grasped his cold thin hand, and he allowed himself to be led to the sarcophagus as meekly as a lamb. Into his stone coffin he stepped, and then sank back and disappeared. A few moments later, Zoraida beckoned me, and, standing beside the great sardonyx tomb, I peered in. The marabout lay stretched out as before, with wide-open, sightless eyes, and when I touched his cheek, it was hard and icy cold.

“There is no life. See!” she said, and, taking the knife, she once again plunged it into the corpse, afterwards withdrawing it and replacing it in the velvet sheath hanging at her girdle.

The old man had again returned to the Great Unknown, leaving Zoraida in possession of the curiously-wrought piece of metal, the fantastic inscription upon which puzzled me greatly.

Chapter Seventeen. Strange Confidences

Gradually the golden censer ceased swinging; the fire in the brazier slowly died out, and the only light in the mysterious chamber was shed by the blue flame of the lamp that had guided our footsteps thither.

“Come, let us return,” she said, with a shudder. She took up the lamp and gazed into the cavernous darkness where the light did not penetrate. Suddenly, just as she was about to turn towards the door, she noticed my face, and became alarmed.

“Ah!” she cried, horrified. “I had forgotten thee. See; thine eyes are already glazing. Thou art dying!”

“Dying?” I gasped, holding my breath.

“Yes. Thou hast not learned the Secret of the Crescent, therefore thou art not rendered invulnerable against the hand of the King of Terrors. The poison hath done its work, and thy spark of life will die out like yonder brazier.”

“Why? Dost thou mean that thou hast actually murdered me?”

“I am no murderess,” she answered, reproachfully. “Thou hast submitted to the fatal inoculation, yet to every poison there is an antidote.” Then, drawing from her breast a little jewelled scent-bottle, about the size and shape of a pigeon’s egg, that was suspended by a chain around her neck, she removed the cap and shook into the hollow of her hand a small quantity of a dark brown powder.

“See! place this upon thy tongue and swallow it. Life and health will return to thee, and no ill effects wilt thou feel to-morrow of thy near approach to the Realm of Silence.”

She emptied it into my hand, and I swallowed it. The drug was bitter as gall and burned my mouth with fiery pungency, but ere I could make another observation, she had snatched up the lamp and was disappearing through the arched doorway. Following, we retraced our steps along the gloomy corridors, until at last she pushed open a door, and we found ourselves back again in the fragrant, luxurious harem.

Placing the lamp upon one of the little tables of ebony and pearl, she sank upon her divan exhausted, but still grasping the Crescent. Her long hair strayed over her shoulders and breast, and as she lay back in utter abandon she panted as if the strain of the past hour had been too great. Taking one of the great silken cushions I placed it tenderly under her wearied head, then sank upon my knee at her side.

“Tell me, Zoraida,” I said. “Tell me more of the strange scenes which I have just witnessed. What giveth thee the wondrous power to recall the dead from the grave, and invoke the assistance of the Great Unknown?”

Turning her brilliant eyes to mine, she hesitated.

“True, O Cecil,” she exclaimed, after a short, silent interval, “I have power that is not vouchsafed to some; but what thou hast seen to-night is not so wonderful as the secret contained within this piece of Damascus steel;” and she raised the Crescent for me to gaze upon.

“What secret can a piece of metal possibly contain?” I inquired, almost inclined to laugh at her earnest assertion.

“Thou thinkest that I fool thee,” she answered in a tone of reproach. “I tell thee, nevertheless, that knowledge of certain things giveth me power over both friend and enemy, power that I use at will for good or for evil. They who are cursed from my lips find no solace in this life, and descend to Eblis, where hot winds blow and there is no water; but those who have my blessing prosper, grow wealthy, and find peace.”

“Have I thy blessing?”

“Thou hast,” she murmured calmly, raising her lips to mine in a long, fierce caress. “My wishes are that thou mayest find happiness and riches, and that thou mayest receive the mercy of the Merciful is my heartfelt desire.”

“My only happiness is at thy side,” I said, with fervent promptitude.

“Ah! it is, alas! but brief,” she replied, sighing. “There are circumstances which prevent our marriage – even though we love each other so well.”

“Circumstances? What are they? Tell me. Thou always speakest in enigmas.”

“The first and most serious is the uncertainty of my life. Even to-night I may die;” and she raised her finely-moulded hand and thoughtfully examined my ancient signet ring upon her finger.

“Absurd!” I said. “What ground hast thou for such gloomy apprehensions? Art thou not safe here, surrounded by every luxury, with slaves to do thy bidding, and guarded from every evil?”

“Not from *every* evil,” she replied slowly. “When thou art absent, unhappiness consumeth me, and sadness, like a corrosive acid, eateth away all life and gaiety from mine heart.”

“But I may see thee more often, surely? How long wilt thou remain here?”

“I cannot tell,” she answered, speaking like one in a dream. “To-morrow thou mayest only find my corpse.”

“Bah! Why entertain Despair when Joy desireth to dwell within thine heart? We love each other, and may meet often, even though these mysterious circumstances of which thou speakest may, for a time, prevent our marriage.”

With a look of bitter sorrow she shook her head, replying, “No. We must not meet, or our friendship may prove fatal. When I invited thee hither, it was to impart to thee the secret of the Crescent of Glorious Wonders that would give thee power to work for our mutual benefit. But, alas! thou, an infidel, mayest not learn the extraordinary truth; the Unseen hath decreed that thou shalt remain in the outer darkness called Ignorance.”

“But how can I act in order to break down this strange barrier that precludeth our happiness? Hast thou – hast thou already a *husband*?”

She started. Her lips quivered, and the colour left her cheeks.

“If I had a husband, I should not ask thee hither, neither would I dare to enter the Kingdom of Shades with thee, a lover. To endeavour to learn my secret at present will be futile. Suffice it for thee to know that there is more mystery to penetrate than thou hast ever dreamed of, and that only by seeking knowledge from afar canst thou hope ever to bring us nearer to each other – to – ”

A sigh finished the sentence.

“I am prepared to do anything, to go anywhere, to render thee service,” I replied, pressing her jewelled fingers to my lips.

“Then hearken,” she said, raising herself upon her arm and looking earnestly at me. “The secret of this, the Crescent of Glorious Wonders, is forbidden thee; yet if thou darest to travel to a distant country far away over the waterless regions beyond the Touareg; if thou wilt penetrate the lands of hostile tribes in the disguise of a True Believer, thou canst learn that which will give thee wealth and power, and will at last bring us together.”

“To marry?”

“Yes. To marry.”

“Tell me all I must do,” I exclaimed excitedly. “Can I learn that which thou callest the Great Secret?”

“Alas! it is impossible,” she replied. “If thou wilt undertake this perilous journey, thou shalt carry with thee the Crescent of Glorious Wonders as my pledge that I do not deceive thee, and as a talisman which, if thou canst learn its secret, will make thee wealthy beyond the dreams of avarice.”

“But what of thyself – what of happiness with thee?”

“Until thou hast accomplished thy mission, I shall remain with my clansmen awaiting thee. Remember, whatever gossip thou mayest hear, or whatever may be revealed to thee about myself,

seek no explanation. Set out upon thy journey as soon as possible, and travel on the wings of haste, for the way is long and the approach difficult. My movements concern thee not until thy return, for although to-night thou art here in the harem, do not forget the awful fate that awaiteth women of Al-Islâm who hold converse with Infidels. Therefore, before I give thee instructions, swear by thine own Deity, thine Allah, to heed nothing that thou mayest see or hear concerning me, but perform thy journey speedily, and learn the Great Secret ere thou seekest any explanation.”

“I swear I will obey thee unswervingly. I will act upon thy commands as blindly and devotedly as I have to-night.”

“Then know, O Cecil,” she said, regaining her feet slowly and standing erect before me, “there is but one spot on earth where the Great Secret may be imparted unto thee, now that it hath been withheld even at the portal of the Land of Shades. Before thou mayest again enter my presence, thou must have gained the power and the riches that it can bestow. Whilst thou art in the distant Desert I shall not forget thee; it is even possible that secret communications may pass between us, for do not forget that in future a fatal affinity existeth between our souls, and that, irrespective of distance, we may have a dream-like consciousness of each other’s well-being.” Her dark eyes fixed upon me seemed to hold me with a strange magnetism. Truly I was under her spell. Even in the brief space that had elapsed, she had now entirely reassumed her marvellous beauty. Stretching forth her hand she poured water from an ewer of chased silver into two drinking-cups. Over them both she passed her fingers swiftly, and then sipped one of them. The sweet odours that hung about the harem had caused a dryness in my throat, and, raising the other cup to my lips, I took several gulps, while she regarded me keenly.

“Shall I always know thy whereabouts?” I asked eagerly.

“No. There will be a certain affinity between our thoughts, but I shall remain hidden from thee until thou hast returned.”

For a few moments we were silent. She was no longer haggard and cold as she had been while the poison coursed through her veins, but the rose-garden of her beauty had forthwith recovered its freshness; in the delicate, rounded limbs and bust there glowed the natural warmth and yielding softness of flesh and blood. Her great lustrous eyes, standing well apart under her darkened brows, the broad white forehead, the perfect nose, the small, well-formed mouth, the pearly teeth, the rounded chin, each added grace to grace. Her beauty was perfect.

“Wilt thou remain here, or go back to the Desert with thy tribe?” I asked, gazing at her enraptured.

“To – to the Desert – peradventure,” she replied hesitatingly. “If the *homards* are thrown off our scent.”

“What! are thy people about to resume their murderous marauding expeditions?” I asked in surprise.

“I – I know not, Cecil,” she replied, laying her hand upon my arm. “I would prevent their terrible crimes if I could, but, alas! it is impossible. Thou knowest not in what constant peril I exist, or – or how unhappy is my life. A single imprudent word may seal my fate. I may be tied in a sack even to-night, and cast into the sea!”

“How can I help thee? How can I save thee?” I asked, with eagerness.

“Only by undertaking the journey of which I have already spoken,” she answered slowly. “If thy mission is accomplished successfully, then thou wilt rescue me from a cruel fate – a fate far worse than death.”

Chapter Eighteen. A Hidden Tragedy

So earnestly she spoke that I felt convinced there was in her life some hideous mystery, and that those who held power over her she regarded with abject terror. Besides, her frequent allusions to the uncertainty of her life made it plain that she was apprehensive of a swift and terrible doom.

Though some of her words and actions were, strange and incomprehensible, and the effects I had witnessed at the weird Shrine of Darkness had, I reflected, been probably produced by some kind of mechanical ingenuity, yet there was something even more remarkable about this Pearl of the Harem than her entrancing beauty. Her actions led me to the conclusion that she was actually the woman reputed by the Ennitra to be possessed of superhuman power, and every moment I now spent in her company deepened my curiosity concerning her.

The mystery by which she was enveloped was puzzling. I felt myself bewildered.

That she was well versed in Oriental mystic, rites was certain, but whether she had actually produced the results I had witnessed without some ingenious trickery I was half inclined to doubt.

Nevertheless, I loved her blindly. Her beauty fascinated me, and her words in soft, musical Arabic that fell upon my ears entranced me.

“Then thou wilt go?” she said fondly, entwining her arm around my neck. “Thou, the Amîn, to whom may the Bestower of Good Gifts be merciful, art willing to face all the terrors of the long journey for my sake?”

“Yes, Zoraida,” I replied, looking straight into her dark orbs. “Already thou hast saved my life. If it lieth within my power I will save thine.”

“Then we must lose no time,” she exclaimed suddenly. Leaving me, she crossed the harem, and took a sheet of paper and an ink-horn from a little cabinet inlaid with silver and mother-of-pearl, returning to where I was standing. Sinking upon her soft divan, she spread out the paper upon a little coffee-stool, and wrote in Arabic character the following: —

“O revered servant of Allah, learned and mighty, thou whose face is as a lamp unto those who walk in the darkness and in error stray from the path, unto thee I send salutation. The One Worthy of Praise made earth for a carpet, and it is written upon the tablet that Allah, Giver of Good Gifts, is the living One. May he who despiseth the revelation enter into the Companionship of the Left Hand, and dwell for ever in Al Sâhira. To seek an elucidation of the Great Mystery, the Rumi, into whose hands have I given the Crescent of Glorious Wonders, journeyeth afar unto thee. Know, O Friend, deadly peril surroundeth me. Of a verity the day hath come when the Great Secret may be revealed, for by its knowledge my life may be spared. Wherefore I beseech thee to grant him audience, and direct his footsteps into the valley of felicity, for assuredly mine enemies may be dumbfounded if thou wiltiest.

“In fear have we flown into the refuge of patience, praying to the Answerer of our Supplications to grant us endurance. When our prayer for the Great Elucidation hath been responded to, the skirts of thine innocence shall be purified from the mire of suspicion, and – if it pleaseth Allah – by the blessing of thy devotions will our petition be heard, and from us will our affliction be removed. May the Beneficent Granter of Requests be gracious unto the Rumi and give him prosperity. Upon thee likewise be perfect peace. Sister.”

As she carefully penned the intricate lines, I noticed for the first time that across the back of her right hand – the hand that bore my ring – was a small red scar about an inch in length, and I silently wondered how it had been caused.

“There,” she exclaimed at last, as she appended with a flourish the characters “*Okht*” which apparently she used as her signature, “together with the Crescent of Glorious Wonders convey this my message to Hadj Mohammed ben Ishak, the chief *imam* of the mosque at Agadez. He will understand

my desire. Tell him that thou hast accompanied me unto the Shrine of Darkness, where I recovered the key to the hidden mystery, but that knowledge was, alas! not imparted to thee. He will then instruct thee how to act.”

“To Agadez?” I echoed, dismayed, remembering that it lay far south beyond the Great Sahara, with nearly two thousand miles of trackless and almost waterless wilderness between it and civilisation.

“Yes; I told thee that the only spot where knowledge can be given thee, and by which thou canst effect my rescue, was far distant. Dost thou fear to travel thither?”

I hesitated in uncertainty. Well I knew how tedious and perilous would be the long journey, for the hostility of the tribes through whose country I should have to pass constituted a terror even as great as the enormous difficulties and frightful hardships that I must encounter for many weeks, perhaps months, in the Great Sahara itself. But the earnest look of pleading in her splendid eyes decided me.

“I will go, Zoraida. If it is thy will, I shall start to-morrow,” I said.

“Thou wilt traverse the Great Desert for my sake – for my sake?” she exclaimed, kissing my hand as I took the missive she had folded. “When I named thee the Amîn I was not mistaken. Hadj Mohammed will be expecting thee.”

“Why?”

“Because he will receive early knowledge that the Crescent of Glorious Wonders is in thy custody. Remember, if lost, it could never be replaced, having been revealed and given unto us by the Power that is all-powerful. Thou wilt undertake this mission in order to save my life, to save me from the horrible fate that threateneth to overwhelm me. When the Secret hath been imparted, and thou hast used it according to instructions that will be given by the aged chaplain of the daily prayers, then wilt thou return to me – and to peace.”

“But how shall I find thee? Many moons may perchance rise and fade ere I return to Algiers.”

“Assuredly I shall know thy whereabouts,” she replied briefly. “Travel swiftly. The horse I gave thee on the night I severed thy bonds will carry thee back from Biskra to El Biodh. Then with camels travel over the vast northern Touareg and the mountains of Adrar, guarding well thy life through Djanet until thou comest to Mount Equelles. From there thou wilt be compelled to guide thyself by the sun over the Desert to the palms of Issalà, where thou wilt find also dates, forage, and water. Another long and weary course of travel will bring thee at last to Assiou, thence journeying due south past Azarara and along the great rocky valleys of Aïr, where dwell thine enemies, thou wilt at length enter the gate of Agadez, the City of the Sorcerers, wherein the strange mystery lieth hidden.”

The exact position of Agadez was, I reflected, somewhat uncertain. Generally believed to be about eighteen hundred miles from Algiers as the swallow flies, it was placed by most maps at the extreme south of the Azarara country, to the west of Lake Tsâd; but among European geographers there was a certain amount of doubt as to its exact position and best approach, for maps of that remote district differ considerably. However, I had decided to set out to seek this aged *imam* for Zoraida’s sake, and meant to do my utmost to accomplish my mission.

Leaning before me in silence against a marble column, with her hands clasped behind her head, her jewels scintillating in the softly-tempered light, her sequins tinkling musically, her rich silks rustling, her scented bosom rising and falling as she breathed, she looked a veritable sultana, a woman for whom any man might have sacrificed his very soul.

“Remember always, O Cecil, that my thoughts follow thee,” she said softly. “Remember, when thou facest the terrors which are inevitable, that there is one woman who is trusting to thee alone to save her. Perhaps ere long I shall return to our palace in the impenetrable mountains beyond Tiourdeouïn; nevertheless my thoughts will be constantly of thee, for now I am convinced of thy love and fearlessness. May Allah, the One Merciful, guard thee, and may all thine enemies perish!”

Placing my arm slowly around her slim waist, encircled by a golden girdle, I drew her towards me, and she kissed me with hot feverish lips.

“I cannot bear the thought, Zoraida, that thou mayest wander again with thy relatives and clansmen over the burning Desert, and witness those awful scenes of plunder and massacre. Ah! if I could but think that thou wouldst be safe here during my absence.”

She sighed, toying with the jewelled scent-bottle suspended upon her breast, the little trinket that contained the antidote.

“Already have I told thee my life is very uncertain,” she exclaimed gloomily. “Even to-night I might fall a victim. The tyranny of unpropitious times hath thrown the stone of separation upon us. I might – ”

“No, no,” I interrupted. “Thou art safe here, surely. Be patient, and keep a stout heart until I return. Thou knowest I love thee dearly, and will strive unceasingly to accomplish my mission quickly and successfully.”

“Yes. I shall be thinking always of thee – always,” she said softly.

“And when I return I shall have learned the mysterious Secret which is so absolutely necessary for our mutual welfare.”

“Ah, Cecil, my Amîn! I love thee! I love thee! As sure as the sun will illumine to-morrow’s dawn, so surely will I – ”

Her passionate words were suddenly interrupted by the entrance of the big negro who had guarded the door of the harem. He rushed in with a look of abject terror upon his dark, brutal countenance, whispering some hasty words into his mistress’s ear that caused her to become agitated and deathly pale.

“Quick! Hasten, or I am lost!” she cried, turning to me.

“What danger threateneth?” I inquired in surprise.

“Leave me! Leave me! Thou must not be discovered!” she exclaimed breathlessly. “Take this, the Crescent, and turn thy face towards the Desert to-morrow. Remember the instructions I have given thee; and, above all, promise to seek no explanation of what thou mayest hear or see regarding me until thou hast returned from Agadez.”

“I promise,” I replied, as for a second I held her in my arms and our lips met in passionate farewell.

“Quick! The Roumi! In Allah’s name, save him!” she cried, turning to the gorgeously-attired Soudanese who stood near, like a gigantic statue.

“Follow,” he commanded; and, crossing the room, drew aside some silken hangings, disclosing another small door, of the existence of which I had been unaware.

I turned. Zoraida had flung herself with languorous abandon upon her divan, with her hand pressed to her bejewelled forehead. Her wistful eyes followed me, and as I waved her a last farewell, she said —

“Go, my Amîn! May Allah give thee perfect peace!” Through the open door we passed, and the negro, closing it, bolted it from the outside, leaving us in total darkness.

“Keep silence. Grasp my arm, and I will lead thee,” said the man, but ere he had uttered the words, there came from the harem a loud, piercing shriek – the cry of a woman!

It was Zoraida’s voice!

“Hark!” I gasped, with bated breath. “Listen! That voice was *hers*! Let us return.”

“No,” he replied gruffly. “That is impossible.”

“But the cry was one of terrible agony!”

“Slaves of the harem never interfere without orders. Death is the penalty of the Infidel found within the precincts sacred to the women,” he answered coldly.

I turned to unbolt the door, but his sinewy hand grasped me by the neck, and without any further explanation I was half dragged through several dark, close-smelling passages, and down a flight of broken stone steps, until we came to a heavy door.

“At least thou canst tell me who is the owner of this place,” I said, slipping a couple of gold coins into his ready palm.

“I cannot. My mistress hath commanded my silence,” he answered, pocketing the bribe, nevertheless.

“May I learn nothing, then?” I asked.

“No. Our Queen of the Desert hath taken every precaution that thou shalt obtain no knowledge of certain facts. For her own sake secrecy is imperative, therefore, if thou holdest her in respect, seek not to loosen my tongue with thy gold.”

Then he pushed me gently but firmly outside, and with a parting word closed the iron-studded door again. The key grated in the lock as it was secured, and, gazing round, I found myself in the narrow crooked street.

For a few moments I hesitated. The moon shone brightly, and all was quiet, for it was long past midnight.

After a final look at the gloomy, mysterious house, I plunged into the labyrinth of Arab thoroughfares, and, half dazed by the strange, dreamy experience, I walked on, descending the steep, intricate streets, trusting to chance to bring me into the Place du Gouvernement, in the European quarter, wherein was situated my hotel.

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