

# ZARAH THE CRUEL

BY

JOAN CONQUEST

AUTHOR OF "DESERT LOVE," "LEONIE OF THE JUNGLE,"  
"THE HAWK OF EGYPT."

NEW YORK

THE MACAULAY COMPANY

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BY THE SAME AUTHOR

- Desert Love
  - Leonie of the Jungle
  - The Hawk of Egypt
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JOAN CONQUEST

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TO  
BETTY C—— OF C——  
TO WHOM I AM INDEBTED FOR SO MUCH OF THIS BOOK

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**ZARAH THE CRUEL**



# PROLOGUE

*“Narrower than the ear of a needle.”—Arabic Proverb.*

The Holy Man, motionless, gaunt, his eyes filled with the peace of Allah, the one and only God, stood afar off, outlined against the moonlight, watching two horsemen fleeing for their lives across the desert.

Pursued by a band of Arabs which hunted them for murder done in the far, fair City of Damascus and had hunted them throughout the Peninsula, they headed for the Mountains of Death towering in the limitless sands of the burning desert and cut off from the world by the silvery belt of quicksands which surround them completely.

Uninhabited by beast or human being within the memory of man and the memory of his fathers, and his fathers' fathers, yet did the wandering storyteller, as he flitted from town to village, from Bedouin camp to verdant oasis, make song or story of the legend which has clung to the pile of volcanic rock throughout the centuries.

A story which either moved the listener to shouts of derisive, unbelieving laughter or held him still, lost in wonderment and dreams.

A legend recounted in this day of grace by the Arabian story-teller to Bedouins, sitting entranced under the stars or the moon, yet which had been inscribed upon a highly decorated vellum by the Holy Palladius in the fifth century of our Lord, which record of early holy church was lost in the burning and sacking of a famous library in the more Christian times of the last ten turbulent years.

The story of a miraculous light, which, so read the vellum, led the Holy Fathers across the sands of death, over which they did most safely pass, to find within the mountains the further miracle of fresh, sparkling water, palm groves of luscious *kholas* dates, stretches of *durra* and grass, coarse enough to be woven into shirts, with which to replace, in the passing of the years, the shirts of hair which covered the attenuated bodies of the thirty-odd early Christian Fathers.

There, within the secret oasis, so went the legend, the holy men who fled the temptations and persecutions of the world and sought safety and salvation in

penance and pilgrimage, built a monastery to the glory of God, and there, so it was to be supposed, they must have died, with the exception of one, who, following the casting of lots, had been sent forth from the miraculous oasis upon a mission to acquaint the Holy Palladius of the community's whereabouts.

The vellum had witnessed the Holy Father's safe arrival at his journey's end, but of his return to the Sanctuary, as was the poetical name given the place by the renowned Palladius, there had been no mention.

A fair legend to endure throughout the passing of the centuries, a sweet story in a land of thirst and death and dire privation, a tantalizing word-picture to those who knew the shifting sands to be impassable.

The Holy Man pondered upon the legend as he watched the horsemen tearing towards the quicksands and certain death, then, with the beads of Mecca slipping between his fingers, turned and continued his pilgrimage due south, the south where the wind blows hottest and the sands burn the sandal from off even holy feet.

And Mohammed-Abd, accused of the murder of a wealthy, flint-hearted usurer in the fair, far City of Damascus, turned to the handsome youth who, loving him as a brother, had helped him to escape, so far, from the vengeance of the flint-hearted usurer's relatives.

"The mare faileth, Boy of the Wondrous Eyes! I fear a spear or a bullet shall find its home in her body, or in mine, before she reaches yonder mass of rocks."

Yussuf laughed and turned in his seat and looked back, shading the beautiful, almond-shaped, long-lashed eyes which had earned him his nickname and had got him into more trouble even than usually befalls a handsome youth in the Arabian Peninsula.

"There is the length of many spears yet between us, brother. Lie upon the neck of Lulah, the mare, so that the wind of her great speed be not counted against her. The swiftest mare in all Nejd, yet in endurance of but little count. Behold is there a light at the foot of the mountains moving this way and that way?

Perchance 'tis one who lives amongst the rocks and who watches with intent to succour us. Allah be praised that the sands lie flat under our horses' feet, though by the wool! would He be thrice praised if, in His mercy and compassion, He were to twist the feet of the horses which follow us and so break their riders'

... -1- ... "

necks.

The mountains seemed within spear-length, the quicksands showed one with the desert, silvery, smooth, when the mare stumbled just as a bullet whistled past, singeing the streaming mane.

She was up on her dainty, unshod feet upon the instant, racing for safety with the last effort of her gallant heart, when Mohammed-Abd turned and yelled defiance at his pursuers.

*“Ista’jil!”* he yelled, *“Ista’jil!”*

Everyday words, which merely mean “make haste,” but destined to become a battle cry which, in after years, struck terror in the hearts of those who heard it, from Oman to Hajaz.

In reply came a volley of firing, mixed with derisive and insulting words, lost in the din of shouting and hoofs upon the sand.

“Follow me, brother!” shouted Yussuf, as he pressed his mare with his knees.

Ahead a greenish light danced this way and that, backwards and forwards, and to it Yussuf rode his mare, with Mohammed-Abd close upon his heels.

They followed the will-o’-the-wispish light formed by the gas floating above the quicksands, mixing with the wind when it blew from the south, and fled upon the narrow path over which it danced. A path formed perchance by the top of some mountain chain thrusting through the desert; hidden throughout the centuries by the inch or so, not more, of sand which overlapped it from the treacherous, seething, ever-moving sea of death; a way to safety discovered to the Holy Fathers and the fugitives before the law by Allah the merciful, the one and only God.

Over it they passed safely, with, if they had but known it, barely the breadth of a hand to spare, upon either side of the exhausted mare; they slipped from the saddle and pulled the panting beasts back into the shadows just as, with much triumphant shouting and firing of rifles, the pursuing Arabs, riding in a straight line, plunged, yelling, screaming, down into the quicksands’ suffocating depths.

The miracle of the fifth century had been explained at last.



An hour later, when the stars shone down upon a scene of perfect peace, Yussuf laughed and pulled at the spear hurled by an Arab in one last effort of revenge before sinking to his death.

It did not move. Stuck fast between two rocks it remained for all time, a sign to mark the commencement of the only means of communication between the Sanctuary and the pitiless, burning desert.

“Methinks we are no better off, brother. If, by the grace of Allah, we find again the hidden path by which we crossed this sea of death, yet have we neither drop of water nor date-stone left with which to stifle the pangs of hunger and thirst, of which we surely die if we move not from this ledge of rock.”

He looked up to the top width of a great V which cleft the mountains half-way down the side, and from the narrowest point of which there seemed to stretch a path to where the spear marked the beginning of the secret path.

Then he stretched his hand and touched the rock behind the spear, and with finger upon cracked lips softly called Mohammed-Abd, who came quickly upon tiptoe.

“Let us go warily, brother, yet let us go in search of those who inhabit the heart of the mountains, so that they help us in our need.”

They passed their fingers over the rough cross hacked in the rock as a sign of his return by the Christian who, in the fifth century, had been sent upon a mission to the Holy Palladius; then, hobbling the mares, crept in the shadows from rock to rock, up the path leading to the narrowest point of the great cleft, which made the one opening in the mountains, slitting them to a spot midway between the foot and crest.

Famished and almost crazed with thirst, the two men hid in blackest shadow, listening for a sound, peering for a sight of those who had marked the way up with rough crosses cut upon the rocks; then, alert, apprehensive, stopping to listen at every yard, crept noiselessly to the opening of the cleft. Through it they passed like shadows, and on down a steeper, broader path to a great plateau, on the edge of which they stopped, staring in amazement.

“A mirage!” whispered Mohammed-Abd in hoarse tones, then, crouching, ran across the plateau and fell upon his knees and to his full length upon the bank of

a sparkling, rushing river.

Whence came the unknown, miraculous water? It flowed from the eastern side of the mountains; it twisted in the shape of a big S in the middle of the fertile plain; it disappeared through a narrow cleft in the western side with the thundering, rushing sound of water falling into space.

The waters of the Wadi Hanifa which flow through Woshim and Ared more or less abundantly, according to the season, have so far not been traced after they disappear in the fertile district of Yemama. Do they flow below the surface to the Persian Gulf? or on into the terrible desert, to be absorbed in the ever greedy sand? Are these the waters which show above ground for a few blessed yards in the secret heart of the Mountains of Death, cut off by the quicksands from the needy sons of the desert who depend upon the scanty, brackish water of deep wells, and vapours carried uncertainly on certain winds from the Persian Gulf, and which are lost once they pass above the *hamads*, those red-hot, dust-laden, scorching, terrible limestone plains?

Or does a subterranean river flow through the bowels of some chain of mountains stretching below the surface of the Peninsula from sea to sea, wrapped in the desert sand?

Maybe!

And may not the short mountain ranges dotted throughout Arabia's deserts be the topmost peaks of that great hidden chain, and the miraculous waters hidden in the Mountains of Death be part of that lost river, escaping through its prison walls in the one spot where the rocks have been worn, during the centuries, by the rush and the fret of the waters below and the wind and the storm above?

Fantastic theory. And yet who knows? Who will ever know?

But there it is, and doubtlessly there it always will be, forming an inaccessible oasis, with sweet water and groves of date palms, and stretches of wheat and barley descended from the grain sown from the Holy Fathers' scanty store centuries ago; a quiet spot, with cotton shrubs and vines, coffee plants and *durra*, climbing gentle slopes covered in rich, coarse grass, and herbs and flowers of every kind which spring from the seeds blown upon the wind or carried by the birds which swarm where water is to be found.

“No mirage, brother,” whispered Yussuf. “Yet must we go warily, with eyes in our heads and hands upon our weapons, for methinks the inhabitants hide and spy upon us from the rocks, waiting the fortunate moment to fall upon us.”

He passed his hand over the first of a short flight of steps leading down to the water and worn smooth by the passage of holy feet. “By the marks upon the steps there is much going and coming, and a good harvest about us. Food for the eating and for the drinking, water, the beverage prescribed for man by Mohammed the prophet of Allah, the one and only God.” He touched the amulet of good luck which hung about his neck and lay quite still, his hand upon his friend’s arm, looking about him in the shadows and up at the birds of all sizes which, disturbed by the intrusion, flew distractedly in every direction. “Stay thou here, brother. I will drink a while, then will I go and fetch thee dates, and if I meet the inhabitants of this corner of Paradise, set in the midst of suffering, will ask of them hospitality—if they be friendly—or the way back across the hidden path by which we entered if they prove otherwise, quickening their tongues, if there be hesitation, with this.”

He loosened the broad, crooked dagger in his cummerbund, and, descending the rough steps, threw himself down to drink until he came wellnigh to bursting. Replete, he rose and walked apart some feet and looked around him and stood amazed, overcome by a strange awe, then, beckoning Mohammed-Abd who drank at the river’s edge, crept like a shadow across the plateau and up a steep flight of steps made by the laying of boulders one upon the other.

The ruins of the monastery, which had been hidden from the fugitives by a great mass of jutting rock which swept down almost to the water’s edge, lay silent, forsaken, upon the natural terraces of the mountainside. In the strong black-and-white shadow and moonlight the rough walls showed no sign of the devastating hand of time, and hid the remains of roofs which, from want of repair, had at last caved in and fallen upon the rock floors. The windows of the cells, thirty in all, showed like black patches painted upon a grey background; thirty doorways gaped desolate; the dust of ages covered stones worn by the passing to and fro of bare feet, some more, some less, according to the span of years allotted to each holy man.

How had the holy men worked? How had they built to the glory of God with no other implements than their hands and the strength of their muscles and their vows?

The walls of the cells, the chapel and the refectory were two feet thick and built of pieces of granite of various sizes, fitted together in rough, mosaic fashion; they had stood throughout the centuries just as they had been put together, without loss of a single stone, just as the trunks of palms, rough-hewn by patience and sharpened stones, had stood, in ones or in columns, to support the roofs composed of other trunks of palms, laid crosswise and covered in laced leaves.

Later was discovered a place, high upon the mountainside, to the edge of which boulders, both great and small, had evidently been pushed and hurled to the rocks below, to be smashed to bits, out of which bits doubtlessly had been picked the pieces necessary to the task of building.

How many years had it taken to build the chapel? How much strength to carry the square slab, which had formed the altar, up the mountainside and to prop it upon four supports? How much patience to build up the pointed *façade* and to pluck out the stones from the middle until a clear cross, formed by space, showed against the blazing sky or the star-studded velvet of the night?

Why had they built? For joy? For penance? The latter probably, for the buildings, which spread terrace above terrace, must have far outreached the need of the holy men.

For many minutes Yussuf stood staring up at this mystery of the desert, and then, slowly, step by step, pulled by the strength of the unknown, halting to listen, hastening to gain the shadows, climbed the rough steps and reached the chapel door.

He stood staring down at the floor littered with stones and across to the altar, before which lay a skull, gleaming in a shaft of moonlight. Making the sign to scare away evil spirits, he stepped across the holy place, though not for a king's ransom would he have touched the white bones of Father Augustine, the last of the holy men, who had laid himself down to die before the altar, upon which had been roughly chipped a cross.

"Christians!" whispered Yussuf, slipping the rosary of Mecca between his fingers. "Infidels!"

Like a great cat he crept out of the place and up the steps leading to the thirty cells, where, upon the stone floors, showed the marks made by the holy men

who had fled the world and the luxury of soft beds. He climbed yet twelve steps more to the refectory, where thirty stones, more or less flat, stood in the circle the holy men had formed for meals or recreation; and up again to other buildings, both great and small, built to what purpose it will never be known; then fled the silent, deserted place, slipping, stumbling down the steps to the plateau, where waited his friend.

Side by side, warily, noiselessly, they climbed to the tombs, high up upon the western flank, natural caves, upon the floors of which twenty-nine holy men slept the long sleep, each underneath a mound of stone.

They lay there now, for all that is known, waiting for the last trump to call them back across the quicksands of time.

They sleep peacefully, undisturbed, for ruthless, savage as were the men who ultimately threw in their lot with Mohammed-Abd, criminals and outlaws every one, from every province and every tribe in the Peninsula, yet they respected the solemnity of that Christian burial ground and left the sleeping forms in peace.

And just as the first sunbeam slid over the mountaintops, filling the rocky bowl with golden light, the two men adopted the place as home.

An impregnable stronghold; a natural fortress in a waste place; a land of dates and water, upon which a man or many men could subsist for lack of better or more tasty nutriment; a citadel surrounded by a sea of death, yet connected with *terra firma* by a path of rock, which as a foundation cannot be bettered.

“... for if we have safely followed in the path of the thirty who sleep yonder,” argued Mohammed-Abd, looking up to the tombs in the rocks bathed in the glory of the sunrise; “why should not yet another thirty, fleeing before the law, and even thrice times thirty, come safely through the hungry sands? If two horses escaped the death, why should not two camels, with their feet as big and soft as the heart of one who leans unduly to the affections, cross that path, and, with violent lamentations and much urging, make their way down yon rocky road? And if two, why should not thirty of their brothers and sisters follow as safely, with thirty Nejdeen stallions and mares, as nimble as goats upon their dainty feet, behind them? And are we so weak that we could not carry sheep and goats, in young, across our saddle bows, so that they multiply in this place of plenty?” He looked up and around, stretching wide his arms. “Is there not place for man and beast and many of each? And are we not, O my brother, bidden by

the Great Prophet to succour those in distress, are we not?”

In such-wise did Mohammed-Abd, the ambitious outlaw, with Yussuf as his right hand, become the head of as daring a gang of brigands as had ever swept the highways of the desert.

And all went well with him, his harvests yielding abundantly, his wealth accumulating, his people and cattle waxing fat and multiplying throughout the years, until he took unto himself a wife, who died on bearing him a daughter.

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# CHAPTER I

*“From the afternoon it will appear if the night will be clear.”—Arabic Proverb.*

Zarah the Cruel leaned on the wall which surrounded the chapel of the monastery, built by early Christians in the fifth century, and looked down at two dogs fighting upon the plateau near the water's edge.

Twenty years had passed since Sheikh Mohammed-Abd, so called by his men, who adored him, had adopted the natural stronghold in a desert waste as home, naming it the Sanctuary, unwitting that he poached upon the poetical tendencies of the long dead Holy Palladius; fifteen years since he had taken to wife Mercedes, the beautiful Spaniard, the arrogant daughter of an impoverished Spanish grandee, who, made prisoner as she journeyed on business bent across the Arabian Peninsula in the company of her high-born and feckless father, had condescended to marry the notorious robber-sheikh in exchange for the liberty of her progenitor and the safe conduct of himself and his retinue out of the country. She had condescended to marry him, but in the secret places of her passionate, adventurous heart she had come most truly to love him, so that the years preceding the birth of their daughter had been years of happiness; years in which, although the raids upon caravans and peoples had been as fierce and bloody as before, the lot of the prisoners had been considerably lightened, until those who had not the wherewithal to pay the ransom demanded had come to sing as they set about their tasks of herding cattle, tending harvests, or working to strengthen and beautify the ruins upon the mountainside. Those who had the means, or friends altruistic enough to raise the ransom, had paid it and taken their departure with a distinct feeling of regret in their hearts.

Many had thrown in their lot with the outlawed chief, whilst the physically undesirable had been liberated at once and sent packing on the homeward track, so that harmony had reigned in the strange place and the welfare of the brotherhood had increased a hundredfold.

Three years later Mercedes died, leaving in her stead a woman-child, upon whom the Sheikh poured out the adoration of his stricken heart. A strange, quiet woman-child, who had neither cried nor laughed as she had lain in her father's arms, staring past him out of tawny, opalescent eyes.

And as she grew, beautiful, cruel, and as relentless as the desert to which she belonged, so did unrest and fear and passion grow in the erstwhile happy community, until women ran and seized their children so that her shadow should not fall upon them, prisoners shrank at sight or sound of her, and the men, hating her in their hearts yet hypnotized by her beauty and her great daring, whispered amongst themselves as they questioned the one, the other, as to the next whim or new punishment her ungovernable temperament would invent.

For an Arabian she was well educated. Vain as a peacock, she forced herself, loathing it the while, to take advantage of every opportunity of learning which presented itself, solely with the object of shining before the men, who, with the exception of one nicknamed the Patriarch, were as illiterate as most Arabs are.

A learned Armenian, a Spaniard and a Frenchman, made prisoners through an injudicious display of wealth, had each had the sentence of heavy ransom commuted to that of two years' instruction to the Sheikh's almost ungovernable daughter.

The Jew had taught her to read and to write whilst thoroughly appreciating his robber-host's hearty hospitality; the Spaniard had taught her his language and the dances of his country whilst enjoying the wild life he had led between lessons; the Frenchman had taught her his language and the use of the foils, and had asked for her hand in marriage, to be thoroughly surprised at a blunt refusal.

She read everything she could get hold of, lining the reconstructed walls of two cells, which had once echoed the prayers and witnessed the austerities of the holy monks, with books brought by caravan from the port of Jiddah. She could eat quite nicely with a knife and fork and manipulate a finger napkin with some dexterity, but showed a preference for her fingers—which she wiped upon the carpet or by digging them into the hot sand—and her splendid white teeth for the process of separating meat from bone.

From her father she undoubtedly came by her magnificent horsemanship and surpassing skill in the use of weapons of self-defence.

He delighted in her physical training, spending hours with her either in a room which had been fitted up as a gymnasium after the counselling of the Frenchman; or on the plateau, pitting her skill with spear, rifle and revolver against that of youths of her own age; or away in the desert riding with the magnificent horses for which he had become famous throughout the Peninsula.



Trained to a hair, with a ripple of muscle under the velvety, creamy skin which the sun barely bronzed, she could, at last, throw an unbroken horse with any of her father's followers, or ride it bare-back out into the mystery of the terrible desert, heedless of its efforts to dismount her, driving it farther and farther with little golden spurs until, with its pride shattered and its heart almost broken, she would race it back, utterly spent, to the shade of the mountains.

She joined the enthusiastic men in the sports they got up amongst themselves to pass the monotony of leisure hours, or hunted with them for the sheer joy of killing, laughing with delight when she brought down ostrich or gazelle, firing at carrion for the sole purpose of keeping her hand in, leaving the birds to die where they fell.

Born and bred in the heat of the tropics, which hastens the physical development of both sexes in the Eastern races, she was almost full grown upon her twelfth birthday. She inherited the beauty of her mother, save for the colour of her hair, which rioted over her head in short curls and flamed like the setting sun, and the colour of her eyes, which shone like a topaz in the moonlight or as the storm-whipped desert, according to the violence or moderation of her mood. Through the Andalusian strain in her mixed blood she had come by her perfect hands and feet and teeth, and to the same source was she a thousand times indebted for the grace of her movements and gait and the assurance of her pose.

Her father's tenacity was abnormally developed in her. It had helped him to cling to life in the first turbulent years in the desolate Sanctuary; it helped her to beat down his almost indomitable will over matters both great and small, until, save for an occasional outburst of authority, he was as wax in her slender hands. Of his great-heartedness, his charity towards the needy—for whom he so often robbed the wealthy, with much violence and bloodshed—his justice and understanding, she had not one particle in her heart of stone, as she had not a glimmer of the humour and tenderness which had served to balance her mother's arrogance and passionate nature.

In her, the crossing of the races, exaggerating the defects, minimizing the merits of her parentage, had resulted in a terrible streak of cruelty which roused a fierce hatred in heart of man and beast.

Virile, ambitious, relentless, she was cursed from birth by the strength of her dual nationality.

Driven, beaten, horses did her bidding, but had never been known to answer to her call; dogs hated her instinctively, but feared her not one bit; her arm still showed, would always show, the marks of Rādi's teeth when, from an incredible distance, the greyhound bitch leapt upon her to revenge the death, by drowning, of one pup which had angered the girl by its continual whimpering. For her life she dared not visit the kennels unattended.

She had tried, but had failed to bring about the fall of Yussuf of the Wondrous Eyes, who loved the Sheikh as a brother, and would have laid down his life for him if he had so desired.

She hated him for his beauty, for his indifference towards her, for the love he inspired in animals—Rādi, the famous greyhound; Lulah, the fastest mare; Fahm, the priceless dromedary, were all his.

Allah! how she hated him!

He responded to her hate with a hate transcending that of his own dog, the maddened bitch; he had hated her blindly from the very beginning—for causing the death of the woman who had brought such happiness to his friend; for usurping her place and his place in the Sheikh's heart; for her cruelty, her tyranny, her utter disregard of the happiness and welfare of others.

He set himself to thwart the child in every possible way and upon every possible occasion—craftily, so that none should point to him as the author of the contretemps which so strangely and so frequently befell her.

From the day she could understand until the dawn of her tenth birthday misfortune after misfortune fell upon her, until those who met her, covertly made the gesture, used all the world over, to avert the evil eye; whilst the Sheikh tore his beard in secret as he tried to elucidate the mysteries of the dead mare, the broken spears, the disappearance, almost within sight of the Sanctuary, of an entire caravan laden with gifts for her, and other calamities which had befallen his offspring, in whom, blinded as unfortunately are so many doting parents, he saw no fault.

But when the sun rose on the anniversary of Zarah's tenth year of life, Yussuf's hate, as is the wont of unbridled passions, turned back upon him, whilst tragedy followed close upon his heel as he wended his way to the Hall of Judgment by one of the many paths he had made, in his love of solitude, amongst the rocks.

Mohammed-Abd looked up at the handsome face and smiled into the wondrous eyes which looked down into his in such splendid friendliness and bade him sit beside him on the carpet, upon which were spread gifts of gold and silver, ivory and glass and silk, to celebrate the festival.

“Zarah would ride thy mare Lulah in the *gazu* this night, little brother. Behold would she be well mounted when gaining the title of *Hadeeyah* by leading the men to the attack, even as did Ayesha, the wife of Mohammed, the Prophet of Allah, the one and only God.”

“She would ride Lulah?” replied Yussuf slowly, ignoring the girl entirely, intentionally, so as to rouse her anger. “Lulah, descendant of the mare that brought thee safely across the path so many moons ago?”

As it happened, Zarah did not mind if she rode mare or stallion in her first raid upon a caravan which had been reported as travelling, heavily laden, towards Hulah.

Foiled, up to that very moment, in all her efforts to break or bend the man she hated with all her heart, she was making one last effort to triumph over him.

Incapable of understanding the friendship between the men, under-estimating Yussuf’s strength of character, believing, in her colossal vanity, that he was merely the victim of a petty jealousy roused by her beauty and her power over the Sheikh, she had decided to make her request before her father upon a day when, so she thought, no one would dare refuse her anything.

“Yea! little brother,” replied Mohammed-Abd, “the fastest mare in all Arabia!”

Knowing nothing whatever about fortune telling, and merely to plague the girl, Yussuf, slowly and with an irritating nonchalance, drew certain signs upon the floor, then spoke, as Fate, who held the strings by which they were hobbled to their destinies, dictated.

“I see Lulah flying across the desert sands,” he whispered, “at dawn, with death upon her back. She flees for her life, with hate, revenge, hard upon her heels. She stumbles, there is ... nay! I see no more. ’Tis hidden in the mists of time. But death, death with a crown of red above her snow-white face, rode her, with hate upon her heels.”

He looked across at Zarah, who, ridden with superstition, and totally unaware that he was fooling her, leant far back upon her cushions, one hand extended, with fingers spread against disaster, the other clutching an amulet of good luck hanging about her neck.

He smiled at her terror and shrugged his shoulders, spreading his hands, palm uppermost, as though to protest against such signs of weakness. The action, the look in the wonderful eyes, acted as a spur upon the girl, goading her to maddest wrath. With a mighty effort she controlled herself and leaned far forward, eyes blazing, her lips drawn back in a snarl of hate.

“What has death to do with me?” she cried. “Verily dost thou croak like a bird of prey. I say that I will ride Lulah, the black mare, *thy* mare, as far as anything in the Sanctuary can be thine, who art but a servant. Hearest thou? I ride Lulah, the black mare!”

“Behold! have I ears to hear thy words, and eyes to see thy face distorted in anger! Yet I say that thou shalt *not* ride the mare.”

The men who sat in the body of the hall smoking or drinking coffee whilst listening to the dispute, nudged each other at the sudden, tense silence which fell between the two.

“A golden piece, Bowlegs, to the dagger in thy belt that trouble befalls before the coffee grows cold within the cups,” whispered the Patriarch, whose benign exterior covered a heart given entirely to gambling.

Bowlegs, who had gained his unpoetical sobriquet on account of his lower limbs, which had become almost circular through his infantile desire to run before he could crawl, laid his dagger on the carpet beside the golden piece.

“Nay! Not to-day. Fall the trouble will between the two who love each other as love the cat and dog, but not upon the tiger-cub’s day of festival—hist—she speaks.”

“And why shall I not ride the black mare?”

Zarah spoke slowly, clearly, whilst the Sheikh looked from the one to the other in grief and anxiety.

“Because she is in foal!”

It was a lie, the girl knew it was a lie, the Sheikh knew it was a lie, as he leaned forward and tried to catch her hand.

He was too late.

“Liar!” she screamed. “Accursed liar!” she screamed again, as she seized a heavy, cut-glass bowl and hurled it in Yussuf’s face, against which it smashed to pieces, cutting it to ribbons, a thousand needle-pointed splinters of glass putting out for ever the light of the wondrous eyes.

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*“The box went in search of the lid until it met with it.”—Arabic Proverb.*

The mistaken love of friends saved him, though would it have been far kinder to have let him close his blinded eyes in the last long sleep, from which he would perchance have wakened with a clearer vision and a better understanding.

“The will of Allah? Does our brother live or die? Speak quickly lest I pinch thy windpipe ’twixt thumb and finger.”

Some many days later the renowned herbalist procured from Huteh, in the Hareek Oasis, by the simple process of kidnapping, and brought, blindfolded, by swiftest camel to the curing of the sick man, looked up at Al-Asad, the gigantic Nubian.

“He lives,” replied the wizened old man, gently removing the Nubian’s slender fingers from about his scraggy throat. “But would have died long ere my advent if it had not been for the tender ministrations of yon woman Namlah and her son, smitten with dumbness.”

Al-Asad nodded as he looked to where Namlah, the busy, who had tended the sick man day and night, stretched out pieces of soft white muslin to dry, with the help of her son.

“Aye, verily has she a heart made for mothering. Two apples has she, one for each eye. Two sons, though which one she loves the most we do not know. The one who is gifted with speech and is slow of wit, or the dumb one with a mind like yonder sparkling water? Hey! Namlah! thou busy ant, wilt give thy boy to the herbalist so that he acquires much learning in medicine?”

Namlah clutched her dumb boy to her heart.

“I will kill him, or her, who takes one of mine from me!” she shrilled, taking off the amulet of good luck from about her own neck to hang it round her son’s.

“The jewels, the fair name, yea! even the eyes canst thou take from a woman, but her manchild, never!”

She spat in the direction of the dwelling where slept the girl upon whom she waited sometimes as body-woman, whereupon the Nubian laughed good-naturedly, bidding her keep a hold upon her tongue.

“Yea! but verily,” said the unsuspecting herbalist, “does the Sheikh’s daughter need a whip across her shoulders.”

“And thou thy tongue pulled forth by the roots!”

Al-Asad, who loved the Sheikh’s daughter with all the strength of his fierce nature, made an ineffectual grab at the terrified old man as he shot like a rabbit down the rocky path; then laughed and looked up to where the girl slept, and fell a-dreaming of the day when, now that Yussuf was out of the running, he might perchance, by right of force, step into the Sheikh’s shoes upon his death, to rule the leaderless men and to wed the fatherless daughter.

The wounds healed, the fever abated, yet for many days, feigning weakness, tended by the dumb youth whom he christened “His Eyes,” Yussuf lay planning revenge for his loss of sight.

Distraught with pain, unable to control his thoughts in the agony of his wounds, he finally decided to leave it to time, which did not mean that he murmured *Kismet* in the quiet watches of the everlasting night which had fallen upon him.

The Oriental submits uncomplainingly to sickness, misfortune and death, but he sees to it that his revenge is of his own fashioning and one that will, if possible, descend unto the furthest generation.

He left his sick bed a seemingly humble, repentant, and forgiving soul, blaming himself for the disaster and promising to make amends for past misdemeanour—seemingly; for not for one single moment of the dreary days and pain-filled, sleepless nights did the thought of revenge leave his tortured mind. Bereft of the joys of hunting and the daily thrills which make part of a marauder’s life, he

wandered by day, ever guarded by "His Eyes," around and about the buildings of the monastery and over the rocks amongst which they had been built; at night he lay, until the coming of the dawn he could not see, thinking, planning, discarding, to think and plan again.

The second sight of the blind, through touch and auditory nerve, came to him swiftly, until, at length, sure-footed as a goat, he passed where no other would have dared to place a foot; of a truth, there did not seem to be rock, or precipice, or height round, through, or over, which he could not lead one safely; nor human whom he could not designate by the sound of his, or her, footfall on sand or rock.

It approached the uncanny even in the blind, bringing with it a certain respect from others, who, thinking him possessed of a *djinn* or evil spirit of the desert, left him alone, with the exception of Mohammed-Abd and the half-caste Nubian, who loved him only one whit less than they loved the girl who had blinded him.

Refusing all aid, even that of "His Eyes," he passed days in discovering and establishing the exact position of the narrow path which stretched through the quicksands up to the foot of the mountain. Day after day, night after night, in the cool of sunrise or sunset, in the peace of star or moonlight, or in the noonday heat, he followed the edge of the quicksands upon his knees, feeling and digging, until one noon his slender fingers found that for which they searched. He turned his face to the sun, and, sure-footed as a goat, picked his way, step by step, backwards, feeling, feeling with his toes, across the quaking bog to the spear stuck fast between two rocks.

There he passed the blazing hours, registering the location of the path by the lay of the sun upon the rocks and his mutilated face; and never once, afterwards, did he fail by day to find his way, unaided, either going out or coming in, across the narrow way.

He crossed to the desert at night upon the back of either one or the other of the two animals he loved to ride, and which, with the help of "His Eyes" and much patience, he trained to negotiate the path without fear and without help of guiding hand or knee.

During the training, Lulah, spoilt and sensitive, had wellnigh lost her life more times than could be numbered; whereas Fahm, the black dromedary, ambled indifferently across the dangerous path as though its great, cushioned feet trod

the desert sands.

A magnificent beast, this black *hejeen* of Oman.

Brainless as a sheep, swift as the wind, as enduring as it was obstinate, it was worth the price of many blood-red rubies on account of its colour, and had fallen to Yussuf as his share of the spoil resultant upon a sanguinary and none too successful attack upon a caravan of camels belonging to the great Sheikh Hahmed, the Camel King.

And with it all he waited, patiently and with the Oriental's fatalism, throughout the years, for his revenge upon Zarah the Arabian.

Subtle, crafty, determined that by his hand alone should punishment fall upon her, he had argued with and beseeched the Sheikh and his fellow-men to spare her. Even upon the night of the disaster had he whispered, between the cut lips held together by the hour in Namlah's tender fingers—had whispered in urgent entreaty, until the men, crowding about his couch, thinking him crazed with fever, touched their foreheads as they looked at each other and made oath upon the beard of the Prophet to do so.

They had thought him crazed with fever then, thereafter they ever thought him slightly mad.

They would touch their foreheads when he spoke gently of the girl, and would shake their heads when he questioned them closely about the suitors who, afire with the tales of her beauty and her wealth, came themselves or sent emissaries laden with gifts, piled high on camel back, to ask her hand in marriage.

They thought him slightly mad, whereas, if they could but have seen into his sane and cunning mind, they would have understood that his interest in the girl's marriage had root in a great fear that he would so be cheated of his revenge.

But Zarah, exceeding proud of the European blood in her veins, had no wish to wed at an age when European girls were still at school, neither had she the slightest intention of becoming one of the four wives which Mohammed the Prophet in his wisdom, knowing the weakness of character and want of self-control in man, allotted unto the male sex. So that Yussuf sighed in relief as each suitor, blindfolded, was led back across the path by which, blindfolded, he had come, and, laden with gifts, set upon the homeward track.



Actively, he knew he could do nothing in revenge until Fate whispered in his ear, but in a hundred ways, a hundred times a day, he made the girl's life a burden to her.

He refused to cover his face, which was no fit sight for man or woman, and took to haunting her, craftily withal, so that it seemed that by mere chance his shadow fell so often upon the path she trod.

She had no escape from him.

If she passed in a crowd he picked out her footfall; when the place was full of the sound of the neighing of horses and the barking of dogs, he could hear her coming, and, quick and silent as a beast of prey, sliding, slipping, holding by his hands, would reach the spot where, knowing the turns and twists of every path, he knew that she must pass; he would stand or sit without movement, staring at her out of sightless orbits, whilst she, believing him ignorant of her presence, would pass swiftly, silently, with averted head and fingers spread against misfortune.

He stood close behind her in the shadows, wrapped in the Bedouin cloak, as she leaned on the wall watching the fight between the dogs, one of which had been accepted as a gift by the rejected suitor who, at that moment, made his adieux to the Sheikh in the Hall of Judgment.

In the depths of the girl's startling eyes shone a merciless light; an amused smile curved the beautiful, scarlet mouth; she clapped her hands covered in jewels, and, jogged by Fate, laughed aloud at the despair of the groom who had allowed the dogs to escape from the kennels.

Jaw locked in jaw, bleeding, exhausted, the dogs were fighting to the death, but they sprang apart when the sound of the girl's laughter was brought to them on the evening breeze and crouched, glaring upwards, ruffs on end, growling, the anger of the moment forgotten in their hatred of the woman.

Furious at the dogs' display of hatred in front of the attendant, consumed with a desire to punish them, Zarah turned to run up the steps leading to the Hall of Judgment where were stacked the weapons of defence.

"Thy spear!" she shouted to a youth who came towards her from the men's quarters.

She seized it from him and leapt upon the wall, standing straight and beautiful, her white draperies blown against her by the evening breeze. She paid no attention to the shouting of the groom; instead, she took careful aim and laughed as the spear, flashing like silver in the sun rays, sped downwards and buried itself in the flank of the greyhound which had been accepted as a gift by her father's guest.

Her vanity appeased, she turned away, neither did she look back as she mounted the steps to her own dwelling.

Had she but glanced over her shoulder she might have taken a warning from the terrible look of satisfaction on blind Yussuf's face.

“‘The little bird preens the breast, while the sportsman sets his net.’” He laughed to himself as he muttered the proverb, and passed on into the shadows and out of sight.

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## CHAPTER II

*“If thou wert to see my luck, thou wouldst trample it underfoot.”*—Arabic Proverb.

Insolently indifferent Zarah stood, some hours later, in the Hall of Judgment waiting for the verdict to be passed.

In outraging her father’s hospitality by killing the dog accepted as a gift by the guest beneath his roof, she had committed the one sin unforgivable to the Arab.

The hospitality of the Arab to-day is as great and as genuine as in the days of Ishmael and Joktan—of either the one or the other he is supposed to be the direct descendant.

Three days is the prescribed limit to the Arab’s bounteousness on behalf of the stranger within the gates, though, if the guest’s company prove agreeable it will doubtlessly be offered for a period extending over weeks, or months, or even years. In any case, however, the three days’ limit is never strictly adhered to, even if there be but little sympathy between host and guest, and once the latter has eaten an Arab’s salt he can count himself as absolutely safe for roof and sustenance, until courtesy or necessity bids him to move on. The Arab may hate the very sight of his guest and loathe his habits and disagree entirely with his views on life, but, whilst aching to see his back, will patiently bear with him and offer him of his best; he may be longing to know whence his guest came and whither he goes, but not a question will he ask if the stranger should not see fit to enlighten him as to his movements; and a traveller can most assuredly feel at ease about his precious life and belongings as long as he is under an Arab’s roof—as guest.

An Arab will give his life for you if you have broken bread with him, and under the same conditions he will not touch a button or a biscuit belonging to you, even though he may be wellnigh starving and dressed in rags himself.

The Emeer, or ruler, of one of the Wahhabee provinces had come in person, though secretly, to ask for the hand of the girl, the fame of whose beauty had been spread throughout the Peninsula by prisoners who had worked or paid their way back to freedom. He had not come straightforwardly, because, even in Arabia, the powers that be, however insignificant, do not openly deal with outlaws. His offer to include Zarah amongst his wives and to give her all that she might wish for—within reason—had been refused, not because he already had

three wives and various lesser lights of the harem, who were known to fight between themselves like cats, or because he was of middle age and inclined to rotundity, but just because Zarah already had everything she could wish for, within reason and without, and had no intention of marrying without love.

He had proffered his gifts and had accepted his host's in return, and his eyes had glistened at the sight of the slender beauty of the greyhound which, within an hour of his departure, had been killed by his host's daughter.

The Sheikh had many greyhounds; in fact, a pair had been substituted for the one killed, but that was not the point; the dead dog having been accepted had become the guest's property, therefore it had also become sacred in the eyes of the host and the host's family and servants.

The severest sentence, oftentimes that of death, is passed upon those who break the Arab's law of hospitality, so that Zarah stood, beautiful, insolent, alone, in the Hall of Judgment waiting to hear what punishment the two, so deeply wounded in their pride, would mete out to her.

And as she stood, knowing the power of her beauty, therefore fearing naught, she looked indolently round the room, once a monk's refectory, and thought in her greedy heart of how it would be decorated to enhance her power when once she reigned supreme.

The Sheikh's taste was rather primitive and inclined more to the useful than to the ornamental. Prisoners had worked upon the rock floor until the surface had been made smooth, and upon it had been thrown skins of the small, ferocious tiger, the panther, the Nejd wolf, and other wild beasts of the Peninsula, with rugs woven from camel's hair, patterned in different colours.

Great brass bowls, full of water, stood upon the thirty stools of stone, once used by the holy men as seats, now ranged against the walls upon which hung weapons of every sort, calibre and age, either honestly bought in towns or lifted in a raid. Lances or throwing spears, heavy and light, swords, knives, daggers ornamented with every conceivable device, and firearms of most genuine antiquity, even match-lock or flint-guns, which, however, should not be treated with contempt when in the hands of the Bedouin. He is a splendid marksman, no matter what the age of the weapon he may handle.

The Sheikh and his men were magnificently armed, wealth and craft having

procured them their hearts' delight in the shape of the most up-to-date rifles and revolvers, which they loved a good deal more than their wives and almost as much as their sons.

The two men sat on cushions upon a dais at the end of the hall, the guest, in the place of honour upon the Sheikh's left hand, looking down, perplexed, uneasy, at the beautiful girl who stood so superbly indifferent just below them.

She had dressed for the occasion.

A *Banian* or Indian merchant, taken prisoner one time, had introduced and taught the men's wives and daughters how to manipulate the *sari*. Zarah had learned from them and had acquired a knack of winding yards upon yards of stuff about her slender person, as far down as her ankles and back again to her lissom waist, where she stuffed the ends in. She had wrapped yards of some glittering, yellow material around her this day, tightly enough to outline her superb figure but not to impede her movements as she walked upon her toes and from her hips in a manner insolent beyond words. Her beautiful arms and neck were bare, her small feet shod in golden sandals; she wore no jewels and looked young and innocent and altogether harmless until she looked up and sideways into the guest's eyes.

She sighed a little and clasped her hands just above her heart of flint and looked down again, well content, believing that the love-stricken man would be on her side whatever punishment her outraged father should feel inclined to pass upon her in his terrible wrath.

"My heart is broken, my pride shattered, the law of my fathers' fathers set at naught by thee, O my daughter!" said the Sheikh quietly, as he sat, torn between a desire to pass the sentence of death upon the offender and a longing to spare the daughter he loved so much. "Know'st thou that if my men were to sit in judgment upon thee that they would drive thee out into the desert to die of hunger and thirst for what thou hast done to this my guest?"

Zarah bent her head and stood with hands clasped upon her breast, a figure of contrition; and it was as well the deluded men were unable to see the look in her eyes or the twitching of the fingers which were aching to steal to a very small but very workmanlike automatic she invariably carried in her girdle.

"I am at a loss, my daughter. I would not humiliate thee before my men, who

will one day serve under thy ruling because, as the proverb says, ‘Him who makes chaff of himself the cows will eat.’”

He paused as the guest murmured, “*El hamdoo l’illahy*,” which is the correct response to the proverb and is translated, “Thanks be to God, that is not *my* weakness.”

There was not a sound as Zarah stood watching the men, nor movement as the men watched her from under half-closed lids, the guest with thoughts of her beauty, the father with fear as to which way his tiger-daughter would spring.

“Never has a father been so outraged in his honour as I by thee, O Zarah; never has a guest been so outraged as mine in all the history of the race.” The Sheikh plucked at his beard as he spoke, a sure sign of anger, though his soft voice was not raised one tone by the wrath which surged within him. “I know not how my guest will look upon that which I am about to propose, nay! nor if I dare to darken the honour of his house by my proposition.”

He looked towards the Emeer, who looked back at him, then sat silent, watching the girl who swayed a little upon her feet like some golden lily in the wind.

“Wilt thou O my guest of whom I crave pardon for the insult put upon thee by my child,” said the Sheikh at last, “wilt thou take her now, bereft of all dignity, as wife, to serve their Excellencies thy wives as handmaiden until the stain upon her honour and my honour be wiped out?”

There was no doubt as in what direction the tiger-daughter would literally spring.

She sprang straight forward, eyes blazing, face distorted with rage, looking from one man to the other and back as, without waiting to see how the Emeer would take the suggestion, she flung a proverb of protest at him.

“Nay! Nay! Nay!” she screamed. “My meat and his meat cannot be cooked in the same pot!”

“Peace, daughter!” said the Sheikh sharply, “lest I drive thee myself out into the desert to die. All that is mine is my guest’s, my bread, my horses, my wealth and *thou*, if he will deign to look upon thee.”

He spoke with the Oriental’s habitual extravagance of speech, but under the

HE SPOKE WITH THE ORIENTAL'S HABITUAL EXTRAVAGANCE OF SPEECH, BUT, UNDER THE agony of the blow dealt his pride by his daughter, with the firm intention of giving all he possessed to the insulted man if by so doing he could obliterate the stain upon his own name. "Wilt have her, with jewels and horses and cattle and slaves, O my guest?"

The Emeer slowly shook his shaven turbaned head.

The offer was tempting indeed, but the brief insight into the girl's character, allied to the memory of the warring factions already established in his house, had decided him.

He was getting on in years, with a liking for peace, good food and long hours of sleep; his line was firmly established, his fortune big enough to buy or hire maidens for the song or the dance.

Why run the risk, he had argued to himself during the altercation between his host and the girl, of keeping a caged tiger which, in all probability, would maul the household if let loose, when tame cats, using their claws only upon each other, could be kept safely at large?

"'More just than a balance' art thou, O my brother" he quoted, stroking his beard, "but not for one thousand *woebe* filled with gold pieces and precious stones would I of her."

In her fury at the man's indifference and the insult to her beauty, Zarah brought her punishment upon herself.

"Thou wouldst not of *me*!" she stormed, as she stepped back and threw out her arms. "Of *me*! *Thou*, with thy beard thinning upon thy ageing face and thy person rounded as a mosque beneath thy belt." She laughed shrilly, looking like some trapped, wild beast, with her flashing yellow eyes and perfect teeth. "Look to thy black slaves for thy cooking, to thy withered wives for dance and song. I have the blood of the whites in me, I——"

"'Tis a pity," said the Emeer, making a gesture of resignation before the verbal storm which hurtled about his head. "Yea! 'tis a pity that thou dost not go to thy mother's people and so rid our race of one who does it no honour!"

"Ah!" softly exclaimed Sheikh Mohammed-Abd, as he let slip the rosary of Mecca between his fingers. "Well said, O my guest! Thou showest the way, thou



hold'st a torch to lighten my feet in the darkness; through thy words of wisdom shall peace fall upon my dwelling for a space and the whip upon the shoulders of she who has disgraced me."

The men sat silent, the amber mouthpieces of the *nagilehs* between their lips, whilst Zarah, utterly undaunted, filled in the time by smoking innumerable cigarettes with her back turned to the dais, which childish and uncontrolled action caused the Emeer to smile in his thinning beard.

The Arab delights in deliberation and procrastination, and it is wise to let him talk round and round his subject or, if it please him better, to sit for long moments, even to the length of an hour, communing with his thoughts.

"Yea," gently said the Sheikh at the end of twenty minutes' hard thinking, "it is ordained. Thou, Zarah, O my daughter, shalt go to the big school in Cairo where attend the daughters of the whites who sojourn for a while in Egypt, and there shalt thou learn the manners and customs of thy mother's people."

If he had proposed strangling the girl on the spot she could not have shown more horror.

"Thou wilt send me to Cairo," she cried, flinging round, "*me*, who must one day, even at thy death, rule in thy stead. Nay! Make not the sign against the evil day, for die thou *must*. Thou art mad, O my father, nearing thy dotage or distraught or sick of a fever. What can they do, these white folk, to make me more than I am? Can they enhance my beauty by their ugly raiment? Or teach me anything that I do not know about horses or the dance, or soften my voice by teaching me their language, which sounds like the hissing of snakes caught in a basket; can they?"

"Nay! they cannot!" indifferently replied the Sheikh, who was as easy to move as a pyramid once his mind was set upon a project. "But they can teach thee to eat even as did thy mother and less like a dog with a bone between its teeth; also can they drive home the duty of a daughter towards her father's guests. For two years shalt thou sojourn amongst the stranger, then will I marry thee to whomsoever I will, if perchance there be a man who will look with favour upon one who has so dishonoured the name of her father."

The Emeer, who was thoroughly enjoying the taming of the beautiful shrew, nodded his head in approval, whereupon the girl's hand slipped to her girdle. She was mad with rage, ripe for direst mischief, ready to kill through the

workings of her untutored mind, but she reckoned without the Sheikh, who had not ruled a band of outlaws for nothing.

As her hand slipped to her girdle he sprang, and, catching her by the wrist, flung her to the floor, wrenching the pistol from her fingers, whilst the Emeer sat unmoved, nodding his turbaned head.

She was on her feet in an instant, breathless, undaunted, magnificent in her fury.

“O *thou*,” she cried, “who thinkest that a woman can be quelled by threats. Thou canst not even keep me by thy side. I leave this place for ever to-night, taking with me the men who, in their youth and strength, love *me*, leaving thee the grey-beards and women and children. O! thou fool, thou *fool*!”

She turned and ran swiftly across the hall as the Sheikh clapped his hands; she stopped dead as two gigantic Abyssinian slaves suddenly appeared in the doorway to inquire their master’s bidding.

“Let loose the greyhounds for the night!” curtly commanded the Sheikh.

The slaves pressed the pink palms of their dusky hands against their foreheads and turned to go.

With a mighty effort Zarah played for her position as future ruler of the two servants, and won.

“Bring me first my body-women—here—at once!”

The two slaves stood like graven images for an infinitesimal fraction of a second, whilst she looked them full in the eyes, then they bowed to the very ground before her and departed—to do her bidding.

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## CHAPTER III

*“Suspicious, treacherous, remote from good works.”—Arabic Proverb.*

Neither storms of tears nor threats of suicide having proved potent enough to alter the Sheikh’s decision, Zarah, with as good a grace as she could muster, had acknowledged a temporary defeat and resigned herself to a visit of two years’ duration to the well-known school for young European ladies over the age of fifteen in Cairo.

The school, exclusive, expensive, was looked upon more as a home from home, where distracted mothers could deposit the offspring they had not had the sense to leave behind in cooler climes; as an establishment where angles could be rounded and manners polished rather than a seminary where such dull things as grammar and arithmetic could be learned.

The Misses Cruikshanks had spent the hours they should have passed in the *siesta* in threshing out the question of introducing a pupil of mixed parentage into the society of the pure-bred, if somewhat insipid, young women entrusted to their charge.

“We have made it our strictest rule, Jane. Europeans *only*!”

“We have, Amelia, and Maria Oporto, the dull little Portuguese, is almost as swarthy and dense as the new scullery-maid who is a mixture of Arab and Abyssinian!” had countered Jane, who kept the books and knew to a *piastre* what the new wing, with the gymnasium, was going to cost.

“We may lose our entire connexion if we break it, Jane.”

“Not if we emphasize the title of her maternal grandfather. Remember, he was a Spanish nobleman. Besides, look at the terms offered. No interference from the father, who is evidently a person of great position in Arabia, fees for two years which will come to as much, if not more, than the fees for all the pupils put together for three years, and extra for holidays if we will keep her with us.”

“Of course, we might make enough to buy a cottage in Cornwall and retire, if we took the plunge, Jane.”

“We might, if you think we could exchange *this* for east winds and grey skies.”

They had both turned and looked out through the open window to the intense blueness of the sky, the glare of the sun, and the green of the palms tossing in the light breeze.

The school stood in the European quarter, within a stone’s throw of the *Midan* where the young ladies, whose parents could afford the extra course in riding, exercised and worried their riding master’s patience and their mounts to fiddle-strings before breakfast twice a week.

All the joyous or irritating noises, according to your mood, of a big Egyptian city had come to the spinsters’ ears as they had sat, uncertain, weighing the pros and cons of the problem.

“If we break the rule just this once—and after all she is half Spanish—we might be able to go round the world before retiring,” had tempted Jane, who hadn’t the slightest intention of giving up work until she dropped dead between the shafts of enterprise.

“And I dare say she will be a dear, gentle, little soul, with big brown eyes and pretty ways,” had replied Amelia, surrendering unconditionally.

The “gentle little soul” swept down upon Jane and Amelia Cruikshanks like a tornado, leaving a trail of wreckage in her path.

She duly arrived at midday, on camelback, alone, surrounded by an armed escort, with half a dozen snarling dromedaries, laden with gifts, bringing up the rear.

A shouting, delighted crowd from the streets surged into the school grounds in the wake of the dromedaries, trampling down the sparse flowers and the cherished grass; the girls refused to move from the windows in response to the bell for tiffin, and screamed with delight when the boot-boy inadvertently opened the door of a cage containing six black and white monkeys and allowed them to escape into the house.

Having sworn some unprintable oaths and lain her whip smartly across the shoulders of the camel driver who had not shown himself over-deft in getting her camel’s legs tucked under, Zarah swept regally into the cool hall. She made a

startling picture in blazing magenta satin embroidered in gold, as she greeted the Misses Cruikshanks. They quaked visibly at the knee—at least Amelia did—whilst the armed escort, in concert with the school servants, packed the hall with bales of silk, boxes of sweetmeats, cages of birds, trays of jewels, and exquisite pots in brass and earthenware. Amelia trotted forward in greeting, and nearly swooned under the overpowering scent which emanated from the new pupil's raiment, whilst Jane eyed her from veiled head to dainty sandal and, being an infallible judge of character by dint of sheer practice, set her mouth. Her heart, heavy through the school-books which had shown a distinct deficit, had been considerably lightened when the Sheikh had paid her in advance half the fees due for the taming of his child; and she had not the slightest intention of refunding that thrice-blessed sum, even if she had to emulate Job for a period of two years, whilst breaking in the girl committed to her care.

“I'm here and I'm hungry!” said Zarah, in French, in response to Miss Amelia's greeting, who thereupon withdrew her hand with a hurt look in her gentle, blue eyes.

“Are you?” decisively replied Jane, who adored the sister she ruled. “Then you'd better come and join the other girls at tiffin after you've washed your hands.”

Zarah walked slowly across to the insignificant looking little woman, with the snap in the blue eyes and the kink in the reddish hair, and smiled.

“Behold! we are sisters in command. I rule men, you women. It will, I think, O Sister, rest with you if I stay or no!”

“You're staying!” flatly replied Jane Cruikshanks. “Come and wash your hands.”

“I wash them after food.”

“You wash them before, here. Come!”

Half a moment's hesitation and Zarah turned to follow the one person who was ultimately to win her respect, if not her affection.

“I will first command my men to depart.”

The girls hung out of every window, the servants peeked round the corners of the house. a still greater crowd collected to watch beautiful. disdainful Zarah

when she appeared at the door and raised her right hand as a sign of dismissal to the armed escort.

A firework display could hardly have been more entrancing to the native onlookers than the escort's departure.

With a shout the men flung themselves into their saddles, pulled their horses until they reared, fired a salvo of farewell, and tore through the gates like a cyclone, homeward bound; upon which Miss Amelia, who believed in doing her duty against the most appalling odds, trotted out to fetch the girl in.

"My dear!" she said sweetly, "I'm afraid the rice will be somewhat heavy if you delay much longer, oh! and look, they have forgotten the dromedaries!"

"They are a gift from the Sheikh, my father," replied Zarah, as she bent low before the astounded little school mistress. "To the honoured head of the house in which his daughter is to dwell!"

"Quite so, my dear, quite so. I'm delighted with the pets. Come with me!" replied Miss Amelia, who could always be depended upon to rise to any occasion, and who secretly returned thanks that the great Sheikh had not seen fit to send six oxen as well.

The heads of the house withdrew, after the usual introduction of the new pupil to the older ones had taken place and a little speech of welcome been made by Helen Raynor, the head of the school. She was the girls' ideal, before whose shrine they offered the incense of their girlish hero-worship, and was leaving next day to act as secretary to her grandfather who, an expert in the sinking of wells, was known all the world over as Egypt's Water Finder.

Zarah, accustomed to cushions on the floor, sat down uncomfortably on a chair at the end of the table and finally drew her feet up under her, to the delight of the girls who surreptitiously nudged each other until they met the reproachful eyes of Helen Raynor, their best-beloved and model in all things.

They gasped when Zarah, whose thoughts were anywhere but on the doings of the moment, took a handful of rice from the bowl passed down the line, and stuffed a fair quantity between her teeth with her jewelled, hennaed fingers, which she proceeded to wipe forthwith on the table-cloth; but when she made use of her beautiful teeth to tear the meat from the drumstick of the emaciated

fowl which followed the rice, then Maria Oporto, whose own methods of mastication were unduly audible and left much to be desired, burst into a peal of uncontrollable laughter.

The laughter did not last long, for the simple reason that, with unerring aim and almost as though she handled a loaded stick, Zarah flung the chicken bone full in Maria Oporto's swarthy face, hitting her straight across the mouth; whereupon, taking no notice of Helen Raynor, as lovely in her golden hair and blue eyes and exquisite skin as was Zarah in her dusky beauty, when she rose to quell the tumult which broke out at the table, Maria Oporto, in floods of tears, subsided on the floor.

"Girls!" Helen cried above the uproar that ensued, "do remember what is expected of us towards a new boarder, and play up for the courtesy of the house; at present, you are being simply vulgar." There fell a complete silence. "It's ten to one if any of us were lunching with the friends of our new companion that they would find our habits unusual, not to say strange."

She smiled across at Zarah, who sat sullenly, without a smile, victim of a sudden, violent jealousy of the other girl's charm and beauty and breeding.

Yet might all have gone well if Maria Oporto had not lifted her swarthy face, stained with a mixture of gravy and tears, above the edge of the table.

"Yes!" she shrilled at Zarah in execrable Spanish, "and it's a pity Helen Raynor's going away to-morrow or you might have learned how to behave from her. She's wonderful, and beautiful, and the dearest darling in the whole world, but you will never, never, *never* be anything like her, you couldn't, you're a savage, that's what you are, a *savage*!"

Followed a strangely dramatic scene.

Zarah, daughter of the desert, gifted with the Eastern's prophetic powers, rose slowly to her feet, gripping the back of her chair with one hand as she pointed at the English girl with the other.

"I do not know who you are, English girl," she said in French, "nor whence you came or where you go, but our paths have crossed at the place appointed by Fate, and they will cross and recross, and you will hold what I desire, and I will wrest it from you." Her great eyes, the colour of the desert sand, opened wide as she

leant forward in the shuttered room, staring far beyond Helen Raynor and far beyond the room and the garden wall outside, into the future. She spoke quietly, as though to herself, and the girls and Jane Cruikshanks, who stood unnoticed in the doorway, shivered slightly as they listened. "I know not what I have to learn from you unless it is pain, English girl; I know not what it is that you hold and I desire, for behold! I see myself upon the topmost peak of a high mountain and you as dust beneath my feet. And I see steps, and coming up the steps one who turns his face from me to you so that I see naught but a scar upon his forehead. I can see no more. I—I——"

She backed from the table and stood against the wall, unconsciously dramatic under the power of the gift of prophecy, which had come to her with her father's blood, then turned and left the room.

Jane Cruikshanks, who had never been known to miss an opportunity, immediately stepped forward and poured the cold water of common sense and reasoning upon the conflagration of immature romance which flared in the twenty young hearts around the dining-room table: explained and suggested things, until the girls declared themselves as only too willing to co-operate in the task of civilizing the new arrival.

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*"Sometimes love has been planted by one glance alone."*—Arabic Proverb.

It proved no easy matter.

Stifled in the narrow confines of the best bedroom, Zarah smashed the windows on the first night and plumped her mattress on the verandah, and, waking at dawn, as was her custom in her mountain home, sprang at the gardener, who gazed enraptured upon the sleeping beauty, causing him to fall backwards down the steps and twist an ankle; upon which disaster, and in an effort to stop his vociferous lamentations, she dashed into her bedroom, and, through the broken window, flung a bag of gold at him, which, catching him in the chest, caused him to forget the hurt to his ankle and to fall upon his knees with his face turned towards Mecca in thanksgiving for the unexpected stroke of good fortune.

Undisciplined, uncontrolled, miserable through want of occupation and interest in those about her, she simply refused to work or to obey in any way, until silver streaks appeared in Amelia Cruikshanks' mousey, scanty hair.



The first day after her arrival she flung her entire silken wardrobe on the ground and her magnificent jewellery on the top, and stamped on it all when the maid came to tidy the litter, then cursed the terrified menial until she fled the room and rushed to the distracted maiden sisters to give notice.

When Amelia Cruikshanks, greatly fearing, approached the new pupil with a cotton skirt and blouse and necessary under-garments, and gently intimated that they would become her better than the heavily embroidered silks and satins and jewellery she wore, she tore the offending articles to ribbons and wound herself from neck to heel in something scarlet and of a great daring. She boxed the servants' ears with one hand and loaded them with gifts with the other, until their time was fully occupied in running to give notice and running back to retract it. She smoked in bed and all over the house, and trailed into class heavily scented, laden with jewels, beautiful, arrogant, scornful, to sit cross-legged upon the floor watching the girls from under her heavily fringed lids. The third day after her arrival she lounged into the room where Signor Enrico was essaying to find a golden thread among a British damsel's throaty vocal chords, and, seizing a guitar from the wall, sang a passionate Arabian love song in her glorious contralto until the whole house crept to the door to listen and the professor tore his hair in rapture.

She sat up o' nights for the best part of the first week brooding upon the incident of the chicken bone and the insult with which Maria Oporto's derisive words had scorched her memory. So deeply did she resent the incident, for so long did she brood, that she ended by hating the very memory of Helen Raynor and her beauty and her influence over the house.

It is not wise to jest with the Arab, but it is absolutely fatal to hold him up to ridicule. He will revenge the pleasantry at his expense sooner or later, even if he has to wait for years or even a lifetime; even if he has to leave this world with the task unaccomplished, handing it down as a heritage to his children.

"*Savage!*" she said, as she watched the sunset on the first night of her arrival. "*Savage!* I will make that toad-faced daughter of a cross-eyed she-camel eat her words mixed with bitterness before we part. I will make them, all of them, the pale-faced daughters, the plank-bodied elders, the miserable servants, acknowledge *me* as queen in this barren dwelling before my two years of prison are spent. I will make them forget the English girl as though she had never been, and when I meet her again, the haughty, contemptuous, Helen Raynor-r-r, for it

is written that we shall meet, I will make her wish that death had smitten her before the crossing of our paths. By ——” She swore a mighty oath as the sun slipped behind the far horizon; she repeated it at every sunset, and she kept it, spurred to its fulfillment by Jane Cruikshanks, who tumbled to the one way of making the girl walk upon the road which stretched in the contrary direction to that primrose path of dalliance upon which she desired to travel.

“Wait, my dear Amelia!” Jane said at the end of the first two tempestuous months as she brushed her crisp hair, whilst Amelia voiced the desirability of returning the girl to her father. “She is learning slowly, but she is learning; I can see a difference already, although she *is* too proud to confess to room for improvement. When we find something to *really* interest her, *then* we shall be secure. I told her she was not quick enough to learn English. What is the result? She already speaks a few words. I tell her she is too clumsily built to wear European clothes. What do we see, or, rather, what do we not see? She wears a riding corset, many sizes too big for her it is true, but she wears it, also shoes with heels as high as the Great Pyramid. I repeat, we have but to find something that will really interest her and she will not want to leave us.”

The riding lessons proved the cure for the homesickness which overwhelmed the Sheikh’s daughter.

She went out one morning to watch the riding-master put six of the girls, and the hacks they rode more or less intelligently, through their paces, and stayed to make rings round the man and to terrify the girls by the marvellous stunts she performed on the master’s horse. She sent a courier for her own stallion, a pure white, pure bred Nejdee, to receive instead six mares which she presented to the Misses Cruikshanks as a gift from her father, with the intimation that he made himself responsible for their upkeep and stable fees.

She established a class of her own for special riding lessons, to which she invited a chosen few; she secretly trained the least gentle of the mares to buck and rear at the word “Oporto”; she lured Maria Oporto on to the beast’s back and put the girl through half an hour which nearly proved her end.

“It’s a pity you can’t stick on!” she cried scornfully when the Portuguese fell at her feet in a sitting position and with a most resounding thud. “You might learn to ride if you did. The mare’s wonderful and beautiful and the dearest darling in the world, but you’ll never, never, *never* ride, you couldn’t, you’re a sack of

potatoes, that's what you are, a sack of potatoes."

The first shoot of the poisonous weed of revenge rooted in her heart.

Little by little she changed outwardly, until Amelia and Jane Cruikshanks came to look upon her as one of their best pupils, plus a millionaire in the way of a father.

"How beautifully she sits, and walks, and behaves at table," said Amelia to Jane as they watched Zarah in the grounds one morning in the middle of her last term. "What a credit to us when she goes with the elder girls to a theatre or a dance. How attractive to the opposite sex——"

"And yet, how dignified, almost scornful!"

"How beautiful in her European clothes, and how sweetly obedient in wearing them and in only smoking three times a day, and then in the seclusion of her bedroom."

"Yes! But I am glad we allowed her to wear her native dress every morning when she rides by herself on the Midan before anyone is about. One cannot be too severe with an opening little heart like hers."

"We shall be simply lost without her—how quick she is in her studies—how generous——"

"Yes, indeed. Did you know that she found little Cissie Jenkins in tears this morning and gave her a silver bracelet and a big box of Turkish delight to comfort her?"

She hadn't.

She had struck the child for no cause whatever, in a sudden flash of the cruelty which had earned her her nickname, even amongst her father's savage followers, and which deep down, lay dormant, fierce and terrible, under the veneer of breeding with which the deluded little school-mistresses had plastered her. She had bribed the child to silence with gifts, whilst longing to strike the podgy little face again; she craved for the end of the term when she could tear the stifling European clothes from her, eat with her fingers, sit cross-legged, and smoke all day long if she so pleased.

One thing she had learned in her sojourn amongst the whites, which, for a time, was to enable her to establish herself as a very ruler of uncivilized men.

She had learnt the rudiments of self-control.

Where she had leapt blindly under the lash of her ungovernable temper, she now waited, giving her crafty brain time to work; where she had once stormed and raved, she now shrugged her shoulders and smiled with a “I will give you my answer later. I must have time to think.”

Admired for her beauty, envied for her brilliance, liked for the seemingly generous way in which she flung money to beggars and gifts to all and sundry, yet she had failed to take Helen Raynor’s place in the hearts of those who had known her, so that she cherished an incredible hatred for the girl who had done her no harm whatever.

She stood on the verandah this morning, an hour before breakfast, waiting for her syce to bring her mare, staring across the grounds towards the Midan where guests of the Hotel Savoy also waited for their horses; stared without seeing them or Fate crouching under the cactus hedge which separated the school grounds from the Midan.

She was almost at the zenith of her beauty, which, in the East, buds, blossoms, and fades almost in the passing of an hour; she was infinitely good to look upon, as thought the gardener who had gazed upon her the first night of her arrival, as he peered in admiration at her from behind a clump of shrubs this day—her last in the school if she had but known it.

She wore satin trousers so voluminous that they hung like a skirt when she did not move; a full short-sleeved chiffon vest under a black velvet bolero, sandals on her feet, a scarlet belt about her slim waist and an orange-coloured flower in her rebellious curls.

As she stood waiting, she idly compared the men who had come as suitors for her hand to her mountain home just over two years ago, with the European men she had met in her short excursions into the world under the wing of a schoolmate’s mother, stationed in Cairo.

She smiled and shrugged her shoulders and reached for a pomegranate into which, knowing herself to be alone, she drove her teeth in none too dainty a

manner.

“Love,” she said, as she laughed. “What have I, who will one day rule, to do with men? If love is to come to me, to me it will come. ‘Thy beloved is the object that thou lovest, were it even a monkey.’” She laughed again as she quoted the Arabian proverb. “*Kismet!* let love come to me, I will even conquer love!”

She spread her fingers against the Arab’s belief in the ill-luck of even numbers as a clock struck six, and ran to the top of the steps at the sound of shouting from the Midan.

Shouting and a scream and the thunder of a horse’s hoofs. She clapped her hands in delight at the sound, knowing that a horse, with the bit between its teeth, was heading straight for the cactus hedge and trouble; thrilled from head to foot, and ran down the steps towards the spot where, her desert-trained ear told her, the horse was making for; raised herself on tiptoe and laughed aloud at the sight of the terrified, riderless beast racing towards her.

“Blind and mad with fear,” she thought as she stood waiting.

Terror is just the one thing that will take a horse over a cactus hedge with its dagger points as strong as steel; on ordinary occasions you may use your spurs or your whip or try coaxing or deception, only to find that your horse will rear or plunge or roll or stand stock still, shaking with fear, rather than approach within yards of the deadly barrier.

Terrified by a newspaper which had been blown into its face by the breeze, Bustard, thoroughbred stallion and Ralph Trenchard’s favorite mount, had broken from his syce and made for the open, heedless of the prickly fence which stretched between the white thing that had jumped from the ground and struck him across the eyes, and liberty.

Tucking his hindquarters well under, he cleared the hedge with a inch to spare and landed magnificently by the side of the girl who, judging to a nicety the infinitesimal pause which follows a landing, caught the flowing mane and was into the saddle before the great beast had realized that a human was anywhere near. Shouts of “*Wah-wah!*” and “By gad! well done!” came from the Midan where the riders rode up to the hedge to see what was happening, whilst those girls who were advanced enough in their toilet tore from the school-house to

witness this fresh escapade of the Sheikh's daughter.

Recognizing the stallion as a Nejdee, which, being translated, means perfection in horseflesh, Zarah did not attempt to use the reins; she rode with her knees, talking soothingly, calling the beautiful beast by soft names in the language of his own country until, bit by bit, he slackened from the runaway gallop to a canter, a canter to a trot, then stopped dead a few yards away from the school gates.

Zarah looked over her shoulder and thrilled again; this time with a great desire to show her power over horses to the onlookers, but especially to her schoolmates, who seemed to think that life consisted of wearing the right clothes and eating from the end of a fork.

She turned Bustard and took him at a canter to the place in the hedge where the cactus was well hidden under a mass of creeper; she smiled when, scenting mischief, he danced sideways and shook his handsome head, and took him back over and over again, talking to him until at last he stood quite still and tried to nibble the nearest leaf. By the same token, if she had been by herself and wearing her golden spurs, she would have raked the satiny sides with the needle points until she had forced him over through sheer agony. Instead, aware of spectators, she took him back to the far side of the grounds, turned him, called to him, rode him at a thundering gallop at the hedge and lifted him magnificently over, failing to notice what looked like an overhanging branch, but was really a finger of Fate, which swept her out of the saddle and senseless into Ralph Trenchard's arms.

She opened her eyes and looked into the handsome face as he carried her across the grounds. "You," she said, raising her hand to touch a scar upon his forehead, then smiled at the stirring of love in her heart. "I knew you would come, for so it is written," she whispered, and relapsed into unconsciousness just as Jane Cruikshanks ran from the house, followed by a stately Bedouin, who had been sent by the dying Sheikh to fetch his daughter home.

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## CHAPTER IV

*“Him who goodness will not mend, evil will not mend.”—Arabic Proverb.*

Zarah stood at the point of the great V which cleft the outer ring of the mountains, and from which started the path leading down to the plateau.

That the dying Sheikh's daughter was expected there was no doubt, as showed the bonfires upon the mountain's highest peaks, streaking the purple, starlit sky with orange flames; yet, save for the Arab who stood patiently near the spear which marked the beginning of the hidden path, with the camels which had brought them safely and at full speed across the desert and the quicksands, there was neither sign of life nor shout of greeting nor firing of rifles in salutation.

She looked back across the limitless, billowing desert, showing under the stars like a great ocean of endless, unbroken waves frozen into immobility as they surged from north to south, by some magician's hand. She laughed softly at the thought of the civilization she had dropped, as one drops an outworn cloak from about the shoulders, and had left for ever upon the outskirts of the great desert of which she was the child. She looked ahead into the future and down the narrow path dividing her from the dying man, over whose kingdom in the heart of the mountains she would so shortly rule.

Giving no thought to her father in her utter selfishness, she laughed aloud in sheer delight at the picture conjured up by her ambition, laughed until the sweet, soft notes were flung against the rocks by the hot wind from the south and carried through the cleft down to the open space where they were thrown in echo, from this side to that side over the sparkling waters until they broke and were lost in the baying of the great dogs which, eyes red with hate and ruffs upstanding, fought to get out of the kennels so as to reach the woman they hated.

She shivered at the sound, although the hot wind from the south enfolded her like a blanket, and, suddenly overwhelmed with a desire to see some living creature in the place of death and shadows, took a quick step forward, then shrank behind a rock.

Upon a ledge, high up on the mountainside, to which it seemed that only a goat could possibly have climbed, sat blind Yussuf, singing to himself: “‘The corn passeth from hand to hand, but it cometh at last to the mill.’”

He sang the words of the proverb as he sat staring down at Zarah the Cruel as



though he had eyes in the scarred face with which to see her.

“It cometh at last to the mill! It cometh at last to the mill!”

He repeated the words over and over again whilst the rosary of Mecca slipped between his sensitive fingers, and the girl, steeped in the superstition of her race, spread hers in the gesture to ward off misfortune and touched an amulet of good luck which hung about her neck.

Did he know she was there? Had he come, ironically, to welcome her and to bid her hasten to her father’s side, as had bidden the man who had awaited her at Hulah with swiftest camels? Or had he, dire figure of ill omen, been set upon her path by Fate this night, when the scorching wind blew from the south heralding the storm? There was no time to ponder the question; there was only just time enough in which to register a vow to lay some cunning trap into which the blind man should set his feet and find his death as though by dire mischance. No! there was no time, for she suddenly fathomed the meaning of the intense silence and stillness, and, gathering her draperies about her, slipped as noiselessly as some tiger cat under the ledge upon which the blind man sat, and down the steep path.

She did not look up, she did not look back, else might she have seen the face of Yussuf the blind turned in her direction, with the scarred mouth twisted in a smile. She sped as quickly as the path would allow her, spurred by the thought of the men who, gathered round their dying chief, only waited for the failing heart to cease beating to acclaim one of themselves as his successor in her place.

She knew full well the man who would be chosen if she failed to reach her father in time. Even Al-Asad, half-caste, bloodthirsty, ambitious, as physically powerful as the lion after which he had been named, outcast from the Benoo-Harb tribe, but more through the fact that his father had been a Nubian slave than for the crimes he had committed in the light-heartedness of youth.

As she ran she conjured up a picture of the man who had taken blind Yussuf’s place at her father’s right hand and who had dared to look at her with something more than the respect due to the Sheikh’s daughter in his handsome eyes.

There was no sign of any man as she fled across the plateau, neither—the hour for sleep having come for the women and children—was there sound of life, but a great light shone through the barred windows of the Hall of Judgment far up on the mountainside. She raced up the steps and stood, breathless, in the doorway,

unseen by the men gathered about the man whom they loved and who lay dying of the wounds received in the last great fight with the Bedouins, who had fallen upon the brigands as they peacefully returned, with much spoil, from raiding a caravan journeying towards Oman.

Knowing the effect of mystery upon her race, she wrapped herself in her great white cloak, pulled the veils about her face and a yashmak beneath her eyes, which flashed with no soft light. She cursed beneath her breath when the men rose and spoke together, looking towards Al-Asad, who stared down at the Sheikh lying so quietly at his feet.

She had arrived too late; her father had died without blessing her and proclaiming her his successor.

She cared nothing about the blessing, but she knew that without the proclamation she stood no earthly chance against the claim Al-Asad would enforce through sheer brute force.

Superstition helped her in her need.

She believed that the soul lingered in the body for three days after the heart had ceased to beat, and she acted unhesitatingly, fearlessly, upon the belief.

She bent and picked up a lance lying upon the ground, and raised it above her head just as, without seeing her in the shadows, the men moved in a body towards Al-Asad.

She pitted her indomitable will against the mighty power of death, she flung it across the space which divided her from her father, and, for a fraction of time, pulled him back to the world he had loved exceeding well.

“Hail! father!” she shouted.

“Hail! father!” she shouted again as the men turned swiftly in her direction, then moved hastily backwards when the right hand of the man whom they supposed dead, moved.

Motionless from fear, they stared at, without recognizing, Zarah as she stood, tall and straight, in the shadows, wrapped in white from head to foot, her eyes half closed under the supreme effort she was making, her right hand raised, holding a spear ready for throwing

spear ready for throwing.

She bent a little forward as she made one last bid for power, and at the sonorousness of her voice, which sounded like the calling of the evil one in the mountains, the men touched the amulets around their necks.

“Hail! father!” she shouted once again, until her words seemed to beat like wings against the walls, which had been built by holy hands. “Speak, father, ere thou passeth on. Speak! Speak! Speak!”

Al-Asad, the lion-hearted, backed against the wall as the Sheikh, his feet upon the edge of the world to come, slowly turned his head towards his daughter; the others flung the end of their cloaks across their eyes, touching their amulets. The girl stood quite still, her face dead white, her nostrils pinched, her breath whistling between her closed teeth.

“Farewell, daughter. Rule wisely in my stead. Take only from those who have more than is necessary for life. Lift up the fallen, help the needy, spare not in charity towards my brother Yussuf, with whose safekeeping I charge thee lest evil befall thee. Throw thou the spear ere I close my eyes, as a sign that thou steppest into my shoes, O my daughter.”

The Sheikh’s words rang clear as a bell but as though from a long distance; his eyes did not waver as the spear, thrown with unerring aim, flashed across the room; he whispered “Mercedes,” and closed them for ever as it buried itself in the cushions at his feet.

Zarah the Cruel had triumphed for a moment over death, but she had caught the look of dismay on Al-Asad’s face and the stealthy movement of the men’s hands towards their cummerbunds. Without hesitating, with no intention of allowing a second to elapse before driving her victory home, she passed slowly up the room towards the dais, unarmed, fearless in the strength of her tremendous personality.

She took no notice of the men as, wrapped in her cloak and veils, she slowly ascended the steps of the dais and knelt to kiss her father; she looked down upon him for a moment, then taking a massive gold ring from the first finger of his right hand, slipped it on her own, and rose to her feet.

“’Tis she,” whispered Bowlegs. “’Tis Zarah the Cruel!”

“Nay, brother, it cannot be; she was a child bordering upon womanhood. This is a woman grown, who is as the gazelle in her walk and as the jasmine in her perfume. Maybe ’tis the spirit of her mother, who has come to meet her lord, or perchance——”

They stopped speaking, and took a step nearer the centre of the dais as Zarah played her trump card.

She dropped the veils from her head, the yashmak from before her face, and the cloak from her shoulders, standing revealed in the garments she had donned at Hulah in the oasis of Hareek.

She was ravenous from hunger and almost dead with fatigue, but she stood without a tremor, glittering from head to foot in the jewels which embroidered the voluminous orange-satin trousers, the golden, travel-stained sandals, and the bolero, which allowed the satin skin to show at the waist. Her face was white, her crimson mouth parted in a slight smile; her yellow eyes passed slowly from one face to the other and on to the next of those fierce, unscrupulous men, who watched her for a while and then, with all the inconstancy of the Arab, reverted, with the exception of Al-Asad, to their former allegiance as they succumbed to the call of her beauty.

A sudden, tremendous shout of reception and of welcome went up:

*“Ahlan wasahlan! Ahlan wasahlan!”*

They shouted the words over and over again, until the women and children wakened on the far side of the mountains and the birds, which inhabited the secluded spot, rose twittering and screaming in clouds, to be whirled this way and that way by the wind from the south, which seemed, in its suffocating heat, to have swept across the open mouth of hell.

Slowly Zarah the beautiful, the relentless, raised her right hand, upon which shone her father’s ring, above her head to quell the tumult, and, as a great silence fell, stretched it out to the men, who, with the exception of Al-Asad, rushed forward and, kneeling, touched her sandalled foot, acknowledging her as chief.

She had won.

There was no tenderness, no love, in her eyes as she looked down upon them,

neither was there softness in her heart as she looked into the future. She would rule the men with an iron hand and drive them with a whip of steel, favouring those who did her bidding, treading beneath her heel those who rebelled until she ground them in the dust. She would be their *hadeeyah*, the woman to lead them into battle, even as had led Ayesha, the wife of Mohammed, the Prophet of Allah, the one and only God; she would make the mountain home a corner of paradise and her dwelling a place of gold and precious stones, as a frame to her beauty.

“I stand in my father’s place, O men!” she cried. “I have taken the reigns of government from the Sheikh’s fingers, which are locked in those of death. Obey me and I will raise you to heights you—nay, not one of you—have dreamed of; rebel, and I will set your bodies upon the highest peak as food for vultures. I will go forth with you, lead you—nay, give ear until I have come to the end of my words, for I will not speak again. Yea! I will lead you forth and bring you back with gold and cattle and fair women, until the fame of these rocks is spread from the north to the south and from the east to the west. I will have none but the beautiful, none but the brave, about me to do my bidding. I——”

She stopped short at a sound from the far end of the hall and raised her head. Yussuf, blind, scarred, terrible to behold, stared back at her from the shadows of the door, challenging her proud statement with his empty orbits, repudiating her words without a sound or movement.

“... save for Yussuf the Blind,” she concluded slowly, as she raged inwardly at the man’s temerity, “whom I must needs take to my heart in obedience to my father’s dying wish.”

She gave no outward sign of the rage which swept her as she finished speaking, but she looked round for someone upon whom to vent her wrath and found him in Al-Asad, who leant against the wall, watching her from out the corner of his eyes.

“Thou!” she said, her voice cutting across the silence like a whip. “Whyfore standest thou when others kneel?”

“The lion does not flee before the gazelle!” replied Al-Asad, who had loved her from the first moment he had seen her.

Zarah made a little motion of her hand which brought the men to their feet, then

beckoned Al-Asad, who walked slowly towards her and into the trap she had set for him. She had more than one weapon in her armoury and more than one form of punishment in her mind.

That the man loved her, in his savage way, she had always known; that he had worked to succeed the dead Sheikh and thereby to force her into becoming his own woman if she wished to rule, she had guessed intuitively, and in a second of time had thought out a plan in which, through his humiliation, she could revenge herself for the insult.

She was well above medium height, but seemed small beside Al-Asad as he towered above her, mighty arms folded across his breast, looking down upon her beauty.

He was a magnificent animal, with all an animal's instincts and a dog's fidelity, but she feared him not a bit. She looked up at the handsome face with the almost negroid lips and into the flashing eyes and down into the heart, as childish as it was vain, and smiled and raised her hand when he made a quick step forward.

"I am footsore," she said softly. "I have cut my sandals upon the rocky path."

She may have heard the sharp intake of breath, but she took no notice when the men turned, the one to the other, as Al-Asad knelt. His fingers trembled in the tumult of his love for the beautiful woman as he unfastened the knotted ribbons of her sandals, his heart leapt as he bent and kissed the little foot, leaving his manhood in the dust beneath it. He sprang to his feet, holding the golden sandal against his breast, shrinking back against the wall at the men's laughter, in which the woman he loved joined.

"Neither does the gazelle fear the dead lion," she mocked as he fled from the hall out into the night and up to his dwelling upon the mountainside, where he flung himself full length upon the ground with the golden sandal against his lips.

"I love thee, love thee, love thee!" he whispered, "and will serve thee to my last hour and with all my strength. If I cannot be thy king, thy master, I will be thy slave. One day perchance, thou too wilt waken to love and learn what suffering means."

If he had but known, love had come to her, love for the white man, causing her to suffer through the chafe of the chains which bound her.

Zarah watched the great figure as he fled past blind Yussuf and through the doorway out into the night, then smiled, and stooping, lifted her cloak and spread it across the dead Sheikh.

“I will sleep in the bed of my fathers,” she said curtly. “Bring me meat and wine to my bedchamber. To-morrow I will commit my dead father to the sands and will then make choice, amongst the slaves, for those who will attend me both night and day. Obey me, and it will be well with all of you; resist me, and your lives will be even darker than this night of storm.”

The men, so long held upon the leash by the dead Sheikh, so long baffled in their fierce desires, shouted their praises as they made a way for her. She passed them without looking at them, glittering with jewels, superb in her strength.

She climbed the steps leading to the dwelling wherein her father had slept, and up to the roof, and, leaning on the balustrade, raised her face to the sky which showed sullen and starless.

Great sandstorms do not sweep the deserts of Arabia bringing devastation in their path, but the hot wind from the south will lift the topmost layer of sand hundreds of feet into the air, where it hangs like a pall across the heavens, causing men to hide their faces and cattle to flee for shelter from the terrific heat which descends from it, scorching the earth.

She walked to the corner of the roof from which, through the cleft in the rocks, the red sands of the desert could be seen stretching in great waves away to the south. She stared down and drew her hands across her eyes, and stared again; drew back with a half-uttered cry of fear, then moved forward, leaning far over the coping, looking down.

At the very edge of the quicksands and as far out across the great waste as eye could see, white shapes danced, and whirled, and bowed, retreating, advancing, whirling hand in hand, flinging their white raiment up to the sky, which hung, like a dun-coloured ceiling, low down above their caperings.

The scorching, sand-laden wind blew against her lips and through her hair and seemed to press like a great bar of red-hot iron against the satin skin which showed beneath her bodice, and yet she stood looking down, watching the light flicker this way and that way over the quicksands, and the ghostly forms running up in pairs, in ones, in twos, in files up and down and over the sand-waves until

they melted into the far distance.

She had heard the tale of the half-starved, half-witted, degenerate races which are supposed to inhabit the mysterious, unexplored depths of the great desert; living like lizards, worshipping the elements, inter-marrying until brain and body are sapped of strength, and for the first time she felt grateful for the ring of quaking sand which kept her safe from robbers, beasts, and such foul creatures as those which danced so merrily under the lowering sky.

She loved beauty, she loved strength, and watched with a shudder until the last white figure, leaping and bounding, had followed its fellows back to the unexplored regions of the desert, then knelt and bowed her beautiful head almost to the ground.

But she knelt before the scorching flames of the love which had sprung up in her heart for Ralph Trenchard as she had lain in his arms. Not for a day, nor for an hour of a day, had he been out of her thoughts since the morning of the accident. She lay awake at night thinking of the handsome face bent down to hers; she thrilled at the thought of his arms about her; she had thought of him unceasingly as she raced death to reach her father; she had sworn by the beard of the Prophet, which being a soulless woman she had no right to do, to bring him some day to her mountain home and for ever to her feet.

She stretched out her arms and called him by name, scorched by the hot wind which had twisted the sand into dancing shapes, sending them capering and leaping this way and that way, in the cross-eddies from the east, a ghostly phenomenon seen once in a lifetime, if that.

She ran to the side and looked out across the desert, which lay silent, foreboding, empty, and shivered under a sudden premonition of evil.

“Where are you?” she cried, beating her hands upon the burning stones. “Where are you? I love you, love you, love you, and I am calling you.”

There was no answer.

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At that very moment Ralph Trenchard rode into the holiday camp pitched by Helen Raynor and her grandfather—Egypt’s Water Finder. They had pitched it some fifty miles west of Ismailiah whilst they waited to start upon an expedition



into Arabia, which had for its object the discovery of water hidden in the heart of a range of mountains, as described upon vellum inscribed by the Holy Palladius.

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## CHAPTER V

*“A rose issues from thorns.”*—Arabic Proverb.

The desert looked like an immense mosque with vast purple dome inlaid with silvery stars, spread with a carpet of many colours—grey, amethyst, saffron, fawn—stretching to Eternity for the feet of worshippers to tread. It held the peace of great spaces and the prayer of the everlasting, and changed, in the twinkling of the stars, to the likeness of a fairy meadow, in which flowers of every shape nodded and curtsied and bowed to each other, as far as eye could see; flowers formed by the light breeze which twisted and turned the sand into little spirals, until the desert seemed covered with dancing, silvery poppies across which love came as silently, as unexpectedly as it comes in country lanes or the city’s crowded thoroughfares.

Helen Raynor looked over her shoulder towards the camp, pitched under the isolated palms which formed the so-called oasis, and smiled at the sound of her “boy’s” voice raised in what he termed a love song, but which had all the monotonous ring of a long-drawn-out litany of personal woes.

She sat on a hummock of sand, dazzlingly fair in the starlight, with a smile of content on her broad, humorous mouth, and the expectancy of youth in her great, blue eyes, whilst the golden sand trickled between her fingers as she counted the seconds of the hour in which love and adventure were to come to her.

She thought lazily of the hot-weather months just passed, spent quite happily in the big, old palace in Ismailiah bought by her grandfather who, in his wanderings in the desert, had acquired some of the attributes of the salamander and an unconscious thoughtlessness towards the well-being of his neighbour.

Unattracted by the little she knew of the world, she had been intensely grateful at the unconventional turn life had taken three years ago, inaugurating a new mode of existence with vista of unknown lands and good promise of great adventure. She had proved herself of the greatest assistance to her irascible grandfather. There was no doubt about it, that, although he seldom bit, he certainly barked furiously, or rather, yapped without ceasing, driving others almost frantic through the methodical working of a mind which teased the most infinitesimal detail to shreds, wore him to fiddle-strings, led him from success to success and

caused his secretaries one after the other to fold their tents and to steal away to less nerve-wracking fields of labour.

Since leaving school, Helen had firmly established herself as his secretary and had accompanied him wherever he had been sent by the Irrigation Department. She had made herself responsible for his creature comforts, which almost amounted to nil, and the good conduct of the staff which learned to adore her, with the exception of Pierre Lefort.

Half French, half native, he was of the worst type of Oriental. Eaten up with the vanity of the superficially educated, but with a genuine, great knowledge of the Arabian horse and the obstreperous camel, the young man had managed to make himself seemingly indispensable to Sir Richard on his expeditions. Helen became accustomed to great distances and solitude, and her eyes gained the steadfast look of those who look upon the sky as the roof of their dwelling, whilst her unfailing sense of humour invariably brought her safely through the most trying ordeals.

Diplomatically feeling her way through the barbed wire entanglement of her grandfather's testiness, she gained a great influence over the brilliant man and, knowing how he chafed against the authoritative methods and manner of the government official, had dropped the suggestion in his all-willing ear of taking a busman's holiday—a holiday expedition with the object of trying to find out the whereabouts of the legendary water in the great Red Desert, the discovery of which had become almost an obsession with him, since the day he had read the vellum inscribed by the Holy Palladius.

They had spent the hot-weather months in getting ready for the expedition, helped enthusiastically by every member of the staff excepting Pierre Lefort who, loving the dregs of the European society he frequented in the cities and the corners of the Bazaar to which he rightly belonged, had made use of every means in his power to frustrate their endeavours.

He had sworn to an epidemic amongst the camels and dromedaries in Arabia proper, which was causing them to die by hundreds; to an absolute dearth of camel drivers, owing to the terror the men had of the animals' disease; to the truth of the terrible tales that had lately come to hand of the activities of a notorious robber gang, led by a woman, which swooped down from nowhere upon unwary travellers; that, in consequence of this band of brigands, neither guide nor servant could be procured for love or money on the other side, and that

last, but not least, no man had ever been known to penetrate, even a little way, into the empty desert and to return alive.

Each of his objections had been met; the expedition, down to the smallest detail, carefully mapped out; the date for the start fixed and the camp pitched some fifty miles out of Ismailiah. Pierre Lefort would doubtlessly, if sullenly, have accompanied the party for the sake of the monetary gain, if he had not fallen a victim to the wiles of a dancer in the Bazaar.

Had ensued a heated scene between him and Sir Richard which had ended by the latter taking him by the collar of the coat and impelling him, none too gently, back upon the road towards Ismailiah.

Since then a week had passed, which Sir Richard had spent in racing, as fast as swiftest camel could take him, into Ismailiah, there to interview men with a knowledge of camels and horses, and racing back to tell his granddaughter of the blanks he had drawn.

There remained another fortnight in which to find someone endowed with camel and horse sense, and Helen had just fled the camp after a trying scene with her distracted and pessimistic relative.

“Grandads,” she had said, after the recital of the latest failure, “I have an idea, although it’s only a faint-hope kind of idea.”

“Well!” had snapped Grandads, who was ready to take his ships of the desert into almost any kind of a port to protect himself from the storm of failure which threatened to burst.

“I think you are making a great mountain out of your mole-hill.”

“Meaning?”

“Lefort. There *are* others who understand as much about horses as he does. I do—for one—almost—and so does Abdul, who did all the spadework under him. Let me be vet, with Abdul for head groom and——”

“Wh-a-a-t?” Sir Richard had sprung from his canvas chair with a bound which would have done credit to a *jerboa*, or kangaroo rat. “*You!* In charge of the horses—you—and what do you know of camels, may I ask?”

“As much, dearest, as anybody, which amounts to nothing. If it’s sick, it usually makes up its obstinate mind to die, so there’s no use worrying about *that*; if you want to get an extra hour of work out of it, you give it a most noisome lump of barley-meal and water, and add a cupful of whisky if you want to make it waltz; if you want it to go to the right, touch it on the left, and *vice versa*, and if it’s out on a non-stop run, hang your coat over its head to pull it up. It will go for six days in the summer and, I believe, ten in the winter without a drink, and is warranted to eat everything it comes across; in fact, I saw Mahli making breakfast off your oldest pair of night slippers this very morning.”

All that she had said was true. She was a magnificent horsewoman, and there was mighty little she did not know about horses; in fact, up to her fifteenth birthday she had unequally divided her time between her lessons and her horses, to the decided detriment of the former; then, upon the death of her mother, had entreated to be allowed to accompany her grandfather to Egypt. He, unpractical in everything that did not concern the finding of water in desert places, had consented, and, acting upon some motherly soul’s advice, offered directly they had arrived in Cairo, had pushed her promptly under the sheltering wings of the Misses Cruikshanks.

But she might as well have pleaded with the Great Pyramid this night of stars as she had sat, just outside the tent, with her beautiful head against the canvas whilst her distracted kinsman had figuratively rent his raiment in wrath.

“You!” he had cried. “What authority would *you* have over the pack of rascallions who look after the shameless beasts called camels, any one of which, in the eyes of the average Mohammedan, is of a hundred times more value than a woman? I know all about woman’s rights in England, but let me tell you that that means nothing, absolutely less than nothing out here, where she is not even allowed to possess a soul of her own, much less a vote. No! if I can’t find a man to fill the post, I will resign myself to having failed, throw up my position in the Irrigation Department, and take to bee-keeping in England.”

And Helen Raynor, who firmly believed that if a thing is to happen it happens, and that nothing can prevent it from happening, also *vice versa*, had ridden some miles out into the silence, where she had hobbled her mare and sat down upon the hummock to think things over. She sat facing the direction in which Ismailiah lay, sat quite still, until the peacefulness of the desert seemed to enfold her and to wipe out the memory of the past weeks, which had gone far to disturb

the tranquillity she so loved to bring into the daily life of the camp. She looked all round in utter content and lifted her face to the stars and listened to the great silence, unbroken now, even by the love song, then sat forward and stared in the direction of Ismailiah.

Great is the solitude of the desert, with no sign of life in it at all; haunting is its solitude when, in the far distance, a solitary figure moves slowly across the limitless sands.

It is the most perfect illustration of the little span of life granted each of us upon this earth.

Out of seeming nothing, remote, alone, the figure approaches, growing clearer and clearer to the watching eye; maybe for a space he stops and raises his head to the star-strewn sky, or maybe he passes on, heedless of God's thoughts about him; even if he stays it will be but for a brief second before he continues his journey, growing dimmer and dimmer until he passes out of sight, alone, into apparent nothingness.

Helen Raynor sat watching a solitary figure as it came slowly towards her from a far distance, and pressed her hand upon her heart, troubled by the biblical picture, the silence, the unknown.

So might Abraham have looked in his youth, or Job before affliction fell upon him, or Boaz, or David, for the desert has not changed since their days, nor has the camel learned to hasten its pace or to alter the insolence of its gait. The night breeze died away suddenly and the flowers born of it faded, leaving a path, marked in grey and silver as though the tide had but just receded from it, for the passage of the camel's feet, which were suddenly urged to a swift trot by its rider, who rode bare-headed and wrapped in a burnous.

When about a mile off Ralph Trenchard raised his hand above his head in salutation to the figure he could see sitting on the hummock, and urged his camel quicker still, then pulled it to a halt and sat and stared at the girl, who looked like some silver statue under the light of the stars; then slipped to the ground instead of bringing the beast to its knees, hobbled it, dropped the white cloak, and followed the beckoning finger of Love, whom he could not see for the beauty of the girl, along the path which had been marked for him to tread even before the days of Abraham.

And Helen Raynor rose and walked towards him, holding out her hand, so that they neared each other and met yet again, as those who truly love do meet down the ages, and will meet, until in perfect understanding they become one perfect spirit which will not be divided even by the short-lived dream of death.

“I seem to know you so well,” said Ralph Trenchard quietly.

“And I you. I have seen you—I recognize the scar across your temple.” Helen Raynor pressed her hand against her forehead in an effort to capture the elusive memory which had suddenly flitted through her mind. “I cannot remember. I \_\_\_\_\_”

“My name is Ralph Trenchard, and my business in Egypt one of pleasure. I was riding out into the desert to be alone at sunrise.”

She shook her head and looked about her and up to the stars and into the eyes of the man who had come to her out of the night, and yet not as a stranger; and she looked frankly at the lean, handsome face with the powerful jaw and humorous mouth, and smiled into the quiet grey eyes, and made a movement with her hand towards the oasis.

“I cannot remember where I have seen you, but will you not come to our camp and have some coffee? I would not keep you from your ride, but my grandfather will, I am sure, be delighted to meet you. I am——”

“Of course!” broke in Ralph Trenchard, as he stooped to remove the hobble from the mare, who danced sideways at the smell of camel which permeated the newcomer. “You must be Miss Raynor. Everybody is talking about the danger of the expedition you are starting out on; they don’t seem to see the other side, the privilege of searching for something which has been lost for centuries, the joy of adventuring into a new country.”

They walked across to the camel, which stretched its neck and made a vicious snap at the mare, who immediately retaliated by lashing out at the contemptuous face.

“Quiet, you brute!” said Ralph Trenchard, as he removed the hobble, whereupon the said brute turned its hideous head and winked at him in hearty friendliness. “There is one thing I really do pride myself upon, Miss Raynor, though perhaps I ought not to, as it may only be the result of a certain brotherhood in sheer mule-

headed obstinacy which I share with the quadruped.”

“And what is it?”

“The way I can manage camels. They seem absolutely to love me before my face, whatever they feel behind my back. I can do almost anything I like with them.”

Helen Raynor walked close up to him and laid her hand upon his sleeve.

“Tell me,” she said eagerly, “where are you going to after you leave Egypt?”

“Well, I have been trying to make up my mind. I’m just down from Oxford, and am having a look round the old places before settling down to manage the estate which came to me when the dear old governor died a few months ago. I was born out here, lived here until I was ten. My people were stationed out here all over the place. Mother is buried in Khartoum. I love the country, and speak the language like a native. I don’t mind much where I go, but I do wish I could have one jolly good adventure when I get there.”

“Come,” said Helen, her beautiful teeth flashing in a delighted smile, “I’m more convinced than ever that my grandfather will be delighted to meet you.”

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## CHAPTER VI

*“Neither with thine eyes hast thou seen, nor with thine heart hast thou loved.”—Arabic Proverb.*

Zarah the Cruel leaned back in her ivory chair, staring unseeingly at the men she ruled. She frowned and stretched her arms and played with the crystal knobs until her jewelled fingers looked like the claws of some great cat, whilst the men glanced at each other as they watched the movement which, they knew, heralded the conception of some new idea or plan in the girl’s masterly, unscrupulous brain.

She had reigned for a year in her father’s stead, and the tales of her cruelty, her infamy and treachery had spread from Damascus to Hadramut, from Oman to the Red Sea. In the days of her father the wealthy only had been in danger of the gang’s predatory attacks; the humbler caravan had been certain of a safe journey and a sure arrival at its destination; the needy, just as sure of help in money or in kind from the man who quietened his conscience by robbing the one to assist the other, whilst keeping the best part of the spoil for himself and his men.

His daughter attacked all and sundry, and as much for the love of the fight as in the hope of gain, meting out dire punishment to those who fought to the last, and, if taken prisoner, lacked deep enough purse or strong enough sinew to pay or work their way back to freedom.

With the exception of Yussuf the men obeyed her and literally fought for the place of honour at her right hand when she led them to the attack.

The whole Peninsula rang with the tales of the mysterious, beautiful woman of the desert. Women used her name as a bogey with which to frighten their children, men looked at each other before they spoke of their affairs and then said but little. Her spies were everywhere, from Damascus to Cairo, from Jiddah to Bagdad, watching the movements and learning the whereabouts of wealthy people. The cities made great effort to discover the channels through which the almost legendary woman gained her information, sending out spy to counter spy, with the result that some were found in the holes and corners of the Bazaars at dawn, knifed through the back, and others, who had been sent to find out the lay of the land round and about the Sanctuary, buried up to their necks in the sands,

dead, with the letter Z cut upon their foreheads.

With a view to spreading reports of her beauty, her riches, and her power, she allowed some of the prisoners to return to their homes without payment of ransom; others disappeared leaving no trace, whilst many, wholeheartedly, threw in their lot with the band, working as grooms to the horses and dogs, as tenders to the cattle, as servants or labourers, marrying the women who looked after the comforts of the strange community; all of them happy in a freedom they could not have realized elsewhere, yet terror-stricken by their mistress, who ordered the severest punishments for the most trifling mistake.

Built in terraces as had been the ancient monastery, the servants' quarters stretched up the eastern side of the mountains, hidden by the jutting wall of rock from the western side where Zarah lived, alone. The walls of the monastery remained, but the interior of the buildings had been changed out of all recognition. Where once her father had lived, with his friend Yussuf, in all the simplicity of those who belong to the desert, the girl lived in barbaric luxury, the presence of Yussuf the only cloud upon what seemed otherwise to be a clear horizon.

Of love she would have none.

Those who had succumbed to the tales of her beauty, her wealth and her power, and who were willing to risk much through greed, sent emissaries, laden with many gifts, to negotiate for her hand in marriage. They would be met far out in the desert, and, blindfolded, led across the quicksands and into the presence of the mysterious woman. She received them right royally, fêted them, laughed at them in secret, and sent them back to their masters, with her own gifts added to those she had rejected.

She did not attempt to conquer her love for Ralph Trenchard; she did not want to; she hugged close the pain it caused her pride, and had sent spies to Egypt in an endeavour to trace him. A report came that he had landed at Port Said. After that, silence.

She was thinking of him as she lay back in the chair watching the men, gathered at her command, in the Hall of Judgment. Upon the first of every three months she called a council, with the object of making plans for the months succeeding. Those of the men who could, hurried from every part of the Peninsula to the gathering. A week of festival invariably followed the great day, during which

sports were held and much wine drunk, in direct disobedience to the law laid down by Mohammed, the Prophet of Allah the one and only God. Those of the men who could not attend, and who were mostly those who had failed in the task set them, sent in reports of their work by safe messenger.

The spy who had reported the arrival of Ralph Trenchard at Port Said had not appeared in person, nor sent in further report, so that Zarah sat a prey to a great anger, which increased every moment under the goad of suspense and uncertainty, and craved for a victim upon which to vent herself.

The business of the hour, with its reports and reprimands, suggestions, punishments and rewards, had been concluded, and the men waited, eager to draw out a programme for the week of festival; they looked at their despotic ruler, raised above them on a dais, as she lay back in her chair sullenly regarding them out of half-closed eyes; they murmured amongst themselves but, under the spell of her beauty, murmured only.

She made an arresting Eastern picture outlined against an enormous fan of peacocks' feathers, which spread on each side and above her. It glowed vividly against the south wall of the hall, which had been covered in Byzantine gold leaf, outlined by an arabesque design carved out in rough lumps of turquoise matrix, agate, jasper, onyx, and different coloured marble.

Seven jewelled lamps, hanging above her head by golden chains, were reflected in the polished surface of the huge dais hewn out of one great block of black granite, up which she ascended by seven steps carved to represent seven crouching lions.

Skins of wild beasts were thrown upon a mosaic floor which replaced the rough stones laid down by the Holy Fathers. It had been set by skilled Italian workmen, taken prisoners as they returned from Bagdad, where they had been sent to set the famous mosaic floor in the house of the Eastern potentate, who is almost as famous as his flooring.

The Italians had won back their freedom by promising to outrival the beauty of this floor in Bagdad, and, having fulfilled the promise, had returned, laden with gifts and well content, to their own country. The pillars of palm trees had been removed and replaced by others of stone, inlaid roughly with uncut turquoise matrix, jasper and agate, which reflected the light of the jewelled lamps hanging

from the roof. The flat roof, which the dead Sheikh had considered good enough as a covering, had been removed and replaced by another, vaulted, painted the colour of the night sky and powdered with silvery stars. It showed misty, this night, above the smoke of torches held above their heads by thirty prisoners who stood upon the stools once used as seats by the Holy Fathers, pushed back against the walls hung with curtains of purple velvet.

Informed that one movement meant instant death, prisoners awaiting sentence would be ordered to hold lighted torches above their heads whilst the Arabian girl sat discussing the events of the day or merely idling away time watching the men wrestling or gambling, in which last pastime she frequently joined.

Men meant nothing to her, but her overwhelming vanity caused her to change her raiment many times a day and to smother herself in jewels.

This night her slender limbs showed through voluminous trousers made of some semi-transparent material, woven by her women slaves, and caught at the ankles by bands of gold inlaid with precious stones; her body, save for breast-plates blazing in jewels, was bare, and showed like white satin in the light of the torches and the lamps above her head; her hands glittered with precious stones, her arms were bare, and a broad gold band set in diamonds bound her head, confining the thick, red curls.

She sat alone, furious, tortured, her sandalled feet upon an ivory footstool, her strange eyes flashing from one side of the hall to the other in an endeavour to find an outlet for her wrath.

She scrutinized the twenty men and ten women of Damascus who had been captured on their way to Bagdad with a precious load of steel weapons, and smiled as she glanced from their leader, a fine old man with white hair and beard and flowing robes, to the girl, his granddaughter, at his side, and on to the young men and women who had gained a world-wide reputation through their work of inlaying steel with gold.

With the fear of death, the one for the other, they had stood throughout the whole evening, motionless, save when slaves replaced the burnt-out torches; but a shiver swept them, and a smile of satisfaction lit the faces of the men in the body of the hall when the old man swayed, then crashed to the ground with a cry.

Zarah sat upright, her eyes gleaming, her jewels flashing, whilst the men looked from her to the prostrate man and back.

“Get up!” she cried, too intent upon her enjoyment of the moment to notice that her enemy Yussuf had entered the hall, standing, a menacing figure, against the wall. “Get up!” she repeated, “lest I give orders to have thee thrown from the rocks so that thou standest for eternity upon thy head in the quicksands.”

A shout of laughter rang out at the words, and ceased as Zarah sprang up, white with rage.

The old man’s granddaughter, flinging her torch to the far end of the hall, where it fell at Yussuf’s feet, sprang to the floor and, kneeling, gathered the old man into her arms.

“He shall not be touched! He shall not be touched!” she cried, looking fearlessly up at Zarah, who stood at the edge of the dais, looking down. “Shameless art thou, woman, in thy cruelty! Shameless in thy nakedness! Shameless in all thy ways! If this old man, my father’s father, be thrown from the rocks, then thou must throw me also, for naught but death shall unclasp my arms from about him. Nay! thou shalt not touch him, thou shalt *not*, I say.”

She bent down over the old man as Zarah ran down the steps and caught her by the shoulder. The men gathered in a circle round the two women, watching the one who shook with rage and the other who looked up fearlessly, strong in her protecting love.

“Seize them, all of them!” commanded Zarah, “and——” She stopped dead and looked towards the door, through which a man came, running at full speed. Zarah turned and, mounting the steps, sat down in the ivory chair, holding up her hand until silence reigned.

“Hither,” she said curtly, and watched the spy, who had reported upon Ralph Trenchard’s doings, with no gentle look in her eyes as he hastened across the floor.

“’Tis well indeed, O my brother, that thou hasteneth thy feet at last. Perchance the delights of the great city prevented thee from keeping the hour of council to which thou wast summoned.”

The man flung himself upon his knees before the dais, then sprang to his feet.

“Thy servant tarried so as to bring good news.”

“Good news! ’Tis indeed well for thee that the news is good. Speak!”

“The white man with a scar upon his forehead is even now upon his way—here!”

“*Here!*”

“Yea! Here! He crosses the water in the company of another man, white, but of great age. They travel, O my mistress, they travel, O my brethren, in search of the miraculous water which, so ’tis said, is hidden in the heart of certain mountains in the Red Desert.”

Laughter rang out, in which Zarah joined, the sweet sound mingling with the men’s deep voices as they shouted grim suggestions and coarse pleasantries the one to the other.

Zarah leant forward, her eyes gleaming.

“They come alone, the two white men, in search of this miraculous water?”

“Nay, O mistress! They travel in a good company of men and camels, led by a woman——”

“Led by a *woman*! O my brethren, is there one of thee in need of a wife or yet another wife?”

Ribald laughter and obscene jest followed close upon her question.

“What is she like? this woman who dares lead men and camels across the empty desert.”

“She is as the heavens at sunrise when the light wraps the world in softest colouring. Her eyes are the blue of the night in which shines the morning star, her mouth as the sun-kissed pomegranate, her teeth as shimmering pearls. Her hair! The houris which wait in paradise to reward the faithful have not such hair as she. It is as the web of the spider gilded by the sunlight, as the corn glowing in the noonday sun, and, in its waywardness, twineth about the heart of men as a

child's fingers about the mother's breast."

The men secretly touched each other as they watched the effect of the man's words upon the woman who ruled them with no gentle hand. Thrones built upon a foundation of consideration towards others are rocky enough at any time, but there is absolutely no security for the monarch who uses his sceptre as a stick with which to drive his subjects.

Zarah sat back in her chair, too primitive in her love to try to hide the jealousy which consumed her.

"Who is she and what position does she hold in the expedition?"

"She rules men, O mistress, and is the granddaughter of the aged one."

"His name?"

"It taketh a twisted tongue, O mistress, to pronounce it. I have essayed and failed. He is a great Sheikh from *Inglistan*, the land where, 'tis said, the heavens drop water without ceasing. His men are well armed; his camels, over which devil-possessed animal the white man with a scar has a strange control, are of the best; his men content, and averse to speech with strangers. They have started; a great caravan awaits them at the port of Jiddah; I hastened by swiftest camel to bring thee the news."

Zarah sat silent for a moment, then called the names of six of her most trusted and unscrupulous followers, and sharply ordered the hall to be cleared for the space of one hour.

"And the Damascenes, mistress?" asked Al-Asad, who had mounted the dais at his mistress's call and stood, gigantic, powerful, behind her, ready to do her bidding.

Zarah frowned.

Jealousy might torture, but hope and an abnormal vanity lay as balm upon the wounds. She had no time for the trivial occupation of finding a punishment befitting the crime of the prisoners. She had called her six most trusted servants with a view to making plans for the capture of the entire party, headed by the beautiful woman with the unpronounceable name.

Time pressed.

Let her but make a prisoner of the white man who had held her in his arms, subject him to her wiles, her beauty, and surround him with all the evidence of her great wealth, then what would she have to fear of any woman where love was concerned!

“Al-Asad!”

He knelt and touched her foot.

“They beg their freedom, those thirty fools. Their freedom they shall have! Lead them safely over the path, then whip them out into the desert to find their way back across the road by which they came. The desert is free to all—to man as well as to beasts of prey and carrion birds. They have asked for liberty and naught else; bid them begone with empty hands.”

But there was no fear in the heart of the girl who had leapt to aid the old man when he fell; she ran forward to the very foot of the dais and called down curses upon the woman above her, cursed her until the hall rang with the terrible words and the superstitious men drew back in fear.

“... and thou shalt be driven into the desert, O woman without heart,” she ended, “and death shall find thee bereft of power and love. Thou shalt leave thy beauty to the jackals and the scorpions shall nest in thine eyes and thy hair.” A speck of foam appeared at the corners of her mouth as she prophesied with the vision of the East. “I see thee pursuing, I see thee pursued, I see dogs upon thy track, and one, whose light cometh from within to lighten his darkness, hard upon thy heels, hunting thee. I——”

She laughed shrilly, pointing at Zarah, who made a quick movement of the hand. Al-Asad sprang down and, seizing the girl by the throat, hurled her backwards, whilst the rest of the prisoners, with hope eternal to spur them, ran from one to the other, until at last, with the girl and the old man in the centre, they marched boldly from the hall, with the gigantic half-caste harrying them in the rear.

Whispered words fell upon the ears of Almana, the gentle Damascene, as she paused to allow those in front to pass through the door out into the night. She turned for a moment and looked up into Yussuf’s blinded face as he stood near her in the shadows.



“Put thy trust in Allah and hasten not. Journey westward and stop and wait. He will save thee and thine.”

He had caught the sound of the girl’s voice as she passed, encouraging the old man, and risked his life to tell her of the help that awaits those who put their trust in a higher power.

She whispered her thanks as she passed on, and in such wise did love come to Yussuf, the blind, and Almana, the Damascene.

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Zarah sat in council with all her men; the women and children and servants slept, so that there were no eyes to watch, nor ears to hear Yussuf as he passed silently amongst the rocks to the paddock where the camels were herded at night, hobbled or tied to posts to prevent them from fighting, as is the custom of the brutes when together in great numbers.

He passed his hands over the animals, choosing three, then crossed to a shed in which were piled the “*ghakeet*” and “*shedad*” the saddles used for riding or baggage camels, with water skins and sacks of dates, the emergency rations required by an Arab for a sudden journey.

Surely Allah, the one and only God, watched over him and listened to his prayers when, later, he walked unhesitatingly across the narrow path of rock, leading the first of three beasts, which followed, grumbling and snarling, but obediently, from fear, and guided them by the sound of voices to the Damascenes.

Almana ran to meet him when he rode towards them out of the night, and led him to her grandfather, who rose and blessed him.

“Come with us, my son, for surely yon place in the mountains is the dwelling-place of devils. Come with us to Damascus.”

“I will come one day when my task is accomplished, and that will be in the time appointed, O father,” replied Yussuf, raising his head and turning towards the East as the wind of dawn swept his face.

The Damascenes lifted their voices in prayer, calling down blessings upon him as he mounted his camel and rode away into the glory of the sunrise.

“How sad,” Almana whispered to her grandfather as they watched him moving swiftly towards the mountains, and “His Eyes” who rode to meet him. “How sad that he should be blind.”

“He is not blind, my daughter,” replied the old man, as he laid his hand upon her head. “There are those who see by the light of the soul, and, verily, our protector is numbered among them.”

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## CHAPTER VII

*“If the moon be with thee thou need’st not mind about the stars.”*—Arabic Proverb.

The desert is the cradle of love!

The love of God or the love of solitude, or the love which seeks its soul-mate and finds it, in the immensity of the sands. There is no room for doubt in the minds of those who love and who pass their days together in the desert’s great spaces. If the love is that which endureth, which floods cannot drown nor many waters quench, which looks ever towards the horizon where the light is born heralding the day, then will the desert be as a book filled with much wisdom; a book in which the handwriting is visible only to those who radiate the love which sees the mountain peak above the swirl of mist; the truth of the dream in which, blindly, we stumble and fall, until enlightenment comes to us so that we rise once more and reach the end of the road at last.

The desert is a background against which love blazes as a torch or shines with the glimmer of the rushlight; a journey into it either fills the mind with the wonder of God or overwhelms the traveller, when the novelty has passed, with a crushing sense of boredom; the sunset, the sunrise, and the stars are either the thoughts of the Creator, or merely a means by which to mark the passing of the endless hours; whilst the stillness, silence, and far horizon teach life’s wayfarers the stupendous lesson of Eternity or fill the gregarious globe-trotter with a deep longing for the noise and bustle of great cities.

For the westerner there are no half-way measures in the desert.

He may have been born in the glamour of the East and have lived the best part of his life with the vast stretches of sand around him, and yet have heard no voice calling in the noonday, nor seen the slender hand beckoning in the shadows of dawn and dusk. He may come from the counting-house upon holiday bent, with guide book in hand and passage booked for the return journey to the city, yet see the spirit of the desert, remote, mysterious, beckoning *him* out of all the merry, personally conducted crowd.

He will either follow the beckoning figure with hungry heart until he falls, to die, clutching at its robes which slip ever from between his fingers, or he will return to the counting-house to pass his life in a great longing which will never be appeased.

In either case, he will have answered the call of the desert to his own undoing.[\[1\]](#)

[\[1\]](#) Instances have been known where Europeans have ridden out into the desert upon seeing it for the first time, and have not been seen or heard of since.

Helen Raynor and Ralph Trenchard sat looking out across the Robaa-el-Khali, or Empty Desert, or the Red Desert, as it is called by the Arabs on account of the colour of its sands.

She sat with her hand in his, watching the strange effect the wind from the north has upon this desert, which rolls away to the horizon in great, sandy ridges, and of which no one has explored the heart. When this wind blows gently, it skims the surface of the great ridges and lifts the topmost layer of the sand, carrying it down into the hollows and up on to the crests for mile after mile, until the desert looks like an ocean of great, glittering billows surging towards the distant horizon.

“The sky seems to be covered with a transparent, diamond-encrusted veil,” whispered Helen, as she lifted her face to the moon, and smiled when the man she loved drew her to him and kissed her.

“It is the effect of the sand in the air, beloved,” he whispered, “under the moon which shines for all lovers.”

“Look at that wave out there”—she pointed to the east as she spoke—“breaking into spray. How wonderful—how wonderful it all is, Ra!”

“I expect a big rock lies just there, beloved, if we could only see it, so that the sand is blown against it and higher into the air. How I love the name you have given me, dearest; it seems to belong to the country where I found you waiting for me, all those months ago, alone, in the desert, under a moon like this.”

“I really expect it was the same moon, Ra; it is only we who have moved,” laughed Helen softly. “Yes, I think your nickname suits you; it’s strong, with the strength of dead Egypt, like you, with your tremendous will power which can even dominate the camel.”

They laughed as they talked of the long journey with its scenes and contretemps, during which Ralph Trenchard had had to exercise every bit of will power and every scrap of patience he possessed, so as to triumph over the splendid camels

which composed the caravan, and which had aroused admiration and no little jealousy in the hearts of the inhabitants of the different villages they had passed through, from the Port of Jiddah to Huth in the Oasis of Hareek.

“Do you remember when Mahli ate Grandad’s best tussore coat and pretended to die, and then, suddenly, got to her feet and rushed at you, because you offered Duria a whole lump of dates and took no notice of her in her tantrums?”

“Sheer jealousy and greed, sweetheart. I believe no woman who loved could be as jealous, or as vindictive, as a female camel in a rage. Look straight ahead, beloved; can you see something moving through the waves?”

Helen sat forward and stared due south.

“Yes, I think—I do. Yes, it looks like mounted men.” She shivered suddenly and turned and caught her lover by the arm. “Ra! I’m frightened.”

“Frightened! Dear heart, what at?”

“I don’t know—I don’t really know. I just felt a tremendous premonition of danger. Ah! look, they’ve gone. I wonder who they were? So near us, yet taking no notice of our big camp with its fires and its white tents.”

“Yes. I wonder!”

If only he had known it, they were the advance guard of a woman who was to show him that there is no jealousy or vindictiveness to equal that of a woman whose love is not returned.

They sat silently, looking out across the sandy ocean until they could no longer see the phantom figures moving eastwards in the far distance; then they talked of the journey behind them and the enterprise ahead.

To gain full control over the staff and, as much as is humanly possible, over the animals, Ralph Trenchard had preceded Sir Richard and his granddaughter, landing in Jiddah a month before them. Death by thirst, exhaustion or violence being a recognized risk to be taken by those who travel off the beaten track in Arabia, he had intensely disliked the idea of Helen Raynor accompanying the expedition; had argued the question; pointed out the dangers; emphasized the added responsibility her safekeeping would entail, insisting upon the intense discomfort she would have to endure. only to find himself un against the mule-

headed obstinacy for which Sir Richard was famous.

He had resigned himself to the inevitable at last and had discovered, after one week spent in the company of the camels and their drivers, that for nothing on earth would he undertake the excursion into the unknown, unless she took it with him, riding at his side. He knew that love had come to him that night when he had seen her sitting on a hummock of sand, alone in the desert under the moon; he knew that that love had come to possess him utterly when he had succumbed to the entreaties of Sir Richard to join the expedition; but he had not known how much he really loved her, or what she really meant to him, until he had been separated from her for weeks.

He had counted the days, the hours, the minutes, and then, jubilantly, thankfully, had rushed down to meet the boat Sir Richard had chartered, as she docked, and happy beyond telling, had started out on the foolhardy enterprise, with Helen at his side.

There is nothing so calculated to make life-long friends or sworn enemies of two people, as a long journey on camels and surrounded by camels. A trip into the desert on camelback for so much an hour, or day, is vastly romantic, causing you to feel one with Pharaoh or Queen Hatshepu, Abraham or Jezebel, according to your sex. It's ten to one you write an ode to the Sphinx or the Pyramids or the Voice of the Past as you sit on the sand, smoking your Simon Artz; it's certain that your camel driver tots up the different items of your toilet in an endeavour to hit upon the right amount of extra *baachseesch* he may extract from you, whilst wishing to goodness you'd get through with your foolishness and return to your comfortable, or otherwise, hotel; but it's an altogether different thing when you make part of a caravan composed of the ill-mannered, ill-natured brutes. No matter how well they are handled, or how far you ride apart from their odorous bodies, you will never be able to count upon a moment's peace as long as they are likely to panic for nothing, or fight for less, whilst filling the air with sounds that resemble the emptying of gigantic, narrow-necked bottles, nests of angry snakes, battalions of spitting cats, moans of incurable invalids and shrieks of insufferable children.

They lie down or get up or refuse to move just as their hateful fancy dictates; they follow obediently one behind another, if in a string, or peacefully together, if in a herd, then stop dead and look on indifferently, whilst one, for no apparent reason whatever, reduces the patience of its driver to shreds and its pack to bits.

Some drivers are cautious and hobble the lot at night, others take the risk and hobble the worst offenders; 'twere, however, wise to be cautious so as to prevent one, suddenly possessed of the devil, from either clearing for the open with the gifts you intend for your host upon its offensive back, or from lifting the flap of your tent in the still watches of the night and, whilst taking a survey of your heat-disturbed person, banqueting off your boots.

If your temper is not of the sort that can come out unruffled from ever-recurring and heated arguments with your companion and the distracted drivers; if your looks cannot withstand the long moments 'twixt heat of sand and sun and wrath, as you sit perched above the turmoil upon the back of your own thrice-accursed beast, then 'twere wise to give the desert an extremely wide berth. Lay down the law to your companion and he will learn to loathe the very sight of you; upbraid the long-suffering driver and he will league himself with the camel to spite you in every way; hit the camel so as to cause it pain, and you will never again feel any security about the welfare of your person. You won't recognize that camel one or five or ten years hence as you saunter through some Bazaar, but it will recognize you all right, and will meet its teeth in the tenderest portion of your anatomy it can find, or, if it gets the chance, will seize, worry, and throw you and deliver the *coup de grâce* of its long-awaited-for revenge by rolling upon you until you are an unrecognizable pulp.

Grin and bear with it all, and your servants and your camels, your companion and your days, will not appear so insufferably obnoxious or so outrageously long, in the land of the Pharaohs.

The caravan was a big one on account of the multitude of gifts Sir Richard carried, with which to buy peace, if not plenty, as it journeyed from Jiddah, skirting the territory sacred to the Holy City, down through the mountainous, fertile district of Taif and southwards along the Wady Dowasir, with its many villages, up to Hulah in the Oasis of Hareek, where commences the Great Desert.

It is wise not to reckon altogether on gifts and a smattering of the language and courtesy to get you safely to your destination in Arabia, but, as they will take you many miles upon your journey, they should be looked upon as the chief items on your list of necessities—especially the last.

Helen Raynor and the man she had learned to love in the distracting, ridiculous, mirth-provoking and aggravating incidents of the journey, laughed, as they looked back to the storms they had weathered safely through love and a perfect



sense of humour and comradeship, unwitting of the news about themselves which had been conveyed, in the mysterious manner of desert places, to Zarah the Cruel who had only waited to attack, with as much patience as she could muster, until the caravan should leave Hutah far behind and arrive at a certain spot between the Hareek mountains and those of the Jebel Akhaf.

The north wind dropped suddenly whilst they talked in whispers, and with it the veil of sand it had spread across the heavens, leaving the desert desolate and formidable under the light of the full moon, save where the camp fires flung red and orange flames and trails of smoke across the silvery sheen.

“Even the grains of sand are numbered, neither can a sparrow fall unless He knows it?” Helen quoted to herself as she stared out across the waste, then turned and put her hand in that of the man beside her who had been watching her and wondering at the anxious look upon her face.

“I feel crushed under a great weight of responsibility, Ra,” she said, speaking in a whisper induced by the fear that had suddenly fallen upon her at the sight of the phantoms in the distance. “I do wish I hadn’t suggested this hare-brained expedition to Grandad. I somehow never thought it would mean such a big undertaking and perhaps, after all, the water was only seen in a mirage by some exhausted pilgrims all those centuries ago.”

Fearful for her, Ralph Trenchard fully agreed in his heart, but contradicted her in an effort to reassure her.

“Oh! I don’t know, dearest. I don’t think you are in the least bit responsible. Your grandfather has been set on discovering this water ever since he read the document all those years ago, and if he hadn’t done it this year he would have done it later, and then I shouldn’t have been here to see you through, should I?”

“No, of course you wouldn’t!” replied the girl, as she looked up into the handsome face. “If we hadn’t pitched our camp just outside Ismailiah, which we shouldn’t have done if we had not been starting on this adventure, you and I would not have met.” She touched the scar on his temple as she spoke, the look of trouble deepening in her eyes. “You laughed at me when I told you about the scene we had with Zarah, the Arabian girl, at school, when she said she saw herself on a mountain peak and me in the dust at her feet and a man with a scar upon his temple, coming towards her. But, you see, she did meet you and

recognize you, and she came from somewhere about here, Ra, and I haven't been able to get her out of my thoughts since we left Huta. She hated me, Ra, *hated* me, and, as you know, I believe in the power of thought."

"So do I, beloved," said Ralph Trenchard, putting his arms round her and holding her very close to his heart. "But no bad thought, no hate, malice or revenge can get through real, pure, everlasting love. It can rage, and storm, and threaten outside and make a considerable noise and kick up a tremendous amount of dust, but *it can't touch the love inside a great fortress of trust.*"

He laughed to reassure her as he watched the troubled look in the big, blue eyes which shone like stars. "Not that I don't also rely upon my good right arm and trusty automatic when wandering in desert places. Besides, you must remember that she was fairly senseless when she dropped into my arms like an over-ripe plum from a tree, also, that the native is as crammed full of tricks as a monkey, and that I haven't set eyes on her since."

But the girl was not to be so easily pacified.

Gently submissive in the smaller events of everyday life, Helen Raynor invariably carried through any project she considered worth while, with a quiet determination which, when opposed, developed into sheer strength of will; also, she had never been known to back out of a task she had been set, however disagreeable.

"I can't agree with you, Ra. I can't help connecting her with the mysterious woman the men are continually talking about; the one who suddenly appears at the head of a gang of bandits, raids a caravan, and disappears as suddenly into the unknown. Of course, if I had known about this woman sooner nothing would have induced me to allow Grandad to undertake the trip. I'm not worrying about myself, but I *am* worrying about the two people I love most on earth, you and him." She shivered uncontrollably as she looked out at the far horizon. "I hate this place, and if he wasn't so terribly obstinate I'd make him turn back, even now. What is the finding of hidden water in a desert compared with the lives of those I love so much?"

Ralph Trenchard rose and stretched his hands out to her.

"You are tired, darling, you do too much for our comfort, you never seem to rest, and I don't like you sitting here without a wrap. It's hot enough, goodness

knows, but the wind from the north is not to be trifled with.”

“Yes, I noticed that the men had their mouths covered after sunset. Let’s go and talk to Grandad, the darling is worrying himself to death because we got half a mile off our course to-day.” She looked up at Ralph Trenchard. “How tall you are, how strong you look, Ra, I don’t think any harm can come to me whilst you are near.”

He leaned and took her hands and pulled her up beside him. He stood over six feet; she was well above the medium height, with her head well set upon splendid shoulders. They seemed the embodiment of strength, with their steady eyes, and quiet movements, and soft voices, as they stood hand in hand alone under the great moon, little knowing that they would shortly be called upon to make use of every atom of physical and mental strength they possessed, so as to win through the terrible days ahead.

“I am strong, beloved, and so are you, and together we will overcome every difficulty in our path.”

“Together,” said Helen softly; “yes, together we cannot fail, and even if we were separated for a time we should still be together. Mentally and spiritually we are so *one* that no one and nothing can ever separate the real us. I—what’s that?”

There had come the sharp report of a rifle from some spot far ahead of them in the desert, followed immediately by the sound of a great disturbance in the camp.

“Excellency! hasten thy footsteps,” cried a camel driver who ran to meet them as they hurried towards the camp. “*Eblis*, the black devil, has possessed the senses of his offspring, the camels. Hobbled, they essay to flee back upon the path by which they have come; fallen, they fight where they lay until the ground is not a fit sight for the eyes of our lady. Hasten, Excellency; our master, full of wrath, calleth his Excellency’s name, with much groaning of spirit.”

“My God!” exclaimed Ralph Trenchard a few minutes later as he stood looking at the camels. “How ghastly!”

To rest both man and beast the camp had been pitched for a week near a well sunk many years ago by Arabs, beneath a clump of palm trees which, in its isolated fertility, they had recognized as the sure sign of water somewhere

beneath the surface.

The camels had been unloaded so that the packs could be more evenly distributed and their backs attended to before starting on the last and most trying lap of the expedition; they had lain contentedly sprawling, or had stood as contentedly ruminating, as near the brackish well as they could get, until fear had swept through the whole herd.

There is no explaining the fear which at any moment, in any place, will suddenly grip this most unimaginative and most stupid of all beasts. In the middle of a crowded thoroughfare, as when alone in the empty desert, it will stop for no reason whatever and begin to shiver, with head outstretched, eyes rolling, and forelegs planted wide as though to resist the onslaught of some unseen enemy.

It is of no avail to kick or beat the terror-stricken creature, and for the following reason it is most unwise to approach too near its formidable mouth. It will stand and shiver until it comes to wellnigh dropping to its knees, and then, with a sudden quick movement of the long neck, will snap at something only visible to its eyes. The fear then passes, and, demoniacal rage filling the vacuum created by the passing of its fear, it will turn and savage the nearest object at hand, be it man or fellow-beast or inanimate substance, until, its wrath appeased, it proceeds calmly, indifferently upon its contemptuous way.

“Excellency! Excellency!” wailed Abdul, whose garments hung in shreds. “Something which neither I nor my brethren could see walked amongst them an hour ago. They became convulsed with fear of the unknown, Excellency, and shook in their terror, until some fell to the ground, and, being bound, remained there foaming at the mouth. Then, at the sound of firing, *Eblis* the devil entered their black hearts, and they fought, all of them, those that lay upon the ground biting at the dust, those that stood tearing the hair and flesh from each other’s back until the place runs with blood, as your Excellency sees. I have done my best, but neither I nor my brethren will take another step into this desert, which is the abiding place of all evil.”

“I don’t blame them,” said Ralph Trenchard to himself, when, having given orders for the tending of the wounded beasts, he went to report the mutiny to Sir Richard.

“They won’t stir another yard, sir! at least, not forward, so we shall have to retrace our steps.”

He rejoiced in his heart at the turn things had taken, without reckoning with the old man's wall-headed obstinacy or the cupidity of the native.

"Nonsense!" replied Sir Richard tersely, as he stalked off towards the mutineers, to return triumphantly ten minutes later.

"We start when I said we'd start, my boy, in two days' time, if the weather clears and the camels are fit," he said as he entered his tent. "I've doubled their pay. Good night."

Ralph Trenchard walked to his own tent and beckoned Abdul.

"... we are poor, very poor, Excellency," the latter said, concluding his apologia. "We could not withstand the money."

"Well, I'm sorry you gave in, on account of her Excellency your mistress, but it can't be helped. Tell me—what did that rifle shot mean?"

Abdul spread his fingers to avert evil as he whispered:

"That was a mistake, Excellency, on the part of those whose eyes watch us from afar."

"Whose eyes?"

"Perchance those of the woman of mystery, of crime, of death."

Ralph Trenchard looked over his shoulder towards the tent of the woman he loved, then back at the man.

"Tell the men to have their rifles ready, I am coming to inspect them," he said abruptly, then turned away and stood looking out across the desert.

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## CHAPTER VIII

*“A person sat demanding from God the rise of morn—when morn rose he became blind.”—Arabic Proverb.*

“I wish the stars could be seen,” Sir Richard said irritably, three nights later, as he looked up at the sky, across which hung a heavy purple cloud. Due to the intense heat, it obliterated the stars, thereby trying the patience of the old man to the uttermost. “This delay is simply abominable. To think, just to think, that this wind has been blowing for nearly a week, clouding the sky and blotting out the stars—the stars by which, if they could have been seen, I could have proved, absolutely proved, that we are camped upon the exact spot, between the mountains of Hareek and the Jebel Akhaf, from where the Holy Fathers turned due south. We could have followed in their footsteps, started to-night; think of it, could have started to-night, if only this wind hadn’t blown. What? Try to find out what the firing meant the other night? Nonsense, man, nonsense! We don’t want to go over all that again. Some Arab, a solitary one. Sound carries for miles, miles in the desert, the slightest sound. If you let a pin drop it could be almost heard in Hulah. Absurd! The thing to do is to get *on*.” He spread out, with an angry slap, the copy he had made of the vellum inscribed by the Holy Palladius, and read out the Latin words by the light of an electric torch. “It absolutely tallies,” he cried enthusiastically. “You see, ab-so-lutely tallies! Another week, perhaps a little less, perhaps a little more, and we should see the Sanctuary before us, if we could only start!”

“But, Grandad,” interrupted Helen, who sat fanning herself with her topee in an endeavour to bear with the terrible heat, which had encircled her eyes with deep violet shadows and caused her collar bones to show with undue prominence. “How can you be sure that that range of mountains is the one in which the water is hidden? It seems to me to be too near the beginning of the desert not to have been discovered before, if it is. In fact, Abdul told me that his own brother had been within five miles of it.”

“And why, when so close, did he not go closer still?”

“Because of the great barrier of evil the bad spirits, which live in the mountains, have built to keep people away.”

“Exactly,” said the old man triumphantly. “We are not going to break new ground, my dear child; we are going to break through the barrier of superstition erected by the Arabs themselves, and which *alone* has kept them from the water of which they stand so badly in need in this terrible spot.”

“It is rather appalling, I must say, without the camp fires,” said Ralph Trenchard, who, in shorts and a silk shirt, wrestled unceasingly with insects of all sizes and shapes which flew and crawled about them, attracted by the light of the torch.

“However did those poor beggars get through without oils of lavender and lemon, kerosene and smoke of sulphur to protect them from these brutes?” He speared a spider as he spoke and flung it into the night, then took Helen’s hand in both of his. “Why not turn in, dearest? You look tired out, and we can’t move until the stars come out, either late to-night or to-morrow night.”

She shook her head as she looked first at the sullen sky, then at the huddled figures of the Arabs, sitting with their heads buried in their burnous, and at the camels lying with their muzzles hidden in each other’s sides. She put her finger to her lips and shook her head again, as she glanced at her grandfather poring over the map, then at the sentries who paced the four sides of the rough square.

The square was small and compact, with their Excellencies’ tents in the middle, and the camels so stabled that there could be no confusion between them and their drivers if danger should arise. To mark the four sides of the square a tent had been pitched at each angle. In the shadow of the one to the south a man lay with his ear to the ground. He lay like one asleep or dead until the sentry turned, when he crawled upon his belly back to the lines where, with the help of two others such as he, he unhobbled certain camels and fastened them together by means of long leather thongs buckled above the knee of the right forelegs, then let them loose. It is an invention of Satan himself to create confusion in a herd of camels, and has never been known to fail in the annals of the turbulent Peninsula.

“Yes, why don’t you go and get some sleep, child?” said Sir Richard, who paid no attention to the passing of the hours himself, having acquired the Oriental’s gift of falling asleep when and where he wished. “Two o’clock already! Dear me! How quickly time does pass when one is pleasantly occupied!” He evicted something that crawled from the vicinity of his neck and patted his granddaughter’s hand. “There’ll be plenty of time for love-making, little one,

when we get back to east winds and frosts, so run along and take off your boots and comb your hair and wheedle a basinful of water from Hassin. I don't know what I should have done without you, and I'm glad to think that there is a man *almost* good enough to look after you. Ah! I thought so. We're in for a thunderstorm. That accounts for the sky and this oppressiveness."

He turned and looked due south, childishly pleased that he had caught the distant rumbling before the others; then looked up at Ralph Trenchard, who had leapt to his feet, jerking Helen up beside him.

"Do you hear it now? Of course, the storm may pass us by."

"The storm's not going to pass us by!" answered Ralph Trenchard sharply. "That sound has nothing to do with thunder; it's the sound of horses galloping on sand. Remember I did my bit in Egypt and know what I'm talking about, and they're not far off either. Take Helen to your tent and stay there, so that I can know where you are. Don't leave it. Quick! Oh, damn the fool!"

A sentry had fired into the pitchy darkness.

The Arab is inclined to impulsiveness with firearms when left to himself, but he is a born fighter and a magnificent fighter when properly armed and led. He will fight to the death for a cause, for a bet, for nothing at all; he loves fighting, and does not own himself beaten until death overtakes him or he is rendered incapable of movement through wounds.

The camp seethed.

Now that the danger was upon them the men were in high fettle at the prospect of a fight. If they died—well, *kismet*! It would be because their hour had come. If they lived, the great English Sheikh would reward them bounteously for having so well defended her Excellency their mistress. They were well armed, the ammunition plentiful, and the young English Sheikh a man among men to lead them into battle. So they yelled in response to the yelling of the distant enemy, and loosened their knives and examined their rifles whilst calling upon the Prophet to allow the battle to be long and bloody and the reward great.

The camp had not been caught unprepared, and all might have gone exceeding well if it had not been for the half-dozen camels which the spies had fastened together with leather thongs. Panic-stricken, they rushed amongst the others



standing helpless on account of the hobbles, entangling them, binding them one to the other as they fought to get free.

“Rifle all right, darling? And yours, sir?”

Ralph Trenchard paused for an instant at the tent, then ran to take his place amongst the men who watched the magnificent picture before them, withholding their fire by his orders.

A torch flared suddenly in the far distance, and another, and yet another, until a line of orange flame swept across the sky towards the camp, rising and falling at regular intervals as though borne upon the crest of some gigantic wave.

From underneath the flaming line came the thunder of many hoofs and the shouting of many men, invisible in the darkness. Then showed dimly the shape of a white horse ridden by a woman, and behind her horses and men sweeping down to the attack.

Glittering from head to foot with jewels, shouting with her men, Zarah the Cruel, the mysterious woman of the desert, rode her favourite stallion native-wise, guiding him with her knees, ripping his satiny sides with golden spur to keep him a length ahead of those she led.

*“Ista’jil! Zarah! Ista’jil! Zarah!”*

The men shouted the battle-cry and the Arabian’s name unceasingly as they drove their horses at full gallop over the billows of sand, holding aloft their throwing spears, upon the points of which lighted torches flared. Little cared she that the line of light made a splendid target for the enemy hidden in the darkness; little cared she what happened to those around her so long as tales of mystery and power about her were carried throughout the Peninsula, across to Egypt, and up to Turkey and far away to India.

She raised her spear when a volley from the camp brought men and horses crashing to the ground, and turning to Al-Asad, who rode at her right hand, shouted an order, which he repeated, whilst the men yelled *“Wah! Wah!”* as they raised their spears and whirled them above their heads, until the sky seemed full of great circles of fire and the earth possessed of demons.

There came the crash of a second volley from the camp just as Al-Asad raised his hand, and the spears, with flaming torch upon the points, flashed like meteors

his hand, and the spears, with flaming torch upon the points, flashed like meteors in a semicircle through the air, to fall in the centre of the camp.

“They surround us, Excellency!” shouted Abdul, who had left the screaming, fighting camels to their fate so as to stand by the side of the white man he had learned to love and respect during the long weeks they had passed together. “Watch her, that thrice accursed daughter of pigs; she makes the point from which her men deploy.”

As the men spread out on each side of her Zarah reined the stallion in, holding him, rearing and plunging, upon one spot, seemingly indifferent to the bullets which rained about her, spitting up the sand at the animal’s feet, bringing her men and her horses to the ground. She laughed aloud and raised her spear twice above her head as the tent to the north caught fire, lighting up the smallest detail of the inferno. In the fire and the smoke caused by the torches falling amongst the packs and tents Ralph Trenchard and his men worked like demons to loosen the great water skins, whilst the camels shrieked and fought and tore at each other in their agony, as the spears hurled by the enemy were buried in their sides or in the ground, or in the breasts of the Arabs who fought so desperately for life.

“Have they no rifles?” yelled Trenchard.

“Yea, verily! But the daughter of swine would take the white people alive for ransom,” yelled back Abdul. “We are surrounded, Excellency. To the glory of Allah we die fighting.”

Trenchard gave one quick look over his shoulder towards the tent where, outlined against the light of the fire, Sir Richard and Helen stood shoulder to shoulder with smoking rifles in their hands. “Fire!” he shouted, as Zarah raised her spear and threw it with unerring aim.

“Out knives and fight to the death!”

He yelled the order which transports the Arab to the seventh heaven of delight as the spear buried itself in Sir Richard’s gallant old heart, and the enemy moved suddenly and swiftly down upon them.

“Fall back and give no quarter!” he shouted again, unwitting in the din and turmoil of a party of Bedouins which, attracted by the red glow in the sky and the sound of firing, raced towards the scene of battle from the west.

Shouting encouragement, firing until his rifle became too hot to hold, Trenchard backed slowly towards Helen, who knelt clasping her grandfather in her arms. Wounded, shouting, the men fell back slowly to form a square round her Excellency the white woman, who had accounted for more than one of the enemy and who, in her bravery, was to be ranked with the most famous of *hadeeyahs*, even Ayesha, the wife of Mohammed the Prophet, whilst the spy who had loosened the camels worked his way sideways until he stood close behind the white man for whose capture alive a great reward had been promised.

“Stand fast, men, they’re on us!” shouted Trenchard as, with a ringing yell, the enemy charged, just as the six camels, their long leather thongs burned through, shrieking and maddened with the agony of their burns and wounds, rushed the gallant square.

“God have mercy upon us!” Helen cried as she sprang to her feet to watch the terrible sight of horses and camels fighting to the death, making an impassable wedge separating her from Ralph Trenchard.

Outlined against a background of orange light, they looked like mighty prehistoric beasts as they reared and plunged, falling to their knees, scrambling to their feet, shrieking as only horses and camels can shriek, in pain and fear. Sick to the heart, she tried in vain to catch a glimpse of the man she loved, whilst Zarah, with Al-Asad at her side, rode round and round the camp, shouting the battle-cry, yelling encouragement to those of her men who were left alive to fight.

Just for the moment Helen stood searching vainly for her lover, her ears deaf to the din of the battle, her eyes blinded to the terrible sights, then flung herself down beside the old man she loved so deeply. Where she loved she had no fear, neither could any task be too hard for her to undertake for the loved one’s welfare, so that she knelt beside Sir Richard and gently drew out the spear which had pierced the gallant heart. When she understood that it had for ever ceased to beat she gathered him up into her strong arms and kissed his white hair. She held him so, just for a little while, as her mind uncontrollably raced back through the happy years spent with him; then she laid him down upon the desert sand and, picking up her rifle, rose to her feet.

She was of those for whom great danger holds no terror. Thrice blessed indeed are they upon whom that great tranquillity descends in the midst of danger; who, steadied and exhilarated by peril, help those around them by their unwavering

calm.

She stood, with the dead man at her feet, waiting to help the living man she loved as he fell back slowly towards her, fighting desperately.

Where the men met they fought without quarter, regardless of the hammering hoofs, the tearing teeth, the foam and blood and welter of the animals. Stripped to the waist, black with grime, fighting at such close quarters that he could scarce tell friend from foe, Trenchard fought, using the butt-end of his revolver, with Abdul by his side, whilst the Bedouins approached nearer and nearer, unseen on account of the smoke, unheard in the din.

“Thy wife!” shouted Zarah, leaning towards Al-Asad and pointing to Helen, who stood alone with her back towards them, nauseated at the sight of a bay mare and a wounded camel in death grips. The camel had reared and flung itself upon the mare, meeting its teeth just below her ears, whilst she, lashing out until great rents were torn in the dying camel’s belly, tried vainly to free herself from the paralysis which crept over her through the vice-like grip upon her spine.

“*Bism ’allah!*” yelled Al-Asad, as Helen raised her rifle. “Behold! is she the maid to be the mother of sons? Let us take her to blind Yussuf as his part of the spoil.” He yelled again in sheer admiration as a double report rang out and the fighting beasts dropped; then rode down upon Helen as she reloaded, and lifting her, swung her, fighting like a tiger, across the saddle.

He laughed exultantly as he held her down, pressing her hands against her neck with his left hand until she was almost suffocated, and her knees down with his right hand, whilst his horse, guided by the pressure of his knees, raced back to where Zarah waited, laughing and shouting remarks which, fortunately, were not heard above the uproar.

“Behold, she is for thee—thy mate,” she cried; “and I—look thou—look—look—behold *my* mate, alone amongst wolves.” Al-Asad, who could hear no word of what she said, looked to where she pointed, then laughed savagely when she screamed in an agony of fear.

It happened in a second.

Flames suddenly burst from the tent to the east, leaping to the very sky, against which, for one instant, Ralph Trenchard, with Abdul at his side, stood out

clearly.

Zarah leant forward, revolver in hand, and fired—too late. From out the heap of dead and dying the spy had sprung, felling Ralph Trenchard to the ground with a blow from the handle of a throwing knife behind the ear, to fall himself with Abdul's knife in his side.

Then friend and foe turned and, shoulder to shoulder, faced the onslaught of the new terror which fell upon them out of the night, whilst Abdul flung himself down upon the body of the white man he loved, and ripping the cloak from a dead Arab, covered him and pulled him under the sheltering bodies of two dead camels.

Zarah turned in her saddle and emptied her revolver into the group of Bedouins who, lying upon their horses' necks, raced down upon her; then shouted to Al-Asad and, giving the stallion his head, fled for her life. They did not skirt the camp; they rode right through it and over everything they encountered in their path, heedless of the curses called down upon them by the wounded they trampled underfoot. Out into the coming dawn they sped, guided by the stars for which Sir Richard had so ardently longed, with the limp body of the English girl as their sole reward for the disastrous night.

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The stars went out and the sky lightened down in the east as the Bedouins sat in a circle, taking counsel together.

The camels and horses that were fit for use stood hobbled, placidly ruminating or fretting and fidgeting, near the spot where the west tent had stood; the prisoners lay groaning on the ground, or sat, with the fatalism of the East, awaiting their sentence.

The sky was covered, as far as eye could see, with vultures, whirling and swooping, settling as near as they dare to the feast awaiting them, or standing motionless until some noise or movement sent them flying in flocks skywards, an offence against the glory of the heavens.

The unconscious form of Ralph Trenchard lay at the feet of the Bedouin chief, whilst Abdul, by his side, craftily bargained for their lives.

“A man of much wealth thou hast seized, O my brother! A great sheikh in a

country where the towns are paved with gold, the bazaars are full of jewels, and the streets of houris of the greatest beauty.”

“Perchance ’tis true; but how know we that he will give us of his wealth once we have nursed him back to life and allowed him to depart from us?”

Abdul turned in the direction of Mecca and lifted his hand.

“By the beard of the Prophet I swear it, by the wind and the wool and the honour of the Arab I swear it, knowing him of whom I speak. In the name of my father and my father’s fathers I will stand as bond for this man’s honour. My life for his word, O brother; and life is sweet, even unto those who are born in lowliness. There is much wealth upon the backs of the camels, for behold! the fire has but touched the covering. It is thine in return for his life.”

“It is mine already, O brother!”

Abdul played his trump card.

“Yea, if thou darest to take it. If thou wilt listen to me it will be thine without the fear of questioning from the king of the great white race, who knows the movements of each one of his subjects and meteth out death to those who slay his children or keep them prisoner. I am the white man’s servant; let me but nurse him back to health, heal his wounds and allay his fever so that he may start upon the quest of the white woman he loves, and I will pour the tale of thy goodness into his ears in such wise that peace and plenty will be thine for ever more. Is it not written, brethren, ‘He is the chosen of the people who rejoices in the welfare of others’?”

So it came about as it had been written that, after many hours the birds of prey drew closer to the scene of tragedy, whilst Abdul, holding his master gently in his arms, followed the Bedouins upon camelback as they rode slowly away across the path by which they had so swiftly come.

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## CHAPTER IX

*“The walls have ears.”—Arabic Proverb.*

Helen Raynor lay like a broken lily, asleep upon a divan piled with cushions, in a great room built between two ledges of rock high up on the mountainside.

The place was bare, save for rugs upon the floor and the cushions of every colour of the rainbow, embroidered in gold, patterned in jewels, and quite unfit for an invalid's repose.

It was refreshingly cool in spite of being nearer the scorching sun than any other part of the erstwhile monastery. A great slab of rock, many feet in thickness, jutting from the mountainside, made a natural ceiling; huge brass bowls full of water stood on the rock floor; the desert winds of dawn and sunset blew in at the cross-shaped apertures which took the place of windows in the east and west walls, built of pieces of stone of all shapes and sizes, fitted together in mosaic fashion and two feet thick; the door faced the cleft in the mountain ring, and through it could be seen the limitless desert, a view of infinite peace.

An austere place, imbued with quiet strength, an eyrie of peace, conjuring up pictures of abstinence and sacrifice, it stood as it had been built all those centuries ago by the Holy Fathers for their prior, connected with the plateau by a dizzy flight of steps leading straight down to the water which Sir Richard had hoped to discover for the good of mankind and his own satisfaction.

Namlah, the native woman, shivered as she sat outside on the edge of the platform upon which the place had been built, but as much from the effect her surroundings were having upon her as from the chill breeze of dawn. She got to her feet, her many anklets jangling as she moved, and walked to the edge of the rock ledge and looked down at the water and shivered again and sighed.

Zarah the Cruel had made the biggest mistake of her life when, in a fit of towering rage, she had set Namlah to tend and guard Helen Raynor. She had thought to set a jailer at the girl's door; she had placed a friend. She had thought to take the body-woman's thoughts away from her dead son by piling still more work upon the bent shoulders; instead she gave her hours in which to sit, to dream, to plan out some way in which to revenge herself for the loss of her child.

Her son had not returned from the disastrous battle. He lay somewhere out there in the desert. Her son was dead. And when, mad with grief, she had flung herself



at her mistress's feet and begged to be allowed to go and find him and bury him, she had been struck across the mouth and ordered up to the dwelling where the prisoner lay, and threatened with still more dire punishment if she told the white girl aught about the secrets of the place.

And what could worse punishment mean but the death of the one son left her? The dumb boy she loved even more than she had loved the one who had not returned from battle; the boy who had been nicknamed "Yussuf's Eyes," and who spoke by tapping with his slender fingers upon the blind man's arm, and almost as readily and clearly as if he used his silent tongue.

Grief and a great fear filled her heart.

What if Zarah the Merciless took this son? She touched an amulet of good luck which hung about her neck and turned to draw an extra covering over the prisoner left in her care.

"Beautiful! Beautiful!" she whispered, gently stroking the golden hair she delighted to brush for the hour together, and which covered the girl, like a veil, to her knees. "What will be thy fate in the hands of the one who knows no mercy?" She spat as she spoke and sat down at the foot of the divan. "Thou a slave who art a queen in beauty? Thou to obey where thou hast ruled, to go when ordered, to come when bidden? Nay! Allah protect thee and bring thee safely through that which awaits thee. I love thee, white woman, for thy gentleness in thy distress. Not one harsh word in the days when the fever ran high; not one black look in these days when thy weakness is as that of the new-born lamb. Behold, is this the time to replace about thy neck the amulet which fell from thy strange clothing when I did take them from off thee, thou white flower?" She searched in her voluminous robes and drew out a small golden locket on a broken chain, and sat turning it over and over in her hand, fighting a great temptation. She fingered the brass bracelets and the silver ring she wore and rubbed the gold chain against her pock-marked cheek.

"The amulet, yea, that will I not keep, for fear I rob the white woman of her birthright of happiness; but the chain, of what use is it to her? It is thin and broken...." She twined it round her wrist, looking at it with longing eyes, then, with a little sigh, unwound it and slipped it round the girl's neck and, knotting the broken ends, hid the locket under the silken garment and ran out quickly on to the platform.

She sat just outside the door, indifferently watching the starlit sky with twinkling eyes in a wry face.

“Behold, I love thee,” she whispered, “and would bring thee back to health. Not alone because of my love for thee, but for that within me which tells me that ‘the time approaches when a camel will crouch down on the place of another camel.’” She rubbed her work-worn hands as she quoted the proverb and pondered upon the happy day when the reigning tyrant should be dethroned and someone with bowels of compassion should be elected in her stead. She turned her sleek head and looked once again at the girl, and fingered her brass bracelets and smiled, as she quoted another proverb, until her perfect teeth flashed in the dusk. “‘He who cannot reach to the bunch of grapes says of it, it is sour.’ Behold, I think the golden chain would not have become my beauty.” She rose as she spoke, laughing, with the childlike happiness of the Eastern who is pleased, and crossed to a small recess, where she made great clatter amongst many brass pots in the process of concocting a strong and savoury broth.

She stood for a moment watching Helen, who had wakened at the noise and lay looking out through the cleft in the mountains to the desert.

For three weeks, so far as she could judge, she had lain ’twixt fever and stupor in the strange room, tended by a middle-aged native who put her finger to her lips when questioned.

Three weeks of agonizing uncertainty as to the fate of those she loved, in which in her delirium she had fought maddened men and beasts or sobbed her heart out in the native’s arms. Twice she had crawled to the platform and tried to descend the steps to reach her grandfather, whom she thought to see standing upon the river bank. Not once had she been aware of Zarah standing behind her as she lay on the bed, with a mocking smile on the beautiful, cruel mouth and a look of uncertainty in the yellow eyes.

She had questioned the native woman, imploring her to give her news of the caravan, promising her her heart’s desire if she could but obtain authentic information about the man she loved. She had begged for her clothes, and when they had been refused had tried to rise from her bed, only to fall back, weak and exhausted from the fever which had resulted from the horror and shock of the battle and the terrible ride, during which, at the last, she had mercifully lost consciousness.

“Am I in the hands of Zarah, the mysterious woman of the desert?” she had whispered to the native the first day her senses had come back to her. “Has a white man been also taken prisoner? Is there any help for us?”

Namlah had looked furtively over her shoulder and had put her finger upon her lips as she had whispered back:

“‘The provision of to-morrow belongs to to-morrow’ is a wise saying, Excellency. Rest in peace whilst yet peace is with thee. ’Tis wise for the hare to abide beneath ground when the hawk hovers, and for the lamb to make no sound when the jackal prowls. ’Tis twice wise for the eyes to be wide open and the mouth shut when those who are in power are likewise in wrath.” She had bent over the girl as she had arranged the cushions, and had whispered lower still: “Trust not the news of her mouth, Excellency; it is as a well of poisoned water in which truth dies. There is one here whose words are as pure gold, though his eyes are like burned-out fires. When he brings news I will bring it thee. Thou may’st trust me.” She had slipped the cotton garment from her back as she spoke. “The marks of the whip that lashed my back are as naught compared to the wounds of grief which the greed and tyranny of our mistress have caused to cut deep into my heart.” She had stroked the girl’s hair and patted her hand when she had cried out at the sight of the great scars, and had waited upon her and nursed her, loving her the while.

“I waited for thee to waken, Excellency,” she whispered this hour before the dawn. “Al-Asad has but just returned; he speaketh even now with Zarah the Cruel.”

And having bathed Helen’s temples and wrists and fed her with much strong broth, Namlah crept noiselessly down the steep steps to the broad terrace where her mistress dwelt, and crouched, a shadow amongst shadows, under the window made by the Holy Fathers centuries ago.

She stayed, crouched against the wall, listening to the voices of her mistress and Al-Asad the Nubian. Unable to catch their words, she touched the amulet at her neck and rose, inch by inch, until the top of her head was on a level with the window’s lower edge.

“Of a truth wert thou cunning ...” she heard her mistress say, losing the rest of the sentence in the peal of laughter that followed.

Complete silence fell, and the night air became the heavier for the scents of musk, myrrh, attar and other such overpowering perfumes beloved of the Oriental, which floated through the window. Namlah sniffed appreciatively, then, too small to see above the window ledge, and with curiosity rampant in her heart, crouched down again until she knelt upon the rock, and felt around with slender, nimble fingers for the wherewithal with which to raise herself the necessary inches that would enable her to see into the room without being seen.

She found nothing, but, spurred by the sound of her mistress's voice, slipped out of her voluminous outer robe, rolled it into a bundle and stood upon it, a wizened, dusky slip of an eavesdropper, in a coarse, unembroidered *qamis*.

“A small date-stone props up the water jar,” she quoted, as with one brown eye she looked furtively into the room from the side of the window.

She drew her breath sharply. Simple in her wants, as are all the natives of the serf-like class, she had never been able to get over the astonishment she felt at the sight of the luxury with which her mistress surrounded herself.

The rough stone walls built by the Holy Fathers and the uneven stone floor had been covered with marble of the faintest green, cunningly worked along the edges in a great scroll pattern of gold mosaic. The scroll glittered in the light of four lamps hanging in the corners of the immense room, reflecting all the colours of the rainbow in their crystal chains and crystal drops. The drops and chains were reflected in a basin of pink marble in the centre of the room, and in five huge mirrors which the Arabian's colossal vanity had caused her to place about. Gold and silver fish swam monotonously round and round in the marble basin, happily unconscious of the moment awaiting them when the woman would catch them in her dainty, henna-stained fingers and throw them on to the floor, for the mere pleasure of watching them die. The water for the marble basin was changed every few hours by prisoners, who toiled up and down the steep steps under the blazing sun and the lash of the overseer's whip, all of which doubtlessly added to the enjoyment Zarah felt when she caught the fish in her merciless hands.

Persian carpets and countless cushions were spread upon the marble floor; stools and tables inlaid with ivory, gold and jewels stood upon them, also bowls of sweetmeats, trays of fruit and great vases of perfumed water, in all the profusion so dear to the heart of the wealthy Eastern. Two black and white monkeys chased each other all over the place, in and out of doors leading to other smaller rooms, which served as dressing-room and wardrobes, and up and down a

slender steel staircase which reached to a platform built right across the north end of the room. The platform was two yards broad, the back made by the marble of the wall, the front protected by a fine broad-meshed gold netting which opened in the middle and swung back like a door. Covered with silken perfumed sheets, piled with cushions and hung with orange-coloured satin curtains, it was but a somewhat exaggerated replica of many Oriental beds, which are raised from the ground for the sake of coolness and also protection from that which crawls by night.

Inside the golden cage, with the slender steps safely drawn up from the floor, Zarah would lie o' nights, either watching the dim shape of her lion cub as it prowled this way and that, or sleeping with the untroubled conscience of the heartless, or dreaming waking dreams of the man she had learned to love in the space of a few moments.

The lion cub, with neither teeth nor claws drawn, and which was a good deal nearer adolescence than a European would have considered healthy in a pet of that category, padded awkwardly backwards and forwards behind a divan upon which his mistress lay this night whilst listening to Al-Asad the half-caste, who, just returned from seeking information concerning the white man, sat cross-legged on the floor beside her.

"Tell me once again, O Asad, all that thou didst learn concerning the white man when, as one fleeing for his life, thou didst crave shelter in the Bedouin camp."

Al-Asad frowned as he looked at the woman whom he served in love and who had had no word of praise for the arduous undertaking he had so successfully accomplished. He loathed himself for the love which so weakened him, causing him to tremble at her frown and almost to prostrate himself at her small feet when she gave him a smile. Longing to drive a knife through her heart to end it all, he held tight clasped instead the golden tassel of the cushion upon which she lay.

"Words repeated are but waste of time, but, as I have told thee, O woman, the old white man lies buried deep in the sands, safe from the birds and beasts of prey, who have left but the bones and tattered raiment of man and beast to mark where the ill-fated battle was fought. The young white man, even the one about whom thou art besotted in love, lives, being taken prisoner, with one Abdul, by the accursed Bedouins who fell upon us. He is likewise recovered from a great

fever which befell him from the blow dealt him, O Zarah, in the midst of the fight, and the blow of a hoof upon the forehead which struck him as he lay upon the ground. He has been nigh dead of this fever, fighting in his delirium, calling ever loudly upon the woman's name I cannot remember, shouting aloud his love for her."

"Thou dullard," broke in Zarah furiously. "Art as of little learning as the Bedouins who give him shelter for their own ends? Make yet another effort, even if thy tongue be too big for thy mouth, which is not over small."

Al-Asad shook his head, taking no notice of the gibe at the expense of his negroid blood. "I cannot, O woman. Yet should I know it again if I but heard it. To pronounce it, must the mouth be opened and the word dropped out without movement of the lips."

Zarah twisted herself round upon her elbows until her face was on a level with the man's.

"Helen!" she said quietly, and sat upright, clasping her hands about her knees, when the Nubian laughed and nodded his head.

"So," she said slowly, "he loves her! Yet has she said no word of him, neither wears she his likeness upon her breast, which, O Asad, is a sickly habit of those who love in northern climes. I have sat with her, watched over her in her fever, yet has she said no word of him, neither found I aught in her garments when I searched them, and the ring that is upon her finger is but a trifle from the bazaar."

That Helen's engagement ring happened to be a scarab inscribed with words of power, and worth a great price, she was not to know.

"Namlah, the body-woman who tends her, has she found naught?"

Zarah laughed as she turned and looked at the stars through the window, outside which stood a dusky slip of an eavesdropper.

"Oh, she, the fool, she thinks of naught but the wounds upon her back and the failure of her son to return from the battle. In her stupidity is she the safest of all to wait upon the white girl? Yet how can I make use of this Helen, who has vexed my spirit since first we met? How can I pay back the laughs and torments

of her companions at that thrice accursed school if she does *not* love this man?”

“He loves her, O Zarah!” guilelessly remarked the Nubian, who was finding rare balm for his own wound in the hurt of his mistress.

Zarah flung herself round and struck at the handsome, stolid face with the loaded whip she kept handy in case of an emergency with her four-footed pet.

“Thou fool!” she stormed. “Keep thy mouth closed upon such words. What knowest thou of the ways of white men and women? They travel together with as much freedom as though they were brother and sister; they dance in each other’s arms; they go to the festival together, returning alone at the rising of the sun; they ride and drive and work together, yet are they but friends, there being naught of love between them. Thinkest thou that the man would look twice upon yon woman, who is the colour of a garment which has hung overlong in the sun, if I were at his side, dost thou?”

In her wrath she looked like one of the restless birds of vivid plumage which sang or moved incessantly in the golden cages standing against the walls; but Al-Asad wisely refrained from answering the question, as he glanced at them and thought of the joy some men find in the homely sparrow.

“Let the white woman, with a name like a drop of water which droppeth from a spout, write unto the white man and bid him hasten to her to deliver her from danger. If he loves her he will speed upon the wings of love, as I would speed if danger should threaten thee, woman of a thousand beauties.”

“Oh, thou!” contemptuously replied Zarah, as she pulled the ears of the lion cub which sprawled at her feet. “Nay, thy words are as empty of wisdom as the pod of the bean that is in the pot. Thou knowest not the white race. It weeps over a hurt done to a beast; it bares its breast to receive the spear thrown at another; it will suffer torture, yea, even death, to shield a brother from harm.”

She sat for a long moment, then looked sideways into the man’s eyes and smiled until he waxed faint with love.

“A light shines, O Asad of the lion heart. I will go, when she waketh from her sleep, and make friends with her and work upon her feelings of friendliness for one who sojourned with her in the thrice accursed school. She will then bid the white man hither to join in the circle of friendliness, and then——” She laughed

softly as she opened her hand and closed the fingers slowly.

“And then, Zarah, thou merciless one, what then?”

“Then will I replace her in the heart of the man I love and give her to thee, as wife or what thou wilt, so that in thy sons the blackness of thy blood may be equalled by the whiteness of hers, and her days be passed in one long torment through the different colouring of her offspring.”

But Al-Asad was in no wise inclined to her way of thinking, and said so in blunt, crude words. He made no movement as he told her of the love which consumed him; he did not raise his musical voice one tone as he described the heaven of his days when near her and the hell when separated from her, even for a few hours; he repeated the story of his love stubbornly, quietly, over and over again, and made no sign of his hurt when she laughed aloud in merriment.

“Behold, O Asad!” she cried as she laughed. “Behold, art thou as perverse as the mule and as blind to thine own advancement as is Yussuf—that thrice accursed thorn in my side—to the sun in his path. A beauteous maid, white as ivory, gentle as the breeze of dawn, awaits thee but a few steps higher upon the mountainside, and yet dost thou sit, like a graven image of despair, within the shadow of one whose love is given elsewhere.”

“Love!” repeated the half-caste slowly. “Thou and love! ’Twere enough to make the mountains split with laughter to hear thee! Let us cease this foolish talk. I love thee, Zarah, and will have none other woman but thee; but I love thee so well that, rather than see thee suffer the torment I suffer, I would bring thee thy heart’s desire and find in thy happiness my happiness and death!”

“How sayest thou, little cat?” Zarah turned lazily on her side as she spoke to the lion cub. “Wouldst bring a mate to thy love because she would have none of thee, or wouldst break her will or her neck so as to prove thyself her master?”

Namlah gasped and Asad leant quickly forward when, with a low growl of pleasure, the great cat sprang upon the divan and stood across its mistress, kneading the silken cover into strips.

“Learn thy lesson from the four-footed beast,” cried Zarah sharply, as she struck the animal across the eyes with the whip until it leapt from the divan and slunk across the room, where it crouched in a corner with lashing tail and blazing eyes.

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“The lesson which teaches the slave that there is a line beyond which his foot may not go.”

But Al-Asad was taking no notice of the lesson he was being taught. From under half-closed lids he was watching something round outside the window which, to the best of his knowledge, had not been there when he had sat down upon the floor, something which he mistook for Yussuf’s head, knowing the hatred which existed between him and his mistress.

“Let us cease this foolish talk,” he repeated as he rose slowly to his feet, his heart hot with anger at the thought of the spy. “Let us instead”—he lowered his voice to the merest whisper as he spoke—“let us visit the woman who is to be the bait in the trap into which the white man will place his feet.”

He was at the door with one mighty bound, and out to the wall which showed bare in the starlight. He stood listening for the faintest sound.

None came.

Namlah lay flat on her face upon the steps, her dusky slip of a body and saffron-coloured *qamis* one with the shadows.

But she was making noise enough with her beloved brass pots to disturb the invalid or to waken the dead as her dreaded mistress, followed by the gigantic half-caste, entered the room in which the prisoner lay, looking out towards the desert where she had lost those she loved so dearly.

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## CHAPTER X

*“Sweet of tongue but of distant beneficence.”—Arabic Proverb.*

“Zarah! It is—it is you! Then it was you!”

Helen raised herself on her elbow and stared at the bewildering picture which suddenly appeared in the doorway, blotting out the peace of the coming dawn and the far-stretching desert.

Wrapped from head to foot in a great cloak of orange satin, the Arabian stood outlined against the purple sky, with the Nubian behind her, whilst Namlah, hidden behind her pots and pans in the recess, cursed beneath her breath with all the Oriental’s volubility.

The terrified body-woman had lain flat on her face upon the steps until certain that she had not been discovered, then, as the sky had lightened, had crept like some gigantic spider up the steps and into the room where the white girl lay. She had barely had the time to whisper a warning and to run noiselessly across to the recess and hide herself when they heard her mistress’s voice speaking softly to the Nubian as they, too, mounted the steps.

Zarah did not hesitate. She determined upon a plan of action even as she caught the unconquerable look in the girl’s bewildered face.

Here was no weakling to be bullied into submission, no poor spirit to be tyrannized, no faltering feet to be whipped along a certain road; rather was it a case for duplicity and cunning, with flowers and green boughs to cover the dug pit into which, misled, betrayed, Helen Raynor would ultimately fall.

With a little cry she ran across to the divan, flung herself on her knees and seized Helen’s hand with a world of innocence and entreaty in her strange eyes.

“Helen R-raynor-r!” She spoke the sweetest broken English in the world, her r’s rolling like little drums. “Ze fr-r-ien’ of my youz! Can you under-r-stan’? Can I beg for your-r for-r-give-e-ness for ze ter-r-ible mistake?”

She gave Helen no time to grant it or not. She launched out on the most plausible explanation of the disastrous battle that a crafty mind could possibly have

Explanation of the disastrous battle that a crafty mind could possibly have invented on the spur of the moment. "I could not hold my men; I could not make zem hear-r or-r under-r-stan' in ze noise of ze fight zat we had not foun' ze r-r-right enemy." She flung her arms up above her head, which she then proceeded to bow to the ground. "By ze gr-r-ace of Allah"—she raised her face and right hand to the ceiling, a veritable picture of piety—"zey did hear-r my or-r-der not to fir-r-e so zat you, dear-r fr-rien' of my happy schooldays, was not kill-ed. Ah! Zose ozer bar-r-bar-rians zat kill-ed ze old Englishman wiz ze white hair-r, zay were ze ones we——"

"My grandfather! But he was killed by a spear through the heart, a spear thrown by one of your men. The others came up from behind!"

In spite of the reputation for lying and every kind of deception that the Arabian had gained at school, Helen had almost allowed herself to believe the plausible tale told in the guileless voice.

But, her suspicions aroused by the last barefaced untruth, she drew away as far as the divan would allow from the supplicating figure with the sorrow-laden eyes.

But as well try to catch an ostrich on the run as Zarah in a falsehood.

She rose to her feet, a superb figure of sorrowful indignation, and threw out her hands as best she could for the cloak she had wrapped round herself in an effort to hide the scantiness of her attire, then sat down on the foot of the divan, facing her enemy.

"Helen R-ray-nor-r! You believe zat of my men, mine, over-r whom I r-reign as queen? Ze bar-r-bar-rians sur-r-rounded us, zey thr-r-rew ze spear-r fr-rom behind my men. Zen I give ze or-r-der to Al-Asad, who is my bodyguar-r-d." She pointed to the Nubian, who stood just outside the door, watching the rocks in the hope of seeing Yussuf pass amongst them. "I tell him to save *you* from ze savage Bedouins."

"But why me alone?" Helen drew the silken coverlet about her and got to a sitting position on the edge of the divan, whilst Namlah watched the battle of wills between the beautiful women from the recess, which was just behind Zarah's back.

Zarah leapt at the chance of firmly establishing her lie. "But zer-r-e was no one

else to save. Ze old one, your-r gr-ran'fazer-r, was dead."

"No, no, no!" Helen sat forward in her intense excitement, her eyes shining, her hands clenched. "There was another Englishman with us, someone you know, Zarah. Think of it, someone you have met!"

"*Me!* I have met! A fr-r-rien' of yours and mine! I do not under-r-stan'!"

Quickly, breathlessly, Helen reminded her of the day she had fallen from her horse into Ralph Trenchard's arms.

"You remember! Oh, you must remember! He told me all about you; said how magnificently you rode. Oh, and when he heard about the mysterious woman of the desert, he said he thought it might be you, because you had told him that you came from somewhere about here and had asked him to pay your father a visit. Didn't you see him? Don't you know where he is? And *are* you the wonderful woman everyone talks about?"

Zarah clapped her hands in childlike enjoyment.

"I just r-remember-r him," she cried gleefully, whilst longing to choke the life out of the girl in front of her. "And he was wiz you? Then wher-r-e is he? We sear-r-ched after-r-wards for our-r men upon ze battlefield, but saw nozing of ze old man, nor-r his bones, nor-r his clothes, and nozing of—of ze ozer. I mean zer was no tr-r-ace of any ozer. I know!" She clapped her hands and laughed. "We saw marks leading back to Hareek. He is escaped, taking wiz him ze body of your-r gr-r-an'fazer-r, and is waiting for you, to know wher-r-e you ar-r-e, to come and fetch you."

"Perhaps! Perhaps you are right!" quietly replied Helen, her eyes fixed on the clasped fingers, which showed white at the joints under the pressure of the Arabian's emotion. "Yes, perhaps you are right." She smiled gently and nodded her head, whilst she asked herself if Zarah's intense solicitude could possibly arise out of friendship for herself. She decided that it did not when, on turning her head, she found the eyes of the handsome native fixed upon her. She frowned and drew the silken coverlet more closely about her in an instinctive desire to protect herself from the feeling of uneasiness and evil which had suddenly fallen upon her, and sighed with unconfessed relief when the sunrays tipped over the edge of the mountains and shone through the open door. "Tell me," she said quickly, "why did you go out to fight those Bedouins? What harm

had they done that they should be shot down, speared, massacred by a force far superior to their own? What right had you to take their lives?"

It is most injudicious to ask such pertinent questions in the uncivilized places of the world, and it was well for Helen that she could not see the rage in the other's heart at her daring.

"*Ai-ai-ai!*"

The cry of the mourner rose to high heaven as Zarah smote her breast, causing the doves and pheasants and other birds to rise in flocks, and the women near the water's edge to look up from the business of the hour.

"Behold!" lied she brazenly. "Even some moons ago zose bar-r-bar-r-ians lay in wait for some of my people as zey r-ret-urned fr-r-om Huta. Ze men zey killed, ze women and ze little, little child-r-ren zey took away wiz zem. Am I not ze mozer of my people? Could I r-refuse my men when zey cr-ried to be r-revenged? Ah, fr-r-ien' of my happy schooldays, ze ways of ze deser-r-t a-r-r-e not ze ways of ze city. Let us not talk of zings so sad. Listen! I have some idea. Do you r-r-remember how Miss Jane used to scold when we said zat?"

She did not give Helen time to say if she did or did not remember, but turned her head and said something in his own dialect to the Nubian. He raised his hand and walked to the edge of the platform, as unwitting as his mistress of Namlah the body-woman, who stood in the doorway of the recess, gesticulating violently and shaking her head.

Helen looked at her quietly and then turned and looked out through the doorway, wondering what Zarah could have said to awaken such perturbation in Namlah's heart.

"What is the great idea, Zarah?"

Zarah smiled bewitchingly, her teeth flashing, her eyes as soft as a gazelle's. "I will r-r-repeat ze invitation to ze Englishman—ah, I cannot pr-r-o-nounce ze name—zrough you. You will wr-r-ite him a letter to ask him to come to stay for ze little time and to take you back wiz him—yes? You will write, will you not, my dear fr-r-ien'?"

Love, the master-key to all problems between woman and woman, unlocked the

door which hid the secret workings of Zarah's mind from Helen. The request explained Namlah's agitation. Zarah had evidently told the Nubian about the letter of invitation.

"How will you send the letter?"

It seemed a trusty messenger would deliver the letter at Hutah and would wait to act as escort to the Englishman on the return journey through the desert.

"But Ralph Trenchard may be ill, or he may not be able to come." Helen watched the other's face intently as she spoke. "The messenger can escort me to Hutah instead of taking the letter."

"No woman is safe unar-r-med, and not even ar-r-med, alone in ze deser-r-t wiz a man. Be r-reasonable, little English r-r-ose, and wr-r-ite ze little letter."

"*You* could take me with an escort to Hutah, Zarah."

Zarah humbly touched her forehead, and threw out her hands as she raged inwardly at the other's obstinacy.

"I am ze mozer of my people. Zey mour-r-n, zey weep in zeir-r sor-r-row. I cannot leave zem even for a little, little while."

"You liar!" said Helen to herself, thoroughly aware at last of the trap which had been laid for the man she loved.

There was no sign whatever in the women's faces of the strength of the passions in their hearts.

Zarah smiled the gentle smile of propitiation as she played for the fierce love which had possessed her for so long, repressing the hate and jealousy which urged her to call the half-caste and bid him fling the girl down to the rocks beneath.

In the depths of Helen's eyes lay the confident smile and the look of strength of those who can bear all, risk all, defy all, for love's sake.

Fell a little pause as the sun ray crept along the floor, flooding the room with light, making a golden halo round Helen's head.

“You do as I ask?” The question fell so gently in the quiet place.

Helen leant forward and looked straight into her enemy’s eyes as she answered slowly:

*“No! I will not write that letter!”*

Fell another silence, in which, whilst exercising the little control she was capable of, Zarah traced the embroidery upon the pillow and worked her cunning mind, and Helen sat still and silent, wondering what the answer to her refusal would be. Love made her brave, love made her ready for sacrifice, but she shivered involuntarily as she remembered the tales she had heard of the Arabian’s cruelty, rage and treachery, both at school and after.

Perfectly healthy in mind and body, she shuddered at the thought of mental or physical pain for others, did everything in her power to alleviate it, made every effort to avert it from them. She felt intuitively that danger threatened the man she loved, and she longed to ask the Arabian the meaning of her mocking smile as she lazily traced the embroidery with a hennaed finger.

Zarah was trying to come to a decision.

She had methods which, though hardly civilized, were extremely efficacious in bending the most obstreperous person to her way of thinking; she had also a fair knowledge of the Briton’s stubbornness and excessive altruism.

For some unknown reason Helen had suddenly become afraid for Ralph Trenchard. Why? She did not love him, because she neither blushed nor cast down her eyes when she mentioned his name, nor did she wear his portrait, after the sickly manner of her race, about her person.

Zarah loved the Englishman with all the violent, uncontrolled passion of her parentage, but her hatred for the calm English girl was almost as deep and as violent as that love, and to it was added a seething desire for revenge—revenge for her looks, her breeding, her gentle ways, but, above all, for the intolerable *camaraderie* which evidently existed between her and the white man.

If only she had known any sign of love, then would the revenge have been easy and subtle and of a surpassing cruelty, but her interest in the man seemed to be that of a friend and no more.

In fact, she seemed only to be interested in her surroundings, in the distant view of the red desert rolling in great billows as far as eye could see, and the golden sunshine which filled the room with its light and warmth. She watched Helen stretch slowly, shrug the over-warm coverlet from her shoulders and pull the cushions into a more comfortable position behind her shoulders; then, with the lightning quickness of a hawk, she leant suddenly forward and wrenched at a locket which had slipped from the silken garment Helen wore.

She sat quite still, staring at the portrait she held of the man she loved, then she gave a little sigh of intense satisfaction and laughed gently as she looked across at Helen, who stared in amazement and stretched out her hand.

“What an extraordinary thing,” she said simply; “it must have got caught and been hidden all the time in the coverlet. I thought I had lost it that terrible night of fighting. Please give it me.”

Zarah twisted the broken chain round her finger and swung it to and fro. She laughed like the girl she ought to have been and playfully shook her head. She could afford to be charming and frank; in fact, to prepare the first step upon the road of revenge she would have to pretend to tease her old schoolmate, so as to allay her suspicions.

Yes! she could well afford to wait, for had she not the white man and the white girl in her power? Would she not be able to draw him into her net and put her in the dust at her feet through the little golden locket which swung on her finger?

“I will keep it for a little while, Helen R-r-aynor-r, my dear-r fr-r-ien’, jus’ for a souvenir of ze ol’ days. My dwelling is your-r-s. I am sorry you will not be able to get away jus’ yet”—she laughed gently so as to disguise the threat held in the words—“but I am ze mozer of my people an’ cannot leave zem, an’ it is not safe for-r a young an’ beautiful woman to be in ze deser-r-t alone wiz an Ar-r-ab. You will wait a little until I am fr-r-ee? You will bathe, you will join in ze spor-r-ts an’ watch my happy people at zeir wor-r-k in zeir homes? I have many books. You will also r-r-ide wiz me or wiz an escort in ze deser-r-t. Yes?”

She laughed softly at the glint in Helen’s eyes, born of a suddenly conceived plan of escape.

“Someone will show you, perhaps, ze way out an’ ze way in of my deser-r-t home. Zat you cannot lear-r-n by your-r-self because it is sur-r-rounded wiz ze



quicksands, in which lie dead ze hundr-r-eds of men an' beasts."

"Ah! tell me again, tell me about the quicksands which have, of course, kept the water hidden all this long time. Tell me all about it so that, when I get back to Bagdad, I can write to the papers and prove to the people, who laughed at Grandad, that his theory was correct."

Helen spoke quickly, her fear momentarily allayed by the thought of being able to vindicate her grandfather. Almost deceived by the other's friendliness into believing that she was solicitous for her welfare, she smiled across at Zarah.

Fully determined that the white girl should remain a life-long prisoner, either dead or alive, in the mountains, Zarah recounted the romantic history of the strange place, whilst Al-Asad sat lost in dreams and Namlah gently rubbed her foot, which had become afflicted with cramp caused by her squatting position behind the pots and pans.

Zarah spoke well, her melodious, deep voice filling the room, the jewels sparkling on her hands as she moved them in graceful, dramatic gesture. She recounted humorous incident, and laughed; tragic, and drew her hand across her dry eyes; she was hypocrisy incarnate as she revelled in the cunningly thought-out revenge she had decided to take upon her prisoner.

"A wonder-r place, is it not, Helena? Unique in ze wor-r-ld. You do wr-r-ong in not sending ze invitation to our-r fr-r-ien'. I would zank him for-r saving me fr-r-om death in my schooldays. But if you will not, you will not, and as you will not, zen must I give you a bodyguar-r-d to keep you safe until I take you back to him?"

"I don't want a bodyguard, Zarah. As long as I have your permission to run about all over the place...."

"But zat is it, ze place is ver-r-y big an' full of danger-r-ous places." Zarah had no intention of letting the girl make friends with any of her people, and rose as she spoke and crossed to the door. "I will ask Al-Asad to r-r-recommend someone to look after you, to chaper-r-ron you, as you say."

Al-Asad got to his feet when his mistress called him.

"I have them in my hand," she said, so quietly that Namlah strained her ears in

vain. "We will descend and speak upon it, but I will not that she makes friends amongst my people; find thou, therefore, someone to be ever upon her heels."

"Nay, woman, leave her free so that we find out the workings of her mind through her actions and through the tongues of those with whom she speaks. Warn her body-woman, even the ever-busy Namlah, that her life depends upon the life of the white woman and——"

Helen, who had been watching the magnificent couple, wondered what the sudden, heavy frown on Zarah's face portended, and instinctively moved back when she swept into the room.

"Where-r-re is your-r ser-r-vant?" she asked abruptly. "Why is she not attending you? Wher-r-e does zis Namlah hide her-r-self, zat woman with a face like a gr-r-avel path?"

Helen smiled up at the Arabian and drew her hand across her hair, pushing it back as a sign to the pock-marked woman who stood, quaking with fear and with hands clasped in the doorway of the recess, to hide herself.

"She went down just as you came up. I wonder you didn't pass her on the steps. I always like my linen washed at dawn, it smells so much the sweeter. She will be up in quite a little while to get my early cup of tea ready."

Helen lied quietly, quickly, bravely, to save the little servant, and sighed with relief when Zarah swept out on to the platform in great wrath. "Namlah!" she called, the mountains echoing the sweetness of her voice. "Namlah! Namlah! *ta al huna! ta al huna!*" and turned back into the room when Namlah did not come.

"She hides somewhere, listening to our speech, the lynx-eyed, fox-eared daughter of pigs," she stormed in Arabic, taking a step towards the recess. She was half-way across the room and Namlah half dead with terror, when Helen gave a piercing cry.

The lion-cub, roaming about as was its wont at dawn, had heard its mistress's voice and, bounding up the steps, had hurled itself into the room and on to Helen's divan. After her one cry of fear, she lay quite still, whilst the tawny beast, with lashing tail, sniffed at her neck, then with a low growl flung itself off the divan and hurled itself at Zarah's feet.

"A strange place zis Helena wiz str-r-ange customs an' str-r-ange nets " said

A strange place zis, Herena, wiz su f range customs an su f range pets, said Zarah casually, holding out her hand at arm's length, over which the lion-cub jumped.

“But is that lion safe?”

“So far-r-r, yes! When it is not, zen we kill it; zose zat do not obey do not live long her-r-e. I am sleepy. I will go down an' you will dine wiz me to-night—yes? Au revoir! Zink of all I say an' be wise, zat woman can wait.”

She walked slowly out of the room, taking no notice of Al-Asad.

He came to the doorway and looked in upon the beautiful white girl and frowned as he turned away.

“‘The butcher is not startled by the multiplicity of sheep.’” He quoted the proverb as he watched the woman who had no compassion for her victims, the woman he loved, descending the steps, then followed her, her willing slave, even to the bringing about of her heart's desire.

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## CHAPTER XI

*“The hole which he made opened into a granary.”—Arabic Proverb.*

She did not dine with the Arabian that night nor any other night, and when, one evening, some seven days later, completely restored to health, she walked out to the edge of the platform to ascertain the cause of the shouting of men, barking of dogs, and occasional firing of rifles, Namlah crept up behind and urged her to go in.

“Orders have come. Her Excellency is to remain inside her chamber until other orders come giving her her freedom.”

“But what is it all about?” inquired Helen, as she reluctantly entered her room.

Namlah spat, or, rather, made a sound as though she spat, before replying.

“Zarah the Merciless makes an excursion into the Robaa-el-Khali.” She pointed towards the cleft through which the desert in the starlight showed like the face of a veiled woman. “Allah grant that she remain there, a food for vultures, as have remained so many. She is a liar, a thief, a murderess. Allah guide the knife through her black heart.”

A spirit of rebellion, of adventure, of recklessness, showed in Helen’s eyes as she questioned the little woman who had repeated all she had heard the night she had spied through the window and had so urgently counselled silence and watchfulness and patience.

“Yea! Excellency! she leads the men. The men and beasts laden with provision and water and ammunition wherewith to make a camp between this and the scene of the fighting have departed these many hours. Ah! she is as cunning as the jackal. She relies not upon chance. She has always a place of refuge to fall back on if the fight goes against her, or if the men are in need of food for themselves or their guns. How long she will be gone? I know not; maybe a few hours, a night, a week—who knows?”

“The Nubian, has he gone too?”

Namlah laughed shrilly.

“Ha! the knotter of shoe-strings, the eater of dust, behold he has gone these may

days upon some secret journey. He held conclave of great length with the woman who rules us with a rod fashioned in the nethermost *Jahannam*. They sat under the starlight so that I could not approach, Excellency; they spoke softly so that I could not catch their words from the rock behind which I lay concealed.”

She smiled up into Helen’s face when, under the strain of the suspense in which she had lived for the last ten days, she took the servant by the shoulders and shook her none too gently.

“I can’t bear it much longer, Namlah!” she said in her pretty, broken Arabic. “I can’t bear the uncertainty, I can’t bear the silence, the waiting, with nothing to do to kill the terrible hours. I simply cannot bear it. For danger to myself I do not fear, I do not care. Cannot I find the way out so that I can escape? Can I not?”

There was no one in sight, there was certainly no one within hearing, up there in the eyrie so near the stars, but the little woman ran first to the right and then to the left and then into the room before she sidled up to Helen and whispered.

Is not intrigue as the breath of life in the East?

“Her Excellency must take exercise, must walk under the stars to-night whilst *she* is abroad.” She spread her fingers wide and down in the direction of the path leading across the quicksands. “Her Excellency must walk, even if it be amongst the rocks where the shadows lie blackest.”

Helen looked intently at the little woman, who gazed out of the doorway with an air of seraphic innocence.

“I could not find my way down there, Namlah! I should fall or get lost or——”

Namlah trotted to the door and stood with her hand shading her eyes, looking out towards the desert.

“Yet is there one, Excellency, who without eyes walketh safely amongst the rocks. One without eyes, but with much wisdom upon his tongue and goodness in his heart, who walketh ever without fear in the great darkness; one who yearneth to help those whose backs have suffered from the whip or whose hearts have suffered from the power wielded by that daughter of *Shaitan*!” She crept close to Helen and whispered in her ear: “One who likewise craveth to hurt, to wound, to kill, in revenge.”

Helen shivered at the hate in the little woman's voice, but she understood. She had learned the history of the blind man from Namlah; once when, restless and unable to sleep through anxiety, she had walked out on to the platform she had seen him in the grey light of the dawn, standing midway on the steps, his face raised to her abode; once Namlah had lain a few flowers on the silken coverlet, had whispered, "patience brings victory to the blind and the prisoner," and had retired to her pots and pans with finger on lips.

The body-woman walked to the edge of the platform and beckoned to the white girl she loved, and pointed to a silvery cloud of sand far out in the desert.

"Yonder she rides," she whispered. "May the sand choke her! May the scorpion sting her heel! May...." She smiled up at Helen and shrugged her scarred shoulders in the expressive Eastern way. "But of the luck of such, Excellency, is it written, 'throw him into the river and he will rise with a fish in his mouth.' Yet will her turn come; the tide cannot remain at the full, the sun must set. Behold! I descend to the river, whilst the men and women make merry in her absence, to fetch water for her Excellency's bath, leaving her alone, to walk amongst the rocks, in the protection of Allah!"

Helen watched the little woman descend the steep steps, balancing a great earthenware jar skilfully upon her head; noticed that she stopped for a moment near one gigantic boulder which lay to the right of the steps; listened to her singing as she made the rest of the descent down to the water, which looked like a ribbon of silver run through a purple velvet curtain, then entered the room, which was really a prison cell, pulled a sheet of dark blue silk from her bed, and ran out on to the ledge.

She did not hesitate.

That the woman might be a spy did not once enter her head, and if it had, under the strength of her love and her anxiety, she would doubtlessly have thrown caution to the soft night wind and risked her life in an endeavour to find out if there was not some way of escape by which she could return to the man she loved.

Her own clothes, cleansed and pressed by Namlah's busy fingers, had been returned to her, so that she stood, a beautiful picture of an English girl, in the strangest of strange surroundings, looking down into the shadows out of which, she prayed, help might come to her.

Afraid of her outline against the sky, fearful of dislodging some stone to send it clattering down the steps, she wrapped the blue sheet round herself and descended slowly, carefully, pausing to listen, standing to peer into the ink-black shadows on every side, and down to the plateau where, by the light of torches and of fires, she could see men and women passing to and fro.

She had almost reached the great boulder, when she stopped and drew the dark silk still tighter and peered about uneasily, as she tried to locate a soft hissing sound which came from some spot quite near to her.

Through bitter experience she had learned the ways of Arabia's scorpions, centipedes, wasps and flies; had fled in terror from the one and only *aboo hanekein* she had encountered, a fat, poisonous brute of a spider with formidable pincers, and wrestled vainly against the great variety of ants which the Peninsula offers; of locusts she had but the slightest acquaintance, and of the deadly vipers, the *Rukla* and the *Afar*, which abound in rocks she had only been warned that afternoon.

Yet for fear of someone mounting the steps she dared not remain where she was, and had just decided to risk the few yards which would bring her to the boulder, when once more she caught the hissing sound.

And then from sheer relief she almost laughed.

"Sit!" whispered Yussuf from the shadows. "Ya Sit! Sit!"

She crept forward and round the boulder to where stood the blind man, who had been perfectly aware of her noiseless descent. She did not shrink at the terrible face, twisted and scarred, which looked down upon her; rather did her heart go out to the maimed man as she laid her hand upon his arm and called him by name.

"I trust you, Yussuf," she said simply, which is quite one of the best ways of winning the heart of an embittered man.

"Her Excellency *can* trust me!" whispered Yussuf as he salaamed. "Namlah and I are brother and sister in affliction. I have lost the light of these mine eyes, she has lost the light of her life, her son, in the grievous battle. To ease our hurts we seek to help thee, gracious lady, so that upon her return the woman who rules us



may find ashes in the taste of her victory and gall in the wine of her success. The plans are laid, have been laid this long while. I will carry her Excellency over the secret path and out into the desert, then will I return for Namlah and the camels, which are hidden and waiting these many hours, the swiftest and most docile *hejeen* in the stables.”

“Now? At once?” asked Helen, trembling with excitement. “But how can you guide us across the desert?”

“Thy servant rides by the wind.” He lifted his sightless face to the star-strewn sky and smiled. “’Tis from the east, *Sit*. Let it blow in our faces, and we go towards the east until the sun sets after the passing of two days, then we go north upon the path to Hutāh, passing the field of the battle where the accursed offspring of the devil lifted the white woman.”

Overpowered with gratitude, almost speechless with amazement as the weight of her fear was lifted from her, Helen trembled, under the shock of the sudden realization of her hopes and, desirous that he should share in her happiness, caught the man’s hand in entreaty.

“You will come with us? You will let me and his Excellency, the man I am going to marry, look after you, make you happy, make you forget, you and Namlah?” She laughed softly, aglow with love and hope. “Gratitude is a small, a very small, word, Yussuf, and it cannot express what I would say in thanks.”

Yussuf smiled as he shook his head. Such words were rare in his ears; of such brotherly love, excepting for that in his own heart, he had had no knowledge.

“I will take thee, *Sit*, to within sight of the oasis, then must I return. My task is not finished, will not be finished, until the spirit of Zarah the Cruel has returned to the *Jahannam* from which it came. We must hasten by a path known only to me. I will lift her Excellency over the rough places and carry her safely across the parts where danger lies. The way is open, the night is clear, we——”

He stopped abruptly at the sound of voices raised in anger, and feeling for Helen, gripped her tight about the wrist.

Namlah’s voice seemed to rise in a screaming crescendo, in ratio to the steps she climbed, accompanied or followed by someone upon whom she poured out the vials of her wrath.

“Nay! thou wine-bibber,” she shrilled. “What if thy mistress did place the safekeeping of the white woman in thy useless hands? Nay! thou shalt not push me to the side of this accursed path so that thy legs, which may Allah strike with numbness, may carry thee with speed to the post thou didst forget in thy drunkenness. Keep thou behind me, lest I break the jar upon thy empty head and waste the precious water upon thy unclean body, which is fit carrion for the birds of prey. What sayest thou? Thou wouldst but look upon the white woman? So that thou mayst see her with thine own eyes? Verily shalt thou, if thou canst see for the wine with which thou hast filled thy vile and accursed body.”

Yussuf lifted Helen bodily into his arms.

“‘If thou seest a wall inclining, run from under it.’” He quoted the proverb as he carried her swiftly up the mountainside by a steep short cut, as sure-footed as a goat, as certain of his path as if he had eyes. “It is not the hour, but let her Excellency remember that Yussuf is her servant in all things.” He put her gently on her feet upon a ledge from which she could climb to the platform. “Remember, too, that when the hour does strike, then will Yussuf strike also. ‘Patience brings victory to the blind and to the prisoner.’”

A few moments later Helen stood just inside the doorway, listening to the violent altercation upon the steps.

There came the crash of a breaking jar, torrents of execration and imprecation, then silence, and, in spite of her disappointment, she smiled as she watched Namlah, slowly and with much dignity, climbing the steps, with a dripping wet individual in the rear.

“Seest thou the white woman with thine own eyes? Yea! Then sit thou there, thou dog!” cried Namlah at the top of her voice. “Nay, upon the second step. Wouldst force thy company upon thy betters? And may Allah strike thee with cold for having forgotten thy duty to thy mistress, so that thou diest of palsy before the dawn.”

There was a twinkle of laughter in the depths of the brown eyes as she combed the prisoner’s golden hair.

Is not intrigue as the breath of life to the Oriental?

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*“He swims in a span of water.”—Arabic Proverb.*

At that very hour Al-Asad, disguised as a holy man, sat in the camp of the Bedouins who had befriended Ralph Trenchard.

True, the holy man’s body was somewhat well covered, as though he had not unduly deprived himself of food in the ecstasy of his religion, and his feet in fairly good trim, considering the length of the pilgrimage he was making on foot to Mecca; also, upon close inspection, might the rents in his one garment be attributed to a blunt knife rather than to time.

But there are many kinds of holy men criss-crossing desert places, depending entirely upon the charity of chance-met Arabs for sustenance and the will of Allah for a safe arrival at their journey’s end. The tattered handkerchief fluttering from the end of the staff can be traced by the keen-eyed, approaching or retreating, for miles in the desert’s clear atmosphere, and heartbeats never fail to quicken at the chance encounter with the solitary human who wends his way across the burning sands, alone with his God.

As to others, so to Ralph Trenchard, sitting outside his tent, came that feeling of great respect which the sudden appearance of these mystics arouses in those who have the wherewithal to allay their hunger, and a place upon which to lay their heads at night; and with the respect, a great curiosity to read the secrets of a mind which allows so emaciated a body to endure and survive days of endless wandering and starvation and nights under heaven’s starlit roof. Al-Asad sat motionless, his eyes fixed upon space, whilst his stomach rebelled against the rice in the wooden bowl at his feet, and his whole being longed to get back to the spot, in the far distance, where he had hobbled his well-laden camel.

Fearful of news of his search being transmitted through space to the ears of those he sought, he had been forced to act up to his disguise and to travel many weary, sandy miles on foot to various Bedouin camps, and to eat many bowls of insipid rice, washed down his gasping throat with muddy coffee, whilst abstracting the news he wanted from his unsuspecting host by subtle questioning.

He had rejoiced to the innermost part of his being when, whilst humbly asking alms from the Bedouin chief, he had seen Ralph Trenchard out of the corner of his eye.

His quest was at an end. He had but to get into communication in some way with

the white man and arouse his interest, then leave the rest to the foolishness of a race which, as his mistress had told him, taught its men to look upon women as an almost sacred charge. He rose, and with hands uplifted turned to the four quarters of the globe, his keen eyes sweeping the camp for sign of the lynx-eyed Abdul, whilst the Bedouins drew back out of respect for his holiness.

On catching sight of the servant at the back of his master's tent, Al-Asad squatted upon his haunches and muttered to himself, letting the beads of Mecca run swiftly through his fingers whilst his crafty mind searched for the best way to start the business without arousing the servant's suspicions.

He scraped up the last handful of rice, being careful not to leave one single grain, and forced it down his rebelling throat, then rose and crossed slowly to a black patch of shadow, in which he sat himself, well aware that the eyes of the whole camp, especially those of the white man, were upon him. He sat motionless for awhile as though in thanksgiving for the nauseating meal, then made a gesture, upon which, with little cries and great jostling, the whole camp, men, women and many children, crowded about him, then, with the chief in the centre, sat themselves down in a semicircle at the respectful distance demanded by the holy one's piety.

Ralph Trenchard strolled to the extreme end of the right side of the semicircle. He was wholly restored to health, a prey to intense anxiety, and upon the eve of his departure for Huthah, where he intended calling upon the aid of the entire Peninsula for the recovery of Helen, and felt thankful for anything which might serve to distract his tormented mind. Abdul gave a final look round his master's tent, which consisted of camel-skins thrown over four upright poles, and ran quickly to his master's side.

He had done his best to dissuade his master from the rash proceeding of trying to discover her Excellency's whereabouts, had preached the doctrine of fatalism as known in the East, and had at last resigned himself to the inevitable and sworn, in the secret places of his faithful heart, to stick to the white man through thick and thin.

The visit of a holy man creates a welcome diversion in a camp where meals of dates, muddy coffee, and, if luck is in, a sickly mess of boiled camel flesh as *pièce de résistance* form the only break in the long, monotonous hours when fighting is not toward; the advent of a holy man who deigned to open his lips

except in prayer was to be reckoned a miracle.

Abdul moved close to Ralph Trenchard at the holy one's first words.

"Are any of thy children wounded, O my Son?" The words came faint and slow, as though spoken by one who had almost lost the power of speech. "I have with me an ointment of great power." Al-Asad searched amongst his rags and produced an alabaster pot, which had once contained rouge and had been bought by Zarah in Cairo, but which now reeked to high heaven of rancid camel fat mixed with aniseed.

"Nay! Father!" replied the chief, whilst his children whispered amongst themselves. "Those that were wounded are healed, those that were sick are recovered. Whyfore asketh thou? How knowest thou that they have been in battle?"

Al-Asad barely suppressed a chuckle as he pressed the lid down upon the distressing concoction and stored it once more about his person. He made no answer. He sat motionless, as though lost in meditation, until Ralph Trenchard could have fallen upon and shaken him back to a consciousness of his surroundings.

"A moon ago I prayed upon the site of a great battle, O my Son!" murmured Al-Asad slowly, after some long while and as though he had but just heard the question. "There was naught but bones and this." He once more searched amongst his rags and looked at some object, which he did not disclose to view, and took no notice of a quickly suppressed movement at the right end of the circle as Abdul gripped Ralph Trenchard by the arm. "I have asked those I have met upon my path if they knew aught about that combat. Nay, my Son! interrupt me not, the hour is slipping into eternity and I must be gone." The chief, who had been anxious to tell what *he* knew of the fight from personal experience, bowed in obedience and spread his hands. "It was a fight between white men and the woman of whose dire deeds the desert rings. All were killed but a white woman, who, grievously wounded and nigh unto death, was made prisoner and taken to the mountains known as the Sanctuary, which lie but a day's journey and a night's journey to the south of the spot where they fought, and where dwells the woman of evil repute."

He rose as he spoke, standing a dim and arresting figure in the shadows, and stretched out his hand.

“This I perceived glittering in the sun, midway between the mountains and the battlefield, upon a path marked in the sand by the swift passing of two camels. It is of too great a value for one who lives upon the words of the Prophet of Allah, the one and only God. Perchance wilt thou, my son, take it in return for thy charity to the humble pilgrim.”

He placed the locket in the chief’s hands, and in the scramble of the entire camp to get a better view of the gift, crept behind the tent and disappeared into the night, where, once sure that he was beyond the chief’s range of vision, he emulated the ostrich in speed until he reached the spot where he had left his well-laden camel.

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## CHAPTER XII

*“This is not the bishop’s square.”—Arabic Proverb.*

Abdul removed the locust from his bowl, laid it on one side with three of its brethren for future consumption, and looked at Ralph Trenchard, who sat, eating his evening meal, some yards away. Then he wet his finger and held it up, frowned, looked across the red sand ridges and over to the scene of the disastrous battle, and shook his head.

“Bad!” he said, removing yet another locust from his shoulder. “Bad locust, bad wind from the east, bad omen of death.” He spread his fingers against the power of dead bones and, a victim of superstition, twisted himself round from north to south as he sat. “All bad for the beginning of a second journey into this bad desert.”

He placed an iron plate, spread with camel fat, to heat upon the top of the up-to-date brazier, which was the joy of his life, spread a thin layer of dough made of *durra* upon it, and whilst waiting for it to brown, prepared the five large, dark locusts for frying, praying inwardly that his master would reject the succulent savoury.

“Five!” he commented, as he salted the insects and rolled them up in the thin, buttered cake. “Praise be to Allah that we have one good omen. *Aï!* Six, nay, seven.” He plucked two more from his skirts, and, fearful of finding the eighth, which would bring the ill-luck of an even number, ran swiftly across to his master with his offering.

For two reasons Ralph Trenchard turned the savoury over with his fork. He had just finished an excellently cooked meal of a highly spiced variety of the ubiquitous *samh* broth, and as highly spiced and as excellently cooked partridge, and a handful of dates; also had he become extremely suspicious of any fresh addition to the larder and of any new culinary effort on the part of his servant.

He refused the crisp, well-browned roll at first, then, thinking it only kind to reward the man for his devotion, bit off an end and finished the lot.

“Topping, Abdul! I’ll have one every day. What’s it made of?”

Abdul hid his hands in his sleeves as he lied with the ease which comes from long practice.

“Little bits of meat and fat and vegetables fried in butter, Excellency. The servant is rewarded by the light of pleasure in his master’s eye.”

Ralph Trenchard rose and shook himself.

“We’d better be starting, Abdul,” he said, flicking a locust from his sleeve. “The journey of a day and the journey of a night, that means the journey of two nights as we cannot travel in the sun, and then—and then I shall know, I shall be certain. And look here, my friend, don’t you go cooking any of these disgusting beasts and serving them up as fried dates or something.”

He plucked one of the disgusting beasts from his shirt sleeve and flung it away, then looked at his servant, who stood motionless, a cloud of despondency dimming the habitually merry countenance.

“Well? And what’s the matter now? Have the camels stampeded or the water-skins burst?”

Abdul suddenly knelt and touched the ground with his forehead.

“Give ear unto thy servant, O master! Hasten not the journey, linger yet one more night and yet one more day. The omens are not propitious for the starting. We are surrounded by death, by the bones of our brethren. The east blows the wind from her mouth and from the north comes a puff of breath, so that the wind will blow slantwise towards the west and the south.”

“Well? Why not? As long as it doesn’t blow straight from the south like a furnace, I should say that we ought to be jolly well pleased.”

Abdul gathered three locusts from the ground, stored them surreptitiously in his voluminous sleeve, and rose to his feet, then walked close up to Ralph Trenchard, salaamed, and clasped his hands in fervent beseeching.

“These few disgusting beasts, O Excellency, are the forerunners, maybe, of a great storm of many disgusting beasts, which in time of stress or famine are thankfully eaten by the Arab and the camel. If the wind were otherwise set, Excellency, if it were but the locust wind from the east unto the west, then would I say beasts, beasts, so that we should pass on and leave the storm behind. But



I cry haste, haste, so that we should pass on and leave the storm behind. But, Excellency, the puff of breath from the north will cause the disgusting beasts to follow us even southwards, so that we are like to drown in a sea of crawling, disgusting beasts, or to flee before them into the heart of the bad desert, there to be fallen upon by the evil spirits which dwell therein. Excellency, the omens are bad. The locust is bad, the wind is bad, likewise the bones, and”—he paused to allow the dread of the last and worst omen to sink thoroughly into the white man’s mind—“and the servant’s camel has pulled the amulet of good luck from about the neck of the master’s camel and”—followed another pause for the same good purpose—“has eaten it!”

Ralph Trenchard laughed heartily, being one of the thrice blessed few who are absolutely free from the faintest trace of superstition, the greatest curse of modern days.

“Look here, Abdul.” He put his hand on the faithful man’s shoulder and turned him in the direction of the south. “Not so very far ahead, in an almost straight line from here, is the range of mountains in which the woman Zarah dwells....” Abdul spat with vindictive vigour in a southward direction. “That woman has knowledge of her Excellency, who is to be my wife....” Abdul, remembering the holy man’s statement about her Excellency’s health, spread his fingers westward in the direction of the bones glistening on the battlefield. “And if you think locusts or bones or amulet-eating camels can prevent me from starting when I said we would start, and that is in an hour’s time, then are you thrice mistaken....” Abdul pushed one of the disgusting beasts, afflicted with an inclination to stray, back into his sleeve. “And I should advise you, my son, to heave those thoughts out of your mind or you’ll have us wading up to our necks in locusts, or the bones getting up and following us, or the camels bursting from an overdose of good luck. Besides, remember your prophecy about the holy man, who, you said, was a bad holy man. He hasn’t brought us bad luck so far. You were mistaken, and you were, and you *are*, afraid and....”

There was a limit to Abdul’s capacity for holding his tongue. He made finger gestures towards the four quarters of the globe, then shook his fist in the direction where lay the Bedouin camp which they had left behind many days ago.

“Mistaken! O master! Mistaken! Why did the holy man run, run like the ostrich, so that the marks of his holy feet showed hardly upon the soft sand? Why did I, thy servant, find the footmarks of a camel far out in the desert just where the feet

of the holy man made no more marks upon the sand?”

“I expect someone was waiting to give him a lift, Abdul.”

“Then why not lift him to the gate of the Bedouin camp, O my master?”

Ralph Trenchard took his servant by the shoulder and turned him in the direction where lay the camels.

“I expect he didn’t want the others to know that he was living in the lap of luxury, my son. Go and eat, because I am coming to overhaul everything and see that all is shipshape before we start on the last bit of the journey, at the end of which this uncertainty will be lifted from me.”

In spite of its pleasantry, Abdul recognized the one tone in his master’s voice which always caused him to obey with alacrity.

He salaamed and departed to do his master’s bidding, gathering a good sleeveful of locusts as he went, and sat, making finger gestures towards the east and returning thanks to Allah for the tasty addition to the meal, while the disgusting beasts browned nicely upon the iron plate spread with camel fat.

But a few hours later he turned in his saddle, then raised his hands to the heavens, which showed black as with thunder towards the east.

“May Allah burn them with the fire of His wrath! May His right hand crush the life from them! May He speak words of anger so that they are swept from the white man’s path.”

From his seat upon the first of seven camels he looked at Ralph Trenchard, who rode at his side, and back along the six beasts which, fastened muzzle to scrumpy tail by rope, had leisurely followed each other up and down the great ridges, whilst the menacing cloud spread rapidly across the sky.

Ralph Trenchard turned and looked back.

“I am sorry I have been the cause of your getting into this frightful danger, Abdul,” he said quietly. “Still, I have been in tighter corners than this and won out, so we won’t despair. You see, the swarm may pass well over our heads as there is nothing green for it to settle on within miles. Besides, if we had stayed where we were it would have been the same thing. We haven’t got so very far

where we were it would have been the same thing. We haven't got so very far from the camp. Still, I'm sorry, and I...."

The rest of the sentence was jerked from him as his camel stumbled to its knees, half rose, fell, and with an infuriated scream got to its feet with the curious back jump exclusive to a fallen camel. They proceeded in silence for almost a quarter of a mile, when there came a shout from Abdul which was lost in a chorus of shrieks and groans and lamentations from the string, as the middle camel crashed, pulling its brother behind to its knees by the rope attached to its halter, and its sister in front to a sitting position by the rope attached to her skimpy tail, until at last the seven beasts sprawled upon the ground.

Ralph Trenchard followed Abdul's pointing finger. Lost in his thoughts and without looking at the ground over which he travelled, he had passed up and down the ridges which were soon to end in a great flat space. He looked down now, and shuddered at the sight. A thin layer of brown and crawling locusts lay upon the sands as far as eye could see—a terrible, living sheet of slipperiness upon which no biped or quadruped could hope to remain upright for long. He did not hesitate. He shook out the feet-long leather thong of the camel-whip and flicked the sides of the nearest fallen camel, against which was already forming a drift of locusts. And as the camel tried to rise he flicked the others, whilst Abdul alternately shouted encouragement and prayed to Allah. And when at last the beasts had been forced to their feet, to stand indifferent and contemptuous, he took his camel slowly across to where Abdul sat upon the leader and looked him in the face, whilst locusts, hurled by the ever-increasing wind, rattled like hailstones upon his topee, and caught and clung and crawled over his shirt and breeches and over his servant's robes.

"You must decide, Abdul," he said quietly. "You belong to the desert. You have seen a locust storm many times. Do we go forward or back, or do we stay here and wait, praying that it will pass before we die of suffocation?"

Abdul did not hesitate. Already the insects had covered the camels' feet and were clinging in bunches to their sides; already the camels were moaning like children in pain, a sure sign that fear utterly possessed them and that panic pressed them close.

"We will move forward. And will his Excellency fasten his shirt lest the disgusting beasts crawl about his person. We are in the hands of Allah, O my master, and we must follow the path marked out for us, even if it be spread with a carpet of locusts. The heart of the storm has not yet reached us. Kismet! it is

a carpet of locusts. The heart of the storm has not yet reached us. Kismet! It is the will of Allah. Forward, my master, for that way the future always lies.”

Inch by inch, with the leather-thonged whip curling backwards and forwards over the string, and Abdul alternately shouting encouragement, praying to Allah, and calling upon the aid of the great Prophet, the camels climbed the next ridge, which rose high above its fellows owing to a mass of volcanic rock beneath it, whilst the locust cloud spread across the heavens. With its forefeet just over the edge on the downward steep descent, Ralph Trenchard’s camel slipped, threw him clear over its head down to the bottom of the dip, then followed in a series of terrible somersaults, to collapse at the bottom with a broken neck.

“Don’t get down, Abdul! For God’s sake, don’t get down!” shouted Ralph Trenchard as he scrambled to his feet just as the seven in a string, well back on their haunches, slid down safely to the bottom, the ridge meanwhile growing higher and higher as the locusts piled upon it. “I’ll cut you loose and take the second camel; it’s got two water-skins. You’ve got to take one—we’ll fix it on somehow.” He hacked at the rope which fastened Abdul’s camel to the second, then cut through the rope connecting the second and third; unfastened the water-skins, pulled the pack off the second camel, wrenched the saddle from the dead beast, and handed it up to Abdul, who threw it across the other camel’s back.

“Jam the brute against the side, Abdul, I’m going underneath. Tight, that’s it, don’t let it move. That’s it. Fling the off-strap further over. My God! That’s it! I’ve done it. Keep him jammed, I’m getting the water-skins on. Oh! my God! one’s burst; one of those fiends has driven its teeth into it. Fasten this one to your saddle—d’you hear what I say? fasten it—I’ve got my water-bottle and—you’ll get the whip across your back if you don’t—I’m going to tighten the strap—jam him still, I’m coming out—you can give me a leg up—I—my....” Abdul bent and hauled him up as he crept from under the camel’s belly and almost threw him into the saddle.

“Come! Master, come! hasten! The camels fight, they are mad with fear; they kill all they see when mad. Nay, master, be not so mad thyself. What matter if they be bound together? They are but camels, and thou, O master, art a son of God! Turn thy camel, Excellency.”

But the camels would not turn. True, they backed in their fear of the other five, which, fastened together, shrieked and fought, tore and snarled, as they vainly tried to climb out of the dip in which the stream of locusts was rising inch by

inch; but get them round they could not, however hard they pulled at their cast-iron mouths and struck them on the off shoulder.

Then Abdul yelled and tore off his outer cloak, sitting breathless, in voluminous drawers and vest, ready for the onslaught. The five camels, hopelessly fastened together, had straightened themselves out. The first, clean mad with fear, had seen two of its own kind standing quietly a little way ahead. For a second it stood quite still, excepting for its head, which swung from side to side, with great eyes rolling and long tongue hanging from the foam-flecked mouth, then it shrieked, shrieked as only a camel can, and charged, dragging the others, which rocked from side to side. They slipped and fell, and scrambled to their feet under the spur of the terrible teeth which met in the hindquarters and the agony of the ropes which lashed muzzle and tail together.

The foremost saw the open space on the waiting camel's off-side and made for it, blindly, drew level with Abdul and swung its head viciously sideways, to find itself enveloped in the man's coat. Followed a frightful scene, in which it stood quite still, lost in the darkness which had suddenly overtaken it, whilst the other four rushed backwards and forwards and swung themselves round until they jammed in a fighting circle.

"Quick, master! Now! Follow! Allah protect thee in this corner of *Jahamman*! Fear at last moves my Satan-possessed beast; may Allah cause it to burn in the nethermost pit!" The faithful man leant over and gripped the halter and wrenched Ralph Trenchard's camel round as his own turned. "We will go apace! We will...."

His words were lost in the screaming of the five camels, as the foremost, freed of the cloak, suddenly charged up the side of the ridge. Up, up, almost to the top, pulling its companions after it, up to the edge where the locusts lay thick, then down, over and over, with its fellow prisoners fighting, struggling, screaming, back to the bottom of the dip, where 'tis wise to leave them to the mercy of Allah.

The two men urged their camels swiftly from the terrible sight, whilst with a soft *phit-phit-phit* the locusts fell upon each other with the sound of raindrops upon glass. The sky was black with them; they swept above their heads with the whistling sound of a tropical hail storm.

"We will stay here, master, if it be the will of Allah! We will throw the

disgusting beasts out as they fill in the space about us. Thou art white and I am black, yet are we brothers in distress and in the sight of Allah.”

Ralph Trenchard held out his hand, which Abdul just touched as he salaamed.

But it was not the will of Allah that they should remain to die, perhaps of suffocation, in the dip filled with locusts; it was His will, perchance, that they should make a last fight for life, which is good when filled with love, love of the woman, love of the master, love of the brother and friend.

Abdul turned for one moment to secure the water-skins more firmly upon his saddle, when his camel stampeded, rushing blindly ahead for no good reason, as is the custom of the brutes. Followed by Ralph Trenchard's, it turned sharply and scrambled to the top of the ridge, where the men bent double to save their faces from the driving locust rain.

“Master!”

Ralph Trenchard heard his servant's voice as his camel turned and fled along the top of the ridge until it was swallowed up in the locust storm. “Abdul!” he called, covering his face with his arm. “God keep....” He beat the insects off his shoulders, beat them off as they piled thickly behind him on the saddle, paused for a moment in the ghastly work as a faint “Allah!” came to him from somewhere out of the dark, then beat at the horrible things which crawled all over him with a sickening scratching of their scaly bodies. The camel, crazed with the things which covered it as with a coat of mail, slid, shrieking, down the side of the ridge and scrambled up the farther side, and down and up the next, and yet the next. Ralph Trenchard, with his feet crossed round the pommel of his saddle, bent his head to his knees and rode for mile after mile, clutching the tufts of coarse hair upon the camel's shoulder, whilst the locusts piled up on his back and neck.

Why should he try to stop the camel? Why should he get down? Why should he not go on and on for ever riding, riding through an endless desert of swarming, crawling, creeping locusts, which stretched across the heavens and the earth from north to south, from east to west? Was it not the will of Allah? Was not ...? Up he went and down, hanging on to the coarse hair just above the camel's shoulders, up and down, and then on and on, evenly, smoothly, whilst the locusts whistled like a tropical hailstorm and the sky lighted way down in the east as the great curtain of insects swept towards and away to the west.

And he went on and on, shuddering under the feeling of the locusts crawling over him when they had long since taken flight, leaving him and his camel free; on and on through the journey of the scorching day which followed the journey of the night, and still onward in the way which was to lead him to certain knowledge of the girl he loved; on and on, with his head bent to his knees and his hands clutching the coarse hair, mercifully unconscious at last.

On and on, until a range of mountains showed faintly in the far distance and the sun went down behind it, just as, many miles away, two Arabs, journeying towards the Oasis of Hareek, drew Abdul out from under his dead camel and, finding that he breathed, straightened the broken leg between improvised splints, and placed him gently upon the third camel, which carried all their worldly belongings.

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## CHAPTER XIII

*“Under every downhanging head dwells a thousand mischiefs.”*—Arabic Proverb.

Namlah had been superseded.

No suspicion whatever attached to her, but, whether her curses had been too potent or the blow of the water-jar too much for him, the man who had partaken of much good red wine the night of Helen’s attempted escape had died.

That, in connexion with certain gossip concerning Namlah’s friendship and enthusiastic praise of the white woman, decided Zarah. She sent her packing, without warning, and in her stead put a villainously ugly, surly negress incapable of speech, much less of a kind thought or deed, who proceeded to follow the prisoner at a distance wherever she went, thereby rendering speech with blind Yussuf impossible.

Knowing that Helen must pass the great rock on her way down to the river to bathe, as was her custom just after sunrise, Yussuf sat himself down in its shadow the morning after Namlah’s dismissal, with intent to tell the prisoner the reason for the change in the body-woman and to warn her to be on her guard. He lifted his head at the sound of her footsteps, then frowned, though no one else could possibly have discerned the other almost noiseless tread made by bare feet, one of which pressed the ground more heavily than the other.

Judging correctly the distance between the two women, he put his finger to his lips and whispered *“A’ti balak”* as he salaamed.

Be careful!

The change in her body-woman, combined with Yussuf’s warning, caused Helen’s anxiety to increase, until her days became a burden of suspense and her nights a nightmare of troubled dreams in which she saw her lover lying dead or wounded in the desert or a prisoner in the hands of some lawless tribe.

She would not allow herself to think of her position nor of her future, but she made a vow in the depths of her valiant heart that, no matter what was in store for her, no matter how the Arabian might exile or threaten, she would not show



for her, no matter how the Arabian might cajole or threaten, she would not show a sign of the anxiety which consumed her, nor write a word of the letter which she knew would bring her lover, if he lived, hot-foot, to her.

Then Zarah, who had not given up hopes of getting the letter from the girl and who waited for the return of Al-Asad from his quest, showed herself suddenly friendly, and Helen gladly responded to her invitations, to visit the kennels and the stables and the rest of the erstwhile monastery.

True, she had been forbidden to wander amongst the rocks or to climb to the beginning of the cleft or to ride either horse or camel; true, also, that the surly negress followed her wherever she went, so that, in spite of the extra liberty, she felt herself more closely guarded and more carefully watched than ever. Still, the days passed more quickly and her friends amongst the dogs and their grooms became almost too numerous to be counted.

Upon her first visit to the kennels, unaccompanied by Zarah, the head groom, who worshipped the dogs, reluctantly offered her the whip without which his mistress would not enter the door when upon her visits of inspection.

“What for?” asked Helen, as she looked over his shoulder to where the famous greyhounds and the dogs of Billi stood watching her.

“Out of fear, Excellency; they may be dangerous.”

“Fear of what?”

The head groom did not reply, but spread his fingers in a gesture against the evil memory of the woman the dogs hated, and rushed to save Helen from them when, barking and leaping, they threw themselves upon her in instant friendliness in response to her call.

In the days following she visited the kennels upon every possible occasion, until even Rādi, the bitch, fawned at her feet in love and the grooms ran to greet her at the kennel door.

Through the order forbidding her to ride, the grooms of the horse and camel stables became smitten of a grievous jealousy as they listened to the tales of the white woman’s graciousness recounted to them by the head groom of the kennels.

“Dogs! Yea! perchance she has knowledge of the dog, but *ride!* pah! O brother, what knows she of the Nejdee? What would she avail against the vagaries of the desert horse?”

“Wilt thou make a bet, O my brother?”

Which is a perfectly absurd question to ask an Arab, who will gamble with his last coffee bean if he has nothing of more value in hand.

The bet spread, dividing the camp into two factions which were ready to fight over it upon the slightest provocation. The grooms of the stables were backed by their friends; the grooms of the kennels had an equal following; they all showed a catholic and reckless taste in stakes, which ranged from marriageable daughters, through money, jewellery and weapons, down to emaciated poultry.

News of the bet came to Zarah’s ears the day upon which Al-Asad returned with the report that Ralph Trenchard was safe, had started for the Sanctuary accompanied by one Abdul, and had been sighted near the scene of the battle, which meant that he was but a day’s journey behind.

She cursed in her heart that interest in Helen should have been aroused at such an inauspicious moment, then instantly, little knowing that the girl’s horsemanship equalled, even surpassed, her own, conceived a diabolically cunning plan by which she could bring about her death before Ralph Trenchard’s arrival, and without, withal, arousing suspicion amongst the men.

Helen wanted to ride, the men wanted her to ride; well, ride she should, and to her death.

Lulah, the black mare, had been pronounced untamable. Descendant of the mare who had brought the Sheikh to safety, likewise descendant of the mare who had been the cause of Yussuf’s blindness, she was as black of temper as she was of coat.

Three people out of the whole camp had been able to ride her the entire length of the plateau.

Zarah, Bowlegs, and the Patriarch.

Not one of the others who had taken the risk even of trying to mount her had escaped injury. Each one had been thrown, considering himself lucky if he

escaped injury. Each one had been thrown, considering himself lucky if he escaped with slight concussion; there had been broken bones a-plenty and one broken neck.

That made the beginning and end of the plan.

If Helen succeeded in getting across the saddle she would of necessity be thrown; she must be. She might break her neck, in which case all the trouble would be over; or she might be stunned, in which case she would look like dead, which would serve as well.

Brigands do not worry themselves overmuch about such details as heartbeats; scruples do not exist in a jealous woman's heart.

Neither was there time to lose.

She sent for the head groom of the stables.

"Lulah the Black, mistress?" The man raised a face of consternation as Zarah finished speaking. "Mistress, she is not fit; she is as wild as a bird on the wing; she is possessed of the devil. One of thy slaves even now lies sick of the meeting of her teeth in his shoulder."

Zarah put an end to his protestations by the simple method of smiting him across the mouth.

"And I will saddle her with my own hands upon the day of sport to-morrow, O my son, and thou shalt hold her near me until I give the signal. Likewise shalt thou and others make a pretence of mounting her, a pretence only. And see that thou makest no mistake, lest thou beareth the burden of my litter for a space."

The morrow came, bringing a horseman who carried the news of the disappearance of the white man and his servant in the locust storm.

In her rage against Fate Zarah decided to countermand the sports; then, fearful of angering her men and aching to find an object upon which to vent her fury and the agony of as big a love as she was capable, once more changed her mind and decided to carry out the programme.

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*“Beaten—but to-day beater.”—Arabic Proverb.*

“The shadow of the great locust storm has fallen upon Zarah the Beautiful!” whispered Bowlegs to Yussuf’s Eyes as they watched the sports with all the enthusiasm and delight of the Arab’s heart, which upon occasion can be so childlike. The dumb youth nodded his head and smiled and tapped a description of Zarah’s face upon his blind friend’s arm, whereupon Yussuf laughed loudly and long and rubbed his slender hands together at the thought of the Arabian girl’s discontent.

She reclined in her litter this late afternoon, swung upon the shoulders of four prisoners, her face as black as thunder; she flung herself irritably from side to side, and used her whip smartly upon the backs of the men—who had stood in the sun for an hour or so—when, by shifting the litter, they tried to alleviate the pain of the wounds it made in their shoulders.

It was her favourite form of punishment for trivial offences, and she kept Al-Asad, the muscular half-caste, close at hand, so that he should be in readiness to take the place of the first one of the four who should collapse under the combined torture of the heat and the weight of the jewel-encrusted ivory litter. She had no reason to use the whip upon his back. His mighty muscle made nothing of the weight; his negroid blood withstood the heat of the sun; his abnormal love caused him to find joy in the task, blinding him to the smiles, rendering him deaf to the titter which the humiliation of his task invariably drew from his friends, who loved the mighty man and grieved over his insensate passion.

She was surrounded by slaves who cast terrified glances at her wrathful countenance as they performed their various tasks. At her head two Abyssinian maidens, nude save for the scarlet sashes which girt them about the middle, stood upon low pedestals like glistening black statues of Venus, fanning her with fans of snow-white ostrich feathers; boys, slim, dark-eyed, with slender hands and feet, offered her cool drinks, sweetmeats and fruits upon trays of beaten silver; girls, slim, dark-eyed, with slender hands and feet, threw perfumed water into the air.

Helen sat some way off upon a pile of cushions in the shade of a rock, making a sharp contrast in her dilapidated but well-built Shantung breeches and knee-length coat with the Arabian’s almost barbaric splendour; and many a glance

was cast at her from the serried ranks of men, who looked with interest upon the beautiful white prisoner, about whom Namlah had, most unwisely, ecstatically and so unceasingly talked.

That morning had come the invitation to witness the sports, to which she had responded with alacrity, to find herself, of a sudden, the object of interest to many hundreds of men, and a prey to uneasiness at the sight of Zarah's mocking smile and the memory of Yussuf's whispered warning.

Her hair shone like gold against the dark rock background. She laughed at the men's encounters in the "*Jerzed*," and clapped her hands at their marvellous dexterity with spear and rifle and revolver; but she kept her eyes away from the spot where the four bare-headed men underwent torture in the terrific heat of the sun.

She had begged Zarah to spare them; she had entreated with clasped hands, and with pitying eyes had lain her handkerchief upon the nearest wounded shoulder, which is a foolish thing for a beautiful girl to do when she is the prisoner of a beautiful woman famed for her cruelty throughout a land which is not exactly noted for the gentleness of its methods. She had retired to the pile of cushions and had sat down with eyes averted from the terrible picture of the beautiful, insolent woman who had imperiously bidden her to mind her own business, and had brought her whip down sharply upon the backs of the two front, undersized, under-nourished Armenians.

She sat quite by herself, so that she could not ask the meaning of the mighty shout which went up when Zarah raised her right hand, sparkling with jewels in the sun. The men in the back rows pushed towards the front, and those in front pushed their ambitious brethren back with oaths, so that a pitched battle seemed imminent, in which some part of the grievances, not only of the seats but also of the stables and the kennels, might be settled.

Peace fell with a great suddenness when Zarah sat forward and beckoned Al-Asad. She looked at the warring factions for a long moment, during which they sat as though carved out of the mountainside; then she smiled slowly and nodded her head and raised her right hand twice, upon which the men awoke once more, as from a trance, and yelled.

Helen rose to her feet and clapped her hands, heedless of the eyes which flashed

from her to Lulah, the black, superb Nejdee mare, as she was led forward, seemingly with as much wickedness in her as a lamb. The men nudged each other and took on fresh bets with the neighbouring enemy as they remarked upon the stirrups swinging from the wisp of a native saddle. "Stirrups!" ejaculated a groom of the stables to one of the kennels. "And thou say'st that the white woman *rides*?"

"The *Inglizi* ride not without stirrups!"

"Then they ride not at all!"

"With or without stirrups, O brother, thou knowest that that black she-devil Lulah is not to be ridden; yet will I make thee a bet of this, my silver-handled knife, against the silver ring of no value upon thy finger that yon white woman rides the Satan-possessed mare."

The two men placed the stakes at their feet just as, with a short run, one of the stable grooms flung himself into the saddle, and fell off the other side as the mare reared, jerking the head groom, who held the halter, off his feet.

Then ran men from all sides, eager, from sheer love of horses and of sport, to try and dominate the beautiful creature that lashed out on every side, squealing with what they thought to be anger, and what Helen knew to be pain. And slowly, inch by inch, the litter tipped to one side as one of the undersized, under-nourished Armenians succumbed to the agony of his hurt, until Zarah, white with rage and cursing volubly, stepped hurriedly out as the other three dumped the litter just as their companion fell. She did not wait, so great was her rage, to upbraid them; instead, longing to hurt, to kill, in her wrath, she walked straight up to Helen, who stood watching the mare pawing the ground.

"You say you can r-r-ride anyzing, Helena, my dear-r-r school fr-rien'," she said sweetly, standing slender and straight, at the English girl's side, whilst the men broke ranks and rushed across the plateau so as to overhear the conversation.

"So I can, Zarah. But you know there's something wrong with that mare. It's not all nerves."

"She has never-r-r been r-r-ridden befor-r-e, Miss Veter-r-inar-r-y, that's all zat is ze matter wiz her-r-r. Why do you not have a tr-r-y?"

"That is all right, but I am not a veterinarian, and I am not a horse."

“Why not indeed? I had a bucking waler at home once, which was miles worse than that mare. Tell the men to stand clear, and tell the one holding her to turn her head from me. I don’t want her broadside on.”

Final and terrific betting took place as the men heard their mistress issue the last orders and rushed back to their places; then complete silence fell as Helen walked towards the mare, then bent to adjust a strap on her riding-boot. She looked back suddenly at Zarah and caught the expression of her face, and bent and adjusted yet again the strap upon her boot.

She could not interpret the Arabian’s mocking smile, but she understood, in a lightning flash of intuition, that she was to uphold her country’s reputation for riding in the eyes of the finest horsemen in the world, and, great horsewoman that she was, became suddenly lost to everything outside a fierce determination to do her country credit.

“My last goat to thy new shoes,” a groom of the kennels whispered feverishly to his neighbour at the sight of Helen’s laughing face as she backed a yard or so; he nearly broke the neighbour’s arm in the terrific grip he gave it when Helen ran, caught the mane, vaulted into the saddle, and throwing her left leg over the beautiful black head, slipped to the ground on the off-side just before the beast reared with a scream.

“*Wah! wah!*” yelled the men. “*Wah! wah!*” and rose to their feet and fought each other in their great excitement.

“Allah gives us the victory!” yelled a groom of the stables. “If she cannot even sit a horse, how can she ride? Hasten, O my brother, with a cushion upon which this white woman may rest safely upon the earth!”

“Advice given in the midst of a crowd is loathsome,” quoted brother, his hand upon his knife, which he forgot to draw as he watched Helen. She stood talking to the mare; she beckoned a child with a tray of dates, and took a handful and held them out. The mare stretched her beautiful head and sniffed at them, then nibbled them, showing the red depths of her nostrils; then, when Helen gave a pull at the saddle, lashed out and flung herself sideways.

“I thought so,” said Helen.

For quite ten minutes she stood talking to the mare, until the men began to fidget and grumble and Zarah to laugh; then she spoke sharply to the groom who held

and grumble and Zarah to laugh, then she spoke sharply to the groom who held the rope halter.

“Hold on tight, I am going to take the saddle off.”

Zarah made a quick step forward as Helen patted the satiny flank, working her hands towards the heavy buckle. There came a yell from everyone as she seized it and hung on to it until it was undone, just as the groom hung on to the rope halter, despite the slashing hoofs and the mare’s violent efforts to be rid of these people who so tormented her.

Helen whipped the light saddle off the mare’s blood-stained back and held it up, turning it first to Zarah, who laughed, and then to the men, who literally howled execrations.

“You brutes!” she cried. “You cowardly brutes! Look! The point of a nail, which pricked the mare each time the saddle was touched. Come here.” The head groom ran forward, salaaming, protesting that he knew nothing about it all, speaking the truth, for a wonder. “You say you did not saddle the mare. Then why don’t you look after the men under you? Take it!” She flung the wisp of a saddle full in the man’s face, so that the buckle cut his cheek, upon which the place resounded with shouts of joy and peals of laughter, which stopped when she raised her hand.

“I ride her bare-back,” she cried, and smiled at the men when, with the Arab’s proverbial inconstancy, they yelled encouragement.

She stood patting the mare, stroking the quivering back, lightly touching the superficial wound until the animal became accustomed to pressure on the spot; then she took the halter and trotted the beautiful beast down the full length of the plateau, whilst the men sighed with joy at the sight.

“A babe can lead a horse,” scoffed the equivalent of a British stable-lad; “let us wait until she essays to scramble to the back, even as a monkey scrambles up a pole.”

But Helen had no intention of emulating the monkey; she intended riding that mare if she died in the attempt. She took the beautiful creature round the full circle, caused by the men sitting in a ring, at a trot, then at a gentle canter, then caught the mane and vaulted across the bare back.



“Now, God,” cried Helen, “help me *now*!”

Which was her somewhat unusual prayer in time of stress.

The spectators held their breath as the mare bucked madly in an effort to dislodge the girl; then they yelled again and again as she reared and bucked and flung her heels up until Helen leant against the satiny back.

It was a magnificent exhibition of horsemanship, but the men scattered like chaff before the wind when Lulah the Black suddenly made a dash through them straight for the river edge; and they shouted bets one to the other upon the white woman’s chance of life and death as she almost shot over the mare’s head when she stopped suddenly on the very brink, with slender forelegs wide spread; then wheeled and raced back to the arena, where she bucked to the far end, then wheeled and broke into a furious gallop, which strenuous exercise lasted for some considerable time, until it changed to a canter, then subsided to a trot, when the men, carried out of themselves with enthusiasm, rushed and surrounded the pair.

Zarah, with a face like a night of storm, had just beckoned Al-Asad to order him to quell the humiliating tumult, when the sentry from the cleft in the rocks came running down the narrow path.

“It is a solitary rider, O mistress,” he panted as he fell at Zarah’s feet, “upon a far-spent camel. He hangs over upon his own knees, he guided not the beast, which even now flounders deep in the sands of death. But the space of three of thy servant’s hands to the west, O Great One, and the camel stood safely upon the hidden path. I cannot see the face of the rider, but his raiment is that of the white race, and I ran to tell thee, O mistress, as thou didst command me.”

Zarah gave an order to Al-Asad and beckoned the head groom of the stables, who stood at a distance nursing his wounded cheek.

“The stallion, Abyad, on the instant,” she said sharply.

The man ran at uttermost speed to the stables, whilst Zarah, taking no notice of Helen, walked swiftly to the beginning of the narrow path leading up to the cleft, as Al-Asad strode through the men, hurling them roughly to each side, until he reached the mare.

“By Allah, I have never seen such a thing before,” said the head groom, “and I have been a groom for thirty years.”

“Behold, O white woman,” he said curtly, “thou art to return to thy nest near the skies and to remain within until thy mistress sends for thee. The black woman with the gait of a lame hen will keep guard over thee, and if thou dost attempt to walk out, even upon the narrow way outside the door, then——”

The men whispered amongst themselves as Helen slipped from the mare’s back and walked slowly to the steep steps, being far too wise either to notice the peremptoriness of the Nubian’s manner or to attempt to disobey Zarah’s orders.

She climbed up and up to her nest near the sky, where the surly negress awaited her, whilst the men followed the Nubian as he ran to overtake his mistress, who drove her stallion as fast as he could scramble up the steep mountain path.

It was a wonderful sight to witness, and one that, in spite of her brutality and cruelty, endeared her to her men.

She rode her favorite Nejdee, a white stallion of purest breed, standing fifteen hands, which is a height never exceeded in this perfect horse. She rode him without saddle or stirrup, and barely lifted the halter-rope which, with the Nejdee, always takes the place of bit, guiding him by knees and voice, urging him on, as she rode to save the man she loved.

The stallion slithered and scrambled like a goat down the other side of the spot where the spear, thrown at the Arabian girl’s father, stuck fast in a cleft between two rocks, whilst the men fought each other for the best point of vantage from which they could watch either the sinking of the camel and its rider, who looked as one dead, or his rescue by the indomitable woman who ruled them.

And all were too intent upon the sport of the moment to notice a faint movement amongst the rocks to the east, where the shadows were heaviest.

“It is a white man, and the camel’s belly sinketh in the sand,” whispered Namlah to Yussuf. “She, our mistress, and may the hyenas pick her bones, rides out to save him.”

“May he be saved,” whispered back the blind man, “and may she make her bed to-night in the depths of the sands in his stead. Linger thou, O Namlah, until we know the will of Allah, the one and only God, concerning this white man; then must thou flee, lest thy absence from amongst the women be noticed.”

As Namlah said, the camel lay upon the quicksands, screaming with fear, struggling and fighting, biting at the sands which were slowly sucking it down, whilst Ralph Trenchard sat with his head on his knees, which, holding the peak of the saddle in a deadly cramp, had prevented him from falling in the last stretch of the waterless journey through hours of burning sun.

The stallion stood near the spear, shivering in the fear of the death he knew to surround him. He had crossed the path more times than his mistress could remember, and he knew that he would have to cross in the end, driven by the agony of the golden spurs in his sides, just as he always crossed in the end, no matter how strenuously he resisted. But he stood and shivered and rolled his gentle eyes until a sharp jab brought him to his hind feet, then another, which sent him dancing, curvetting down the path. His long silvery mane and tail blew out in the evening breeze like silken streamers, his dainty, polished hoofs flashed in the red light of the setting sun, and he pricked his small ears at the screams of the camel, as he went down the path and turned, spurred by the beautiful, relentless woman until they faced the rocks.

Zarah's eyes were wonderful to behold as she leant far over and touched Ralph Trenchard on the shoulder. They were tender and sweet and fearless, until into them shot an agonizing look of terror as she clutched the stallion's silvery mane and leant farther over still and caught the man's hair in her fingers and pulled back his head and looked down into the terrible face with the closed eyes.

Then she grasped his collar with her right hand and pulled on the rope-halter with her left, as she dug the spurs into the stallion's sides so that he reared and backed until, for fear of falling over onto the camel, she had perforce to let go her hold on the man who sat stiffly, with his head on his knees, as the camel sank inch by inch to its death.

She sat back, with an agony of horror stamped on her face, which was beautiful under the power of her love, and sent a ringing cry over to the men gathered to watch the fight.

*"Bil-'ajal, Asad,"* she called. *"Bil-'ajal! bil-'ajal!"*

Al-Asad leapt from the rock to the hidden path and raced to his mistress's bidding, swiftly, surely, heedless of the death which awaited him on the first false step, eager to help the woman he loved, even in the task of rescuing the

man to whom she had given her heart.

“Give me space, O mistress!” he cried, as he stood with one foot upon the path and the other upon the back of the camel’s saddle and gripped Ralph Trenchard round the waist. “Nearer, O mistress, and place the stallion’s silver hair within my hand.” The shouts of the men rang out over the desert as they watched the desperate fight, as the Nubian put out all his mighty strength and pulled just as Zarah drove in the golden spurs until the stallion reared. “Thy dagger, O mistress,” he cried, as he let go his hold upon the mane and sprang back upon the path. “The white man’s knees break under the strain.” He seized the razor-edged, jewelled dagger and stood once more with his foot on the back of the camel’s saddle and bent and felt in the sands, which pulled at his hands and arms as he sawed at the girth.

He sawed through the girth on both sides and cut the ropes, and holding the jewelled dagger between his teeth, bent and took hold of the saddle as the sands rose to the level where the animal’s mangy tail began. He had a few minutes in which to perform the mighty deed, and Namlah gripped Yussuf’s hand and the men made the wildest, maddest bets upon the outcome of the struggle.

He placed both hands under the back of the saddle and tipped it forward; it was free; then gripped the back pommel and the front pommel and looked up at the woman he loved.

“Back, O mistress! Back, lest I break the stallion’s legs!”

The muscles of his back and chest and arms rippled, then tautened, then stood out in great knots.

He lifted the saddle a few inches and let it fall back and shifted his slender hands; lifted it higher and higher until it rested for a second upon his bent knees; then, to the sound of the men’s mighty shouting, made one superhuman effort and, just as the sands touched his feet, with a great swing of the shoulders flung the saddle and the senseless rider to safety upon the narrow path.

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## CHAPTER XIV

*“A greater liar than Moseylama.”*—Arabic Proverb.

Three weeks passed, in which the Arabian nursed Ralph Trenchard until the fever, brought on by exhaustion, thirst and terrific heat, had left him, and left him very sane and not unduly weak, and very full of gratitude to the beautiful girl whom he seemed to have seen at his bedside day and night, and who seemed to have changed her dress a hundred times, if she had changed it once.

The nerve-racking jangle of her bracelets and anklets and the overwhelming strength of her perfume drove him wellnigh crazy at times, but, remembering what he would learn from her upon his complete recovery, he stuffed the ends of the silk sheets into his ears and held his nostrils forcibly between thumb and finger under cover of the same luxurious bed-spread.

Truly once or twice he grievously feared for his reason.

He wakened one night to see a remarkably handsome and muscular man, clad in naught but a loin-cloth, sitting motionless in the middle of the floor with what looked like a woman's sandal pressed to his heart; and right strange and idiotic did he look, too, when he placed the sandal upon the floor and proceeded to press his forehead upon it. Then, two or three, or maybe more, nights following—for he had completely lost all sense of time—he wakened to see nothing less than a lion rolling blithely upon its back not two yards from him, which, having rolled awhile, proceeded to gambol playfully about the room, then slouched to the doorway, through which it disappeared for good. When he turned slowly upon his bed to see what else might be in store for him, he saw the face of the beautiful girl looking down upon him from a spot 'twixt floor and ceiling as though suspended in mid-air.

He laughed when, the delirium passed, these strange occurrences were explained to him by Zarah, who, just because he felt too uncertain for the moment about past events to question her about Helen, allowed herself to be deluded into the belief that he had forgotten the tale Al-Asad had told when he visited the Bedouin camp disguised as a holy man. Then this evening he sent the youth who waited upon him to ask her to come to him.

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She came quickly, Zarah the beautiful, the tender, the pitiful, Zarah the most perfect hypocrite and liar, and sat at his feet upon the floor, appropriately clothed in black and silver, with the lower part of her lovely face semi-hidden by a yashmak, over which her beautiful eyes gazed into his with an expression which would have deceived even the astutest old Holy Father.

“Where is Helen Raynor?”

He asked the question abruptly, taking her unawares.

She had intended telling him—if he should remember the Nubian’s story—that Helen had returned to Huta under escort and had perished in the locust storm, but the abrupt question took her off her guard.

“She is dead and buried in the quicksands,” she lied instantly, uncontrollably, infinitely unwisely, without giving a thought to the far-reaching effects of the lie.

“Dead! My God! When? How?”

Seeing the terrible mistake she had made, seeing no way out of it, she backed the lie, planning in a flash to give a slight foundation to the disastrous mistake by getting rid of the girl that very night. She laid her henna-tipped, jewelled hand upon Ralph Trenchard’s and told him the sad story of Helen Raynor’s death, and mopped her melting, dry eyes with the corner of the silken sheet as she answered his horrified questions.

“ ... yes! I made a gr-r-reat effort to save her-r, my dear-r schoolmate,” she said, “but, alas! *kismet*, Allah had decr-r-r-eed other-r-wise....” Her arms showed like creamy-yellow ivory as she raised them dutifully above her downcast head in a gesture that showed off her alluring figure to perfection. “ ... Nay! dear-r Helena said no wor-rd, she just *died*. Wher-r-re? Oh! in a bed. Yes! here in the mountain dwelling. By the mercy of Mohammed the Pr-r-ophet did she die, so zat her face should be a beautiful memor-r-y to her fr-r-ien’s, even if I, Zarah ...” She struck her breast with a beautiful gesture of resignation, but not hard enough to mark it, even in her intense grief. “ ... Yea! even if I, Zarah, shall have to car-r-y the dr-r-readful picture of it, all br-r-oken, before my eyes until ze day when death shall claim me also.” When Ralph Trenchard shivered in absolute horror, she shivered also, perhaps out of sympathy for him, perhaps to impress the thought of the English girl’s face upon him—who knows? Then she got up and trailed across the floor to a table laden with drinks of divers sweetness and coolness.

He looked at the exquisite picture she made, and, longing to hear more about the girl he loved, stretched out his hand; and she looked at him with the love of all women in her glorious eyes, and walked back to him swiftly and with all the grace of her Spanish mother, carrying a tray with glasses of frothing sherbet, which he did not want or touch.

“Thou art indeed a man,” she said softly in Arabic, as she placed the tray on a stool, ensconced herself cross-legged upon the divan, and leant towards him as she lit her cigarette, so that he was almost suffocated with the pungency of her perfume. “Yea! verily amongst my subjects, who are of a truth somewhat misshapen about the legs from overmuch bestriding of the Nejdee, thou art indeed a man!”

She sat and looked at him with all her love in her eyes, whilst he sat and wished that in some way he could express his gratitude for all she had done for Helen. But when, after much searching in those portions of her raiment which looked as though they might be large enough to conceal a minute pocket, she showed him Helen’s wrist-watch upon her palm, then he moved close to her and crushed her hand in both of his until he almost broke her fingers, as she told him how Helen had given it to her in memory of old times.

“ ... I give it to you,” she said at last.

It was a sacrifice.

Smothered in jewels as she was, yet, with the delight some Orientals have in the purloined object, she coveted that looted watch more than all her rubies, emeralds, pearls and diamonds put together in a heap.

He sat for a long time with the tragic, lying, little token in his hand, then turned and looked into the doe-like eyes, which looked fearlessly back into his.

“And this is all? You have nothing else, no little thing, a handkerchief, a hair-pin, anything, no matter how trivial, that belonged to your old school friend?”

Zarah shook her beautiful head and sighed as she lied once more with the ease of long-established custom, and the certainty of being able before long to give some foundation to the lie.

“Nozing! No little zing! We bur-r-ried her-r, as I have told you, in her-r cloze.

She was not beautiful to look upon. *Ai, ai*, she was not pr-r-etty in ze gr-r-eat sleep, so we bur-r-ied her-r-r deep, deep in ze comfor-r-ting sands, which tell no tales.”

She rose once more as she spoke and trailed across the marble floor to the door.

Perchance she wished to study astronomy or, perchance, to draw a comparison between the beauty of those who live in luxury and the disfigurement of those who die in battle. Whatever her intent, she certainly made a striking picture as she leaned against the lintel, wrapped in a sheath of black and silver.

Ralph Trenchard stared at her, his eyes wandering from the red curls to the small feet in silver sandals.

She knew his eyes to be upon her, and turned slowly sideways and sighed as she raised her bare arms above her head so that their creamy whiteness shone against the purple background of the sky; she sighed again and pressed her hands upon the spot where by rights her heart should have been, whilst her melting eyes showed fine specimens of the tears of the crocodile as she inwardly asked herself if, in the whole world, there was to be found anything quite so slow as an Englishman.

And he sat and gazed and gazed at the exquisite figure, in which he saw the golden head and the broad shoulders, the slender waist and the polished riding-boots, of the girl to whom he had given the gold watch he held in his hand.

He sat quite still for a long time, stunned with horror, then, quite unconscious of what he did, caused the beautiful Arabian to totally lose her bearings, so that fear, jealousy and love linked hands in her heart and drove her down the road of tragedy which had been marked out for her through the ages.

Saying nothing, he smiled at her and held out his hand, so that, completely on the wrong tack, she ran to him, the silver embroidery glittering in response to her fast-beating heart; then he kissed her hand in gratitude, which was just about the most idiotic thing he could have done, and, considering all things, spoke words of equal idiocy into her willing ear.

“You will come and talk to me to-morrow, will you not?” By talk he meant talk of Helen, but how on earth was the Arabian to know that? “You will? Thank you so much, so very much!” He stopped; then, in his craving to regain his strength



so as to get away from the horror of the place where Helen lay dead, hidden from him for ever in the ghastly sands, misled the Arabian entirely. "Can I walk about the camp? Can I have a horse or a camel or something to ride in the desert so as to get really strong?"

"Ride with me?"

She barely whispered the words.

"Rather! If you have the time to spare. It would be awfully kind of you. Then we could talk about the school you were at and everything."

By which he meant Helen's schooldays and Helen's illness and Helen's death; but how was the Arabian, blinded by love and vanity, to know that, especially as out of sheer gratitude he held her hand in both of his whilst he talked.

He took her to the steps and watched her descend, then turned and flung himself upon the divan with the watch against his lips, whilst Zarah the Cruel, wide awake to the danger of his walking amongst her men whilst Helen remained in the camp, climbed the narrow path to the building where dwelt the girl he thought to be dead.

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*"May her envier stumble over her hair."*—Arabic Proverb.

She had told Ralph Trenchard that the girl was dead, when not only was she alive, but a person of some consequence in the camp through the thrice cursed episode of the black mare.

Knowing nothing about constancy and honour and about as much about the question of nationality in marriage, she was firmly convinced that in time the white man, forgetting Helen, would succumb to her beauty and marry her.

But before that thrice blessed day, even before he left his dwelling to walk with her in the camp as he had just suggested, the girl must disappear so that the unlucky lie should have a slight foundation of truth, as have so many falsehoods in the East when sifted to the bottom.

Once the girl was dead she would rely upon her own power over her own people to prevent the real facts of the case from reaching his ears.

The first thing was to find a way of ridding herself of the girl who stood as an obstacle in that path of peace and love which ended in the white man's heart, but, above all, a way which would cause no comment amongst the men. The way was shown her, startlingly clear and simple, within the hour.

She cursed herself, the lie, fate and the black mare as she climbed the steep steps to Helen's prison.

If only she had not saved the girl in the first place, if only, in the second, she had not so foolishly allowed Helen to win the men's hearts by her magnificent horsemanship, if only she had not lied. If it had not been for that thrice cursed episode with Lulah, the mare, she would not have hesitated an hour ridding herself of the girl, either by sending her back to civilization under escort or by some more drastic method.

Up till then the white girl had meant nothing more than a prisoner to the men, and the disappearance of a prisoner, even one of the white race, would have been no subject of comment amongst them. As it was she could do nothing.

The Nubian reported that the men constantly talked about Helen; exercised their best horses in the hope that she would one day ride out in the desert with them, either to hunt ostrich with cheetahs or to lead them to the attack on some caravan or company of Bedouins. They had taken to standing at the foot of the steep steps to gamble upon the chance of seeing her come out upon the platform, whilst gossip ran high as to the relationship between her and the white man whom the half-caste had saved from the sands of death.

So that she cursed herself over and over again for the lie she had told Ralph.

She lied by nature and by habit; in fact, she found it easier and a good deal more enjoyable to lie than to tell the truth, but she had lied without giving herself time to look at the result of this particular lie from every point of view.

The surly negress, with the gait of a lame hen, rose from her squatting position as her dire mistress passed up the steps, and retired still farther into the shadows, where she occupied herself in the pleasant and stimulating, if not too elegant, task of chewing *Kaat* as a relaxation from the dull work of spying upon the gentle white girl.

Zarah stood for a moment and looked through the doorway at Helen. She sat

upon a pile of cushions, reading by the light of a silver lamp hanging from the ceiling.

Certain that the negress had replaced Namlah for the purpose of carrying reports about her, she had made up her mind that nothing but reports of normal behaviour should be carried.

She woefully missed the peace and austerity of the other dwelling, also the view of the desert through the cleft, and of the plateau with the rushing, sparkling river; but she made no sign, neither did she complain about the heat, which was so much greater, nor about the clutter of Persian rugs, cushions and tables, which only served to intensify it. She had been told that her old dwelling-place had been required for certain prisoners, and that on their account she had been forbidden to walk outside. Not a word of which she believed.

Certain that eyes continually watched her, she forced herself to read; constantly on the lookout for danger, she smiled upon and spoke gently to the surly negress, who would not open her lips or respond in any way to her friendly advances. She was putting up a plucky fight against loneliness and anxiety. But it was not likely that Zarah should understand the moral strength which sustained the English girl in the long, weary days of silence and confinement. It would have suited the Arabian better to have seen her crying her eyes out, or pacing the floor in agitation; anything, in fact, rather than sitting quietly reading; so that she made a quick gesture of impatience, upon which Helen looked up, shut her book with a snap, and sprang to her feet.

“Zarah!” she cried. “It’s ages since I’ve seen you. You haven’t been near me since I was moved from my old place. Have you got rid of the bad prisoners? I am so tired of being cooped up in here!”

Zarah sat down on a pile of cushions and lit a cigarette, as an answer to her difficulties flashed across her mind at Helen’s words.

“You want to walk? You do not like being a pr-r-isoner-r your-r-self. You ar-r-e no pr-r-isoner. You must not go acr-r-oss ze plateau, but ozerwise ze place is all your-r-s.”

As one could not move out of the place without crossing the plateau, the all-ness seemed to be limited to the building and a small space behind, surrounded by towering rocks at which even the goats looked askance.

Helen knew it, and suddenly changed the subject. She wanted to get leave to wander about the place as she used to do; she wanted to find the secret path and to speak to Namlah; she wanted desperately to escape, but she knew Zarah's astuteness and had a faint conception of her intense hatred for herself; so went warily in her demand for a little more liberty and changed the subject.

"I wonder what this building was used for?" she said, slowly passing her finger over a roughly carved stone panel, tracing the outline of a fish, some kind of a waterfowl and a cross, carved in the centre of a disc in the fifth century by the Holy Fathers. "The age almost makes me creep, and I often wonder if the dead fathers come back at night to walk about their old home."

Zarah sprang to her feet in a positive whirlwind of gestures against spirits.

"You br-ring ze bad luck upon your-r-self and ze place, Helena. Nozing comes her-re or-r leaves her-r-e without my per-r-mission."

Helen seized the opportunity and crossed quickly to where Zarah stood, marvelling at her beauty.

"Zarah," she said sweetly, "*when* are you going to find the time to take me to Hulah. I do so want to get back. Do you know what I've been thinking?" Zarah shook her head as she looked at Helen, raging inwardly at the English girl's beauty, especially the golden hair, which, for coolness sake, hung in two great plaits to her knees. "You come with me and stay with me on a return visit, and together we will try and find out what has become of Ralph Trenchard, because I am sure he is alive. I should know if he wasn't, I am sure I should."

Zarah turned abruptly away, swinging her cloak about her so that her mouth was hidden. She wanted to laugh, and she wanted to strike the English girl for the possessive way in which she always spoke of the sick man, whom she, Zarah, had nursed so assiduously for days and nights; also could she willingly have killed her on the spot for the almost irreparable mistake she had caused her to make by lying about her death.

Helen saw nothing of the girl's fury; she had bent to pick up a box of chocolates, whilst the surly negress watched her through the doorway and inelegantly wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

"Have a sweet, Zarah," Helen said gently, offering the box, "and then be really

nice and take me for a walk. I shall die if I don't get a scramble amongst the rocks."

"Wher-r-e do you want to go?" Zarah asked, as she zealously filled her mouth with the sweetmeats the surly negress coveted.

"I do so want to see the spear which was flung at your father, and then"—Helen laughed so that her request should not be taken too seriously—"then couldn't we walk across the wonderful hidden path to the desert, then walk back? I'll pin your train up if you've got a safety pin. You *are* beautiful, Zarah; I can't think why you haven't been married years ago."

Zarah whirled round on her like a tiger-cat. In her violent jealousy she thought the other sneered at her; in her littleness of mind she failed to catch the ring of honest admiration in the girl's voice.

"Mar-r-ried!" she shrilled. "I am going to be mar-r-ried soon, and you won't be her-r-e to see the cer-r-emony. Oh, do go away!" She pushed Helen roughly on one side when she put out her hand in congratulation. "We Ar-r-rabians do not expand over-r ze idea of mar-r-riage as you English do." She walked to the door as she added insolently, "We have no old maids, and I am younger zan you," then clapped her hands and called the surly negress shrilly, angrily.

"Methinks a whip upon the soles would hasten thy feet," she cried furiously, as the woman ran forward and flung herself face downwards. "Thou three-footed jackal, get up!" She struck the woman in the face when she opened her mouth, from which no coherent sound came, owing to her tongue having been split in her youth for misdemeanour, and struck again, until Helen caught her by the shoulder and flung her on one side, whereupon the negress fell on her knees, bowed her head to the ground and kissed the Arabian's feet.

"You stop that, Zarah!"

The words sounded like the crack of a whip as the two beautiful girls faced each other over the crouching woman.

"She's dumb, and I never knew it! It's awful!"

"You fool!" replied the Arabian. "Her husband beats her after every meal, and sometimes between. Get up!" She kicked the woman, who leapt to her feet and stood shivering with bent head.

stood shivering with bent head.

“The white woman has a desire for exercise after her long confinement owing to the unruliness of the prisoners. Dost hear, thou fool? She wishes to walk across the path of peril even to the far side. It is dangerous, and I have tried to prevail against her. One step too far, as thou knowest, and she passes into the keeping of Allah, the one and only God. Watch thou and pray to Allah for her safe return.”

The negress watched them walk slowly along the narrow path until they were out of sight; then, with all the cunning of her race in her rolling eyes, and all a child's glee at its naughtiness, crept back to the room, and, sidling along the wall, grabbed a handful of French chocolates. If she had waited one instant longer she might have seen a hidden figure crawl away between the rocks as silently as a snake.

Blind Yussuf went quickly amongst the rocks, as at home and as sure of his footing in his blindness as any goat. He crept through incredibly small places, swinging himself hand over hand at a height where no person with vision would have dared to have even moved, arrived at the cleft, thanks to the short cut, ahead of the girls, dropped like a cat from rock to rock, then, slipping like a shadow between the boulders, sat down in the shadow near the thrown spear.

He listened to the girls' voices as they made their way down the steep incline. ““A mouth that prays, a hand that kills.”” He drew a finger down the scars upon his face as he quoted the proverb and sat like an image of Fate as the girls stopped quite close to him at the beginning of the path.

“It is quite hard, you see,” said Zarah, as she bent and drove her fingers through a few inches of the wet sand. “It is not quite three of your yards wide.”

“But how wonderful!” Helen bent and dug her fingers in, then moved them along sideways until her whole hand disappeared into soft, wet, warm sand which pulled it gently. “How dreadful!” Then she laughed. She had found her way to the secret path and learned its secret. “I tell you what! You lead the way out, Zarah, then we'll turn and I'll tread in our footsteps and lead you back.”

Zarah laughed also, suddenly, shrilly.

The way showed clear. The end was in sight! Upon the return journey she had but to push Helen gently and all the difficulties arising out of the accursed lie would be over

would be over.

She made a step and put her sandalled foot upon the path, then turned her head and stood quite still, her face convulsed with fury.

Like some great guardian spirit Blind Yussuf stood just behind Helen.

“It is not wise, O mistress,” he said gently, “to venture upon the perilous path this night of strong wind. It bloweth from the west unto the east, so that the wayfarer is like to be blown into the sands of death. It is not wise, O mistress, and thanks be to Allah that I heard voices as I passed and followed with great swiftness. Nay, verily it is not wise.”

He spoke gently, his great cloak hanging motionless in the still night, and salaamed to the ground when the Arabian, without a word, beckoned to the bewildered Helen and swiftly retraced her steps.

Back in her prison, Helen walked out to the space behind the dwelling to think over matters as the moon rose over the edge of the mountains. She looked up when a stone rattled down the side to her feet.

Upon a ledge to which a goat would have hardly dared to climb sat Yussuf. He put his fingers to his lips as he looked down at the girl he could not see but whom he had recognized by her footstep. “*A ti balak,*” he whispered, then rose and swung himself from rock to rock by the way he had come, whilst Helen stood looking up until he disappeared, frozen with fear for his safety; then, more determined than ever, through his warning, to try and find a means of escape, turned and entered her dwelling, just as Zarah entered hers and summoned Al-Asad.

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## CHAPTER XV



*“A rose fell to the lot of a monkey.”—Arabic Proverb.*

Zarah and Al-Asad sat in consultation.

Two beautiful beings in whom cunning stood for brain and nether millstones for hearts—where others were concerned.

To enhance her beauty in the eyes of the white man, who looked upon her but indifferently, the Arabian had worn a transparent *yashmak*, dyed her finger tips, plastered her person with as many jewels as she could fasten on to her garments, and walked like a cat on hot bricks or a mannequin or a Spaniard. In the presence of the Nubian, who loved her with all the might of his half-savage soul, she sat cross-legged on a pile of cushions, smoking endless cigarettes, wound in a wrapping of silk, which she kept in its place by tucking the ends in, and with her bare feet thrust into heelless slippers. She was far more beautiful in her simplicity than in her most extravagant apparel, if she had only known it, and a furnace would have but mildly described the tumult of love which she aroused in her magnificent slave.

An hour had passed since she had hastily summoned him on her return from her meeting with her blind enemy at the beginning of the secret path—an hour in which they had talked and suggested and yet had failed to find a way out of the difficulty which had arisen out of her lie.

“Thinkest thou, O Al-Asad, that the blind one *knew*?”

“I know not, mistress,” he said slowly. “Perchance ’tis Fate who guides his feet continually across thy path, or maybe the wind of chance. Yet can we do nothing.”

He touched an amulet of good luck at his neck; the Arabian made a circle in the air with her fingers.

“May the spirit of my father, who placed the safekeeping of the blind one in my hands, remain peacefully in Paradise.”

They got up solemnly, turned from left to right three times, and sat down again.

The heathens!

When *will* they learn to touch wood or to turn the whole chair or couch round three times, with themselves, as do their Christian and more civilized brethren!

“Thou dost worry overmuch, woman, about this white girl. She is but a fly to be blown from the rim of thy cup of happiness and good fortune. A word to thy slave and he pinches the fly between his thumb and finger.”

He illustrated his words, his splendid teeth flashing as he laughed, then ducked his handsome head so as to avoid the back-hander dealt him by the woman he worshipped.

“Thou fool!” she replied shortly. “Where findest thou the sense to drink when thou art thirsty or to eat when thou art empty? Have I not told thee that the white man believes the white woman to be dead, yea, buried in the sands, as she would verily have been buried this night if the thrice accursed blind one had not yet again crossed my path. If the white man who has, through the accursed foolishness of my tongue, been told that the girl is dead, speaks with one who tells him that she is alive, what then? Thou dullard! Canst thou not see a glimmer of light? Behold, art thou blinder than the blind one, thou imbecile offspring of foolish parents!” She got up and crossed to the door, from which nothing could be seen but the stars above great walls of rock, whilst the Nubian rose and followed her noiselessly.

Standing close to her, girt in his loin cloth, he towered above her. He bent his head so that the scented curls touched his lips, and gently stroked the silken wrapper with his slender fingers, whilst his heart almost broke in the love he had for her.

He would have starved for her, endured torture for her, died for her; he was her rightful mate; she was his woman out of all the world; yet she hankered for the grapes which hung well beyond the reach of her crossbred hands, and he forgot his manhood in the fear of losing the little—which was yet so much—she gave him. He worked so hard to gain the barest word of gratitude; he found such joy in lying across the threshold o’ nights to keep her safe; he suffered such hell through jealousy; yet in his loyalty, in his desire to bring her happiness, he had not once thought of removing the white man from his own path. The white woman, yea, why not? What difference would one soulless woman more or less make in this world already overstocked with soulless women? Once she was removed and the woman of his heart’s desire married to the man she loved—and did Allah in His wisdom ever know of such a tangle—then he would ride out

into the desert and die, or, better still, become chief of a band with which to harry the white man when he ventured across the quicksands.

Primitive reasoning, but not too bad for one who could neither read nor write, and whose idea of God was a vasty, corporeal deity who offered sweetmeats with one hand and struck one for taking them with the other.

He laughed as he spoke, on the spur of his primitive reasoning, and stroked the soft silk which wrapped his rightful mate.

“Mistress!”

At a certain tone in his voice with which she was unacquainted she turned her head and looked over her shoulder and up at him sideways, so that her yellow eyes gleamed through half-closed lids, just as gleamed the eyes of the wellnigh adolescent lion cub watching them from a corner of the luxurious room.

“Mistress, it were well if I broke the neck of the white woman within the hour, and fastening her dead body upon some horse, sent them floundering into the sands of death. Then will I spread a tale of the white woman’s betrayal of thy hospitality, and how she stole thy horse and attempted to escape, so——”

He laughed as she turned upon him in anger, then bent and looked down into her beautiful, furious eyes with a look she did not understand, but which caused her to draw back a pace.

“Behold, are thy words as bright as a rusty sword and thy reasoning as sharp as the blunt edge,” she cried. “The white woman has found favour in the eyes of thy brethren, thou fool! Thinkest thou that when they hear of her death that their lamentations will not reach to the mountaintops, yea, and to the ears of the white man, so that he turns upon me in rage? Behold, are the wits of the deaf boy who waits upon the white man like two-edged daggers compared to thine, O Al-Asad of the camel head!”

Al-Asad of the camel head made no sign of the storm caused within him by the nearness of the woman and her contemptuous words. He stood quite still, the perfume of her hair in his nostrils, the silk of her garment in his hands.

“Thou makest a pond of a raindrop, woman,” he answered. “What are my brethren but children, pleased to-day at a smile, angered to-morrow at a word?”

Make great promise of feasting and fighting, and their love belongs to the giver of food and promoter of battle; laugh at them, mock them, make sport of their words and their raiment and their countenance, and they kill without a word.”

Zarah put her little hands against his chest and pushed him away, and looked at him sideways as she crossed to the couch, and looked at him again when he did not follow, and beckoned him with a backward movement of the head, which showed him the beauty of her throat as he leant against the lintel and looked at her, and laughed at the simplicity of the plan that was formulating in his mind.

Dying of thirst, he stretched for the cup even if there was but a drop of water left; starving, he swept the very floor for a crust; destitute, he demanded the smallest coin as price for the way he had found for removing the obstacle from the Arabian girl’s path. When she beckoned he crossed to her and sat down, but not upon the floor at her feet. He sat beside her, close to her, and looked at her so that she shrank away.

“Shelter is given to the camel, meat to the dog, water to the horse at the end of a day of toil,” he said slowly. “What reward will be given this slave if he removes the cloud from before the sun of his mistress’s happiness?”

“Thou! A reward given unto thee?” She could hardly have shown more astonishment if he had asked for the heaped-up contents of her jewel safe. “My father gave thee shelter when thou didst flee from the wrath of those who desired thy life, dates when thy bones pierced thy skin, water when thou wast wellnigh dead from thirst. A reward? Behold, the whip across thy mouth will be thy reward for thy daring, thou mongrel!”

She had worked herself into a rare rage, and flung herself to the far end of the couch, so that an end of the silken wrapper became untucked; and she beat upon the cushions with clenched fists, thereby causing the loosened garment to slip yet lower still, until it exposed the splendid shoulders, which looked the more bewitching in that they were half draped.

Alas! that it be so hard a task to drill into the heads of women the simple truth that, where *décollétage* is concerned, a hint is far more potent than a whole hard fact.

“A reward for thee?” she repeated. “For thee?”

“Yea, a date, a drop of water....” He paused, then rose and walked to the door and looked up at the stars and laughed at the thought of the gift he would pluck from paradise. “Yea, a date for the camel and water for the horse, but a kiss—one kiss—from thy mouth, which is as a red flower fashioned in rubies and set with pearls which are thy teeth. Nay, fling not thyself upon thy slave, for he could break thee with one hand. The camel works not without reward, the horse dies without water, thy slave will not reveal his plan without the promise of that which he craves.”

“But the camel and the horse fulfil their tasks,” said Zarah sweetly, slowly, baiting her trap, into which the simple barbarian would ultimately fall. “The reward comes afterwards, O Al-Asad, when the heat of the day is o’er and the peace of the night falleth apace. Come!”

She held out her hand and he ran to her, ran as swiftly as a deer, as noiselessly as the lion watching them out of tawny, half-closed eyes, and knelt at her feet and encircled her with his arms without touching her withal.

“Thou wilt—thou wilt—when my plan is unfolded—my tale is told—thou wilt?”

Zarah the liar, the hypocrite, the merciless, smiled gently as she looked down into the handsome face so near her own, nodded her head as she listened, and pushed away the encircling arms as she rose to her feet and moved a few steps.

It was such a simple plan and such an effective plan for getting her out of her quandary, and the reward was such a simple one to grant—a solitary kiss, a thing of nothing, a sound, a fleeting second of rapture to him; yet she vowed in her treacherous heart that no man but the man she loved should hold her in his arms or other lips than his touch her beautiful, lying mouth.

“Yea, verily, ’tis a good plan and easy,” she said, watching him out of the corner of her eyes. “Thou wilt spread tales of this white woman’s ingratitude and of her mocking of our sisters, so that the men, infuriated, fall upon her and kill her, not this night, but upon the night of feasting.”

“Yea, mistress, upon the night of feasting, so that the women, occupied in the task of cooking, know nothing of her death, and knowing nothing, will say nothing. Mistress,” he ended in a whisper, “is it not a good plan and simple?”

Forgetting the Arabian proverb which teaches that “a spark can fire the whole

quarter,” counting upon her power over the man, forgetting also that he was human even if he were a slave, she laughed mockingly as she answered: “Verily is it simple, and methinks that the little toil is not worthy of so great reward!”

He crossed the room in one bound and swept her, fighting desperately, into his arm. He crushed her down upon his heart and laughed at her when she met her teeth in his forearm until the blood ran, and caught her hands in one of his and held her beautiful head pressed against his shoulder with his arm and kissed her scented hair; then flung her upon the divan and, laughing, turned to meet the lion as it sprang.

He caught it in mid-air, grasping its throat with his left hand, and with a lightning sideways movement gripped its hind legs just at the joint with his right.

The beast’s front paws just reached his chest and tore it with great claws until the blood streamed; it roared and choked and moaned as, holding it at arm’s length as it struggled and fought, the gigantic man bent the head back to meet the feet of the hind legs, which he as slowly bent over the back to meet the head.

Zarah stood upon tiptoe, eyes blazing, hands clasped, insult forgotten in the wonderful feat of strength, of which even she did not think the man was capable.

“*Wah! Wah!*” she cried, a very child of the desert, as she watched the animal fighting for its life. “*Wah! Wah!*” she cried again, clapping her hands when Al-Asad, the magnificent half-caste, met the lion’s feet and head with a hardly perceptible effort, and at the little click which was all that announced the end, flung the carcass at the woman’s feet and walked towards the door.

“Al-Asad! Thy wounds!”

He turned and looked at the beautiful woman who, carried out of herself by the intoxication of the moment, held out her arms to him, then down at the mark of her teeth upon his arm.

“My wound, O woman, is thy seal upon me, which I shall carry to the day when Allah, the one and only God, shall bid me leave this maze which we call life. I go to work upon my plan, so that the desire of thy heart is granted thee.” He paused for one moment with his hand upon the curtain and took his revenge for all the bitterness of the past. “I have kissed thy hair, I have held thee upon my heart, I have bruised thee. Go to the white man an thou wilt; he will find thee

marked by another man. I will have nothing, not even one kiss from thee, until of thy own free will thou givest it me.”

He was gone, leaving her staring at the curtain. She laughed, laughed at the thought of the white man’s love which awaited her, laughed at the memory of the just fled hour, and raised her hands to call her body-woman; then turned her head and listened.

From somewhere outside amongst the rocks came the sound of a man singing.

Over and over again he sang the Arabian proverb mockingly, sweetly.

“‘They wooed her and she resisted; they left her, and she fell in love.’”

Over and over again the Nubian sang the words in his golden tenor voice as he made his way to the men’s quarters.

Then she clapped her hands sharply, threw herself on the couch, and sought for the photograph of Ralph Trenchard, which she wore upon her heart in Helen Raynor’s golden locket.

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*“The fire of more than one war has been kindled by a single word.”—Arabic Proverb.*

The firelight shone on Al-Asad as he stood in the centre of an admiring circle. His bronzed skin glistened and his perfect teeth flashed and the blood upon his chest showed dark as he moved lightly upon his feet in describing the fight with the lion.

He had got the men interested and pleased and curious, and it would require but a very slight effort to get them angry.

Their splendid teeth flashed as they laughed and shouted encouragement, and their shadows danced as they answered the Nubian’s every movement. They stretched out their hands and brought them slowly together, and bent this way and that way as they breathed heavily, in unconscious imitation of the half-caste, as is the way of the Oriental when deeply interested in a story.

“Wah! Wah!” they yelled. “What then? What then?”

They shouted with laughter, gleefully, joyously, and exchanged remarks which were better left unprinted, when a youth ran forward and touched Al-Asad's arm.

"Now, O brother, tell us the tale of the tiger-cat. The lion is dead; didst thou perchance also draw the tiger-cat's teeth and claws, *after* they had mauled thy flesh?"

The youth wrapped his great cloak tight about himself and, copying Zarah's walk, strolled back to his place, where he stood looking over his shoulder at the Nubian from half-closed eyes. The men roared with laughter and yelled encouragement and suggestion until the mountains echoed and re-echoed to the sound.

Al-Asad took advantage of the opening.

He sprang at the youth, caught him, tightly wrapped in the great white cloak, held him easily above his head in spite of his struggles, then, still holding him horizontally, swung him round and round, with much the same movement as one uses in swinging clubs, plumped him on his feet, shook him like a rat, and flung him like a sack of *durra* back to his place, whilst the men roared with delight.

"I break thy neck, O brother, and the neck of any who dares to make mock of Zarah the Beautiful. She is a woman, but is she not the child of our dead chief? Did she not give us shelter when we fled from the wrath of the pursuers? Food when our bones wellnigh pierced the skin? Water when we thirsted? Then...."

"'Tis well said, O Lionheart, verily is thy speech of gold...."

"Does she not reward us when the toil is done?" continued Al-Asad, taking no notice of the unseemly interruption. "When the heat of the day is o'er and the peace of the night falleth apace." He glanced down at the mark upon his arm, well pleased at the effect his flowing, if borrowed, rhetoric was having upon his unsuspecting audience. "Shall we not be grateful? Shall we not show her our gratitude? Shall we not—shall we not help her against her enemies—even as she helped us in our need?"

He had the men in the hollow of his hand.

Their knives flashed as they leapt to their feet, their voices sounded like thunder as they shouted in execration, cursed in volume, and clamoured to be led against



the foe.

Al-Asad gave them no time to collect their senses scattered by their desire for battle, murder and revenge. He hit whilst their wrath was at white heat, raining blows upon their pride and ultrasensitiveness. He seized the white cloak from the one nearest and wrapped it about him, and cleared a space by the strength of his good right arm.

“Her enemy, my brethren, and thine, is a woman, nay! give ear for a while. Our mistress, with a desire to help her white prisoner—yea! even she—sat with her anon, whilst I sat without the curtain, unseen by either of them. Before Allah, they were as night and day, sun and moon, in their beauty. Yea! and I will see that thou speakest not again in this life, my brother, if thou essayest once more to open thy mouth, which is as wide and ugly as the storm-swept desert. And, behold! this is what mine eyes saw and mine ears heard. She mocked, this white she-devil, mocked the people of the desert, walked like thee, brother, this wise”—with all the aptitude of the negro, he bowed his legs and rolled as he walked towards Bowlegs, the finest horseman in the Nejd—“and sat crosswise upon the cushions and rode like thee, little one”—he laughed and pointed at a youth who was noted for his ungainly seat upon horseback—“and made mock of our women as they draw water for her bath or grind the *durra* for her bread.” He imitated the surly negress with the gait of a lame hen, he also gave the quick movements of Namlah the Ant, then ran and barred the way as the men made a sudden, ugly rush. It was touch and go if he held them or if they overpowered him and, in one blinding moment of fury, rushed and killed Helen, thereby rousing the sleeping women and children and undoing all his cunning work. He laughed, laughed long and loud, until the place rang, laughed until, suspicious of being fooled, they hesitated and stopped.

Then he beckoned them and, squatting upon his haunches, spoke to them in whispers, thereby imparting a feeling of mystery to the tale he recounted of Zarah’s lie, which they thoroughly appreciated, and her dilemma, which they laughed at right heartily.

But he had reckoned without the love of gambling with which the Eastern is obsessed.

The Patriarch, who looked for all the world like Abraham at his most benevolent, and who was the hardest rider to hounds, or, rather, into battle, and the most inveterate gambler in Arabia, held up his hand, upon which the rest of

the inveterate gamblers nudged each other with the *mijan*, the small stick the Bedouin usually carries, and felt for their counters or dice or whatever they fancied most in games of chance.

“Thou sayest, O Asad, mighty of muscle and clear of understanding, that our mistress desires the death of the white woman, so that there shall be a portion of truth in the tale she has told the white man of the death of this white woman, who still lives.”

Al-Asad nodded. He was loth to see his plans go awry, but he would have been still more loth to lose the chance of an hour’s gambling.

“We say that for her mocking this white woman shall die this night, *thou* sayest she must live until the night of the great feasting which our mistress prepareth for us, so that in the sounds of singing and dancing her passing shall be unnoticed by the women, who, were it otherwise, might prattle about her death. I will play thee for her death! Choose thou the game.”

Came a positive roar, which brought Helen upsitting upon her bed, as each man shouted to his neighbour, and Al-Asad drew from out his loin-cloth a set of cherished dice, whilst Yussuf drew nearer the fire with his counters in his hand.

Logs were thrown on the fires, so that orange, red and yellow flames shot skywards, against which the infuriated, excited men stood out in startling relief as they gesticulated and laughed and cursed; bets were laid against the time of Helen Raynor’s death, and the particular kind of death she should die for her breaking of the great law of hospitality, with side bets upon every conceivable trifle which by the wildest stretch of the most prolific Oriental imagination could be possibly connected with the case.

“Thou Yussuf!” shouted Bowlegs, as he walked towards the blind man with the roll of a sailing ship in the Bay. “My eldest daughter—who is as fair favoured as an ostrich without feathers—against thy spavined mare that the white woman dies upon the night of the feast.”

Yussuf leaned forward so that the firelight shone upon his terrible face whilst the men gathered about the two, forgetting their own concerns, for the moment, in the interest they always took in the doings and sayings of the afflicted man.

“I prefer the gentle company of my spavined mare, though she be useless for the

chase or the battle, O my brother, but I will lay my jewel-encrusted *nagileh* against a handful of dates that the white woman dies to-night. This woman without compassion, this breaker of the Arab's law. I have suffered much, my brethren, but to the death I uphold our mistress against one who abuses her. For is it not written, 'A well from which thou drinkest, throw not a stone in it'?" Yussuf was playing to the gallery and throwing sand across his brethren's vision, whilst praying secretly to Allah the Compassionate and the Merciful to hold the scales of justice well balanced between the two women.

The benevolent looking Patriarch, who had more death notches in his favourite spear than any man in the Peninsula, once more held up his hand. He stroked his flowing white beard as he looked at Al-Asad, who sat with no sign of his inner perturbation upon his handsome face, whilst at the top of his voice Yussuf cursed the white woman in her past, present and future, as well as in her morals, looks and ancestry.

"So it has been arranged, O my children," said the Patriarch, who looked as though he should have been patting the heads of the third or fourth generation clustering about his knees instead of gambling on a woman's death. "If our brother Al-Asad throws the dice so that three sixes fall upwards at the same time, then the thrice-accursed woman dies upon the night of feasting and banqueting. If Fate decrees that I throw these three figures of the same value at the same time, *kismet*, 'tis the will of Allah that she dies to-night. Throw, my son!"

Al-Asad shook the dice between his slender hands and tossed them high into the air. The men backed as the ivory squares fell amongst them and made way for the Patriarch and Al-Asad to examine them.

The Patriarch raised his hands, Al-Asad laughed softly, the men howled in disappointment.

The half-caste had thrown three sixes.

In one brief second the chances of a whole night of gambling, to be followed by the exhilarating task of putting an offender to death, had been wiped out, yet by the decision of the dice did those uneducated, semi-savage, grievously disappointed men abide.

True, they turned in the direction of the dwelling wherein Helen slept and

fingered their knives, but more from the rancour aroused by her insult than with any intention of disputing the untoward ending to what might have been such an enjoyable night.

The Patriarch looked at them and grieved for their disappointment, as much as for his own, and walked to a little distance, where he lifted his benign countenance to the stars as he worked his wits, which in their cunning could have given points to a monkey; then he turned and spread wide his arms, looking for all the world as though he had stepped out of a picture by some old master, and called his sons so that they ran to him, like the children they really were, in spite of their ferocious appearance and still more ferocious deeds.

“Al-Asad the Lion of nimble wit saith that ’twere wise to allow our mistress to wed this white man—for a space. Allah alone wots of this power which drives the white to the dark, the fat to the lean, the well-favoured to the ill-favoured, and which causes more trouble than the rat in the corn or the viper on the hearth.”

“And the tiger-cat to meet its teeth in the flesh of the slave,” shrilled the youth who had been swung like a club, but who had revived sufficiently to gamble with the best.

The men, restored to good humour by the promise in the old man’s voice, shouted with laughter as they aimed friendly blows at the Nubian, who stood close to the Patriarch’s side.

“My son!” said the old man as he stroked his beard, which was about his one possession he would not have staked against fortune. “I will play thee for the death of the white man. If I throw three sixes he dies this night, if thou throwest three sixes then he takes Zarah the Gentle as wife for the length of six moons, after which he dies so that thou mayest take his place at her side. And may Allah show thee the path through the maze of love which spreads about thee and her and the white man.”

Helen, sitting on the edge of her bed, covered her ears with her hands at the savagery in the shouts of the men, whilst Yussuf strode forward with his counters in his hand.

“My spavined mare against a bowl of rice cooked by thy daughter—and may her cooking be better favoured than is her face—that the white man—and may his

soul be as black in *Jehannam* as his skin is white on earth—dieth this dawn in the stead of the thrice accursed white woman,” he cried, whilst praying secretly and fervently to Allah the Merciful to strike the Patriarch dead.

They threw the dice unavailingly till dawn, whilst the elder women, wakened by the gentle method of applying the foot to their slumbering persons, rose and made coffee for their lords, half of whom, at the last throw of the dice, were to find themselves minus coffee beans, daughters, horses, weapons or *piastres*.

The sky shone like an opal in the east, the birds sang, the smoke of the fires in the women’s quarter clung like mist against the mountainside as Al-Asad shook the dice in his hands and flung them up to the flaming heavens.

The men backed as the ivory squares fell amongst them, and made way for the Patriarch and the Nubian to examine the result.

The Patriarch raised his hands, Al-Asad laughed, the men shouted with laughter and smote him friendly-wise, hip and thigh.

He had thrown three sixes.

And half an hour later Helen, little recking how near she and the man she loved had been to death, stood just inside her door, watching the magnificent sight of the shouting, laughing men as they rode their horses up the steep incline on their way to a gallop across the desert.

Her eyes were full of perplexity, her heart beat heavily in an unaccountable fear, but, determined that the spy should have naught to tell her mistress, she let drop the curtain and stretched herself upon her bed.

Al-Asad ran up the steps to his mistress’s dwelling and entered her room.

She watched him from under her arm as she lay upon the divan and smiled at the mastery of the man’s bearing, then looked up at him out of sleepy, opalescent eyes as he knelt beside her so that his face was on a level with hers.

“He is thine, woman. The white man is thine for a space. I, Al-Asad the slave, have given him unto thee. I have worked well for thee, mistress, I have worked well for thee!”

He rose as he spoke and swept her into his arms, and laughed down at her as she

He rose as he spoke and swept her into his arms, and laughed down at her as she struggled desperately.

Then he kissed her scented hair, and held her down upon his heart so that she could not move.

“I give thee the white man! For a spell! I, thy mate!”

He crushed her until she lay as still as death in his arms, then flung her on the cushions and ran out of the dwelling and down the steps to the stables, where he led out his mare, and, without saddle or bridle or harness whatever, leapt across her back and rode her, shouting with the joy of life, up the steep path and out to the desert he loved.

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## CHAPTER XVI

*“It is an hour’s poison.”*—Arabic Proverb.

If Ralph Trenchard had been a guest instead of a prisoner, if he had been the men’s blood-brother in crime instead of an intruder likely, for a space, to become their leader by marriage through the love-madness of the Sheikh’s daughter, more solicitude could not have been shown for his amusement and welfare in the days which preceded the great feast at which he was to be tricked or publicly coerced into a betrothal with Zarah.

As a rider and a shot, he had won the men’s hearts; as a foreigner who menaced the peace of the community, he stood in hourly danger of his life, if he had but known it.

He did not know.

With his thoughts given entirely to the memory of the girl he loved, lacking, through her death, the spur necessary to send him hot-foot back upon the road to civilization, he had unquestioningly accepted the explanation Zarah had given him of the mistake her men had made, and which had ended in the disastrous battle, and had set himself to live but for the passing day. He had longed for adventure, he had found adventure, and when the novelty passed off and the salt of hunting with cheetahs, racing across the moonlit desert, pitting his skill with rifle and horse against the finest riders and shots in the world, lost its savour, then he would make tracks for his own land, where the fare, if somewhat lacking in spice, is figuratively and literally less calculated to upset the digestion.

Having forgotten the European half of Zarah’s parentage, and lacking woman’s intuition and keener psychological perception, he put her almost extravagant hospitality down to friendliness arising out of her friendship with Helen and her meeting with him in the past, just as he put the men’s apparent friendliness down to the perfect and world-famed hospitality of the Arab. He failed to grasp the fact that their intense interest in the sports arose from an almost savage determination to beat him, or to notice the ring of triumph in their shouting, or the bitterness in their eyes when either they triumphed or failed against him.

He came to look forward to his daily meeting with the men in the company of

their mistress, well content, in his British detestation of all outward show of feeling, to hide his grievous hurt under a cloak of seeming indifference.

It was an adventure, and would end, as all adventure must, if a taste of salt is to be left on Life's palate.

He loathed the luxury of his dwelling, and longed to ask the meaning of many things, amongst them the cause of the dogs' hatred for the Arabian woman and of the empty sockets in the face of the man he encountered so often on his path, but with whom he had not spoken.

But believing that his adventure must soon end, and knowing the Oriental's dislike of investigation into what concerns him privately, he asked no questions, in which he showed his wisdom; truth, in an answer to a straight question, being about as rare in the East as moss in the desert. He rode and bathed and hunted and ate and slept whilst waiting for something to fix his departure, ignorant of the fact that Helen, watched closely day and night, a prey to an overwhelming, secret fear, bravely endured the discomforts of her restricted life on the far side of the jutting rock wall he could see from his door.

He had almost forgotten Zarah's criminal reputation; had grown accustomed to her continual presence and well-meant, if tiresome, ministrations. He thought that the day of sport and night of feasting and dancing had been arranged to celebrate her union with the handsome Nubian, against whom he had found himself so often pitted in the sports.

He turned to look for Al-Asad as he raced at Zarah's side across the desert at the head of a hundred men and, carried out of himself at the magnificent sight, shouted as he rode, taking no more notice than they did of the extraordinary appearance of the sky to the south-east, mistaking the distant phenomenon for a part of the sunset, which was making a blazing, fiery furnace of the sky in the west.

Zarah and Ralph Trenchard headed fifty men, who, their white cloaks streaming behind them in the evening breeze, shouted and laughed as they rode, separated by the Patriarch, Al-Asad and Bowlegs from fifty of their brethren, who, their white cloaks streaming behind them in the evening breeze, shouted and laughed as they urged their *hejeen*, or dromedaries, to their swiftest pace.

To mix camels and horses in a hunt, or at any other time, is a dire and foolish



and fruitless task, giving rise to pitched battles between the beasts and broken heads amongst their riders. But Zarah's men looked forward to the inevitable fight which decided the question of the horse or the camel's precedence over the secret path at the end of a day's hunting; it gave them all such a chance of paying off bad debts and old scores and such an appetite for the meal prepared for them by their patient, downtrodden womenfolk.

Al-Asad sang at the top of his golden tenor voice as he guided his magnificent dromedary from Oman with his feet, and with his spear prodded the cheetahs, with which they had been hunting, between the bars of the specially made cage strapped on the back of the dromedary he led. Bowlegs led another dromedary, upon whose *shedad* or baggage saddle were piled the gazelle, ostrich and bunches of kangaroo-rat which constituted the not particularly good bag for a day's hunting in the desert.

The Patriarch, looking as must Moses have looked if he bestrode a camel in rounding up the trapesing tribes of Israel, rode between the two men, with whom he conversed as best he could for the laughter and shouts of the men and the rumblings of the camels.

He looked at Ralph Trenchard and Zarah as they rode together just ahead and shook his head.

"'Tis best for the horse to mate with the mare and the white with the white," he said, "for the mule is but a beast of burden, to which is apportioned a grievous fare of blows, and the half-caste is but a thing of scorn even to the pure-bred donkey-boy of the cities."

Al-Asad stopped his singing and stared towards the west, as Bowlegs made answer as best he could for the sounds which proceeded from his camel's throat and which denoted fear.

"Yea, oh, father," he shouted in gasps. "What afflicts this evil beast? The half-caste is of no account, as we have lately learned through the death of the great Sheikh Hamed's first born by his white wife. Methinks danger threatens, for, behold, this thrice accursed child of sin trembles as he runs. And the offspring of yon two would have the blood of three countries in its veins, so 'twere well to fell the tree before it bears fruit. And may Allah, in His mercy, give me a camel in paradise in the stead of this bag of shivers I now bestride."

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Al-Asad shaded his eyes from the glare of the evening sky and pointed towards the west.

“What seest thou yonder? A string of ostrich, a fleeing herd of gazelle, or Yussuf hunting with his dogs?”

The Patriarch, with eyes like a hawk, looked in the direction and laughed.

“’Tis Blind Yussuf with ‘His Eyes,’ followed by his dogs. They fly like the wind towards the mountains. From whence do they come and for what reason do they fly like the wind?”

Al-Asad made a trumpet of his hands and sent a call ringing across the miles of desert sand, upon which Ralph Trenchard, whose horse was in a sweat of terror, turned and looked at him and in the direction in which Zarah was also looking.

Yussuf had evidently heard the call.

Against the strangely angry-looking sky he stood out in black silhouette, with a team of dogs racing like the wind at his side, and the dumb youth, pillion-wise, behind him.

A strange couple truly, the one with the sight, the other with the speech, rendering each other service, until, when together, they each spoke and saw with the other’s vision and tongue.

They rode together now, and the youth pointed backwards and then forwards, and they stayed not their flight for a moment; neither did they try to change their course so as to approach their mistress.

Al-Asad looked behind to where the youth pointed and gave a shout of fear, upon which strange sound Zarah and Ralph Trenchard and the entire body of men looked back and, in a desperate effort, tried to check their beasts.

They might as well have tried to stop a runaway engine as horses and camels fleeing before the dread *simoom* which advanced slowly behind them like some great, evil, purple giant or monster of the underworld.

The *simoom*!

A column of poisonous gas, twin of the cyclone, with naught in common with

the *sirocco*; a slowly moving column, whipping the air into gusts, as violent and hot as though blown straight out of the mouth of hell; a phenomenon peculiar to the tropics' desert places, falling upon the desert wayfarer, over him and gone, in the passing of two or three minutes if he happens to be favoured by the gods, in fifteen if ill-luck dogs his path.

A terrible, writhing, twisting scourge of scorching air, with a centre as calm as a lake under a summer's sky and as full of poison as a scandal-monger's tongue. If the wayfarer should not be mounted upon some four-footed beast, endowed with such speed and endurance as will carry him out of its range, then there is only one course left, and that is for him to lay flat upon the ground, to cover his head, to scrape a hole in the sand into which to bury his face, and to hang on to his breath and commend his spirit to his Maker, until the fell monster has passed over him and proceeded upon its death-dealing way.

Zarah was not a leader of men, or the mother of her children, or a child of the desert for nothing.

She turned and raised her right hand, and smiled at her men when they shouted and closed in a ring about her, the horses on her right, the camels on her left, whilst Al-Asad urged his dromedary to her side and caught her mare's halter, so that she rode between him and Ralph Trenchard.

"It's almost certain death," she shouted to Ralph Trenchard as he pressed his horse against her mare as they tore like the wind in the direction of the mountains they could not even see. "Almost certain death if we cannot outride it. The horses are——" She gave a sharp cry as a great puff of scorching wind blew over them, then shouted to Al-Asad.

"Those on horses are to follow me, twenty yards ahead; they are to turn with me and ride back on the camels to stop their flight. When they meet they are to fling their cloaks over the camels' heads. The camels are to be got to their knees; those who ride horses are to dismount and to let them go." She was magnificent in her courage and beautiful in her seeming solicitude for her men, whereas, if only the truth had been known, she was merely revelling in the fight against almost overwhelming odds.

She turned to Ralph Trenchard and held out her hand as she swept forward at the head of the fifty horsemen, who rode with their knees, holding their cloaks in their hands.

“Turn!” she cried, though her words were drowned in the thunder of the gallop and the moaning of the wind, which blew like a furnace from the purple cloud close upon their heels. “Fight them back, fight them. Follow me!”

The terrified horses were turned almost in a line and, headed by Zarah, with Ralph Trenchard and Al-Asad on either side, charged the camels.

The impact was terrific.

The two lines of huge beasts met with a crash, which sounded to Ralph Trenchard like the splitting of rocks, as the fifty horsemen fought the camels back and to a standstill, flinging their cloaks over their heads.

“Dismount!” shouted Zarah, as she rode from end to end, whilst, swaying and bending, the column of poison gas crept slowly across the sands. “Let the horses go! Get the camels down! Dismount for your lives!”

She swung from the saddle and fought her way amongst the seething beasts to where Ralph Trenchard helped to force the camels down by kicks and blows upon the knees.

“Thy heavy boot,” she gasped; “bring that camel down, then lie beside it, and—and——”

She swayed and choked as a blast of poisonous wind blew right across them, then staggered closer to Ralph Trenchard as, choking, gasping, he brought the camel to the ground with the heel of his heavy riding-boot upon its knees, and fell. He fell beside Zarah, his arm across her.

Holding his breath for one perilous moment, he lifted his head and looked about him.

The camels lay humped together, their long necks stretched upon the ground, their muzzles buried in the sands; the men lay alongside, their heads pushed under the beasts’ heaving flanks, their faces wrapped in their cloaks and pressed into the sand. Far out in the desert, tails and manes flying in the scorching wind, the horses fled, close together, as though pursued by a thousand devils. The sound of their hoofs upon the sand came faintly, like distant thunder, to be lost in the moaning of the dread *simoom* as it advanced slowly, writhing, bending,

flinging its purple draperies heavenward like some gigantic dancer seen in nightmare.

It was a pillar of horror against the night sky, in front of which fled life, in the wake of which lay a path of death.

Then Ralph Trenchard, with heart hammering, blood thundering in his ears, and brain beating as though it must break the skull, struggled to his knees. The world, like a molten mass of red-hot lead, seemed to weigh upon his shoulders; a band of white-hot iron to encircle his chest; a sponge soaked with boiling water to lay upon his face as he struggled to get out of his coat.

He fell forward upon his hands, the sweat pouring down his agonized face; he raised himself and with a mighty effort pulled his coat off. The fringe of the air eddies lifted the loose ends of the men's cloaks and tore at the coat he grasped between his teeth as he pressed close to the Arabian girl, who lay motionless on the ground. He laid himself down close beside her, so close that his cheek touched hers and lifting her head, with infinite pain spread the coat upon the ground and wrapped it about her head and his own head, even as the men had wrapped their cloaks, and held the edges tight as the full weight of the *simoom's* poison-filled centre passed over them.

Favoured of the gods, they lay for two minutes under the scorching weight—two minutes in which the camel, driven mad by the cheetahs which fought with frenzy in their cage upon its back, scrambled to its feet and fled into the centre of the *simoom*, there to drop dead; a few seconds in which it seemed to the men that great steamrollers of red-hot steel passed backwards and forwards over them, as they prayed to Allah the Merciful, and held their breath for an eternity of time which was counted in one hundred and twenty ticks of the watch upon the white man's wrist.

They lay long after the pillar of horror had passed, incapable of movement, their heads pressed under the heaving flanks of the camels, which lay there motionless, and were quite capable of lying there, in their camel-headed foolishness, until another *simoom* should overtake them.

The desert stretched peacefully under the glittering stars when Al-Asad stirred, pulled the cloak from about his head and his head from under the camel's flank. He stretched his aching limbs and felt his throbbing head, laughing huskily as he kicked the nearest camel into a consciousness of life and lifted his nearest

unconscious neighbour and propped him against the camel's back. He sat for awhile filling his lungs with the desert air, then rose stiffly and crossed to where Ralph Trenchard and the Arabian girl lay side by side as still as death. He fingered his dagger as he looked at the white man, then laughed and shook his head and removed the coat from about their heads and twined his slender hands in the woman's hair, then removed Ralph Trenchard's arm from about her shoulders and lifted her up against his heart.

"Mine!" he said gently, then laughed softly as he looked at the men and camels lying as though dead, and, with the touch of perversity which came, perhaps, from the mixing of the blood in his veins, bent and laid Zarah in Ralph Trenchard's arms just as he regained his senses and, struggling to his knees, lifted her out of pure solicitude against his shoulder. There was nothing, however, to tell her that his arms had been placed about her simply out of anxiety for her well-being and not in love, so that when she opened her eyes and looked up into his handsome face, bent down so near her own, she naturally concluded that the game was almost won.

She looked at Al-Asad with eyes devoid of expression, but got to her feet at the smile in his and sat down upon the camel nearest to her.

"Kick them, Al-Asad, all of them, men and beasts, to see if there are any alive," she said curtly, anxious to be rid of him, and sat and indifferently watched the efforts of men and camels as they struggled back to life, and merely nodded at the Nubian when he reported that one man and two dromedaries would not respond to his drubbing.

She had fought for her men's lives when danger threatened, but rather for the love of gaining a victory over so dire a foe than for any anxiety she felt for them, and now, thirsty, hungry, alive but uncomfortable, she did not care one *piastre* if they or the camels struggled back to life or remained where they were to die. She wanted to get back to her own dwelling; she wanted to ride there alone with the white man who had held her in his arms, at least, so she thought, sheltering her from death; she frowned as the men swayed drunkenly upon their feet, laughing stupidly as they staggered amongst the camels.

"Asad!" she cried sharply, showing how little she understood of the white man's character by so shamelessly exposing her want of pity and consideration for others. "Bring two camels, thine for our guest and yon for me. Thou canst return

with one or two or more of thy brethren upon one *hejeen*, clustered like bees about a honey-pot if——”

She stopped and got to her feet and laid her hand on Ralph Trenchard’s arm.

“Camels!” she said briefly.

There was no sound, neither was there anything in the desert to be seen.

“I think you’re mistaken,” replied Ralph Trenchard. He spoke tersely, his admiration for the girl’s courage suddenly turned to a great dislike through her callous behaviour towards the visibly suffering men. “By Jove! you’re right, though!”

Headed by Yussuf, with “His Eyes” pillion-wise behind him, fifty men mounted on camels and leading fifty more camels suddenly appeared out of the shadows in the far distance.

Zarah frowned and cursed under her breath at being thwarted in her intention of riding back to the Sanctuary alone with Ralph Trenchard.

“Splendid man, Yussuf,” he said, watching the approaching camels. “Absolutely devoted to you. I suppose he raced home in front of that poisonous pestilence so as to get you a relay of camels and emergency rations and remedies. You’re lucky to have anybody like that about you, don’t you think?”

Zarah did not answer. She crossed to Al-Asad, thereby giving Yussuf the opportunity he wanted and Ralph Trenchard the surprise of his life.

Guided by “His Eyes,” the blind man brought his camel to a halt within a foot or so of where the white man stood, whilst the fifty brace of camels deployed in a semicircle behind him.

He bent down and searched with his hand until he touched Ralph Trenchard’s shoulder; then he bent lower still.

“Helena!” he whispered, and pressed his hand down hard as Ralph Trenchard started.

“Helena!” he repeated, put his finger to his lips, straightened himself and rode, with much shouting towards Zarah followed by fifty brace of grunting camels

with much shouting, towards Sarah, followed by my race of grinning children.

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## CHAPTER XVII

*“It may be fire; on the morrow it will be ashes.”—Arabic Proverb.*

From dawn till dusk the day of festival had been passed in brief, light-hearted excursions into the desert, sports, and those infantile amusements so dear to the complex Oriental mind, during all of which Zarah had walked amongst her men with Ralph Trenchard at her side.

Anticipating the great feast which would be spread for them an hour after sunset, the men refrained from eating more than a handful of dates, whilst drinking innumerable cups of black coffee, so that they moved about restlessly during the day, walking lightly and talking excitedly, with eyes which shone like polished stones.

They chased each other like goats over the rocks, wrestled friendly-wise like boys, inspected the cooking-pots and worried, almost to death, the patient, downtrodden womenfolk, whose only share of the entertainment would be the scraps left over from the feast.

So mercurial became the atmosphere towards sunset that the men roared with laughter when, laden with a bowl of spicy stew, of which the chief ingredients were kangaroo-rat and rice, the fourth wife of Bowlegs slipped on the steps and immersed herself in the succulent mess. They picked her up and, in all fun, threw her into the river, and stripped and dived in after her, fighting each other for the privilege of saving her, before she disappeared into the cavern through which the river raced. They fought each other light-heartedly. They looked upon Zarah the Beautiful more in the light of a trust from the dead Sheikh whom they had loved than their real leader. Superstition and animal magnetism bound them to her more than anything else, and they saw no harm in her marrying the white prisoner for a space, so long as there should be nothing permanent in the union.

Everything had been arranged for a happy ending to the day.

After the feast Zarah and her white lover would appear, followed by one of the many bands of the *Ghowazy-Baramake*, which are formed from a certain tribe of hereditary prostitutes who wander through city, town and village and from oasis to oasis.

Following that diversion, the Patriarch would arise, clothed in new raiment, to acquaint the white man of the honour which the community intended to confer

upon him, incidentally allowing him to understand that, if he liked, he could choose death in preference to tying a tiger-cat to his hearthrug.

Not that they thought he would for one moment.

They knew of the long hours the two had spent together far into the night; of the rides *à deux* they had taken in the desert at sunrise, sunset, and in the light o' the moon; had seen him clasping the girl to his heart after the passing of the poisonous pestilence only seven days ago, and, quite naturally, had put their own construction upon it all.

Who wouldn't?

And knowing as much about the Western mind as their mistress, were just as completely at sea as she.

Having seen nothing of Helen since the night when Al-Asad had whipped them into fury with the tales of her ingratitude and mocking, and with other and more interesting things than her death upon their minds, they had ceased to think about her; in fact, if it had not been for the hatred of their womenfolk, which had been roused by the Nubian's tales of her mocking of them, some of them would have quite willingly sent her back to Hulah. They were too well-fed, too secure, for hate or love to endure. They worried about nothing, yet a certain restlessness and incertitude caused them to press about Ralph Trenchard when he walked, most friendly-wise, amongst them this day of festival; to lightly finger his clothes, to brush against him and to look at him in the strange, unseeing manner of the Oriental, lost in contemplation.

So mercurial became the atmosphere after the feasting in the great Hall, where the men filled the vacuum caused by abstinence with highly spiced viands and wines forbidden by the Prophet, that it required but a spark to set their minds ablaze.

Replete, they lay upon the floor chiding and tormenting the elder and more ugly of the women, who ran amongst them with braziers and coffee or with bowls of water for the washing of hands, whilst the younger ones sped hither-thither in the task of clearing away the *débris* of the feast before the advent of the mistress they so sorely dreaded.

Al-Asad sat cross-legged upon the floor near the steps leading up to the dais.

Nude, save for the loin-cloth, he looked a giant amongst the men who, barefooted or sandalled, with black or striped kerchief round the head, lounged in the long shirt, open to the waist and bound about the middle by the leather thong, universally worn by the Arab. The Patriarch, wrapped in a cloak which added much to his dignity, sat upon a pile of cushions near the first of the columns. Blind Yussuf sat upon the floor against the wall, with "His Eyes" beside him.

Following upon the blind man's whisper of Helen's name one whole long week ago, the subsequent and strange behaviour of "His Eyes" had given Ralph Trenchard cause to think.

The dumb youth would touch him upon the arm to attract his attention, then touch his face and point insistently at the rock wall behind which Helen lived, and, illiterate, as are most Arabs, would shake his head when offered pencil and paper.

He had tried vainly by sign to acquaint the white man of the white woman's presence in the camp, a piece of self-constituted diplomacy which would have much displeased Yussuf.

The mercurial atmosphere had affected Ralph Trenchard.

True, he had not subsisted upon a handful of dates and unlimited cups of strong coffee throughout the day, but Yussuf's whispered word, the youth's strange pantomime, a certain watchfulness he noticed amongst the men, and an extraordinary solicitude for his comfort and welfare on the part of Zarah, had wellnigh brought him to the limit of endurance during the past week. The novelty had worn off, the salt had lost its savour, and he had determined, poor, unsuspecting soul, as he waited to make his way to the great Hall to witness the dancing, to start for Hulah within the next ten days.

In one word, everyone was on tenter-hooks this festive eve, and as ready to fly at each other's throat as any two wild beasts of the desert. The rock-pigeons, sparrows, hoopoes and other birds which abounded in this watered sanctuary in a desert waste rose in clouds at the ringing shouts of laughter and ribald jokes with which the men greeted Zarah's herald, the camp jester, in the misshapen form of a dwarf holding a veritable tangle of black and white monkeys. Following him came four handsome youths carrying gigantic circular fans of peacock feathers, and after them fifteen little maids—who ought to have been abed—with bowls

of perfumed water, which they sprinkled on the floor.

Then the men sprang to their feet and shouted, until Helen, alone, desperate from the solitude of the last terrible week, ran to her door, only to be pushed back, and none too gently, by the surly negress, who longed inordinately to be with her sisters as they devoured the remains of the great feast.

Zarah entered alone, her immense jewel-encrusted train sweeping like a flood over Yussuf's feet as he crept stealthily along the wall and slipped through the door into the night.

For an instant she stopped so that the men should fully take in the beautiful picture she made against the flaring orange lining of her train.

Her limbs showed snow-white through the transparent voluminous trousers, her body, bare save for the glittering breast-plates and jewelled bands which held it, shone like ivory, whilst she seemed to tower, even amongst her men, owing to the mass of black and orange osprey which sprang from the centre of her jewelled head-dress.

Fifteen little boys—who too ought to have been abed—spread wide her train as she walked slowly over the wonderful mosaic floor, with all the grace of her Andalusian mother, between the rows of shouting men. She stayed for one moment as she drew level with the Nubian standing like a giant, and, under the impulse of her innate cruelty, looked at him sweetly from half-closed eyes.

He raised his hands to his forehead, so that a mark made by pearly teeth showed upon his arm, and looked at her from head to foot and smiled as the crimson swept her face. Then he gathered the full burden of her train into his arms and followed her up the seven steps and spread it wide as she sat down in the ivory chair, then knelt and kissed her knees and her golden-sandalled feet.

She leant back and watched the thirty children climb on to the stone stools, upon which had sat the thirty Holy Fathers centuries ago, and looked down at the hawklike, eager men who watched her, and up to the star-strewn, vaulted ceiling, from which hung silver lamps which drew lustre from her jewels and her eyes and the precious stones glittering in the columns.

Against the golden background of the Byzantine wall, with the great fans moving slowly above her head, she was barbaric in her beauty, and not for one moment did she or the men doubt that the white man had fallen a victim to her

moment did she or the men doubt that the white man had fallen a victim to her enchantment.

She rose when Ralph Trenchard stood in the doorway looking across the hall in bewilderment, and, holding out her hands, descended the steps, her great glittering train spread out behind her like an enormous fan. She walked slowly, whilst the men whispered remarks, which were better left unprinted, the one to the other, and the fifteen mites leapt from the stools, upon which had stood the prisoners from Damascus, and ran to lift her train as she turned with her hand in Ralph Trenchard's.

He looked at her from head to foot. He gazed at the superb figure, the jewels, the beautiful face, the crimson-tipped fingers, and, with all the perversity of the human, was suddenly overwhelmed with a longing for just one glimpse of the girl he had loved, in her riding kit, with her sweet, laughing, fair face turned up to the light of the stars.

"Thank God," he said to himself as he walked up the steps by the side of the beautiful Arabian. "Thank heaven this is the end of this awful time, and I shall soon be riding back along the road I came with her, my Helen."

He looked down at the men, to find their eyes fixed upon him, and wondered vaguely at the feeling of tension that pervaded the place; then forgot all about it at the sound of a drum outside the great door.

With great shouting and to the shrilling of reed pipes and the throbbing of drums the dancers burst through the doorway. They had been enticed across the desert by the biggest fee they had ever been offered in the whole of their vagrant life, and had thoroughly enjoyed the blindfolding and their mysterious entry into the strange camp where they had been so lavishly entertained.

Men and women, youths and girls, virile, joyous, burned deep brown by the sun and the storm, with the knowledge of life in their flashing eyes, the love of adventure in their hearts and the call of great spaces in their vagabond blood, they stood quite still for a moment and then moved.

They danced to the sound of the drum, the shrilling of reed pipes, the clapping of hands, the beating of bare feet. They danced in groups, in pairs; one, thin as a lath, supple as a snake, danced by herself, driving the men wellnigh mad, so that the silver lamps swung to their shouting until she dropped in a heap at the foot of

the dais. They sang as they danced, until the echoes of the wild Arabian love songs and battle songs beat against the star-strewn, vaulted ceiling; they laughed and clapped their hands in joy, and swayed and rocked to a great moaning; they advanced to the foot of the dais, caring little, in the power of their ancestry, which stretches back beyond the days of the Pharaohs, for the imperious woman who sprang from Allah knew where, or the man who, handsome as he was, came from a foreign land.

They danced for two hours. Danced to earn their huge fee, to amuse, to entertain, to end in dancing for the sheer love of it.

In and out of the columns and amongst the men went their slender bare feet to the flashing of knives, the clash of cymbals and the call of the Arabian love songs. They met, they parted, they met again; whilst the girl as thin as a lath, as supple as a snake, sprang up and stood upon one spot, moving only from her waist upwards.

And as suddenly as they had come, as suddenly they departed, to the rolling of the drums and the reed pipes' sweet shrilling, whilst some of the men crossed to the door to watch them descend the steps, and others got up and moved about, restless under the excitation of the nerves invariably caused by the *Ghowazy-Baramake*.

Followed a certain time set apart for the drinking of wines forbidden by the Prophet, the eating of the sweetmeats and the lighting of hubble-bubbles and cigarettes.

"You like it?" said Zarah, so softly, as Ralph Trenchard lit her cigarette. He bent to catch her words, then drew his great ivory chair nearer still and leaned towards her as he talked, upon which actions the men who watched put their own construction.

"As gentle as the new-born tiger cub," quoted Bowlegs as he helped himself in right lordly fashion from the heaped-up tray offered him by his third wife, who, being childless, filled the post of drudge to the entire Bowleg family.

"As placid as the surface of the sands of death," replied his neighbour as he looked at Zarah and winked at Bowlegs. "Allah grant we split not our sides with laughter when the claws of the tiger cub draw blood."

“Or when he slips up to his neck in the sands of her displeasure.”

“What of the white woman? Has aught been prepared for her passing to Paradise or *Johannam*?”

By spitting with vigour Bowlegs managed to interrupt the speaker.

“My heart is loth to send so fair a maid upon so long a journey. All women are cats, longing to sharpen their claws upon each other. Let us send her upon the road to Hulah, and so trick the gentle Zarah.”

“Nay....”

“Yea....”

Followed a heated *sotto voce* discussion, with interludes of gambling instigated by the Patriarch, who had grown a-weary of his new raiment, in which he found it difficult to find the dice and counters. The gambling spread right through the hall; the men were quiet, watching Zarah as she played every note in the scale of woman’s charm to enthrall the man at her side, whilst he, thinking of Helen, replied mechanically to her questions.

And Helen, pale, with great shadows round her eyes, sat on her couch with her hands clasped in a desperate effort to keep herself well under control. For a week she had not been allowed outside the front of her building, nor had she seen Zarah or caught a sign of Yussuf amongst the rocks which towered around the little clearing behind.

When she had moved to the door or the windows she had met the negress, who had pushed her back, and none too gently, whilst making sounds of anger in her throat. Her food had become scanty and badly cooked; her books had been taken one by one; she had been made to understand that to bathe in the river, ride, or visit the dogs, which had learned to love her, was forbidden.

When the shouts of laughter which greeted the dwarf with his tangle of monkeys rang through the night air, she jumped from the couch and ran out into the clearing at the back, whereupon, to her everlasting undoing, the negress shifted her ungainly person into the direct centre of the doorway in the front of the building and lost herself in a great disgruntlement, whilst chewing the fragrant “*kaat*.”



Helen stopped dead in the middle of the clearing and pressed her hands upon her mouth.

Swinging hand over hand, dropping noiselessly from rock to rock, came Yussuf down the mountainside, with “His Eyes” upon his shoulders.

Fifteen feet above her they stood, side by side, upon a narrow ledge, then, after a few whispered words, leapt like panthers and landed like great cats upon the sand of the clearing. Noiselessly they crossed to Helen, who stood, speechless, against the wall. In the merest whisper Yussuf asked her a question and repeated the answer to “His Eyes.”

There was no sound as the youth crept to the door and peered in, nor when, with his back to the wall and his dagger between his teeth, he stole round the room, his eyes fixed on the surly negress lost in her great disgruntlement. Neither did she make other sound than a little sigh when, struck by Fate from behind, she fell forward into Eternity with her mouth full of *kaat*.

“Quick, Excellency!” said Yussuf, when Helen cried out at the terrible scene. “There is no time to lose upon sympathy. That stroke of the dagger did but remove one who was but a little better than a beast and a little less evil than she who blinded me. Spill not thy heart’s blood for such, but hasten, in the name of Allah, hasten to the white man, who even now is in the hands of the she-devil and my brethren, who know not what they do.”

“White man! What white man?”

Helen walked close to Yussuf and stared up into his sightless face.

“White man!” she whispered, her face ashen through the tumult of her heart. “What white man? In God’s name, in the name of Allah, tell me! Is it—is it \_\_\_\_\_”

Yussuf caught her and shook her as she reeled up against him.

“Thou art brave, white woman; be not a coward *now*, when thy man waits for thee, surrounded by those who, inflamed with forbidden wine, will strike him down for a misplaced word. It is this wise. In the few words time and Fate allow me——”

Helen turned to “His Eyes” & she stood beside her, smiling and nodding his head

Helen turned to Mine Eyes, who stood beside her, smiling and nodding his head, whilst the blind man talked. Then she placed her hand in Yussuf's.

"... rush not in, Excellency," finished Yussuf as they moved towards the door. "Listen to the words of the old man with the white hair and venerable beard. Wait until the thoughts of my brethren are fixed upon the white man, then—*then* do as Allah the Merciful bids thee, and may His blessing rest upon thee and thine throughout all time. I shall be within the Hall, likewise 'Mine Eyes,' when he has well hid the body of yon slave and has finished the task I have set him."

Yussuf's sandalled feet made no sound, the noise of Helen's boots upon the rocks was deadened by the shouting from above as they sped like deer up the steep, deserted steps to the doorway of the Hall of Judgment. With finger upon lips Yussuf slipped in unnoticed, leaving Helen in the shadows, staring across the great chamber to the dais, where sat Zarah, in all her barbaric loveliness, with Ralph Trenchard beside her.

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## CHAPTER XVIII

*“Upon every misfortune another misfortune.”*—Arabic Proverb.

A straight, clear path stretched from her to the man she loved.

The end of the room near the door was empty, the men having pressed forward towards the dais so as to watch the white man's face when the proposition, which would amount to an order, backed by a threat, should be made to him. They stood on each side, close together, leaving a path the width of the dais, their eyes over-bright and their fingers straying towards the dagger—which the Arab ever carries—in their cummerbunds.

Zarah sat leaning slightly forward, her face white under the tension of the moment, her jewelled fingers playing with the crystal knobs of the ivory chair. She sat in a sea of flaming orange, jewel-encrusted satin, the fans blowing the ospreys of her head-dress, as they swung the silver lamps above her head.

Ralph Trenchard, sensing that something out of the ordinary was afoot, sat right forward, alert, watchful, his eyes following the movements of the men as they walked restlessly to and fro, or stood talking with overmuch gesture.

He turned once and looked at Zarah, who sat divided from him by the glistening folds of her train. He looked at her steadily, trying to find the answer to the riddle of the hour, and caught his breath when she stretched out her hand and laid it on his and whispered, “I love you.” He sat staring at her, stunned by the sudden realization of his blindness and his crass stupidity, then looked down at the Nubian, who, arms folded, stood looking up at him, a world of hate and mockery in his face.

The hate in the man's eyes, the love in the woman's voice, the sense of pending danger, the unaccountable expectation in his heart.

Love, hate? Turmoil, peace? Life, death?

Which?

He lifted his head and looked straight across to the doorway. It showed black, with a background of purple strewn with stars and he sighed unaccountably

with a background of purple, strewn with stars, and he sighed, unaccountably disappointed, and watched the benign Patriarch move slowly forward until he stood in front of the dais.

As he moved Helen moved forward and hid behind the velvet curtain hanging to one side of the door, and made another quick movement when the man she loved unknowingly looked straight at her, then stood quite still when Yussuf, without turning, raised his hand.

The Patriarch had begun to speak.

He bowed himself to the ground before Zarah, then stood upright, reminding Ralph Trenchard of a picture of Elijah he had loved to look at in the family Bible on account of the ravens with loaves of bread in their beaks, little recking in his baby understanding that the word raven stood for a certain village, or tribe of people, in the holy one's environs.

The Patriarch's fine voice and sonorous words rang through the building, causing the men to press closer still, and the Nubian to look up at Zarah. She looked down at him with a mocking smile, and then at the venerable old man, and lastly at Ralph Trenchard, who sat in amazement, looking from one to the other.

Happily Helen's sharp cry was drowned in the Patriarch's sonorous words as he offered the Arabian girl's hand in marriage, with her wealth in cash, jewels, horses, camel and cattle, to the Englishman; happily everyone was too enthralled at the sight of the Englishman's amazed face to look back to the doorway where she stood, her eyes flashing in a great anger, her heart beating heavily with fear.

Ralph Trenchard held up his hand.

The baying of the dogs from the kennels could be heard in the silence that fell, whilst the men tugged at each other's sleeves and surreptitiously made bets upon his answer to the proposition.

He repeated the Patriarch's proposal word for word, then turned to Zarah, speaking slowly, so that all should understand.

"Have I understood correctly? Yon old man, who, he says, stands to you in place of a father, proposes that I—I, an Englishman, a foreigner, should marry you, an Arabian and a Mohammedan. That I should live here with you and help you rule

these fine men of yours, who could learn nothing from me. That I should give up my country, for which I fought, my people whom I love, to become one of a nation whose blood is not my blood, nor ways my ways. Is that so?"

Zarah's hands lay still on the crystal knobs of her ivory chair as she answered, a dull crimson slowly flushing her face:

"Verily," she replied, holding up her hand to ensure silence. "It is as you say. It is our custom in Arabia, though of a truth it is not customary for the maid to be present at the bargaining."

She laughed suddenly, sweetly, and held out her hands, whilst her words beat like hammers upon Helen's brain. "For me, he who stands to me as father offers you my hand in marriage, with my wealth, my people, my horses, all I possess, asking naught of you in return. I have the blood of Europe in my veins, I have learned the customs and the speech of the white races, even of my mother's race. I am not ill-favoured, nor too much wanting in wit. I——" Her voice changed as the song of the summer breeze might change to the warning of the coming storm. "I wait for your answer before my men, who desire naught but my happiness and, with mine, their own."

At the veiled threat in the last words Ralph Trenchard turned and looked at the men, his dominant jaw out-thrust, his mouth a line of steel.

So this was the meaning of the feasting, the watchfulness, the tension, the solicitude.

The horror of it all.

Love in the place of friendliness, the love of a despotic woman who had never in her life been denied or thwarted; a veiled threat as lining to the mantle of hospitality which had been thrown about him; a life-long captivity, or even death, for his freedom if he stood true to his love for Helen.

Captivity!

He shuddered involuntarily at the thought of some of the prisoners he had seen working under the lash of the overseer's whip.

Death!

He smiled.

A few steps across the no man's land stretching between the now and the hereafter and he would see Helen waiting for him, her lovely, fair face alight with the love of all eternity.

A great silence fell as he rose, followed by a sound like the wind as the men whispered amongst themselves.

"A fitting mate for the tiger-cat, a fitting sire for the whelps, if it were not for his blood."

"Yea, verily," answered Bowlegs. "'Tis a rare beauty in a man and the stature of a giant."

"He and the Lion would be well matched in a fight."

Bowlegs would have spat in derision if he had dared.

"A mouse in the Lion's maw, brother. I lay thee my shirt of silk to thy sandals that the Lion would break him in——"

The whispering stopped when Ralph Trenchard raised his hand, whilst the Patriarch, by force of habit, searched for the counters in the folds of his new raiment.

"The honour you do me is very great, very great. I cannot find words to thank you. But——" Ralph Trenchard looked down at Zarah, who rose slowly, a lovely glittering thing full of apprehension and a rising anger. She looked him straight in the eyes without a word, and at the relentlessness which shone in hers he subconsciously wondered what kind of death by torture she would mete out to him in return for his loyalty to Helen.

"But——?"

The word dropped from her lips like the first thunder drop heralding the coming storm, and Helen, a great light blazing in her eyes, stepped forward and stopped as Yussuf held her back by a movement of his hand.

"But," continued Ralph Trenchard slowly, very slowly, so that every word could be clearly heard throughout the hall "the honour the great honour I must refuse

be clearly heard throughout the hall, the honour, the great honour I must retain, because——”

“Because——?”

Under the impulse of a great excitement the men moved forward in a body, then stopped.

There was not a sound to break the terrible silence, not a movement except for the jewels which flashed as they rose and fell above the Arabian girl's heart and the fans which swung the silver lamps and stirred the black and orange osprey of her head-dress.

She stood like a statue of terrible wrath, outraged in her pride before her men. Like a cobra about to strike she waited motionless to pay back that insult a hundredfold.

“Because——?” she repeated.

“Because,” Ralph Trenchard said slowly, clearly, “because I love the memory of the white woman who died amongst you, too much to give a thought of love elsewhere.”

Helen's ringing, joyous cry was lost in the men's shouting and the sharp sound of their daggers as they whipped them from the sheath, and her scream of rage was lost in their shouts of laughter when Zarah, lifting her hand, smote the white man across the mouth.

Then she ran, oblivious of the roar of amazement, up the clear path which stretched between her and her lover.

“Ra!” she cried as she ran, with arms outstretched. “Ra! I'm here! I'm coming to you, Ra! Come to me!”

She ran to him as he leapt from the dais; she was in his arms and he had folded her close and kissed her before Zarah had time to give an order to the men, who stood motionless with astonishment.

A moment of utter silence, then the storm broke.

“Separate them!”

The order, given to the Nubian, cracked like a whip as Zarah, white with passion, sank slowly into the ivory chair.

“Seize the white man!”

She flung her order to a young Arab whilst the Nubian struggled to wrench Ralph Trenchard’s arms from about Helen.

“Drive them in!”

The young Arab turned the dagger he held in each hand and drove the blunt handle hard down on to the ribs just above Ralph Trenchard’s waist, and jerked him roughly back when his arms slackened under the shock and agonizing pain.

There was a moment’s breathless silence.

Helen stood perfectly still, her elbows held from behind by Al-Asad, her face, radiant with love, turned towards Ralph Trenchard, who sickened at the sight of the Nubian’s glistening skin so near the girl he adored. He knew that they were in a desperate plight, the tightest corner any two could have got into, but he was not giving the Arabian the satisfaction of seeing a sign of his dismay in his face, and he worshipped Helen for her outward calm, though his whole being revolted at the Nubian’s close proximity to her.

He knew he had only to make a certain movement to fling off the man who held his elbows from behind, but before he made it he wanted to find a way to make the half-caste loosen his hold of Helen.

And the way came to him as he looked at Al-Asad, who stood staring down at Helen’s golden hair with an indescribable look on his face.

“You, Al-Asad,” he said slowly, pronouncing each word so that it sounded clearly in the hall, “you nigger, let go of the white woman. In our country we do not allow the black——”

He rid himself with a lightning movement from the hands which held him and sprang and caught the Nubian, who, hurling Helen back against the dais, leapt at the man who had so direly insulted him.

There came one tremendous yell as the men rushed to form a ring, then a very



babel of voices as they laid their last *qamis* and their last *piastre* upon the outcome of the struggle between the two men who stood locked in a mighty grip.

“My shirt of silk to thy sandals,” yelled Bowlegs, “that the foreigner is crushed like a mouse in the Lion’s maw.”

“Taken, O thou little one with legs like the full moon,” yelled his neighbour, who had learnt a thing or two in the fine art of wrestling when he had fought so magnificently for the whites. “The white man will use our brother as a cloth with which to wipe the marks of thy misshapen feet from the ground. Bulk counts not against knowledge.”

Bowlegs spat as he glanced at Ralph Trenchard, who, trained to a hair, stood well over six feet, yet looked like a stripling beside the gigantic Nubian, who overtopped him by inches.

The men’s attention was diverted for one moment when Helen ran up the steps of the dais, and they held their breath in sheer delight when the Arabian rose from her chair to confront her.

The two girls were about the same height, both of an amazing beauty, and they both loved the same man, who was likely to have his neck broken within the next few minutes.

What more could they desire as an evening’s entertainment?

“Will you take a bet, Zarah?”

The lamps seemed likely to spill their oil as they swung to the men’s shouting.

“Take it! Take it!” they yelled. “Take it, Zarah the Beautiful. Let it not be said that an infidel could show thee a path.”

“The stakes?”

“Ralph Trenchard’s life against my locket, which hangs around your neck!”

“They are both mine!”

“The locket is *mine*, his life is *God’s*, in your keeping for a little while.”

“You, Helen R-r-aynor, you sign his death warrant? He cannot win against my slave!”

“Will you take the bet?”

The Arabian unfastened the chain and, laughing, flung the locket at Helen’s feet as the two men moved.

The Nubian put forth all the strength of his mighty muscle. Ralph Trenchard, one of the finest exponents of jiu-jitsu to be found anywhere, took advantage of the movement to slip his hand an inch or two, and to move his foot an inch or so. For a second he stood quite still, then, as the Nubian moved, with a movement too quick and too fine to be described, lifted the gigantic man and flung him so that he struck his head against the dais and lay still at his mistress’s feet.

In the uproar which followed Helen was down the steps like a bird, and, laughing happily in her complete misunderstanding of the Oriental mind, was in her lover’s arms.

“His life!” she cried, looking over her shoulder towards Zarah. “His life! I’ve won! I’ve won!” then flung her arms round him and held him close at sight of the fury in the Arabian’s face, whilst the men pressed upon them, their hands outstretched, waiting for the order which they knew must come.

“Separate them!”

Helen’s hair came down about her like a mantle as hands, only too willing, dragged her away from the man she loved, and Ralph’s silk shirt ripped to the waist as he fought desperately for her until overpowered by numbers.

Zarah stood half-way down the steps, looking like some great bird with her train spread out behind her, the ospreys blowing this way and that above her death white face with its half-shut tawny eyes and crimson mouth. She stood looking from the one to the other evilly as she planned a torture for the two which might, in some little way, ease the torture of her own heart.

She had given her word to spare the white man’s life, and as it had been given before some hundred witnesses, her word she had to keep, but she would make of that life such a hell that the white girl would wish, before she had finished with both of them, that death had overtaken her and her lover in the battle.

In the intense excitement of the moment no notice was taken of Yussuf as he crept quietly through the doorway from behind the curtain where he had been sitting, nor of the clamour from the kennels, which a few moments later rent the peace of the night.

“Bring them here, both of them, to my feet. Hold them apart! Thou dog! Who told thee to strike the white man?” Zarah pointed at a pock-marked youth who had pushed Ralph Trenchard forward by the shoulder in an exuberance engendered by the uproar so dear to the Arab’s heart. “’Tis well for thee that it is a day of festival, else would ten strokes of the whip have been paid thee for thy presumption.”

The youth shrank back behind a pillar, whilst Zarah looked from one to another of the men, dominating them all by her unconquerable will and her magnetic beauty.

She had but to smile and to speak to them as her beloved children and the prisoners would be free to go where they pleased; to say one word for the hall to be emptied; to raise her hand for the prisoners to die on the spot.

She was supreme in her command, superb in her beauty, but as she looked at the English girl she knew she was beaten.

She could see the love in Ralph Trenchard’s eyes as he looked across at Helen, who stood smiling, dishevelled, with her golden hair in a cloud around her over-thin, death-white face; and she knew that in his love for Helen, the love she herself craved for and had failed to inspire, he would fight to the death to save her from harm.

Death!

Even as the word flashed into her mind, the youth whom Al-Asad had whirled like a club and shaken like a sack of *durra* for mimicking his mistress sprang forward.

In the Arab’s supreme callousness towards his brother’s feelings he used the Nubian’s limp body as the first step as he ran up the steps of the dais and knelt at Zarah’s feet.

“Her death, mistress!” he shouted, his eyes blazing at the thought of the white

girl's insult towards his womentolk. "Behold, she mocks thee and the women who tend and serve her. She mocks them this wise."

He sprang back, landing, with the Arab's supreme callousness towards his brother's feelings, full upon the Nubian's back, so that, the last ounce of breath being expelled forcibly from his lungs, he lay limper than ever. Followed a mimicry of Helen's supposed mimicry of Namlah the busy and the surly negress, until the men shouted with laughter and yelled with appreciation, whilst Zarah looked down without a smile and Helen looked on in amazement.

She understood at last, and tried in her indignation to free herself, and failing, shouted her denial of the untruth.

"It is a lie! It is a lie! I could not, would not——"

As the youth spat in her direction, and the men, their pride once more ablaze at the thought of the insult offered their own women, cursed and yelled, Ralph Trenchard, with an effort beyond all telling, broke from his captors and sprang straight at the youth who had spat.

"You swine! You filthy swine!" he cried, and with a fist like a flail caught the spitter full on the point, smashing his jaw, whereupon the men yelled "*Wah! Wah!*" and at a sign from their mistress, shouting with joy, flung themselves upon Ralph Trenchard and held him fast.

"Pass not the sentence of death upon him this night, mistress," suddenly cried Bowlegs, waddling forward. "He has grievously insulted thee, as has the white woman, but let him live for a space and under the eyes of Al-Asad teach us his cunning tricks, for, behold! if 'twere but a question of muscle even could I pinch his life out 'twixt thumb and finger. After we have learned the tricks, then——"

A shout of appreciation followed hot upon his words of wisdom. Helen in despair fought to free herself so as to protect her lover, whereupon Zarah looked slowly in her direction.

"And the woman?"

"Kill her! Sink her in the sands of death! Give her to the dogs! Drive her out into the Empty Desert!"

Zarah shook her head at the suggestions shouted by men who are taught in their

religion that woman is devoid of soul, and therefore to be looked upon either as a plaything or a drudge, or the potential bearer of sons, and, in any case, far below the level of the horse at her very best.

“Death is but a closing of the eyes in sleep.” Zarah translated the line she had learned at school. “And I would keep her wide-eyed in life, working as work the women she has mocked.” She caught the horror in Ralph Trenchard’s eyes as he looked from her to Helen, who stood mute, her heart aglow at the thought of her lover’s safety for the moment. Lost to all thought of self, she but half understood Zarah’s words, and looked questioningly from the men to her and back.

“Yea! Ralph Tr-r-enchar-r-d!” said Zarah slowly, pouring the balm of revenge into her smarting wounds. “To work as my servant, to wait upon me, to serve me, even as thou shalt work under the ruling of that fool, who would even now be dead if it were not for the thickness of his skull.” She held up her hand as the men shouted. “Has the white man aught to say, the man who changes his coat to the wind? The white woman at dawn, the Arabian at noon, the white woman at dusk, and Allah knows which in the watches of the night!”

“You liar! You despicable coward! There isn’t a word of truth in what you say, you *liar*!”

Helen’s words, forcible, if somewhat lacking in diplomacy considering her position, rang through the room, and Yussuf, standing hidden just outside the door, raised the electric torch he held as a sign to “His Eyes” standing outside the kennels deserted by the grooms, who, against orders, had crept to the feast *en bloc*, instead of in shifts. Yussuf, who knew his brethren backward and looked upon them as children, had planned the death of the Arabian and the escape of the whites as a *grand finale* to the day’s festivities.

For the last half-hour the dogs, headed by Rādi the bitch, had been driven to the point of madness by “His Eyes,” who had drawn one of Zarah’s sandals across the bars of the kennels, inciting them to a very lust to kill.

Yussuf had planned everything, but had forgotten to take into consideration the extraordinary trait in the character of the white races which urges them to give their life for their brother at the slightest provocation. He raised his hand to flash the signal, then dropped it to listen to Ralph Trenchard speaking.

“There is a proverb in England.” he was saying slowly. so that everyone should

understand, “which says, ‘One man can take a horse to the water, but ten cannot make him drink.’ You will never make the girl, who will one day be my wife, wait upon you as a servant, neither will you make me work under your half-caste lover.”

Which words were also lacking in diplomacy, taking everything into consideration.

A great silence fell. The men thought that Zarah had been rather badly cornered; she waited out of sheer dramatic instinct. Then she laughed, laughed until the hall was full of the sweet sound, as she turned and sank into her chair.

She had the prisoners in the hollow of her hand, and not one whit of their punishment would she spare them.

She put her exquisite, golden-sandalled foot upon the ivory footstool, and looked at Helen.

“Loosen the white woman!”

She spoke curtly, and the men holding Helen sprang back.

“I would remove my sandals, Helen R-r-aynor-r! Come and loosen them!”

Helen smiled and shook her head. Torture would not force her to save her life by humiliating the white races.

“You will not? Remember you are a prisoner, my prisoner, and that the power of life and death and punishment is in my hands!” Zarah leant right forward and looked into the steady blue eyes, whilst the men, knowing their mistress’s cunning, pressed forward. “You will not, you say?”

“No! I will not!”

Zarah sat up, her hand pointing at Ralph Trenchard, her eyes half closed in the strength of her terrible cruelty.

“I will make you, and I will make him in like manner if he refuses to obey.” She paused for a moment, and then spoke sharply. “Take the white man out, and whip him till he drops. Stop!”

She had won.

Yet as she leant back slowly she felt no triumph as she watched Helen swing round to the man who fought to get free.

Helen laughed, laughed good humouredly, splendidly, with all the pluck of her race, as she spoke to the man she was fighting for.

“Why should I not unfasten the very pretty sandal, Ra? Why should you be made to suffer, if my very capable fingers can undo the gold laces of my lady’s footwear? Don’t get angry, Ra, it’s a great waste of energy; besides, you know I always do exactly as I please.”

Yussuf listened to the men’s exclamations and laughter, to the sound of Helen’s feet mounting the steps, then flashed his torch three times.

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*“The world is a mirror; show thyself in it, and it will reflect thy image.”—Arabic Proverb.*

Helen looked over her shoulder at her lover and smiled without a trace of bitterness, then turned and looked straight into the Arabian’s eyes.

For a long moment the two girls looked at each other, until, unable to bear the contempt in the steady blue eyes, the Arabian lowered hers, and pointed to her sandal, then lifted her head sharply as Helen knelt.

Pushing Helen to one side, Zarah sprang to her feet and walked quickly to the top of the steps and stood staring at the doorway, through which could be seen the star-strewn sky and through which could be heard the baying of dogs in full cry.

Her face was white as death, her eyes wide in fear; her hands pressed down upon her heart as she backed away from the savage sound, until she stood upon her train, which swept around her like a shell.

The men stood facing the doorway, whispering to each other. They had hunted too often with the dogs; they knew every sound of their voices too well not to know that they were hard on the scent of whatever they were so strangely hunting at this hour of the night, when they were never allowed to be at large.

Bowlegs, who loved the dogs almost as much as he loved his horses, under a strange excitement which had fallen upon him as well as on the other men, spoke to Helen, whom he knew to be so beloved of the dogs.

“They cross the plateau in a pack, hot on the trail, ah! they have lost. Canst hear Rādi the bitch, the finest in the kennels? They near the water’s edge! Hearken to the echo thrown by the rock above the cavern! They have found. Ah! hunt they the devil? Or is’t a pack of *djinns* hunting the dead from the quicksands? Tell \_\_\_\_\_”

A man came running from the doorway, his eyes full of fear, his dagger in his hand. He ran up to the foot of the dais and stood half turned towards the door, to which he pointed frantically, and shouted up to Helen.

“They come, they come, the greyhounds and the dogs of Billi. They mount the steps; their eyes shine in the dark; they are mad; with rage; death hunters with them



steps; their eyes shine in the dark; they are mad with rage; death hunts with them ——” He turned and looked at Zarah, who stood like a pillar of stone, wrapped in her train.

She did not seem to count in this moment of great danger.

Helen, knowing the dogs’ inexplicable hatred of their mistress, turned and looked at her, the contempt in her eyes deepening to scorn as she saw the frozen look of fear in the Arabian’s eyes.

“The dogs have got out,” she said sharply. “Look! your men are running before them. Look! Wake up and do something. Order the doors to be shut or they’ll be in. Quick, Zarah!”

The Arabian took no notice. Lost in one of the visions which swept down upon her at times, she was looking into the future.

She stood stark with terror, her eyes wide and glassy, her crimson lips drawn back from her teeth, which chattered like gourds rattled by the wind. She shook from head to foot, and put out her hand and tried to speak as the dogs suddenly gave tongue.

She clutched at her throat and pointed to the door, and Helen, who did not understand, turned away from the picture of abject fear and held out her arms to her lover, who stood a prisoner in the hands of men who showed great signs of uneasiness as they looked at their mistress and then at the door.

Then Helen stamped her foot and shouted, so that the men who stood near the door turned towards her, then impeded each other in their haste as they tried to obey her.

“Shut the door!” she cried. “Keep them out! Quick! they’re almost at the top! Shut it! You’re too——”

Her words were lost in a piercing scream from Zarah as she ran back and back until she reached the wall. She flung her arms out and fought, fought the imaginary dogs which in her strange vision she saw leaping upon her. She fought desperately, a wonderful picture against the glittering Byzantine wall, fought nothing but her imagination or the shadows thrown by Fate. Then she screamed and screamed and, covering herself in her train, crouched down, as the whole pack of grevhoums and the hunting dogs of Billi tore through the doorway.

from the grey masses and the running dogs of the race through the doorway.

“Ra!” cried Helen. “Ra! come to me! They’re after her. She’ll be torn to pieces before our eyes, Ra!”

The men holding Ralph Trenchard backed before the onslaught of the great dogs; he seized the opportunity and leaped for the steps, gaining the top just in time.

“My God!” he cried, as he watched the beautiful creatures tear across the floor. “If they leap to the top, sweetheart, we’re done; they’re too mad to recognize us.” He put his arm round her and kissed her on the mouth. “Darling! we shall win through, never you fear; keep a brave heart, beloved, and remember that I love you.”

Helen whispered as she put her hand in his: “And remember that I love you and that Yussuf is our friend.”

They had no time for more, the dogs were on them. Ralph Trenchard caught the splendid bitch and flung her back as she reached the top of the steps. He caught her again and yet again as she returned to the charge, meeting her teeth in the younger dogs who tried to outdo her or to pass her on the steps, whilst the dogs of Billi leapt and leapt and leapt again to reach the top of the dais, where crouched the woman they hated so deeply in their canine hearts.

Yussuf’s “Eyes” had over-reached himself in letting out the entire pack.

They were jammed too close together to get up the steps or for any single one to be able to get the necessary run which might have allowed the strongest to leap to the top. They baulked each other; they fought each other; they rushed the dais in a wedge and fell back and fought each other where they fell, until the place seemed a mass of maddened dogs.

The scent of the woman they hated was strong in their fine noses; she was there just above their heads, just out of reach of their mighty, snapping jaws. They rushed the steps when the bitch fell back, exhausted, and fought the man who held them at the top. He knelt upon the top step and caught them by the neck and threw them headlong back and down amongst those who rushed behind; whilst those far back in the middle of the hall flung themselves upon those in front, which turned and fought them, then turned again and strove to reach the steps.

Helen knelt beside her lover ready to help, and the men stood far back against the wall making bets upon the outcome of it all, watching the stupendous picture, full of admiration for the white people, who had tackled the situation without hesitation, whilst the grooms flung themselves into the seething mass of dogs and fought to dominate them.

And the dogs far back in the hall, who fought to get forward, flung themselves on the men against the wall and on the grooms, then, losing the woman's scent in the male garments, sat back and howled and barked and fought each other, until the place was like a corner of hell let loose.

Rādi the bitch, in one last effort of revenge, made a sudden rush and making a spring-board of the Nubian's body, with a wonderful leap, which brought shouts of approval from the men, landed on the top of the dais at Helen's side.

With the Arabian's scent strong in her pointed nose, she rushed to where she crouched and turned and ripped Helen's coat as the girl flung herself sideways and caught her by the neck, calling to her, hanging on to her with both hands. The bitch recognized the voice she had learned to obey in love, and turned suddenly and thrust her muzzle into Helen's neck and hands, just as the head groom shouted from the body of the hall.

"Whistle, Excellency," he shouted. "The madness is past. They obey. Whistle to them, then with thy hand upon the bitch's neck, I beseech thee to lead the way to the kennels."

"Yea! Excellency!" yelled the different men from the kennels and the stables, as they stood holding on to a struggling dog with each hand. "They will follow thy whistle, loving thee."

Helen laughed as she led Rādi to the top step, looking like "Diana of the Uplands" in a strange setting as the splendid greyhound strained to get down to her companions.

She gave a long, low whistle, upon which every dog fought as frenziedly to get to her in love as they had fought to get to the Arabian in hate.

"Hold them!" she cried. "I will whistle them back to the kennels."

Which words were heard and taken up by a child standing outside in the

shadows, and passed on to the women, who, with a hate in their hearts even greater than that of the dogs for the Arabian, had crept from their quarters and half-way up the steps to the Hall of Judgment.

The hate of these docile creatures for the white girl, planted and fostered by the men who had been so led astray by Al-Asad, was most truly to be feared a hundred times more than the instinctive hate of the dogs for the Arabian. They had done their best to please this foreigner, cooking for her, mending her clothes, fetching and carrying for her and waiting upon her; when their men had come back raving of her beauty and her horsemanship, the meek, downtrodden souls, who had lost their looks and their figures through hard work and overmuch child-bearing, had said no word, but when they had heard the tales of the beautiful white girl's mimicry of their efforts to please her, then they had vowed to themselves to be revenged upon her and at the first opportunity.

The news of the dogs' escape had reached them. The opportunity had arrived, and perhaps a double opportunity for revenge, for why should the dogs not pull both the women down so that they should be quit of their dreaded mistress and the foreigner.

When the child passed on Helen's words they crept swiftly down the steps and up to the kennels, and hid themselves amongst the rocks to wait just a little longer.

"No! don't come with me, beloved," Helen said, as she stood on the top of the dais steps pressed close to her lover's side, with the dogs leaping and barking at her feet. "A love such as ours must come right in the end, and I don't believe she meant what she said."

In which she was mistaken, as she was to learn.

"Then, until we meet again, dear heart! I don't like you doing this, somehow."

"She wouldn't let us be together, Ra! It's wiser not to make her *really* angry!"

He held her close, and kissed her, and watched her run down the steps into the middle of the dogs, which nearly knocked her down in their exuberance; and watched her laughing, calling, whistling, as she ran down the hall, followed by them all, whilst the men, who were but children in their wrath and very good-tempered children when left alone, shouted their admiration.

She turned at the door, beautiful, radiant, and held out her arms.

“Ra!” she called. “Ra! beloved!” and disappeared into the night, the rocks echoing the barking of the dogs.

The men rushed to the door and out on to the broad ledge to watch the wonderful picture.

Down the steps and over the plateau and up the other side to the kennels she fled like Diana, preceded by the dogs and followed by the kennel grooms, who called the blessings of Allah upon her as they ran.

Her voice calling to the dogs came faintly on the soft night breeze; they heard her whistle; there fell a silence. Then were heard the shrill cries of many hate-filled women.

The clamour grew louder and louder and ended in prolonged, insufferable peals of laughter.

Silence.

Sick with horror, Ralph Trenchard took a step down and stopped.

Al-Asad sat on the bottom step, looking up.

His handsome face was drawn in pain, his lips pulled back from his splendid teeth. He sat crouched, still, looking up out of eyes filled with hate.

Ralph Trenchard swung round to the woman. She stood against the wall, a slender, silent figure, love and hate shining from her half-closed eyes.

He did not hesitate, he leapt clear of the dais to save the girl he loved from what the insufferable peals of laughter, which echoed in his ears, portended.

He had got half-way down the hall, when, upon a sign from the Arabian woman, hands caught him and held him, whilst a golden sound of laughter came from Zarah as she stood, a thing of love and hate, against the glittering Byzantine wall.

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“Fear not, my children,” whispered Yussuf to “His Eyes” and Namlah the Busy

some time later as they talked over the failure of their plans within the last few hours. “Even as the pounding of many grains of wheat goes to the making of bread, so is life learnt in many lessons. Dawn breaketh. To revenge the loss of thy son, my daughter, thy speech, my son, and mine eyes, we will bring about the downfall of the accursed woman. The proverb says ‘Three persons if they unite against a town will ruin it.’”

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## CHAPTER XIX

*“Before the clouds appeared the rain came upon me.”—Arabic Proverb.*

Two months had passed in which Zarah had absolutely failed to break her prisoners' indomitable spirit; two months in which her passion for the white man and her hate for the white girl had grown deeper and fiercer.

With the density of some women, she clung with an extraordinary and ridiculous tenacity to the belief that, if she only threatened or cajoled enough and held her rival up plainly enough to ridicule or contempt, she would ultimately win Ralph Trenchard's love.

Also did fear urge her to force or cajole him into becoming her husband.

She knew her own men were blown like cotton threads before every passing gust of their facile emotions, and that their suddenly aroused hatred of Ralph Trenchard had given place to genuine admiration; by that she had come to realize she had no real hold over them and that, where they had obeyed her father, the Sheikh, through genuine love, they merely obeyed her because it pleased them so to do.

She was just their nominal head. She pleased their sense of beauty, and they almost worshipped her for her courage in raids, but they were too well fed, too sure of an unfailing supply of the necessities of life, too secure against intrusion and interference to wish to relieve her of the reins of government with its attendant burdens.

If they had formed one of the itinerant groups of Bedouins which have to literally fight for their existence as they flee across the desert, she knew they would not have tolerated her for a day.

True, they made no effort to run counter to her orders and to ameliorate the white man's position. They considered the rough hut he lived in on the far side of the plateau, and the rough food sent him, quite good enough for any infidel; but they greeted him with friendly shouts when he arrived to teach them his tricks of cunning, and did their best to beat him at his own game.

If it had not been for his overwhelming anxiety for the future and for Helen

If it had not been for his overwhelming anxiety for the future and for Helen, whom he knew, by hearsay, to be a very slave to the tyrannical Arabian, Ralph Trenchard would not have complained of his life or his treatment. True, he hated the half-caste, who did his best to humiliate him in the eyes of the men and, in a moment of forgetfulness in the early days, had forcibly rebelled against his constant espionage and irritating presence. He had been instantly cured of the spirit of rebellion by the sight which, with a mocking laugh, the Nubian had pointed out to him, of Helen, kneeling by the river surrounded by jeering women, as she washed the Arabian's linen.

“And worse will happen, thou infidel, if thou dar'st disobey my mistress's commands. Mohammed the Prophet of Allah decreed in his understanding that unto the faithful should be four wives given, neither did he in his wisdom say aught against an infidel wife being of the four. Nay! in thine eyes I see the lust to kill. The life of the white woman pays forfeit for my life; thy life if the white woman essays to shorten the days of Zarah the Beautiful.”

For fear of something worse than death befalling the beautiful, splendid girl he loved, he dared do nothing. For every word, for every act of rebellion on his part, some task even more menial than those she daily performed would be forced upon her; for any attempt he might make upon the Nubian's life, to assuage his own outraged feelings, her life would be taken.

And there seemed no possible way out.

Not only did the Nubian dog his footsteps, but Yussuf, upon whom he had counted in his heart of hearts, had failed him, and without his help nothing could be done, no communication with Helen effected, no plans for escape made.

He saw Yussuf every day seated amongst the men gathered to learn the arts of wrestling and jiu-jitsu, and of all the little crowd he seemed to be the only one who still cherished his hatred for the infidel. He spat with vigour when the white man passed, and at other times shouted various abusive or ribald remarks, whilst urging his brethren to down the unbeliever in the tests of strength and cunning, for the glory of Allah the one and only God.

His days were most humiliatingly mapped out for him by the Nubian.

There seemed to be no satisfying the men's craving to master the rudiments of wrestling.



From two hours after sunrise until the first moment of the great noonday heat they milled and boxed, with intervals of single-stick and jiu-jitsu, in which they invariably forgot instructions, lost their self-control and temper, and almost broke each other's legs, arms, heads or backs.

The afternoons were passed in the heavy, unrefreshing sleep induced by great heat; from the moment the sun slipped down behind the topmost mountain peaks, throwing deep shadows across the plateau, they were at it again until the hour of the one big meal of the day, which takes place about two hours after sunset.

The best part of the night they passed in gambling, story telling, singing, or tearing over the desert on horseback, Ralph Trenchard accompanying them, invariably shadowed by the Nubian.

To his intense relief, Zarah left him entirely alone for the first month. Fully aware that he was surrounded by spies, he gave no sign of the rage which swept him each time he caught sight of Helen following the Arabian, fanning her or holding an umbrella over her; or descending the steps to the river with a great earthenware vessel on her shoulder, which she would fill for the tyrant's bath and carry up the steep steps to her dwelling.

Zarah had passed the month in trying to break Helen's splendid spirit, ignorant of the strength which real love gives to those who, either through physical weakness or untoward circumstances, are at the mercy of those moral cowards who take advantage of their distress or defencelessness. Cowards who, amongst the educated and the ignorant, the clergy, the laity, in the highest profession or in trade, place themselves morally on the level of the man who kicks his dog or hits his opponent when he is down.

She made no impression on the English girl.

Strong in her love, certain that her prayers for help would be answered, she endured all things.

She waited on the Arabian hand and foot, climbed the ladder to the golden cage, wherein Zarah lay during the *siesta*, with coffee, sherbet, or whatever she desired, and descended and climbed again with ever the sweetest smile in her steady, blue eyes. She brushed and combed the red curls until her arms ached; carried and fetched and read aloud and looked after the birds; fanned the woman,

fetches water from the river for her bath, washed the silken garments, and waited upon her at meals, without a murmur on her lips or a shadow in her eyes.

She spoke to no one, but through the gossiping of the women learned that the body of the surly negress had not been discovered, and that Zarah, owing to a certain spirit of insubordination that had lately swept through the camp, had not dared to punish the grooms of the kennels for their gross carelessness.

She was continually surrounded by the women, who, ignorant of the lies told them, jeered at and laughed at her and did everything in their power to make her tasks even yet more distasteful. When away from Zarah her every movement was spied upon and reported.

She slept in a hut in which tools had been stored during the alterations to the building, rough and infinitely uncomfortable, but a very haven of refuge at the end of the day when she returned, to fling herself on her knees and pray for strength and patience.

If only she had known it, spies watched her at her prayers, noting the look of peace which followed quickly upon them, and the content with which she stretched herself upon the bed composed of rugs flung upon the sand; watched her asleep and at her toilette, and ran to make report on all things, especially upon the delight she seemed to take in combing her masses of beautiful hair and in her bath in the river long before the dawn.

And when a rough hand shook Helen out of her sleep and ordered her to Zarah's presence, it seemed that God had turned a deaf ear to her prayers and that fear must, after all, dominate her splendid courage.

It was long after midnight when, with a heavily beating heart, she entered the luxurious room.

Two Abyssinian women, nude save for a short petticoat which stopped above the knees, stood behind the divan upon which Zarah lay smoking a *naghileh*. She lay and looked at Helen without a word, hating her for the ethereal look, which heightened her beauty and had come to her in her days of toil and privation.

"I am told," she said after a while in Arabic, "that the hut you sleep in is not clean, that your habits are not the cleanly habits of the Mohammedan, that your hair has not escaped contamination from the disorder in your hut; therefore——"

When Helen interrupted her quickly, she looked back at the tittering black women and laughed.

“How can you say such a thing! I am perfectly clean, my clothes are in holes through being washed on the stones, my hair....” To her own undoing and yet, if she had but known it, as an answer to her prayers for help, she undid the great golden plaits and shook the rippling mass out over her shoulders, holding long strands at arm’s length until even the negresses exclaimed at the glory of its sheen. “My hair is combed and brushed every day and washed once a week; it is perfectly clean!”

Zarah laughed as she puffed at her hubble-bubble, inhaling the fumes of the tobacco of Oman, which is calculated to absolutely stun the uninitiated in its gunpowder strength.

“Anyway, I do not like these tales of uncleanness to be spread amongst my women, Helen R-r-aynor-r,” she said curtly at last. “I therefore have decided to keep you beneath my eyes. You will sleep in my room, on a mat, you will bathe under the supervision of this slave here, who will now cut your hair off so that you are clean.”

“I’ll kill her if she touches me!” Helen cried sharply, and, gathering the glory of her hair round about her, ran to a table upon which lay an ornamented but most workmanlike dagger. She loved her glorious, naturally curling hair, looking upon it, with her beautiful teeth, as the greatest asset with which nature had endowed her. Her lover loved it, and had often told her that she had ensnared his heart in its golden mesh. Forgetting her impossible position as prisoner and the utter futility of any effort at resistance, determined to fight for the glorious mantle which covered her to her knees, she picked up the dagger as the two gigantic women approached her.

“I’ll kill the first one of you who touches me!”

Zarah laughed and raised her hand.

“Go and find Al-Asad and bid him bind the white man and bring him here. *Stop!*”

Helen had thrown out her hands in surrender.

Even her hair would she willingly sacrifice in her great love, everything she would sacrifice except her honour, and that she knew was safe in a place abounding with deep precipices and paths where the foothold was precarious.

Save for her tightly locked hands, she made no sign when the beautiful mass lay about her feet; in fact, with an almost superhuman effort of courage, she refrained from touching her shorn head, and leant down instead and picked up a handful of hair, which looked like a great skein of golden silk.

“It’s a pity to waste it, Zarah,” she said gently. “Why not stuff a pillow with it?”

The Arabian bit hard on the amber mouthpiece of the *naghileh*. With her short hair curling round her face, Helen looked like an exquisite girl of fifteen, defenceless, helpless, and calculated to inspire pity in the heart of almost any man.

“Call Namlah!” She lashed the Abyssinian across the thigh when she had to repeat the order. “Art deaf or bereft of the use of thy limbs, thou fool!” she screamed, seizing the dagger from her belt and throwing it after the rapidly retreating negress, missing her shoulder by an inch as she emulated the speed of the ostrich through the doorway.

Namlah, upon whom Helen had counted in her heart of hearts, had failed her, and without her help nothing could be done, no communication with Ralph effected, no plans for escape made.

Of all the crowd of women who jeered and laughed at her she seemed to be the one who cherished the greatest hatred for her. She spat with vigour when the white girl passed, and at other times shouted various abusive and ribald remarks, urging the women to see that the unbeliever performed her menial tasks thoroughly, so as to enhance the glory of Allah the one and only God.

She ran in and prostrated herself before her dread mistress, then pulled the masses of hair roughly from under Helen’s feet and tossed it this way and that as though it were the hair of goat or camel.

“A kerchief for thy head, O great mistress, could I weave, or a plaited girdle set with pearls, though ’twere wellnigh sacrilege for the middle of the believer to be bound by the hair of the infidel. Behold the infidel looks even like the skull of one dead, with her face like unbaked bread and her head like unto the wing of

the ostrich plucked of its feathers.”

With instructions to make what she could of the silky burden which filled both her arms, she spat or, rather, for fear of her mistress’s humour, made the sound of vigorous spitting in Helen’s direction, and vanished through the doorway.

Helen lay on the floor that night, her beautiful shorn head resting on her arm, and poured out her heart in gratitude that Zarah had not seen fit to shave it completely.

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*“What is in the cauldron is taken out with the kitchen spoon.”—Arabic Proverb.*

*“A thousand raps at the door but no salute or invitation from within.”—Arabic Proverb.*

During the night, in the passing of a second, for no apparent reason and with all the Arab’s lamentable instability, Zarah grew suddenly tired of baiting her prisoner, and, with the extraordinary density of the woman in love, decided to make one last endeavour to break down Ralph Trenchard’s resistance.

She could not understand, and she would never be able to get it into a mind narrowed by self-love, that one might as well try to stem the Niagara Falls with straw or hold a *must* elephant on a daisy-chain as to influence the invincible love of soul-mates.

She decided she would offer Ralph Trenchard Helen’s liberty. She would offer to give up her mountain home, her freedom, her power. She would offer herself as his servant, his slave, to cook for him, to wait upon him, anything to keep him by her side, no matter if he returned her love or not, as long as he lived near her; and if that failed, as a last resource would use the despicable lever of the lowest type of coward.

To gain her end she would threaten to commit suicide. So the night following the cutting of Helen’s hair, which was also the night preceding a tournament, in which the men were to show how much they had learned of the art of pugilism, she attired herself in great splendour and summoned Ralph Trenchard to her presence. Helen, surrounded by women who gossiped, knelt at the river edge rubbing silken garments on a stone, with Namlah mocking and jeering beside her when the Abyssinian, sent to fetch Ralph Trenchard, shouted her errand as she

passed. Helen shrank back when Namlah suddenly sprang at her and wrenched the silken garment from her hand.

“Thou fool!” Namlah shrilled as she knelt. “This wise, and this and this. The soap? Or hast thou eaten it in thy imbecility?” She leant across Helen and snatched at the soap, which slid into the water, then rung the garment as though it were the neck of an offending hen as she whispered: “Give me a message for the white man. Zarah offers him thy freedom for his love.” Down came the garment on the stone as though she essayed to soften the tough carcass of some female Methuselah of the poultry world as she screamed at the top of her voice: “Wilt thou never learn? Did Allah in his wisdom not teach thee even how to wash a garment? Take it and try, lest I smite thee with it!” She flung the silken remnant at Helen, who, eyes alight, caught it in both hands and crashed it on the rocks until one half followed the soap into the water, whereupon Namlah leant across her and gripped her wrists.

“Fool! This wise, and this and this!”

The women crowded round to watch Namlah swinging Helen’s arms like flails.

“Tell him,” whispered Helen as she beat her breast, “that—— Nay, Namlah, thou tearest out my arms. Behold, I can do no more.” She fell forward with the woman underneath, and in the confusion whispered her message. “Tell him I prefer death to my freedom at such a price,” and shrank back, for the benefit of the onlookers, when Namlah, flinging all that was left of the washing item in her face, ran off, with much cursing, up the path to where Yussuf waited in the shadows.

And hope sprang up in Ralph Trenchard’s heart as he climbed the steps in answer to Zarah’s summons, followed by the Nubian at some distance.

Suddenly, and with a most amazing clumsiness, Yussuf walked out from behind the great boulder straight into his arms.

“Sorry!” said Trenchard shortly, as he tried to free himself from the grasp of the infuriated Arab. “You came out so——”

“Hast no thoughts for others?” shouted Yussuf at the top of his voice. “Thine ear,” he whispered, whilst he shook Ralph Trenchard violently. “Zarah will offer thee thy white woman’s freedom for thy love. The white woman prefers death to freedom without thee. She loves thee. Nay,” he suddenly yelled, “wouldst push a

freedom without life. She loves life. Nay, he suddenly yelled, "wouldst push a blind man to his death?" The two seemed locked in anger as Al-Asad raced up the path. "A message," he whispered. "Shake me in anger. Give me a message for thy woman—give me a message."

The Nubian was close upon them.

Trenchard grasped the blind man and shook him.

"Tell her to stand fast and to fear nothing," he whispered, then shouted angrily. "How can I hear thy noiseless feet on the——" He reeled as Yussuf hurled him backwards and continued to climb the steps, whilst the blind man filled the night air with curses.

Zarah was quite alone.

The Nubian, under orders, sat down upon the steps to await developments.

He was well content to wait.

He had gauged the white man's strength of resistance and had no fear that he would become entangled in the beautiful Arabian's wiles. He smiled as he crept, as noiselessly as a great cat, to the platform before the door and stretched himself flat upon it, the blackest spot in the black shadows, to listen to the woman he loved pleading for the love of one who loved another.

Lost to all sense of shame as are those women who have not learned the meaning of self-control and self-sacrifice, Zarah pleaded with Ralph Trenchard for his continued presence by her side. Pleaded for his company and his comradeship so that she might enjoy the shadow of his great good looks and actual presence whilst keeping the substance of his love from her rival.

She had made the greatest mistake in her toilette.

None too over-dressed at the best of times, she had a startlingly undressed appearance as she stood like a beautiful exotic flower beside the Englishman.

She had not—how could she in the name of decency?—discarded a single garment, but had donned the most transparent outfit in her wardrobe.

Her feet were bare and jewelled, as were her arms, her hands, her waist. The

trousers, worn by most Arabian women, were voluminous in their transparent folds, her body shone through a jewelled vest which fitted her like her skin.

Trenchard looked at her from head to foot, and with the perverseness of the human mind immediately thought of the picture Helen had made as she stood beside her grandfather in the desperate battle; and he backed a pace before the Arabian's semi-nudity, whilst the Nubian buried his face in his arm to stifle his cry of longing.

"I love thee," Zarah was saying softly, looking up at the man she loved with love-filled eyes. "I love thee, R-ralph Tr-r-enchar-r-d. I have loved thee ever since I lay against thy heart so many, many moons ago. I will give up my home, my people, I will name Al-Asad as ruler in my stead, I will follow thee upon the path of thy choice, to the country that should please thee. I will wait upon thee, serve thee, devote myself to thee, if thou wilt give up the other woman. I love thee."

"I have already told you, Zarah, that I do not love you, could never love you." Ralph Trenchard, loathing the scene, spoke curtly, and stepped back quickly as Zarah flung herself at his feet. "Do get up," he added in English, as he tried to loosen her grasp upon his knees. "If only you knew how we English loathe scenes like this, and what we think of hysterical, unbalanced people!"

She sat back on her heels, lifting her hands in supplication.

"I offer you Helen R-raynor-r's freedom if you will stay with me. I do not want to keep her. Let her go back to her own country. She is young; she will forget; she does not know what love is. Besides, I fear my slave. He is handsome; he, too, is young; he wishes to take a wife. I will send Helena safely away from him if you will stay with me."

Trenchard showed no sign of the horror of the fate in store for Helen; he spoke quite calmly, slowly, almost indifferently.

"You will not gain anything if you hurt Helen. If she dies I die; if you try to harm her she will find a means of killing herself, and I shall kill myself. Not because of my love for her—our kind of love is higher than suicide, it endures—but only so that you shall find no pleasure in her death."

He pulled her hands apart and stepped back as she sprang to her feet. She failed



to understand that, living or dead, she was no more to the man than one of the birds in its cage, and played what she mistakenly believed to be her trump card.

“Then I will kill *myself*, R-r-alpha Tr-renchar-r-d.” She choked with rage, the r’s in the English words rolling like little drums. “And you will never forget that upon your head will lie the death of a woman, never be able to wipe out the picture of my broken body lying amongst the rocks.” She ran close up to him, shaking with the unseemly rage of the uncontrolled woman. “I go to my death.” She pointed through the doorway, striking a most dramatic attitude, whilst watching for a sign of interest in her proceedings in the man’s indifferent face. “To my death!” she screamed as she saw none, and fled through the doorway, missing the astounded Nubian by an inch.

She stopped upon the edge of the very steep incline and listened for the sound of footsteps hastening to her rescue. At the absence of all sound she looked over her shoulder, to see Ralph Trenchard, with his back to her, lighting a cigarette. She tore back into the room with the last shred of her restraint gone and swung him round by the arm.

“Oh, you didn’t do it?” He looked her straight in the eyes. “We have women like you in England, never very young or very pretty, who, verging upon the sere and yellow, and with nothing to fill their days or occupy their minds, try to coerce the people they love by threats of suicide. They never get what they want, either. The slightest chain frets love, real love, you know. You can’t inspire love just because you keep the person *you* love, but who doesn’t love *you*, in the same house with you. You can’t hold love by cooking or serving. Love, real love, will thrive on a crust offered by the one loved, but will sicken at the sight of a basket of sweetmeats offered by anyone else.” He had no intention of giving her the slightest cause to hope by offering her any sympathy in her tantrums. He added coldly, cruelly, as he turned from her: “It’s rather a pity these silly, hysterical women don’t carry out their threat of suicide; the world would be no loser by their death.”

He backed before her as she burst into a torrent of reproach which ended in a storm of abuse.

“... Go!” she screamed at the highest pitch of the Arabian voice, which is none too sweet in wrath. “To-morrow at the tournament I will decide what is best to be done with this white woman who is not fit to mingle with my women and children. Yea. even. owing to her dislike of water have we cut her hair so that

\_\_\_\_\_”

She screamed and struck at Ralph Trenchard as he caught her by the wrist and pulled her roughly to him.

“What did you say? You’ve cut off Helen’s hair? All that wonderful golden mass! You have dared to do that? Speak, can’t you!”

He flung her on the divan as she laughed and clapped her hands at the sight of his horror-stricken face, and laughed again at the plan for revenge which flashed into her mind.

“So I have prevailed in making you feel, R-ralph Tr-r-enchar-r-d,” she shouted after him as he left the room and ran down the steps, followed by the amazed Nubian.

She ran to the door and laughed until the mountains echoed and re-echoed to the sound, then turned and flung herself on the floor, where she gave way to the violent hysterics of the uncontrolled, jealous woman.

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## CHAPTER XX

*“Tyrannical, cheating, of ill omen.”—Arabic Proverb.*

The overpowering heat of the day had given place to the lesser heat of early evening as the sun sank behind the western edge of the mountain ring. The interior of the ring looked like the inside of some rough-edged, painted flower-pot, with grey, purple, blue-black foundation and sides of green and richest reds and browns, melting to saffron, topaz, amethyst and rose, crowned by great peaks which seemed to flicker in the terrific heat radiated by the sun-scorched rock. Little golden, pink and crimson clouds, faintly stirred by the blessed evening breeze, sailed serenely across a sky of deepest blue which stretched, a gorgeous canopy, above the heads of the men seated on the ground or up the gentle incline rising from the plateau.

Those opposite the steps down which Zarah would have to pass sat with knees to chin, placidly chewing *kaat* or smoking red or black *sebel* and longer pipes with big, open bowl.

Those to the north and south of the steps sat sidewise, also contentedly chewing or smoking, with eyes fixed upon the steep path.

There was no laughing, no gambling, no betting upon the outcome of the different sporting items in the tournament for which they had foregathered. They were strangely quiet, with a certain expectancy in their eyes and a vast amount of meaning in their expressive gestures as they commented upon and argued about the tales the Nubian had spread anent their mistress's strange behaviour of the night before.

*“Bism ’allah! upon the very edge, with one eye upon the running water into which the Lion thought she desired to throw herself, and one eye upon the white man, who, by the wool! is a man of strong heart, even if he be an infidel.”*

Bowlegs laughed as he stretched his circular limbs and pressed himself against his neighbour so as to make room for Yussuf as he came towards them, led by “His Eyes,” down the path made for him through the serried ranks.

“Welcome, brother, thou true believer in the shaven crown,” cried the handsome

youth who had been swung like a club, and who had not followed the precepts of the Prophet to the extent of shaving his head. "Hast heard that the white woman, who holdeth the heart of the man who loveth her and who is loved of the beautiful Zarah, and may Allah guide their footsteps in the crookedness of their paths——" As he spoke he pushed his way between Bowlegs and Yussuf, and as he looked up into the mutilated face, touched the blind man gently. "Hast heard that the tiger-cat, in her rage, has caused the head of the white woman to be shaven so that, if she were lost in the Robaa-el-Khali, the ostrich might even wish to brood upon it as her egg?"

The men shouted in ribald mirth as they bandied jokes, mostly unprintable in their Oriental flavour.

"Yea, and shaven after the setting of the sun," said the Patriarch bitterly, whilst every man in earshot touched his favourite lucky amulet or made the finger gesture against ill-luck. "Behold, will Zarah's mocking of Fate surely bring catastrophe upon the camp, for what but misfortune can follow the shaving of a crown after the setting of the sun?"

The fine sons of one of the most superstition-ridden races in the world performed divers tricks to placate the fury of the false god of ill-luck they had raised up in their minds, then continued in their merriment.

"Who has seen the shaven head?"

"No eyes have seen the head, O brother, but mine own eyes have seen Namlah the Busy, seated like a bee in the heart of a golden flower, weaving a kerchief from the infidel's wondrous hair."

Bowlegs shouted with laughter.

"Yea! verily! a kerchief to replace the gentle Zarah's garments, torn asunder 'twixt her teeth and fingers in her wrath at the white man's coldness."

"Or to wipe the tiger-cat's face, which, wet with tears and hot with anger, was like an over-ripe fruit of the *doom* tree, fallen upon the sand!"

"Or to remove the dust from her chamber, wrecked like unto a house swept by the hurricane, with feathers of many fowl, liberated from the burst cushions, clinging to the silken curtains and her hair."

Prodded by Fate, the handsome youth turned and laid his hand on Yussuf's arm whilst the men crowded closer yet to listen to their conversation.

"O brother," he said laughingly, "thou who hast suffered, thou who even now dost pass sleepless nights of pain, wilt thou not in thy goodness, to quieten the agony of the tiger-cat's gentle heart, give unto her a few drops of the sweet water prescribed thee by yon old herbalist for sleep?"

Yussuf smiled as best he could for the distortion of his mouth, as he searched in his cummerbund and pulled out a flask, filled with the strong narcotic he took to still the throbbing of his torn nerves when the wind blew from the north.

"'Tis overpowerful, little brother. A drop too little and she wakes from her sleep like a tigress bereft of her cubs; a drop too much and she wakes not at all."

"Twenty drops and what..."

The voice from behind was stilled suddenly as the men rose quickly and stood staring up to the platform outside Zarah's dwelling.

Zarah stood looking down.

She stood almost upon the spot from where some years ago she had hurled her spear at the fighting dogs, and, killing the one intended for a gift to her father's guest, had followed the decree of Fate, who had tangled her life's thread with those of her white prisoners.

"Zarah is a very queen of loveliness!"

"Yea! with hair like the setting sun!"

The hawk-eyed men with the superb sight of those who live in the clear atmosphere of great spaces criticized in detail the Arabian's garments, which at such a distance would have shown as a white blur to the eyes of the westerner, accustomed as he is to an horizon bounded by walls and a sky ever limited by chimney-pots or partially obliterated by smoke or fog.

"The white man tarries! Would that the Lion were here to tell once again of the calmness of his face in the storm of yester-night."

"Perchance does his heart fail at the thought of the maiden's shaven crown "

perchance does his heart fail at the thought of the maiden's shaven crown.

“Likewise does she tarry, fearful perchance of beholding her lover’s eyes empty of love light.”

“She gave her the vinegar to drink on the wings of flies.” Yussuf touched his sad face as he quoted the proverb. “Verily were the words of wisdom written to describe the refinement of the tortures our thrice gentle mistress meteth out to her prisoners.”

There was not a movement, not a whisper from the men when Zarah turned and lifted her hand, but there came a great cry from hundreds of throats as Helen appeared in the doorway, followed by the two gigantic Abyssinian women.

“Hast seen the shaven crown, brother?”

The handsome youth turned to Yussuf, who stood with his sightless face raised to the skies.

“Nay, blind one,” he replied quietly, all the merriment gone from his face. “I have seen the white woman. She stands behind the dread Zarah, her golden hair, even the length of thy longest finger, twining about her head like a crown of flowers upon a young acacia tree. She is like an orchard of choice fruit in her beauty. Yea! like an orchard of pomegranates and peaches, and as the gentle incline of the rocks where the evening sun kisseth the oranges and apricots and luscious fig. If it were not that she is of a race of infidels, likewise cursed with a spirit of mockery and a lack of gratitude, I would e’en woo her in the shadows of the night and make of her *my* woman.” He moved forward, drawn by Helen’s radiant beauty, as she descended the steps fanning Zarah with a circular, painted fan of dried palm leaves.

The men stood as though spellbound at the sight of the two beautiful girls.

They forgot the tournament, their wrath, their merriment; they stood speechless, staring, then moved forward in a body as Zarah reached the bottom step and made a way for her up to where an ebony chair, inlaid with gold, stood upon a carpet of many colours.

The expression of Zarah’s sullen face was almost as black as the shadows spreading half-way up the mountains; her heavy brows were bent above her strange eyes; her crimson mouth set in a line which boded no good to those who

might thwart her.

A chance word, an indiscreet gesture, would be spark enough to start the conflagration, and Fate, close to Helen Raynor, stood ready to fire the Arabian's raging jealousy as Ralph Trenchard, followed by the Nubian, walked slowly from the men's quarters towards them.

There was not a sound and scarcely a movement in the vast throng of men as they stood looking from one to the other of the three who, even in the desert, made the seemingly inevitable love triangle. And so enthralled were they, and so oblivious were the three who composed the triangle to their surroundings, that no notice was taken of the downtrodden, docile women who, headed by Namlah, and imbued with the spirit of insubordination which was sweeping the camp, also with a fierce desire to see the white woman's shaven head, crept in ones and twos from behind the rock buttress which hid their quarters from the greater part of the plateau.

They stole along the river edge, behind their men, who were too engrossed in the picture before them even to bet, let alone to notice the doings of their womenkind.

They crept up behind the gigantic Abyssinian women who stood behind Zarah's chair, and turned and looked at them as a couple of Yemen buffaloes might turn to inspect an ant heap.

The radiance of the blazing sky seemed to fill the mountain ring for a moment as Ralph Trenchard passed down the path made for him by the men, and stood suddenly clear of them, and exactly opposite Helen as she fanned the Arabian.

The mountains echoed Helen's name as he called to her, holding out his arms, and her cry of joy as she flung the circular fan with pointed edges sideways, so that by mischance it caught in the Arabian's hair, and ran to her lover.

The rocks echoed Zarah's screams of wrath and pain and her sharp order to the Abyssinians, and the downtrodden women's screams of hate, as they swept round the chair headed by Namlah, and cut Helen off.

Zarah shrieked in agony as the fan pulled her head down to one side, scratching her face and her shoulder, and beat the arms of the chair and the Abyssinians' glistening bodies as they tried their best to relieve her whilst she fought like a

wild cat, with her eyes fixed on the fight which was taking place in front of her.

The women were trying to prevent Helen from reaching her lover, and the men were endeavouring, and none too gently, to push the women on one side, so that the white man they had come to admire and like might meet the woman of his heart. They did it for the sport of the thing, and to assert their authority over their women; also, in their heart of hearts was there a certain amount of admiration for Helen's beauty and courage.

The women who had come to titter and jeer at Helen's bald head were consumed with wrath at their disappointment and fought their men tooth and nail, taking advantage of the scrum to pay off many an old score and avenge many a lash of the whip or tongue. The men, amused at first, then astounded, then really angry at this sudden exhibition of women's rights, slapped their own particular womenfolk with the flat of their hand, then smote them smartly with the *mihjan*, and finally shook them violently until their sleek heads seemed like to leave their shoulders and their beautiful teeth to break in their chattering.

Ralph Trenchard stood at the back of the men who slapped and shook and cursed; Helen stood, looking towards him, towering above the dusky little women like a young acacia tree in the bush.

In spite of the peril in which they knew themselves to stand, they smiled across and called messages to each other, which were lost in the universal torrents of abuse and vociferous yelling, interspersed with screams and sounds of slapping and tearing.

Namlah, wedged on the outer circle of the maelstrom, fought like a fury to get at Helen, screaming abuse, hurling her fighting sisters from her path in the excess of her seeming rage, whilst Yussuf, led by "His Eyes," rattled his staff on the shins of the gentler sex as he strove to reach Namlah.

Bowlegs brought about their meeting.

Aided by the mighty muscle of his legs, he leapt free of the shrieking sisterhood high into the air and, in a manner somewhat reminiscent of a hawk and a field mouse, pounced upon his second and obese wife, whom he had spied fighting with the best in much torn raiment.

The tremendous impact from above flung her backwards against Namlah, who in



her turn was flung backwards against Yussuf.

Proceeded a pretty passage of arms and tongues between these two, during which the blind man slipped a silver bottle down the front of Namlah's torn *qamis* whilst she belaboured him, and "Yussuf's Eyes" rained blows upon his mother's back.

"Ai! ai! ai!" she wailed, as she rolled the flask in the top part of her torn petticoat. "Would'st tear the very *tannurah* from my limbs, thou wifeless, childless, breaker of the Prophet's law? Push me forward—ha! thou would'st push me forward, thou rascal son of mine, even unto the first line of my fighting sisters. Well, push, push hard, so that I leave the mark of my nails upon the white girl's face!"

Helen turned at the sound of the woman's voice and raised herself on tiptoe the better to see, and caught the look in the dusky little woman's twinkling eye, which in no wise responded to the wrath of her voice and gestures.

"Yea! white woman," she shrieked, "come nearer to me, or let me come nearer unto thee, if thou art not afraid. I will show thee what manner of woman it is thou did'st mimic and mock."

"Afraid," cried Helen, forcing a way through the men. "Afraid! Come to me and \_\_\_\_\_"

She reeled back as Namlah flung herself upon her, pushed by her son, who pulled the blind man after him, whilst the men who were not actually engaged in taming their shrews surged round them, shouting in delight.

Namlah landed right on Helen's chest, to which she clung as a woodpecker to a tree trunk.

"Take this! Ten drops this night before she sleeps—then wait in the shadows," she whispered; then shrieked: "Ha! thou infidel. I would tear out thine eyes, I \_\_\_\_\_"

"Yussuf's Eyes" suddenly and forcibly pinched the underpart of his mother's arm, upon which she yelled, let go her hold on Helen and leapt at him, then slid meekly to earth and tried to cover her face with her torn veil, which she spread out to arm's length as Helen hid the silver flask in her belt.

The sun had set, leaving the sky in a tumult of violent colouring, through which, in a small patch of deepest blue, shone one great star. Helen looked up to the banners of gold and red and orange, the curtains of saffron, the trails of rose and wispy bands of grey, then looked across at Zarah, who walked slowly towards her, blood trickling down her scratched cheek. Her eyes flamed in her white face, which showed over the top of the dead black satin cloak she had wrapped round her like a skin; and Ralph Trenchard, who saw the menace in her sombre eyes and the cruel twist to her mouth, seized the men nearest him and threw them on one side as he raced to get to Helen before the Arabian could reach her.

He was a second too late.

Even as he touched her one of the gigantic Abyssinian women reached her and, lifting her like a straw, carried her to where Zarah stood insolently, contemptuously watching the scene, whilst Yussuf stepped in front of him and pushed him back as “His Eyes” got tangled up in his feet.

“For God’s sake get out of my way, you fool!” Trenchard shouted, and lifted the dumb youth by the neck of his *jubbah* and dropped him as Yussuf rushed blindly at him, guided by his voice.

“To-night, when the dog barks thrice,” he whispered, then shouted: “Harm not ‘Mine Eyes’ lest I stray from the right path so that——”

He stopped and turned as Helen’s voice came clearly through the night air.

“Don’t worry about me, Ra! I’m all right; no one can harm me,” she cried; then stepped back quickly as Zarah turned on her and, seizing her by the wrist, pulled her forward.

Held by Yussuf, who whispered without ceasing, Trenchard stood in the centre of a semicircle of men and women with the Patriarch at the end nearest Zarah and Helen, and Namlah, in a most indecorous and dishevelled state, at the other.

The two beautiful girls stood exactly opposite the man they loved, with the gigantic negresses close behind.

“Move not—have patience until the dog barks thrice to-night—make no effort to help—all is well—Allah watches over thee and thine in thy need—nay! make no sign—nothing can be done to her until the morrow.”

Yussuf whispered without ceasing, whilst, sick to the heart at the menace in the air, Ralph Trenchard stood waiting, with what patience he could command.

Zarah raised her hand and, fully aware of the backing she would get from the women, began to speak.

“I am speaking for my children,” she cried, “the children this white woman has mocked and derided, and for whom she has not had one word of thanks, not one little feeling of gratitude.”

“*Na’am, na’am!*” wailed Namlah in full acquiescence.

“For myself I do not mind that she strikes me until the blood runs, but my children I will protect!”

“*Akhkh!*” wailed Namlah, crouching on the ground and beating her breast with much vigour.

“And I will punish those who hurt my children. Yea! I will make of *them* a sport, a mock. The white man—nay, Al-Asad, come thou to me—the white man I bear no ill will, for he has worked well among my sons.” She put her hand upon the Nubian’s arm when he ran across to her, and smiled up into his handsome face as she shook her head. “I am mistress here; thou shalt not touch the white man. For the white woman...” She looked at Helen, who looked at her, then across to Ralph Trenchard, who stood with Yussuf’s hand upon his arm and “His Eyes” at his feet. “For the white woman who has derided my children I do now place her amongst them as their servant, and to humiliate her even as she has humiliated them, do order the Abyssinian Aswad to shave her head this instant, before us all, so that she appears not before mankind without——”

Her words were drowned in the scream which burst uncontrollably from Helen, and the shout from her lover as he flung himself towards her, only to be tripped by the dumb youth at his feet.

“Ra! Ra!” cried Helen, clutching her lovely curls in both hands. “For God’s sake save me, Ra; don’t let them do it, don’t, don’t——” She turned and struck the negress across the face as the Abyssinian caught her by the arm, and struck again and again as Ralph Trenchard tore at the arms of the youth who clung to him like a leech. Helen made no other sound as she wrenched herself free from the woman who held her, nor when, filled with the desire to kill, she flung herself

upon Zarah.

The Arabian stepped back quickly and laughed, laughed until the place rang with the sound, then flung off her mantle and drove her dagger down on to Helen's heart just as the Patriarch sprang and caught her hand.

Helen turned and ran towards her lover, and struck at Namlah, who suddenly caught her by the knees and held her, screaming abuse.

The men and women stood silent, looking from one to the other of the three principals in the love drama, then turned their attention to the Patriarch, who by that time was speaking.

He made a magnificent picture as he imposed his will upon the furious woman for the welfare of his brethren.

"In the days of thy father the Sheikh, my daughter," he said, "no blood was spilled, no punishment proclaimed, after the setting of the sun. If thou desirest the death of this woman, then must thou wait until sunrise. Neither shalt thou bring misfortune upon this camp by shaving a head after the setting of the sun; that also must thou order to be done after its rising."

"*Wah! wah!*" yelled the men, and smote the women who dared to differ.

"And for fear of the wrath of these women, who should have the whip laid across them for their unseemly behaviour, keep thou the white woman in thy chamber to-night."

"Yea!" cried Yussuf, walking forward, led by "His Eyes," until he stood exactly opposite the Arabian, who withdrew a pace before his terrible appearance. "And in the name of thy father, O Zarah, and for fear of the Nubian's wrath being vented upon him before the rising of the sun, I claim the watching of the white man this night. Fear not that he sleeps over-sweetly in my care." He turned and spat in Ralph Trenchard's direction, then, led by "His Eyes," strode towards him and seized him by the arm. "Thou infidel," he cried savagely, "thou and thy white woman!"

Zarah raised her hand.

"The women to the cooking, the men to the eating, the morrow for the punishment." She turned and looked at Ralph Trenchard, her eyes filled with a

punishment. She turned and looked at Ralph Trenchard, her eyes filled with a terrible jealousy. "Look upon thy white woman for the last time, for, behold! the morrow thou shalt be taken back across the desert by the road by which thou didst come unto her. She shall work here amongst my people, with her shaven head for a space, then will I send her to the slave market, where her white skin will fetch a great price. Get thou up, Helen R-r-aynor-r!"

She pointed up the steps.

Helen turned and held out her arms.

"Ra! Beloved! I love you!"

The Arabian struck down her arms as Yussuf pulled Ralph Trenchard back.

"Come thou with me, thou infidel!" he cried.

"Get thou up, Helen R-r-aynor-r," commanded the Arabian.

The stars blazed in the sky as the women scuttled back to their quarters and the men talked together.

"Behold, has my acacia tree no luck!" said the handsome youth.

"As saith the proverb of those whose luck changeth not," replied Bowlegs, as he shook his fist after his retreating, obese and second wife. "'The misfortune either falls upon the camel or upon the camel driver or upon the owner of the camel.' Ha! wouldst show me what thou hast learned from the white man?"

He caught the Arab who had sprung at him in a friendly desire to show his pugilistic skill, tossed him on one side like a bundle of clothes, and shouted defiance to the whole camp.

So that the tournament, if somewhat impromptu and lacking a referee, took place after all and lasted well into the night.

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## CHAPTER XXI

*“At the close of night the cries are heard.”—Arabic Proverb.*

Yussuf, with his back against the door of Ralph Trenchard’s hut, lifted his face to the star-bestrewn sky.

He waited.

He waited for the striking of his hour of revenge, which had been fixed by Fate in the beginning of Time; he waited imperturbably for Allah, in His compassion and wisdom, to remove the Nubian, who sat cross-legged and contemplative and to all appearances absolutely unmovable by his side.

Al-Asad sat leaning slightly forward, looking into the shadows with dreamy, half-shut eyes, then turned his head and listened as though, above the distant noise of the men’s shouting and laughter, some sound had reached his ears.

“Camels!” he said softly. “Camels going out. Methought our brothers were having their fill of wrestling?”

Yussuf also had heard the sound of a dromedary grunting its disapproval as it made the steep ascent, but no sign of his inner perturbation showed on his placid, mutilated face.

“Zarah the Merciless makes ready for the white man’s journey into the desert tomorrow. Our brethren of the stables even now revile her shadow, for instead of loading the dromedaries with water skins and provender, they would try their strength against Bowlegs, who, in his vanity, swears by the wind that no man can excel him in the games taught by the white man.”

Al-Asad laughed scornfully as he rose to his feet, swallowing the bait which hung from the line Fate dangled in front of him for his removal.

“Bowlegs!” He spoke in infinite scorn as he pulled himself up to his full height, and laughed again as he caused the muscle to ripple up and down his arms.

“’Twere well to show the little man with legs even as round as thy turban that there is one who can spike him upon his finger. Thinkest thou, Yussuf, that the

white maid will lose her golden covering at the rising of the sun? 'Twere a pity to my mind to mutilate such beauty in a woman, even if she be sent to the slave market to ease the tiger-cat's jealousy."

Yussuf pulled at his hubble-bubble, making no sign of his longing to accelerate his companion's departure.

"Methinks the beautiful Zarah spoke in haste and in anger. Perchance she is tired of her white playthings and yearns for a master."

"Thinkest thou, who hast learned much wisdom in thy blindness, that she will come to love me?" Al-Asad asked eagerly.

"Yea! she loves thee even now. Thou art her real mate. The great tiger-cats mate with one another, my son, and were it not wise to stay here, for fear that thou art bested by Bowlegs, and that the news of thy defeat is carried to her."

He showed no sign of his intense satisfaction when the Nubian, primed with a desire to reduce Bowlegs to shreds, ran, laughing, down the path.

Strong in the fatalism of the East, Yussuf sat on, pulling calmly at his hubble-bubble, waiting for the striking of his hour, and made no answer to a slight hissing sound which came from behind the rocks. Instead, he rose slowly and pushed open the door of the hut, and, with the Oriental's love of elaborate detail where intrigue is concerned, shouted at Ralph Trenchard:

"Thou infidel, thou white dog, sleepest thou? Hast thou no bowels of compassion for the white woman? Dost thou leave her here to work as a slave, without an ache in thy heart of stone?"

Ralph Trenchard sprang up and crossed the hut quickly at the blind man's beckoning finger.

"'Mine Eyes' waits without to lead you by the hidden path to where the dromedaries stand," Yussuf whispered. "Nay, speak not, tarry not, there is little time to spare. The dromedaries must be but specks upon the horizon when the men cease their games to seek their slumber."

Trenchard wrapped himself in the *burnous* Yussuf offered him and followed him to the door, where they stood for a moment in the shadows, listening to the

shouts of the men, which came startlingly clear on the night air.

“Bowlegs fights with the Lion,” whispered Yussuf. “Now is the moment chosen by Allah for the escape. ‘Mine Eyes’ will lead you to the dromedaries, and I will go to fetch her Excellency, to carry her over the dangerous places and down the steep path to where love and happiness will await her.”

“But if the Arabian does not sleep? How then?”

“Then must you go to her and break her neck to save your own woman. What is she, this daughter of two races? We tire of her. If she dies he who will govern in her stead will be chosen by the casting of lots. Hasten, Excellency, for we know not at what hour the medicine of sleep was administered unto the tiger-cat. Also do the women, who hate the white woman and who are the yeast wherewith this trouble has been fermented, rise early to be about the business of the new day.”

Trenchard, wrapped in the *burnous*, followed Yussuf as he made his way without hesitation to the spot where “His Eyes” sat in the shadows.

Yussuf whispered the dumb youth’s name and questioned him, and nodded his head in satisfaction when the youth, in the code they had invented, tapped the answers to the questions upon his friend’s arm.

“All is ready, Excellency.” Yussuf spoke as calmly as if he discussed a pleasure trip to the nearest oasis. “Namlah waits at the edge of the sands of death. The camels are well laden with water and bread for many days. They are the swiftest in Arabia, renowned from Hadramut to Oman. Bred in Oman, they will need no drink for ten days if there is none to spare. Namlah accompanies you, and——”

“And you, Yussuf? You’re coming with us; we can’t leave you behind to face the racket. You have *got* to come. ‘Your Eyes’ can’t let his mother go without him.”

Yussuf smiled and shook his head and laid his hand upon the dumb youth’s shoulder, who also smiled and shook his head.

“Excellency, not for ten thousand golden *lira* would I be away from the camp when the tiger-cat learns of the flight. A piece of news for you, white man, who comprehends not the guile of this woman of mixed blood. Did you think she had tired of you? Nay! by the beard she loves you even a hundred times more for



your refusal of her love. She sends you to Hareek after the rising of the sun, only to follow you and to beguile you in the solitude of the Red Desert. There is no leech that clings so close to its victim as a woman to the one she loves but who does not return that love. There is no trick she will not descend to, no lie she will not utter, no promise she will not make, with no intent to keep, to gain her end. This is the commencement of my revenge—the end, Excellency, will be the death of her who blinded me. I have waited for this revenge these many years, even from the moment when the sun faded from my sight. I and ‘Mine Eyes’ will follow you, and if we do not overtake you by the noon, then place yourself in Namlah’s keeping. She is of the desert born.” He raised his right hand and turned his sightless face to the skies. “May Allah guide you, and keep you, and bring you to everlasting peace.”

Trenchard stood for a moment to watch the blind man make his almost miraculous way through the rocks which skirted the west end of the plateau, then turned and followed the dumb youth, who smiled and nodded his head in his delight at the trick which was being played upon the Arabian. And Namlah rose from where she sat in the shadows thrown by three dromedaries hobbled at the commencement of the hidden path across the quicksands, and pressed her hand against her forehead in humble salutation and smiled up at her son, and laughed softly in the delight she also felt at the way the beautiful Zarah was being duped. Within the hour she might have to give her life in her fight for the liberty she had lost some many years back when captured in the desert, or she might lose it in saving that of the white woman she had grown to love; but with all the Oriental’s fatalism, she had resigned herself to liberty or to recapture, to life or death. Allah had decided the result in the womb of Time.

*Kismet!*

Yussuf’s Eyes pressed the back of his hand against his forehead, then bent and touched Ralph Trenchard’s foot as a sign that he was willing to serve the white man to the end, whilst Namlah, smiling all over her homely face, translated the gestures the dumb boy made as he tried to make Trenchard understand.

“He says, Excellency, that before the sun is above our heads at noon he will have guided the Blind One to you upon the path we shall have made across the desert. He loves you for your gentleness and strength, O man of the great white race, and prays you to succour Yussuf if aught should befall him before he reaches the great City of Damascus, which is his home and my home.”

Trenchard raised his right hand and made his oath after the manner of the Arabs.

“Before my God, who is thy God, I swear to make myself responsible for the comfort, welfare and happiness of the three who have so befriended me and mine. I swear that my descendants, unto the farthest generation, shall befriend thy descendants, so that in some small way I shall pay my debt of gratitude.” He smiled down at the enraptured little woman. “Let us sit awhile whilst we wait. Come, Namlah, tell me of the life thou wilt lead in Damascus with thy people.”

The stillness of the night was broken by the grumbling of the dromedaries, the distant shouts of the men, and the body-woman’s whispered words as she told him of the house she would buy or rent in the Bazaar, with rugs upon the floor and many brass pots and pans of her own, filled with milk and butter from her own kine.

“... and when her Excellency returns to Arabia, then will Namlah wait upon her,” she said, smiling at the thought, being sure, with the fatalist’s conviction, of a happy ending to the flight. “Then will her golden hair once more glisten like the silk in the sun which makes of the Bazaar a paradise.” She paused for a moment as she drew out a packet wrapped in a cloth. “We have gifts which perchance his Excellency in his goodness will allow his humble servants to present to the *Sit* upon her marriage as a token of the gratitude the servants have in their hearts for the gentleness of the white people.”

Trenchard took the packet, removed the cloth, and looked at the exquisite golden kerchief.

“By Jove! what a beautiful thing,” he exclaimed.

Namlah smiled and nodded her sleek head at his genuine admiration.

“It is woven of her Excellency’s hair!”

“Helen’s hair!” He turned to Yussuf’s Eyes as the youth pressed something hard and heavy into his hands, speaking by gesture, which his mother translated.

His fine teeth gleamed and his beautiful eyes flashed as he watched Trenchard remove the wrapping from the heavy object.

“However did you get this?” Trenchard cried, as he delightedly turned his own

automatic over in his hand and released the full clip.

“The mistress, and may Allah guide a bullet to her black heart, commanded the Patriarch, who is the oldest amongst us and possessed of a very devil of gaming, to guard the weapon of death for your departure, Excellency. The old one, bereft of his last *piastre* and of the very *qamis* from about his shrunken old body, did lose the weapon in a bet to my son when you did wrestle with and overthrow the Nubian.”

Trenchard tried to express his delight at the gifts, upon which, with all the Arab’s genuine and world-famed hospitality, the two natives offered him all they possessed.

“My son,” whispered Namlah, “will live with me in the Bazaar, yea! and with us will sojourn Yussuf, his friend. The blind one will sit peacefully in the sun until he find a wife to take pity upon him, whilst ‘His Eyes,’ even my son, will sell the steel of Damascus inlaid with gold to the faithful and to the infidel. Our home will be humble, O white man, but our food and our drink, our raiment and our couch, will be for you and her Excellency if your Excellencies should see fit to honour our humble dwelling and I——” She stopped suddenly and held up her hand as she listened to the sound of a dog barking.

It barked angrily, at which sound the little woman shook her head.

“Verily, ’tis a dog!” she whispered. “When the blind one shall have carried her Excellency safely by the steep and dangerous path, which is midway between here and where Zarah the Merciless sleeps, then will he bark thrice, and in all the kennels there is not one who can say if it be a dog which barks or Yussuf. Methinks, he is over long upon the road.” She clasped her hands together upon her faithful heart. “Has mischance befallen them? Does your Excellency think that mischance causeth him to tarry thus?”

Mischance did not cause Yussuf to tarry. Seated in the shadows beneath the window through which Namlah had spied upon the Arabian and Al-Asad, he waited calmly for the moment of his revenge.

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There was utter silence and stillness inside the building. No sound of voice or movement gave Yussuf any indication as to what had taken place in the last hour, neither in his blindness had he any means by which to find out if the

Arabian slept or if she lay awake upon the divan watching the stars through the doorway.

He sat as immovable as the Fate to which, as an Arab, he was resigned, and he made no movement when Zarah's mocking laugh suddenly broke the silence.

Helen sat on the floor with her back against the wall, the light from the lamp shining on the golden curls which were to be shaven on the morrow.

A shaven crown!

The Hindoo widow! The vision of bald pate seen in the Mirror 'twixt the curtains of the hair-dresser's cubicle! The asvogel sitting disconsolately on its perch in the Zoological Gardens.

She shivered as the pictures flashed across her mind.

Zarah, lying like a tiger behind the golden bars of her elevated bed, laughed when Helen suddenly clasped her head in uncontrollable horror, twisting her fingers in her curls, and she laughed again when the white girl sprang to her feet and stood looking up with the world of rebellion in her eyes.

"Do you remember my vision, Helen, dear school-friend?" she said mockingly in Arabic, "when I saw you in the dust at my feet and the white man coming towards me? Verily will you be in the dust to-morrow, and so covered therewith that my children will walk upon you and cleanse their feet and sandals upon your raiment. You fool!" She slid her feet over the edge and stood upright upon the fourth step, straight, slender and very beautiful; then, balancing herself upon her precarious foothold with outstretched arms, descended slowly and walked to where Helen stood against the wall. She laughed as she looked at Helen's golden curls.

"I hate you, Helen R-r-aynor-r. I hated you the first time I say you in Cairo, when you tried to show your superior breeding to the contemptible half-caste."

"I did not."

"*You*, whose grandfather was of a caste of water carriers, whilst my father's fathers dwelt in the shadow of the Great Pharaohs and my mother at the Court of Spain. The white man shall see you with your shaven crown; then, when the

picture of your bald head is set for eternity in his mind, so that, waking or sleeping, he will laugh at the thought of you, I will ride out to meet him in the desert, to sit with him under the moon, to talk with him until dawn, to sing to him until his eyes close in dreams of my beauty. You fool, to pit yourself against me!”

Helen smiled as she looked at the Arabian from head to foot. She was sick with fear of the morrow, and sick with disappointment at the absence of all sign of help, but she smiled with the indomitable spirit of the splendid race from which she sprang. She took no notice of Zarah when she stretched herself upon a divan in a corner of the room, nor of the body-women when they passed her, laughing derisively and making signs of contempt with their expressive fingers. She watched them descend the steps, and involuntarily listened to the jokes they bandied amongst themselves about the ceremony of shaving, which would take place at the waking of their mistress at the rising of the sun; then sat down with her back to the wall, hoping against hope for a sound or a sight of Namlah or Yussuf.

As there could be no doubt as to Zarah’s intention of carrying out her threat, the situation was desperate; and the help promised seemed so vague, hanging upon the chance that the Arabian would ask for sherbet or coffee before she went to sleep—if she went to sleep.

She was just as capable of staying awake the whole night, smoking her *naghileh* or countless cigarettes without touching food or coffee, as she was of sleeping, without stirring, until dawn.

And if she called for coffee and drank it, drugged, and slept, what then?

What could Namlah, a humble slave, do, even if she connived with Yussuf, to further their escape?

“Bring me sherbet instantly!”

Yussuf made no movement as the words came to him through the window. Helen’s heart beat heavily as she prayed for help in her hour of great need.

“Now, God, help me *now*,” she whispered, as she rose slowly and crossed the room to the corner where she prepared the drinks or messes of sweetmeats the Arabian consumed frequently in the night. With her back to her tormentor she

pulled the flask which contained the drug from inside her belt and unscrewed the tight-fitting top, and with steady hand dropped ten drops into the golden goblet which Zarah loved on account of its barbaric jewelled stem.

“In the name of Allah, was a snail included in your parentage, or are your fingers as heavy as your wits? You will fetch but a poor price with your clumsiness and shaven crown. Hasten, or by the Prophet’s beard I will lower your price still further by marking your shoulders with the whip.”

Helen slowly crossed the room, carrying the tray with the goblet, filled to the brim with sweet, frothing drink, and offered it to the Arabian, who sat up suddenly, making a quick, savage gesture with both her hands.

“Do you think such arrogance suits a slave? Kneel!”

The prisoner’s fate trembled in the balance as for one brief second Helen, consumed with a desire to fling the goblet in the beautiful, mocking face, grasped its jewelled stem; then, remembering that the victorious or disastrous ending of the attempt to escape depended entirely upon her, she knelt and, stirring the sherbet with an ivory spoon, offered the tray on uplifted hands.

To keep her kneeling Zarah drank slowly, whilst Helen half closed her eyes under the agony of her suspense. There was no sign in her face of her terror when, with but a drain to drink, Zarah sniffed at the goblet, scowled and flung it to the farther end of the room, thereby drinking one drop too little of the drug.

“Have you not yet learned how to mix so simple a drink as this?” she raved, inelegantly wiping her beautiful mouth with the back of her hand. “Were it not that my women taste all that you touch and replace all you have touched every hour, and likewise that none but my women approach you or have speech with you, I would swear by the Prophet that you had put something in my cup. Bring me coffee, hot and strong, in the big bowl. Hasten, lest I summon the black women to teach you the real meaning of speed.”

Helen’s heart sank.

She had no idea of the potency of the drug or the time required for it to take effect, but she knew the stimulating effect black coffee had on the Arabian, and how, once she had drunk a bowlful of it, she would pass a sleepless night, reading or smoking or roaming about the camp, paying surprise visits to the

kennels and her people's quarters.

She spent long precious minutes in fanning the brazier, which burned brightly behind a screen, casting fleeting glances towards the divan to see if the Arabian showed any sign of somnolence.

Zarah sat cross-legged, looking through the doorway at the stars, and showing as much sign of sleep as an angry cat. She turned and frowned at Helen when she clattered various brass pots and pans, making a great to-do, so as to waste still more precious moments over the intricate process of brewing the sickly, sweet Arabian coffee.

"Bring the coffee!" Zarah shouted suddenly, swinging her feet to the floor and half rising from the cushions.

Helen placed the brass pot, the porcelain bowl, and a smaller bowl of scented water upon the silver tray, looked over her shoulder at the Arabian and caught her breath.

Zarah yawned, widely, heavily.

The whole future depended upon the next five minutes—her future, the future of the man she loved.

Another few moments and Zarah the Cruel might be asleep. Yet what excuse could she make for wasting those precious moments? Everything was ready on the tray; it would take but a moment to cross the floor, and another five, perhaps ten, for the strong, hot, black coffee to be drunk and to react against the drug, and then farewell to all hope of escape.

"Must I come and fetch it myself?"

Helen moved forward, carrying the tray. Zarah glared at her, and yawned until it seemed her scarlet mouth could not bear the strain.

"The coffee," she said slowly, and rubbed her eyes, just as Helen, with a sharp cry, twisted her foot sideways, pretended to recover her footing, and let fall the tray and its contents with a loud clatter to the floor.

Zarah sprang to her feet with a shout of rage which ended in a yawn, staggered forward a step or two, swung sideways and fell back across the divan, where she

...and a step or two, opening her eyes and ran back across the arway, where she lay peacefully, sound asleep.

Helen lay perfectly still, so as not to attract the Arabian's attention in any way; then, assured that she slept soundly, gathered herself up and stole across to the divan.

"Oh, Yussuf, if you were only here!" she said as she stood looking down at the sleeping girl, wondering what step she should take next; then turned to look out at the night sky.

Outlined against the sky, Yussuf stood in the doorway.

She ran to him and touched his arm, whereupon he smiled as best he could for the distortion of his mouth and put his hands to his forehead, lips and heart.

"She sleeps, Yussuf, soundly. I gave her ten drops!"

Helen whispered the words, though she might have safely shouted them aloud for all the effect they would have had on Zarah.

"Does she lie at ease, Excellency? If not, stretch her forth as though she passed the night in natural sleep. Let nothing cause her fret and thereby hasten her waking."

Helen crossed to the divan and looked down at the merciless girl who had no pity for man or beast. She lay full length in the exquisite raiment she had worn for the tournament, her face half hidden in her arm, smiling like a child in her sleep. Helen watched her for a moment, then drew a satin coverlet over the Arabian's feet, glanced round the room, moved slowly round the walls blowing out the lamps which hung from silver sconces, and returned to Yussuf.

"I will carry your Excellency down the steep unused path, for fear that some of those who wrestle with each other might see you. Come! I will lead you to where your lover waits, even I, blind Yussuf."

Helen put her hand in his and looked back at the woman who had tried her best to humble her to the dust and failed. She touched her curls and smiled involuntarily at the thought that neither the daily round of menial tasks nor the threat of death had frightened her as had the threat to shave her head.

"...and a step or two, opening her eyes and ran back across the arway, where she lay peacefully, sound asleep."



"I shall never be able to thank you, Yussuf," she said, as he lifted her into his arms and carried her across the broad ledge upon which the Holy Fathers had built the dwelling-place.

"Put your arms about my neck, Excellency, for in times of stress must custom and thought of race vanish. I will hold you on my left arm; my right hand knoweth every jutting rock, my feet every stone upon this path. Shut your eyes, Excellency, for they say that one with vision would not dare to tread this road. We must hasten, for who knows if the tiger-cat will not waken 'neath the urging of her hate-filled mind? Your arm about my neck and your heart full of courage until the waning of the morning star, when you and your lover will be far upon the road to freedom and happiness."

Helen did not shut her eyes, and until the end of her life she never forgot the descent.

Certain of every inch of the path, rendered as sure-footed as a goat through the blindness which had uprooted the dread spectre of fear from his mind, feeling with his feet, clinging with his hand, climbing, scrambling, dropping safely upon the narrowest foothold, Yussuf carried Helen safely by the hidden and almost unnegotiable path to where the dromedaries lay in the shadows.

Just once he stopped to give the pre-arranged signal.

"The *Sit*, Excellency," he said briefly, as Trenchard sprang towards him and took Helen into his arms.

"Helen! My beloved! You at last!"

He let her slip to her feet and crushed her up against his heart whilst the Arabs busied themselves with the camels' packs.

"Dearest," whispered Helen, as she lifted her radiant face to his, "I began to think I should never see you again."

"We must hasten, Excellencies. Life stretches before you full of hours of happiness; these moments are fraught with danger. 'Mine Eyes' and I will follow you or not, as wills Allah, the one and only God of mercy and compassion. I will lead her Excellency's camel across the hidden path, 'Mine Eyes' will lead yours, your Excellency; Namlah, desert born, will ride her own, wilt thou not, sister?"

Namlah laughed softly.

She was helping her son to tighten knots and to fasten the loads upon the camels' backs still more securely.

"Yea, brother, that will I. I would cross the desert on foot to escape from the claws of the tiger-cat. All is ready, Excellency. A water-skin each, and much bread and many luscious dates, coffee and the wherewithal to make many cups. A tent for the noonday heat. To the north-east, and then due north, his Excellency says, and may Allah guide our feet and thy feet, O blind brother, to liberty and peace!"

Trenchard and Helen made one last effort to induce Yussuf and "His Eyes" to join them.

"Now's your chance, Yussuf. It seems so much like running away to leave you to face the row by yourself."

"Come with us, Yussuf." Helen laid her hand on the blind man's arm as she spoke. "You and 'Your Eyes.'" She laid her other hand on the dumb youth's arm, standing linked to them in a friendship that was to endure a lifetime.

"Excellencies," replied Yussuf, "before Allah I would rather pass my life in prison than miss the tiger-cat's rage when she finds you gone. Behold, the calmness of the white people when in the midst of danger has won our hearts and will pass as history down the generations. Not by word or sign have you shown fear or anger, thereby, with the mercy of Allah, winning your way to freedom. Nor," he added with a smile, "do the white people waste overmuch time in rejoicing or protestations of affection."

"Have a little patience, Yussuf," said Helen, as she righted herself after having swayed backwards and forwards and bent this way and that in answer to the movement of the camel as it lurched to its feet with considerable lamentation and sounds of wrath. "Wait until we come out to Damascus to visit you, then we will all rejoice together, won't we, Ra?"

"Rather!" said Ralph Trenchard, as he leant over and took Helen's hand and kissed it, then let it go as Yussuf led her camel forward, having found his direction by turning his face to the night wind as he touched the spear.

"The night wind," said Yussuf, "is the wind of the night, the wind of the night."

“Not a word, Excellencies,” he said when the three camels stood in a line upon the narrow path, upon each side of which lay a terrible death. “The wind plays strange tricks with sound from this spot, carrying at times the spoken word from the quicksands to the rocks, which increase it a hundredfold, until the camp is filled with whispering. Allah grant that the dogs do not bark and waken the tiger-cat until dawn, and that my brothers cease not their games until I am seated once more without the empty hut.”

Helen turned and smiled at her lover, and leant sideways and waved her hand to the devoted body-woman, who, in her placidity, looked as though she were embarking upon a picnic instead of a dash for liberty across the desert. The mountains towered behind them, grim and menacing, the desert stretched, silvery and peaceful under the stars, the quicksands lay on each side of their hidden path, still and treacherous.

Yussuf walked ahead, leading Helen’s camel, “His Eyes” followed, Namlah came last, looking as must have looked Ruth or Naomi or any other woman of the Scriptures.

The great beasts, as they stepped off the hidden path on to the safety of the desert sands, were urged into line with Namlah between Helen and her lover.

“Namlah will ride three paces in front, Excellency,” said Yussuf. “Ride at fullest speed until the first ray of the sun breaks through the clouds of night, keeping the great star behind the right shoulder; then guide yourself by the sun as I have instructed you, and may Allah have you and yours in His keeping. I and ‘Mine Eyes’ will overtake you if it is the will of Allah, whose Prophet is Mohammed.”

The camels moved forward slowly; then, gathering speed, sped across the desert.

Yussuf and “His Eyes” waited at the beginning of the path until the faint sound made by the beasts’ huge feet upon the sand died away altogether, then turned and, Yussuf leading, retraced their steps across the hidden path.

“Allah guide them, little brother, for behold, my heart is soft towards those white people of great courage. Go thou and pit thy strength against that of the half-caste lion, so that his suspicions are not aroused, whilst I sit here to await the awakening of Zarah the Beautiful.”

He sat cross-legged before the door of the empty hut, from which, if he had had eyes, he could have seen the tombs of the Holy Fathers. He sat calmly, patiently

eyes, he could have seen the tombs of the Holy Fathers. He sat calmly, patiently, resigned to Fate, until, as the sky lightened way down in the east, a dog, then another, and then a many began to bark.

They barked without ceasing, whilst the grooms stirred in their sleep and the voices and laughter of the men died down as they stopped to listen to the noise.

Knowing that the barking of dogs never failed to waken Zarah, Yussuf raised his sightless face to the heavens and offered a prayer of thanksgiving.

The hour of his revenge was at hand.

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## CHAPTER XXII

*“Everyman—and his own care!”—Arabic Proverb.*

Zarah stretched her arms above her head, yawned, listened for a moment to the barking of the dogs, then, struck with a premonition of impending disaster, awoke to her surroundings, struggled to a sitting position, and stared up at the unlit lamps and round the room in amazement.

Save for the faint light of the coming dawn, the place was in darkness and strangely still.

Who had blown out the lights? Where was Helen? What was the meaning of the dogs' unrest at this hour, when they usually slept? Why was she weighed down with such an oppressive drowsiness?

She roused herself, swaying to her feet, stood for a moment bemused, then staggered forward and crashed into a great brass bowl filled with many fruits. It fell with a clatter, arousing her from the strange lethargy which seemed to cause the room to spin about her and to dull her active brain.

She stood watching the oranges and pomegranates, figs, apricots and peaches roll this way and that across the marble floor, then called for Helen.

Helen!

She shouted the name savagely, under the whip of her premonition, shouted it until the vaulted roof rang with her cries, shouted it until the echoes gave back the call.

Helen! Helen! Helen! a mocking voice seemed to shout back from the shadows.

In a flash enlightenment came to her, and with it the blindest rage that ever entered woman's heart.

There could be but one reason for the dark desertion of the room and for the unanswered call. In some way the girl she hated, the man she desired, had communicated with each other, had outwitted her. How? When? Where? Oh, of what avail to lose time in asking useless questions when, even at that moment.

...that even to look into the coming across questions which, even at that moment, they might be on their way to freedom and love? She stood in the centre of the faintly lighted room, then laughed until the ugly sound beat against the walls. She laughed with sheer rage at the thought of how she, Zarah the Cruel, the most beautiful woman in Asia, the woman who had never been thwarted or foiled, had at last been circumvented by Helen. Helen Raynor, the fool English girl, the slow-witted, the dense, the hopelessly dull, as she had described her when holding her up to ridicule to her women slaves.

Her slaves!

In a moment her trend of thought changed, and with it, replacing even her rage, came a violent desire to revenge herself on everyone who had connived at or participated in the prisoners' escape.

Yussuf! Namlah!

She seized the metal rod and smote the huge brass gong as the two names leapt to her mind. Her men were gathered together on the plateau, with Yussuf and the dumb boy whom he loved in their midst. She would summon the two who had been thorns in her flesh since the death of the Sheikh and wring a confession from them.

Left by her father in her care!

In the name of Allah what mattered a promise more or less when it had to do with those who had put humiliation after humiliation upon her? She would see to it that they and the white people were rendered dumb and blind in death by the time she had wiped out all the insults they had heaped her with.

Her women!

They slept peacefully in their quarters with Namlah in their midst. She would summon them all and wring a confession from her. She had treated the body-woman, who had shown such strong affection for the white girl, with a strange leniency, merely replacing her, upon the spies' report, by the surly negress who had so unaccountably disappeared upon the night when the dogs had rushed the hall. *She* should learn what awaited a slave and a prisoner who dared plot against the master.

She smote the gong to awaken the entire camp and to summon her attendants,

smote it without ceasing.

Lost to all sense of reasoning through her overpowering rage, she flung herself upon the divan and sat looking out to the desert through the cleft in the mountains, planning her revenge upon them all.

The Red Desert, the Empty Desert, the forcing-ground of hate, revenge, despair, the burial place of love and hope and life.

The great waste places of the Arabian Peninsula, swept by the tribes of Ad, Tasim and Jadis, devastated by the hordes which inundated it in the early days when the Holy Fathers, in penance, built the very building in which the desert-born girl sat; ruled by African kings, allied to the Roman and Byzantine Empires, coveted, conquered, beaten, yet as ready to-day to rise in revolt against oppression and to hurl itself against the enemy as it was ready to fling itself victoriously against the mighty Roman generals.

Immense tracts of sand across which, pursuing or pursued, passed those countless legions, leaving, save for the footprints of Solomon's mighty Yeminite Queen and Mohammed, the greatest Prophet the world has known since the advent of the gentle Nazarene, but little mark upon the path of time; desolate plains under which those who, through the centuries, have laid its fair cities waste, sleep in death amongst the ruins and treasures and secrets of cities, kingdoms and dynasties of which the names alone remain; silent, mysterious oceans of sand above which, wheeling, calling, sailing on outstretched wing at dawn, at noon, at dusk, drift the vultures from north to south, from east to west, as they have drifted and called since the day every grain of the sands was numbered.

Revengeful, relentless, restless, the Great Desert knows no peace nor rest nor shade. It sweeps flat that which it piled high but yesterday, and upon its surface, stretching like an Eastern carpet, blows its sands to the height of hills, to sweep them flat again. It kills with thirst, it slays with hunger and exhaustion; it leaves but little trace of those who dare to pass its desolate boundaries. Bones of fugitives, of the hapless, the luckless, bones of birds and beasts, covered feet deep with sand at dawn, uncovered by the dread *shelook* to dance to the blowing of its scorching breath at noon, mark out a path across its desolation under the star-strewn, peaceful sky. High-born and low-caste, criminal and holy man, friend and enemy, there is nothing to tell who they were in life nor in what

manner death came to them. Vultures follow jackal and hyena; settle for a while and rise again to drift from north to south, from east to west; the wind of chance wafts the tattered, blood-stained kerchief across the desert to the feet of the holy man who has watched it, the only thing to move, dancing this way and that across the plain towards him; he ties it as a pennant to his staff and continues, with a prayer for the soul of the dead, upon his pilgrimage; the Bedouin, starving upon a handful of stringy *sihanee* dates and a cup of brackish water, searches amongst the bones and offers the desert victim's purse and amulets and weapons in exchange or sale to those he may encounter upon his journey to the nearest oasis.

A fitting place indeed in which to hide all trace of the Arabian's vengeance upon the white people. Let them fly for their lives, they would but leave their bodies to the vultures and the wind and the starving Bedouin, when her men had done with them.

Her men!

Since the sinking of the last moon her spies had brought reports of discontent amongst them. They had become restless and rebellious under the inactivity she imposed upon them during her fleeting but violent obsession for the white man.

Within the hour she would once more lead them across the sands under the light of the dying night and the coming dawn. With her they should hunt the fugitives down, and with spear or rifle wipe out the cause of their unrest and anger.

Born of the desert, bred in its scorching heat, Zarah made one with it in her relentless cruelty. In it she had found her joy and, what counted more to her than all, her greatest triumphs with her men. Through it love, the love which is passion, the only love of which she was capable, had come to her; in it, in years to come, death would find her.

Death!

She laughed aloud as she listened to the sound of her people calling to each other as they hastened from their quarters to obey her summons.

Death would come, as it must come to all, but not until she had repaired the mistake she had made in endeavouring to place the white man at the head of her small but turbulent kingdom; not until she had ruled for many years; not until



she had wiped the memory of the white people who had tricked her from the minds of her subjects, whom she would link closer still by her union with one of themselves.

With all the instability and inconstancy of the Arab blood in her veins her passion for the white man passed, burned out in the fire of the wrath that consumed her.

Let the white people die. Let the slight ripple they had made upon the sea of her exuberant, triumphant life be wiped out, so that peace might once more reign in the Sanctuary.

Death!

With her plan of revenge in her mind she looked across at her throwing spears hanging upon the wall, then laughed as she caught sight of herself in one of the many long mirrors her intense vanity had caused her to place about the room.

As she crossed the floor she made the gesture with her fingers, used by the superstitious all the world over, against the thought of death which filled her mind, then took her favourite spear from the wall. Damascus steel, inlaid with gold, with razor edges to the slender, needle-pointed blade. She smiled as she thought of the day, those years ago, when with it she had transfixed the greyhound accepted as a gift by her father's guest.

"Death!" she cried, as she stood, a magnificent figure of youth, with the spear raised and poised for throwing. "Nay, revenge upon those who try to humiliate me. I will gather my men together and will promise gold, horses, women, what they will, to those who overtake and bring back to me, alive or dead, the prisoners who have escaped. Love! I in love with any man, be he white or black or of mixed blood! Nay, by the beard of the Prophet I love naught but power. Let them flee into the desert, even until the sun is risen, so that Helen R-raynor-r's countenance be blistered and as roundly swelled as yon knob of wood, the which, to see if my hand hath not lost its cunning, I will pierce with the spear."

She ran back a space, caught her foot in a rug, staggered, and, in an effort to recover her balance, involuntarily flung the spear.

She stood for a moment petrified with horror, then screamed and screamed until the place rang.

Thrown off her balance, she had flung the spear straight at the mirror. As she stood it transfixed her reflection through the heart.

Hundreds of torches flared below, where her men stood looking up, watching the women as, with exclamations of fear, they ran to answer the dreaded summons of the gong.

“By the beard,” said Bowlegs to Yussuf’s Eyes, “something is amiss.”

A shout went up as Zarah appeared, wrapped in her great riding cloak, spear in hand. “She leads us to battle, little brother who cannot speak.” Bowlegs turned, laughing as he spoke, and stared in amazement. The dumb youth was not there, but in his place towered the gigantic Nubian.

“Verily to battle or the hunt, brother,” said Al-Asad. “Battle methinks, for of a truth the woman I love seems in no patient mood. Ha! canst hear? She calleth for Namlah! Ha! she smites the Abyssinian across the mouth. The tiger-cat! Yet do I love her the more for her cruelty. Her small hand is like a flower petal blown against the rock when, in her childlike wrath, she smites me. I could pinch the breath from her throat, which is like unto the jewelled column in yon hall, ’twixt thumb and finger, yet love I to anger her so that her little hand shall smite me. Ha! Harken! She calleth for the blind one, for Yussuf. Look, brother! Is she not as the wind from the south in her wrath?”

Zarah faced her terrified women slaves, amongst whom Namlah was not to be found.

“Search for the white woman, you black dogs!” She smote the Abyssinian across the face as she spoke. “Find her and bring her to me. Namlah will you find with her. Search, all of you, and hasten, lest I drive you down to the sands of death.” The women turned and fled down the steps, touching their amulets, praying to Allah, whispering the one to the other.

“Whither, my heart’s delight? Whither in such haste, with thy beautiful countenance distraught with fear?”

Bowlegs’ second wife tore herself from his detaining grasp and ran as fast as her weight would allow her, and literally for her life. “We run in search of the white woman, who is not to be found, and Namlah, who——” The rest of her words were lost as she disappeared in the throng of her panting sisters.

“Oh! ho!” said Bowlegs. “Now find we the kernel in the nut. The beautiful Zarah calleth for Yussuf.” He turned and scanned the band of laughing, interested men. “Behold are the blind and the dumb ones not to be seen. Let me hide in thy shadow, O Lion, lest thy mate-to-be scratches out mine eyes as she passes.”

Al-Asad took no notice. He stood watching the beautiful Arabian as she ran down the steps. The men made a passage for her, and closed in behind and around her as she passed between them, wrapped in her riding cloak.

“Yussuf!” she said sharply. “Where is he? Thou who standeth above thy fellows, seeth thou him?” She laid her hand on Al-Asad’s arm as she spoke and looked up into his eyes, which were alight with love. “Is he here?”

The wind blew her cloak against him. Starving for love, he caught it and held it crushed in his hand, and stood looking down at her, his eyes full of worship, whilst the men, intuitive as are all Orientals, watched the little scene, pressing close upon each other.

“Her veritable mate,” whispered one. “Seeth thou that his right hand holds her cloak?”

“Yea! I bear no malice towards the white man, but ’twere well to send him with the white woman back to the country where the white race is bred,” answered the Patriarch.

“Seest thou Yussuf?”

“Yussuf guards the white man, O Zarah!” said Al-Asad slowly.

“Bring him and the white man. Hasten, thou——” She pointed with her spear at a youngster, who, terrified, turned and ran towards the men’s quarters.

“My amulet for a death in battle, against thine for many sons amongst thy children,” whispered the Patriarch, “that the lad finds neither the blind one, nor the dumb one, nor the white man?”

The gamblers slipped their amulets from about their necks.

“Thinkest thou that they have escaped, O Father?”

“Nay, that I know not, but the hitch that so hateth our woman ruler turned from

“Ay, that I know not, but the sign that so hatch our woman fast turned from her meat and howled thrice at the moon! Naught but death can follow the sign! From fear of disaster amongst the dogs, she has been separated from her companions and placed by herself for the night in the small kennel amongst the rocks.”

“Ai, Ai!” whispered his companion, spreading his fingers against disaster.  
“Behold! the lad returneth with a face like troubled waters.”

The lad flung himself at Zarah’s feet, speechless from terror.

“Speak! Where are they?”

Zarah kicked him as he lay, and turned and half raised her spear in the direction from which had come a murmuring.

“The dwelling of the white man is empty, O mistress! Neither is the blind one nor the dumb one to be found for the searching.”

“Make a way for yon black dog!”

Zarah’s voice, high pitched in fury, rose above the men’s. They pushed each other back as the gigantic negress came running lightly, and smote her playfully upon her broad shoulders as she passed amongst them, up to where her mistress and the Nubian stood. Almost as tall as Al-Asad, she made a superb picture as she stood, thoroughbred and perfect in form, beside the two half-castes. Arrogant in her breeding, aware of the rebellion seething in the camp, she eyed them insolently as she revenged herself for the blows her mistress had rained upon her since she had been bought in the slave market.

“Thy prisoners have escaped, O Zarah!” she said slowly, contemptuously. “The white man has fled with the white woman. Black stallion with black mare, white stallion with white mare, and Allah’s curse upon the foal of different colouring.”

She turned her back upon the Arabian, and walked away with the insolent gait of the thoroughbred negro.

Speechless with rage, Zarah raised her spear, then, in a flash, realized that she no longer had the power to move her men to the madness of hate or to the lust of battle. They stood between her and the negress, but she kept her spear raised as she made a mighty effort to regain her hold over them. She stepped back and

shouted the battle-cry with which she had been wont to gather the men for a foray into the desert or about her in battle. The words were echoed a thousand times from the mountains, but not from one throat of the men about her; she called aloud her promise of horses, gold or women as a reward for the capture of the prisoners; she drove a way between the men until she stood upon the outer edge of the throng, then once more she shouted the battle-cry, until the women, who had been watching, ran and hid amongst the rocks and some of the younger men felt stealthily for their knives.

“Is there not one among you who dare face the white man?”

A voice from the centre of the throng quoted an Arab proverb, a voice with a mocking note in its clear tones:

“‘It is written upon the cucumber leaf,’ O Zarah, ‘that from a house from which thou eatest thou shalt not pray for its destruction.’”

The Patriarch, with Bowlegs at his side, pushed his way to the front. “The white man, my daughter, we will not for master,” he said, “but for his patience and his strength, yea! and his love for his own woman, we love him as a brother. Behold has he lived and eaten like a dog in yon hut and worked amongst us, to teach us his tricks of skill, with no word of complaint upon his lips. Nay! let him be, with his own woman. Their ways are not our ways, and their lives are in the keeping of Allah the one and only God. Likewise let the friend of thy father with his dumb friend be gone upon their own business. They irk the Sanctuary with their infirmities, as does the busy Namlah with her wailings for her lost son.”

But Zarah had long since passed the stage of sane reasoning. She was white with fury as she faced these men, who would not move hand or foot to help her in her need and looked at her with laughter in the depths of their mocking eyes.

*“Thou!”*

Her voice trembled with rage as she looked across to Al-Asad, who stood surrounded by men.

He shook his head.

“Thou art my woman!” he said simply, “and if I cannot have thee, thinkest thou that I would strive to bring back one thou lovest and who has escaped?”

“Thou fool! Bring him back dead, slung across thy shoulders——”

“Nay! I love him as a brother, let him go!”

“Then will I bring him back myself!”

The men looked at each other as she laughed shrilly and turned and ran across the plateau towards the stables, and gripped the Nubian as he made a movement to follow her.

“Let her be,” said the Patriarch. “She but makes mock of thee. What can a woman armed with a spear do against those who are fully armed? She will hide amongst the rocks until hunger drives her forth, then will we wed her to thee, O brother, or carry her to the sands of death, for we tire of her moods and would find her a master.”

But Zarah was in no vein for trickery.

Desperation had swept her completely off her course towards the whirlpool of impulsiveness, into which the hot-headed flounder, to struggle, sink and drown.

A moment’s thought, a whole-hearted surrender to her subjects’ wishes, a joke at her own expense, a laugh, and she might even then have won back her hold upon the men who, as all Arabs, were swayed by the emotions of the moment and as easily placated as they were easily roused.

Her love had passed; the mockery in her men’s eyes, the insolence in the black slave’s words, signalled her defeat; the future, bereft of power, loomed cold and barren, yet, in the smart of the wound dealt her colossal vanity, she gave no thought to aught but swift, sure revenge upon those who had been the chief cause of her downfall.

The grooms of the stables standing half-way down the slight incline, devoured by curiosity, fled at sight of her, and rushed to their quarters at the back of the buildings.

She paid no attention.

Time pressed, and she required but a halter-rope with which to guide Lulah, the fastest mare in all Arabia, across the desert. There was no necessity for questioning: the fresh tracks of the camels or horses ridden by the fugitives

questioning, the fresh tracks of the camels or horses hidden by the fugitives would show plainly on the sand in the light of the coming day. In the agony of her humiliation she gave no thought to weapons; all she wanted was to find the white man with his woman, to get within spear range, and then to leave the rest to Allah the Merciful and Compassionate.

Terrified at the gleam of the white cloak, Lulah backed across the loose box, then lashed out until it seemed she must break the partition with her dainty, unshod hoofs. Her beautiful, soft eyes rolled as she backed into the corner, and she jerked her head, lifting Zarah from the ground, when the Arabian caught her by the halter-rope; she stood quite still for a moment, snuffing at the cloak, then suddenly rushed for the open door and bolted, slipping, sliding, with the girl running at her side, down the passage between the stalls, through the outer door, and out on to the broad ledge upon which the stables had been built.

She reared when Zarah vaulted to her back, then, exhilarated by the dawn and under the pressure of the girl's knees, danced sideways towards the edge, whilst the men, who watched the splendid picture, held Al-Asad forcibly, and Yussuf's Eyes peeping from behind the rock which hid them, tapped an answer to the blind man's question.

The black mare reared until struck between the ears, when she crashed to her feet, slipped them over the edge, tried to regain her foothold, then, under her own impetus and the pressure of the girl's knees, who was too savagely impatient to pull the beautiful beast back to the made track, slithered like a goat down the path from the stables to where it joined the upward track which led to the cleft.

Zarah took her up the steep incline at a terrific rush, and pulled her at the top until she reared again. For one instant they stood sharply outlined against the night sky in which the morning breeze blew out the stars one by one, then vanished, as the battle-cry, mocking, challenging, rang through the air down to the men standing close together upon the plateau.

"His Eyes," who watched, turned and tapped a message upon his blind friend's arm.

"To the kennels?" answered Yussuf. "Yea, verily will we hasten whilst our brothers and sisters gossip of the flight. Zarah the Merciful will have no time in which to spy the swiftest dromedary in Arabia hidden behind the rocks." He raised his right hand as he spoke. "By the honour of the Arab, when I have

raised his right hand as he spoke. By the honour of the Arab, when I have finished with her who plucked the light from my eyes, behold will her laughter be 'as the laughter of the nut when cracked between two stones'!"

He laughed savagely as he quoted the proverb, staring down at the boy he could not see, then took his hand and, without faltering, passed quickly along a path he had made for himself between the rocks up to the kennels, deserted for the moment by the grooms, who had rushed to talk over the doings of the past hour with the distracted grooms of the stables.

"Allah keep her tongue still!" whispered Yussuf as "His Eyes" opened the door of the isolated kennel amongst the rocks and softly whistled the bitch. Whimpering with delight, the beautiful creature flung herself upon the men whom she had so often followed across the desert. She loved them. They had petted her when in disgrace, and had fed her with bones between the regulation and none too satisfying meals. Yussuf's hour of revenge had struck. Vengeance for the loss of his eyes, for the mutilation of his once handsome face, for the humiliations which had deftly been heaped upon him throughout the years by the woman who had failed to recognize the intensity of his hate for her.

For just such a moment had he longed and prayed, for just such a moment had he fostered the hate of the bitch, who, only on account of her unblemished pedigree and for the gentleness of her ways to all but the Arabian, had not been destroyed long since. For years she had followed the scent of one of the Arabian's discarded sandals which "His Eyes" had trailed upon a string across the desert, mile upon mile, to be rewarded at the end by some dainty fastened to a staff, thrust into the sand, for which she had been taught to leap and fight.

She knew the way down the narrow path to the spear stuck fast between the two rocks, and had never forgotten the severe lessons which had taught her to keep silent until well out in the desert; she whimpered softly and thrust her muzzle into Yussuf's hand as he passed quickly to the rock which marked the beginning of the path leading up to the cleft.

"They gamble, thou sayest, 'Mine Eyes,' seated upon the ground, with the Lion, a prisoner, in their midst. Then bending low will we make our way to the cleft, praying to Allah to bind their eyes to the dice until we can be no longer seen. How light is it? As light as the feathers upon a pigeon's breast? Then must we hasten!"



Bent double, they crept up the steep path to the cleft, through which Yussuf passed, just as the first sunbeam shot from behind the edge of the world, and a great shout rang out from the plateau.

Al-Asad, chafing against the restraint put upon him and longing for the woman he loved, turned to look up at the cleft through which she must pass upon her return.

Outlined against the sky he saw the disappearing figure of the blind man, whom he knew hated the woman he loved with a bitterness beyond description; upon the near side he saw, waiting to pass, Yussuf's Eyes, holding the bitch who hated the Arabian with a hatred which equalled that of the blind man.

The men leapt to their feet at Al-Asad's cry and flung themselves upon him, then fell back when, making a bugle of his slender hands, he sent the battle-cry ringing over the mountain tops out to the desert.

At the sight of the bitch he had divined the revenge Yussuf the blind had planned; he sent the battle-cry to reach the woman he loved, so that she should know that help was coming.

Again and again he called, until the birds rose twittering and screaming in flocks and flew towards the sunrise, whilst Yussuf whistled to the bitch trotting at the dromedary's heels, as the great beast, under the urging of the dumb youth, passed across the hidden path at a desperate, dangerous speed.

The women rushed from their quarters at the sound of the battle-cry, which invariably heralded the death of one or more of their menfolk, and beat their breasts as they watched the men, headed by the Nubian, running towards the stables.

*"Ai! Ai! Ai!"*

The lamentation rose to high heaven as they watched the Nubian take his stallion at a terrific pace down the short cut to the path. They screamed when the magnificent beast fell and rolled to the bottom, where he scrambled to his feet and limped forward a foot or so, whilst Al-Asad, without hesitating, sped to meet the men as they tore like the whirlwind down the made track. He caught the rope-halter of one who outdistanced the rest, and, putting out all his almost superhuman strength, stopped the horse dead in its tracks and hurled it back on

its haunches. Clinging to the mane with his left hand, he lifted the rider with his right, flung him to the ground, bent and snatched the spear from his hand, and ran at the stallion's side up to the end of the path, where he vaulted across its back and disappeared through the cleft with a challenging cry.

Afraid of the Arab who lay stunned across their path, the foremost horses stopped dead in their headlong career, bringing the others up against them in a struggling mass, so that much time was lost as the men tried to straighten out the confusion made by the horses jamming on the narrow path as each struggled to free itself from its neighbour, whilst they slipped and reared and fell.

The rim of the sun had just shown above the horizon; the Nubian was a speck in the far distance; of Yussuf and "His Eyes" and the Arabian there was no sign in the shadows which still shrouded the vast ocean of sand, when, headed by the Patriarch, with much shouting and firing of rifles, the whole band, riding at full speed, swept across the desert.

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## CHAPTER XXIII

*“Remove the gates of thy stable to another side.”—Arabic Proverb.*

An ominous dawning.

Misty, silvery shadows fleeing before the coming light left no mark upon the Crimson Desert, which stretched to the east and west a desolate unbroken plain, to the north and south in motionless, blood-red waves of sand. Sunrays, yellow, orange, red, spread like gigantic searchlights across the sky from behind a mass of clouds which the west wind had driven eastward and piled low down upon the horizon.

Copper-coloured masses against a background of green and rose and dun, concealing the end or the beginning of an arch of clouds, which flared, a signal of disaster, a pennant of death, blood-red, high across the sapphire firmament, where one great star still defied its enemy—the dawn.

Over the empty plain, under the ominous arc, straight towards the stupendous sunrise fled the three camels, leaving a dead-black trail stretching back as far as eye could see.

Namlah the body-woman glanced over her shoulder at the Morning Star and touched the amulet of good luck which hung about her neck. She looked round at the ill-omened sky and back over the miles across which the huge beasts had raced, at the almost incredible speed to which the camel can attain when urged to its greatest effort. Scarcely a word had the riders said since the sky had lightened when, wondering if the alarm had been given in the camp, they had turned to see if Yussuf overtook or if Zarah pursued them through the misty, silvery shadows.

Ralph and Helen rode side by side, their dromedaries almost touching, as they raced death for their lives, their liberty, their love. Namlah, the desert born, rode ahead, steering her course unerringly by the great star.

She glanced back at Helen's face, showing death white in the shadows of the passing night and distressed at the signs of a great fatigue, anxious to advise, to help, touched her camel upon the right shoulder, so that it turned to the right in a wide circle, whilst its companions, ignoring or totally unconscious of their

leader's change of route, and utterly lacking in imagination, reasoning power or sense of any kind, forged ahead on a non-stop run.

Once more her keen eyes swept the vast plain which lay behind and across which, like a band of jet on damask cloth, showed the path made by the camels in their flight. She made no sound as she shaded her eyes and stared and stared into the far distance, but touched the amulet for good luck which hung at her own neck and, leaning far forward, touched the amulet which had been fastened in a tuft of hair on the camel's left shoulder, thereby guaranteeing its safe arrival at the journey's end.

“O thou who troublest thyself about the care of others, to whom hast thou left thine own cares?” She muttered the proverb, then prayed to Allah as she smote the camel so that it finished the half circle and formed up with its companions, which utterly ignored its return.

“What is it, Namlah?”

Helen leant sideways as she spoke to the body-servant, in whose eyes she had seen the light of a great fear, then turned and looked back in the direction in which the woman pointed. She turned to her lover and pointed back along the path by which they had come, to where, hardly discernible and as a mere speck in the far distance, something moved.

“We're followed, Ra!” she cried, leaning towards him and stretching out her hand.

“I know we are, sweetheart. I've known it for some time. Let's hope it's Yussuf.” He smiled at Namlah and shouted across to her. “We'll put up a good fight, little sister, if they overtake us, and I swear they shall never take you two women alive.”

“*Kismet!* Excellency,” cried Namlah. “Perchance 'tis the blind one riding to join us, though verily there is but Lulah who could overtake these three beasts, the swiftest in Njed, and the black mare Yussuf does not ride. I pray thee let me have speech with Zarah if 'tis she, before death claims either the one or the other of us, likewise, if so be it is the will of Allah, allow me to approach the tyrant.”

She spat as she made her request, and guided her camel close to Helen's and prayed to Allah, with frequent interludes of cursing, as they fled like the wind towards the spot whence they would turn due north and, if Allah the Merciful

towards the spot whence they would turn due north and, if Allah the Merciful answered the prayers of the body-woman, would overtake a caravan journeying towards Oman or Hareek.

“’Tis the birds of prey, Excellency,” she said later, “calling as they ever call at dawn. Perchance from the heavens the eagles and the vultures spy food with which to break their fast.”

Helen looked up at the sky, across which drifted and wheeled vultures, eagles, hawks, and shook her head and smiled at the dusky little woman who lied to allay her fears.

“Nay! Namlah, it is a voice, it is—listen!”

Faintly but clearly the cry came to them upon the morning wind. Helen looked at her lover, and Namlah bent and touched the amulet upon the camel’s shoulder so as to hide her eyes. The battle-cry, derisive, challenging, even at a great distance, left no doubt as to who pursued them.

But Namlah was of the desert, with the eyes of a hawk and the tenacity of those whose daily life is one long fight against the greatest odds. She shaded her eyes suddenly and stared ahead. She pointed and laughed and kicked her camel vigorously.

But there was no sign of living thing in all the desert to Ralph and Helen when they looked to where she pointed.

“I see nothing, Namlah.”

“Yonder, Excellency! See you not a band of men moving many, many miles away. Allah! their backs are towards us. They go from us.” She turned in her saddle and shook her fist at the speck in the far distance, then put her hand to her ear. “Allah! ’tis verily a horse! Faster! Faster! Excellencies, urge the camels, they but crawl, urge them, for in yon band of men, be they robbers or starving Bedouins, lies our salvation.”

Infinitesimal spots upon the desert, which, ridged and wrinkled, lay like the outstretched hand of Fate, they urged the dromedaries until they fled to outstrip the wind, under the sky of violent colouring.

“Allah! open their eyes that they see us! Open their ears that they hear us!

Excellency! Excellency! is there no way by which to turn their heads towards us!" Her words were lost in the rush of the tremendous speed, but Helen, understanding the expressive gestures, turned and shouted to her lover.

The camels paid no heed when the desert rang with the double report of Trenchard's revolver, but Abdul, who journeyed in the company of the Bedouins who had succoured him, in the hope of learning news of his white master in Hareek, turned in his saddle and looked back, whilst Zarah, oblivious of the strain she was putting upon the mare, shouted the battle-cry derisively when the firing shattered the desert stillness and drove the beautiful creature at full speed over the sands, urging her with needle-pointed spear.

Nor did she look back, else might she have seen Fate pressing hard upon her heels.

---

*"On the day of victory no fatigue is felt."*—Arabic Proverb.

Like a darker shadow amongst the shadows thrown upon the desert from the ill-omened sky, Rādi the bitch, the swiftest greyhound whelped in Hasa, loped alongside the dromedary ridden by Yussuf, with "His Eyes," pillion-wise, behind him. She barely left a mark upon the sands so lightly did she run, perplexed, upon a track which held but the common scent of horse and camel. True, she ran in the wake of Lulah, her stable friend, but of enemy there was no trace; therefore of what avail to spend her strength in chasing shadows by the light of the rising sun?

"His Eyes" frowned when she broke away, and like an arrow from a bow set off hard upon the scent of something which had crossed the path after Lulah the mare.

"She has no interest, brother." He tapped his message upon the blind man's shoulder. "Even now she turns to follow the scent of some small beast of no account. Give me the sandal of Zarah the Cruel, so that she holds in her fine nose the scent of the woman of whom as yet we see no sign, but whom we hunt to the death."

Yussuf sent a long, low call ringing across the sands, and Rādi, with every muscle in her gaunt body trained to a hair, without checking her speed, spun round upon her hind feet and tore back in answer to it. She ran at an angle to

overtake the black dromedary, whose price was above that of many rubies, and recognizing the object dangled just out of reach, leapt at the sandal, missing it by an inch; then, as trained to do, on touching the ground turned in a circle to the right and at the top of her terrific speed, still at an angle, tore towards the dromedary and launched herself straight upon its back. Catching her by the throat, the dumb youth held her back, whilst, with claws clinging to the tufts of hair upon the dromedary's haunches, the bitch fought to reach the sandal, the scent of which drove her to a veritable madness of hate and filled her with a lust to kill. She had it between her teeth when firing suddenly shattered the desert stillness, and she fought like a fury to keep it, until "His Eyes," putting out all his strength, hurled her to the ground and, clasping Yussuf round the waist, leaned far sideways and stared ahead. In his excitement he snatched the *mihjan* from the blind man's hand and, leaning backward, smote the dromedary upon the fleshy part of its hind leg above the knee, the tenderest spot of its tough anatomy, so that with a scream of rage it increased its pace seemingly a hundredfold and tore like a hurricane of wrath upon the path, at the far end of which "His Eyes" at last discerned a moving figure.

"*Bism 'allah!*" yelled Yussuf, answering the message tapped upon his shoulder. "Allah the Merciful delivereth the tyrant into our hands. The mare faileth, sayeth thou; the marks of her hoofs show ever deeper in the sand. Whence came the firing? From Zarah the Cruel or from our white brother who fleeth with the women before her vengeance? Nay! Nay! Knowest thou so little? Can'st not discern the difference 'twixt a pistol and a rifle? Allah strike her hand so that it is useless, and strike the mare dead so that the woman falls to the hound, who hates her even as I hate her in my blindness."

He leaned down and called to the greyhound, exciting her with words as he pointed ahead, until, sensing an enemy at last, she shot in front of the dromedary. Then, sitting erect, he lifted his mutilated face to the flaming heavens and chanted verses from the Korān to the honour of Allah the one and only God, Who delivered the enemy into his hands:

*"Flight shall not profit you if ye fly from death or from slaughter, and if it would, yet shall ye not enjoy this world but a little!"*

*"Who is he who shall defend you against God, if He is pleased to bring evil on you?"*

*“O Lord, give her the double of our punishment; and curse her with a heavy curse!”*

The sonorous words range out on the stillness, barely broken by the padding of the dromedary’s cushioned feet upon the sand, then he stopped suddenly, alert, apprehensive.

His hearing, sharpened by his blindness, had caught the sound of the drumming of a horse’s hoofs upon the sand many miles behind.

“Look once more behind, little brother, methought ’twould not be long before her lover rode in pursuit. Ha! thou seest one riding like a leaf before the wind. By the beard! ’tis the Lion riding to find his mate! Allah smite that which he bestrides so that no harm befalls him.” He turned round in the saddle and stared back along the path he could not see. “Seest thou aught else behind the Lion, little brother? Far behind? Thou seest naught! Yet is there a sound of thunder in mine ears, even the sound of the hoofs of many horses tearing like the hurricane towards us.”

He listened for a moment, then turned again and stared unseeingly in front towards the figure of the woman who had blinded him. He smiled as best he could for the distortion of his mouth and threw back his head.

Zarah looked back, at last, as the challenge of the battle-cry came to her on the wind, and, recognizing that speed alone would save her from the death which hunted her down, drove her spear into the mare’s hindquarters.

The exhausted beast, ridden without mercy, her satiny coat dripping, her chest asmoother with foam, bounded forward under the agony of the goad, crossed her feet, stumbled, flinging Zarah over her head as she crashed to her knees, then, up before the Arabian could rise, turned and fled into the desert towards the east, where the sun showed above the clouds.

---

*“One hour for thy love, one hour for thy Lord.”—Arabic Proverb.*

A mighty picture made Al-Asad and the stallion as they rode in the race to outstrip death. To aid the magnificent beast as it tore across the plain the Nubian lay close to its satin neck, guiding with knees and hand, coaxing and urging with his voice as it fled *ventre à terre*, silken mane and tail flying like banners in the



wind.

There was naught but vision to tell him if he gained upon the dog or not, and even in that he dare not put his trust. For how was he to tell if the figures before him, the camel with its two riders, the dog ahead, the girl upon the black mare still farther off, and the three camels, mere dots upon the horizon, became gradually clearer because the stallion lessened the distance between itself and them or because the light made all things clearer as the sun rose from behind the clouds?

He did not count Yussuf nor the dumb youth in the race for Zarah's life. A great brotherly love existed between them, protecting them from harm one from the other; nor did he blame the blind man for taking his revenge by setting the bitch to hunt the girl down.

In his wild heart and simple mind love, hate and revenge were inextricably interwoven in the web of life, circumstance alone deciding which should triumph in the end.

He would overtake them easily and pass them with a friendly shout, as he rapidly lessened the distance which separated him from love and freedom.

His plan was of the simplest.

He would lift the woman he loved into his arms and ride away with her to some distant part of the desert. There he would gather the fiercest outlaws to him, and with them raid the country until his name should become a byword in the land, whilst his riches should accumulate so that his woman's happiness should be great. He smiled as he rode with the dreams in his heart and his eyes upon the greyhound and the spear loose in his hand.

He knew that the Bedouins, who had seen Rādi hunting across the desert, had come to swear by her endurance and resistance, and to boast to the stranger within the land of how she hunted the night through without water or food or rest.

Likewise she held an unbroken record.

She had never failed to kill.

He looked down at Fuleh's hoof-prints and called to the stallion as he crossed

He looked down at Lulian's hoof-prints and called to the stallion as he caressed the glossy neck. The mare's hoof-prints showed deeper and deeper, and in two places where she had crossed her feet under the strain of a great fatigue. For speed she was renowned throughout the Peninsula, but in endurance the lowest hireling from the bazaar could beat her.

And behind her ran the greyhound which had never been known to fail in a kill.

He felt the stallion's pace increase as he stroked the glossy neck; then, clutching the silvery mane, he swung, head down, listening to a sound which had come to him along the sand even above the pounding of the stallion's hoofs. He swung himself erect and turned and looked along the path marked out by those who fled and those who pursued.

Led by the Patriarch, the men of the Sanctuary, stretched out in a line across the horizon, raced towards him. They rode with the lance at rest, and shouted as they rode, until the heavens were filled with the sound of their voices and the thunder of their horses' hoofs.

There was no help to be sought of them.

They rode in the joy of the hunt, in the hope of a kill, just as they had ridden to the attack upon the white man's camp, led by the woman who had revolted them at last with her tyranny, and who, in the secret places of their inconstant hearts, they hoped would die rather than the white man and the white woman who fled before her.

Then Fate jerked the strings which hobbled them all to their destiny.

Al-Asad, riding with his eyes upon the greyhound, looked up and ahead when Yussuf's challenging cry came to him on the wind. Breathlessly he watched for an instant of time, then sat back and raised his spear as the mare stumbled and flung Zarah to the ground. In an unconscious effort to catch the mare he pulled the stallion to the left, then pressed the beast hard with his right knee, bringing it back to the path, and touched its neck with the tip of the needle-pointed spear, so that it leaped forward under the unexpected goad and hurled itself on the track of the greyhound, which tore like the wind to where the girl stood.

The half-caste just glanced at Yussuf and "His Eyes" as their dromedary suddenly left the path and sped away across the desert. He knew the dromedary was being driven along a circuitous route by which it would ultimately join up

was being driven along a circuitous route by which it would ultimately join up with the white people; he knew that Yussuf felt sure of his revenge and had left the end to the will of Allah; he felt no hatred in his heart as he looked after them, fleeing to the safety which was their birthright; he felt no anger as he raised his spear above his head, so that it glittered in the risen sun, and shouted the battle-cry as he drove the stallion to the rescue of the girl who stood alone, so far away, facing him and the greyhound who had never failed to kill.

He turned for an instant to look at the men who followed hard upon his track, magnificent in his desperate need, his face alight with the glow of battle. He raised his spear in answer to the Patriarch, who raised his in salutation, and raised it again in greeting to the men, his friends.

---

*“A day which is not thine do not reckon it as of thy life.”—Arabic Proverb.*

With the fatalism of the Arab, Zarah stood watching the race between the greyhound and the man who loved her.

She had glanced at the black dromedary carrying Blind Yussuf and “His Eyes” to freedom; she had looked at the magnificent sight of the men she had ruled so tyrannically as they deployed so that they should encircle her when they reached her; she did not turn to look in the direction taken by the girl she hated and the man she had loved passionately and for so brief a time.

Yet did hate outweigh the danger of the hour.

“By Allah,” she cried, lifting her spear, “if I live I will lead my men upon them and trample them and those who help them under foot. Yea, by the honour of the Arab I swear, if I throw the spear so that it pierces the heart of yon cursed dog, that not one of them shall be left alive within the hour.”

She dropped her white cloak from her shoulders and stepped clear, weighing the slender spear as she measured the lessening distance between the stallion and the greyhound. Her heart quickened not one beat, nor did the slightest shadow of fear show in the tawny eyes. She did not despair as the bitch seemed to gain upon the stallion; she did not hope as the thunder of the stallion’s hoofs sounded clearer and clearer every moment.

She was alone in her hour of desperate need, and only upon the strength and skill of her right hand and the judgment of her eye could she depend for life if the

Nubian failed to reach her in time.

Yet even when that life trembled in the balance she could not refrain from tormenting the man who had been her willing, humble slave from the moment his eyes had first met hers, and who alone raced to help her in her peril.

She held out her arms towards him and called his name and smiled, even though she could almost see the red gleam of hate in the greyhound's eyes, so near was the revengeful beast.

"Al-Asad!" she called. "Al-Asad!"

Her voice sounded like a peal of bells in the desert stillness, her beauty flamed like the sky above, her courage was superb as she measured the distance between herself and the maddened greyhound.

Then she leant forward and screamed, screamed till the echo of the terrible sound carried to Yussuf's ears, so that he turned and looked back in the direction of the girl he could not see.

Death was upon her; death with a crown of red above its snow-white face; the death Yussuf had prophesied when she had struck him blind.

She ran back so that the white cloak stretched between; she looked round and up, up to the sun which was her birthright, forward to the closing of her day. She flung out her arms, her hands, fingers widespread as though to clutch the last moments of the life she loved so well. Life was nigh spent; she stood within the shadows of Eternity; but, true to her father's race, true to the relentless desert to which she belonged, she would die fighting.

She shouted the battle-cry as she raised her spear.

*"Ista 'jil! Ista 'jil! Ista 'jil!"*

The desperate, defiant words were carried across the sands as she flung the spear, flung it as Rādi the bitch, increasing her speed in a last desperate effort to revenge her pup, changed her course by a few inches, so that the spear barely grazed the shoulder as it flew past and buried itself in the sands.

Then fear came to Zarah the Cruel, not the fear of death, but fear of an

ignominious end in the eyes of her men.

“Kill me, Al-Asad! Kill me!”

She called desperately to the Nubian as she caught the bitch by the throat as she leapt upon her.

“Kill me! Kill me! Kill me!”

The terrible cry rang in the Nubian’s ears as, misjudging his strength, he hurled the spear even as the greyhound leapt.

He shouted with triumph as the greyhound fell back dead, then flung himself from the stallion as he swept past at full speed and threw himself upon the girl he loved as she lay still.

The point of the spear which had killed the greyhound had buried itself in Zarah’s heart.

He did not hear the shouting of the men as they swept down upon him from every side; he did not seem to see the sun in the heavens as he knelt and drew the weapon free; he did not hear the call of life as he lifted the girl and held her against his heart.

“Zarah,” he whispered softly, holding her gently on his arm. “I love thee! No kiss have I wrested from thee awake. Behold, is it for me to snatch one from thee in sleep?” He turned her face to his shoulder and touched her hair gently, winding one curl about his slender fingers. “I love thee, mate of mine. I hunger for thee, I thirst for thee. Yea, by the wind of dawn I cannot live without thee. Behold, is there a smile lurking in the corner of thy mouth, and thine eyes, like unto clear water winding across the sands, laugh at me between thy lashes. Thou art gone but a space before me across Life’s desert, and I hold the hem of thy garment in my hands so that thou canst not escape me. I hear thee calling me in the wind, I see thee beckoning me ’neath the sun.” He bent and kissed her hair, then looked up to the sun, to the heavens, to that which awaited him.

He raised his spear above his head and smiled.

The men, racing towards him in a great circle, raised their spears and shouted a salutation as they pulled their horses back upon their haunches. He shifted the girl a little upon his left arm, then threw back his head and shouted the battle-

cry, shouted until the desert rang with the triumphant cry, as the men, divining his intention, charged down upon him.

He shook the spear above his head and laughed.

“Zarah! My woman! Zarah, I follow thee!”

He shouted the words, shouted with joy, then drove the spear deep down into his faithful heart.

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## EPILOGUE

The Holy Man, motionless, gaunt, his eyes filled with the peace of Allah, the one and only God, stood afar off, outlined against the blazing sky.

He looked to the north, where had passed a party of Bedouins with a white man and a white woman in their midst—a white woman with eyes like stars of happiness and hair like unto a golden flower.

He looked to the east, where passed a body of men, driving their horses at greatest speed as they rode silently, swiftly, into the unknown, with the lance at rest.

Leaderless they rode, a black line across the limitless, relentless desert, their spear points glittering in the sun.

They faded into the distance, they were gone.

To the south lay the Holy Man's path, the south where the wind blows hottest, where the sands burn the sandal from off even holy feet, which search salvation in distress throughout the years.

*“And deliver them from evil.”*

He leant upon his staff, older by some score years than when he stood to watch two horsemen fleeing for their lives across the desert. The beads of Mecca slipped between his fingers as he bent to read the inscription from the Korān which the Patriarch had roughly scratched with spear point upon the sand.

He lifted up his voice in the wilderness above the spot where Zarah the Arabian, wrapped in her great white cloak, lay upon Al-Asad's heart, asleep beneath the sands of the desert to which they both belonged:

*“For whomsoever thou shalt deliver from evil on that day on him wilt thou have mercy; and this will be great salvation.”*

The wind from the south carried the sonorous word from the Korān up to heaven as the Holy Man passed on the one solitary figure moving in the relentless desert. the forcing-ground of hate and fear and revenge. the burial place of love

...and hope and peace, above which the birds of prey wheeled and called as they drifted to the north and the south, the east and the west, as they have drifted since the day every grain of sand was numbered.

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