

**EDITH MAUDE
HULL**

THE SHEIK

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E. M. Hull

The Sheik: A Novel

CHAPTER I

"Are you coming in to watch the dancing, Lady Conway?"

"I most decidedly am not. I thoroughly disapprove of the expedition of which this dance is the inauguration. I consider that even by contemplating such a tour alone into the desert with no chaperon or attendant of her own sex, with only native camel drivers and servants, Diana Mayo is behaving with a recklessness and impropriety that is calculated to cast a slur not only on her own reputation, but also on the prestige of her country. I blush to think of it. We English cannot be too careful of our behavior abroad. No opportunity is slight enough for our continental neighbours to cast stones, and this opportunity is very far from being slight. It is the maddest piece of unprincipled folly I have ever heard of."

"Oh, come, Lady Conway! It's not quite so bad as all that. It is certainly unconventional and—er—probably not quite wise, but remember Miss Mayo's unusual upbringing—"

"I am not forgetting her unusual upbringing," interrupted Lady Conway. "It has been deplorable. But nothing can excuse this scandalous escapade. I knew her mother years ago, and I took it upon myself to expostulate both with Diana and her brother, but Sir Aubrey is hedged around with an egotistical complacency that would defy a pickaxe to penetrate. According to him a Mayo is beyond criticism, and his sister's reputation her own to deal with. The girl herself seemed, frankly, not to understand the seriousness of her position, and was very flippant and not a little rude. I wash my hands of the whole affair, and will certainly not countenance to-night's entertainment by appearing at it. I have already warned the manager that if the noise is kept up beyond a reasonable hour I shall leave the hotel to-morrow." And, drawing her wrap around her with a little shudder, Lady Conway stalked majestically across the wide verandah of the Biskra Hotel.

The two men left standing by the open French window that led into the hotel ballroom looked at each other and smiled.

"Some peroration," said one with a marked American accent. "That's the way scandal's made, I guess."

"Scandal be hanged! There's never been a breath of scandal attached to Diana Mayo's name. I've known the child since she was a baby. Rum little cuss she was, too. Confound that old woman! She would wreck the reputation of the Archangel Gabriel if he came down to earth, let alone that of a mere human girl."

"Not a very human girl," laughed the American. "She was sure meant for a boy and changed at the last moment. She looks like a boy in petticoats, a damned pretty boy—and a damned haughty one," he added, chuckling. "I overheard her this morning, in the garden, making mincemeat of a French officer."

The Englishman laughed.

"Been making love to her, I expect. A thing she does not understand and won't tolerate. She's the coldest little fish in the world, without an idea in her head beyond sport and travel. Clever, though, and plucky as they are made. I don't think she knows the meaning of the word fear."

"There's a queer streak in the family, isn't there? I heard somebody yapping about it the other night. Father was mad and blew his brains out, so I was told."

The Englishman shrugged his shoulders.

"You can call it mad, if you like," he said slowly. "I live near the Mayos' in England, and happen to know the story. Sir John Mayo was passionately devoted to his wife; after twenty years of married

life they were still lovers. Then this girl was born, and the mother died. Two hours afterwards her husband shot himself, leaving the baby in the sole care of her brother, who was just nineteen, and as lazy and as selfish then as he is now. The problem of bringing up a girl child was too much trouble to be solved, so he settled the difficulty by treating her as if she was a boy. The result is what you see."

They moved nearer to the open window, looking into the brilliantly lit ballroom, already filled with gaily chattering people. On a slightly raised platform at one end of the room the host and hostess were receiving their guests. The brother and sister were singularly unlike. Sir Aubrey Mayo was very tall and thin, the pallor of his face accentuated by the blackness of his smoothly brushed hair and heavy black moustache. His attitude was a mixture of well-bred courtesy and languid boredom. He seemed too tired even to keep the single eye-glass that he wore in position, for it dropped continually. By contrast the girl at his side appeared vividly alive. She was only of medium height and very slender, standing erect with the easy, vigorous carriage of an athletic boy, her small head poised proudly. Her scornful mouth and firm chin showed plainly an obstinate determination, and her deep blue eyes were unusually clear and steady. The long, curling black lashes that shaded her eyes and the dark eyebrows were a foil to the thick crop of loose, red-gold curls that she wore short, clubbed about her ears.

"The result is worth seeing," said the American admiringly, referring to his companion's last remark.

A third and younger man joined them.

"Hallo, Arbuthnot. You're late. The divinity is ten deep in would-be partners already."

A dull red crept into the young man's face, and he jerked his head angrily.

"I got waylaid by Lady Conway—poisonous old woman! She had a great deal to say on the subject of Miss Mayo and her trip. She ought to be gagged. I thought she was going on talking all night, so I fairly bolted in the end. All the same, I agree with her on one point. Why can't that lazy ass Mayo go with his sister?"

Nobody seemed to be able to give an answer. The band had begun playing, and the floor was covered with laughing, talking couples.

Sir Aubrey Mayo had moved away, and his sister was left standing with several men, who waited, programme in hand, but she waved them away with a little smile and a resolute shake of her head.

"Things seem to be getting a hustle on," said the American.

"Are you going to try your luck?" asked the elder of the two Englishmen.

The American bit the end off a cigar with a little smile.

"I sure am not. The haughty young lady turned me down as a dancer very early in our acquaintance. I don't blame her," he added, with a rueful laugh, "but her extreme candour still rankles. She told me quite plainly that she had no use for an American who could neither ride nor dance. I did intimate to her, very gently, that there were a few little openings in the States for men beside cattle-punching and cabaret dancing, but she froze me with a look, and I faded away. No, Sir Egotistical Complacency will be having some bridge later on, which will suit me much better. He's not a bad chap underneath if you can swallow his peculiarities, and he's a sportsman. I like to play with him. He doesn't care a durn if he wins or loses."

"It doesn't matter when you have a banking account the size of his," said Arbuthnot. "Personally, I find dancing more amusing and less expensive. I shall go and take my chance with our hostess."

His eyes turned rather eagerly towards the end of the room where the girl was standing alone, straight and slim, the light from an electrolier gilding the thick bright curls framing her beautiful, haughty little face. She was staring down at the dancers with an absent expression in her eyes, as if her thoughts were far away from the crowded ballroom.

The American pushed Arbuthnot forward with a little laugh.

"Run along, foolish moth, and get your poor little wings singed. When the cruel fair has done trampling on you I'll come right along and mop up the remains. If, on the other hand, your temerity meets with the success it deserves, we can celebrate suitably later on." And, linking his arm in his friend's, he drew him away to the card-room.

Arbuthnot went through the window and worked slowly round the room, hugging the wall, evading dancers, and threading his way through groups of chattering men and women of all nationalities. He came at last to the raised dais on which Diana Mayo was still standing, and climbed up the few steps to her side.

"This is luck, Miss Mayo," he said, with an assurance that he was far from feeling. "Am I really fortunate enough to find you without a partner?"

She turned to him slowly, with a little crease growing between her arched eyebrows, as if his coming were inopportune and she resented the interruption to her thoughts, and then she smiled quite frankly.

"I said I would not dance until everybody was started," she said rather doubtfully, looking over the crowded floor.

"They are all dancing. You've done your duty nobly. Don't miss this ripping tune," he urged persuasively.

She hesitated, tapping her programme-pencil against her teeth.

"I refused a lot of men," she said, with a grimace. Then she laughed suddenly. "Come along, then. I am noted for my bad manners. This will only be one extra sin."

Arbuthnot danced well, but with the girl in his arms he seemed suddenly tongue-tied. They swung round the room several times, then halted simultaneously beside an open window and went out into the garden of the hotel, sitting down on a wicker seat under a gaudy Japanese hanging lantern. The band was still playing, and for the moment the garden was empty, lit faintly by coloured lanterns, festooned from the palm trees, and twinkling lights outlining the winding paths.

Arbuthnot leaned forward, his hands clasped between his knees.

"I think you are the most perfect dancer I have ever met," he said a little breathlessly.

Miss Mayo looked at him seriously, without a trace of self-consciousness.

"It is very easy to dance if you have a musical ear, and if you have been in the habit of making your body do what you want. So few people seem to be trained to make their limbs obey them. Mine have had to do as they were told since I was a small child," she answered calmly.

The unexpectedness of the reply acted as a silencer on Arbuthnot for a few minutes, and the girl beside him seemed in no hurry to break the silence. The dance was over and the empty garden was thronged for a little time. Then the dancers drifted back into the hotel as the band started again.

"It's rather jolly here in the garden," Arbuthnot said tentatively. His heart was pounding with unusual rapidity, and his eyes, that he kept fixed on his own clasped hands, had a hungry look growing in them.

"You mean that, you want to sit out this dance with me?" she said with a boyish directness that somewhat nonplussed him.

"Yes," he stammered rather foolishly.

She held her programme up to the light of the lantern. "I promised this one to Arthur Conway. We quarrel every time we meet. I cannot think why he asked me; he disapproves of me even more than his mother does—such an interfering old lady. He will be overjoyed to be let off. And I don't want to dance to-night. I am looking forward so tremendously to to-morrow. I shall stay and talk to you, but you must give me a cigarette to keep me in a good temper."

His hand shook a little as he held the match for her. "Are you really determined to go through with this tour?"

She stared at him in surprise. "Why not? My arrangements have been made some time. Why should I change my mind at the last moment?"

"Why does your brother let you go alone? Why doesn't he go with you? Oh, I haven't any right to ask, but I do ask," he broke out vehemently.

She shrugged her shoulders with a little laugh. "We fell out, Aubrey and I. He wanted to go to America. I wanted a trip into the desert. We quarrelled for two whole days and half one night, and then we compromised. I should have my desert tour, and Aubrey should go to New York; and to mark his brotherly appreciation of my gracious promise to follow him to the States without fail at the end of a month he has consented to grace my caravan for the first stage, and dismiss me on my way with his blessing. It annoyed him so enormously that he could not order me to go with him, this being the first time in our wanderings that our inclinations have not jumped in the same direction. I came of age a few months ago, and, in future, I can do as I please. Not that I have ever done anything else," she conceded, with another laugh, "because Aubrey's ways have been my ways until now."

"But for the sake of one month! What difference could it make to him?" he asked in astonishment.

"That's Aubrey," replied Miss Mayo drily.

"It isn't safe," persisted Arbuthnot.

She flicked the ash from her cigarette carelessly. "I don't agree with you. I don't know why everybody is making such a fuss about it. Plenty of other women have travelled in much wilder country than this desert."

He looked at her curiously. She seemed to be totally unaware that it was her youth and her beauty that made all the danger of the expedition. He fell back on the easier excuse.

"There seems to be unrest amongst some of the tribes. There have been a lot of rumours lately," he said seriously.

She made a little movement of impatience. "Oh, that's what they always tell you when they want to put obstacles in your way. The authorities have already dangled that bogey in front of me. I asked for facts and they only gave me generalities. I asked definitely if they had any power to stop me. They said they had not, but strongly advised me not to make the attempt. I said I should go, unless the French Government arrested me.... Why not? I am not afraid. I don't admit that there is anything to be afraid of. I don't believe a word about the tribes being restless. Arabs are always moving about, aren't they? I have an excellent caravan leader, whom even the authorities vouch for, and I shall be armed. I am perfectly able to take care of myself. I can shoot straight and I am used to camping. Besides, I have given my word to Aubrey to be in Oran in a month, and I can't get very far away in that time."

There was an obstinate ring in her voice, and when she stopped speaking he sat silent, consumed with anxiety, obsessed with the loveliness of her, and tormented with the desire to tell her so. Then he turned to her suddenly, and his face was very white. "Miss Mayo—Diana—put off this trip only for a little, and give me the right to go with you. I love you. I want you for my wife more than anything on earth. I shan't always be a penniless subaltern. One of these days I shall be able to give you a position that is worthy of you; no, nothing could be that, but one at least that I am not ashamed to offer to you. We've been very good friends; you know all about me. I'll give my whole life to make you happy. The world has been a different place to me since you came into it. I can't get away from you. You are in my thoughts night and day. I love you; I want you. My God, Diana! Beauty like yours drives a man mad!"

"Is beauty all that a man wants in his wife?" she asked, with a kind of cold wonder in her voice. "Brains and a sound body seem much more sensible requirements to me."

"But when a woman has all three, as you have, Diana," he whispered ardently, his hands closing over the slim ones lying in her lap.

But with a strength that seemed impossible for their smallness she disengaged them from his grasp. "Please stop. I am sorry. We have been good friends, and it has never occurred to me that there could be anything beyond that. I never thought that you might love me. I never thought of you in that way at all, I don't understand it. When God made me He omitted to give me a heart. I have

never loved any one in my life. My brother and I have tolerated each other, but there has never been any affection between us. Would it be likely? Put yourself in Aubrey's place. Imagine a young man of nineteen, with a cold, reserved nature, being burdened with the care of a baby sister, thrust into his hands unwanted and unexpected. Was it likely that he would have any affection for me? I never wanted it. I was born with the same cold nature as his. I was brought up as a boy, my training was hard. Emotion and affection have been barred out of my life. I simply don't know what they mean. I don't want to know. I am very content with my life as it is. Marriage for a woman means the end of independence, that is, marriage with a man who is a man, in spite of all that the most modern woman may say. I have never obeyed any one in my life; I do not wish to try the experiment. I am very sorry to have hurt you. You've been a splendid pal, but that side of life does not exist for me. If I had thought for one moment that my friendship was going to hurt you I need not have let you become so intimate, but I did not think, because it is a subject that I never think of. A man to me is just a companion with whom I ride or shoot or fish; a pal, a comrade, and that's just all there is to it. God made me a woman. Why, only He knows."

Her quiet, even voice stopped. There had been a tone of cold sincerity in it that Arbuthnot could not help but recognise. She meant everything that she said. She said no more than the truth. Her reputation for complete indifference to admiration and her unvarying attitude towards men were as well known as her dauntless courage and obstinate determination. With Sir Aubrey Mayo she behaved like a younger brother, and as such entertained his friends. She was popular with everybody, even with the mothers of marriageable daughters, for, in spite of her wealth and beauty, her notorious peculiarities made her negligible as a rival to plainer and less well-dowered girls.

Arbuthnot sat in silence. It was hardly likely, he thought bitterly, that he should succeed where other and better men had failed. He had been a fool to succumb to the temptation that had been too hard for him to resist. He knew her well enough to know beforehand what her answer would be. The very real fear for her safety that the thought of the coming expedition gave him, her nearness in the mystery of the Eastern night, the lights, the music, had all combined to rush to his lips words that in a saner moment would never have passed them. He loved her, he would love her always, but he knew that his love was as hopeless as it was undying. But it was men who were men whom she wanted for her friends, so he must take his medicine like a man.

"May I still be the pal, Diana?" he said quietly.

She looked at him a moment, but in the dim light of the hanging lanterns his eyes were steady under hers, and she held out her hand frankly. "Gladly," she said candidly. "I have hosts of acquaintances, but very few friends. We are always travelling, Aubrey and I, and we never seem to have time to make friends. We rarely stay as long in one place as we have stayed in Biskra. In England they call us very bad neighbours, we are so seldom there. We generally go home for three months in the winter for the hunting, but the rest of the year we wander on the face of the globe."

He held her slender fingers gripped in his for a moment, smothering an insane desire to press them to his lips, which he knew would be fatal to the newly accorded friendship, and then let them go. Miss Mayo continued sitting quietly beside him. She was in no way disturbed by what had happened. She had taken him literally at his word, and was treating him as the pal he had asked to be. It no more occurred to her that she might relieve him of her society than it occurred to her that her continued presence might be distressing to him. She was totally unembarrassed and completely unself-conscious. And as they sat silent, her thoughts far away in the desert, and his full of vain longings and regrets, a man's low voice rose in the stillness of the night. "*Pale hands I loved beside the Shalimar. Where are you now? Who lies beneath your spell?*" he sang in a passionate, vibrating baritone. He was singing in English, and yet the almost indefinite slurring from note to note was strangely un-English. Diana Mayo leaned forward, her head raised, listening intently, with shining eyes. The voice seemed to come from the dark shadows at the end of the garden, or it might have been further away out in the

road beyond the cactus hedge. The singer sang slowly, his voice lingering caressingly on the words; the last verse dying away softly and clearly, almost imperceptibly fading into silence.

For a moment there was utter stillness, then Diana lay back with a little sigh. "The Kashmiri Song. It makes me think of India. I heard a man sing it in Kashmere last year, but not like that. What a wonderful voice! I wonder who it is?"

Arbuthnot looked at her curiously, surprised at the sudden ring of interest in her tone, and the sudden animation of her face.

"You say you have no emotion in your nature, and yet that unknown man's singing has stirred you deeply. How do you reconcile the two?" he asked, almost angrily.

"Is an appreciation of the beautiful emotion?" she challenged, with uplifted eyes. "Surely not. Music, art, nature, everything beautiful appeals to me. But there is nothing emotional in that. It is only that I prefer beautiful things to ugly ones. For that reason even pretty clothes appeal to me," she added, laughing.

"You are the best-dressed woman in Biskra," he acceded. "But is not that a concession to the womanly feelings that you despise?"

"Not at all. To take an interest in one's clothes is not an exclusively feminine vice. I like pretty dresses. I admit to spending some time in thinking of colour schemes to go with my horrible hair, but I assure you that my dressmaker has an easier life than Aubrey's tailor."

She sat silent, hoping that the singer might not have gone, but there was no sound except a cicada chirping near her. She swung round in her chair, looking in the direction from which it came. "Listen to him. Jolly little chap! They are the first things I listen for when I get to Port Said. They mean the East to me."

"Maddening little beasts!" said Arbuthnot irritably.

"They are going to be very friendly little beasts to me during the next four weeks.... You don't know what this trip means to me. I like wild places. The happiest times of my life have been spent camping in America and India, and I have always wanted the desert more than either of them. It is going to be a month of pure joy. I am going to be enormously happy."

She stood up with a little laugh of intense pleasure, and half turned, waiting for Arbuthnot. He got up reluctantly and stood silent beside her for a few moments. "Diana, I wish you'd let me kiss you, just once," he broke out miserably.

She looked up swiftly with a glint of anger in her eyes, and shook her head. "No. That's not in the compact. I have never been kissed in my life. It is one of the things that I do not understand." Her voice was almost fierce.

She moved leisurely towards the hotel, and he paced beside her wondering if he had forfeited her friendship by his outburst, but on the verandah she halted and spoke in the frank tone of camaraderie in which she had always addressed him. "Shall I see you in the morning?"

He understood. There was to be no more reference to what had passed between them. The offer of friendship held, but only on her own terms. He pulled himself together.

"Yes. We have arranged an escort of about a dozen of us to ride the first few miles with you, to give you a proper send-off."

She made a laughing gesture of protest. "It will certainly need four weeks of solitude to counteract the conceit I shall acquire," she said lightly, as she passed into the ballroom.

A few hours later Diana came into her bedroom, and, switching on the electric lights, tossed her gloves and programme into a chair. The room was empty, for her maid had had a *vertige* at the suggestion that she should accompany her mistress into the desert, and had been sent back to Paris to await Diana's return. She had left during the day, to take most of the heavy luggage with her.

Diana stood in the middle of the room and looked at the preparations for the early start next morning with a little smile of satisfaction. Everything was *en train*; the final arrangements had all been concluded some days before. The camel caravan with the camp equipment was due to leave

Biskra a few hours before the time fixed for the Mayos to start with Mustafa Ali, the reputable guide whom the French authorities had reluctantly recommended. The two big suit-cases that Diana was taking with her stood open, ready packed, waiting only for the last few necessaries, and by them the steamer trunk that Sir Aubrey would take charge of and leave in Paris as he passed through. On a chaise-longue was laid out her riding kit ready for the morning. Her smile broadened as she looked at the smart-cut breeches and high brown boots. They were the clothes in which most of her life had been spent, and in which she was far more at home than in the pretty dresses over which she had laughed with Arbuthnot.

She was glad the dance was over; it was not a form of exercise that appealed to her particularly. She was thinking only of the coming tour. She stretched her arms out with a little happy laugh.

"It's the life of lives, and it's going to begin all over again to-morrow morning." She crossed over to the dressing-table, and, propping her elbows on it, looked at herself in the glass, with a little friendly smile at the reflection. In default of any other confidant she had always talked to herself, with no thought for the beauty of the face staring back at her from the glass. The only comment she ever made to herself on her own appearance was sometimes to wish that her hair was not such a tiresome shade. She looked at herself now with a tinge of curiosity. "I wonder why I'm so especially happy to-night. It must be because we have been so long in Biskra. It's been very jolly, but I was beginning to get very bored." She laughed again and picked up her watch to wind. It was one of her peculiarities that she would wear no jewellery of any kind. Even the gold repeater in her hand was on a plain leather strap. She undressed slowly and each moment felt more wide-awake. Slipping a thin wrap over her pyjamas and lighting a cigarette she went out on to the broad balcony on to which her bedroom gave. The room was on the first floor, and opposite her window rose one of the ornately carved and bracketed pillars that supported the balcony, stretching up to the second story above her head. She looked down into the gardens below. It was an easy climb, she thought, with a boyish grin—far easier than many she had achieved successfully when the need of a solitary ramble became imperative. But the East was inconvenient for solitary ramble; native servants had a disconcerting habit of lying down to sleep wherever drowsiness overcame them, and it was not very long since she had slid down from her balcony and landed plumb on a slumbering bundle of humanity who had roused half the hotel with his howls. She leant far over the rail, trying to see into the verandah below, and she thought she caught a glimpse of white drapery. She looked again, and this time there was nothing, but she shook her head with a little grimace, and swung herself up on to the broad ledge of the railing. Settling herself comfortably with her back against the column she looked out over the hotel gardens into the night, humming softly the Kashmiri song she had heard earlier in the evening.

The risen moon was full, and its cold, brilliant light filled the garden with strong black shadows. She watched some that seemed even to move, as if the garden were alive with creeping, hurrying figures, and amused herself tracking them until she traced them to the palm tree or cactus bush that caused them. One in particular gave her a long hunt till she finally ran it to its lair, and it proved to be the shadow of a grotesque lead statue half hidden by a flowering shrub. Forgetting the hour and the open windows all around her, she burst into a rippling peal of laughter, which was interrupted by the appearance of a figure, imperfectly seen through the lattice-work which divided her balcony from the next one, and the sound of an irritable voice.

"For Heaven's sake, Diana, let other people sleep if you can't."

"Which, being interpreted, is let Sir Aubrey Mayo sleep," she retorted, with a chuckle. "My dear boy, sleep if you want to, but I don't know how you can on a night like this. Did you ever see such a gorgeous moon?"

"Oh, damn the moon!"

"Oh, very well. Don't get cross about it. Go back to bed and put your head under the clothes, and then you won't see it. But I'm going to sit here."

"Diana, don't be an idiot! You'll go to sleep and fall into the garden and break your neck."

"*Tant pis pour moi. Tant mieux pour toi,*" she said flippantly. "I have left you all that I have in the world, dear brother. Could devotion go further?"

She paid no heed to his exclamation of annoyance, and looked back into the garden. It was a wonderful night, silent except for the cicadas' monotonous chirping, mysterious with the inexplicable mystery that hangs always in the Oriental night. The smells of the East rose up all around her; here, as at home, they seemed more perceptible by night than by day. Often at home she had stood on the little stone balcony outside her room, drinking in the smells of the night—the pungent, earthy smell after rain, the aromatic smell of pine trees near the house. It was the intoxicating smells of the night that had first driven her, as a very small child, to clamber down from her balcony, clinging to the thick ivy roots, to wander with the delightful sense of wrong-doing through the moonlit park and even into the adjoining gloomy woods. She had always been utterly fearless.

Her childhood had been a strange one. There had been no near relatives to interest themselves in the motherless girl left to the tender mercies of a brother nearly twenty years her senior, who was frankly and undisguisedly horrified at the charge that had been thrust upon him. Wrapped up in himself, and free to indulge in the wander hunger that gripped him, the baby sister was an intolerable burden, and he had shifted responsibility in the easiest way possible. For the first few years of her life she was left undisturbed to nurses and servants who spoiled her indiscriminately. Then, when she was still quite a tiny child, Sir Aubrey Mayo came home from a long tour, and, settling down for a couple of years, fixed on his sister's future training, modelled rigidly on his own upbringing. Dressed as a boy, treated as a boy, she learned to ride and to shoot and to fish—not as amusements, but seriously, to enable her to take her place later on as a companion to the man whose only interests they were. His air of weariness was a mannerism. In reality he was as hard as nails, and it was his intention that Diana should grow up as hard. With that end in view her upbringing had been Spartan, no allowances were made for sex or temperament and nothing was spared to gain the desired result. And from the first Diana had responded gallantly, throwing herself heart and soul into the arduous, strenuous life mapped out for her. The only drawback to a perfect enjoyment of life were the necessary lessons that had to be gone through, though even these might have been worse. Every morning she rode across the park to the rectory for a couple of hours' tuition with the rector, whose heart was more in his stable than in his parish, and whose reputation was greater across country than it was in the pulpit. His methods were rough and ready, but she had brains, and acquired an astonishing amount of diverse knowledge. But her education was stopped with abrupt suddenness when she was fifteen by the arrival at the rectory of an overgrown young cub who had been sent by a despairing parent, as a last resource, to the muscular rector, and who quickly discovered what those amongst whom she had grown up had hardly realised, that Diana Mayo, with the clothes and manners of a boy, was really an uncommonly beautiful young woman. With the assurance belonging to his type, he had taken the earliest opportunity of telling her so, following it with an attempt to secure the kiss that up to now his own good looks had always secured for him. But in this case he had to deal with a girl who was a girl by accident of birth only, who was quicker with her hands and far finer trained than he was, and whose natural strength was increased by furious rage. She had blacked his eyes before he properly understood what was happening, and was dancing around him like an infuriated young gamecock when the rector had burst in upon them, attracted by the noise.

What she left he had finished, and then, breathless and angry, had ridden back across the park with her and had briefly announced to Sir Aubrey, who happened to be at home upon one of his rare visits, that his pupil was both too old and too pretty to continue her studies at the rectory, and had taken himself off as hurriedly as he had come, leaving Sir Aubrey to settle for himself the new problem of Diana. And, as before, it was settled in the easiest possible way. Physically she was perfectly able to take up the role for which he had always intended her; mentally he presumed that she knew as much as it was necessary for her to know, and, in any case, travelling itself was an education, and a far finer one than could be learned from books. So Diana grew up in a day, and in a fortnight the old life was

behind her and she had started out on the ceaseless travels with her brother that had continued for the last six years—years of perpetual change, of excitements and dangers.

She thought of it all, sitting on the broad rail of the balcony, her head slanted against the column on which she leaned. "It's been a splendid life," she murmured, "and to-morrow—to-day begins the most perfect part of it." She yawned and realised suddenly that she was desperately sleepy. She turned back into her room, leaving the windows wide, and, flinging off her wrap, tumbled into bed and slept almost before her head was on the pillow.

It must have been about an hour later when she awoke, suddenly wide awake. She lay quite still, looking cautiously under her thick lashes. The room was flooded with moonlight, there was nothing to be seen, but she had the positive feeling that there was another presence in the room beside her own; she had had a half-conscious vision in the moment of waking of a shadowy something that had seemed to fade away by the window. As the actual reality of this thought pierced through the sleep that dulled her brain and became a concrete suggestion, she sprang out of the bed and ran on to the balcony. It was empty. She leaned over the railing, listening intently, but she could see nothing and hear nothing. Puzzled, she went back into her room and turned on the lights. Nothing seemed to be missing: her watch lay where she had left it on the dressing table; and the suit-cases had apparently not been tampered with. By the bedside the ivory-mounted revolver that she always carried was lying as she had placed it. She looked around the room again, frowning. "It must have been a dream," she said doubtfully, "but it seemed very real. It looked tall and white and solid, and I *felt* it there." She waited a moment or two, then shrugged her shoulders, turned out the lights, and got into bed. Her nerves were admirable, and in five minutes she was asleep again.

CHAPTER II

The promised send-off had been enthusiastic. The arrangements for the trip had been perfect; there had been no hitch anywhere. The guide, Mustafa Ali, appeared capable and efficient, effacing himself when not wanted and replying with courteous dignity when spoken to. The day had been full of interest, and the long, hot ride had for Diana been the height of physical enjoyment. They had reached the oasis where the first night was to be passed an hour before, and found the camp already established, tents pitched, and everything so ordered that Sir Aubrey could find nothing to criticise; even Stephens, his servant, who had travelled with him since Diana was a baby, and who was as critical as his master on the subject of camps, had no fault to find.

Diana glanced about her little travelling tent with complete content. It was much smaller than the ones to which she had always been accustomed, ridiculously so compared with the large one she had had in India the previous year, with its separate bath—and dressing-rooms. Servants, too, had swarmed in India. Here service promised to be inadequate, but it had been her whim on this tour to dispense with the elaborate arrangements that Sir Aubrey cultivated and to try comparative roughing it. The narrow camp cot, the tin bath, the little folding table and her two suit-cases seemed to take up all the available space. But she laughed at the inconvenience, though she had drenched her bed with splashing, and the soap had found its way into the toe of one of her long boots. She had changed from her riding clothes into a dress of clinging jade-green silk, swinging short above her slender ankles, the neck cut low, revealing the gleaming white of her soft, girlish bosom. She came out of the tent and stood a moment exchanging an amused smile with Stephens, who was hovering near dubiously, one eye on her and the other on his master. She was late, and Sir Aubrey liked his meals punctually. The baronet was lounging in one deck-chair with his feet on another.

Diana wagged an admonishing forefinger. "Fly, Stephens, and fetch the soup! If it is cold there will be a riot." She walked to the edge of the canvas cloth that had been thrown down in front of the tents and stood revelling in the scene around her, her eyes dancing with excitement as they glanced slowly around the camp spread out over the oasis—the clustering palm trees, the desert itself stretching away before her in undulating sweeps, but seemingly level in the evening light, far off to the distant hills lying like a dark smudge against the horizon. She drew a long breath. It was the desert at last, the desert that she felt she had been longing for all her life. She had never known until this moment how intense the longing had been. She felt strangely at home, as if the great, silent emptiness had been waiting for her as she had been waiting for it, and now that she had come it was welcoming her softly with the faint rustle of the whispering sand, the mysterious charm of its billowy, shifting surface that seemed beckoning to her to penetrate further and further into its unknown obscurities.

Her brother's voice behind her brought her down to earth suddenly. "You've been a confounded long time."

She turned to the table with a faint smile. "Don't be a bear, Aubrey. It's all very well for you. You have Stephens to lather your chin and to wash your hands, but thanks to that idiot Marie, I have to look after myself."

Sir Aubrey took his heels down leisurely from the second chair, pitched away his cigar, and, screwing his eyeglass into his eye with more than usual truculence, looked at her with disapproval. "Are you going to rig yourself out like that every evening for the benefit of Mustafa Ali and the camel-drivers?"

"I do not propose to invite the worthy Mustafa to meals, and I am not in the habit of 'rigging myself out,' as you so charmingly put it, for any one's benefit. If you think I dress in camp to please you, my dear Aubrey, you flatter yourself. I do it entirely to please myself. That explorer woman we met in London that first year I began travelling with you explained to me the real moral and physical

value of changing into comfortable, pretty clothes after a hard day in breeches and boots. You change yourself. What's the difference?"

"All the difference," he snapped. "There is no need for you to make yourself more attractive than you are already."

"Since when has it occurred to you that I am attractive? You must have a touch of the sun, Aubrey," she replied, with uplifted eyebrows, drumming impatiently with her fingers on the table.

"Don't quibble. You know perfectly well that you are good-looking—too good-looking to carry through this preposterous affair."

"Will you please tell me what you are driving at?" she asked quietly. But the dark blue eyes fixed on her brother's face were growing darker as she looked at him.

"I've been doing some hard thinking to-day, Diana. This tour you propose is impossible."

"Isn't it rather late in the day to find that out?" she interrupted sarcastically; but he ignored the interruption.

"You must see for yourself, now that you are face to face with the thing, that it is impossible. It's quite unthinkable that you can wander for the next month all alone in the desert with those damned niggers. Though my legal guardianship over you terminated last September I still have some moral obligations towards you. Though it has been convenient to me to bring you up as a boy and to regard you in the light of a younger brother instead of a sister, we cannot get away from the fact that you are a woman, and a very young woman. There are certain things a young woman cannot do. If you had been the boy I always wished you were it would have been a different matter, but you are not a boy, and the whole thing is impossible—utterly impossible." There was a fretful impatience in his voice.

Diana lit a cigarette slowly, and swung round on her chair with a hard laugh. "If I had not lived with you all my life, Aubrey, I should really be impressed with your brotherly solicitude; I should think you really meant it. But knowing you as I do, I know that it is not anxiety on my behalf that is prompting you, but the disinclination that you have to travel alone without me. You have come to depend on me to save you certain annoyances and inconveniences that always occur in travelling. You were more honest in Biskra when you only objected to my trip without giving reasons. Why have you waited until to-night to give me those reasons?"

"Because I thought that here, at least, you would have sense enough to see them. In Biskra it was impossible to argue with you. You made your own arrangements against my wishes. I left it, feeling convinced that the impossibility of it would be brought home to you here, and that you would see for yourself that it was out of the question. Diana, give up this insane trip."

"I will not."

"I've a thundering good mind to make you."

"You can't. I'm my own mistress. You have no right over me at all. You have no claim on me. You haven't even that of ordinary brotherly affection, for you have never given me any, so you cannot expect it from me. We needn't make any pretence about it, I am not going to argue any more. I will not go back to Biskra."

"If you are afraid of being laughed at—" he sneered; but she took him up swiftly.

"I am not afraid of being laughed at. Only cowards are afraid of that, and I am not a coward."

"Diana, listen to reason!"

"Aubrey! I have said my last word. Nothing will alter my determination to go on this trip. Your arguments do not convince me, who know you. It is your own considerations and not mine that are at the bottom of your remonstrances. You do not deny it, because you can't, because it is true."

They were facing each other across the little table. An angry flush rose in Sir Aubrey's face, and his eyeglass fell with a little sharp tinkle against a waistcoat button.

"You're a damned obstinate little devil!" he said furiously.

She looked at him steadily, her scornful mouth firm as his own. "I am what you have made me," she said slowly. "Why quarrel with the result? You have brought me up to ignore the restrictions

attached to my sex; you now round on me and throw them in my face. All my life you have set me an example of selfishness and obstinacy. Can you wonder that I have profited by it? You have made me as hard as yourself, and you now profess surprise at the determination your training has forced upon me. You are illogical. It is your fault, not mine. There was bound to be a clash some day. It has come sooner than I expected, that's all. Up till now my inclinations have gone with yours, but this seems to be the parting of the ways. As I reminded you before, I am my own mistress, and I will submit to no interference with my actions. Please understand that clearly, Aubrey. I don't want to wrangle any more. I will join you in New York as I promised. I am not in the habit of breaking my promises, but my life is my own to deal with, and I will deal with it exactly as I wish and not as any one else wishes. I will do what I choose when and how I choose, and I will *never* obey any will but my own."

Sir Aubrey's eyes narrowed suddenly. "Then I hope to Heaven that one day you will fall into the hands of a man who will make you obey," he cried wrathfully.

Her scornful mouth curled still more scornfully. "Then Heaven help him!" she retorted scathingly, and turned away to her tent.

But, alone, her anger gave way to amusement. It had been something, after all, to rouse the lazy Aubrey to wrath. She knew exactly the grievance he had been nursing against her during the last few weeks in Biskra. Though he travelled perpetually and often in remote and desolate places, he travelled with the acme of comfort and the minimum of inconveniences. He put himself out for nothing, and the inevitable difficulties that accrued fell on Diana's younger and less blase shoulders. She had always known the uses he put her to and the convenience she was to him. He might have some latent feelings with regard to the inadvisability of her behavior, he might even have some prickings of conscience on the subject of his upbringing of her, but it was thoughts of his own comfort that were troubling him most. That she knew, and the knowledge was not conducive to any kinder feeling towards him. He always had been and always would be supremely selfish. The whole of their life together had been conducted to suit his conveniences and not hers. She knew, too, why her company was particularly desired on his visit to America. It was a hunting trip, but not the kind that they were usually accustomed to: it was a wife and not big game that was taking Sir Aubrey across the ocean on this occasion. It had been in his mind for some time as an inevitable and somewhat unpleasant necessity. Women bored him, and the idea of marriage was distasteful, but a son to succeed him was imperative—a Mayo must be followed by a Mayo. An heir was essential for the big property that the family had held for hundreds of years. No woman had ever attracted him, but of all women he had met American women were less actively irritating to him, and so it was to America that he turned in search of a wife. He proposed to take a house in New York for a few months and later on in Newport, and it was for that that Diana's company was considered indispensable. She would save him endless trouble, as all arrangements could be left in her hands and Stephens'. Having made up his mind to go through with a proceeding that he regarded in the light of a sacrifice on the family altar, his wish was to get it over and done with as soon as possible, and Diana's interference in his plans had exasperated him. It was the first time that their wills had crossed, and she shrugged her shoulders impatiently, with a grimace at the recollection. A little more and it would have degenerated into a vulgar quarrel. She banished Aubrey and his selfishness resolutely from her mind. It was very hot, and she lay very still in the narrow cot, wishing she had not been so rigid in the matter of its width, and wondering if a sudden movement in the night would precipitate her into the bath that stood alongside. She thought regretfully of a punkah, and then smiled derisively at herself.

"Sybarite!" she murmured sleepily. "You need a few discomforts."

She was almost aggressively cheerful next morning at breakfast and for the time that they lingered at the oasis after the baggage camels had started. Sir Aubrey was morose and silent, and she exchanged most of her badinage with Stephens, who was superintending the packing of the tiffin basket that would accompany her in charge of the man who had been selected as her personal servant, and who was waiting, with Mustafa Ali and about ten men, to ride with her.

The time for starting came. Stephens was fussing about the horse that Diana was to ride.

"Everything all right, Stephens? Up to your standard? Don't look so glum. I wish you were coming to look after me, but it couldn't be done. Sir Aubrey would be lost without you."

The idea of a tour without Stephens in the background seemed suddenly momentous, and the smile she gave him was more serious than she meant it to be. She went back to her brother, who was pulling his moustache savagely. "I don't think there's any use waiting any longer. You won't want to hurry yourself too much, and you will want to be in Biskra in time for dinner," she said as casually as she could.

He swung towards her. "Diana, it's still not too late to change your mind. For Heaven's sake give up this folly. It's tempting Providence." For the first time there was a genuine ring in his voice, and for a moment Diana wavered, but only for a moment. Then she looked at him with a slow smile.

"Do I fall on your neck and say, 'Take me back, dear Guardian; I will be good,' or do I prostrate myself at your feet and knock my head on your boots, and whine, in the language of the country, 'Hearing is obeying'? Don't be ridiculous, Aubrey. You can't expect me to change my mind at the eleventh hour. It's perfectly safe. Mustafa Ali will take care that everything goes smoothly. He has his reputation in Biskra to think of. You know the character the authorities gave him. He is not likely to throw that away. In any case I can take care of myself, thanks to your training. I don't mind owning to being conceited about my shooting. Even you admit that I am a credit to your teaching."

With a gay little laugh she whipped out the ivory-mounted revolver, and aiming at a low flat rock, some distance away, fired. She was an unusually good revolver shot, but this time she seemed to have missed. There was no mark on the stone. Diana stared at it stupidly, a frown of perplexity creasing her forehead. Then she looked at her brother, and back to the revolver in her hand.

Sir Aubrey swore. "Diana! What a senseless piece of bravado!" he cried angrily.

She took no notice of him. She was still staring at the smooth rock fate. "I don't understand it. How could I miss? It's as big as a house," she murmured thoughtfully, and raised the revolver again.

But Sir Aubrey caught her wrist. "For God's sake don't make a fool of yourself a second time. You have lowered your prestige quite enough already," he said in a low voice, with a glance at the group of watching Arabs.

Diana jerked the little weapon back into its place reluctantly. "I don't understand it," she said again. "It must be the light." She mounted and wheeled her horse alongside of Sir Aubrey's, and held out her hand. "Good-bye, Aubrey. Expect me a month after you arrive. I will cable to you from Cherbourg. Good luck! I shall roll up in time to be best man," she added, laughing, and with a nod to Mustafa Ali she turned her horse's head southwards.

For a long time she rode in silence. The quarrel with Aubrey had left a nasty taste in her mouth. She knew that what she was doing was considered unconventional, but she had been brought up to be unconventional. She had never even thought, when she planned her tour, of possible criticism; it would have made no difference to her if she had thought, and she had been amazed and amused at the sensation that her proposed trip had caused. The publicity to which it had given rise had annoyed her intensely; she had been scornful that people could not occupy themselves with their own affairs and leave her to deal with hers. But that Aubrey should join in the general criticism and present such a complete *volte-face* to the opinions he had always held was beyond her comprehension. She was angry with him, and contempt was mingled with her anger. It was inconsistent with the whole of his lifelong attitude toward her, and the discovery of his altered ideas left her rather breathless and more than ever determined to adhere to her own deeply-rooted convictions. Aubrey was responsible for them, he had instilled them, and if he chose now to abandon them that was his look-out. For her own part she saw no reason to change principles she had been brought up in. If Aubrey really thought there was danger in this expedition he could have sacrificed himself for once and come with her. As Jim Arbuthnot had said, it was only a month, a negligible length of time, but Aubrey's selfishness would not allow him to make that concession any more than her own obstinacy would allow her to give way. It was too

much to expect. And this was the desert! It was the expedition that she had dreamed of and planned for years. She could not give it up. The idea of danger brought a little laugh to her lips. How could anything in the desert hurt her? It had been calling to her always. There was nothing strange about the scene that lay all around her. Her surroundings seemed oddly familiar. The burning sun overhead in the cloudless sky, the shimmering haze rising from the hot, dry ground, the feathery outline of some clustering palm trees in a tiny distant oasis were like remembrances that she watched again with a feeling of gladness that was fuller and deeper than anything that she had been conscious of before. She was radiantly happy—happy in the sense of her youth and strength, her perfect physical fitness, happy in the capacity of her power of enjoyment, happy with the touch of the keen, nervous horse between her knees, exhilarated with her new authority. She had looked forward so eagerly, and realisation was proving infinitely greater than anticipation. And for a whole month this perfect happiness was to be hers. She thought of her promise to Aubrey with impatience. To give up the joyous freedom of the desert for the commonplace round of American social life seemed preposterous. The thought of the weeks in New York were frankly tedious; Newport would be a little less bad, for there were alleviations. The only hope was that Aubrey would find the wife he was looking for quickly and release her from an obligation that was going to be very wearisome. Aubrey was counting on her, and it would be unsporting to let him down; she would have to keep her promise, but she would be glad when it was over. Aubrey married would settle definitely the possibility of any further disagreements between them. She wondered vaguely what the future Lady Mayo would be like, but she did not expend much pity on her. American girls as a rule were well able to care for themselves. She stroked her horse with a little smile. Aubrey and his possible wife seemed singularly uninteresting beside the vivid interest of the moment. A caravan that had been visible for a long time coming towards them drew nearer, and Diana reined in to watch the long line of slow, lurching camels passing. The great beasts, with their disdainful tread and long, swaying necks, never failed to interest her. It was a large caravan; the bales on the camels' backs looked heavy, and beside the merchants on riding camels and a motley crowd of followers—some on lean little donkeys and others on foot—there was an armed guard of mounted men. It took some time to pass. One of two of the camels carried huddled figures, swathed and shapeless with a multitude of coverings, that Diana knew must be women. The contrast between them and herself was almost ridiculous. It made her feel stifled even to look at them. She wondered what their lives were like, if they ever rebelled against the drudgery and restrictions that were imposed upon them, if they ever longed for the freedom that she was revelling in, or if custom and usage were so strong that they had no thoughts beyond the narrow life they led. The thought of those lives filled her with aversion. The idea of marriage—even in its highest form, based on mutual consideration and mutual forbearance—was repugnant to her. She thought of it with a shiver of absolute repulsion. To Aubrey it was distasteful, but to her cold, reserved temperament it was a thing of horror and disgust. That women could submit to the degrading intimacy and fettered existence of married life filled her with scornful wonder. To be bound irrevocably to the will and pleasure of a man who would have the right to demand obedience in all that constituted marriage and the strength to enforce those claims revolted her. For a Western woman it was bad enough, but for the women of the East, mere slaves of the passions of the men who owned them, unconsidered, disregarded, reduced to the level of animals, the bare idea made her quiver and bring her hand down heavily on her horse's neck. The nervous creature started sharply and she let him go, calling to Mustafa Ali as she cantered past him. He had ridden to meet the caravan and was dismounted, deep in conversation with the chief of the armed guard. With the thoughts that it had provoked the caravan had lost all interest for Diana. She wanted to get away from it, to forget it, and she rode on unmindful of her escort, who, like her guide, had stopped to speak with the traders. Diana's horse was fleet, and it was some time before they caught her up. There was a look of annoyance on Mustafa Ali's face as she turned on hearing them behind her and signed to him to ride beside her.

"Mademoiselle is not interested in the caravan?" he asked curiously.

"No," she replied shortly, and asked for some details connected with her own expedition. The man talked easily and well, in fluent French, and after giving the required information, volunteered anecdotes relating to various well-known people whom he had guided in the desert. Diana watched him interestedly. He seemed a man of about middle age, though it was difficult to guess more than approximately, for the thick, peaked beard that hid both mouth and chin made him look older than he really was. His beard had been his only drawback from Diana's point of view, for she judged men by their mouths. Eyes were untrustworthy evidences of character in an Oriental, for they usually wavered under a European's. Mustafa Ali's were wavering now as she looked at him, and it occurred to her that they had not seemed nearly so shifty in Biskra when she had engaged him. But she attached no importance to the thought, and dismissed it as much less interesting than the great difference displayed in their respective modes of riding. The Arab's exaggeratedly short stirrup would have given her agonies of cramp. She pointed the difference with a laugh of amusement and drew the man on to speak of his horses. The one Diana was riding was an unusually fine beast, and had been one of the greatest points in the guide's favour when he had brought it for her inspection. He was enthusiastic in its praise, but volubly vague as to its antecedents, which left Diana with the conviction that the animal had either been stolen or acquired in some irregular manner and that it would be tactless to pursue further inquiries. After all it was no business of hers. It was enough that her trip was to be conducted on the back of a horse that it was a pleasure to ride and whose vagaries promised to give interest to what otherwise might have been monotonous. Some of the horses that she had seen in Biskra had been the veriest jades.

She asked Mustafa Ali about the country through which they were passing, but he did not seem to have much information that was really of interest, or what seemed important to him appeared trivial to her, and he constantly brought the conversation back to Biskra, of which she was tired, or to Oran, of which she knew nothing. The arrival at a little oasis where the guide suggested that the midday halt might be made was opportune. Diana swung to the ground, and, tossing down her gloves, gave herself a shake. It was hot work riding in the burning sun and the rest would be delightful. She had a thoroughly healthy appetite, and superintended the laying out of her lunch with interest. It was the last time that it would be as daintily packed. Stephens was an artist with a picnic basket. She was going to miss Stephens. She finished her lunch quickly, and then, with her back propped against a palm tree, a cigarette in her mouth, her arms clasped round her knees, she settled down happily, overlooking the desert. The noontime hush seemed over everything. Not a breath of wind stirred the tops of the palms; a lizard on a rock near her was the only living thing she could see. She glanced over her shoulder. The men, with their big cloaks drawn over their heads, were lying asleep, or at any rate appeared to be so; only Mustafa Ali was on foot, standing at the edge of the oasis, staring fixedly in the direction in which they would ride later.

Diana threw the end of her cigarette at the lizard and laughed at its precipitant flight. She had no desire to follow the example of her escort and sleep. She was much too happy to lose a minute of her enjoyment by wasting it in rest that she did not require. She was perfectly content and satisfied with herself and her outlook. She had not a care or a thought in the world. There was not a thing that she would have changed or altered. Her life had always been happy; she had extracted the last ounce of pleasure out of every moment of it. That her happiness was due to the wealth that had enabled her to indulge in the sports and constant travel that made up the sum total of her desires never occurred to her. That what composed her pleasure in life was possible only because she was rich enough to buy the means of gratifying it did not enter her head. She thought of her wealth no more than of her beauty. The business connected with her coming of age, when the big fortune left to her by her father passed unreservedly into her own hands, was a wearisome necessity that had been got through as expeditiously as possible, with as little attention to detail as the old family lawyer had allowed, and an absence of interest that was evidenced in the careless scrawl she attached to each document that was given her to sign. The mere money in itself was nothing; it was only a means to an end. She had never

even realised how much was expended on the continuous and luxurious expeditions that she had made with Sir Aubrey; her own individual tastes were simple, and apart from the expensive equipment that was indispensable for their hunting trips, and which was Aubrey's choosing, not hers, she was not extravagant. The long list of figures that had been so boring during the tedious hours that she had spent with the lawyer, grudging every second of the glorious September morning that she had had to waste in the library when she was longing to be out of doors, had conveyed nothing to her beyond the fact that in future when she wanted anything she would be put to the trouble of writing out an absurd piece of paper herself, instead of leaving the matter in Aubrey's hands, as she had done hitherto.

She had hardly understood and had been much embarrassed by the formal and pedantic congratulations with which the lawyer had concluded his business statement. She was not aware that she was an object of congratulation. It all seemed very stupid and uninteresting. Of real life she knew nothing and of the ordinary ties and attachments of family life less than nothing. Aubrey's cold, loveless training had debarred her from all affection; she had grown up oblivious of it. Love did not exist for her; from even the thought of passion she shrank instinctively with the same fastidiousness as she did from actual physical uncleanness.

That she had awakened an emotion that she did not understand herself in certain men had been an annoyance that had become more intolerable with repetition. She had hated them and herself impartially, and she had scorned them fiercely. She had never been so gentle and so human with any one as she had been with Jim Arbuthnot, and that only because she was so radiantly happy that night that not even the distasteful reminder that she was a woman whom a man coveted was able to disturb her happiness. But here there was no need to dwell on annoyances or distasteful reminders.

Diana dug her heels into the soft ground with a little wriggle of content; here she would be free from anything that could mar her perfect enjoyment of life as it appeared to her. Here there was nothing to spoil her pleasure. Her head had drooped during her thoughts, and for the last few minutes her eyes had been fixed on the dusty tips of her riding-boots. But she raised them now and looked up with a great content in them. It was the happiest day of her life. She had forgotten the quarrel with Aubrey. She had put from her the chain of ideas suggested by the passing caravan. There was nothing discordant to disturb the perfect harmony of her mind.

A shade beside her made her turn her head. Mustafa Ali salaamed obsequiously. "It is time to start, Mademoiselle."

Diana looked up in surprise and then back over her shoulder at the escort. The men were already mounted. The smile faded from her eyes. Mustafa Ali was guide, but she was head of this expedition; if her guide had not realised this he would have to do so now. She glanced at the watch on her wrist.

"There is plenty of time," she said coolly.

Mustafa Ali salaamed again. "It is a long ride to reach the oasis where we must camp to-night," he insisted hurriedly.

Diana crossed one brown boot over the other, and scooping up some sand in the palm of her hand trickled it through her fingers slowly. "Then we can ride faster," she replied quietly, looking at the shining particles glistening in the sun.

Mustafa Ali made a movement of impatience and persisted doggedly. "Mademoiselle would do well to start."

Diana looked up swiftly with angry eyes. Under the man's suave manner and simple words a peremptory tone had crept into his voice. She sat quite still, her fingers raking the warm sand, and under her haughty stare the guide's eyes wavered and turned away. "We will start when I choose, Mustafa Ali," she said brusquely. "You may give orders to your men, but you will take your orders from me. I will tell you when I am ready. You may go."

Still he hesitated, swaying irresolutely backwards and forwards on his heels.

Diana snapped her fingers over her shoulder, a trick she had learned from a French officer in Biskra. "I said go!" she repeated sharply. She took no notice of his going and did not look back

to see what orders he gave the men. She glanced at her watch again. Perhaps it was growing late, perhaps the camp was a longer ride than she had thought; but Mustafa Ali must learn his lesson if they rode till midnight to reach the oasis. She pushed her obstinate chin out further and then smiled again suddenly. She hoped that the night would fall before they reached their destination. There had been one or two moonlight riding picnics out from Biskra, and the glamour of the desert nights had gone to Diana's head. This riding into the unknown away from the noisy, chattering crowd who had spoiled the perfect stillness of the night would be infinitely more perfect. She gave a little sigh of regret as she thought of it. It was not really practical. Though she would wait nearly another hour to allow the fact of her authority to sink into Mustafa Ali's brain she would have to hasten afterwards to arrive at the camp before darkness set in. The men were unused to her ways and she to theirs. She would not have Stephens' help to-night; she would have to depend on herself to order everything as she wished it, and it was easier done in daylight. One hour would not make much difference. The horses had more in them than had been taken out of them this morning; they could be pushed along a bit faster with no harm happening to them. She eyed her watch from time to time with a grin of amusement, but suppressed the temptation to look and see how Mustafa Ali was taking it, for her action might be seen and misconstrued.

When the time she had set herself was up she rose and walked slowly towards the group of Arabs. The guide's face was sullen, but she took no notice, and, when they started, motioned him to her side again with a reference to Biskra that provoked a flow of words. It was the last place she wanted to hear of, but it was one of which he spoke the readiest, and she knew it was not wise to allow him to remain silent to sulk. His ill-temper would evaporate with the sound of his own voice. She rode forward steadily, silent herself, busy with her own thoughts, heedless of the voice beside her, and unconscious of the fact when it became silent.

She had been quite right about the capabilities of the horses. They responded without any apparent effort to the further demand made of them. The one in particular that Diana was riding moved in a swift, easy gallop that was the perfection of motion.

They had been riding for some hours when they came to the first oasis that had been sighted since leaving the one where the midday halt was made. Diana pulled up her horse to look at it, for it was unusually beautiful in the luxuriousness and arrangement of its group of palms and leafy bushes. Some pigeons were cooing softly, hidden from sight amongst the trees, with a plaintive melancholy that somehow seemed in keeping with the deserted spot. Beside the well, forming a triangle, stood what had been three particularly fine palm trees, but the tops had been broken off about twenty feet up from the ground, and the mutilated trunks reared themselves bare and desolate-looking. Diana took off her heavy helmet and tossed it to the man behind her, and sat looking at the oasis, while the faint breeze that had sprung up stirred her thick, short hair, and cooled her hot head. The sad notes of the pigeons and the broken palms, that with their unusualness vaguely suggested a tragedy, lent an air of mystery to the place that pleased her.

She turned eagerly to Mustafa Ali. "Why did you not arrange for the camp to be here? It would have been a long enough ride."

The man fidgeted in his saddle, fingering his beard uneasily, his eyes wandering past Diana's and looking at the broken trees. "No man rests here, Mademoiselle. It is the place of devils. The curse of Allah is upon it," he muttered, touching his horse with his heel, and making it sidle restlessly—an obvious hint that Diana ignored.

"I like it," she persisted obstinately.

He made a quick gesture with his fingers. "It is accursed. Death lurks beside those broken palm trees," he said, looking at her curiously.

She jerked her head with a sudden smile. "For you, perhaps, but not for me. Allah's curse rests only upon those who fear it. But since you are afraid, Mustafa Ali, let us go on." She gave a little light laugh, and Mustafa Ali kicked his horse savagely as he followed.

The distance before her spread out cleanly with the sharp distinctness that precedes the setting sun. She rode on until she began to wonder if it would indeed be night-fall before she reached her destination. They had ridden longer and faster than had ever been intended. It seemed odd that they had not overtaken the baggage camels. She looked at her watch with a frown. "Where is your caravan, Mustafa Ali?" she called. "I see no sign of an oasis, and the darkness will come."

"If Mademoiselle had started earlier—" he said sullenly.

"If I had started earlier it would still have been too far. To-morrow we will arrange it otherwise," she said firmly.

"To-morrow—" he growled indistinctly.

Diana looked at him keenly. "What did you say?" she asked haughtily.

His hand went to his forehead mechanically. "To-morrow is with Allah!" he murmured with unctuous piety.

A retort trembled on Diana's lips, but her attention was distracted from her annoying guide to a collection of black specks far off across the desert. They were too far away for her to see clearly, but she pointed to them, peering at them intently. "See!" she cried. "Is that the caravan?"

"As Allah wills!" he replied more piously than before, and Diana wished, with a sudden feeling of irritation, that he would stop relegating his responsibilities to the Deity and take a little more active personal interest in his missing camel train.

The black specks were moving fast across the level plain. Very soon Diana saw that it was not the slow, leisurely camels that they were overtaking, but a band of mounted men who were moving swiftly towards them. They had seen nobody since the traders' caravan had passed them in the morning. For Diana the Arabs that were approaching were even more interesting than the caravan had been. She had seen plenty of caravans arriving and departing from Biskra, but, though she had seen small parties of tribesmen constantly in the vicinity of the town, she had never seen so large a body of mounted men before, nor had she seen them as they were here, one with the wild picturesqueness of their surroundings. It was impossible to count how many there were, for they were riding in close formation, the wind filling their great white cloaks, making each man look gigantic. Diana's interest flamed up excitedly. It was like passing another ship upon a hitherto empty sea. They seemed to add a desired touch to the grim loneliness of the scene that had begun to be a little awe-inspiring. Perhaps she was hungry, perhaps she was tired, or perhaps she was only annoyed by the bad arrangements of her guide, but before the advent of the mounted Arabs Diana had been conscious of a feeling of oppression, as if the silent desolation of the desert was weighing heavily upon her, but the body of swiftly moving men and horses had changed the aspect utterly. An atmosphere of life and purpose seemed to have taken the place of the quiet stagnation that had been before their coming.

The distance between the two parties decreased rapidly. Diana, intent on the quickly advancing horsemen, spurred ahead of her guide with sparkling eyes. They were near enough now to see that the horses were beautiful creatures and that each man rode magnificently. They were armed too, their rifles being held in front of them, not slung on their backs as she had seen in Biskra. They passed quite close to her, only a few yards away—a solid square, the orderly ranks suggesting training and discipline that she had not looked for. Not a head turned in her direction as they went by and the pace was not slackened. Fretted by the proximity of the galloping horses, her own horse reared impatiently, but Diana pulled him in, turning in her saddle to watch the Arabs pass, her breath coming quick with excitement.

"What are they?" she called out to Mustafa Ali, who had dropped some way behind her. But he, too, was looking back at the horsemen, and did not seem to hear her question. Her escort had lagged still further behind her guide and were some distance away. Diana watched the rapidly moving, compact square eagerly with appreciative eyes—it was a beautiful sight. Then she gave a little gasp. The galloping horses had drawn level with the last stragglers of her own party, and just beyond they stopped suddenly. Diana would not have believed it possible that they could have stopped so suddenly

and in such close formation while travelling at such a pace. The tremendous strain on the bridles flung the horses far back on their haunches. But there was no time to dwell on the wonderful horsemanship or training of the men. Events moved too rapidly. The solid square split up and lengthened out into a long line of two men riding abreast. Wheeling behind the last of Mustafa's men they came back even faster than they had passed, and circled widely round Diana and her attendants. Bewildered by this manoeuvre she watched them with a puzzled frown, striving to soothe her horse, who was nearly frantic with excitement. Twice they galloped round her little band, their long cloaks fluttering, their rifles tossing in their hands. Diana was growing impatient. It was very fine to watch, but time and the light were both going. She would have been glad if the demonstration had occurred earlier in the day, when there would have been more time to enjoy it. She turned again to Mustafa Ali to suggest that they had better try to move on, but he had gone further from her, back towards his own. She wrestled with her nervous mount, trying to turn him to join her guide, when a sudden burst of rifle shots made her start and her horse bound violently. Then she laughed. That would be the end of the demonstration, a parting salute, the *decharge de mousqueterie* beloved of the Arab. She turned her head from her refractory horse to look at them ride off, and the laugh died away on her lips. It was not a farewell salute. The rifles that the Arabs were firing were not pointing up into the heavens, but aiming straight at her and her escort. And as she stared with suddenly startled eyes, unable to do anything with her plunging horse, Mustafa Ali's men were blotted out from her sight, cut off by a band of Arabs who rode between her and them. Mustafa Ali himself was lying forward on the neck of his horse, who was standing quiet amidst the general confusion. Then there came another volley, and the guide slid slowly out of his saddle on to the ground, and at the same time Diana's horse went off with a wild leap that nearly unseated her.

Until they started shooting the thought that the Arabs could be hostile had not crossed her mind. She imagined that they were merely showing off with the childish love of display which she knew was characteristic. The French authorities had been right after all. Diana's first feeling was one of contempt for an administration that made possible such an attempt so near civilisation. Her second a fleeting amusement at the thought of how Aubrey would jeer. But her amusement passed as the real seriousness of the attack came home to her. For the first time it occurred to her that her guide's descent from his saddle was due to a wound and not to the fear that she had at first disgustingly attributed to him. But nobody had seemed to put up any kind of a fight, she thought wrathfully. She tugged angrily at her horse's mouth, but the bit was between his teeth and he tore on frantically. Her own position made her furious. Her guide was wounded, his men surrounded, and she was ignominiously being run away with by a bolting horse. If she could only turn the wretched animal. It would only be a question of ransom, of that she was positive. She must get back somehow to the others and arrange terms. It was an annoyance, of course, but after all it added a certain piquancy to her trip, it would be an experience. It was only a "hold-up." She did not suppose the Arabs had even really meant to hurt any one, but they were excited and some one's shot, aimed wide, had found an unexpected billet. It could only be that. It was too near Biskra for any real danger, she argued with herself, still straining on the reins. She would not admit that there was any danger, though her heart was beating in a way that it had never done before. Then as she hauled ineffectually at the bridle with all her strength there came from behind her the sound of a long, shrill whistle. Her horse pricked up his ears and she was conscious that his pace sensibly lessened. Instinctively she looked behind. A solitary Arab was riding after her and as she looked she realised that his horse was gaining on hers. The thought drove every idea of stopping her runaway from her and made her dig her spurs into him instead. There was a sinister air of deliberation in the way in which the Arab was following her; he was riding her down.

Diana's mouth closed firmly and a new keenness came into her steady eyes. It was one thing to go back voluntarily to make terms with the men who had attacked her party; it was quite another thing to be deliberately chased across the desert by an Arab freebooter. Her obstinate chin was almost square. Then the shadow of a laugh flickered in her eyes and curved her mouth. New experiences

were crowding in upon her to-day. She had often wondered what the feelings of a hunted creature were. She seemed in a fair way of finding out. She had always stoutly maintained that the fox enjoyed the run as much as the hounds; that remained to be proved, but, in any case, she would give this hound a run for his money. She could ride, and there seemed plenty yet in the frightened animal under her. She bent down, lying low against his neck with a little, reckless laugh, coaxing him with all her knowledge and spurring him alternately. But soon her mood changed. She frowned anxiously as she looked at the last rays of the setting sun. It would be dark very soon. She could not go chasing through the night with this tiresome Arab at her heels. The humour seemed to have died out of the situation and Diana began to get angry. In the level country that surrounded her there were no natural features that could afford cover or aid in any way; there seemed nothing for it but to own herself defeated and pull up—if she could. An idea of trying to dodge him and of returning of her own free will was dismissed at once as hopeless. She had seen enough in her short glimpse of the Arabs' tactics when they had passed her to know that she was dealing with a finished horseman on a perfectly trained horse, and that her idea could never succeed. But, perversely, she felt that to that particular Arab following her she would never give in. She would ride till she dropped, or the horse did, before that.

The whistle came again, and again, in spite of her relentless spurring, her horse checked his pace. A sudden inspiration came to her. Perhaps it was the horse she was riding that was the cause of all the trouble. It was certainly the Arab's whistle that had made it moderate its speed; it was responding clearly to a signal that it knew. Her guide's reluctance to give any particulars of his acquisition of the horse came back to her. There could not be much doubt about it. The animal had unquestionably been stolen, and either belonged to or was known to the party of Arabs who had met them.

The *naivete* that paraded a stolen horse through the desert at the risk of meeting its former owner made her smile in spite of her annoyance, but it was not a pleasant smile, as her thoughts turned from the horse to its present owner. The sum of Mustafa Ali's delinquencies was mounting up fast. But it was his affair, not hers. In the meantime she had paid for the horse to ride through the desert, not to be waylaid by Arab bandits. Her temper was going fast.

She urged the horse on with all her power, but perceptibly he was slowing up. She flashed another backward look. The Arab was close behind her—closer than she had been aware. She had a momentary glimpse of a big white figure, dark piercing eyes, and white gleaming teeth, and passionate rage filled her. With no thought of what the consequences or retaliation might be, with no thought at all beyond a wild desire to rid herself of her pursuer, driven by a sudden madness which seemed to rise up in her and which she could not control, she clutched her revolver and fired twice, full in the face of the man who was following her. He did not even flinch and a low laugh of amusement came from him. And at the sound of his laugh Diana's mouth parched suddenly, and a cold shiver rippled across her spine. A strange feeling that she had never experienced before went through her. She had missed again as she had missed this morning. How, she did not know; it was inexplicable, but it was a fact, and a fact that left her with a feeling of powerlessness. She dropped the useless revolver, trying vainly to force her horse's pace, but inch by inch the fiery chestnut that the Arab was riding crept up nearer alongside. She would not turn to look again, but glancing sideways she could see its small, wicked-looking head, with flat laid ears and vicious, bloodshot eyes, level with her elbow. For a moment or two it remained there, then with a sudden spurt the chestnut forged ahead, and as it shot past it swerved close in beside her, and the man, rising in his stirrups and leaning towards her, flung a pair of powerful arms around her, and, with a jerk, swung her clear of the saddle and on to his own horse in front of him. His movement had been so quick she was unprepared and unable to resist. For a moment she was stunned, then her senses came back to her and she struggled wildly, but, stifled in the thick folds of the Arab's robes, against which her face was crushed, and held in a grip that seemed to be slowly suffocating her, her struggles were futile. The hard, muscular arm round her hurt her acutely, her ribs seemed to be almost breaking under its weight and strength, it was nearly impossible

to breathe with the close contact of his body. She was unusually strong for a girl, but against this steely strength that held her she was helpless. And for a time the sense of her helplessness and the pain that any resistance to the arm wrapped round her gave her made her lie quiet. She felt the Arab check his horse, felt the chestnut wheel, spinning high on his hind legs, and then bound forward again.

Her feelings were indescribable. She did not know what to think. Her mind felt jarred. She was unable to frame any thoughts coherently. What had happened was so unexpected, so preposterous, that no conclusion seemed adequate. Only rage filled her—blind, passionate rage against the man who had dared to touch her, who had dared to lay his hands on her, and those hands the hands of a native. A shiver of revulsion ran through her. She was choking with fury, with anger and with disgust. The ignominy of her plight hurt her pride badly. She had been outridden, swept from her saddle as if she were a puppet, and compelled to bear the proximity of the man's own hateful body and the restraint of his arms. No one had ever dared to touch her before. No one had ever dared to handle her as she was being handled now. How was it going to end? Where were they going? With her face hidden she had lost all sense of direction. She had no idea to what point the horse had turned when he had wheeled so suddenly. He was galloping swiftly with continual disconcerting bounds that indicated either temper or nerves, but the man riding him seemed in no way disturbed by his horse's behavior. She could feel him swaying easily in the saddle, and even the wildest leaps did not cause any slackening of the arm around her.

But by degrees as she continued to lie still the pressure on her body was relieved slightly, and she was able to turn her head a little towards the air for which she was almost fainting, but not enough to enable her to see what was passing around her. She drank in the cool air eagerly. Though she could not see she knew that the night had come, the night that she had hoped would fall before she reached her destination, but which now seemed horrible. The fresh strength that the air gave her fanned the courage that still remained with her. Collecting all her force she made a sudden desperate spring, trying to leap clear of the arm that now lay almost loosely about her, her spurred heels tearing the chestnut's flank until he reared perpendicularly, snorting and trembling. But with a quick sweep of his long arm the Arab gathered her back into his hold, still struggling fiercely. His arms were both round her; he was controlling the maddened horse only with the pressure of his knees.

"Doucement, doucement." She heard the slow, soft voice indistinctly, for he was pressing her head again closely to him, and she did not know if the words were applied to herself or to the horse. She fought to lift her head, to escape the grip that held her, straining, striving until he spoke again.

"Lie still, you little fool!" he snarled with sudden vehemence, and with brutal hands he forced her to obey him, until she wondered if he would leave a single bone unbroken in her body, till further resistance was impossible. Gasping for breath she yielded to the strength that overpowered her, and ceased to struggle. The man seemed to know intuitively that she was beaten, and turned his undivided attention to his horse with the same low laugh of amusement that had sent the strange feeling through her when her shots had missed him. It had puzzled her then, but it grew now with a horrible intensity, until she knew that it was fear that had come to her for the first time in her life—a strange fear that she fought against desperately, but which was gaining on her with a force that was sapping her strength from her and making her head reel. She did not faint, but her whole body seemed to grow nerveless with the sudden realisation of the horror of her position.

After that Diana lost all sense of time, as she had already lost all sense of direction. She did not know if it was minutes or hours that passed as they still galloped swiftly through the night. She did not know if they were alone or if the band of Arabs to which this man belonged were riding with them, noiseless over the soft ground. What had happened to her guide and his men? Had they been butchered and left where they fell, or were they, too, being hurried unwillingly into some obscure region of the desert? But for the moment the fate of Mustafa Ali and his companions did not trouble her very much; they had not played a very valiant part in the short encounter, and her own situation swamped her mind to the exclusion of everything else.

The sense of fear was growing on her. She scorned and derided it. She tried to convince herself it did not exist, but it did exist, torturing her with its strangeness and with the thoughts that it engendered. She had anticipated nothing like this. She had never thought of a contingency that would end so, that would induce a situation before which her courage was shuddering into pieces with the horror that was opening up before her—a thing that had always seemed a remote impossibility that could never touch her, from even the knowledge of which her life with Aubrey had almost shielded her, but which now loomed near her, forcing its reality upon her till she trembled and great drops of moisture gathered on her forehead.

The Arab moved her position once, roughly, but she was glad of the change for it freed her head from the stifling folds of his robes. He did not speak again—only once when the chestnut shied violently he muttered something under his breath. But her satisfaction was short-lived. A few minutes afterwards his arm tightened round her once more and he twined a fold of his long cloak round her head, blinding her. And then she understood. The galloping horse was pulled in with almost the same suddenness that had amazed her when she had first seen the Arabs. She felt him draw her close into his arms and slip down on to the ground; there were voices around her—confused, unintelligible; then they died away as she felt him carry her a few paces. He set her down and unwound the covering from her face. The light that shone around her seemed by contrast dazzling with the darkness that had gone before. Confused, she clasped her hands over her eyes for a moment and then looked up slowly. She was in a big, lofty tent, brightly lit by two hanging lamps. But she took no heed of her surroundings; her eyes were fixed on the man who had brought her there. He had flung aside the heavy cloak that enveloped him from head to foot and was standing before her, tall and broad-shouldered, dressed in white flowing robes, a waistcloth embroidered in black and silver wound several times about him, and from the top of which showed a revolver that was thrust into the folds.

Diana's eyes passed over him slowly till they rested on his brown, clean-shaven face, surmounted by crisp, close-cut brown hair. It was the handsomest and cruellest face that she had ever seen. Her gaze was drawn instinctively to his. He was looking at her with fierce burning eyes that swept her until she felt that the boyish clothes that covered her slender limbs were stripped from her, leaving the beautiful white body bare under his passionate stare.

She shrank back, quivering, dragging the lapels of her riding jacket together over her breast with clutching hands, obeying an impulse that she hardly understood.

"Who are you?" she gasped hoarsely.

"I am the Sheik Ahmed Ben Hassan."

The name conveyed nothing. She had never heard it before. She had spoken without thinking in French, and in French he replied to her.

"Why have you brought me here?" she asked, fighting down the fear that was growing more terrible every moment.

He repeated her words with a slow smile. "Why have I brought you here? Bon Dieu! Are you not woman enough to know?"

She shrank back further, a wave of colour rushing into her face that receded immediately, leaving her whiter than she had been before. Her eyes fell under the kindling flame in his. "I don't know what you mean," she whispered faintly, with shaking lips.

"I think you do." He laughed softly, and his laugh frightened her more than anything he had said. He came towards her, and although she was swaying on her feet, desperately she tried to evade him, but with a quick movement he caught her in his arms.

Terror, agonising, soul-shaking terror such as she had never imagined, took hold of her. The flaming light of desire burning in his eyes turned her sick and faint. Her body throbbed with the consciousness of a knowledge that appalled her. She understood his purpose with a horror that made each separate nerve in her system shrink against the understanding that had come to her under the consuming fire of his ardent gaze, and in the fierce embrace that was drawing her shaking limbs

closer and closer against the man's own pulsating body. She writhed in his arms as he crushed her to him in a sudden access of possessive passion. His head bent slowly down to her, his eyes burned deeper, and, held immovable, she endured the first kiss she had ever received. And the touch of his scorching lips, the clasp of his arms, the close union with his warm, strong body robbed her of all strength, of all power of resistance.

With a great sob her eyes closed wearily, the hot mouth pressed on hers was like a narcotic, drugging her almost into insensibility. Numbly she felt him gather her high up into his arms, his lips still clinging closely, and carry her across the tent through curtains into an adjoining room. He laid her down on soft cushions. "Do not make me wait too long," he whispered, and left her.

And the whispered words sent a shock through her that seemed to wrench her deadened nerves apart, galvanising her into sudden strength. She sprang up with wild, despairing eyes, and hands clenched frantically across her heaving breast; then, with a bitter cry, she dropped on to the floor, her arms flung out across the wide, luxurious bed. It was not true! It was not true! It could not be—this awful thing that had happened to her—not to her, Diana Mayo! It was a dream, a ghastly dream that would pass and free her from this agony. Shuddering, she raised her head. The strange room swam before her eyes. Oh, God! It was not a dream. It was real, it was an actual fact from which there was no escape. She was trapped, powerless, defenceless, and behind the heavy curtains near her was the man waiting to claim what he had taken. Any moment he might come; the thought sent her shivering closer to the ground with limbs that trembled uncontrollably. Her courage, that had faced dangers and even death without flinching, broke down before the horror that awaited her. It was inevitable; there was no help to be expected, no mercy to be hoped for. She had felt the crushing strength against which she was helpless. She would struggle, but it would be useless; she would fight, but it would make no difference. Within the tent she was alone, ready to his hand like a snared animal; without, the place was swarming with the man's followers. There was nowhere she could turn, there was no one she could turn to. The certainty of the accomplishment of what she dreaded crushed her with its surety. All power of action was gone. She could only wait and suffer in the complete moral collapse that overwhelmed her, and that was rendered greater by her peculiar temperament. Her body was aching with the grip of his powerful arms, her mouth was bruised with his savage kisses. She clenched her hands in anguish. "Oh, God!" she sobbed, with scalding tears that scorched her cheeks. "Curse him! Curse him!"

And with the words on her lips he came, silent, noiseless, to her side. With his hands on her shoulders he forced her to her feet. His eyes were fierce, his stern mouth parted in a cruel smile, his deep, slow voice half angry, half impatiently amused. "Must I be valet, as well as lover?"

CHAPTER III

The warm sunshine was flooding the tent when Diana awoke from the deep sleep of exhaustion that had been almost insensibility, awoke to immediate and complete remembrance. One quick, fearful glance around the big room assured her that she was alone. She sat up slowly, her eyes shadowy with pain, looking listlessly at the luxurious appointments of the tent. She looked dry-eyed, she had no tears left. They had all been expended when she had grovelled at his feet imploring the mercy he had not accorded her. She had fought until the unequal struggle had left her exhausted and helpless in his arms, until her whole body was one agonised ache from the brutal hands that forced her to compliance, until her courageous spirit was crushed by the realisation of her own powerlessness, and by the strange fear that the man himself had awakened in her, which had driven her at last moaning to her knees. And the recollection of her abject prayers and weeping supplications filled her with a burning shame. She loathed herself with bitter contempt. Her courage had broken down; even her pride had failed her.

She wound her arms about her knees and hid her face against them. "Coward! Coward!" she whispered fiercely. Why had she not scorned him? Or why had she not suffered all that he had done to her in silence? It would have pleased him less than the frenzied entreaties that had only provoked the soft laugh that made her shiver each time she heard it. She shivered now. "I thought I was brave," she murmured brokenly. "I am only a coward, a craven."

She lifted her head at last and looked around her. The room was a curious mixture of Oriental luxury and European comfort. The lavish sumptuousness of the furnishings suggested subtly an unrestrained indulgence, the whole atmosphere was voluptuous, and Diana shrank from the impression it conveyed without exactly understanding the reason. There was nothing that jarred artistically, the rich hangings all harmonised, there were no glaring incongruities such as she had seen in native palaces in India. And everything on which her eyes rested drove home relentlessly the hideous fact of her position. His things were everywhere. On a low, brass-topped table by the bed was the half-smoked cigarette he had had between his lips when he came to her. The pillow beside her still bore the impress of his head. She looked at it with a growing horror in her eyes until an uncontrollable shuddering seized her and she cowered down, smothering the cry that burst from her in the soft pillows and dragging the silken coverings up around her as if their thin shelter were a protection. She lived again through every moment of the past night until thought was unendurable, until she felt that she would go mad, until at last, worn out, she fell asleep.

It was midday when she awoke again. This time she was not alone. A young Arab girl was sitting on the rug beside her looking at her with soft brown eyes of absorbed interest. As Diana sat up she rose to her feet, salaaming, with a timid smile.

"I am Zilah, to wait on Madame," she said shyly in stumbling French, holding out a wrap that Diana recognised with wonder as her own. She looked behind her. Her suit-cases were lying near her, open, partially unpacked. The missing baggage camels had been captured first, then. She was at least to be allowed the use of her own belongings. A gleam of anger shot into her tired eyes and she swung round with a sharp question; but the Arab girl shook her head uncomprehendingly, drawing back with frightened eyes; and to all further questions she remained silent, with down-drooping mouth like a scared child. She was little more. She evidently only half understood what was said to her and could give no answer to what she did understand, and turned away with obvious relief when Diana stopped speaking. She went across the tent and pulled aside a curtain leading into a bathroom that was as big and far better equipped than the one that Diana had had in the Indian tent, and which, up to now, had seemed the last word in comfort and luxury. Though the girl's knowledge of French was limited her hands were deft enough, but her ignorance of the intricacies of a European woman's toilette was very apparent, and constantly provoked in her a girlish giggle that changed hurriedly to a startled gravity

when Diana looked at her. Laughter was very far from Diana, but she could not help smiling now and again at her funny mistakes.

The girl, with her big, wondering eyes, her shy, hesitating French and childish curiosity, in some indefinable way gave back to Diana the self-control that had slipped from her. Her pride reasserted itself, rigidly suppressing any sign of feeling or emotion that could be noticed by the gentle, inquisitive eyes fixed on her.

The hot bath that took the soreness out of her limbs brought back the colour to her face and lips. She even tubbed her head, rubbing the glistening curls dry with fierce vigour, striving to rid herself of the contamination that seemed to have saturated her. Yet the robes against which they had been pressed were spotless, and the hands that had held her were fastidiously clean, even to the well-kept nails.

She came back into the bedroom to find Zilah on her knees poring over her scanty but diverse wardrobe with bewilderment, fingering the evening dresses with shy hands, and finally submitting tentatively to Diana the tweed skirt that had been packed with her other things for the journey when Oran should be reached. But Diana put it aside, and pointed to the riding clothes she had worn the previous day. In them she felt more able to face what might be before her, the associations connected with them seemed to give her moral strength, in them she would feel herself again—Diana the boy, not the shivering piece of womanhood that had been born with tears and agony last night. She bit her lip as she stamped her foot down into the long boot.

She sent the girl away at last, and noticed that she avoided passing into the adjoining room, but vanished instead through the curtains leading into the bathroom. Did that mean that in the outer room the Arab Sheik was waiting? The thought banished the self-control she had regained and sent her weakly on to the side of the bed with her face hidden in her hands. Was he there? Her questions to the little waiting-girl had only been concerned with the whereabouts of the camp to which she had been brought and also of the fate of the caravan; of the man himself she had not been able to bring herself to speak. The strange fear that he had inspired in her filled her with rage and humiliation. The thought of seeing him again brought a shame that was unspeakable. But she conquered the agitation that threatened to grow beyond restraint, pride helping her again. It was better to face the inevitable of her own free will than be fetched whether she would or not. For she knew now the strength of the man who had abducted her, knew that physically she was helpless against him. She raised her head and listened. It was very silent in the next room. Perhaps she was to be allowed a further respite. She jerked her head impatiently at her own hesitation. "Coward!" she whispered again contemptuously, and flung across the room. But at the curtains she halted for a moment, then with set face drew them aside and went through.

The respite had been granted, the room appeared to be empty. But as she crossed the thick rugs her heart leapt suddenly into her throat, for she became aware of a man standing in the open doorway. His back was turned to her, but in a moment she saw that the short, slim figure in white linen European clothes bore no resemblance to the tall Arab she had expected to see. She thought her footsteps were noiseless, but he turned with a little quick bow. A typical Frenchman with narrow, alert, clean-shaven face, sleek black hair and dark restless eyes. His legs were slightly bowed and he stooped a little; his appearance was that of a jockey with the manners of a well-trained servant. Diana coloured hotly under his glance, but his eyes were lowered instantly.

"Madame is doubtless ready for lunch." He spoke rapidly, but his voice was low and pleasant. His movements were as quick and as quiet as his voice, and in a dream Diana found herself in a few moments before a lunch that was perfectly cooked and daintily served. The man hovered about her solicitously, attending to her wants with dexterous hands and watchful eyes that anticipated every need. She was bewildered, faint from want of food, everything seemed unreal. For the moment she could just sit still and be waited on by the soft-footed, soft-spoken manservant who seemed such a curious adjunct to the household of an Arab chief.

"Monseigneur begs that you will excuse him until this evening. He will return in time for dinner," he murmured as he handed her a cous-cous.

Diana looked up blankly. "Monseigneur?"

"My master. The Sheik."

She flushed scarlet and her face hardened. Hypocritical, Oriental beast who "begged to be excused"! She refused the last dish curtly, and as the servant carried it away she propped her elbows on the table and rested her aching head on her hands. A headache was among the new experiences that had overwhelmed her since the day before. Suffering in any form was new to her, and her hatred of the man who had made her suffer grew with every breath she drew.

The Frenchman came back with coffee and cigarettes. He held a match for her, coaxing the reluctant flame with patience that denoted long experience with inferior sulphur.

"Monseigneur dines at eight. At what hour will Madame have tea?" he asked, as he cleared away and folded up the table.

Diana choked back the sarcastic retort that sprang to her lips. The man's quiet, deferential manner, that refused to see anything extraordinary in her presence in his master's camp, was almost harder to bear than flagrant impertinence would have been. That she could have dealt with; this left her tingling with a feeling of impotence, as if a net were gradually closing round her in whose entangling meshes her vaunted liberty was not only threatened, but which seemed destined even to stifle her very existence. She pulled her racing thoughts up with a jerk. She must not think if she was going to keep any hold over herself at all. She gave him an answer indifferently and turned her back on him. When she looked again he was gone, and she heaved a sigh of relief. She had chafed under his watchful eyes until the feeling of restraint had grown unbearable.

She breathed more freely now that he was gone, flinging up her head and jerking her shoulders back with an angry determination to conquer the fear that made her ashamed. Natural curiosity had been struggling with her other emotions, and she gave way to it now to try and turn the channel of her thoughts from the fixed direction in which they tended, and wandered round the big room. The night before she had taken in nothing of her surroundings, her eyes had been held only by the man who had dominated everything. Here, also, were the same luxurious appointments as in the sleeping-room. She had knowledge enough to appreciate that the rugs and hangings were exquisite, the former were Persian and the latter of a thick black material, heavily embroidered in silver. The main feature of the room was a big black divan heaped with huge cushions covered with dull black silk. Beside the divan, spread over the Persian rugs, were two unusually large black bearskins, the mounted heads converging. At one end of the tent was a small doorway, a little portable writing-table. There were one or two Moorish stools heaped with a motley collection of ivories and gold and silver cigarette cases and knick-knacks, and against the partition that separated the two rooms stood a quaintly carved old wooden chest. Though the furniture was scanty and made the tent seem even more spacious than it really was, the whole room had an air of barbaric splendour. The somber hangings gleaming with thick silver threads seemed to Diana like a studied theatrical effect, a setting against which the Arab's own white robes should contrast more vividly; she remembered the black and silver waistcloth she had seen swathed round him, with curling scornful lip. There was a strain of vanity in all natives, she generalised contemptuously. Doubtless it pleased this native's conceit to carry out the colour scheme of his tent even in his clothes, and pose among the sable cushions of the luxurious divan to the admiration of his retainers. She made a little exclamation of disgust, and turned from the soft seductiveness of the big couch with disdain.

She crossed the tent to the little bookcase and knelt beside it curiously. What did a Francophile-Arab read? Novels, probably, that would harmonise with the atmosphere that she dimly sensed in her surroundings. But it was not novels that filled the bookcase. They were books of sport and travel with several volumes on veterinary surgery. They were all in French, and had all been frequently handled, many of them had pencilled notes in the margins written in Arabic. One shelf was filled entirely with

the works of one man, a certain Vicomte Raoul de Saint Hubert. With the exception of one novel, which Diana only glanced at hastily; they were all books of travel. From the few scribbled words in the front of each Diana could see that they had all been sent to the Arab by the author himself—one even was dedicated to "My friend, Ahmed Ben Hassan, Sheik of the Desert." She put the books back with a puzzled frown. She wished, with a feeling that she could not fathom, that they had been rather what she had imagined. The evidence of education and unlooked-for tastes in the man they belonged to troubled her. It was an unexpected glimpse into the personality of the Arab that had captured her was vaguely disquieting, for it suggested possibilities that would not have existed in a raw native, or one only superficially coated with a veneer of civilisation. He seemed to become infinitely more sinister, infinitely more horrible. She looked at her watch with sudden apprehension. The day was wearing away quickly. Soon he would come. Her breath came quick and short and the tears welled up in her eyes.

"I mustn't! I mustn't!" she whispered in a kind of desperation. "If I cry again I shall go mad." She forced them back, and crossing to the big black divan that she had scorned before dropped down among the soft cushions. She was so tired, and her head throbbed persistently.

She was asleep when the servant brought tea, but she started up as he put the tray on a stool beside her.

"It is Madame's own tea. If she will be good enough to say if it is made to her taste," he said anxiously, as if his whole happiness was contained in the tiny teapot at which he was frowning deprecatingly.

His assiduity jarred on Diana's new-found jangling nerves. She recognised that he was sincere in his efforts to please her, but just now they only seemed an added humiliation. She longed to shout "Go away!" like an angry schoolboy, but she managed to give him the information he wanted, and putting cigarettes and matches by her he went out with a little smile of satisfaction. The longing for fresh air and the desire to see what place she had been brought to grew irresistible as the evening came nearer. She went to the open doorway. A big awning stretched before it, supported on lances. She stepped out from under its shade and looked about her wonderingly. It was a big oasis—bigger than any she had seen. In front of the tent there was an open space with a thick belt of palm trees beyond. The rest of the camp lay behind the Chief's tent. The place was alive with men and horses. There were some camels in the distance, but it was the horses that struck Diana principally. They were everywhere, some tethered; some wandering loose, some exercising in the hands of grooms. Mounted Arabs on the outskirts of the oasis crossed her view occasionally. There were groups of men engaged on various duties all around her. Those who went by near her salaamed as they passed, but took no further notice of her. A strange look came into Diana's eyes. This was the desert indeed, the desert as she had never expected to see it, the desert as few could expect to see it. But the cost! She shuddered, then turned at a sudden noise near her. A biting, screaming chestnut fury was coming past close to the tent, taking complete charge of the two men who clung, yelling, to his head. He was stripped, but Diana recognised him at once. The one brief view she had had of his small, vicious head as he shot past her elbow the evening before was written on her brain for all time. He came to a halt opposite Diana, refusing to move, his ears laid close to his head, quivering all over, snatching continually at his grooms, who seemed unable to cope with him. Once he swung up on his hind legs and his cruel teeth flashed almost into the face of one of the men, who was taken off his guard, and who dropped on to the ground, rolling out of the way with a howl that provoked a shout of laughter from a knot of Arabs who had gathered to watch the usual evening eccentricities of the chestnut. The French servant, coming from behind the tent, stopped to speak to the man as he picked himself up and made a grab at the horse's head, and then turned to Diana with his pleasant smile.

"He is rightly named Shaitan, Madame, for he is assuredly possessed of a devil," he said, indicating the chestnut, who, at that moment, with a violent plunge, broke away from the men who

were holding him and headed for the edge of the oasis with the Arabs streaming after him. "The mounted men will catch him," he added with a little laugh, in response to Diana's exclamation.

"Is he amusing himself, or is it really vice?" she asked.

"Pure vice, Madame. He has killed three men."

Diana looked at him incredulously, for his tone was casual and his manner did not indicate any undue feeling.

"He ought to be shot," she said indignantly.

The man shrugged. "Monseigneur is fond of him," he said quietly.

And so because Monseigneur was fond of him the vicious animal was surrounded with every care that his master's pleasure might not be interfered with. Evidently the lives of his wretched people were of less value to him than that of a favourite horse. It sounded compatible with the mercilessness she had herself experienced. What she would not have believed yesterday to-day seemed terribly credible. The courage that the relief of his absence brought back was sinking fast, as fast as the red ball glowing in the heavens was sinking down towards the horizon. She turned from her own fearful thoughts to look at some more horses that were being led away to the lines on the other side of the camp.

"The horses are magnificent, but they are bigger than any Arabs I have seen before."

"They are a special breed, Madame," replied the Frenchman. "The tribe has been famous for them for generations. Monseigneur's horses are known through all the Barbary States, and as far as France," he added, with a little accent of pride creeping into his voice.

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