

Le Queux William

The Veiled Man



William Le Queux

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Le Queux William
The Veiled Man / Being an Account
of the Risks and Adventures of Sidi
Ahamadou, Sheikh of the Azjar Maraude

Preface

Author's Note

The remarkable adventures of the notorious robber-sheikh Ahamadou, “the Abandoned of Allah,” once the terror of the Areg Desert, but now friendly to the French, were collected during a journey across the Great Sahara. In the belief that some description of the wild life of the Desert, with its romance and mystery, told by one upon whose head a price was set for twelve years, and who a dozen times narrowly escaped capture, may interest those fond of adventure, I have translated, edited, and presented these reminiscences in their present form.

Chapter One

The City of the Seven Shadows

During half a century of constant wandering over the silent sunlit sands, of tribal feuds, of revolts, battle and pillage, of bitter persistent hatreds, of exploit, foray, and fierce resistance against the lounging Spahis, cigarette-smoking Zouaves, black-faced Turcos, and swaggering Chasseurs of the French, I have met with some curious adventures, and have witnessed wonders more remarkable, perhaps, than many of the romances related by the Arab story-tellers. They mostly occurred before I was chosen sheikh of the Azjar; when I was simply one of a band of desert-pirates, whose only possessions were a long steel lance, a keen, finely-tempered poignard, and a white stallion, the speed of which was unequalled by those of my companions. A thief I was by birth; a scholar I had become by studying the *Tarik*, the *Miraz*, the *Ibtihadj*, and the *Korân*, under the Marabut Essoyouti in Algiers; a philosopher I fain would be. When riding over the great limitless red-brown sands, I was apt to forget the race whence I sprang, the learning that had made me wise, the logical reasonings of a well-schooled brain, and give myself up with all the rapture of an intense enthusiasm to the emotion of the hour. It was the same always. Essoyouti, a scholar renowned throughout Tripoli and Tunis, had versed me in legendary lore, until I had become full of glowing fancies and unutterable longing to penetrate the entrancing mysteries to which he had so often referred as problems that could never be solved.

I am a Veiled Man. Openly, I confess myself a vagabond and a brigand. Living here, in the heart of the Great Desert, six moons march from Algiers, and a thousand miles beyond the French outposts, theft is, with my nomadic tribe, their natural industry – a branch of education, in fact. We augment the meagreness of our herds by extorting ransoms from some of our neighbours, and completely despoiling others. Mention of the name of Ahamadou causes the face of the traveller on any of the caravan routes between the Atlas mountains and Lake Tsâd to pale beneath its bronze, for as sheikh of the most powerful piratical tribe in the Sahara, I have earned an unenviable notoriety as leader of “The Breath of the Wind,” while the Arabs themselves have bestowed upon my people three epithets which epitomise their psychology: “Thieves, Hyenas, and Abandoned of Allah.”

The only law recognised by my race, the Touaregs, is the right of the strongest. We wear the black *litham* wrapped about our faces, leaving only our noses and eyes visible, and never removing it, even at meal-times. It becomes so much a part of us that any one being deprived of his veil is unrecognisable to friends or relatives. If one of our number is killed, and divested of his veil, no one can identify him until it has been restored to its place. We are therefore known and dreaded as “The Veiled Men.”

My first journey by paths untrodden resulted strangely.

For two whole moons a party of us, numbering nearly three hundred, all well-armed and desperate, had been lurking in a narrow ravine in the far South, known as the Gueden, close to the point where it is crossed by the route taken by the caravans from Lake Tsâd to El Aghouat in Algeria. News travels fast in the desert. We had received word that a caravan laden with ivory and gold-dust was on its way from Kuka to Timissao, and were awaiting it, with the intention either of levying toll, or attacking it with a view to plunder. In our sombre robes of dark blue kano cloth and black veils, we were a mysterious, forbidding-looking rabble. As day succeeded day, and we remained inactive, with scouts ever vigilant for the approach of our prey, I recollected that in the vicinity were some curious rocks, with inscriptions recording the Mussulman conquest, and one morning, mounting my *meheri*, or swift camel, rode out to inspect them.

The sun rose, and beneath its furnace heat I pushed on into the great waterless wilderness of Tasili, the true extent of which is unknown even to us Children of the Desert, for the utter dearth of water there renders a journey of many days impossible. Until the *maghrib* hour I remained in the

saddle, then dismounting, faced towards the Holy Ca'aba, recited my *fâtiha*, ate a handful of dates, and squatted to smoke and watch the fading of the blood-red afterglow. On the next day, and the next, I journeyed forward over the wide monotonous plain, where the poison-wind fanned my brow like a breath from an oven, and nothing met the aching eye but glaring sand and far-off horizon, until, when my shadow lengthened on the sixth day after parting with my companions, I found myself within sight of a range of high hills, looming darkly against the brilliant sunset.

Well acquainted as I was with the geography of my native sands, I had never heard mention of these hills, and was therefore convinced that I had mistaken the route to the great black rock whereon the inscriptions were engraved, and was now approaching a region unexplored. On many occasions I had traversed the caravan route to Timissao, and crossed the rocky ravine where my companions were now in ambush; but none of us had ever before left that track, clearly defined by its bleaching bones, for to the solitary traveller in that inhospitable region a pricked water-skin or a lame camel means death. With irrepressible awe I gazed upon the hills, clothed in the deep purple light of the descending sun, because of one strange thing my eyes had detected. I saw, above the serrated line, two cone-like peaks, rising close to one another, in majesty solemn and sublime, and recognised in them a scene exactly as described by my master Essoyouti, in one of the curious romances he was fond of relating. I stood recalling every detail of the scene, just as I had imagined it when, seated under the vine, in the cool patio of his house, in the ancient Kasbah at Algiers, he had told me a story that held me breathless and entranced.

Worn with fatigue, exhausted and feverish from long exposure to the fiery sun, half stifled by the sand-laden wind, and riding a camel scarcely less jaded than myself, I confess that, despite my love of adventure, and by reason of the strangeness of the story I had heard, I contemplated with no little dread the prospect of passing that night alone within sight of those twin mountain-crests. Twilight is brief in the desert, and soon the moon, having risen from behind a bank of cloud, afforded an uncertain light, which partly illuminated the prospect, and I sat hugging my knees and thinking deeply until sleep closed my eyes.

Before the appearance of the first saffron streak that heralds the sun's coming, I had recited a *sûra* and mounted, with my face set resolutely towards the unknown range. In the skin across my saddle I had only just sufficient water to enable me to return to our ambush, therefore I broke not my fast, determined to hoard up my frugal store. The sand was soft and treacherous. At every step my camel's spongy feet sank deeper and deeper, until, after a toilsome ride of three hours, we arrived near the foot of the two dark, ominous-looking mountains. Then I pulled up, fearing to proceed further lest we should be overwhelmed by the quicksands.

Near me was a narrow pass between the two mountains, and shading my eyes with my hand, I was startled at beholding two gigantic figures standing on either side of the entrance. The sight of them confirmed my suspicion that I had approached the Unknown, and with curiosity aroused, I urged my *meheri* still forward, coming at last close up to the colossal figures. They were fashioned from enormous blocks of dark grey stone, ten times the height of a human being. One, carved to represent a beautiful woman, had her right hand lifted towards the sky, while the other, a forbidding-looking hag, with chipped, time-worn face still wearing a repulsive expression, pointed downward. Between these colossal figures was a space of about thirty paces. According to the legend related by the sage Essoyouti, and told by our story-tellers through ages, there existed beyond a land forbidden.

I held my breath. I was about to view a country that had not been viewed; the ravine known in story as the Valley of the Ants. In eagerness I pressed onward, leading my camel, and passing up the stony valley until at length I came to a second and more fertile space of vast extent, covered entirely by the colossal ruins of a forgotten city.

Aghast, I stood gazing upon the remarkable and unexpected scene.

Ruined temples, with long rows of broken columns, and great houses cracked and fallen into decay, stood silent and deserted, grim, grey relics of a glorious past. Here and there obelisks and

colossi still stood, and the broad streets of the giant city were everywhere well-defined by the ruins, half-buried by drifting sand on either side. Above, a single eagle soared high in the heavens, the only sign of life in that once populous and magnificent centre of a lost civilisation.

Having tethered my camel, I started forward through the ocean of soft sand that through centuries had drifted over the place, and as I did so the story of old Essoyouti recurred to me. The appearance of the place agreed with the strange legend in almost every detail. The ruler of this gigantic capital had been Balkîs, the wealthy and luxurious queen mentioned in our Book of Everlasting Will. This was actually the city of Saba, once the wealthiest and most magnificent capital in the world. According to the legend of the sages, this place existed somewhere in the Great Desert, but whereabouts no man had been able to determine, although it was believed that its entrance was between two cone-like mountains, but surrounded by quicksands of so treacherous a nature that none dare approach it.

With hurried footsteps I scrambled on over fallen columns and great blocks of hewn stone, with inscriptions in characters unknown to me, until suddenly my eyes were bewildered at beholding on the mountain-side an enormous palace, with beautiful terraces and pavilions, apparently in an excellent state of preservation. From the city it was approached by a long flight of wide stone steps, flanked on either side by a pair of colossal figures of similar design to those at the entrance of the Valley of the Ants.

At first, I doubted that the scene before me was one of actual reality, but having reassured myself that I was not dreaming, and was entirely in possession of my senses, I gripped my long lance firmly, and started to ascend the thousand steps that gave access to the historic palace of Balkîs. Hardly, however, had I placed my foot upon the first step, when my eyes were blinded by a lightning-flash, and my ears deafened by a crash of thunder, that, shaking the earth, resounded among the hills, until it became lost in innumerable echoes.

I halted in suspicion, puzzled to account for the strange phenomenon, which seemed like some ominous warning.

Nothing daunted, however, I sprang up the steps, two by two, halting but once to regain breath, and in a few minutes entered the great, marvellously-sculptured portals of the magnificent dwelling-place of one of the most powerful and beautiful women the world ever knew. About to enter, my footsteps were suddenly arrested by the discovery that the floor of the palace was of running water, wherein fish disported themselves, and in the centre, raised upon a daïs of ivory and gold, was the great empty throne of Balkîs, constructed entirely of chalcedony, amethysts, and rubies.

The extent of my discoveries entranced me. I twisted up my robe, and prepared to wade through the water, when, on setting foot into it, I discovered to my amazement that the floor was of transparent glass, laid over the running water, thus keeping the palace uniformly cool during the hottest hours. On approaching the throne I at once became aware of its enormous value, and with my poignard prised from its setting one of the largest rubies my eyes had ever beheld. It was the size of a pigeon's egg, and of matchless colour.

Through the wonderful courts of the deserted palace I wandered, amazed at every turn. Of gigantic proportions, with strange grotesque embellishments that clearly showed its ancient origin, it had stood here in the zenith of its magnificence ages before the days of the Prophet, and for many centuries had remained hidden from the sight of man within that unknown valley. From the flat roof of one of its pavilions I stood gazing down upon the once mighty city, trying to reconstruct it in my imagination, and endeavouring to form an idea of its aspect in the long-past days, when the hosts of Balkîs went forth to battle, and when the beautiful queen herself flashed forth in her golden chariot, amid the wild plaudits of the multitude.

Many hours I spent in exploring this wonderful relic of a decayed civilisation, visiting pavilion after pavilion and finding most of them knee-deep in the accumulated dust of ages, until at last I came to a small chamber built right against the side of the mountain. This I entered, finding traces

of the most extravagant luxury within. The decorations were richly ornamented with gold even now untarnished, the beams supporting the roof being set with gems which sparkled where a ray of sunlight fell upon them. Beyond was a door which, on examination, proved to be of solid iron. On dragging it open there was disclosed a small, dark, and cavernous burrow into the mountain-side. Minutely I examined this door, and finding thereon great bolts with sockets sunk deeply into the solid rock, it occurred to me that in this place might be hidden some of the treasure that the Korân tells us was possessed by the great Queen Balkîs. Cupidity prompted me to search, and having constructed a large improvised torch, I propped open the door with a huge stone sculptured to represent a lion's paw, and started forward up the narrow gloomy tunnel. The natural sides of the cavern were rough, gleaming with long pendant stalactites; but soon it grew larger, and the air became so warm that the perspiration fell from my brow in big drops. One or two articles, old cross-hilted swords, a rusty, dented helmet and a battered breastplate, showed that this place had long ago been frequented, therefore I pressed forward eagerly, hoping to discover that which would render me wealthy. The increasing heat within the cavern surprised me; nevertheless I went forward, my torch held high above my head, my eyes eagerly strained into the impenetrable gloom, and my feet stumbling ever and anon over the uneven ground, until suddenly a harsh grinding noise fell upon my ears, and next second a crushing blow fell full upon my skull, felling me like a log and rendering me unconscious.

How long I remained in that dark stifling tunnel I have no idea.

When, slowly and painfully, I opened my eyes I found that my veil had been removed, my brow deftly bandaged, and my fevered head was resting upon a woman's cool hand. A soft feminine voice gave me "Peace," and turning I saw by the light of a burning brazier that my companion was a girl of wondrous beauty. Her face was of the pure Arab type, her complexion white as those of the Englishwomen who come to Biskra at Ramadan; her little skull-cap was thickly embroidered with seed-pearls, and her bracelets and anklets, set with beautiful diamonds, gleamed with a thousand iridescent fires at each movement. At first I fancied myself dreaming, but when at length I entirely recovered consciousness, I recognised that we were together in a small apartment hung with heavy hangings of thick dark crimson stuffs. The golden perfuming-pan diffused an intoxicating odour of attar of roses, and the silken couch whereon I reclined was soft, restful, and spacious.

Turning to my companion who, instantly divining my longing, handed me water in a crystal goblet, I enquired where I was.

"Thou art with a friend," she answered. "Thou hast dared to enter the City of the Seven Shadows bent on plunder, and the wrath hath fallen upon thee."

"Didst thou discover me?" I asked, raising myself upon my elbow, and looking at her.

She nodded, and with bent head sat with her luminous dark eyes fixed upon the ground.

"Thou hast entered this, the city upon which the seven lights of the heavens have cast the shadows of their wrath, and where all who enter are accursed," she exclaimed at last, speaking slowly and impressively. "Thou earnest hither with evil intent, to secure the treasure of Balkîs. Yet out of evil cometh good, for in thee I have found a companion in adversity."

"In adversity!" I echoed. "What art thou?"

"I am Balkîs, sole lineal descendant of the great queen who ruled over Saba, and guardian of her treasure," she answered. "I am a queen without court; a ruler without people. The palace that thou hast inspected is mine; the throne from the arm of which thou hast filched the great ruby is my lonely seat of royalty; for I am queen of a dead city. Although I am bearer of the historic name of Balkîs, and possess treasure of greater worth than men have ever dreamed, my subjects number only fourteen persons, all of whom are my relatives and live here with me in this my palace. As thou hast already seen, our once-powerful city with its fifty brazen gates hath fallen into decay because of the curse placed upon it by Allah. The teeming populace that once crowded its thoroughfares and market-places have dwindled down until mine own family only are left, the last of a long illustrious, world-

famed line. Soon, alas! I, too, shall pass into the grave, and the royal house of Balkîs will become extinct,” and her jewel-laden breast rose and fell slowly in a long deep-drawn sigh.

“Why speakest thou in tone so melancholy?” I asked. “Thou hast youth, health, long life, everything before thee!”

“No,” she answered gravely, with her white pointed chin still resting thoughtfully upon her palm. “Already I am threatened; nay, I am doomed.”

“How?” I enquired, incredulously.

“Listen, and I will explain,” she said, slowly, raising her beautiful eyes to mine. “About two moons ago, attired in the *haïck* of an Arab woman, I journeyed with my aged uncle to In Salah, in order to make purchases in the market, as is our custom twice each year. On our return hither we came across an encampment of those red-legged dogs of French, and having accepted the hospitality of their tents through several days on account of the sand-storms, I was surprised and annoyed by receiving a declaration of love from the young lieutenant in charge, whose name was Victor Gaillard, and whose home, he told me, was in Paris. Believing me to be daughter of an Arab merchant, he announced his readiness to take me to Algiers and make me his wife; but hating these youthful irresponsible masters of our land, I declined that honour. He then declared that at all costs I should be his, for at the end of the year he was going north to the seashore, where he would be quartered until the spring, and that if I escaped him he and his host who ruled the Desert would treat me and my people as rebellious, and shoot us down like dogs. I laughed his declaration to scorn, for he little dreamed of my real name, birth, and dwelling-place. Next day I remained in the encampment, but on the following night, by bribing one of the Spahi sentries with a ring from my finger, I and my uncle managed to escape, and, beneath the crescent moon, pushed our way forward in the direction of Saba. Through four days we travelled almost incessantly, until at midnight on the fifth our camels’ feet sank deep into the quicksands that render the entrance to Saba unapproachable. Laughing as I congratulated myself on my cleverness at outwitting him, I had gone some hundred paces when, chancing to glance back, I saw not far away, hesitating at the edge of the treacherous belt of ground, a single horseman. The glint of moonlight on his bright scabbard showed him to be an officer of the Roumis, and instantly I recognised the slim silhouette of Victor Gaillard. He sat motionless in his saddle, and with his field-glass raised calmly watched our difficult progress towards the two colossal statues which have guarded the entrance to our city from the day of King Solomon. My uncle, noticing my alarm, also turned and detected our pursuer. That night, before my family assembled in the palace, I explained the whole of the facts, and they, knowing how relentless are these harsh infidel rulers of ours, unanimously decided upon flight. But I declined to leave. Was I not Balkîs, Queen of Saba? Was not the great store of gold and jewels given into my keeping that I should remain and watch them until I drew my last breath? They urged me to accompany them into the mountains, but finding me obdurate all fled, leaving me alone to face the unscrupulous man who had declared that at all costs I should become his wife. Ten weary anxious days have since gone by. Yesterday thou earnest hither, thy face wrapped in thy black *litham*, and naturally I supposed thou wert the accursed infidel in disguise. I watched thee explore my palace and enter to the cave wherein my treasure lieth concealed. When thou hadst entered I breathed more freely, full well knowing that thou hadst gone forward into thy grave.”

“How? Is the tunnel azotic?”

“No. Within is an ingenious mechanical contrivance which was constructed by Balkîs herself, whereby the unsuspecting intruder releases a spring, and is struck down by a great iron mace.”

“I was struck,” I observed.

She nodded, smiling sadly.

“When I went forward to ascertain whether mine enemy still lived I found thy veil unloosened, and that thy features were not those of the hateful Frank. Then I tended thee throughout the night, and at dawn thou didst rally and art now rapidly recovering.”

“Of a verity I had a narrow escape.”

“Assuredly thou didst. Many others, as adventurous and stout-hearted as thyself, have met their fate at that spot.”

“So thou hast remained here alone and single-handed to guard the treasure of thine ancestor against the pilfering of the Franks?” I said, regarding the beautiful, frail-looking girl with admiration. “Assuredly thou art as courageous as the great Balkîs who defied the combined powers of the ancient world.”

She sighed. “It hath been the duty of the Queens of Saba to remain within their kingdom even if evil threatened and all forsake them. I will never be wife of a Frank, neither will I exhibit fear to these new rulers of the Desert who are led by amorous youths from Paris boulevards,” she answered, drawing herself up with queenly hauteur.

“Peradventure he only useth idle threats,” I observed.

“No. The Franks who conquered Algeria and hold it beneath the thralldom of the religion they call Christianity, are our rulers also. He ordered me to remain in the encampment on pain of being outlawed. I disobeyed; therefore I and my people are rebels. That he will return and seek me out I am convinced.”

“Then why not fly?” I suggested. “I will take thee to where my tribe, are encamped. Although we are thieves and brigands, thou, a woman, wilt nevertheless meet with chivalrous treatment at our hands.”

She shook her head, and with dogged persistence announced her intention of remaining, while, on my part, I promised to render her whatever assistance lay in my power.

“Then first help me to remove the throne into the treasure-house,” she said, and opening a door that had been concealed behind the heavy hangings she led me into the great hall where water flowed beneath its pavement of glass.

Together we dragged the bejewelled seat of royalty through several courts, until we came to the small pavilion which gave entrance to the cavern. Then, while she carried a flaming flambeau, I toiled on with it after her. When we had gone some distance into the heart of the mountain she stooped to secure the ancient mechanism so that the iron mace could not again descend, and advancing some further distance we found ourselves in a kind of *cul-de-sac*, with only a black wall of rock before us. To the right, however, was a cunningly-concealed door which gave entrance to a spacious natural chamber, wherein I saw, heaped indiscriminately, the most wondrous collection of golden ornaments and brilliant jewels my eyes had ever gazed upon. Some of them I took up, holding them in my hand in wonderment. The gems were of the first water, the spoils taken in battle by the notorious queen once feared by all the world, while heaped everywhere were bejewelled breast-plates, gem-encrusted goblets, golden dishes, and swords with hilts and scabbards thickly set with precious stones. Wheresoever I trod there were scattered in the fine white dust strings of pearls, uncut gems, rings, and ear-ornaments, while all around were piled great immovable boxes of hewn stone, like coffins, securely clamped with rusting iron. These had never been opened, and contained, according to the story of my companion, the tribute of enormous worth sent by King Solomon to Balkîs. These I examined carefully, one after another, at length discovering one, the stone of which had split so that a small aperture was formed. I placed my hand inside and withdrew it, holding between my thumb and finger three cut diamonds, the like of which I had never before beheld. The stone box was filled to the brim with gems of every kind.

In wonderment I was standing, contemplating this vast wealth of a vanished nation, when my fair conductress exclaimed —

“There is still one other marvel about this place. Listen! Canst thou hear a sound?”

Distinctly I heard a dull, monotonous boom, which had continued uninterruptedly ever since we had been there.

“Yea. What is its cause?” I asked.

"The interior of this mountain is as a fiery furnace. That roaring is the unquenchable flame that has burned therein through ages. During mine own remembrance as a child smoke hath issued from the cone above, and so near are we to the fiery interior here in this treasure-house that its very walls are warm."

Upon the rock I placed my hand, and so hot was it that I was compelled to withdraw it instantly. Only a thin partition of stone apparently divided us from the mysterious fathomless crater.

"One of the beliefs that have come down unto me through ages," Balkîs said, "is that within this place is Al-Hâwiyat, the dwelling prepared for infidels and pagans, where their food shall be offal, and they shall slake their thirst with boiling pitch."

"Allah is mighty and wise," I answered. "Alone he knoweth the hearts of his servants. May perfect peace remain ever upon thee."

"And upon thee, O Ahamadou," she responded, raising her bright eyes earnestly to mine. "Now that I have shown thee this, the wealth of my ancestors, thou wilt promise never to conspire to gain possession of it while any of my family remain here in Saba."

"Although of a tribe of thieves, I swear by Allah's might that never will I expose thy secret, nor will I seek to possess myself of what is thine," I answered. "Thy family shall ever be as mine, for I am no abuser of the salt."

"In thee do I place my trust," she answered, allowing her soft hand, the hand that had so deftly bandaged my injured brow and bathed my face – to linger for an instant within my grasp.

Then, drawing from my pouch the great lustrous ruby I had stolen, I handed it back to her. But she made me retain it as *souvenir* of my visit to Saba, the city forgotten.

The atmosphere in the treasure-house was stifling. Having, therefore, deposited the throne of Balkîs in fitting place, we left, returning through the concealed door to the narrow burrow which had exit in the small pavilion. Side by side we slowly crossed court after court of the great palace which had witnessed pageants of such magnificence that their splendour has been proverbial till this day, she pointing out the principal objects of interest, halting to explain curious sculptured wall-pictures and inscriptions commemorating the triumphs of the great queen, or pausing to recall some long-forgotten story of love, hatred, or malice connected with the spot whereon we stood. In that mellow sunset-hour, as we lingered together beneath the cool shadows, I learnt more of the historic, time-effaced empire of Balkîs than savants have ever known. As scholar, it delighted me to hear it from the lips of one who had descended in the direct royal line from that famous woman, who, according to our Sura, entitled "The Ant," became convinced during her visit to Solomon that, by worshipping the sun she had dealt unjustly with her own soul, and resigned herself unto Allah, the lord of all creatures.

She had given me some wine and dates, and we had passed through the great hall with its transparent pavement and out upon the terrace before the palace when, of a sudden, a loud cry escaped her.

"See!" she gasped, dismayed. "See! The Franks are here!"

Next second a hulking Zouave who had secreted himself behind one of the great sculptured columns sprang upon her. She uttered a loud scream; but, ere he could secure her hands, I had drawn my poignard and dealt him an unerring blow, causing him to reel and fall back heavily upon the stones.

A dozen soldiers, headed by Victor Gaillard, their evil-faced, narrow-browed, moustached officer in his gold-laced uniform and cherry-coloured trousers, had nearly gained the top of the steps. But the ugly sight of blood had already unnerved my fair companion, who, turning quickly to me, cried —

"Let us fly! Follow me. There is but one way to escape."

She rushed away, and I followed, our pursuers close at our heels. I no longer wore my black *litham*, therefore the elegant youth from Paris, sent by the French to rule the Dwellers of the Desert, could not have been aware that I was a Touareg, one of the bandits of the Azjar, whom he amused himself by hunting when inclined for sport. Onward we sped, crossing court after court, until we

again entered the subterranean burrow, and groping along it in the darkness, my companion found at last another secret door, which she opened, pushed me into it, and entering herself, closed it. Then we listened. There was no sound. Apparently our pursuers had not dared to follow us there.

"This," she explained beneath her breath, "leadeth by a secret way out upon the mountain-side. We may yet escape."

Upward we toiled in a tunnel so narrow that oftentimes we were compelled to crawl upon hands and knees, yet ever ascending, and feeling our way, we at last, after half an hour's frantic effort, saw a faint glimmer of light above, and succeeded in emerging upon the bare rocky side of the giant mountain.

"Let us mount still higher and pass along to the other side," she urged. "I know the path."

Together we started off in the fast falling gloom, when suddenly I heard an exclamation in French, and, looking down, saw Gaillard, with three of his Zouaves below us, scrambling up as quickly as they were able.

Instantly I saw that their further progress was barred by a sheer cliff of rock quite fifty feet in height, and that we were in a position impregnable. Balkîs, noticing our situation, also turned towards him with a low scornful laugh.

Next instant the fierce uncurbed anger of this young *boulevardier* found vent, for, with a loud imprecation in French he declared that she should never escape him, and ere I could divine his intention he had snatched a rifle from the man standing at his side and covered the woman he had desired to marry.

I sprang quickly towards my fellow-fugitive; but ere I could drag her down to earth, our only cover, there was a flash, a loud report, and Balkîs, with a shrill shriek, stumbled forward mortally wounded, and rolling helplessly down the mountain-side, fell dead almost at the very feet of her brutal murderer.

The gold-braided officer laughed.

It was one of the most heartless assassinations I had ever witnessed, but knowing that efforts would undoubtedly be made to shoot me also, I threw myself upon my stomach and crawled upward quickly with hands and toes.

"See, men; I have brought down the dainty little bird!" I heard Gaillard exclaim, as he walked to where the body was lying crumpled in a heap. "Give me her necklaces and bracelets. The rest of her jewels you may divide. She was merely a rebel. It is our duty to repress revolt, even though we may sometimes be compelled to shoot women."

The Zouaves ruthlessly tore the jewels from the body of the last remaining daughter of the Queen of Saba, while their lieutenant amused himself by firing at me. A dozen shots he sent after me, but all the bullets sang over my head, until at last, when the darkness became complete, I halted, breathless, behind a projection of rock, and there waited, watching from my elevated position the camp fires lighted, and the soldiers exploring the deserted ruins by the aid of flambeaux.

Once during the night I thought I heard a noise like thunder, and distinctly felt the mountain tremble. But soon after dawn I had the satisfaction of seeing our enemies strike their camp and march slowly out towards the plain. The few jewels they found about the palace they had divided among themselves, and were apparently in high glee.

Having remained in hiding three hours after their departure I descended, passing the body of the hapless Balkîs, already surrounded by a screaming crowd of grey vultures, and, re-entering the palace to ascertain the extent of the depredations of the Franks, I was amazed to discover a dense black smoke issuing from the pavilion before the mouth of the cave. I tried to advance, but sulphurous fumes almost overcame me. Instantly I discerned the truth. The thin partition of rock which divided the treasure-house from the burning crater within had been broken through, and the suppressed fire of the volcano was issuing in great volume from the burrow, together with quantities of molten lava and ashes which have since entirely overwhelmed the ruins.

Three years afterwards I had occasion to travel to Algiers to see Gaillard, then raised to a responsible position in the Bureau Arabe, regarding a Zouave whom we had captured and afterwards set free. I casually mentioned the buried ruins of the forgotten City of the Seven Shadows at the spot he knew so well, but he merely replied —

“Ah! yes, I know. I once explored them and found a curious cave there in the side of the mountain. I blew it up with dynamite in order that it should not be used as a hiding-place by any of your veiled tribe. The explosion, however, much to our dismay, opened a suppressed volcano, with the result that fire issued forth, killing all six of our men who performed the work.”

Victor Gaillard, although now a Colonel, and back in his beloved Paris, where he sits in the Chamber of Deputies as representative of a constituency in the Alpes Maritimes, does not know that by the irresponsible use of his explosive he lost for ever the greatest collection of gold and jewels that has ever been brought together.

The only single gem of the vast treasure of Balkîs that has been preserved is the magnificent blood-red ruby which at this moment adorns my sword-hilt. In both colour and size it is matchless. Never can I handle that weapon without reflecting upon its tragic story, or without visions rising to my eyes of the beautiful queen who reigned so briefly over her vanished and forgotten kingdom.

Chapter Two

A Sappho of the Sand

Throughout our breathless land of sun and silence there is a well-known adage that the word of a Veiled Man is like water poured upon sand which, when once dropped, is never to be recovered. I am, alas, compelled to admit that there is much truth in this; nevertheless, to every rule there is an exception, and in every tribe of the Touaregs, from those of the Tidikelt to those of the Adrar, are to be found men who are not thieves or evil-doers, even though they may be marauders.

Those acquainted with the progress of recent events in Algeria will remember that when our brothers, the Kabyles, rose against our now masters, the French, and committed the terrible massacres at Al-Setit, news was promptly circulated over every one of the vast Saharan plains that the forces of Al-Islâm had, at last, risen against the infidels. Eager for the fray, most of the desert tribes, among them the Touaregs of the Benin Sissin, Haratin, and Kel-Owi, or "People of the Light," united against the Roumis. Hence, we of the Azjar pressed northward in force in order to unite with the warlike Beni-Mزاب in a formidable attack upon the French posts at Gardaia and Wargla, south of the great Atlas range. Assembling at the El Gettara oasis we left our women, old men, and children encamped, crossed the high sunbaked lands of the Tademayt, then, passing up the rocky waterless valley of the Miya, traversed the region of bare red sand-hills known as the Erg, and leaving Wargla fifty miles to the east, set our camels' heads towards Metlili, halting one day's march off that town.

In ordinary circumstances we should never have dared to approach so near the sphere of French influence, especially as this was the region of the Beni-Mزابs, who zealously guarded any encroachment upon their territory. But war had been declared against the infidel, and the Shorfa (Faithful) were uniting beneath the green banner of Al-Islâm. At high noon we halted, and soon afterwards there appeared a French Colonel with a large escort of his scarlet-burnoused Spahis. The officer, who had ridden from Metlili to intercept us, was received courteously by Tamahu, our Sheikh. He demanded the payment of taxes, but the proud old man whom I have since succeeded answered, "Tell that lord of yours, that if he wants our taxes he can come for them himself, and we will make sure he gets them, in silver coins too, for we will roll each franc into a bullet, and deliver it to him ourselves." The Colonel declared that the taxes must be paid, but our Sheikh courteously requested the infidel and his horsemen to return to the town.

"Then you intend fighting?" the Colonel asked, at last.

"We do," answered Tamahu. "Tell thy lord that The Breath of the Wind decline to make submission to the French."

"You intend attacking Metlili?" the officer enquired, thoughtfully, twirling his pointed moustache.

Our Sheikh nodded, his keen eyes watching the face of the infidel. The latter's countenance grew grave, whereat we, standing around leaning on our spears, laughed in derision.

"Thou art of the great army of the infidels," Tamahu said. "Yet thy face palest when we speak of conflict!"

The officer started, and knit his grey brows.

"I fear not thine host of Veiled Men, fierce and relentless though ye be. True, I am a soldier, but one thing alone I dread."

"Thou fearest to lose thy life," observed our Sheikh, knowing that the garrison at that little desert town was but small and weak.

"For myself I care nothing," the Colonel answered. "It is the fate of my daughter that I fear."

"Thy daughter! Why is she here, in the desert, so far from Algiers?"

“Not having seen me for four years she travelled from Paris a moon ago to visit me. Both my captain and my lieutenant have died of fever, and we two are now the only Europeans in Metlili. The rising of thy tribesmen hath occurred so unexpectedly, or I would have sent her under escort back to the coast.”

“Is thy daughter a child?” asked Tamahu.

“She is nineteen,” answered the officer, whose name he informed us was Colonel Bonnemain. We at once knew him by repute as a distinguished traveller and soldier.

“Thou knowest what is said of the word of a Touareg,” the Sheikh said, regarding him keenly. The Colonel nodded.

“Canst thou trust these my tribesmen with the escort of thy daughter?” Tamahu asked. “If thou wilt, no harm shall befall her. We have agreed with the Mzabs to attack and pillage thy town, because thou, with thine horsemen, hast established a post therein; therefore it must be done. But the Azjars wage not war upon women, and ere we commence the attack thy daughter shall find safe asylum within our camp.”

For a moment the Colonel hesitated, looking intently into the dark, bright eyes of our aged headman. But seeing honesty and truth mirrored in his face the infidel held out his hand, and in silence more eloquent than words gripped that of his enemy. At last his tongue’s strings became loosened.

“Henceforth, although I am an officer of the French, and compelled to fight against thee, I am nevertheless thy friend, and some day will prove my friendship. Gabrielle shall be within thy camp at dawn.”

“The Azjars will give her the welcome of friends,” answered our Sheikh.

With a brief expression of heartfelt thanks Colonel Bonnemain vaulted lightly into his saddle, and wishing us “Peace,” spurred away to where his troop of expectant Spahis awaited him.

“May Allah guard thee and thine!” answered Tamahu in response to the infidel’s salutation, and a moment later our enemies were riding hard away towards the far-off horizon.

The long breathless afternoon went slowly by. We had not encamped, because we knew not when our allies, the Beni-Mzabs, might approach, and rapidity of movement was of urgent necessity, inasmuch as a formidable French column was on the march. Spent by long travel, the majority of us stretched ourselves on the hot sands and slept, leaving half-a-dozen to act as sentinels and prevent surprise; but at the *maghrib* hour all were awakened by the clear voice of our aged marabout reciting the *fâtiha*. Every man, without exception, knelt upon the sand, his back turned upon the blaze of crimson in the west, and recited the *suras*, praying to Allah to prosper our expedition.

When we arose, Tamahu, his right hand raised to heaven, and his left grasping his gleaming spear, exhorted us to remain faithful, and to bear arms bravely against the infidels.

“Ye are called forth against a mighty and a warlike nation,” he exclaimed. “Ye shall fight against them, or they shall profess Islam. If ye obey, Allah will, of a verity, give you a glorious reward; but if ye turn back he will chastise you with a grievous chastisement. Allah has promised you many spoils, which ye should take; and he giveth these by way of earnest; and he restraineth the hand of man from you; and the same may be a sign unto the true believers; and he guideth you in the right way. Allah knoweth that which ye know not; and he hath appointed you, besides this, a speedy victory.”

Long and earnestly the old Sheikh addressed us, quoting from our Book of Everlasting Will to emphasise his declarations. Then he referred to the compact he had that day made with the leader of our enemies.

“A woman of the Franks we shall receive into this our camp. Remember, O my people, that she will partake of our salt, and that while this war continueth she is our friend. Let not a single hair of her head be injured. The word of thy Sheikh Tamahu hath already been given.”

That evening we spent in sharpening our spears and shangermangors, preparatory to the fight, singing snatches of war-songs and discussing the prospects of the attack. Perhaps of all the tribes in the trackless solitudes which constitute our home, we of the Azjar are among the most active,

vigorous, and enterprising, inured as we are to hardships, and with our mental faculties sharpened almost to a preternatural degree by the hard struggle for existence in our arid rocky fastnesses. The rearing of oxen, horses, and goats is our chief occupation, but the scarcity of water and our speedy exhaustion of the scanty pasturage of the oases keep us perpetually on the march. Agriculture is scarcely possible under a sky from which rain does not fall for six or eight consecutive years; therefore it is, perhaps, not surprising that we have developed into desert-pirates.

Those who have never set foot upon the Saharan plains can possess but a vague idea of their appearance. In the whole of the Great Desert, a track comprising over two million square miles, there is not a single carriage-road, not a mile of navigable waters, not a wheeled vehicle, canoe, or boat of any kind. There are scarcely even any beaten tracks, for most of the routes, though followed for ages without divergence of any kind, are temporarily effaced by every sandstorm, and recovered only by means of the permanent landmarks – wells, prominent dunes, a solitary eminence crowned with a solitary bush, the remains of travellers, slaves, or camels that may have perished of thirst or exhaustion between the stations.

Long and patiently we waited for the arrival of the woman to whom we had promised protection; but although the night passed, the dawn rose, and the hours crept on towards the noon, our vigilance remained unrewarded. A second day passed in inactivity, then, wearied of waiting, we struck camp and moved forward.

The afterglow had deepened into evening dusk when at length we came within sight of Metlili. Looming high up on a pinnacle of rock, white against the clear sky, its appearance astonished us, for it looked impregnable. Its flat-roofed houses rose tier upon tier around an exceedingly steep eminence crowned by a great mosque with high square minaret, while at the foot of the hill were some scattered date-groves.

We had passed over the summit of a sand ridge, and were making a dash straight upon the French stronghold, when we noticed that our presence had already been detected. Upon the walls a few Spahis in scarlet and some white-burnoused Arabs were moving hurriedly. Suddenly there was a flash from the Kasbah, followed by a report, loud, sharp, echoless. Our enemies had opened fire upon us.

Tamahu instantly gave the word to spur forward on the wings of haste. With one accord we rode in a huge compact body so swiftly as to justify our popular appellation “The Breath of the Wind,” and, regardless of a rapid rifle-fire that was poured out from the white walls, pressed forward to the foot of the rock. Here we dismounted, and with loud yells of savage rage dashed up the rough narrow way that gave entrance to the town. Many of my companions fell dead or wounded ere they reached the hastily-barred gate, but by dint of fierce and dogged determination, we pushed forward in force so great that we managed to at last batter down the huge wooden doors. Next second we poured into the place in overwhelming numbers. Up its steep streets, so narrow that two asses could not pass abreast, we engaged Spahis and Zouaves hand-to-hand. So strong was our force that soon we overwhelmed them, and commenced loud cries of triumph as we dashed up towards the Kasbah. Suddenly, however, as we approached it we saw that its walls literally swarmed with French soldiers who, at word of command, fired a withering volley from their rifles which caused us to hold back dismayed.

Colonel Bonnemain had evidently received reinforcements. With their firearms they were more than a match for us.

“Courage, brothers!” I heard Tamahu cry as he brandished his spear. “Let us show these dogs of infidels that the Touaregs are no cowards. Of a verity the Roumis shall never be our masters.”

With set teeth we sprang forward towards the high sun-blached walls of the citadel, determined to take it by assault, but alas! its battlements were full of well-armed Spahis and Turcos, and from every point showers of lead swept down upon us. Still we kept on undaunted. Once I caught a momentary glimpse of Colonel Bonnemain. He was standing upon the wall bareheaded, shouting and waving his sword. But only for an instant. He disappeared, and was seen no more.

Almost at the same instant a loud incessant spitting of guns deafened us; bullets swept through our ranks in deadly hail, killing us by dozens and maiming hundreds. Then, dismayed, I saw mounted on the wall a strange-looking weapon, which once charged shed rifle-balls in hundreds. Death seemed inevitable. My companions, appalled by the sight of that terrible engine of destruction, wavered for an instant, then, with a cry that Eblis was assisting the infidels, turned and fled.

Above the din of battle Tamahu shouted himself hoarse. But darkness having now fallen, none could discern him amid the dense smoke and constant flashing of the guns. Thus the defenders drove us back, sweeping us away with their deadly machine-gun, and, making a sortie from the fortress, bayoneted the more valiant ones.

Our cause seemed lost. As soon, however, as we had drawn the Spahis outside their fort, we turned, and re-engaging them hand-to-hand, quickly hacked our way back to the very gates of the Kasbah, the streets in the vicinity being heaped with dead and dying. Suddenly, however, at the moment when we were relinquishing our hope as a forlorn one, loud shouts, followed by the beating of tam-tams, gave us renewed courage. From mouth to mouth the glad tidings were repeated. The Beni-Mzabs, one of the most powerful tribes on the desert border, had come up, and being our allies, were rendering us assistance.

Of the exciting moments which immediately succeeded, I have but vague remembrance. Suffice it to say that the warlike race of the Atlas to the number of two thousand poured into Metlili, and with our forces combined we succeeded in dislodging and totally annihilating the French garrison. Everywhere throughout the town fighting quickly became general, but in such numbers had we now assembled that those holding the Kasbah were compelled to sue for peace. The Beni-Mzabs declined, however, to give quarter, consequently the scenes of bloodshed were terrible to behold. Before dawn the sack of the town had commenced, and everywhere the firebrand was applied. The loot obtainable was, we found, of very little value, nevertheless both the Beni-Mzabs and our own tribesmen were in high glee at their first success against the infidel forces. It was regarded as precursory of a great victory.

Just as the sun was rising I was inside the ancient citadel so recently the infidel stronghold, and was exploring its many courts with their old blue-tiled fountains and cool, handsome colonnades, when suddenly as I passed beneath an archway in the thickness of the wall a noise startled me. My companions in arms were regaling themselves in an open square before the great white mosque, therefore I was alone. Around me lay many bodies of Touaregs, Spahis, and Beni-Mzabs, while some of the wounded were still groaning, dying slowly, for there had been no attempt to succour the disabled. To fall in a holy war is not a misfortune, but the reverse. The noise, a loud knock, again sounded, and turning I saw a bolted door, which I at once opened, and was confronted by a pretty dark-haired French girl, who, glancing at me in terror for an instant, screamed and fled down a flight of stone stairs into an impenetrable darkness.

In a moment I dashed after her. Already the Kasbah had been set on fire, and to save her life instant escape was necessary. Below, in the small foul stone chamber, used long ago as a prison, I discovered her crouching. She screamed loudly at my approach, fearing me, perhaps, because of the mysterious black veil across my face, and knowing that the Veiled Men were of evil repute.

"Thou art Mademoiselle Gabrielle, daughter of our friend Colonel Bonnemain," I exclaimed in the best French I could articulate. "Fear not, but fly at once with me, or we may both lose our lives."

"How knowest thou my name?" she gasped in amazement. By the glimmer of light that came from the open court above I saw that her face was beautiful but deathly pale. "True, I am daughter of Colonel Bonnemain, but thou art a Touareg. Assuredly thou art our enemy, not our friend. Why, it was thine hosts who attacked us!"

Briefly I explained the promise of our Sheikh, assuring her of our friendship. At first she was inclined to doubt my sincerity, but at length I prevailed upon her to accompany me in our race for life from the burning ruins. Quickly we sought Tamahu, and as there were no women with us she was at

once placed under my protection. I was to be her guardian and her champion during the remainder of hostilities. Long and earnestly we both searched and enquired for her father, the Colonel, but could discover no trace of him. Some of his Spahis who survived declared that he had been struck down in the earlier hours of the conflict, while others maintained that they had seen him fighting uninjured up to the very last. From our enquiries it appeared evident that, on receiving unexpected reinforcements from the north, he had determined upon holding out against us, and overlooking our agreement with the Beni-Mzabs, was ill-advised enough to decline our good offices. Then, when he found an attack in force being made, he locked Gabrielle in a place of safety until the fight should end.

Full of excitement were those days that followed. I must, however, here confess that within twenty-four hours I found myself deeply attached to this bright-eyed fragile girl whose gallant father had disappeared so mysteriously. We, of the Azjars, leaving the prosperous town of Metlili a mere pile of smoking ruins, encamped for a few days in the vicinity where there was an excellent well, then together with the fierce horsemen of the Beni-Mzab set our heads towards Wargla, another French outpost. At first Gabrielle felt the fatigue of travel terribly. Fortunately she could ride well, and as her inseparable companion, I endeavoured to render her journey as comfortable as possible. At my suggestion she had exchanged her European clothes for the *serroual* and *haïck* of the Arab women, finding that mode of dress more comfortable and less conspicuous than her own; and so light-hearted she grew that not unfrequently she would join me in a cigarette. Her grace and manner charmed us all. The fierce horsemen of the Azjar and the Beni-Mzab are scarcely chivalrous where women are concerned, but ere we had been on the march three days there was not a single tribesman who would not execute her slightest wish.

Riding day by day over the breathless solitudes of sand, no single word of complaint ever escaped her. Whenever we halted, before she ate she would busy herself in attending to our wounded; sometimes bandaging an arm or a leg, at others pouring out water and handing it to a thirsty man with a pleasing smile that quickened his pulse. Then, after we had eaten and turned our faces to the Holy Ca'aba, she would take an old Spanish mandoline which one of my companions had picked up cheap long ago in Oran, and play and sing to us in a sweet contralto songs from her own far-off Paris. They were mostly gay *chansons*, such as one hears in the *cafés* in Algiers, and those with refrains were sung lustily in chorus by the whole of the great assembly.

One night after she had given us several songs I persuaded her to dance. To those unaccustomed to life in the desert the scene would have appeared a strange one. The bright moonlight shining full upon her, tipped also with silver the keen heads of a couple of thousand spears upon which her audience leaned. She had fascinated them. Unanimously it had been declared that she was an enchantress. Only one fact remained to mar her happiness: her uncertainty regarding her father's fate.

"I will dance on one condition, Ahamadou," she answered in French, throwing back her pretty head and showing her white teeth as she laughed.

"What is that?"

"I will dance if thou wilt take off that hideous black veil. Thou hast been my friend all this time, yet, strangely enough, I have never beheld thy face."

I hesitated. Such a demand was unusual, for a Touareg never removes his veil.

My companions overhearing, and noticing my disinclination to acquiesce, with one accord urged me to accede, and at last, amid much good humour, I unwound my black *litham*.

Long and earnestly she looked into my eyes. Her gaze lingered upon me strangely, I thought; then suddenly clapping her hands, she raised her long white arms above her head, and to the thumping of four *derboukas*, one of which I held, she commenced a slow graceful dance. Never tired of exerting herself to comfort the wounded or amuse those who were her father's bitterest foes, she danced on until she sank completely out of breath. Then she reclined upon the soft rugs spread for her, and, with Tamahu and myself, smoked a cigarette in silence. From her full red lips she blew clouds of smoke,

and watched it curl upward in the still night air. I glanced at her furtively, and saw that she had grown unusually thoughtful. Her brilliant eyes were fixed upon the stars.

At last, pillowing her handsome head upon a leopard's skin I rolled and placed for her, she wished me "Peace," and presently closed her eyes in sleep.

Silence, dead and complete, had fallen upon the camp. The stillness was only broken by the uneasy groaning of a camel or the soft footfall of a sentry whose spear gleamed afar in the white moonbeams. Gabrielle's heart slowly heaved and fell as she slept. Through that calm night I sat, hugging my knees and thinking deeply. Try how I would, I could not get rid of the one thought that for days had possessed me, the thought of her. That she had entranced me; that she held me in her toils irrevocably, I could not deny. Never before had I looked upon any woman with affection until now. But I loved with all my heart and soul this delicate Roumi, whose fair face the sun had never kissed.

Was it not in order to behold my countenance she had that evening requested me to remove my *litham*? Her every word, her every action, now that I recalled them, showed plainly that she did not regard me with disfavour. The moon waned, the stars paled, and dawn was nigh ere I cast myself upon the warm sand near her, and snatched a brief hour's repose, not, however, before I had carefully placed a rug about her, fearing lest the morning dew, so deadly to Europeans, should chill her.

One bright balmy night we reached El Okaz, and halted. It was a large oasis with running water, luxuriant vegetation, and many palms. When the *maghrib* had been said, the evening meal eaten, and the sun was slowly sinking, I went forth among the trees to search for camel-grass, and invited Gabrielle to accompany me. She walked by my side, and when we were out of hearing I took her tiny hand in mine, and, raising it reverently to my lips, declared my love.

Slowly, but resolutely, she drew her hand away. The last ray of sunlight tipped her hair with molten gold as we stood together beneath a great high palm. Her brilliant eyes glistened with unshed tears.

"Alas! no, Ahamadou," she answered huskily. "We must not love each other, it would wreck both our lives."

"Why not?" I cried passionately, my arm around her waist, her slim white hand raised again to my lips. "I adore you. To me thou art my life, my love, my everything."

"Ah! yes," she sighed sadly. "To you I owe my life. You have all been so good to me, although I am a woman of the Franks, that I can scarce believe that you are actually the Azjars, the dreaded Breath of the Wind, reports of whose exploits have times without number caused me to shudder."

"An Azjar never forgets a favour nor forgives a false friend," I answered. "To our enemies we are brutal and relentless; yet those who eat our salt need never fear. Already hast thou had experience of the treatment the stranger receiveth within our tents."

"True," she answered, her hand closing tightly over mine. "I have had experience of thine own tender care of me, Ahamadou, yet –"

"Yet thou hast already grown tired of our life?" I hazarded reproachfully.

"Ah! no," she said quickly, fixing her brilliant eyes upon mine. "Thou hast asked if I could ever love thee. I tell thee that I do love thee, yet there is between us a barrier of blood, and such love can only bring unhappiness unto us both."

"Thou lovest me!" I cried, delighted, and taking her soft cheeks between my hard, sun-browned hands, our lips met for the first time in a long passionate caress. Again, she put me from her, saying – "No, it can never be. We are of different races, different creeds. What is right in thine eyes is sin in mine; what is worship to thee is, to me, idolatry. No, Ahamadou. It must not be. We must not love, for we can never marry."

I was silent. Her argument seemed utterly unassailable. Never before had I faced the situation until now. She had, indeed, spoken the truth.

"But we love each other!" I cried, dolefully.

“Yes,” she sighed, shaking her head. “I confess that I love thee,” and her fingers again gripped my hand. “But it is the very fact that we love one another that should cause us to part and forget.”

“Why? Until the war is ended thou must, of necessity, remain in our camp,” I observed.

“And after?”

“Then we could return to Algiers, or to Oran, and marry.”

She remained silent for a few moments, nervously toying with the single ring of emeralds upon her finger.

“No,” she answered at length. “This love between us is but a passing fancy. When the war is at an end, thou wilt have become convinced of the truth of my words.”

“Never,” I answered. “I love thee now; I shall love thee always.”

“Alas!” she said, laying her hand softly upon my shoulder, and looking earnestly into my face. “Now that we have both made confession we must endeavour to forget. We love each other, but the wide difference in our races renders happiness impossible. Thou wilt find for wife some good woman of thine own people, and I – perhaps I shall find some man of mine own nationality to become my husband. From to-night, Ahamadou, if thou lovest me, thou wilt make no further sign.”

I bit my lip to the blood. Although she had uttered these words, I saw that she nevertheless loved me with a mad, passionate love, for soon down her pink cheeks tears were coursing.

“Thou art all to me – everything, Gabrielle,” I cried. “Allah knoweth how deeply and honestly I adore thee, I – ”

The sound of a rifle-shot startled us. With bated breath we both strained our ears. The evening gloom had crept on unperceived, and it was almost dark. In rapid succession other shots sounded, followed by the fierce fiendish war-cry of the Beni-Mzabs. Instantly the truth flashed upon me. We had been surprised by the French!

By the route we had come we sped back to the encampment, where we found all confusion. A large body of Spahis had made a sudden and determined attack, but it had been repulsed. My first thought was of Gabrielle’s safety. I found cover for her behind a huge boulder, and telling her to seat herself, and not attempt to watch the progress of the fight, returned, spear in hand, to bear my part against our enemies.

The cessation of the fighting was only for a few minutes. We heard the sudden sound of a bugle, and from among the trees there dashed a formidable troop of red-burnished horsemen, led by a young European officer, who sat his horse as if he were part of it. Even in that moment of excitement I admired the way he rode. The charge was, however, an ill-fated one. Not half those who dashed forward lived to retreat. The Arabs of the Mechefer, who had recently joined us, possessed guns, and the flashing of these, in combination with those of our enemies, illumined the darkness, while the still air was full of dense, stifling smoke. More desperate each moment the conflict grew. Undismayed by loss or misfortune, we thrice returned their attack, each time with increasing force, until our bullets and keen spears commenced to work havoc among the infidel ranks. East and furious became the fight, but gradually the attack upon us grew weaker, and at last, determined upon reprisals, Tamahu ordered a dash forward. With one accord we charged, and then before us the remnant of the ill-fated troop fell back and fled to save their lives.

When I returned I found Gabrielle kneeling beside the officer whose riding had been so conspicuous, tenderly bandaging an ugly spear-wound he had received in the left shoulder. She had improvised a torch, and beneath its fitful light was pursuing her task unconscious of my approach. Upon the clammy brow of the unconscious man she placed her cool, soft hand; then, having felt his pulse, she seemed satisfied, and taking her flambeau went forward to one of my own tribesmen who had been injured in the breast. From the deep shadow wherein I stood I watched her, white-robed and fair like one of the good genii of whom the Korân tells us, passing from one to another, alleviating their sufferings as best she could, uttering cheering words, or giving water to the dying.

I did not approach her, for my heart seemed too full. It was best, I thought, to leave her alone to her merciful work.

Before the sun rose many of those whom she had so carefully tended and watched had drawn their last breath, but the young officer, whose name I afterwards learned was André de Freyville, lieutenant of Spahis, had recovered consciousness sufficiently to thank his nurse, and learn from her lips the curious circumstances which had led her to accept the hospitality of our tents. He proved a pleasant fellow, and during his convalescence we all three had frequent chats together. Although he was our prisoner-of-war, he soon became on excellent terms with Tamahu, and his time passed happily enough. Colonel Bonnemain had, he told us, escaped when Metlili fell, and had reached Algiers unharmed.

Soon, in order to join forces with another large body of horsemen moving from the great Hammada, or stony tableland, in Tripoli, we advanced to the oasis of Medagin, two days' march from El Aghouat, then held in such force by the French that we dared not attack it.

Reaching Medagin at noon, we encamped. When the stars shone both Gabrielle and De Freyville sang us some French *chansons*, the one accompanying the other upon the mandoline. Before we scooped out our hollows in the sand to form our couches I borrowed a gun from one of the Arabs, intending to go out at dawn to shoot some desert-partridges in which the oasis abounds. Ere day broke I rose, and leaving the whole camp in slumber, strolled away to a rocky spot I had on the previous day noted as a likely place to find the birds. It was on the edge of the oasis, at some distance from the well where we had encamped. When I arrived there the sun had not risen, and the birds were still roosting. Therefore, with my rifle loaded with a bullet (for I had no small shot), I sat down to wait.

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